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Birthing Radical Selves

The Making of a Scholar-Activist

This chapter chronicles Wangari Muta Maathai's experiential history with the topics engaged in the rest of the book—environmental management and justice, critical feminisms, democratic spaces, and globalization and global governance systems. It is my hope that the reader will gain a degree of appreciation for the events and journeys that molded Maathai and shaped her politics and critical thinking. Through the seasons of her life, I recount the advent of her activist and scholarly identities, selves, and roles. I draw her narrative primarily from her memoir, interviews, and media reports and meld it with Kenyan and global histories of the different seasons of her scholarship and activism.

Wangari Muta was born on April 1, 1940, in the village of Ithithe, Nyeri, in the central highlands of what was then British Kenya, to peasant farmers Muta Njugi and Wanjiru Muta, who were members of the Gikuyu ethnic group (Maathai 2007a, 3–4). She was the third of six children and the first daughter of her biological mother. Her earliest memories on record are mostly connected to experiences with her mother, with whom she was very close. Growing up in a polygamous family, she remembered the four mothers living mostly in harmony and being supportive of each other, although she acknowledged the existence of some dissonance in the family and that her father beat his wives (19). Nevertheless, she reflected on her childhood with unmistakable nostalgia. Her earliest memories place her family residing and working on a farm in Nakuru belonging to a settler named Mr. Neyland (14–28). In 1947, Wangari, her mother, and her sisters left the farm to join her brothers on the family's ancestral land in Ithithe. This move increased young Wangari's responsibilities as eldest daughter within the home and family (37). She said, "I was very

much my mother's helper . . . literally almost emulating her and being a little woman around the house" (2009a).

Historical, political, and social coincidences stimulated the early development of what would become Maathai's distinctive personality—as a radical humanist and defender of women's and human rights and the environment—and grounded what would become her value system, *utu*. Her childhood was punctuated by significant moments in Kenya's political history. The early years of her life coincided with the founding of nationalist initiatives and movements by African Kenyans. At the time, Jomo Kenyatta had become leader of the Kenya African Union (KAU), formerly the Kenya African Study Union, amid rumblings of nationalism. Adding to the development of her person was her family's appreciation for formal education. Members of her extended family were part of the *athomi*, translating to "readers" or "those who could read." This was the moniker assigned to those who had acquired some level of formal education, a status distinction that abetted the construction of social classes during and after colonialism. Wangari started her formal education at Ithite Primary School, following the intervention of her brother, Nderitu, and her mother's agreement to send the young girl to school (Maathai 2007a, 39). Here began her journey as *muthomi*, a reader, a scholar. Thus, the *muthomi* was born in an environment that also supported the genesis of her political and environmental consciousness. At the same time, Wangari started her life as a farmer, a lover of the environment.

Wangari tended year-round a small plot of land given to her by her mother, even while she helped her mother and brothers cultivate the larger family land (Maathai 2007a, 46). This was at a time when people in many parts of the country had lost their land to white settlers, who commandeered the most productive land as property of the Crown or private property. Karuti Kanyinga (2009) demonstrates that the process of alienating Kenyans from their land took place in steps, first with the protectorate acquiring the land, then by the establishment of English property law, endorsing and giving authority to that acquisition. The ancestral and customary recognition of landownership was replaced by Crown laws that privatized ownership by individuals and the colonial state, facilitating the foundation of the settler economy (327). These settlers then used underpaid African labor, especially of men, leaving women, such as Wangari's mother, and children to tend what was left of family land and some women as the only full-time, active parents. Maathai's words and works recognize women

as autonomous society members and leaders with agency, a trait she appreciated from her childhood.

The Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), popularly known as the Mau Mau, responded to this appropriation of native land and loss of freedom by revolting from 1952 until 1956. British officials countered with violence and martial law (Branch 2007; Kanogo 1987; Koster 2014, 2016; Githuku 2015). The beginning of the KLFA uprising and the consequent declaration of the state of emergency by British prime minister Winston Churchill coincided with Wangari's entry into intermediate school after completing her Kenya Primary Examination with extremely high scores at Ithite Primary School in 1951. She proceeded to boarding school at St. Cecilia's Intermediate Primary School at Mathari, a Catholic mission in Nyeri (Maathai 2007a, 53). Her mother and brother felt that this option held the best promise for her even though the family could ill afford the fees to send her there. This choice would insulate her from the political happenings in the outside world for the time being.

In 1952, then-governor Evelyn Baring declared a state of emergency in Kenya on behalf of the British government and sent British and African soldiers to help colonial administrators capture Mau Mau fighters and send them to detention camps (Heather 2017; Kanogo 1987). It was as part of this campaign that, on April 8, 1953, Jomo Kenyatta, who would become independent Kenya's first prime minister, and then president, was convicted for being a leader of the Mau Mau. He and five others, Bildad Kaggia, Achieng' Oneko, Paul Ngei, Kung'u Karumba, and Fred Kubai, collectively referred to as the Kapenguria Six, were sentenced to seven years with hard labor (Ngesa 2013, 3). Nationalist organizations were under siege, and arrests were rampant. Several members of Wangari's family lost their homes, and some, including her mother, were herded into native reserves or emergency villages as part of this sweep (Maathai 2009a, Kanyinga 2009, 328; Elkins 2000, 36).

