

Research Article

BEYOND THEMATIC PROTEST: ECOLOGICAL RESISTANCE AS TEXTUAL AND VISUAL PERFORMANCE IN UNBOWED

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ABSTRACT

Many critical readings of Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed* (2008) treat the memoir as an open window onto the Green Belt Movement, rural women's civil disobedience, and democratic resistance under Daniel arap Moi. Reading it only for this protest narrative, however, overlooks how the work operates as an aesthetic and material object. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism and life-writing theory, this article argues that resistance in *Unbowed* is also enacted through the book's physical, linguistic, typographical, and photographic design. It proceeds in four stages. First, it examines the paratextual threshold, setting aside the familiar association with Henley's *Invictus* to foreground the collective grammar of the title ("We remained unbowed"), the agrarian liberation theology of the epigraph (Ezekiel 34:27), and the ecological ethics of the recycled paper (mottainai). Second, it traces vernacular knowledge through colonial school badges, Kikuyu botanical naming, place-names as counter-mapping, and the author's deliberate spelling of her surname. Third, it analyses the visual politics of print, reading state enclosure signs against grassroots counter-markers and the blood signature ("X") at Karura Forest. Finally, it turns to the photographic archive, showing how image selection asserts visual control, records spatial reclamation, and withholds spectacles of the wounded female body. The article concludes that environmental autobiography can function as decolonial struggle when the page itself becomes contested ground.

Keywords: Postcolonial ecocriticism, eco-formalism, life-writing, Green Belt Movement, visual politics.

INTRODUCTION

Readers approaching Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed* (2008) have tended to treat the text as transparent documentary prose. For the most part, scholars have read it as an unadorned historical record of the Green Belt Movement, feminist grass-roots mobilization, and democratic defiance against Daniel arap Moi's authoritarian administration (Muthoka Mutie 2022, 1-4). In these appraisals, narrative testimony takes centre stage, while questions of literary form, typographical design, and aesthetic experimentation are pushed to the margins (Thompson 2018, 20-22). Yet no autobiography enters the public sphere as unmediated speech. Life writing is always a historically situated artifact, shaped by publishing conventions, material constraints, and ideological boundaries (Lejeune 1989, 14-16; Smith and Watson 2001, 37-38).

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon reminds us that postcolonial environmental writers face an acute formal dilemma. They must find imaginative ways to depict the slow, attritional wear of ecological dispossession while navigating a global publishing market that favours solitary heroes and celebrity memoirs (Nixon 2011, 5, 128-129, 143-144). Postcolonial ecocritics have raised a similar point: confronting land grabs and ecological degradation demands an "aesthetics of the earth" capable of recovering suppressed indigenous knowledge systems (Huggan et Tiffin 2010, 3, 11; DeLoughrey et Handley 2011, 3-4)

To address this gap, the present paper proposes an eco-formalist reading of *Unbowed*. The underlying reason is that *Unbowed* enacts resistance through its form too. This can be seen in the book's paratextual thresholds, vernacular language, graphic typography, and photographic curation, which, put together, map out the present inquiry.

Paratextual roots: title, agrarian theology, and material ecology

Literary and journalistic accounts have frequently read the title *Unbowed* as an unstated nod to William Ernest Henley's Victorian poem *Invictus*¹. The parallel seems obvious at first glance, especially given the brutal head injuries Maathai suffered at Uhuru Park in 1992 and Karura Forest in 1999 (221-222, 268-270). Yet this reading misplaces the political centre of gravity. Henley is neither quoted nor mentioned anywhere in the book. Far from endorsing a solitary, Victorian ideal of endurance, the word "unbowed" appears in the narrative during a moment of collective crisis: the March 1992 police crackdown on the mothers of political prisoners at Freedom Corner in Uhuru Park (Maathai 221-222; Muthoka Mutie 2022, 11). As Maathai writes:

The story of Freedom Corner did not end with my hospitalization or the dispersal of the mothers. We remained unbowed. The day after the police attack, many of the women, on their own, returned to Freedom Corner. Finding the area guarded by hundreds of armed soldiers, the women decided to seek help at nearby All Saints Cathedral in contacting the other mothers and their supporters. (222)

The stance is grammatically rooted in the first-person plural: we remained unbowed. This distinction cuts to the heart of what Nixon identifies as the central tension of the postcolonial "movement memoir", caught between Western marketing conventions celebrating lone dissidents and the collective ethos of grass-roots movements (Nixon 2011, 143-144). What we encounter on the cover is what Gérard Genette might call a rhematic synecdoche (1997, 82, 89): the

¹Consider the following verses: "Under the bludgeonings of chance / My head is bloody, but unbowed" extracted from *Book of Verses* (1888). The poem expresses theme of resilience, endurance, self-mastery. (« Poetry By Heart | *Invictus* », s. d.)

