Lost Chances? Re-Negotiating Forest Activism in the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the recent cultural revisit of previous forms of forest activism. Focusing on the 2019 Austrian art installation "For Forest" by Klaus Littmann and the 2018 novel *The Overstory* by American novelist Richard Powers, the article takes a closer look at the representation of, and reactions to, eco-activism and shows how discrediting representations and backlash against such activism blocks the development of an ecological consciousness.

KEYWORDS: Environmental Activism, Climate change, Anthropocene, 'Ecoterrorism,' Literary representation, Art.

Introduction

In 2019, the global environmental movement saw a surge in activism devoted to ameliorating the deteriorating state of the environment, expressed in protest marches, sit-ins, roadblocks, and multiple forms of civil disobedience. The driving force behind most of these and more recent demonstrations is the climate crisis, a crisis resulting from anthropogenic climate change. Human activity, most importantly the extraction and burning of fossil fuels, impacts and shapes the earth's atmosphere and ecosystems. Remnants of this 'activity' can now also be found in the geological strata. In 2000, biologist Eugene Stoermer and atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen therefore began to speak of the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch, characterized by human activity in every corner of the planet (17). Feelings of loss in connection to 'nature' are certainly nothing new; however, with more rapid deforestation, habitat and biodiversity loss, as well as changes in the planet's climate that people can now experience 'in their own backyards,'[1] awareness of environmental destruction and the climate crisis seems to have reached new heights. In the past year, people have come together in all parts of the world to demonstrate against political inaction in the face of the climate emergency and the ensuing environmental problems, as well as social inequalities further aggravated by the changing climate (see Malm 23-25). As part of this new global movement, new groups and collectives have formed, such as *Fridays for*

[1] In a 2020 series of articles in *The New York Times Magazine*, Abrahm Lustgarten explored potential future climate migration within the United States, detailing where the change in climate is already perceivable. Moreover, the recent wildfires in Australia, the Amazon, Canada, and the United States have been linked to climate change (see Xu et al. 2020; Lustgarten 2020; Philips 2020).

Future or *Extinction Rebellion*, that raise awareness of the various problems caused by the climate crisis, pursuing different goals with different tactical repertoires.[2]

The Anthropocene poses a challenge to hegemonic, resource-intensive lifestyles in the West that have been based on a fundamental and strict separation of nature and culture, of the human and the non-human, as it collapses the traditional Western boundary between human history and natural history (Chakrabarty 207). Human domination over nature, human exceptionalism, anthropocentrism, and the utilitarian idea that nature is an inexhaustible resource are tenets of a dominant Western view of nature and the environment that humans have to overcome to "go onwards in a different mode of humanity," as Val Plumwood (*Review*, 1) suggests. Donna Haraway, in a similar vein, argues for new ways of understanding the non-human Other, for new ways of making kin across species boundaries, in order to render the Anthropocene a "boundary event," on the way to a more sustainable and respectful way of living on planet earth (160). While future-oriented approaches to the question of living with/in the Anthropocene often stipulate that (new) sustainable ways of life are needed—which is certainly true to a large degree—there also seems to be an urge to revisit earlier periods of environmental uncertainty, precariousness, and activism. In a new volume on the concept of the Anthropocene for the humanities, Eva Horn highlights that the new aspect regarding the state of the planet is not humanity's knowledge about it, but a newly perceived urgency to the situation:

> The public at large has known about climate change for more than 30 years. The ecological movement's mantra has long been that 'we cannot go on like this', but even if environmental politics has more or less successfully tackled some of the symptoms of the crisis, the last few decades have shown all too clearly that things *could* and *did* go on as before. Our present is the future that the environmental movement has been warning us against. And today there is no going back. (2)

Horn thus points to the fact that environmental activists have long been protesting environmental degradation, deforestation, and climate-related inaction and that there have been efforts to promote a more sustainable way of living on Earth ever since the launch of the "modern" environmental movement in the 1960s and 70s in the "industrialized West" (Rootes 2004).[3]

The 'environmental movement' or what Horn calls the "ecological movement," is certainly not a homogeneous group of activists and there are numerous and very diverse topics and issues that are prominent within the movement; there are, for example, protesters against nuclear energy, fracking, or coal-mining; then there are groups that promote the protection of specific animals, such as the *Sea Shepherd Conservation Society*, and the "forest

[2] Andreas Malm traces the beginnings of these two newly formed groups in his 2020 book *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*; he states that the climate strikes of the *Fridays for Future* groups might have to be called a "mass phenomenon" by now, as they spread from the Global North all over the world. Moreover, he acknowledges the slightly different repertoire of *Extinction Rebellion*, which is focused on civil disobedience.

