Rhetorical Leadership of a Data Story

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Rhetorical Leadership of a Data Story

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Developments in teleconferencing, necessitated by the COVID pandemic, have changed the ways that Indigenous and marginalized communities participate in development planning. In this paper I examine digital artifacts (recorded Zoom meetings and digital data stories) to uncover the rhetorical leadership strategies of Indigenous and minority population leaders as they reach international audiences. I ask if presentation of data stories and participation in international development meetings facilitated by teleconferencing have become a way to resist dominant social narratives that have been produced by mainstream media with little grounding in or for the community.

To answer this question, I examine the use of emplaced rhetoric and the ways that leaders have negotiated the presentation of community data in these new digital spaces. I focus on one moment of conflict—the eviction of 8,000 Kenyans from Kariobangi North in May of 2020. I examine how this community, which has been historically excluded from decision making, negotiated the unique rhetorical constraints and opportunities afforded by digital storytelling and teleconferencing to establish their own for rhetorical leadership that successfully stopped future evictions.

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> "How can the urban poor claim space? It is through data."
>
> (Land Portal, 2022, 1:19:03)

The COVID pandemic necessitated developments in teleconferencing that have changed the ways that Indigenous and marginalized communities participate in development planning. In this essay I examine emplaced rhetoric via digital artifacts (recorded Zoom meetings and digital data stories created from aerial photos, arc-GIS maps, and oral histories) to uncover the rhetorical leadership strategies of Indigenous and minority population leaders as they reach international audiences. I use the eviction of 8,000 Kenyans from Kariobangi North, who historically have been excluded from decision making, to understand how marginalized communities can negotiate the unique rhetorical constraints and opportunities afforded by digital storytelling and teleconferencing to establish their own form of rhetorical leadership based on emplaced rhetoric. I conclude that the presentation of data stories, as well as marginalized community members' participation in international development meetings, as facilitated by teleconferencing, have become a way to resist dominant social narratives produced by mainstream media with little grounding in or for the community.

This paper begins with a background in the literature on marginalized communities' rhetorical leadership, their use of ICTs (internet and communication technologies) prior to COVID, and an analysis of how COVID's restrictions on international travel altered deliberations and development policy making. Then, I introduce the case study of "Wachira's Data Story: Rapid Mapping of Areas Marked for Demolition." This data story demonstrates how rhetorical leaders from Kenya have utilized emplaced rhetoric (understood to be postcolonial message-making about the environment) to build community within local contexts while also reaching international audiences.

Marginalized Community Networks and Rhetorical Leadership Before COVID

Historically marginalized communities simultaneously are the most vulnerable to environmental threats and the least likely to receive advantages of environmental development. Their rhetorical leadership is understood here as the speech acts of leaders not in official positions of power in the community—they are not presidents, parliamentarians, queens, or kings.

Rather, they are individuals who "emerge as leaders because of their role in framing experience in a way that provides a viable basis for action."[1] These leaders converse across multiple audiences, and their speech acts are their own when they make presentations. The leadership of the organizations I examine operate differently from the way that many development projects work, in which community members are engaged only during a period of local consultation, potentially collecting long interviews with designated community leaders which are then condensed, interpreted, and presented by developers rather than community members.[2] Development planners often are divided on the role that marginalized communities can, or should, play in their own community development and do not easily relinquish narrative control to community members.

Katheryn M. Olson of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee argues that rhetorical leaders must address the ways that their voices are distorted or undervalued in environmental and social development in ethical ways; rhetorical leadership is not propaganda.[3] As a remedy, scholars emphasize a practice of rhetoric *in situ*[4] and advocate for participatory critical rhetoric.[5] Olson outlines a curriculum of Rhetorical Leadership for the social success of humanities students.[6] The leaders analyzed in this paper participated in a similar training program sponsored by the Dutch Tenure Facility. The training employed emplaced rhetoric (ER), a tool which "decenters environmental rhetoric and activism away from Eurocentric texts and places, incentivizing explorations into greening aspects of postcoloniality. . . . ER recenters agency of marginalized rhetors and respects them as emplaced persons with valuable knowledge."[7] Within the context of this essay, the space in ER is both physical (Kariobangi North) and online (through video recorded presentations distributed via new and social media).

