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The romance of human leaders? A socio-material analysis of a follower's account of being inspired

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ABSTRACT

The romance of leadership (ROL) has been much discussed amongst leadership researchers, yet few researchers actually analyze the way in which it is talked into being as it is socially constructed in the here-and-now of localized interaction. Drawing on the Montreal School's interactional twist to Actor Network Theory with which to analyze transcripts of interview talk from a socio-material perspective, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the way in which a follower discursively constructs leadership. Findings indicate that, from the follower's emic perspective, leadership occurs within a network of human and other-than-human actants that inspire her to act and follow the leader. This therefore challenges and nuances the conventional wisdom of leadership research that locates the ROL in the purely human leader. The implication of this for leadership research is clear: if followers construct (transformational) leadership in terms of socio-materiality, then so should leadership researchers.

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As Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich (1985, 78) put it in their seminal paper, the central argument being advanced by romance of leadership (ROL) scholars is that 'the concept of leadership is a perception that plays a part in the way people attempt to make sense of organizationally relevant phenomena'. In a nutshell, ROL is therefore concerned with the way in which followers socially construct romanticized versions of leadership, often implicitly based on widely circulating theories of leadership, in order to account for what has happened, is happening, or will happen in an organization. Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich's (1985) initial research was followed up by further studies and has grown into an accepted and much researched strand of leadership research. However, it is noticeable that much of this literature is situated, as with most leadership research (Klenke 2016, 3), within an objectivist, positivist, and quantitative paradigm. Consequently, it has been based on theoretical models (Meindl 1995), quantitative analysis of experimental studies (e.g. Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich 1985), surveys, and self-assessment questionnaires (e.g. Schyns, Felfe, and Blank 2007; Schyns, Meindl, and Croon 2007). To date, qualitative studies which investigate the ROL are under-represented and we know little, if anything, about how followers talk romanticized versions of leadership into being.

The purpose of this paper is thus to follow such researchers as Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014), Tourish (2014), and Schnurr and Schroeder (2019) who argue that discursive approaches can offer fresh and new insights into leadership research. More specifically, we draw on the Montreal School's interactional twist to Actor Network Theory (ANT) (see, for example: Cooren 2012; Cooren

et al. 2013; Cooren 2015) which allows us to focus on the interplay between human and other-than-human actants as a self-avowed follower discursively constructs a romanticized version of transformational leadership.

Further, we also seek to add to ROL research by using data drawn from a non-western venue, notably Kenya, which scholars have argued are under-represented in leadership research generally (Walumbwa, Avolio, and Aryee 2011) and in ROL specifically (e.g. Bligh 2011). More specifically, the data we use consist of transcripts of an interview with a self-avowed follower of Wangari Maathai (1940–2011) who was a Nobel Peace Prize winner and internationally recognized leader of Kenya's women's, pro-democracy and environmental movement in the late twentieth century.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we briefly outline the life and work of Wangari Maathai. Second, we discuss and review the literature in relation to the ROL. Third, we outline discursive leadership and The Montreal School's interactional spin to ANT. After presenting the data, we analyze two extracts of interview talk in which the interviewee specifically accounts for her activism by stating that she was inspired by Wangari Maathai (both as a living and a deceased person) and 'things' such as a book, a dream, an event, and so on. In the final sections we zoom out of such a fine-grained single case analysis and discuss the implications of our analyses for leadership research more generally.

Wangari Maathai (1940–2011)

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an in-depth resume of Wangari Maathai's life, suffice it to say that she was born, grew up, and was educated in Kenya during the post-colonial struggle for independence. After finishing high school, she was selected to study in the United States where, in 1966, she was awarded a master's degree in biology. Upon her return to Kenya, she obtained a research position at the University College of Nairobi and began an academic career during which she became the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate. At the same time as working at the University College of Nairobi, she became an active campaigner for environmental conservation and women's rights. In 1977 she was instrumental in setting up the Green Belt Movement which is a grassroots NGO which encourages local communities to plant trees as a way of battling environmental degradation caused by deforestation which is one of the root causes of rural poverty. Women were, and still are, especially important in this movement because, as primary care-givers, Wangari Maathai realized that if they could be persuaded to plant more trees then this would become a way of providing fuel, food, shelter, and income that would be beneficial to local communities.

Whilst not initially directly addressing political issues, it became clear that responsible governance of the environment would necessitate changes in the political system. Consequently, Wangari Maathai's activities brought her into conflict with the Kenyan political establishment and the one-party rule of the then president of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi. This struggle is perhaps typified by two political battles which opposed the government selling off public land in the Uhuru Park, in Nairobi, and the Karura Forest, just outside the central business area of Nairobi. Such land deals would have favored the associates of Moi and deprived Kenyans of two important 'green lungs' within and around the city of Nairobi. Consequently, whilst protests against the destruction of parkland and forest were obviously framed as environmental action, on the other hand, the protests had a staunchly pro-democratic and anti-Moi element to them which was met by state-sponsored violence. Wangari Maathai, as the figurehead of such protest, was imprisoned and forced to leave the country. However, in 2002 following Moi's enforced retirement from politics, she was finally elected to parliament where she rose to become the assistant minister for the Environment and Natural Resources. As a result of her activities, in 2004, she became the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy, and peace. Her vision, enshrined in the Green Belt Movement, can be summed up as that of establishing 'a

values-driven society of people who consciously work for continued improvement of their livelihoods and a greener, cleaner world.¹⁷

The romance of leadership

The ROL, most notably articulated by Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich (1985) in their seminal paper, is an approach to leadership that takes a social constructionist and attributional stance to leadership and considers why and how followers attribute agency to leaders. Consequently, leadership is understood as an 'explanatory category that can be used to explain and account for organizational activities and outcomes' (Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich 1985, 79). Since leaders and leadership are used to account for such organizational activities and outcomes, it is unsurprising that followers enact a romantic approach to leadership in which the single atomized leader is considered to be the agent of change. Followers therefore often implicitly draw on notions of transformational leadership, which Meindl (1990, 182; cited in Schyns, Meindl, and Croon 2007, 32) describes as a form of 'hyper romanticism', as a way of understanding leadership.