[3] Christopher Rootes highlights the importance of the very first US Earth Day in 1970 for the development of the influential US American branch of the modern environmental movement (614). He also states that the term "environmental movement"—or even "global environmental movement"—is misleading, as it suggests an inexistant uniformity (631-32).

defenders" who protest extensive logging.[4] Moreover, it should be noted that not all of these diverse strands and groups offer solutions to the problems they protest, and that not all of their tactics are aimed at directly promoting a more sustainable (Western) way of life.[5] While not all the entities that are typically subsumed under the header 'environmental movement' focused on a re-thinking of human-non-human relationships,[6] some groups of radical environmentalists have aimed at "overturning the anthropocentric and dualistic beliefs they believe alienate people from nature and produce an ideology of human superiority that precludes feelings of kinship with other life forms" (Taylor, *The Tributaries of Radical Environmentalism* 28). Adherents to the philosophy of deep ecology traditionally think in ecocentric terms; that is, they give priority to the ecosphere, not the human.[7] As a critique of anthropocentrism, deep ecology, a term coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (Taylor, ibid. 43), holds that the human and the non-human meet on the same level—without any hierarchies (Devall 310)[8]—and that all life (including landscapes, rivers, and ecosystems) has inherent value (Naess 49). Both Devall and Taylor argue that an "explosion of ecological philosophizing during the 1970s" (Taylor, *The Tributaries of Radical Environmentalism* 44) played an important role for groups like *Earth First!* to develop their non-anthropocentric environmental ethics in the 1980s. The call for a new and different ecological consciousness was thus already popular in some circles 30, 40, 50 years ago.

In this essay, I will examine the 2019 Austrian art installation "For Forest" by Klaus Littmann and the 2018 novel *The Overstory* by US-American novelist Richard Powers, to show how they both effectively evoke earlier periods in which the loss of nature was perceived as imminent (at least by activists). Moreover, it will be shown how they incorporate those earlier periods into Anthropocene narratives that inspire a re-thinking of human-non-human relationships based on a current sense of emergency. The realization of "For Forest" in 2019,

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[4] As Christopher Rootes and Eugene Nulman write, "'environmental movement' is a problematic denotation of a phenomenon that is highly diverse in its forms of organization and action" (730). Yet, because environmentalists of different groups tend to think inclusively, they define "an environmental movement as a loose, non-institutionalized network of informal interactions", which includes different groups and forms of organization, and "is engaged in collective action motivated by shared identity or concern about environmental issues" (Rootes and Nulman 730).

[5] See, for example, Ramachandra Guha's critique of US American wilderness advocacy.

[6] Scholar Bill Devall, who promoted Arne Naess's notion of deep ecology wrote the following in 1980: "There are two great streams of environmentalism in the latter half of the twentieth century. One stream is reformist, attempting to control some of the worst of the air and water pollution and inefficient land use practices in industrialized nations and to save a few of the remaining pieces of wildlands as 'designated wilderness areas.' The other stream supports many of the reformist goals but is revolutionary, seeking a new metaphysics, epistemology, cosmology, and environmental ethics of person/planet" (299). Devall also argued that while the reformist approach might bring short-term success, in the long run, any adherent to environmentalism would have to embrace deep ecology: "In the future, as the limits of reform are reached and environmental problems become more serious, the reform environmental movement will have to come to terms with deep ecology" (Devall 299-300).

[7] Taylor cites *Earth First!* and the *Earth Liberation Front* as examples in a US context (*Tributaries*, 28); for *Earth Liberation Front* the abbreviation ELF will be used in the remainder of the text.

[8] Bill Devall lists 15 tenets of deep ecology in his essay on "The Deep Ecology Movement"; the human as part of nature in a non-hierarchical system is the first tenet he mentions and can be said to have laid the groundwork for each of the following 14 points.

with climate change looming large, can be said to be an uncanny yet very fitting happenstance, as the art project is based on a drawing that dates back to the 1970s. *The Overstory*, on the other hand, re-negotiates the so-called Timber Wars[9] of the 1980s and 90s and calls for a re-evaluation of US-American radical environmentalism. Both "For Forest" and *The Overstory* share the concern with environmental activism: the art project clearly took an activist stance, not only because it was termed an 'intervention,' but also because the program surrounding it embraced forest-preservation activism and celebrated tree-planting as a means of slowing down the effects of climate change. In Powers' novel, each of the nine human protagonists becomes an activist: some of them join a radical environmentalist cell, some refuse to stick to the suburban rules of garden-keeping in favor of wilderness, and others break with the conventions of forestry and gaming to radically re-think the relationship between the human and the tree(s).[10] While "For Forest" sparked controversy and became the target of right-wing populist attacks, which point to well-known patterns of discrediting environmental activism and the discursive power of dichotomization—workers vs. environmentalists; high culture vs. the people—that work to discredit efforts towards an ecological consciousness, *The Overstory* can be read as a re-negotiation of earlier representations of environmentalists in literary fiction and film, as well as news media, which mostly tended to depict activists as "sentimental preservationists" (Sutter vii), misanthropic 'tree huggers,' or dangerous eco-terrorists who threaten not only the dominant lifestyle, but also national security.[11] Thus, as will be shown, the attacks on "For Forest" followed a pattern of discursively discrediting eco-activism, which is also demonstrated powerfully in Powers' *The Overstory*.