The use and claiming of online spaces has long been practiced by Indigenous and minority language speakers[8] whose work has resulted in Indigenous-specific platforms.[9] In East Africa, migrant and nomadic communities have used new and social media to engage in democratic deliberations,[10] including Maasai communities using YouTube to protest environmental hazards,[11] and engage in policy making.[12] While some engagement occurs through video, other communities have clustered around the use of hashtags encouraging community members to speak their own languages (such as #speakcree)[13] and indigenoustweets.com.[14] New and social media have become a critical tool to connect Indigenous communities separated by modern borders,[15]

connecting individuals within the community and community members with their advocates.

Utilizing new and social media, many marginalized communities forged new international networks for information exchange and support. Emergent communicative networks between Indigenous communities facing similar environmental threats demonstrate the ways that marginalized communities support community education, alliances, and networks amongst themselves.[16] Yet, a need exists to better understand the ways that networks support communication between communities and an international audience of decisionmakers.

Scientific studies focused on technological, geographic, and conservation concerns in the area have, at times, come close to addressing the need for Indigenous, non-western focused research. A plethora of scholars have examined inclusion and consultation amongst Indigenous communities, seeking a more accurate understanding of climate change.[17] These studies emphasize the ways that Indigenous leaders address climate change and the environment differently, highlighting how Indigenous and marginalized community members negotiate development policy.[18] However, Indigenous and marginalized leaders typically only receive space for a short quote or narrative within a much larger text that emphasizes the scientist as an interpreter of Indigenous knowledge.[19] Research also lacks the deep historical conceptualization that Indigenous and marginalized communities can provide, making academic representations prone to mischaracterization.[20] Indigenous and marginalized community members' desire to represent themselves, to forge new communities, and to participate in decentralized digital communication networks primed Indigenous communities to adapt rapidly to new modes of communication in the era of COVID, which allowed for their direct participation in decision making. To be clear, many of marginalized community members were ready to participate in online deliberations prior to COVID, but organizations were not ready to hold public deliberations until COVID prevented travel and in person meetings.

COVID Changes

COVID necessitated the movement of academic and policy making deliberations to online spaces such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, producing a rupture in the construction of these meetings, deliberations, and development

decisions. As events moved online, they became more accessible to marginalized communities. No longer was it necessary to send just one representative from a community to meet with development practitioners; anyone who wanted, and had the ability, to get online could participate in decision making processes. Moreover, no longer were geographically distant communities unable to form collaborative networks. Prior to COVID, a (presumed or perceived) split existed between low-tech, rural/marginalized/Indigenous communities' actions and movements and urban, high-tech settler and colonialist communication.

Castro-Sotomayor defines "organizations at-the-margins" as not urban, with limited access to technology, and use non-dominant languages.[21] COVID opened a space for organizations at-the-margin to gain prominence, power, and a space to participate in decision making. Utilizing mobile technologies including cell phones, satellite connections, and (nearly instantaneous) translations, organizations at-the-margins were able to engage in multinational deliberations. These engagements necessitated quick developments of rhetorical leadership designed to capitalize on the opportunity to speak in larger spaces. As Peeples and Depoe argue, "voice is the currency of environmental struggle."[22] Through teleconferencing, many communities found and projected their voices.

In what follows I examine an example of how the Kariobangi North community in Nairobi, Kenya and their local advocates worked with an international organization, the Tenure Facility, to utilize emplaced rhetoric to negotiate the presentation of their identity in digital spaces, resulting in lasting changes to their lands, community, and environment. I begin by introducing the community and the organization.

Kariobangi North, Nairobi Kenya

The Kariobangi North district is two square kilometers, located 15 kilometers outside of the Nairobi city center. The 2009 Kenyan census estimated that 81,288 residents lived in the area, many of them the decedents of the rural to urban migration that happened during Kenya's independence from the United Kingdom in 1963.[23] Since residents do not have a long-historic connection to the land, Kariobangi North residents occupy a difficult rhetorical position as the ability to claim a historic connection to land is central to many Kenyan land cases. Additionally, Kariobangi North advocates claim that recent national

censuses did not accurately reflect their population, which contributes to their inability to demand public services and democratic representation.