Since Burns's (1978) seminal work, transformational leadership has perhaps developed into one of the most widespread and popular theories of leadership and has been the focus of significant research output (for an overview, see, for example: Avolio and Yammarino 2013). Whilst, as Rafferty and Griffin (2004) point out, there is ambiguity and difference in defining the dimensions of transformational leadership, nevertheless, foremost amongst the various conceptualizations of transformational leadership is perhaps Bass and Avolio's (1994, 3) notion of the 4I's, which are:

- idealized influence whereby 'leaders behave in a way that results in their being role models for their followers';
- inspirational motivation whereby 'transformational leaders behave in ways that motivate and inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their followers' work';
- intellectual stimulation, whereby 'transformational leaders stimulate their followers' efforts';
- individual consideration, whereby 'transformational leaders pay special attention to each individual's needs'.

It is noticeable in the way that Bass and Avolio (1994, 3) craft their description of the 4Is that the transformational leader is seen as agent and the follower as passive recipient of the leader's desire for change. Noticeable also is that the performance of transformational leadership is seen as a purely human affair in which other-than-human elements have no place. However, whilst most work on transformational leadership focuses on the leader, ROL reverses the lens and focuses on the follower's perception of leadership. Though some researchers (e.g. Collinson et al. 2018) see the roots of ROL stretching beyond Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich's (1985) seminal paper, nevertheless it was this paper that initiated a flurry of research into how followers construct romantic images of leaders and leadership. Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich (1985), in their seminal paper, analyzed the way in which leadership was constructed in the popular press, student dissertations, general business periodicals, and in experimental studies in which students reported on vignettes. This was followed by further studies (Meindl and Ehrlich 1987) and the development of a ROL scale (Meindl 1998) which formed the basis of further studies (for an overview of such research, see for example: Bligh and Schyns 2007; Bligh, Kohles, and Pillai 2011; Collinson et al., 2018; Uhl-Bien and Pillai 2007).

Whilst such a body of largely quantitative and survey based research has no doubt brought significant understanding of how followers construct (romantic) images of leaders, as Sinha and Jackson (2006, 233) point out, 'considerable ambiguity or vagueness about the underlying processes and mechanisms by which transformational leaders exert their influence on followers' still remains, and as Meindl (1995, 339/340) noted:

Much sweat and tears have gone into redoubled efforts to remediate leadership studies by disentangling, decoupling, or separating leadership from its origins: objectifying it—cleaning it up, so to speak—so that researchers can better work with it as a scientific construct, independent of its lay meanings.

Responding to these observations, the purpose of this paper is thus to make visible such ‘lay meanings’ of leadership (cf. Meindl 1995, 340) as they emerge in face-to-face interaction during a research interview and before they are cleaned up, disentangled, decoupled, and separated from the site in which they emerged. In this way, we seek to avoid treating the follower as the ‘faceless other’ (Ford and Harding 2018) or as a mere aggregate of statistical analysis. Rather, we seek to analyze what the follower actually says and to explicate (i.e. demonstrates by unfolding the phenomenon and making it visible in a more detailed way) the follower’s emic account of leadership.

Discursive leadership

As already pointed out, ROL often takes a social constructionist approach to the ‘just whatness’ of leadership and followership. Central to social constructionism is that idea that language is much more than a means of communicating pre-existent realities, rather it is a way of constructing realities, or as Burr (2015, 11) puts it: ‘when people talk to each other, the world gets constructed’. Therefore, in order to make visible, and thus analyzable, the social construction of a follower’s account of leadership as it happens, we take a discursive approach to leadership (Fairhurst 2007). Since Gail Fairhurst’s (2007) seminal work on discursive leadership – which dedicates an entire chapter to material mediations and leadership – there has been a steadily increasing stream of work that takes the linguistic turn in organizational studies seriously and which seeks to analyze how leadership is brought off in the here and now of interaction (see Schnurr 2018 for an overview of this work). Whilst researchers taking a discursive approach to leadership studies have used many different methods such as conversation analysis (Clifton 2019), discourse analysis (Wodak, Kwon, and Clarke 2011), and sociolinguistics (Vine et al. 2008), common to this work is the use of transcripts of naturally-occurring workplace interaction, notably business meetings, as data. However, Clifton and Dai (2019) have recently suggested that one way in which discursive leadership could move forward is to shift focus from how leadership is achieved as *in situ* workplace practice, to studying how conceptions of leadership are talked into being in other venues such as research interviews. After all, as Alvesson and Spicer (2011) suggest, leadership should not only be considered in terms of practice, but also in terms of how social actors make sense of the world. Consequently, taking a discursive approach to the analysis of interview talk becomes an ideal way of explicating the central concern of ROL which is to investigate how followers ‘construct their experiences in terms of leadership concepts – that is when they interpret their relationships as having a leadership-followership dimension’ (Meindl 1995, 332).