Forests, Trees, and the Climate Emergency

In recent years, with the climate crisis impacting daily lives all over the globe (albeit to very different degrees) and the ensuing loss of biodiversity in the sixth mass extinction, interest in trees and forests has surged significantly. Probably the most commercially successful publication on trees was *The Hidden Life of Trees* by German forester Peter Wohlleben, which was an international bestseller in 2015. However, numerous other texts have engaged with forests, trees, and the human connection to plant life over the last decade: H.G. Haskell's *The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature's Great Connectors* (2017), Richard Preston's non-fiction account of the redwoods and the fascination of their canopy *The Wild Trees: A Story of Passion and Daring* (2008), as well as Eric Rutkow's and Jared Farmer's

[9] The Timber Wars were a series of conflicts about the clear-cutting of old growth (mostly redwood) forests on the US West coast (Farmer 95-96); due to the many activist campaigns to preserve either specific trees or stretches of old-growth forest, there is also a body of literature that focuses on redwood-activism in particular (see Speece 2017; Widick 2009; Dietrich 1992; Chase 2001; Satterfield 2002).

[10] Birgit Spengler's article "Arboreal Encounters in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*" examines how the novel gives (narrative) agency not only to humans but also to trees and argues that it thereby encourages a re-thinking of human relationships with the more-than-human.

[11] Michael Crichton's 2004 novel *State of Fear* is probably the most well-known example of this type of representation. In this eco-thriller, a group cleverly termed the 'Environmental Liberation Front' (the acronym for which is also ELF) provokes lethal 'natural' disasters to raise awareness of climate change—which is largely depicted as a hoax invented by green elites to keep the population in a 'state of fear.'

respective historical studies, *American Canopy: Trees, Forests, and the Making of a Nation* (2013) and *Trees in Paradise: A California History* (2013), examine trees and their importance for human life from different angles. Annie Proulx's novel *Barkskins* (2016), in contrast, depicts a gold rush-like run on the 'New World's' seemingly endless and inexhaustible forests, from the first European settlements to the present, in which trees are first and foremost considered as an economic resource; at the core of Proulx's novel are humans wreaking havoc on forest ecosystems from North America to New Zealand. Most recently, Michael Christie's novel *Greenwood* (2019) envisions an almost treeless world where a small pocket of intact forest has survived on a Canadian island in the Pacific—which becomes a place only the super-rich can afford and experience.

These recent publications, however, largely celebrate forests and trees for their capacities, most importantly for the fact that a healthy forest can compensate immense amounts of CO2. Thus, while deforestation for the purposes of agriculture and urban sprawl accelerates and forests diminish due to changes in the climate conditions of their habitats—in short, while the loss of forests looms large—there seems to be a reinvigorated love of forests and a re-discovery of the value of trees; not only in terms of monetary or spiritual value, but as a basic prerequisite for human and non-human life (survival?) on the planet that has for too long been taken for granted.

"For Forest"

"For Forest – The Unending Attraction of Nature" was an art "intervention" realized in Klagenfurt, Austria by gallery owner Klaus Littmann, which at first glance seems to testify to the recent fascination with forests. Littmann and his team planted 299 trees of 16 different species on the field of a former European Championship soccer stadium. The accompanying program of readings, concerts, symposia, and art exhibitions spread out over the city and for several months examined the history of the human connection to forests and celebrated trees and their capabilities – mostly in the battle against rising temperatures. The planted forest in the Wörthersee stadium was visited by more than 200,000 people and was written about and reported on in 80 countries (forforest.net). Viewed on its own, the installation was an artificial forest, planted in a stadium for people to look at and experience—as if in a dystopic future, in which trees no longer exist outside of this artificial human-made habitat. With the struggling Carinthian forest surrounding the stadium,[12] visible in the distance over the arching roof, "For Forest" was an even more powerful experience, and raised a number of questions: is it a scenario of the future? A warning that artificially planted 'forests' might, in fact, *be* the future? Or rather, a call to action at a point in time when humans can still act to avoid this dystopic vision becoming real?