The KLFA were very active around Wangari's ancestral home, and members of her family were involved on both sides of the struggle—the revolutionary group or supporters of the home guards, who worked on behalf of the British administration (Maathai 2007a, 64–65). Her time in boarding school ensured that she was spared many of the challenges attached to the uprising. However, as a girl of seventeen, she was picked up while making the trip to Nakuru during her school holidays to visit her father and detained in an emergency village. She was questioned

for two days and later released at the intervention of Mr. Neylan. Even though she was insulated from a considerable part of the events, she noted the trauma suffered by others who were not so lucky (65–69). Her time at St. Cecilia's lasted almost the entire duration of the KLFA revolution. She acknowledged that living in the boarding school bubble gave her an inaccurate and tarnished understanding of the KLFA for a long time. She regarded its members as enemies of the people or terrorists, as the British administration characterized them, even praying with others at St. Cecilia's for their defeat (64).

It was also while at St. Cecilia's that Wangari converted to Catholicism and took the name Mary Josephine in honor of Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus (Maathai 2007a, 61). Prior to that, as a Protestant, she had been baptized and given the name Miriam (2007b). Even as a young girl, the combination of spiritualities that would inform her philosophy was being nurtured. In this process of spiritual and political sensitization, she remained close to the land, cultivating her plot and communing with its spirituality during her breaks from school (Maathai 2007a, 69).

Entering the Catholic school determined the trajectory of Mary Josephine's future academic journey and would later influence her theorizing and value system. She took the Kenya African Preliminary Examination in 1955 and obtained top marks. In 1956, the same year that she entered Loreto Girls High School in Limuru (a prestigious Catholic school for African girls), the KLFA revolt finally started to wind down, culminating with the seizure of Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi in October (Branch 2010, 203).

Mary Josephine entered young adulthood in a charged political environment, as the nationalist movement was picking up pace across the continent (Maathai 2007a, 73). Kenyatta was released from jail in Lokitaung and placed under house arrest in Lodwar in 1959 (Nyangena 2003, 4), the same year she graduated from Loreto. She excelled in the Cambridge School Certificate examinations, earning a first division. On January 12, 1960, the state of emergency officially ended, and Britain announced plans to prepare Kenya for majority African governance. This was the Kenya that Mary Josephine left behind on her first trip out of the country as part of the Kennedy Airlift project, in which Kenyans received scholarships to study at universities in the United States (Nyangena 2003, 73; Speich 2009, 455). The initiative, spearheaded by Tom Mboya and US senator John F. Kennedy, was an investment in young East Africans who would help build the

postindependence nations. The Catholic Church in Kenya looked to the leading Catholic schools for candidates to participate in the program. Having just graduated with excellent results, Mary Josephine Wangari was an obvious choice. She made the decision to give up an opportunity to study at Makerere University in Kampala, then the premier East African university, and at twenty years of age, Mary Josephine Wangari traveled to the United States to begin her college education at Mount St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas. A series of adjustments would mark not just her life but also that of her country over the ten years that followed.

In 1961, Jomo Kenyatta was released after years of detention, hard labor, and house arrest and assumed the presidency of the political party Kenya African National Union (KANU). In 1963, Kenya gained independence, with Kenyatta elected prime minister on May 27. On June 1, 1963, commemorated as Madaraka Day, Kenya's first self-governing administration was established, also achieving internal self-rule. Kenya became officially independent in December 1963, and the republic was formed on December 12, 1964, with Kenyatta as its first president. Years later, Maathai recalled, "For me, it was a moment to celebrate that finally we were free, as Martin Luther King was crying out at that time. I thought we were going to enjoy our freedom, we were going to be happy, we were not going to be oppressed anymore. Little did I know what lay ahead" (2005c, 39). Maathai's combined experiences—of colonialism, the plight of colonized Africans, Kenyans' agitation for independence, the postindependence situation for Kenyans and especially women, the conditions of African Americans in the United States, and the civil rights era—informed the development of her ideas and ideals, politics and activism. Regarding the civil rights movement, she said, "It shaped my concept of human rights, and it made me understand that human rights are not things that are put on the table for people to enjoy. These are things you fight for, and then you protect" (2009a).

In 1964, Mary Josephine earned her bachelor of science degree in biology from Mount St. Scholastica and proceeded to the University of Pittsburgh for graduate studies. Back in Kenya, the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) was established as the institution that would coordinate activities of women's groups and associations. As Kenya had moved toward independence, organizations formerly run by colonial wives and other white women had started handing over the reins to Kenyan women. These included Maendeleo ya

Wanawake (MYWO), an organization Maathai would later be a part of and then at odds with, which elected its first African president in 1961. The NCWK was expressly founded to oversee some of these organizations. Maathai later led the NCWK, under whose banner she started the Green Belt Movement (GBM). The NCWK would later launch her into national politics in the 1980s. In 1962, the Kenya Association of University Women (KAUW) was founded as an affiliate of the International Federation of University Women (later renamed Graduate Women International [GWI]). The KAUW, whose membership consisted of women with university degrees from recognized institutions, would propel Maathai into the political and activist spotlight and enable her membership in the NCWK.