More specifically, in order to investigate the discursive construction of lay accounts that romanticize leadership, we take an approach to the analysis of naturally occurring talk which is inspired by the Montreal School. The Montreal School can loosely be described as a collection of scholars inspired by the work of, most notably, François Cooren who has given ANT an ‘interactional and organizational twist’ (Fairhurst and Cooren 2009, 474). As Law (1992, 380) argues, the heart of ANT is the study of how ‘society, organizations, agents and machines are all effects generated in patterned networks of diverse (not simply human) materials’. Key to ANT is thus the notion of generalized symmetry (Callon 1986) whereby it is argued that researchers should not privilege the agency of humans alone, rather when seeking to explain sociological phenomena they should consider the agency of both human and non-human actants. From this perspective, as Latour (1996a, 373) states, ‘an actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of action’. Thus, in terms of leadership, drawing on ANT, Grint (2005, 49) demonstrates that traffic lights lead. This, he argues, is because they tell drivers when to stop and when to go.

However, such a proposition could give the impression that materiality is synonymous with physical objects, yet as a Carlile et al. (2013, 4) suggest, 'materiality is an inherently polysemic concept' and so is not necessarily restricted to artifacts. Cooren, Fairhurst, and Huët (2012, 301), for example, point out that the words materiality and matter come from the same Latin roots '*materia*' which signifies both the substance from which something is made and the 'grounds, reason or cause for something', hence the expression 'what's the matter?' which enquires into, or demands an account for, the cause of a person's conduct or state of mind. Thus, following Cooren, Fairhurst, and Huët (2012), in this paper, we consider materiality, more widely, to refer to 'things that matter' which therefore includes, *inter alia*, 'passions, principles, arguments, facts, values, dispositions, texts, collectives, etc.' (Cooren 2010, 4) which may cause social actors to act in particular ways. For example, following this logic, Cooren (2010, 61) argues that jealousy – something that matters to Othello – was part of a network of agents that led to the murder of Desdemona. Interpreting materiality as 'things that matter', we are particularly interested in focusing on who and what is said to animate, prompt, or drive the actions of a follower. We particularly focus on the things that inspire (cf. the 4Is of transformational leadership), and therefore matter to, the interviewee because, as Latour (1996b, 237) puts it: *faire c'est faire faire*, to do is to make happen. Thus, in the interviewee's account, it is inspiration that has led her to act in much the same way as it was jealousy that led Othello to act.

Essential to the Montreal School's approach to analysis is the metaphor of ventriloquism i.e. 'the phenomenon by which an actor makes another actor speak through the production of a given utterance' (Cooren 2010, 1). Further, it is important to note that ventriloquism is a two-way process: not only can the ventriloquist make the dummy speak, but the dummy can make the ventriloquist speak. This is captured in Cooren's (2010, 9) notion of upstream and downstream ventriloquism. Upstream ventriloquism relates to the way in which the 'things that matter' are staged as making humans say or do things, and downstream ventriloquism relates to the way in which humans act as spokespeople for 'things that matter'. Separating the process of ventriloquism into upstream and downstream is, as Cooren (2010, 115) recognizes, necessarily and a researcher's concept which eases understanding of who (or what) is acting on whom, whereas *in situ* the actual process of ventriloquism entails a constant oscillation between the ventriloquist and his/her dummy in which the entities are intertwined and indivisible.

Using the notion of ventriloquism, we argue that it is through the fine-grained analysis of naturally-occurring interaction (the terra firma of interaction as Cooren (2010, 11) puts it) that researchers will be able to investigate how organizational phenomena, such as ROL, are communicatively constituted in and through ventriloquism. Methodologically speaking, once the recordings of actual interaction have been made, they are then transcribed. It is through the repeated listening of recordings required for transcription that the researcher begins to notice phenomena of interest. These phenomena of interest are therefore data-driven and derived from the display of the participants' own emic understanding of the social action that is being performed: analysis it is not driven by a priori theorizing. Once phenomena of interest are isolated in the talk of the social actors, the analyst can begin to unearth the participants' own practical understanding of events and, in the case of this paper, demonstrate how a follower accounts for her followership in her own terms. More specifically, without claiming to adhere to a canonical form of conversation analysis, scholars adhering to the approach of the Montreal School nevertheless draw on the findings and technical vocabulary of conversation analysis to carry out fine-grained analyses of the sequences of talk so that they can reveal, to borrow phrase from Harvey Sacks (1984), the 'machinery of talk' through which ventriloquism is enacted (see Bencherki 2014, for more on this issue).

Whilst the vast majority of work which takes a ventriloquial approach to analysis uses transcripts of naturally-occurring workplace interaction, this, as Wilhoit and Kisselburgh (2017) argue, need not be the case and in this paper we use interview talk to access the interviewee's practical reasoning which ventriloquizes both human agents and 'things that matter' when accounting for being an environmental activist. In this paper, we will especially focus on how the interviewee attributes agency to someone or something 'that matters' and asserts that she was inspired to follow in

Wangari Maathai's footsteps because something or someone inspired her to act in a particular way. The interviewee thus presentifies (i.e. makes present in her talk/account) agentive things or human agents who are metaphorically the puppet master (leader) that makes her, the dummy (follower), act in a particular way (upstream ventriloquism), and reciprocally things and people that matter which lead her to act as animated and made present in her talk (downstream ventriloquism). Thus, despite the fact that the data we use in this paper come from a research venue, we nevertheless treat interview talk as naturally-occurring interaction and claim that through such an analysis we are able to show how social actors render their (reported) actions account-able, in the ethnomethodological sense of explaining or making intelligible on demand (Garfinkel 1967). Consequently the Montreal School's interactional spin to ANT becomes an ideal tool with which to analyze the construction of a follower's romanticized account of leadership.