Nobel laureate's name on the jacket condenses a wider communal defiance enacted by rural women who regrouped on their own to reclaim militarized public land (Maathai 222). The title resists the isolated individualism of conventional Western autobiography, linking civil rights directly to the survival of the ecological commons (Nixon 2011, 133-134; Thompson 2018, 35). Even if Western publishers recognized and leaned into the marketing appeal of the *Invictus* echo, the text itself insists on a communal reading.

This collective orientation carries over into the book's framing page. Printed *en exergue* on an otherwise blank leaf, the sole epigraph turns to the Hebrew Scriptures:

"The trees of the field will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in the land. They will know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them." — EZEKIEL 34:27 (NIV) (quoted in Maathai unpaginated peritext)

Epigraphs exert a quiet interpretive pull; they offer a lens through which what follows is to be read (Genette 1997, 156-157). Here, the scriptural passage directly challenges conventional Western preservationist thinking. As Byron Caminero-Santangelo points out, mainstream conservation has long imagined "nature" as an untouched, depopulated wilderness, separating environmental protection from human labour, historic dispossession, and environmental justice (2014, 32, 43). Maathai's epigraph joins what colonial conservation tore apart: fruit-bearing trees and human harvests ("trees... will yield their fruit") are tied inextricably to political liberation ("break the bars of their yoke").

At the same time, the promise that "the people will be secure in the land" upends the authoritarian rhetoric of the postcolonial state. Under Daniel arap Moi, "national security" was invoked to justify land-grabbing, silence critics, and brand environmental activists as public threats (Thompson 2018 35; Muthoka Mutie 2022, 12; Nixon 2011, 135). State officials routinely labelled Maathai a subversive troublemaker for defending Uhuru Park and Karura Forest (Maathai 135; Muthoka Mutie 2022, 13). It seems that the author put this biblical verse to dismantle this logic before the first chapter even opens. The reason might be that she believes, as we do, that true security does not come from barbed wire, armed guards or police batons. It rather rests on what Nixon terms "sustainable security", that is an order realized only when political oppression ends and communities are allowed to sustain themselves from their own soil (Nixon 2011, 133).

This environmental awareness extends to the physical book itself. Genette reminds us that paratextual study must take in the "publisher's peritext", that is the physical paper, trim size, and manufacturing of the volume (Genette 1997, 16, 33-34). In the Afterword to the 2007 Anchor Books edition, Maathai reflects on the Japanese ecological concept of *mottainai*, an ethic of gratitude that strictly rejects waste (299). She notes: "I am grateful that Random House has decided to do its part in practicing *mottainai* by printing *Unbowed*, as well as other books it publishes, on recycled paper. Wherever I go, I carry the spirit of *mottainai* with me." (300)

Throughout her story, Maathai documents how colonial foresters and the postcolonial elite ruined Kenya's indigenous water catchments by replacing native forests with commercial monocultures of pine and eucalyptus (44, 121, 265). That is why she insists on recycled stock to ensure that the book's physical substrate reflects the values of *mottainai* she advocates for. As such, the published volume does not take part to the very destruction it condemns. Moreover, the book's final page closes with the website of the Green Belt Movement,

www.greenbeltmovement.org, inviting the reader to participate directly in global tree planting (Maathai, unnumbered page, before the back cover page). The book does not simply end. It opens outward into an activist invitation.

Linguistic resistance, toponymy, and the orthography of self-naming

Imperial rule in Africa sought control over physical land and local languages alike. European powers imposed botanical taxonomies, maps, and linguistic rules that systematically pushed indigenous ecological knowledge to the sidelines (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, 5-6, 11; DeLoughrey and Handley 2011, 3-4, 8). In *Unbowed*, language is not a neutral tool for remembering the past; it is a battleground. Maathai counters linguistic assimilation by recovering Kikuyu taxonomies, correcting colonial maps, and asserting control over the spelling of her own name.