Littmann's installation, however, was not entirely inspired by the present moment and the state of the planet in the twenty-first century. Rather, it was the realization of a drawing by Austrian artist Max Peintner from 1970/71 entitled, "Die Ungebrochene Anziehungskraft der

[12] Like many other places, Austria experiences drier summers and winters, which leads to a higher susceptibility to beetles and other parasites, which in turn endangers the survival of many indigenous tree species (cf. Weisbier, "Der Klimawandel holt das Waldsterben zurück").

Natur" (engl.: the unending attraction of nature). The black-and-white pencil drawing imagined 'nature' (a forest) in a zoo-like setting, as an attraction, a highlight, which people flocked to the stadium to see. In the background of the stadium, numerous skyscrapers compete with cranes, and factory chimneys emit pillars of black smoke. In the center of this industrial city, hundreds of people (men) are sitting and standing on the stands of a soccer stadium; the attraction, however, is not a group of humans chasing after a ball during a soccer match, but trees. A planted forest in the middle of the field, trees as an endangered species in an industrial(ized) world, one can only see and experience in the sealed-off space of the stadium. As already mentioned, Peintner's drawing dates back to the 1970s, the decade that saw the launch of a global environmental movement and is part of a series of drawings that critically engage with industrial society, capitalism, and human alienation from the natural environment. Yet, even in the 1970s, this specific drawing could be viewed as a foreboding of what was to come in the following decade: in the 1980s, the loss of forests due to acid rain and a bark beetle infestation seemed a plausible catastrophe and the notion of the *Waldsterben* occupied people's minds (cf. Metzger 10).

The forests that were in decline during the last part of the twentieth century have begun to grow back in many places (cf. Greenpeace, "Borkenkäferbekämpfung"), however, in 2019, with severe droughts in some areas of Western Europe, the drawing's message seems even more relevant and real.[13] Even though Littmann tried to realize this project for many years, its opening in the summer of 2019 seems perfectly timed (cf. Großmann, "Bäume im Stadion"): The notion of the Anthropocene has entered public parlance, and climate activism has spread all over the globe. "For Forest" seemed to cater to the re-invigorated interest in forests in 2019 and can be viewed as an attempt to unsettle, maybe even disturb, and raise awareness for the struggling forests around the globe. According to Paul Buchholz, "the ecological pessimism expressed in 'Die Ungebrochene Anziehungskraft der Natur' needed no significant revisions or updates to resonate with a wider popular audience in 2019" and was thus "a more or less exact replication of the world pictured in the drawing" (292). Following the assumption that people 'care for what they know and love', signs posted around the field informed visitors about the planted tree species and their specificities. Moreover, for every piece of merchandise sold, the organizer pledged to plant a tree, in cooperation with one of the many tree planting organizations that exist today.[14] The trees from the stadium are supposed to be replanted in Vienna and Carinthia, while the art project can now be found online as "The Voice for Trees." However, "For Forest" has not only inspired action on behalf of forests but it has also sparked protest and controversy.

[13] The forest dieback that came to be known as the "Waldsterben" in Germany and its neighboring countries in the late twentieth century did not happen as predicted—at least not to the degree feared (cf. Roland Schäfer und Birgit Metzger, 202).

[14] "For Forest" cooperated with the company Treecelet, which planted 5000 trees according to a blog post on the art project's webpage: https://forforest.net/news-aktuelles/5000-baeume-wurden-gepflanzt/. Tree-planting organizations are numerous, and many companies, just like Littmann's installation, also aim to give themselves a sustainable image by linking reforestation to sales. https://onetreeplanted.org/collections/all; https://www.trilliontreecampaign.org/donate-trees; https://www.plant-for-the-planet.org/de/startseite; https://edenprojects.org/; https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/plant-a-billion/; https://www.earthday.org/campaign/the-canopy-project/

Austrian politicians from the right-wing political parties and groups, the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) and the Alliance for the Future of Austria (*Bündnis Zukunft Österreich*, BZÖ)—both former political homes of the late FPÖ leader Jörg Haider—especially tried to instrumentalize the art installation for political purposes. Claiming that the project used tax money and was initiated by "crazy politicians," one BZÖ candidate called for public protest with dysfunctional chainsaws (BZÖ Kärnten, "Motorsägen versus Stadionwald"). At the same time, the FPÖ's leader in Carinthia decried the misuse of the soccer stadium and talked about "violence" against the planted trees and the "rape" of nature (fpoe-ktn.at, "Bäume-Vergewaltigung"). Portraying Littmann's installation as the project of rival political parties and ridiculing the idea of art in the public location of a soccer stadium, those opposing "For Forest" played with well-known dichotomies between "the people" and "detached elites."