As this flurry of political, social, and civic developments related to gender picked up momentum in Kenya, Mary Jo was focused on earning her master of science degree in biological sciences from the University of Pittsburgh, which she did in January 1966. Her thesis, titled “Developmental and Cytological Study of the Pineal Body of *Coturnix coturnix japonica*,” was adjudged “excellent” by the examining board (Maathai 2007a, 95). Toward the completion of her master’s degree, recruiters from the University College of Nairobi interviewed her in Pittsburgh and followed up with a job offer, asking her to report for duty on January 10, 1966.

Mary Jo returned on January 6, 1966, to a nation and continent where many changes had occurred. Her intention was to take up the position of research assistant to a professor of zoology at the University College of Nairobi, as outlined in her job offer letter. However, upon reporting to work on January 10, she was informed that her promised job had been offered to someone else, which she believed was due to gender and ethnic bias (Maathai 2007a, 100–101). This marked a significant turning point in her career as an academic. She eventually found work under Professor Reinhold Hofmann in the microanatomy section of the newly established Department of Veterinary Anatomy in the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University College of Nairobi.

Two other significant changes happened in 1966. She dropped her “English” names, preferring to go again by her Gikuyu name, Wangari, and she met her future husband, Mwangi Mathai. The name change was part of a conscious embracing of her indigenous Gikuyu and African self that began the disposition of unapologetic African-ness one encounters in her work, words, and self-fashioning. She recounted her shifting sensibilities, specifically on self-identifying and

the duality of names and consciousness, in a 2007 interview at the Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, saying, “Later on when I went to school and became a Christian, you were told to adopt a new name, and you were told to accept that as your first name. But it is actually your second name” (2007b). She offered the example of the fact that in Kansas she was addressed as Miss Wangari, which was when she started deconstructing the question of names and naming. She shared a realization about her various name changes: “I had been walking in a zig zag way and I decided to go back to the beginning, and I said, “My name is Wangari!” I decided that from then on, I would try to look at myself using my own mirror and would not allow people to tell me who I was” (2007b).

Wangari Muta started her doctoral studies with encouragement from Professor Hofmann and relocated to Germany on a scholarship under the Nairobi-Giessen partnership program in 1967 to pursue doctoral research and training from the University of Giessen and the University of Munich. At the time there was only one electron microscope in Kenya. Because more were expected to arrive at Kenyan universities, she spent part of her time in Germany extending her experience working with this equipment (Maathai 2007a, 107). In 1969, after twenty months in Germany, she returned to Kenya to the position of assistant lecturer at the University College of Nairobi and to complete her PhD dissertation. In what was a busy year, she married Mwangi Mathai and was immediately thrown into her role as a politician’s wife during his unsuccessful campaign for a seat in parliament.

This was a year of personal and national turmoil. Wangari Mathai experienced great personal loss with the passing of her brother Kibicho, the assassination of government minister Tom Mboya triggered ethnic unrest, and Kenya also became a de facto one-party state after the Kenya People’s Union (KPU) was banned. The KPU’s leader, Oginga Odinga, was arrested, leaving KANU the only party to “compete” in the elections. Later, in the 1970s through the 1990s, this situation would heavily impact Maathai’s politics and political engagements. It also directly impacted the place of her husband in politics and thus Wangari Mathai’s social location. This was the Kenya of her post-Germany return, in which she quickly found her place and voice in her roles as career woman, wife, and mother.

Wangari Muta Mathai completed her PhD dissertation, titled “Early Development of Male Bovine Gonad,” in 1970, the year her first son, Waweru, was born. She was awarded a degree in anatomy

from the University College of Nairobi in 1971 (Maathai 2007a, 112), the year she gave birth to her daughter, Wanjira. Wangari Mathai was the first woman in East and Central Africa to receive a doctoral degree. She rejoined the faculty at the university as senior lecturer of anatomy. In 1974, her second son, Muta, was born, and her husband won the parliamentary elections to become the member of parliament (MP) for Lang'ata Constituency. Here began her more active public life and advocacy, informed and motivated by her identities as academic, mother, and public servant.

Even as she supported her husband's political career, her own professional journey witnessed an upward trajectory in the mid-1970s. She became a senior lecturer in anatomy in 1975, chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy in 1976, and in 1977 she was promoted to associate professor (Maathai 2007a, 118). She was the first African woman in the department to hold those positions, all while enduring and fighting against constant gender bias from both students and faculty members, including some who openly or indirectly questioned her competence. Outside the university, she worked for various civic organizations, including the KAUW and the local Environment Liaison Centre. In 1974, she was invited to serve on the board of the latter, and, from 1973 to 1980, she served as director of the Nairobi branch of the Kenya Red Cross (119).

