

# Fragments of an Occupied Forest

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## 1. Introduction

The following short stories are an attempt to draw on multiple (non-) human actors' perspectives on events, which occurred around the Hambacher Forests occupation in the year of 2018. While the method of choice for each fragment will be fictional writing, the cosmos and area of concern are effectively found in Germany's federal state North-Rhine-Westphalia. The public's attention reached its highest point in October and November 2018, when thousands of people participated in the protests.

Most parts of the Hambacher Forest, with its original size of around 5500 Hectares, had been clear cut by the energy company RWE since 1978 to extract local brown coal deposits. In 2012, activists started to permanently occupy one of the remaining pieces of coherent forest, an ecosystem with the size of 200 Hectares. They started to build treehouse villages, complex ground infrastructures and put their bodies in resistance to the forests' destruction. In autumn 2018, the number of activists grew drastically in a short period of time. The occupation called in support from all over the country in order to oppose the government's measures of evicting the people as well as their housings from the forest.<sup>1</sup> The high administrative court Münster, North-Rhine-Westphalia's minister president Amin Laschet and the minister of the interior Herbert Reul, were in favor of the forests' clearing and supported RWE's development plan of extending the coal mine into the area of the remaining Hambacher forest. Especially because of the police operations' dimension and as a response to current developments in Germany's energy policy making, involving the plan of exiting brown coal energy industries, a nationwide civil commotion and condolence gave space for several narratives and positions to be heard. The Hambacher Forest had long become a symbol for a people's struggle against fossil fuel industries as well as a site of resistance and protest in the tradition of a global climate and social justice's movement.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hambacherforst.org, Access 13.3.19

<sup>2</sup> further reading: Mauch; Stoltzfuß, 2006

## **2. They are everywhere**

Suddenly there was movement, buzzing and growing with the time. Sounds echoed through the trees without definite origins, diffuse in their directions. The night was not silent anymore and lights flashed in its darkest hours. The daylight promised neither safety nor freedom. A different rhythm was beating. His fur started to slowly grow thicker and longer, its color changed to a grey-yellowish tone and forecasted a cold and meager period of feeding. His neck muscles were strong, carrying the small branchlike antlers sprouting out on the sides of his forehead. Soon he would strive them off and join the remaining ones of his kind, until the cold days would give way for another cycle of growth. They were only few remaining, most of them had left after combat for their ever diminishing habitat. His area had become invaded, his usual ways seemed to lead him straight into the danger, hidden behind the trunks and bushes he had known too well. These beings became more and more, and they came to stay. Sometimes a stream of them moved like a gigantic snake through the trees, carrying their permanent sounds and echoes, leaving a track of small, shiny matters behind them on the ground. The air was full of their strange smell and kept his nostrils busy negotiating its complex spectrum. Some of them moved silently and lonesome and blended in the forests scents. When he fed himself, his head would sometimes snap up from the young sprouts or delicate berries and his legs would take him to run as they unexpectedly appeared in front of him. Others were bigger, dark and he had noticed their bonds in strange formations. Nothing of their motion invited his curiosity. Instead, a provoking vastness emerged from their presence, a fierce militancy which kept his spirit alerted and always prepared to escape. With the time, he would possibly also leave this place, not knowing the future or even being aware of it.<sup>3</sup>

## **3. Falling and Climbing**

She was terrified. In a panic, her hands tried to get a grip of that slicky rope on which she had hung her live on. She was swinging in the air, unable to gain control over the situation or even understand the cause of the problem. As her shoes suddenly touched the old oaks massive trunk next to her body, calm and focus moved upon her mind and let her thoughts come in order. She heard her breath slowing down, not quite as much as her heart which still was beating in a cumbia rhythm. One of the front loops on her climbing belt had torn off and let go of the

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<sup>3</sup> deutschwildtierstiftung.de, Access 15.3.19

carabiner which connected her through another small string to the big rope. Luckily, there was another one still holding and saving her from falling. She heard herself calling for help, and the people ten meters below her, with their feet on the ground, started to react. Voices told her to wrap one foot around the rope and then step on it with the other one. In that way, she would be stable for a while and could figure out the string and carabiner mess around her hips.