Data

The data we use here are the transcripts of two extracts of talk that come from a research interview that was recorded in Kenya, in 2019 (see [appendix](#) for a list of transcription symbols used). The original focus of the research project was on environmental leadership in Kenya, but we noticed that such a theme inevitably led to talk about the work of Wangari Maathai who became the focus of this paper. We therefore reduced our research focus to four interviews with the winners of the Wangari Maathai prize for the environment and in this paper we focus on just one of these interviews which was carried out with an interviewee given the pseudonym Amy, a young environmental activist in Kenya. We chose this interview for further analysis because a recurrent theme was how Wangari Maathai's vision inspired (cf. classic notions of transformational leadership) the interviewee to act and become an environmental activist. When transcribing the interviews we noticed that inspiration was a theme raised by both the interviewer (analysis of extract one) and interviewee (analysis of extract two). Consequently, without having a pre-conceived research hypothesis concerning socio-materiality, followership, inspiration, or whatever that could skew the analyses to looking for talk that supported a priori hypotheses, we began to investigate how the topic of inspiration, as articulated by the interviewee and interviewer, was used to romanticize leadership.

In line with the Montreal School's interactional approach to ANT and its reliance of fine-grained analyses of interaction, we take a qualitative approach to the analyses of the interview-talk. We thus consider the interview and the interaction between interviewee and interviewer to be a site for the production of meaning in which the interviewee/follower accounts for her beliefs, opinions, and actions and so constructs her experience in terms of implicit leadership theories which is the essence of ROL. In order to capture the *in situ* production of an account of followership in which the interviewee attributes agency to both humans and 'things that matter', we present fine-grained analyses of two extracts of interview talk. On the one hand, we argue that such analyses, because they explicate the interviewee's practical reasoning and sense-making in action, are of interest to ROL researchers in their own right. And, on the other hand, we argue that these analyses make visible generalizable features of followers attributing leadership to both human actants and 'things that matter'.

Analyses

In this section, we analyze two extracts of talk when the topic shifts to inspiration. Inspiration, one of the 4Is of transformational leadership, therefore becomes the focus of our study not because, as researchers, we had a prior interest in inspiration, but because it emerged as a key phenomenon in Amy's account of her followership.

Extract one. 'I'm following in her footsteps'

In the talk prior to line one, the interviewee has been talking about her activities as an environmentalist. We join the interaction in line one, when the interviewer shifts topic from Amy's activities to who or what inspired her to act and how the interviewee uses the notion of inspiration to account for following, as she says, in Wangari Maathai's footsteps (line, 83).

Fragment 1.1 human and 'things that matter' as sources of inspiration

1	IR	what made you=I mean what things or
2		<u>who</u> inspired you to be an environmentalist at such
3		a young age?
4	IE	okay I was inspired by two things one is a person [and
5	IR	[uhu
6		the other is something I saw
7	IR	who was this
8	IE	so the late professor Wangari Maathai

In asking who or what inspired her, Amy is asked to render her activity as an environmentalist account-able (cf. Garfinkel 1967). Significantly, the interviewer first frames this in terms of an other-than-human agent (line 1: what made you). As Latour (1996b, 237) points out, having agency is related to making someone (or something) do something (*faire faire* – in the original French), and in this case the question form 'what made you' explicitly refers to an other-than-human agent that caused Amy to do something. The initial question is then self-repaired to 'what things or who' which suggests that humans as well as other-than-humans may have been agents who/that inspired the interviewee. In line 4, Amy provides a two-part answer: 'I was inspired by two things one is a person and the other is something I saw'. At this point the interviewee topicalizes the 'who', rather than the 'what', and Amy reveals the source of her inspiration to be 'the late professor Wangari Maathai'. It is thus the late professor Wangari Maathai who was the agent who made Amy act, and who inspired Amy in her daily activities. Consequently, in terms of Cooren's metaphor of the ventriloquist: Wangari Maathai is the puppet master who inspires Amy and makes her act. In terms of leadership, if we accept that providing inspiration is a key act of leadership (cf. the 4Is of transformational leadership), then we can say that Amy orients to the late professor Wangari Maathai as a leader.

However, it is noticeable here that, through using the adjective 'the late', Amy makes relevant the fact that Wangari Maathai is deceased. This thus begs the questions: can a deceased person inspire/lead, and if so how is it that a dead leader can nevertheless still be an influential presence in a follower's life? The possibility that deceased people can be present in some way thus opens up consideration of the agency of spectral presences (Derrida 1993) which would imply, from a researcher's perspective 'replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead or alive' (Davis 2005, 373). We stress that this does not imply drawing on any reference to African notions of leadership which can be accounted for in terms of other-than-human spiritual, cosmic, and/or supernatural forces as other researchers have done (e.g. Eyong 2017; Ngunjiri 2010, 757). Rather, this notion of leadership is more in line with Boje and Rhodes (2006) notion of virtual leadership in which it is the image of a leader that does leadership, rather than the leader per se. We develop this point throughout the rest of the analyses.

After a brief aside about the fact that Wangari Maathai and Amy come from the same constituency, Amy begins a story about a dream she had as discussed below.

Fragment 1.2 the dream as inspiration

19.	IR	↓↑aha:::
20.	IE	actually she actually came from where I come from that
21.		is Tetu constituency [and I had this dream when I was a

22.	IR	[yes
23.		young girl I wanted to meet her and plant a tree with her
24.	IR	o::h
25.	IE	it was a dream that I always told everyone and I remember
26.		when I told my grandmother she would tell me if you want to
27.		meet Wangari Maathai and plant a tree with her you have
28.		to study just like she did [because she was the first woman
29.	IR	[okay
30.		in East Africa to get a PhD
31.	IR	that's correct
32.	IE	so she was = I had to study to get to meet her and
33.		to plant a tree with her and I remember one of these
34.		fine days she will come to campaign she was
35.		once my area MP [and you know when you're a child
36.	IR	[yes
37.		and people are waiting for the people to come campaigning
38.		they're surrounding in a certain place I tried to go through
39.		the crowd and they chased me away [so I got to meet
40.	IR	[((slight giggle))
41.		her finally [so::
42.	IR	[so you never got to plant a tree
43.	IE	£no::£
44.	IR	((slight laugh)) £okay£