Kariobangi North residents have faced discrimination and attacks on their survival. The Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company claims they own the Kariobangi district and the Kariobangi North residents have illegally occupied the land since 2008.[24] Other reports indicate that the district's apartments and slums face high levels of crime, a lack of water, and poor sanitation.[25] As a remedy, the city targeted Kariobangi North, alongside six other districts, for eradication, which would have eliminated housing for an estimated 8,000 people in Kariobangi North and 71,000 people in the other districts.[26] Although Kenyan courts halted the evictions,[27] police and officials from the Nairobi Water and Sewerage Company arrived in Kariobangi North and utilized excavating machinery to destroy the community—including homes, markets, schools, and houses of worship.[28] Deputy President William Ruto called the evictions "that kind of spectacle . . . [that] is inhumane, unconstitutional and should never be allowed to happen again."[29] The evictions occurred during the 2020 COVID outbreak and quarantine.

Destroying their residences put the marginalized Kariobangi North community at even greater risk as they were now homeless *and* breaking the law for not being in a home during the COVID quarantine curfew.[30] After eviction, prior residents were at greater risk of arrest, fines, and violence from state agencies, private security, and gangs.[31] Many Kariobangi North inhabitants remained in the district, living on top of the rubble of their former homes they were prevented from rebuilding.[32] The participation of the Kariobangi North families, in the days before and after the demolition, facilitated the creation of Wachira's data story.

Many organizations observed and commented on the demolitions in Kariobangi North, although I struggled to find government or statistical information about who would be affected, where they were located, and if they had a legal case for living on the Kariobangi North lands. The data story examined in this essay brings together divergent media sources, ranging from sounds to images to data points to explain and to contextualize Kariobangi North data for both domestic and international audiences.

Data Stories

The data story of the Kariobangi North people was produced by a local Kenyan organization, Pamoja Trust, and sponsored by the Dutch organization the "International Land and Forest Tenure Facility ("Tenure Facility") as part of their annual data story competition. This essay focuses on one entry to the International Land and Forest Tenure Facility ("Tenure Facility") Data Story Contest. Established in 2014, the Tenure Facility advocates for land reform that enables Indigenous communities to gain legal titles, ownership, and access to their traditional lands. They argue that Indigenous and marginalized communities' control and right to lands can mitigate climate change, work towards conservation goals, and preserve traditional communities. The Data Stories Contest contributes to the mission of securing land tenure by presenting and narrating complex data sets to local and international stakeholders. The first competition, held in 2019, occurred in person, with presentation of the data stories occurring in the Netherlands. COVID moved the presentation of the stories and the award ceremony online. Now, the data stories are publicly available, archived on YouTube, and accessible to an international audience.

Diana Wachira from Habitat International Coalition (HIC) and the Pamoja Trust, who submitted her story "Rapid Mapping of Areas Marked for Demolition," won the 2021 data story contest. In what follows I analyze both her data story and her presentation, shared via a live Zoom session held on July 19, 2022 with live translation, followed by a question-and-answer period. Wachira was joined in that event by staff from the Land Portal and the second and third place contest winners.

Wachira's Data Story: Rapid Mapping of Areas Marked for Demolition

Wachira presented her data story to an international audience from her office in Nairobi, Kenya. She spoke in English from a sparsely decorated room about evictions in Nairobi that resulted in the displacement of 80,000 people as the city attempted to reclaim urban land for infrastructure service developments.

Wachira's work addresses local and international audiences to frame the narrative of eviction. The most immediate audience for the data story, the households and community of Nairobi, advocated the cessation of evictions through multimodal emplaced rhetoric that relied on photography and imagery.

She began by gathering news clippings and cellphone video recordings of evictions sourced from social media such as YouTube, adding the collected media to her team's own production of images, reports, and maps.[33] The images portray both the dehumanizing effects of eviction, alongside the quantitative data—for example, the team gathered pictures of children living in Kariobahgi North and juxtaposed the images with maps indicating how many children the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company displaced within the community. The images highlighted the effect of the double bind, with evicted residents rendered criminal because the Company forced denizens of the community to violate the curfew by not having a permanent residence, embodied by the children forced to become homeless, criminalized, and at significant risk of catching COVID.