She had borrowed the climbing gear from Baum, a guy who had been living in the forest for quite a while. Baum was not his real name, as most of the activists in the forest gave themselves new ones to keep their identity anonymous. She remembered her excitement just some moments ago, when she grabbed the opportunity and started climbing up to the treehouse for a first time. 'The knowledge would come', she had thought after a short briefing, 'learning by doing.' It's been a busy day of sharing skills, building new ground infrastructure for all the people who had just arrived, of planning actions and recharging energy. It was supposed to be a day of cease-fire between the police units and the activists in the forest, announced officially through the polices' megaphones. They said, there would be no attempt to clear the villages or barricades and that the people could rest.

Just one day before had happened an accident which gave reason to pause the constant confrontation and introduced a temporary, delusive period of peace. One activist had died as he walked across a wooden bridge between two treehouses and one of the planks burst underneath his step. He fell. His body was taken away by the police, who just before had been circling those same trees and prepared to evict the people up in their crowns. It was a moment of grief and anxiety which spread around the forest and even the country like a wildfire. All heaviness and deadly gravity of the situation became visible. If it had been a game for some until this point, the presence of death suddenly changed its reality. Sure, there were always sacrifices to make in fighting for ideals which were in opposition to a governments agenda. And for sure there were sacrifices in fighting for an imagined future, which would be different from destruction, war and a capitalist society structure. But how high would this sacrifice be? There had been a limit, an invisible line framing the occupation with its life in the treehouses, the building of barricades and the sneaking through the woods. Everyone knew, that the power of the resistance lay in a basic human right, in a body's inviolability. They were obliged to protect it. Even though there has been fighting and severe violence during direct confrontations, enough to break an innocent mind, the life itself had to be saved. This was the rule of the game, an

overall consent. Now things had changed, one life was lost and out of the paralyzing horror emerged a narrative defining new borders between ‘us’ and ‘them’, friend and enemy, perpetrator and victim. The shaking ground gave now force to a wave of actions, ensuring that this life had not vanished for nothing. After the fog had cleared, there was this battle still on and it would be fought until the end. Its highest price had already been payed.

It was this persuasion somehow, operating deep down in some unconscious realms, that helped her to manage the current crisis. Even though she wasn’t familiar with the strings nor the knots, her muscles worked and cooperated with an intuitive understanding for tension and weight. A calm and steady breath, while loosening and blocking the rope between her feet, moved her down to the forests ground. Baum received her with relieve and before they could discuss what had happened, people started to shout and called for support in a sitting blockade. A group of some dozen policemen invaded the ground and destroyed the atmosphere which had somehow become like one of a scout’s camp.

#### **4. Fearing the future**

In the morning mist, he drove along the dirt roads next to the big whole. It seemed strange and threatening to him, this huge empty space, different than it used to when he started his work for the company some thirty-five years ago. Everything had changed since then. Yes, there had been ups and downs before, but nothing could be compared to what was happening now. After the media and politicians had started to interfere with the forest and dramatized the overall topic of brown coal industry, relationships started to become tough and complicated.

By the time, he had started a training as electrical engineer. After his completion, he stayed and worked in the region that he’d grown up in. The jobs around the still young mine were widely treasured and the company became the biggest employer of the region. With his salary, he could provide for his young family and even support his mother in keeping the house, after his father had passed away. Later they offered him work as one of the working councils and he knew the companies structure and its history like the back of his hand. He had enjoyed his work. It was an honorable job, at least, that’s what it used to be, before working in brown coal became something like a crime against humanity and the environment. In the beginning, the Hambacher mine promised more than 55 billion tons of brown coal, with a heating value which covered as much as all of Iran’s oil reserves. What he and his colleagues worked for was nothing less than

independence of the region and the Bundesrepublik and this was not only theirs but a general understanding, as there had always been support from the politicians.