This defence grew out of early experiences in the colonial classroom. Remembering her days at St. Cecilia's Intermediate Primary School, Maathai describes how the school system weaponized English to erode pupils' cultural identities (59-60). Children caught speaking their mother tongue were forced to wear a humiliating wooden block known as the "monitor", often carved with English slurs like "I am stupid, I was caught speaking my mother tongue" (59). In addition to performing punitive chores like cutting school grass and digging garden plots, children were exposed to public mockery (59). The monitor was designed to alienate as can be read here: "[n]ow, as then, this contributes to the trivialization of anything African and lays the foundation for a deeper sense of self-doubt and an inferiority complex." (60) Mother tongues, Maathai insists, are indispensable "vehicles of communication and carriers of culture, knowledge, wisdom, and history" (60). Losing native languages breaks the intergenerational chain of environmental stewardship, leaving Western-educated elites disconnected from the ecosystems that keep them alive (Maathai 60; Caminero-Santangelo 2014, 4).

This linguistic reclamation shapes how Maathai maps the Kenyan landscape. Colonial explorers routinely erased native place-names in favour of British patrons, producing what Maathai calls an internal divide: "Throughout Africa, the Europeans renamed whatever they came across. This created a schism in many Africans' minds and we are still wrestling with the realities of living in this dual world" (6). The memoir counters this erasure by restoring indigenous names alongside their oral histories. The Aberdare Mountain Range – named in 1884 after Lord Aberdare, then president of the Royal Geographical Society – is restored as Nyandarua, Kikuyu for "drying hide", because the mountain crest resembles an animal pelt spread across the horizon (6).

Similarly, she recounts the story of German missionaries Johan Ludwig Krapf and Johannes Rebmann asking a Kamba guide carrying a traditional gourd for the name of the snow-peaked mountain. Assuming they were pointing to his container, the guide answered "kii-nyaa" which the British corrupted into "Kenya" (6). The name of the modern nation-state is thus revealed as a colonial mishearing of an indigenous agricultural vessel.

This vernacular approach also informed the day-to-day operations of the Green Belt Movement. When running rural seminars across Kenya, Maathai insisted that workshops use local mother tongues rather than English or official Kiswahili (135-138). Government officials had long dismissed rural women as uneducated and incapable of understanding scientific forestry. Maathai, by contrast, saw that subsistence farmers had developed a deep practical

knowledge through working the soil (121, 136). Calling these women “foresters without diplomas” (136), the seminars used local idioms to explain soil erosion, watershed conservation, and seedling cultivation. Working in native languages broke through the professional gatekeeping of colonial forestry, turning tree planting into a participatory civic practice (Maathai 136; Muthoka Mutie 2022, 14).

Perhaps the most striking linguistic intervention in the memoir occurs around the author's own name. In *On Autobiography* (1989), Philippe Lejeune describes the autobiographical pact as an agreement grounded in the identity of the author's proper name across cover, title page, and narrative persona. In Western literary theory, this name is often assumed to be unproblematic. In postcolonial African women's writing, however, naming is fraught with the legacies of colonial conversion and patriarchal control (Thompson 2018, 21-22; Boehmer 2005, 4-5). Maathai describes how missionary baptism required her to set aside her father's lineage for Christian names – first Miriam, then Mary Josephine (61). She compares this missionary custom to the naming practices of American chattel slavery, where enslaved people were stripped of family names and addressed only by first names. Upon returning from her university studies in the United States, she cast off her baptismal names to reclaim her Kikuyu name, Wangari Muta (96).

A second naming battle arose during her high-profile 1979 divorce from politician Mwangi Mathai. Amid a hostile press that attacked her academic success as an affront to traditional African womanhood, her former husband's lawyer sent a formal letter demanding she stop using the surname “Mathai” (146–147). Her response was an ingenious typographical manoeuvre:

I remember thinking to myself, “I'm not an object the name of which can change with every new owner!” And I had resisted adopting his name in the first place! As a way to deal with my terrible feelings of rejection, I got the idea of adding another “a” to “Mathai” and to write it as it is pronounced in Kikuyu. And so I became “Maathai.” The extra syllable also signified that although a part of me would always be connected to Mwangi and his surname, I had a new identity. Henceforth, only I would define who I was: Wangari Muta Maathai. (147)