Wachira encouraged environmental justice conversations within the public sphere of Kariobangi North via the understanding and articulation of their own data. In July 2022 Wachira reflected on the use of pathos in the stories to enhance the persuasive appeal of the data: the images show the "gross violation of rights of mothers and children and the luggage that they had that they could carry away from their wreckages . . . it was very emotional in the ways that we used this imagery."[34] She reported that the narratives equipped Kariobangi North residents with the knowledge of how the evictions affected their community: "For those who were not able to access the maps or the special technology then the data story made it possible for them to actually see this is what it means in the case of this eviction take place in these kinds of settlements."[35] Each family's story contributed to the community's narrative of discrimination.

Wachira's production of demographic data inspired new public spheres and activism within the Kariobangi North community. She noted that many residents either did not think the evictions would happen, did not understand their magnitude, or were resigned that nothing could be done to change the outcome. In collecting images and oral histories, Wachira and her team began a conversation about the evictions, helping community members identify like-minded residents. The research team also sponsored impromptu gatherings as community members came together to participate in data production. Wachira explains, "gaps in data processes have resulted in a lot of civil society actors engaging with informal settlement communities and because of this engagement you'll find over time informal settlements are constantly growing and getting a voice."[36] Community participation created advocates through several data-generating activities.

Wachira's research team combined data generated by the community to produce the data story. Data included the use of ariel imagery and photography to produce arc-GIS maps housed on S3 platforms. Researchers then linked the maps to oral histories of community members produced from responses to the question, "What if this land is demolished, what will be the impacts?"[37] The resulting complex visualizations created an understanding of land use, the importance of the land to the community, and how community members would respond to change, predicting the implications of the evictions.

The power of Kariobangi North community members' voices in the data stories protected members of other marginalized communities. Their stories highlighted the contrast between the everyday denizen's lived experiences and power brokers within their own community. The diverse media present in the data visualizations showed how the destruction of rights, property, and community stood in contrast to statements made by the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company—which only spoke of the city's sewage and sanitation needs. The data-driven arguments contributed to a partnership with Muungano wa Wanavijiji (a national federation of Kenyan slum dwellers), which organized community activism and community preparedness for the evictions.[38] Thus, the data story trained "informal populations [who were] able to claim visibility, they were able to show that they're actually there in these informal areas."[39] The Kenyan Housing Coalition then used the Kariobangi North data stories to force the Kenyan Ministry of Water and Sanitation to cancel additional land repossessions in other districts by July 2020.[40]

Finding a community voice, as argued by Peeples and Depoe, is critical to securing environmental justice.[41] Wachira agrees and her work shows that, when communities produce their own data, "they're actively claiming their presence."[42] Additionally, by utilizing multiple media forms, including aerial photography and images of children, communities can generate a sense of urgency as well as understand the magnitude of change the evictions would produce. When presented to international audiences, the data can alter development projects by minimizing their effects on marginalized communities. Wachira's data story demonstrates how a marginalized community created its own data to frame the narrative of evictions, human rights, and environmental justice. Furthermore, the following analysis of Wachira's data story highlights the importance of emplaced rhetoric (ER) as a tool of rhetorical leadership during moments of crisis for marginalized communities.

EMPLACED RHETORIC

Wachira's data story engages the Kenyan postcolonial milieu by interweaving hard data sets, narrative storytelling, and international appeals for human rights to achieve environmental justice for Kariobangi North. By mixing different medias and platforms, Wachira's data story connects the physical world outside of Nairobi to the experiences of Kariobangi residents as they connect to the world.