In the continuation of her turn, Amy accounts for her inspiration in terms of her dream (line 25) to meet Wangari Maathai and plant a tree with her. The dream, rather than Wangari Maathai herself, thus becomes the 'thing that matters' in leading her to become an environmentalist. Moreover, her grandmother also becomes an agent in making the dream come true. This is because the grandmother points out that to make the dream come true and meet and plant a tree with Wangari Maathai the young Amy must study 'just like she [Wangari Maathai] did'. This thus enacts and makes relevant the notion of idealized influence which Amy uses to account for why she was inspired to become an activist. Idealized influence is described by Bass and Avolio (1994, 3) as occurring when 'leaders behave in a way that results in their being role models for their followers' and when 'followers identify with the leaders and want to emulate them'. Thus, in short, in this extract we see how 'something that matters', the dream to meet Wangari Maathai and to plant a tree with her, is made relevant to the interview talk as something that inspires, animates, and impels her to act. This therefore aligns with the work of researchers such as Boje et al. (2011) and Parry and Hansen (2007) who consider that stories, rather than the leaders who tell them, can 'do' leadership, and it adds to such work by suggesting that a follower's inspirational dream to do something can also do leadership in a similar way to the stories of leaders.

In line 43, Amy shifts topic to a story about the non-realization of the dream which is not analyzed for reasons of space. We pick up the analysis in lines 55 following in which Amy returns explicitly to the topic of her inspiration.

Fragment 1.3 the death of Wangari Maathai as inspiration

55.	IE	but the inspiration is there I never got to plant a tree
56.	IR	yeah
57.		with her when I heard she had passed on I was in
58.		high school that was Kangubiri high school in Nyeri
59.	IR	I know it
60.	IE	yeah you know it so I started an environmental
61.		club there and I planted trees which I can take you
62.		and show you the shape of the tree that I planted
63.		which was in school and even my geography teacher
64.		knows ..h this-this tree belong me
65.	IR	yes
66.	IE	yes so when she passed on I- it-it was so sad
67.		because the dream I had this dream and that's why
68.		I'm studying just to meet and plant a tree with her so

In line 55, Amy re-topicalizes ‘inspiration’ (‘but the inspiration is there’). To illustrate this point, she then tells a brief story in which hearing of the death of Wangari Maathai inspires her to start an environmental club at school (lines 57 ff.: when I heard she had passed on I started an environmental club there and I planted trees). It is this event, ‘something that matters’, that becomes the inspiration which motivates Amy to start an environmental club and to plant trees, and so which does leadership. Thus, to return to Cooren’s notion of ventriloquism, it is the death of Wangari that is ventriloquized, made present and made relevant as the source of Amy’s inspiration: the event, rather than the person, is articulated as the agent animating Amy and inspiring/leading her to act.

Fragment 1.4. The book as inspiration

In line 69, Amy re-topicalizes Wangari Maathai’s death (‘now she’s gone’) and discusses a further consequence of this event, namely, the fact that she started reading her books which became a source of inspiration.

69.	IE	now she’s gone what happens to me so I started reading
70.		her ↓books and one of the books that I read it was
71.		Unbowed that inspires (.) everyone and it tells her story
72.		from the beg = it’s like her talking
73.		to you so it inspired me more and I continued er doing
74.		environmental work and today I can be proud to say that I did not
75.		plant a tree with her but I was able to water her tree
76.		at the Green Belt Movement when I won the scholarship
77.		because the scholarship is by the Green Belt Movement
78.	IR	yeah
79.		and I’m also a member I’m the youngest member of
80.		the Green Belt group at the moment
81.	IR	oh wow
82.	IE	I w-was nominated by the board so I didn’t meet her but I
83.		can say that I am proud that I am following in her footsteps
84.	IR	okay
85.	IE	that was one the second

In lines 70 following, Amy states that the death of Wangari Maathai led her to start ‘reading her ↓books one of the books that I read it was Unbowed that inspires (.) everyone and it tells her story from the beg = it’s like her talking to you’ (lines 70 ff.). The book *Unbowed* – Wangari Maathai’s autobiography – and the story it tells thus become the source of Amy’s inspiration, and so they are attributed with agency which inspired Amy to continue her environmental work and so index the doing of leadership by ‘something that matters’. Further, Amy adds that ‘it’s like her talking to you’ which explicitly, though in lay person’s terms, invokes the concept of ventriloquism. The book, according to Amy, literally speaks on behalf of Wangari Maathai and so ventriloquizes her. Thus a network of actants (i.e. the book, the autobiographical story of Wangari Maathai, and the (deceased) Wangari Maathai as author) is set up and it is this network that inspires Amy to act and which is invoked in order to account for her activities as an environmental activist. However, since Wangari Maathai died in 2011, it is not Wangari Maathai per se who is part of this network, rather it is her spectral presence (cf. Derrida 1993). Attributing agency to a spectral presence therefore supplants the presence of a living human with the figure of the ghost which is neither dead, nor alive, but which nevertheless has an impact on the present. The focus is thus on the spectral presence of Wangari Maathai which is made present in Amy’s interview talk and attributed agency as the source of inspiration and therefore the agent which makes her take action as an environmental activist.

Amy then carries out a stepwise transition to mention her activities in the Green Belt Movement, and then she concludes her extended turn by specifically invoking followership (lines 82 and 83: I can

say that I am proud that I am following in her footsteps). Thus rather than the researcher explaining the talk in terms of followership, we can see that Amy's own account of her inspiration is framed by her as followership. However, if she claims follower identity for herself, who is the leader who inspires her? On the one hand, it is, of course, the late Professor Wangari Maathai as is explicated in extract 1.1. However, in extract 1.2, it is less the late Wangari Maathai herself who inspires Amy, rather it is the dream of meeting Wangari Maathai and of planting a tree with her that inspires her to both get an education and to plant trees. Similarly, in extract 1.3, it is 'things that matter', namely Wangari Maathai's death that inspires her to set up an environmental club to plant trees and so fulfill the vision of Wangari Maathai. And, in extract 1.4, it is Wangari Maathai's story and her book that inspire Amy to act.