The outcry and protests against "For Forest" may stem specifically from the region's history and may also be connected to the stadium itself, which was a project of the late Carinthian Jörg Haider. However, the allegations made and the clear black-and-white worldview that is presently perceivable can be said to also fall back on well-known patterns and mechanisms of discrediting environmentalist efforts in earlier decades. Carinthia is a region in which the right-wing populist party FPÖ is traditionally strong. The FPÖ, which was one of the main opponents, and certainly the 'loudest,' of "For Forest" took offense to the 299 trees that were to be planted in the stadium. The selected species were native species occurring in Carinthia, where they were supposed to be replanted after the installation; however, they were brought in from Germany, Slovenia, and Belgium—'foreign' trees, and thus a thorn in the right-wing politicians' side. Moreover, spokespeople of the FPÖ tried to construct and reinforce a dichotomy between the 'low-brow' people's sport soccer ("Volkssport") and the allegedly 'high-brow' art installation, a dynamic that is apparently a well-known populist pattern in the region (cf. Schönberger, "Streit um die Kunstinstallation").[15] Due to the "For Forest" project, the Wolfsberger AC, a team from roughly 60 kilometers northeast of Klagenfurt, had to play its UEFA Euro League matches in a different location, a situation that the right-wing party and opponents of the art project used in order to create local opposition and cause public outcry. The online blog *12ter Mann*, for example, decried the "expulsion" of soccer from the stadium, further stating that soccer is an artform in itself as it offers "a certain aesthetic" (Kurakin, "For Football," my translation). According to the blog, without "For Forest" the Wörthersee stadium "would have had the chance to serve as a gallery for a universally appreciated form of art" (ibid., my translation) – a statement that reinforces the notion of a clear difference between people who appreciate Littmann's installation ("'real' art-connoisseurs", ibid.) and those passionate about soccer. Even though the timing was admittedly unfortunate because the qualification of the team for the 2019 UEFA Euro League was arguably the biggest success in the club's history, the actual home team of the stadium is the SK Austria Klagenfurt, which plays in the second Austrian soccer

[15] FPÖ politician Gernot Darmann demanded the cancellation of "For Forest" so that "thousands of local soccer fans" would be able to "celebrate the once-in-a-hundred-years success" of the local team qualifying for the Euro League (FPÖ Kärnten, "SPÖ-Fehlentscheidung").

league and had an average of 1,089 visitors in the 14 games of the previous season[16]—in a stadium constructed for 30,000 people (cf. "Wörthersee Stadion"). Thus, judging from the numbers of visitors, "For Forest" was a successful use of a stadium originally built for one competition in 2008, which some view as a testimony to the late Jörg Haider's megalomania (Randolf, "Holt die Motorsägen").[17]

The idea that art is reserved for a well-educated and well-off elite is nothing new, of course, and neither is the attempt at linking ecological thinking or environmentalism to city-dwelling, educated, out-of-touch people that try to take something away from communities invested in extractive industries. It is well-known from a number of contexts that activists have traditionally been pitted against workers: from the protection of old-growth redwood forests in the US, the establishment of national parks in areas with jobs dependent on the timber industry everywhere, or the recent campaign to save the Hambacher Forst in Germany from being cut in order to excavate the coal underneath. Such examples are comparable to the dichotomy that the opponents of "For Forest" have constructed between low-brow soccer as a sport for the people and art as the high-brow amusement of a detached city-dwelling elite. In his foreword to Darren F. Speece's study on the redwood wars, *Defending Giants*, Paul S. Sutter states that the moniker "tree hugger," with which environmentalists are often labeled, serves to "portray environmentalists as privileged and misguided nature lovers, sentimental preservationists who are out of touch with the economic struggles of those who work in rural extractive economies," (vii) despite the fact that also in this specific conflict activists came from rather diverse backgrounds (Sutter, ix). This mechanism, which serves to discredit environmentalist efforts, can also be found in *The Overstory* – albeit in a different way. While the debates about "For Forest" make clear that the discursive dichotomization of environmentalists vs. workers/'the people' is still used in 2019 to discredit activist efforts, Powers' fictional text illustrates how this discrediting of eco-activists has led to the current environmental crisis. A large part of the novel is dedicated to a group of environmental activists who radicalize themselves as a consequence of a series of unsuccessful non-violent public protests. The tactical repertoire of the depicted activists, some locations, as well as events described in the novel strongly resemble historical events of the so-called 'timber wars,' a series of protests and conflicts that took place predominantly in Oregon and California.

The 'Timber Wars' and *The Overstory*: Re-evaluating Forest Activism

Even though the timber wars are probably the most renowned period of forest activism, the first efforts of forest preservation movement(s) in the United States date back to the nineteenth century, when public figures like John Muir or Madison Grant decried the loss of

[16] The average number of visitors refers to the 2018/19 season with 15,252 visitors from the 14 regular matches of a second league season in Austria (cf. "SK Austria Klagenfurt).