How did this change? Everything what had happened so far, with this filthy pack in the forest, those ignorant kids playing Robin Hood, affected him in a way he didn't want to accept. If it was just him, maybe things wouldn't look so dark, but he knew that his wife and kids were suffering under the new circumstances. Suddenly his future was unknown, his job could become dispensable and not just his, there were thousands of people depending on the continuation of the mine. But worse than the existential worries, that his mind couldn't stop circling around, was this constant fear. Those creatures walked around masked, mummied, attacked his workers and demolished the machines. Their only goal seemed to be sabotage, without even caring that they were threatening the workers lives and integrity. They were irrational, playing the good guys and pretended to save the planet from evil forces, whose only intention was to destroy the natural environment. They were short minded liars, cutting out the real world in their utopist games. Has there been anyone considering the reforested areas just some kilometers away, which the company's biologists had started to recreate from the beginning? The trees were maybe not yet as old and the history of the place not as ancient, but what did it matter? The so called endangered species of the original forest, like the middle-spotted woodpecker or the hazeldormouse, had already been resettled there and couldn't be used as an argument against the clearing anymore. But still, the company's image had been demolished drastically throughout the process and the only way he could give air to his everlasting anger, was to step up and speak for his people. He had organized with the locals and started a campaign which promoted that the people from here were in favor of the mining project. He had been giving endless interviews, produced an image clip to give voice to the workers, had organized demonstrations and supported various online movements to battle those left, self-rewarded specialists. Even though he was tired, he would not give up and fight till the end to save his and the whole areas future. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> [hambacherforst.com](http://hambacherforst.com), Access 13.3.19  
[youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), Access 13.3.19

### **5. I am not an enemy**

With the rain, things started to get dirty. He remembered his morning coffee after a sleepless night and his discomfort as his unit gathered for another grueling day in the forest. And now it was pouring, as if the weather gods entertained themselves by reinforcing his anger with this Armageddon scenario. Anyhow, he would do his job. The operation had gotten to a point of no return, and everyone knew it. No one dared to speak the unspoken criticism, his or her personal opinion about the forests destruction. It would've been an act of giving salt to the wound and contributed even more to the growing mood of discontent which had started to weaken the solidarity between the people. He wasn't in favor of the forests clearing, and he was surely not in favor of brown coal or any fossil fuel industry, which in their billion dollars' weight tried to hold up old systems of energy economy, just to protect their shareholder's excessive wealth. Sure, there had been the minister of the interiors' order and a court's sentence to evict the occupants and defend the property rights of the lands legitimist owner – which was nothing else than the company itself. But at the same time, he remembered his shift leader once saying to him, that in front of court would always be a verdict, but rarely justice. So, this must've been what it felt like to be put in front of a wooden cart, to be responsible to pull it out of the mud so the gentlemen wouldn't have to get their white pair of gloves dirty. An impulse he had noticed already for some time in the midst of his chest, was somehow the opposite of being the obedient horse, and a need to break out of his serfage-like position which he had unconsciously committed to by the time he entered the riot police.

His unit, six uniformed officers, made its way together with five other units in direction of a treehouse village called Lorien. With time, his people got a good coordination in the area, there were about fifty-three treehouses spread around the forest and the activists had even distributed maps with their locations. Some of them were lonely warriors hidden in the forest, others were integrated in village-like settlements high up in the crowns and were connected through wooden bridges. It was still raining, and he could hear it dropping on his helmets shell. On his arm hung the Plexiglas shield he would need later, as soon as the activists would start blocking their way. Today's mission was to clear this forest road from barricades and the wooden structures along its side. They called them Monopods or Tripods, tall constructions of vertical wooden pegs, which allowed the activists to navigate along ropes through the air, from one tree to another, from one manmade tower to the next. Sometimes, they would hang in the ropes with their

climbing gears for hours, knowing, that the machines couldn't take the interconnected constructions down as long as there was a person's life involved. No matter how drawn-out these tactics were, they worked, made up time and in this attracted a public's eye to the field in and around the forest.