It was in this season of her life that her interests and work began to coalesce. When her husband became an MP, Wangari Mathai facilitated the fulfillment of promises he had made to his constituents during the campaign period. Mwangi Mathai had pledged to increase employment opportunities for his constituents to alleviate skyrocketing unemployment. She shared in her memoir that after winning the elections he dropped the plan, which had been just a strategic campaign promise. She wanted to fulfill the incomplete contract her husband had entered into with his constituents. Thus, Wangari Mathai founded her first environment-related organization, Envirocare. The company not only intended to provide employment but also to attend to environmental restoration. Envirocare's first nursery was erected in the Karura Forest. However, due to financial hitches and lack of support from her husband, once she moved the nursery production to their home, the project shut down (Maathai 2007a, 127–29). Nevertheless, her efforts did not go unnoticed. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) sponsored her trip to the June 1976 United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, also known as

Habitat I, in Vancouver, Canada, where participants called for greener cities, among other recommendations.

The trip to Habitat I was a major turning point, launching Wangari Mathai on a journey that solidified her position as a scholar and activist on matters of women's rights and empowerment, the environment, and governance. Because she was a member of the KAUW, Wangari Mathai had joined the NCWK. When she returned to Nairobi after Habitat I, the NCWK invited her to speak about the conference and its deliberations. Out of this presentation and the ensuing action plans, a new idea and program was born, committed to reforestation and saving the environment. The organization approved the idea and established the Save the Land Harambee project (Maathai 2007a, 131). On June 5, 1977, to celebrate World Environment Day, the NCWK and Save the Land Harambee organized a march to Kamukunji Grounds in Nairobi, where they planted seven trees in honor of seven Kenyan (s)heroes: Wangu wa Makeri, Waiyaki wa Hinga, Mekatilili wa Menza, Masaku Ngei, Nabongo Mumia, Ole Lenana, and Gor Mahia wuod Ogalo. Save the Land Harambee was the forerunner of the GBM (119–25). Both, albeit cash strapped, operated as successful components of the NCWK.

Wangari Mathai's personal life, at the time, was not progressing as well as her public one. In 1977, she and her husband separated, and in 1979 Mwangi Mathai filed for divorce. The three-week divorce proceedings in court turned ugly. Whereas some have reported that Mwangi sought divorce on the grounds that she was too uncontrollable and strong-minded, Wangari maintained that he falsely claimed she had been unfaithful and contributed to the deterioration of his health (Maathai 2007a, 145–46). The case ended with a win for him and new troubles for her. In an interview with Salim Lone of *Viva* magazine following the ruling, she stated that the judge would have had to be corrupt or incompetent to render that judgment. The judge then threatened her with a contempt-of-court charge if she did not withdraw the statement. She refused to back down and was charged and found guilty. Sentenced to six months in prison, she was taken to Lang'ata Women's Prison without the opportunity to say goodbye or explain the situation to her children. After three days, her lawyer negotiated a deal wherein she wrote a statement the court found sufficient, setting her free (147–50).

Most know Wangari Maathai as a radical outspoken activist. She questioned whether her life would have taken the same trajectory had

she stayed married to Mwangi (*Taking Root*). Following the divorce, Mwangi demanded that she drop his name, and she made the bold choice to change it by adding an extra *a*, becoming Wangari Muta Maathai.

Her life at this time also underwent other weighty changes. The court case, lawyer's fees, and the fact that she had decided not to ask for support from Mwangi left her in financial difficulties (Maathai 2007a, 152–53). Additionally, she had to relocate to a new house with her children. Struggling to make ends meet, she accepted an offer from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to work as a consultant for six months in Lusaka, Zambia, with the Economic Commission for Africa. Upon reaching that decision, she loaded up the kids in the car, drove to Mwangi's house unannounced, and dropped them off, promising to return in a little while. She failed to explain that the "little while" would be six months. The children would stay with Mwangi until 1985, when they came back to stay with her of their own volition.

Meanwhile, events in the Kenyan political sphere further stimulated the development of her public persona. While her marriage was deteriorating, on August, 22, 1978, Jomo Kenyatta passed away and was succeeded by Daniel arap Moi. This ushered in a period of adverse interactions between Maathai and Moi as his presidency produced conditions that required more radical responses from activists. Her personal contestations with him started with her interest in the position of chair of the NCWK at the annual elections in 1979. She ran for the post that year but lost by three votes and served for a year as vice chair.

The following year, when she ran for chair again, the government, not wanting her to serve, interfered openly with the elections through representatives of the NCWK's largest member organization, the MYWO. The government representatives expected the MYWO to take charge by making the case that the NCWK was an organization for elite women that was disconnected from grassroots women and who could not understand their needs or represent their interests. Even with this interference, Maathai won the election (Maathai 2007a, 157–58), and she would be reelected year after year until 1987, when she did not run for office. Her initial win caused the government to pull support for the NCWK, forcing members to find other ways to fund their operations and initiatives. Further, the MYWO withdrew from the NCWK, and the government directed most support toward women's initiatives through the former. Despite these roadblocks and immense financial problems, the NCWK gained local and global

visibility for its work on the environment, development, and women's empowerment under Maathai's leadership.