Extract 2: 'Wangari Maathai was a big inspiration for many'

We pick up the analysis about 5 min later when Amy returns to the theme of Wangari Maathai as a source of inspiration.

Extract 2.1 – the spectral presence of Wangari Maathai.

1	IR	so tell me a little bit about Wangari Maathai
2		[you said () her role in the environmental
3	IE	[oh <u>ye:s</u>
4	IR	cause
5	IE	yes↓
6	IR	uhu
7	IE	I would say that er Wangari Maathai was a big
8		inspiration for many [and not just me but for many
9	IR	[uhu
10	IE	people out there because she gave up her life and everything
11		about her just to fight for conservation and even though
12		people did not realize what she was doing and the impact
13		of what she was doing [sometimes when we are facing
14	IR	[uhu
15		these environmental challenges you can hear people saying
16		that she gave us a signal [that is how people always say because
17	IR	[yes
18		she fought for Karura forest [which when I go now I am so proud
19	IR	[uhu
20		like <u>wow</u> what if she did not fight for this where would I
21		be <u>going</u> for nature walks because I like nature walks so much
22	IR	yes
23		and Uhuru Park the government wanted to-to construct a
24		building there but she came
25	IR	() exactly
26	IE	she came with women all the way from the village
27		[and I remember people would ask her why are you fighting
28	IR	[yes
29	IE	for this land and it is not even yours and she said she was doing
30		this for the future generations and I can proudly say that like I
31		am the future generation of her time I am proud of the things
32		that she did she really inspires me the energy she had the
33		vigour the zeal to conserve and the heart she had for the
34		future generations and that is the same thing that I want er
35		for myself that's one thing that I want to change for the
36		world it's the mindset of the people and how they view
37		conservation because I'm sure at her time if she had longer
38		time to live we would not be where we are today [because
39	IR	[(slight giggle)]
40		we have a greater population of people whose mindset
41		who are changed by what she did people <u>now</u> can
42		connect with conservation and they're conscious about
43		the environment because we're able to see things
44		she did and are like Mama was right
45	IR	yes

46	IE	that was it
47	IR	erm okay
48	IE	yes yes
49	IR	so tell me something about the environment why

In line one, at the end of an extended turn in which Amy talks about her activities, the interviewer shifts topic and asks Amy to tell her 'a little bit about Wangari Maathai'. In the following talk, Amy returns to the topic of inspiration and states that 'Wangari Maathai was a big inspiration for many people and not just me but for many people out there' (lines 7–10). Wangari Maathai is therefore positioned once again as the agent through whom social actors are influenced and inspired to act in a certain way and thus she is romanticized as a transformational leader. Amy then shifts to the present and states that 'sometimes when we are facing these environmental challenges you can hear people saying she gave us a signal that is how people always say' (lines 13–16). Amy therefore ventriloquizes the 'people' who say that Wangari Maathai has given them a signal through what she did, which is later revealed as fighting for Karura Forest (line 18) and Uhuru Park (line 23). This therefore invokes the notion of being a role model (cf. idealized influence, one of the 4Is of transformational leadership) as previously discussed in extract 1.2 and, despite being dead, Wangari Maathai, or at least the spectral presence of Wangari Maathai, is attributed with agency because she still inspires people, in the present, to take certain actions and the people are still looking for a signal from her (cf. discussion of extract 1.1 and 1.4). Thus, returning to the ventriloquial metaphor, the puppet master acting on the dummy (the people) is the spectral presence of Wangari Maathai speaking as it were from beyond the grave and telling 'the people' what to do.

Further, in lines 27 following, Amy uses reconstructed dialogue to directly ventriloquize Wangari Maathai and literally put words in her mouth. This happens when Wangari Maathai replies to the villagers who ask her why she was doing that (i.e. defending Uhuru Park) and she said 'she was doing it for the future generations'. This has implications for leadership because, at least in this case, Wangari Maathai, as ventriloquized by Amy, makes it clear that she also had the intention of having an impact on, and therefore some form of agency in, the future beyond her death (line 29: she said she was doing it for future generations). Amy then self-identifies as being the future generation for whom Wangari Maathai acted (line 30: I can proudly say that like I am the future generation of her time) and she explicitly attributes this form of leadership to inspiration when she says that she 'is proud of the things that she [i.e. Wangari Maathai] did she really inspires me'. Thus inspiration is again invoked to account for her followership and this is attributed to 'the energy she had the vigor the zeal to conserve and the heart she had for the future generations'. Once again the inspirational-leader-as-role-model is made present and this element of transformational leadership is made relevant in terms of its ability to transcend death by being intended for future generations. Identifying with the future generation to whom Wangari Maathai speaks, Amy states that this is what she wants for herself (line 34) and it is also what she wants for the world. She wants to change 'the mindset of the people and how they view conservation'. Thus even though Wangari Maathai is dead, being inspired by Wangari Maathai is made relevant as a way of accounting for Amy's actions in the present, and so it is the spectral presence of Wangari Maathai acting in the present that is made relevant rather than Wangari Maathai per se.