Autobiographical subjectivity, as Smith and Watson observe, is forged through acts of self-naming that claim personal agency within restrictive social structures (2001, 38-42). Adding that single vowel – turning *Mathai* into *Maathai* – was an orthographic subversion. The doubled vowel brought the Latin alphabet closer to the vowel sound of spoken Kikuyu, defying both patriarchal ownership and legal intimidation (147). She refused to be treated as property whose label changed at a man's instruction. The insertion of a single letter produced an independent signature that turned an imposed surname into an internationally recognized mark of environmental leadership. This vernacular impulse also explains why Maathai includes the Kikuyu oral story “Konyekinaithi” (Konyeki and His Father”) as an appendix to the published volume (309-315). She laments the colonial suppression of the *gichandi*, the sacred Kikuyu gourd inscribed with riddles, proverbs, and tribal histories that missionaries ordered destroyed. Incorporating the Konyeki folktale into the memoir helps recover this oral heritage. The story of Konyeki – an ogre child whose endless appetite devours his community's cattle and grain until human ingenuity outwits him – serves as an allegorical critique of the greed driving the postcolonial state.

Graphic and somatic typography

Beyond vocabulary and spelling, resistance in *Unbowed* appears on the printed page through graphic typography and the physical body.

In life writing, the body is not an abstract concept. As Smith and Watson observe, “the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge, as well as a textual surface upon which a person's life is inscribed” (2001, 37). Thompson similarly notes that African women activists under repressive rule frequently put their bodies on the line as the front line of defence against state terror, embodying Maathai's resolve: “If we are going to shed blood because of our land, we will!” (Thompson 2018, 25). In *Unbowed*, physical vulnerability is typographically enacted on the page through a visual clash between uppercase state signs and grass-roots counter-markers, culminating in a confrontation where official bureaucracy is overwritten in blood.

This typographic contest plays out across Kenya's physical landscape, where privatization was announced through uppercase lettering. When the Moi regime attempted to divide portions of Nairobi's 2,500-acre Karura Forest among political allies, private contractors erected barricades to close off public land (267). Arriving with seedlings on October 17, 1998, activists found the entrance barred: “the section of the forest slated for development had been blocked off by a fence and a huge gate, plastered with a big sign that said, PRIVATE PROPERTY” (267). The capital letters in the text mirror the aggressive partitioning of public ground. The state used capitalized signage to enforce spatial exclusion, attempting to legitimize what Nixon calls a “winner-takes-all-and-takes-it-now kleptocracy” that turned shared resources into private real estate (Nixon 2011, 135).

Grassroots activists answered this official lettering with counter-signs of their own. During the March 1992 hunger strike in Uhuru Park, Maathai transformed an ordinary stretch of grass into a recognized sanctuary:

We decided to erect a sign, so I asked some friends to prepare a large board and write FREEDOM CORNER on it and bring it to us. We planted it where our encampment was, so the spirit of the corner matched the spirit in which the park had been named. That section of Uhuru Park has been called Freedom Corner ever since. (219)

The verb “planted” is telling: the sign was treated like a seedling, rooted into the earth to join political protest with ecological life.

Similar counter-markers appear throughout the memoir's photographic plates. Banners carried in demonstrations against illegal logging show the stark demand: Plant a tree or DIE (Maathai, photographic insert). When public outrage forced the government to abandon its planned sixty-story skyscraper in Uhuru Park, the movement marked the site with a permanent sign: MEMORIAL TREES OF PEACE / LEST WE FORGET! / A PROJECT FOUNDED BY THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN OF KENYA (Maathai, photographic insert; Muthoka Mutie 2022, 11). Capital letters, once deployed by the regime to enforce enclosures, were turned into tools of civic reclamation.

The intersection of print, bureaucracy, and physical violence reached its peak during the assault at Karura Forest on January 8, 1999. Accompanied by members of Parliament, reporters, and environmentalists, Maathai arrived carrying a small garden hoe to plant an indigenous tree (268). A gang of around two-hundred-armed men ambushed the group with whips, machetes, clubs, and arrows (268). Confronted by thugs shouting, “Who do you think you are, woman?”, Maathai stood her ground: “It is time for me to plant a tree” (268). A mercenary struck her head with a club, opening a deep wound (268-269). Fleeing to a police post two miles away, she attempted to file a criminal complaint. The officers refused to investigate or arrest the attackers, demanding instead that she write

out a standard report (269). Her response turned an administrative routine into an act of somatic protest:

My head still warm with the blood, I reported the assault and told the officers that we knew who the attackers were. We offered to take them back to the scene of the violence so they could arrest our assailants. If you can believe it, the police didn't move at all. Instead, they asked me to sign a formal complaint testifying to my assault. So, sign it I did: I took my finger and dipped it into the blood pouring from my head and wrote a red "X" on that paper—so they would know how I felt about what had happened and also be unable to avoid the evidence in front of them. (269)

The drawn "X" ruptured the procedural calm of state bureaucracy. As Elleke Boehmer observes, postcolonial women writers often challenge authoritarian regimes by making the injured female body a visible site of political witness (2005, 4-6). The officers wanted a tidy signature on a standard form, burying state violence in paperwork meant to be shelved and forgotten. Maathai refused that sanitizing ritual. Dipping her finger into the blood running down her face, she forced state brutality onto the police register itself.

This mark also complicates Lejeune's autobiographical pact, which looks to the legal signature to bind the author, narrator, and historical subject together. In *Unbowed*, the blood signature collapses the distance between text and bodily injury. The "X" – conventionally the mark of an illiterate person, executed here by the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate in biology – served as an indictment of the police, who were later shown on television news to have collaborated with the attackers (270). The fluid that sustained life became an indelible medium of civic dissent (Thompson 2018, 25).

A similar structural logic organizes the book's table of contents. Instead of a straightforward chronological list of years, the chapter headings follow the life cycle of a tree: starting with germination ("Beginnings", "Cultivation", "Foresters Without Diplomas", "Seeds of Change"), moving into civic struggle ("Fighting for Freedom", "Freedom Turns a Corner", "Aluta Continua", "Rise Up and Walk"), and concluding beneath the expansive shelter of "Canopy of Hope" (vii). The layout maps the path to political freedom onto the growth of a forest, suggesting that lasting democracy, like afforestation, requires patience, communal care, and deep roots

The photographic apparatus

Resistance in *Unbowed* extends into its visual structure. In *Light Writing & Life Writing*, Timothy Dow Adams notes that autobiographical photographs are never simple neutral illustrations; rather, text and image function as unstable partners caught between showing and hiding (Adams 2000, xxi, 10). Linda Haverty Rugg similarly argues that photographs in autobiography create a "double consciousness": the subject must navigate the camera's objectifying gaze while asserting an authorial self-anchored in place and embodiment (Rugg 1997, 18-19, 30). For an activist under state surveillance, publication becomes an opportunity to reclaim self-representation from government media that seek to discredit and criminalize them (Rugg 1997, 30, 231). In *Unbowed*, photographs form an active visual apparatus that asserts visual sovereignty, records spatial reclamation, and withholds graphic spectacles of trauma.

This visual strategy is visible in the selection of archival prints from the Green Belt Movement and Wangari Maathai archives. Rather than presenting nature through pastoral landscapes or elite conservation conferences, the plates centre the collective physical

labour of peasant women (Maathai, photographic insert). Snapshots show women bent over communal seedbeds, mixing soil, tending seedling bags, and carrying watering cans across rural homesteads in Ihithe and Kibwezi (Maathai, photographic insert).

The camera captures what Caminero-Santangelo calls an environmental justice perspective: conservation appears not as an untouched wilderness separated from human activity, but as a community practice tied to livelihood and survival (Caminero-Santangelo 2014, 43-44). The photographs back up the authority of the "foresters without diplomas", demonstrating visually that rural women, historically overlooked by colonial foresters and postcolonial technocrats, are the true caretakers of Kenya's commons.

These rural images sit alongside portraits that document Maathai's academic and international stature. Photographs show her in doctoral regalia beside her husband, speaking at global podiums, meeting Canadian and European leaders, and planting commemorative trees with international figures like British Chancellor Gordon Brown in Uhuru Park (Maathai, photographic insert).

As Stephen Mutie shows, Daniel arap Moi's regime weaponized state media and parliamentary debates to dismiss Maathai as a "madwoman", an uncultured divorcee, and an unruly woman who defied traditional gender expectations (Muthoka Mutie 2022, 1-4, 10). The photographic record counters this smear campaign. Juxtaposing village tree-planting with academic robes and international diplomacy dismantles the regime's "madwoman" label, presenting instead an image of scientific authority, civic stature, and global standing (Mutie 2022, 14).