The 1980s were tough yet defining years for Maathai. At a time when she was struggling to rebuild her life after the divorce, she started her seven-year service as chair of the NCWK. Moi's power increased in 1982 when, following a failed coup attempt, the president and his government pushed through a constitutional amendment to make Kenya a de jure one-party state, although it had been so, de facto, since 1969. The hyperauthoritarian president grew steadily more intolerant of any opposition, and this informed his relationship with Maathai for years to come. The government heightened its suppression of detractors and opposition leaders, a situation that would endure through the decade, leading to the exiling of many Kenyans, including academics and artists such as Micere Githae Mugo, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Wangari wa Goro. The attempted coup drew the country's ethnic political identifying lines sharper as Oginga Odinga and his son Raila Odinga were implicated in it, with Raila placed in detention for six years.

It was during this decade that Maathai's political identity came into focus, fueling her radical activism. In 1982, Maathai gave up her position at the University of Nairobi to run for a parliamentary seat, but she was blocked from running on a technicality, which she contested in court. The University of Nairobi, whose chancellor was President Moi, declined to offer her back her job, which she had left only three days earlier, stating that it had been given to someone else (Maathai 2007a, 162). As Vertistine Mbaya, a board member at the GBM and a close personal friend of Maathai's, remembered, Maathai had nothing left to lose, and this heightened the lengths to which she was willing to go in her advocacy (*Taking Root* 2008).

Without a job, she settled in as the only full-time worker and coordinator for the GBM, an unsalaried position. Eventually, funding from the Norwegian Forestry Society, the Voluntary Fund for the United Nations Decade for Women, and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) allowed the GBM to expand its programs and staff, and Maathai stayed on as coordinator, ending her job hunt. Having one leader for both the GBM and the NCWK at the same time provided prime opportunities for the two organizations to feed each other's missions and projects. For Maathai, it was an opportunity to fine-tune her ideas and ideals on questions of women's rights, environmentalism, and governance.

Maathai's public persona as a political, gender, and environmental activist and as a critical thinker continued to grow even as the Moi administration intensified its crackdown on government critics, often inciting global criticism for political arrests and human rights abuses. So intense was the state's focus on Maathai that she encouraged her children to move to the United States for their safety and to continue their studies (Maathai 2007a, 155). The conflict between Maathai and the government on the plans to erect the Times Media Trust Complex Tower, a sixty-story skyscraper, and a statue of Moi at Uhuru Park in Nairobi, chronicled in chapter 4, intensified this animosity. Following this event, the GBM was evicted from the government offices it occupied, and she moved all GBM operations to her house in the South C neighborhood in Nairobi, where it was located until 1996.

The work of the GBM became progressively intertwined with the work of the prodemocracy movement, and Maathai became an outspoken advocate for a democratic Kenya. The 1988 elections left many Kenyans unhappy, and as the 1990s approached, agitation for democratic governance was on the rise. The murder of Foreign Affairs Minister Robert Ouko in February 1990 sparked more dissent against the government, emboldening the prodemocracy movement, which was calling for a return to multiparty politics. The Saba Saba prodemocracy meeting at Kamukunji on July 7, 1990, which organizers proceeded with despite the fact that they had been denied a license, was violently disrupted by police (Muigai 1993, 27). That day, 7/7, would become known in Kenyan history as Saba Saba Day (*saba* being "seven" in Kiswahili) and remains a significant marker in the journey toward a democratic Kenya. The events of that day galvanized more Kenyans to stand behind the struggle for democracy and captivated the world's attention. Maathai, later, planted trees at Uhuru Park to memorialize the victims who died on the day. After Saba Saba, she remained a constant fixture in what would become known as Kenya's second liberation. In turn, the Moi regime continued to monitor her activities closely, increasing its hostility toward the GBM as the 1990s began. During these years, Maathai was constantly afraid for her life. She reflected, "I realized that I was now a political figure, and that I had to take care even as I knew I couldn't stay silent" (2007a, 206–7).

The 1990s constituted the most radical years of the prodemocracy and women's movements in Kenya up to that point. This volatile time was characterized by expanding prodemocracy initiatives, protests, and battles; outbreaks of ethnic violence related to elections; and the

fight for affirmative action on behalf of Kenya's women. Against this setting, Maathai's global profile and visibility as an activist for human rights, democracy, women's rights, and environmental protection expanded. Some saw her as a liberator and others as an anti(s)hero. Her crusading resulted in public judgment and shaming, repeat imprisonments and assaults, and reported assassination threats.