However, then Amy goes on to lament that had Wangari Maathai lived longer 'we would not be where we are today' (line 38). This implies, in line with her desire to change people's mindsets (lines 36), that Wangari Maathai's task was unfinished. Yet, even so, despite her death, people's mindsets were changed 'by what she did' and 'people now can connect with conservation and they're conscious about the environment because we're able to see things she did and are like Mama was right'. Thus, in extract 2, we see that Wangari Maathai's past life becomes an active agent in inspiring Amy and influencing her to act. This, as mentioned previously (see discussion of extract 1.2), makes present the specter of Wangari Maathai as a role model to whom followers aspire and whose action they seek to emulate (cf. Bass and Avolio 1994, 3). Moreover, this is specifically framed as Wangari

Maathai's intention: she was speaking to future generations and therefore necessarily setting up a posthumous leadership role which Amy, for one, orients to. Leadership is therefore not only performed by the living, it is also enacted by the dead and their spectral presence is oriented to by Amy as an active agent in the present, which she uses to account for her actions.

Moreover, in the line 44, Amy specifically invokes Mama [Maathai] as being right. Mama is a term of address that in the Kikuyu tradition emphasizes the value given to motherhood (Maathai 2008, 140), and in Kiswahili means mother. The term of address used here thus makes relevant the Kikuyu, and thus African, motherly identity of Wangari Maathai. It is therefore, implicitly, an African and feminine version of leadership that inspires and causes change. So, to return to Cooren's notion of ventriloquism, the puppet master that makes Amy act is a Kikuyu mother. This makes relevant the notion of motherhood which Ngunjiri (2009) links specifically to the romantic notion of servant leadership arguing that servant leadership in a Kenyan context can be seen as a form of 'motherhood made public' (Ngunjiri 2009, 18). This is because leadership is interwoven with traditionally considered motherly activities such as nurturing and sustaining life, caring, healing and reconciling, and having stewardship of natural resources so that future generations will have something to inherit – all things that are part of Wangari Maathai's vision.

Further, this could be seen to invoke the specifically sub-Saharan African notion of Ubuntu as 'something that matters' and which, on the one hand, makes Amy speak (upstream ventriloquism) and which, reciprocally, Amy makes speak as part of her accounting for her actions (downstream ventriloquism). Whilst acknowledging that Ubuntu is a contested and multifaceted concept, Ncube (2010, 78) explains it is a social philosophy that:

embraces a spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness (Mangaliso 2001). It is further described as the capacity for compassion, reciprocity, and dignity (Bekker 2008). The hallmarks of Ubuntu are harmony and continuity. It is about understanding what it means to be connected to one another.

Thus, through animating and being animated by such a specifically African concept, Amy makes present and accounts for her actions in a culturally specific manner in which caring for the environment and the wellbeing of the community's future generations is enacted and used to account for her actions.

Observations

The purpose of this paper has been to make visible, and thus analyzable, the way in which a follower discursively constructs (transformational) leadership in her own lay terms. Applying a fresh lens to an old issue and focusing on the notion of inspiration, one of the 4Is of transformational leadership which the interviewee herself specifically makes relevant, we note that ROL is enacted in five ways.

First, in extract 1.2, we note that it is the dream that inspires and has agency in acting on the follower. Bennis (2015, 367) considers the dream to be the leader's vision and argues that, from a classic transformational leadership paradigm, the dream is the leader's compelling vision to which he/she recruits people to follow. However, shifting the lens to the follower, we demonstrate that the dream that inspires is not necessarily the leader's dream, rather it is the follower's dream in which the leader has a central role. Consequently, we note that it is not the leader per se who inspires the follower to act, as in classic anthropocentric transformational leadership theories, rather it is 'something that matters' – the follower's dream – to which agency is attributed. Thus, as researchers such as Parry and Hansen (2007, 282), Auvinen (2012), and Takala and Auvinen (2016) argue, it is the story/dream that is the active agent in inspiring followers rather than the human leader per se as assumed in most transformational leadership research. However, through taking a ventriloquial approach to analysis, the researcher is able to build on such work and add to it. This is because, rather than focusing on the leader's story/dream as agent, through analyzing the follower's talk in this paper we have been able to explicate how a follower attributes agency to her, rather than the leader's, dream as part of *in situ* social practice whereby she renders her actions account-able.

Second, in the analysis of fragment 1.3, we note that it is an event – the death of Wangari Maathai – that inspires Amy to act and start an environmental club and so continue Wangari Maathai's environmental work planting trees. This again illustrates the fact that it is not only living leaders who inspire, rather it is also 'things that matter' such as events. This adds credence to the argument that 'things' can also lead through inspiring followers to work towards fulfilling the vision of the leader and so challenges the inherent assumption that transformational leadership is the preserve of human actants alone.

Third, continuing the argument that it is not only living leaders who inspire and so lead, but it is also things, we note that Amy attributes inspiration and thus leadership to Wangari Maathai's autobiography (*Unbowed*) which tells her story and which inspires Amy and other people to follow her vision. Thus, the book is the spokesobject which ventriloquizes Wangari Maathai and allows her to speak and to inspire Amy in the present (downstream ventriloquism). Reciprocally, Wangari Maathai also makes the book speak and presents her vision that leads Amy to act (upstream ventriloquism). Thus in this paper we demonstrate how a deceased leader, or at least the spectral presence of a deceased leader, is an active agent in a network (i.e. the book and the story) that does leadership by inspiring Amy to act. This adds to knowledge of leadership which so far has largely adopted an anthropocentric lens and has principally focused on living leaders. If deceased leaders are considered, they are considered as examples of how leadership was achieved in the past and their relevance to the present and how they act on the present is rarely considered. Indeed, little research has focused on posthumous leadership. For example, researchers such as Allison, Eylon, and Hope (2005), Allison and Goethals (2008), Allison et al. (2009), Van Dick et al. (2019), Steffens et al. (2017) and Wilner et al. (2014) consider how a leader's inspirational appeal increases after their death, but none of these studies consider how a deceased leader may still lead in the here-and-now. One of the few researchers who breaks this mold is Adebani (2008) who discusses how Awolowo, a deceased Nigerian politician, survives as an ideal or spirit and how this shapes the interests and outlook of his followers in the present. Thus, in this paper we add to Adebani's work by making visible and analyzable the mechanism through which deceased leaders can still lead.