[17] Haider was a former populist 'governor' of Carinthia from the FPÖ, who is still beloved by many inhabitants of the region despite—or maybe because—of his overt racism. The Carinthian chapter of the populist BZÖ (Bündnis Zukunft), for example, claims to "continue his legacy" (bzoe-kaernten.at). According to Christian Fuchs, "Haider used election slogans such as 'Stop der Überfremdung!' (Stop the overforeignisation!). In 1993, he started the anti-immigration-referendum 'Österreich zuerst!' (Austria first!)" (165).

the redwoods due to extensive logging. The reasons for this first resistance to the unregulated exploitation of wooden resources were quite different from today: Grant, a leading eugenicist, favored the redwoods due to their characteristics as long-term survivors (to him, they represented "superior individuals"; Farmer 70), while others saw the redwoods as a symbol of US-American greatness in comparison to Europe.[18] Thus, groups like the Sierra Club and the Save-the-Redwoods-League were primarily interested in conserving the most beautiful groves, the biggest, and the tallest trees. From the 1980s onward then, the struggle for forest preservation became more and more heated and intense.[19] Led by the North Coast chapters of *Earth First!*, who embraced the philosophy of deep ecology, activists protested the practice of clear-cutting and engaged in lobbying, civil disobedience, and sabotage (cf. Taylor, *Radical Environmentalism's Print History*; Farmer 92) to save the Redwoods, Sequoias, and Douglas firs. The so-called 'timber wars' were a series of conflicts over old-growth forests on the US West Coast that began in 1983, saw the activist campaign 'Redwood Summer' in 1990, and extended into the early 2000s (Farmer 93).[20] Activists built roadblocks, marched against logging companies, spiked trees, and squatted on platforms in the canopy (for over two years in the case of Julia 'Butterfly' Hill) to keep the 'ancient' trees safe from logging. The fact that these conflicts became known as 'wars' not only points to the heated nature of these disputes, it also implies violence and a sharply defined narrative of insuperable differences with activists on one side and workers and corporations on the other. Despite the fact that Judi Bari, leader of the Northern California chapter of *Earth First!*, tried to forge alliances with timber workers to pressure companies into adopting a more sustainable way of logging, the timber wars were most often depicted as a conflict between sentimental hippie environmentalists and almost iconic, hard-working American loggers (cf. Farmer 97).

From the 1980s onward, the label of terrorism was used against environmentalists to denote them as 'ecoterrorists,'[21] likening them to Unabomber Ted Kaczynski despite their abstaining from violence against human beings.[22] While Lawrence Buell claims that environmentalists,

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[18] Both Jared Farmer's *Trees in Paradise* and Eric Rutkow's *American Canopy* include chapters discussing the appropriation of the redwoods to serve as a symbol for a similarly long and great US history in comparison to Europe.

[19] While earlier campaigns often focused specifically on the redwoods due to their impressive size (see footnote 18), the activist campaigns of the late twentieth century also set out to preserve other remaining old-growth forests in California, Oregon, and Washington.

[20] In 2020, Oregon Public Broadcasting released a podcast entitled *Timber Wars*, which dates the starting point of the timber wars to Easter Sunday of 1989.

[21] In 1997 Ron Arnold, who allegedly coined the term 'ecoterrorism,' published his book *Ecoterror: The Violent Agenda to Save Nature–The World of the Unabombe*r, in which he tries to link environmentalists adhering to groups like *Earth First!* with the bombings of Kaczynski. Arnold lumps environmentalists of different groups (non-violent protesters, those engaging in civil disobedience, and those engaging in sabotage) and novelist Edward Abbey together with the Unabomber–as 'ecoterrorists.'

[22] It should be noted that the notion that crimes are more acceptable because they do not physically harm human beings is called into question by scholars such as David N. Pellow (2016: 83-84) because it is based on a clearly anthropocentric view. In some cases, the fact that no human being has been physically harmed has been used as a defense strategy, operating according to the standards of the legal system and this fact is also often mentioned when debating the appropriateness of the terrorist-label (cf. Sumner and Weidman).

who tried to use the terrorist-label against corporations, had lost this "war of words" early on (Buell 157), the post-9/11 decade saw an intensification of the use of this word and a government crackdown on the green movement (see, for example, Potter, *Green is the New Red*): *Earth Liberation Front* (ELF) adherents Daniel McGowan[23] and Jeffrey Luers, both guilty of arson, were convicted as domestic terrorists and sentenced to 7 and 22 years in prison, respectively (cf. Taylor, *Foreword* 4; greenisthenewred.com). As a study by David Thomas Sumner and Lisa M. Weidman, published in 2013, shows, the term "ecoterrorism" was by then widely accepted in the United States:

> Our first indication that 'eco-terrorism' had become the preferred term in the news media was the great quantitative disparity we found between the 1,818 articles containing variations on the word 'eco-terrorism' and the 88 articles using the environmental movement's preferred terms, such as 'eco-sabotage,' 'eco-arson,' and 'ecotage,' with no mention of 'terrorism.' […] Our findings regarding the nature of the use of 'eco-terrorism' in the 594 articles we analyzed provide the strongest indication that the term has become widely accepted as the appropriate word to describe destructive acts of environmental activism. (865)

In a similar study, specifically on the *Earth Liberation Front*, Paul Joosse analyzes the media coverage of the group by reviewing 62 articles from the *New York Times*, published between 1998 and 2009 (cf. 77). He finds that while articles often aim to trivialize ELF spokespeople, at the same time they use the ecoterrorist-label, as in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* on public spokesperson Craig Rosebraugh titled "The Face of Ecoterrorism" (cf. 82). The ecoterror-discourse, ignited by anti-environmentalists such as Arnold (Vanderheiden 2008, 303), picked up by the government and FBI (Wagner 26), and subsequently adopted by the media, as shown above, served to silence and delegitimize parts of the environmental movement, with possibly detrimental consequences for the movement as a whole. Moreover, as Steve Vanderheiden states, the legal changes made in the post-9/11 US "creat[ed] powerful and potentially abusive tools for suppressing dissent" (2005, 426). Demonstrating for and trying to raise awareness of the poor state of the environment was thus criminalized and likened to terrorism in public discourse. Given that social movements are often considered vital motors of change (Reed 2005)—not only in regard to laws and political changes, but also when it comes to changing hegemonic values and cultural aspects—the (mis-)representations of environmental activists as terrorists can be said to inhibit the development of an ecological consciousness and the re-thinking of anthropocentric value systems.[24]

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[23] Daniel McGowan's case is the main subject of Marshall Curry's Academy Award-nominated documentary *If A Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front* (2011), which critically engages with the terrorism label applied to radical environmentalists. His case is also discussed in detail in Will Potter's book *Green is the New Red: An Insider's Account of a Social Movement Under Siege* (2011).

[24] Even though the term terrorism is ubiquitous in the twenty-first century and has produced numerous subcategories (domestic, foreign, right-wing, religious, 'eco', etc.), there is still an ongoing debate about a concise and clear definition (see for example Gage 74; Law 4; Thaler 120) with some scholars highlighting processes of labeling that seem to be detached from the actual acts that can fall under the various definitions (see Zulaika and Douglass 1996; Gallaher 328). Definitions vary from nation state to nation state; for the US, the FBI briefly defines domestic terrorism as follows: "Violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of

The ecoterror-discourse described above and the so-called 'Green Scare'—which, according to Michael Loadenthal, describes "a matrix of juridical, legalistic and political mechanisms designed to criminalise a specific form of political dissent" (Loadenthal, 2013: 93)—are also reflected in Richard Powers' Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Overstory*. The novel, which addresses the relationship between humans and trees, has thus far been approached by scholars from different angles, highlighting different qualities of a dense and rich text, often focusing on its narrative technique and formal aspects. Scholars have analyzed how the novel's narrative structure "foreground[s] nonhuman assemblages" to "question anthropocentric assumptions" (Caracciolo 86), how its formal elements "give voice" and agency "to the-other-than-human" while "proposing an eco-centered way of being" (Masiero 135), and how it conceptualizes "time and space in ways that destabilize an exclusively anthropocentric perspective" (Spengler 66). The novel is certainly innovative in that it gives agency to the nonhuman in various ways,[25] not only by conveying insights and a large amount of information on the interconnectedness of the single entities that make up a forest, but also by giving voice to trees, such as the pine tree in the opening scene (cf. Masiero 140). The parts of the narrative focusing on the human protagonists provide insight into the novel's representation of those who, through their activism, speak for and stand in solidarity with the nonhuman. Spanning roughly 40 years, from the Vietnam War in the late 1970s to the Occupy movement in the early 2000s, the novel ends as the ecological crisis becomes more severe and climate change is perceptible in the US: "The hottest year on record will soon be followed by an even hotter one. Every year a new world champion" (609). Climate change enters the narrative subtly and gradually and, in the end, is the catastrophic backdrop that functions as a legitimization of the radical actions—the "ecoterrorism"—of the novel's radical activists.