The crusaders for Kenya's second liberation challenged section 2A of the constitution, even demanding a dissolution of parliament. As part of this campaign, in August 1991, six opposition leaders, Oginga Odinga, Masinde Muliro, Martin Shikuku, Philip Gachoka, Ahmed Bamahriz and George Nthenge, formed the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD) and invited the participation of like-minded individuals, including Professor Maathai (Muigai 1993, 29). The government reacted by outlawing the party and arresting its members but released them following criticism from local and global leaders and governments, including those of the United States and United Kingdom (29). At the time, the agenda of the women's movement was becoming intertwined with the prodemocracy movement, placing Maathai at the center of the action as a principal of both movements. As 1991 wound down, the Paris Club made the decision to freeze aid to Kenya until change was evident in policy and practice, a direct result of the unrelenting campaigns by the leaders of the prodemocracy movement as well as increased international scrutiny of Kenya's poor democratic practices, human rights violations, and economic mismanagement (28). This was a significant blow to the Kenyan government. The reality that many African nations—Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, Zambia, Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, the Central African Republic, Mauritania, Rwanda, and Madagascar—were embracing multipartyism around the same time put extra pressure toward change on the Moi regime.

On December 3, 1991, a special KANU conference at the Kasarani Sports Complex in Nairobi agreed to the reintroduction of multiparty politics and the legalization of opposition parties. On December 10, the amendment to the constitution repealing section 2A, marking transition from a one-party system to a return to multiparty politics in Kenya, was passed in parliament (Adar and Munyae 2001, 8). Multipartyism opened up opportunities to engage semiliberalism in opposition politics. In July 1992, female delegates at the National Capacity Building Workshop for women candidates, hosted by the National Committee on the Status of Women—Kenya (NCSW), endorsed

Wangari Maathai as the women's choice for president of Kenya. She declined the invitation to run, however, preferring to focus on her work with the GBM and with grassroots women.

The rise of opposition politics in Kenya came up against a militantly obdurate government, leading to a bloody march toward democratization. Maathai and other members of FORD spent much of the 1990s in running battles with the government. Unfortunately, in 1992, FORD split into two parties—FORD-Kenya, led by Oginga Odinga, and FORD-Asili, led by Kenneth Matiba. Splintering the opposition further, Mwai Kibaki and John Keen founded the Democratic Party of Kenya (Fox 1996, 601). As part of her work with the prodemocracy movement, Maathai cofounded and served as chair of the Middle Ground Group (MGG), tasked with reuniting the opposition, and also led the Movement for Free and Fair Elections (Allen 1997, 332–33). Because the GBM was an active partner in these initiatives, detractors often lumped the activities and criticism of the two movements together. Thus, as Maathai's stature as an environmentalist grew internationally, so did her politically instigated conflicts back in Kenya. This was demonstrated in the 1992 Release Political Prisoners (RPP) protest and, later, the globally publicized fight to save the indigenous Karura Forest. These events, explored further in chapter 3 and appendix 2 respectively, placed her in direct conflict with Moi and his government. The run-ins with the government were accompanied by assaults, hospitalizations, arrests, court appearances, death threats, and constant intimidation for crusaders for democracy.

Global leaders and organizations, including the secretary-general of the United Nations (UN), leaders of Western nations, religious leaders, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, would intervene time and again to ensure the safety of Maathai and other prodemocracy leaders (Maathai 2007a). With direct threats made against her life, Maathai later recounted that she often had to travel during the night and in disguise and even change cars to avoid detection on her trips. She regularly stayed at safe houses she and her friends and supporters had established (247).

The administration's antagonism toward Maathai and the risks to her life are exemplified by events relating to a planned seminar in Nakuru on ethnic violence that followed the 1992 elections. She reported that she, with GBM employees and other partners, were engaged in initiatives toward establishing peace and rebuilding communities following conflict in the Rift Valley. On this particular occasion,

members of the police force with guns and dogs blocked their entry to the venue of the proceedings. Fearing for her life, she arranged to ride back to Nairobi with an ambassador of a foreign nation to ensure her security. Government representatives foiled further attempts to hold the event and other meetings in the Rift Valley, forcing Maathai to file an injunction with the High Court to compel the government to cease the obstructive behavior toward her efforts to convene the seminar (Maathai 2007a, 238–42).

In this environment, on February 23, 1993, one of Maathai's allies, Dr. Ngorongo Makanga, was abducted from his pharmacy, and Maathai reported receiving death threats. In an open letter to the attorney general, she requested protection and followed this with a trip on March 4 to the courthouse to plead bail before arrest in an effort to preempt any attempts to take her into custody. The following day, she went into hiding for two months after sending out a call for international organizations and governments to uphold the freezing of aid that had been instituted against the country before Kenya's transition back to multipartyism (Maathai 2007a, 244–46). On that same day, Amnesty International published the statement "Fear for Safety KENYA: Wangari Maathai (female)—Environmentalist, Opposition Activist," calling for appeals demanding the guaranteed safety of Maathai and Dr. Makanga to be sent to President Moi, Commissioner of Police Phillip Kilonzo, and Attorney General Amos Wako.