Akin to Ellen Gorsevski's argument that Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathaithis utilized emplaced rhetoric (ER) to inspire international environmental justice movements, Wachira's data story presents the narrative of a diverse, engaged, and deep-rooted community linked to the land. ER, Gorsevki tells us, engages "contemporary environmental communication in postcolonial contexts."[43] The crisis analyzed in this essay differs from that discussed by Maathaithis. Maathaithis's advocacy speaks of beautiful places such as parks, lakes, and ancestorial homelands, valued for "social, cultural, political, economic, and historic" relationships.[44] Although not known for ecological beauty, Kariobangi North nevertheless supports a multi-generational space cherished by its residents. Some families have fought to stay on the land despite more than 100 years of attempted evictions under the guise of removing "unhygienic" housing.[45]

Wachira's data story uses ER to highlight the community, their data, and their determination to continue residing on their land. Her rhetorical leadership moves the depictions of Kariobangi from the mainstream media's focus on hygiene to her framing of the community as one of resilience. She works beyond what the activist Reuben Kigame refers to as the "bulldozer trumpeted song of 'they were there illegally'"[46] to humanize residents, their multigenerational history in Kariobangi, and the conflicting government regulations which they faced.

In contrast to Wachira's data story that combines ariel photography, mapping, and community narrative to frame the evictions as disrupting individual lives and an established community, news accounts lacked context and dehumanized community members. The KNT News Kenya report showed police using tear gas to clear residents and protesters to make way for bulldozers that carried out the evictions, including images of police vehicles and protesters on a road behind a burning wall of tires.[47] Another Kenyan new service, *the Star Kenya*, began their report of the evictions with images of backhoes demolishing houses. *The Star*'s reporting included interviews with

residents narrating the unexpected destruction of their homes as neighbors sort through rubble in search of their possessions.[48] Both news sources' portrayal of the evictions lacked the history of the community as well as context for why the evictions occurred, where the residents came from, or where they should go. Watching these news reports we see a distant, poor, at times dehumanized resident—much different than the humanistic approach taken by Wachira.

Wachira's work frames the evictions as a violation of human rights. She narrates the evacuation and contextualizes the disenfranchisement of the Kariobangi North community members as well as those of the five other communities slated for eviction and demolition. She offers evidence of Kariobangi North's lack of human services and rejects the idea that the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company ordered the evictions so that hygiene could be improved. Instead, she reminders her auditors what is at stake—the "loss of life and property, loss of livelihoods, and loss of social bonds" of community members.[49] The risks Wachira identifies broadcasts the interconnectedness of the community and space—the ER—and frames preserving the community as a humanizing action.

In Wachira's accounting, the loss of community, housing, schools, and medical care result from greed. Wachira frames the evictions as a destructive act that enables richer Kenyans to have better access to sewage and public services[50] while destroying the homes and livelihoods of other Kenyans. Wachira's data stories utilize ER to represent environmental justice as a physical, cultural, and political locus within a public sphere. Her work brings forth the perspective of residents of Kariobangi North as both active and empowered citizens. Their data stories map and photograph their homes as existing in Kariobangi. The project manifests narratives from the community that tell how the spaces are used, why they are important, and how community is found in the district. From Wachira's work, Kariobangi North emerges as a rhetorically significant place—one filled with organized, informed citizens who have a strong community tied to the land. Used as a unifying technique in the data stories, ER not only "resist[s] environmental and cultural destruction, but also actively creat[es] opportunities to foster political and social justice."[51] Although bulldozers razed Kariobangi North, Wachira's rhetorical leadership preserved the data story of the district, preventing evictions in other marginalized communities.

The humanizing stories used by Wachira weave together a complex story of life, hope, and imagination in Kariobangi North. Wachira and the Tenure

Facility's collection and processing of data draws community members into their stories. They argue, "If communities have the capacity or the understanding to easily express different stories about how they experience life, how they deal with challenges from their day-to-day lives, then it became very easy for them to participate in decision making."[52] By participating in the process of mapping their community before it was demolished, Kariobangi North residents contributed to deliberations that spanned beyond the documentation of their community to enable decisionmakers to visualize and to understand the effects of additional planned demolitions. Through collected media, marginalized communities came alive, creating a pathos-filled data story argument stronger than any excel spreadsheet data or printed report could hope to achieve on their own.

Throughout her data story, Wachira invites viewers to participate in the interpretation of their data. She discusses how the complex set of maps and images can predict how many families and communities would be affected if the demolitions occurred in a 500-meter radius or a 1000 meter radius from a location. The community networks, schools, and religious institutions affected and mapped in Wachira's project highlight potential spaces of public deliberation and community making. The data story uses situated data points to forge new connections through proximity, shared risk, and imagination of a different future. In the current case study, a community of 80,000 people was mapped within a short time span. Although their homes were leveled, their data stories remain, searchable on GoogleMaps, allowing viewers to walk virtually through the demolished neighborhoods before their destruction. Databased in protected cloud servers, the memory and history of the Kariobangi North community cannot be erased by governments or special interest groups.