Fourth, in the analysis of extracts 1.1 and 2, Amy specifically cites Wangari Maathai's life as being inspirational. This, thus, talks Wangari Maathai into being as a role model which is, following Bass and Avolio (1994, 3), a key way in which transformational leaders inspire followers. Being a role model is specifically invoked by Amy as a source of inspiration that tells her and others how to act. Significantly, Amy makes relevant the fact that Wangari Maathai lived for future generations. This brings to the fore the fact that Wangari Maathai was conscious of the future and that, as she says, 'all of the work I have done and continue to do – for Kenya, the environment, and peace – I have done and continue to do for them, *and for the generations that will follow ...*. They are my hope and they give me a sense of immortality' (Maathai 2008, xvii – italics added). Thus, it would appear that leaders themselves seek, or at least Wangari Maathai sought, to influence 'beyond the grave' and to have a lasting legacy. If this is the case, perhaps consideration of exactly how posthumous leadership is enacted could be a profitable line of inquiry for leadership researchers. Doing this would require moving beyond the largely anthropocentric approach to leadership and moving towards a socio-material perspective that could allow investigation of the phenomenon of the spectral presence of deceased leaders and the ways that they affect the present through, *inter alia*, inspiring followers.

Fifth, we note that in extract 2.1 Amy talks into being a romanticized version of leadership that has both a gendered and particularly African slant to it. This is because, through referring to Wangari Maathai as Mama, she implicitly accounts for her followership in a gendered and African (Kikuyu) way and so enacts a gendered and African form of transformational leadership. Findings therefore hint at a particularly gendered and culturally specific aspect to ROL which so far has been focused on data drawn from mainly western venues (Bligh 2011; Walumbwa, Avolio, and Aryee 2011). We address this point further in the conclusions.

Conclusions

In conclusion, through providing a fine-grained discursive analysis of a follower accounting for her followership through being inspired, we are able to challenge the anthropocentric assumption of much transformational research which accounts for leadership in terms of the agency of the human leader who inspires and motivates others to act. This paper adds to our knowledge of leadership/followership by making visible how 'things that matter', such as the spectral presence of a deceased leader, a book, an event, and a dream, are made present in interview talk and are used to account for a follower's inspiration which leads her to act. Thus we demonstrate the importance, at least from the emic perspective of an interviewee/follower, of 'things that matter' in inspiring followers and so in accounting for leadership. Considering these findings, we argue that leadership scholars could consider more fully the role of 'things that matter' in followers' romancing of leadership.

Further, whilst the central focus on this paper has been on the socio-materiality of leadership and the way in which 'things that matter', as well as humans, lead, this paper offers other insights into ROL. Whilst Bass (1997, 130) claims that there is universality to the transformational leadership paradigm and that the 'same conception of phenomena and relationships can be observed in a wide range of organizations and cultures', others (e.g. Den Hartog, House, and Hanges 1999; Leong and Fischer 2011) have noted that despite the fact that the effectiveness and desirability of transformational leadership may be universal, attributes that are considered to be characteristic of transformational leaders may vary strongly in different cultures. In this case (cf. analysis of extract 2.1), Amy refers to Wangari Maathai as *Mama*, the Kikuyu term of address which we argued makes relevant as 'something that matters' the notion of motherhood and the specifically African notion of *Ubuntu*. This leads us to speculate that this analysis reveals a particularly African aspect to ROL and transformational leadership in which the African notion of *Ubuntu* plays a key role. This paper therefore adds to, and builds on, the 'limited amount of leadership research and theorizing coming out of the African context' (Ngunjiri 2016, 238) in two ways. On the one hand, it provides some, though relatively limited evidence, that nuances the universality of transformational leadership and, on the other hand, it adds to ROL by providing an analysis of a self-avowed follower accounting for her followership outside of a western context. The findings, therefore, hint at the possibility that different aspects of romancing leadership may become 'matters of concern' for different cultures.

Finally, whilst this study remains a single case analysis which may or may not have generalizability, we argue that, following Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003, 1456), 'the very point of qualitative research is the insightful example'. Consequently, we argue that this example points to the significance of 'things that matter' such as books, events, stories, and spectral presences of deceased leaders which, from a follower's perspective, inspire action. If lay people, as in the case of Amy discussed in this paper, place such an importance on 'things that matter' when accounting for their followership, perhaps the leadership research community should also consider looking beyond the purely human when seeking to explain any leadership/followership phenomenon. We thus call for more work that takes a non-anthropocentric perspective on followership and leadership and we join calls from researchers who advocate taking a socio-material approach to leadership more seriously. This might be especially relevant in research that considers the materiality of leadership in sub-Saharan contexts. This is because, as Eyong (2017) argues, traditional sub-Saharan notions of leadership are marked by the belief that non-living actors (such as ancestors and gods) have an active role to play in leadership processes.

'Declarations of interest

none'.

Note

1. The Green Belt Movement. Available at: <https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/who-we-are>

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Appendix

Transcription symbols used

()	untranscribable word
(.)	slight pause
.h	audible inbreath
£word£	word spoken with a smile voice
((laugh))	description of an activity
Wo:rd	extended vowel sound
<u>Word</u>	word spoken with emphasis
Word ↓	word spoken with falling intonation,
Word ↑	word spoken with rising intonation
Word-	a sharp cut off between words
Word=	word latched to prior word
[word	onset of overlapping talk