As previously mentioned, Maathai's security was made possible by supporters, including friends, prodemocracy leaders and activists, foreign diplomats, and religious leaders. Vertistine Mbaya recalled, "We were constantly on the lookout to make sure they didn't pick her up, particularly secretly where nobody could protest because that's when the damage can be done" (*Taking Root* 2008). On March 17, 1993, eight female politicians made a public statement asking the president to stop trying to intimidate Maathai. On April 18, Mikhail Gorbachev sent President Moi a letter requesting that he personally guarantee her safety as she traveled to the first International Green Cross gathering in Kyoto, Japan, which the former president of the Soviet Union had founded (Maathai 2007a, 248). Moi denied that the government was harassing Maathai, asserting that she was free to come and go as she pleased. The next day, she came out of hiding.

That June, Maathai attended and spoke at the UN's World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, where she also planned to hold an exhibition of photos on the ethnic violence in Kenya and distribute

the parliamentary report on the violence. She later disclosed that persons acting on behalf of the government had stolen the photos and reports. This act of sabotage, she noted, was not an isolated event. She had helped establish the Tribal Clashes Resettlement Volunteer Service to support rebuilding postconflict communities (*Taking Root* 2008, 238), and government forces had constantly inhibited its efforts. The following September, Maathai called a press conference to say that she planned to sue the government for failing to intervene to stop the ethnic violence in Kenya. According to the Human Rights Watch Africa, approximately fifteen hundred Kenyans lost their lives and three hundred thousand were internally displaced during these ethnic conflicts (Materu 2014, 38). Lack of government will and investment in addressing the core issues related to ethnic conflicts resulted in violence flaring again briefly in some parts of the country in 1994.

As prodemocracy leaders intensified the call for a functioning democracy, the vigilance of the government against any criticism heightened. Supporters of the opposition were forced to apply for licenses to hold meetings, which were habitually denied. Defiant, the movement's leaders sometimes held the meetings anyway, resulting in numerous arrests. Political trials for treason and sedition became the order of the day. Maathai and the MGG continued their work through 1993 and 1994, often holding meetings at her house late into the night. Maathai reminisced in her memoir, *Unbowed*, "We held seminars in my house in the evenings, since during the day the house resembled a beehive, packed with Green Belt staff. People came over and sat in the living room and I'd teach, sometimes until one or two o'clock in the morning. . . . At this time, we were still being constantly monitored by government informers" (2007a, 250).

On October 1, 1993, the pressure from the movements for democracy and women's rights compelled the government to appoint a task force led by Justice Effie Awuor to review laws and customs relating to women. During its tenure, the task force would contribute to the drafting of bills that included the Equality Bill, the Affirmative Action Bill, the Family Protection Bill, and the Gender Policy Bill. As the first half of the decade wound down, Maathai and other Kenyan and African female leaders focused on preparations for the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in 1995. It is important to note here that over four decades she worked closely with other champions of the postindependence

women's movement in Kenya. These sister-activists who influenced and were influenced by Maathai include Micere Mugo, Muthoni Likimani, Eddah Gachukia, Grace Onyango, Jane Kiano, Ida Odinga, Wanjiru Kabiru, Margaret Kenyatta, Achola Pala, Maria Nzomo, and Tabitha Seii. The organizations affiliated with the women's movement in Kenya focused in the 1990s on building broader, stronger regional and global networks to fight for basic human rights and political inclusion for women. From November 16 to 23, 1994, the Fifth Regional Conference on Women was held in Dakar, where the African Platform for Action was adopted in readiness for Beijing. In the summer of 1995, Maathai convened, with the NCWK, a conference in Nairobi, also in preparation for Beijing (Maathai 2007a, 252; Chegu and Wamahiu 1999, 417). At the Beijing conference on August 30, 1995, she presented the paper "Bottlenecks to Development in Africa." The spirit of the paper demonstrates why activities of the women's movement following the Beijing conference were inextricably linked to the activities of the prodemocracy movement in Kenya. The paper also highlights the interconnections between global human rights and the challenges that Africans and their nations faced. This is illustrative of her holistic and utu-based approach to engaging knowledge and activism.

The prodemocracy movement picked up steam during the second multiparty elections in 1997. On November 20, 1997, five weeks before the elections, Maathai announced that she would be running for president under the banner of the Liberal Party of Kenya in an election that included fifteen presidential candidates. The party was later renamed the Mazingira Green Party of Kenya, with a focus on promoting green values. The organization eventually became a member of the Green Parties of Africa and the global network of green parties. She reported that on the eve of the election, a rumor had circulated, with the help of the media, that she had withdrawn her candidacy for the presidency and the parliamentary seat. It was unclear whether this had any effect on her numbers in the election. The blow of a second win by Moi in multiparty elections was massive for the prodemocracy movement and the women's movement. At the same time, it motivated and galvanized support for both movements as the twentieth century came to a close.