The photographs also serve as an archive of confrontations over public space. As Nixon observes, environmental activists must find ways to make visible the fences and barriers through which privatizing regimes divide public land (Nixon 2011, 135-136). The plates in *Unbowed* offer physical proof of these spatial struggles. An October 1998 photograph captures Maathai addressing crowds before the iron gates of Karura Forest, framed directly against the developers' PRIVATE PROPERTY sign (Maathai, photographic insert). Another photojournalistic image documents the morning of February 22, 1992, when protesters pulled down the corrugated metal barrier around the proposed skyscraper site in Uhuru Park, verifying the public's victory over the regime's development scheme (Maathai, photographic insert).

This visual documentation extends into the private home through Mia MacDonald's photograph of Maathai's front door in South C, Nairobi (Maathai, photographic insert). The image captures a heavy metal door scarred by crowbar marks, dents, and twisted hinges left by police during her arrest in January 1992 (Maathai, photographic insert). This domestic threshold becomes a physical record of state aggression. The image preserves the physical violence of an authoritarian regime, a permanent record of political intimidation.

Yet the most critical political choice in the visual layout lies not in what is shown, but in what is kept out of view. In autobiographical photography, as Adams points out, the "withheld photograph" reveals the tension between what is displayed and what is concealed (2000, xxi, 10, 22). Rugg similarly notes that figures like Walter Benjamin and Christa Wolf avoided portrait photographs in their memoirs to resist surveillance and prevent the camera from reducing them to passive objects (Rugg 1997, 18-19, 231).

In *Unbowed*, a sharp divide separates the written text from the photographic insert. In prose, Maathai offers raw accounts of physical

suffering: being beaten unconscious at Freedom Corner, enduring head injuries, and receiving stitches after the Karura ambush (221-222, 268-269). She also describes the police attack on March 3, 1992, when elderly mothers of political prisoners stripped off their clothes to place an ancestral curse on armed officers (220).

None of these scenes appear in the photographs. The book includes no images of Maathai injured in a hospital bed, bleeding from the head, or incapacitated. Nor does it include pictures of the protesting mothers unclothed at Freedom Corner, despite the enduring fame of that moment in Kenyan political history (Maathai 220; Boehmer 2005, 4-5). This silence is a calculated choice. Postcolonial feminist critics have long noted that imperial and patriarchal media have used pictures of wounded or exposed African female bodies as spectacles of defeat, pity, or exotic fascination (Boehmer 2005, 4-6; Thompson 2018, 21-22). Reproducing hospital photographs or pictures of unclothed women would have opened their bodies to sensationalist consumption.

Keeping these painful images out of the visual record is an assertion of visual sovereignty. By restricting physical trauma and cultural curses to written prose – where their spiritual, historical, and political meanings can be explained on the author's own terms – Maathai refuses to let the camera reduce women's resistance to a spectacle of victimhood. She indeed preserves, through this photographic selection, the dignity of the body, curating instead an archive of shared labour, political resilience, and collective victory.

CONCLUSION

Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed* shows that ecological resistance can be expressed in the manner the book itself is made. Beyond telling a story of activism, the memoir uses its design, language, typography, and photos to challenge political oppression and colonial history. First, resistance begins on the opening pages. The title *Unbowed* does not celebrate a lonely, stoic hero; it comes from a collective moment when protesting mothers refused to give up ("We remained unbowed"). The opening biblical passage ties environmental health directly to political freedom, while printing the physical book on recycled paper puts the conservation ethic of *mottainai* into practice. Second, Maathai reclaims local knowledge through language. She rejects colonial school rules that punished native speech, weaving Kikuyu plant names, seasons, and local place-names back into the text. She even asserts her independence by adding a letter to spell her last name as "*Maatha*" and including traditional oral stories in the book. Third, the visual arrangement of print and bodily sacrifice work together to confront state violence. Finally, the photographic archive exercises visual control. By showing rural women at work and documenting protested land boundaries, the pictures celebrate real community labour. At the same time, by intentionally omitting photos of her own hospitalized body or the unclothed protesting mothers, Maathai protects their dignity and refuses to turn their suffering into a spectacle.

In the end, *Unbowed* proves that for dispossessed communities, telling a life story requires every tool available – from page design and language to physical marks and curated images. The printed page is never just a passive sheet of paper; it becomes an active ground of struggle where words, bodies, and images remain unbowed.

Competing interests

No competing interests exist.

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