Both sides along the dirt road were covered in thicket, young birches and high grown fern made the vanguard of older and higher oaks, beeches and spruces. As they walked, he could already make out one of the four ramshackled treehouses of Lorient between the trees, approximately twenty to thirty meters high in a beeches crown. The houses weren't much more than platforms made of palettes with wooden walls and a tarp roof. He was curious about how the interior must have looked like, but he couldn't imagine a life in there, as some of the occupants spent days or weeks without even setting a foot on the ground. They were even peeing and shitting from up there. Despite his sense for action and tolerance for all kinds of existence, this just simply went too far.<sup>5</sup>

## 6. Generations

Finally, they set foot on some muddy earth. She had seen it from miles away, this small strip of trees, and had longed for leaving the endless tar roads leading to the forest. Her body was already tired but her legs followed the mind's strong persuasion faithfully. It already had been a long and eventful way to get here. At first, they didn't even open the crowded train's doors when it arrived at the station of a town nearby, called Buir. As they waited to exit, she could see the young police officers through the train windows, guarding the platform with their stony faces. The people inside complained vociferously, something between indignation and panic started to spread around the passengers. Why wouldn't they let them out? This just couldn't be rightful. Then, after some moments of fretful waiting, they eventually opened the doors and she stepped out into the clear autumn's air, all the while holding her granddaughters hand tightly. The girl had fallen silent and she could see the anxious wonder in her wakeful face, she was still a small child. Nonetheless, it had been her wish to come here. She had developed a strong sense for justice from a young age on and after she had heard the news of the forests immanent destruction, its rescue had been all that mattered. So they went together this Sunday morning,

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<sup>5</sup> DIE ZEIT, 7.3.2019  
polizistmensch.de, Access 14.3.19



while the girl's mother had stayed at home in stand-by duty for the hospital, and joined the demonstration. More than thousand people of all ages had gathered and her previous doubts about this excursion had been quickly wiped out. Not that she questioned the importance of caring for the environment and its protection, but she had lived in this world for a long time. Every age had its specific fears and catastrophic scenarios. It had always been her strategy not to take them too seriously, she didn't want to live her life in fear and miss out on its beauty. A childhood in post war Germany and growing up during its slow resurrection had shaped her resilience and what she knew for sure was that the world would always be turning, life would go on and especially nature would continue its own, wondrous ways. Humans had been thinking themselves on top of creation for too long, and now, especially for the young people, the coin started to flip.

## 7. Fin

It is a challenge, and will be in further humanities writing's traditions, to give extensive insights in complex environmental contexts and developments through the written word. I think, a question for each scholar of the humanities would be for who and what reason he or she is working, and through which measures the addressed audience will be affected in the most effective way. It is a question of how to tell stories in a scientific manner, and of weather the intention might be, to contribute to an improvement of realities and to a mutual understanding in scientific, social, political and environmental entanglements. In environmentalism's traditions, the processed issues are commonly dressed in a heavy and uncomfortable coat, wearying its attentive authors, readers or listeners in their mental and emotional capacity. Some works may carry patterns of an instructive moralism, which is too one-sided to include all social realities involved in a specific case.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, I tried to open possible worlds of different agents in the Hambacher Forest, which are confronted with each other as well as connected through negotiating the "right thing to do" in relation to a specific case. The stories came into being through my own experiences and autoethnographic reflexions, as well as through inspiration drawn from current multispecies and fictional writing approaches in the humanities.<sup>7</sup> Surely, there are more circumstances and

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<sup>6</sup> Seymour, 2018

<sup>7</sup> Münster; van Dooren; Kirksey, 2016

inner monologues to this topic, than I am capable of processing and there are other techniques to do so. But at the same time, I am convinced, that a synthesis of scientific and fictional writing can open up perspectives that otherwise would be inaccessible and that this approach can contribute positively to a solution oriented communication. To end with the words of social anthropologist and fictional writer Rachel Newcomb: “Despite its lack of theory, however, fiction can still offer social analysis” and “Novels can be useful in teaching because, like good ethnography, they humanize the struggles of people one might not hear from otherwise.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> savagemind.org, Access 16.3.19

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