Even as Maathai doubled down as a key player in both movements, the turn of the century was consumed with taking care of her mother, who passed away on International Women's Day in 2000 (Maathai

2007a, 274). Maathai also immersed herself in activism against global economic systems that disadvantaged African countries. This work, including her service to the Jubilee 2000 Africa Campaign, is engaged in chapter 5. While her journey from 2001 to 2010 was still loaded with battles for democracy, justice, human rights, and environmental conservation, this was in many ways a winning decade for Maathai. She took up fellowships—Montgomery Fellow at Dartmouth College in 2001 and Dorothy McCluskey Visiting Fellow for Conservation at Yale University in 2002. Significantly, on the home front through the decade, the role of Wangari Maathai and others of the prodemocracy movement led to the realization of a new constitution in 2010 (Kramon and Posner 2011, 89; Kanyinga and Long 2012, 41). Additionally, Moi's twenty-four-year rule ended in the presidential election of December 27, 2002, when Mwai Kibaki, the head of an opposition coalition, the National Rainbow Alliance (NARC), won. Maathai earned a seat in parliament to represent the Tetu Constituency in Nyeri District after receiving 98 percent of the vote as a NARC candidate. On December 30, Kibaki took power, and in January 2003, he appointed Maathai assistant minister in the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources.

Many critiqued her lack of impact on government policies and structures in relation to the environment during her tenure, a situation some argue was contributed to by the fact that she was an assistant minister and not the minister. Over the decade, uplifted by the African Union's passing of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, the new female parliamentarians, including Maathai, delivered an active women-focused agenda in Kenya's parliament.

In 2004, Professor Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts toward realizing "sustainable development, democracy and peace" (Norwegian Nobel Committee, 2004). This was the most significant but only one of a plethora of prestigious awards she received, a list of which is included in appendix 1.

In that same year, Maathai did an interview with *Time* magazine, in which she was widely reported as having claimed that HIV/AIDS was an agent created by the West to decimate African populations. She subsequently denied this in an interview with Pal Amitabh in the *Progressive Interview*, stating, "I never said what was being reported, and I don't believe in it. . . . I don't know why the reporter reported that, and I noticed that even though I kept saying that I didn't say that, the reporter still continued to report what he wanted to report. . . . I

am sorry that people got me completely wrong” (Maathai 2005c). Elsewhere (Maathai 2004b), she sought to clarify, saying, “I have . . . been shocked by the ongoing debate generated by what I am purported to have said. It is therefore critical for me to state that I neither say nor believe that the virus was developed by white people or white powers in order to destroy the African people. Such views are wicked and destructive.” Her statements failed to put this controversy to bed successfully, and it continues to plague her legacy.

After receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, while she remained active in her roles within Kenya, Maathai also took on prominence and responsibilities that were more regional and global in nature, as chronicled in appendix 1. In 2006, she collaborated with sister laureates Jody Williams, Shirin Ebadi, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Betty Williams, and Mairead Maguire to start the Nobel Women Initiative, with the aim of promoting peace and equity. The laureates consolidated their experiences and vast influential platforms to bring attention to challenges of grassroots women across the world as well as to support their work and promote various initiatives and movements.

In 2007, Maathai lost her bid to return to parliament and continued to work as an ambassador for human rights, women’s rights, democracy, and environmental protection globally. During the postelection violence in 2007–8, she joined mediation teams to promote unity and peace through restorative justice approaches, as she had done after the 2002 elections. She maintained her work with the GBM, which established new initiatives, including the Women and Girls project. To crown it all, in 2010, she helped establish the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies (WMI),¹ housed at the same veterinary campus at the University of Nairobi where she had lost her job (S. G. Kiama,² personal communication with author, July 11, 2018). The establishment of this institution, which grants master’s and doctoral degrees, represented a full-circle return of Maathai the scholar, with her academic and activist ideals and ideas infused into the development of an entire academic institution. She served as WMI’s founding distinguished chair, a position she held until she passed away on September 25, 2011, at the age of seventy-one, following a battle with ovarian cancer.

Wangari Muta Maathai was mourned globally. To honor her commitment to environmental protection, “her remains were placed in a bamboo-frame coffin made of water hyacinth and papyrus reeds. She

was cremated, and her remains were interred in the compound of the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies” (Dalby 2011).

This chapter has explored the roots of Maathai’s individualities related to environmental development and management, women’s rights, human rights, democratic politics, and international relations as developed out of interactions with particular personal, Kenyan, and global histories. These identities are numerous and complex. As a scholar and academic leader, this first female PhD in East and Central Africa (and awardee of over fifteen honorary doctorates) was a scientist, researcher, professor, author of books, public intellectual, department chair, and distinguished academic chair. As an activist, she was an environmental conservationist, a human rights defender, an advocate for peace, a UN messenger of peace, a global feminist, a board member for various organizations, a philanthropist, and a goodwill ambassador. As a politician, she was a presidential candidate, a political party leader, an assistant minister, an MP, an activist for democracy, and a thorn in the side of the oppressive Kenyan government as well as global governance bodies. Her thoughts and philosophies that emerged from these interfacing identities, roles, and histories, and which epitomize her ideas and ideals, are explored in the chapters that follow.