Other presentations archived by the Tenure Facility show the capacity-building implications of data stories' rhetorical leadership. The collected body of data stories can advance scholars' and the public's understanding of ER from one of national parks and prestigious locations to less photographic—but just as important—community spaces threatened by expansion and development. The continued presentation of data stories via Zoom and archived on YouTube advances the potential (and expectation) that marginalized communities and their rhetorical leaders can, and should, have a seat at the table during development planning.

Emplaced through Zoom

Utilizing Zoom for their presentations and interactions, marginalized and Indigenous community leaders who participated in the data story contests employed ER in new ways to encourage meeting participants and observers to understand the value of lands, land access, and the links between cultural and environmental protection. Wachira's work, and that of the larger Pamoja Trust, uses evidence-based research to advocate for the eradication of injustices, strengthen capacities of the urban poor, and produce solutions on city and state levels.[53] The data story addressed in my essay exists as a continuation of that work, and leads to those goals through a "community-centered evidence-based advocacy approach."[54] I argue, however, that data stories do much more: they strengthen civil society. Wachira and the Pamoja Trust strengthened civil society in Kariobangi North by collaborating with community leaders to identify community needs and to inspire resilience. At a fundamental but radical level, they preserved the memory of a community by documenting that the people within the community existed, had been evicted, and yet still desired to remain on the land.

Through the presentation of her data story, Wachira draws attention not only to her project but also to the plight of residents of Kariobangi North and the continued risk of evictions around Nairobi. Her emplaced rhetoric highlighted public values, universalism, and a goal of uniting multiple urban poor communities to press for human rights-based approaches. Her July 2022 presentation of the data story reached an initial 125 participants via a Zoom teleconference. The archived YouTube recording has reached approximately 60 more. Although the number of received audience members appears small, the number of viewers should not lessen the impact those audience members had on the five districts that encompass 71,000 residents whose homes were saved from demolition. A community very much at the margins coalesced around a crisis to inspire new networks, document their past, and cope with oncoming trauma. Activists have created similar data stories in Nigeria, Cambodia, and North Macedonia showing that marginalized communities can utilize emplaced rhetoric as a tool of rhetorical leadership to produce a meta-data story of land movements and activism.

Conclusion

Wachira's work demonstrates how leaders from, and in support of, marginalized communities can interweave hard data sets, narrative storytelling, and international appeals to human rights organizations to achieve environmental justice for their communities. Her work centers residents as emplaced persons with valuable knowledge. Utilizing ER, the Karaiobangi North evictions can be understood not as a hygiene campaign but one of dehumanizing displacement. I began my essay by asking if the presentation of data stories and participation in international development meetings facilitated by teleconferencing has become a way to resist dominant social narratives produced by mainstream media with little grounding in or for the community. In my case study, the clear answer is yes. Wachira's rhetorical leadership emplaced a community bound for distinction and helped save other marginalized communities, developing new public spheres and materially affecting development policy.

The data story, "Rapid Mapping of Areas Marked for Demolition," has also set a rhetorical norm for future data stories. The Tenure Facility has invested in refining Wachira's data story and promoting it through their webpage. As the first-place winner, Wachira's work demonstrates what makes a strong submission for future data story competitions: affecting action on a local level while influencing the production of future data stories and the policy making leadership that they bring.

Future scholarship should engage the larger set of data stories to better understand the emerging body of emplaced rhetoric produced by Indigenous and marginalized communities. What were once "organizations at-the-margins" have new possibilities for engagement both in-person and through online platforms. Their work need not stay marginal and, indeed, is already forging new connections. As demonstrated by the residents of Kariobangi North, emplaced rhetoric need not only occur in the most beautiful spaces. The social, cultural, political, economic, and historic relationships between human communities and place (both on the ground and online) are critical to establishing environmental justice, including land rights for all communities.

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