The Overstory imagines and re-narrates parts of the Timber Wars, in a narrative that follows the *Earth First!* period of the early 80s and the 'formation'[26] of the *Earth Liberation Front* in the late 90s and early 2000s. All of the nine human protagonists become eco-activists—radical to different degrees—and their separate plot lines intersect at specific points, either

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a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature" ("What We Investigate", fbi.gov). Moreover, the USA PATRIOT Act specifically states that violence against inanimate objects can fall under the definition of terrorism as well, the loss of human life thus not being a criterion (Pellow 2014: 173). Thus, property damage or sabotage ('ecotage') can potentially be prosecuted as a form of terrorism; however, scholars have criticized this all-encompassing and broad use of 'terrorism' as an infringement of civil liberties and/or potentially detrimental to the prosecution of crimes targeting human life (see Sumner and Weidman; Vanderheiden 2005; Pellow 2014).

[25] It does, in part, offer what Val Plumwood calls for in her essay "Nature in the Active Voice": "Writers are amongst the foremost of those who can help us to think differently. Of course, artistic integrity, honesty and truthfulness to experience are crucial in any re-discovery of 'tongues in trees.' I am not talking about inventing fairies at the bottom of the garden. It's a matter of being open to experiences of nature as powerful, agentic and creative, making space in our culture for an animating sensibility and vocabulary" (n. page).

[26] Formation is used here for lack of a better term; the ELF is generally considered to be a loosely connected web of cells, which are operating independently, and their activities are viewed as a form of "leaderless resistance" (cf. Joosse 2012). Thus, while Judi Bari and Dave Foreman were well-known and publicly visible spokespeople for different *Earth First!* chapters, the 'Elves' are usually 'invisible' and thus unknown to the public.

through in-person-meetings or, for example, the circulation of Patricia Westerford's book *The Secret Forest*. And, most importantly, when approaching the novel with a focus on eco-activism, all of them face pushback and opposition regarding their eco-centric viewpoints and convictions. Of the nine (human) protagonists, the reader follows five to the protests of the forest defense movement, reads about their frustration and moments of radicalization, and finally, accompanies one of them to prison. The ELF-like group is comprised of Mimi Ma, a Chinese American engineer, who joins the movement after a beloved grove of pines is cut down to make room for a parking lot; Douglas Pavlicek, a war veteran saved by a tree, who planted thousands of saplings only to realize that he is complicit in hiding huge clear-cuts in Oregonian National Forests; Nicholas Hoel, who grew up with the last American chestnut outside his window and ends up squatting some 180 feet above-ground in a redwood tree; Olivia Vandergriff, a college student, who, after a near-death experience, can listen to the trees and becomes the gravitational center of the group; and finally, sociologist Adam Appich, whose plan of studying the ideological convictions of environmentalists leads him to become a member of the ELF-like cell and who ends up in prison as a convicted domestic "ecoterrorist." Moreover, there are Dorothy and Ray Brinkman, who start paying attention and getting to know the plants in their backyard after about six decades of ignorance, and who become activists only in their seventies;[27] Neelay Mehta, a computer genius who tries to develop a game not based on the exploitation of the planet's natural resources that would teach players a respectful engagement with the nonhuman world; and, probably the novel's most impressive character: Patricia Westerford, "Plant Patty," a biologist whose work on trees' communicative abilities is ridiculed by the scientific community because of its lack of human exceptionalist logic.

From a transatlantic perspective, the novel's publication in German translation was very timely as it correlated with the protests at the Hambacher Forst that shared so many characteristics with the actions described by Powers. As a consequence—and despite having won the Pulitzer Prize and critical acclaim—some reviewers writing for German-language newspapers saw the novel as a nostalgic account of yesterday's failed activism that does not develop the power of today's broadcast images and reports on all-out environmental devastation (Haeming, "Zwischen Kitsch und Borke") or criticized the novel's clear demarcation between ignorant humans and the novel's activists (Ebel, "Auf dem Holzweg"). However, by bringing former conflicts and waves of environmental activism to the forefront, the novel is not so much dwelling in a nostalgic past but rather reflects what Eva Horn claims, namely, that "[o]ur present is the future that the environmental movement has been warning us against" (2). The novel openly and repeatedly reflects on the connections between past and present, past and future: "The past always comes clearer, in the future" (166); or "Life has a way of talking to the future. It's called memory" (600). Moreover, by highlighting how all of the protagonists in the novel were ridiculed, ignored, or declared crazy, *The Overstory* points to a mechanism that complicates and blocks the re-thinking of human-nonhuman relationships and attempts at a sustainable use of 'natural resources.'

[27] Dorothy, whose plotline "provides the quintessential movement from blindness to light" (Masiero 148), decides to let the plants take over in their backyard in an act of civil disobedience—"the Brinkman Woodlands Restoration Project" (584), which is a thorn in the neighbor's side: "Now she's almost seventy, at war with the entire city. Jungle in an upscale suburb: it's up there with child-molesting" (584).

The tree-loving characters have to face adverse reactions by their fellow humans to different degrees. An ancestor of Nicholas Hoel, who takes a photograph of his chestnut tree every month, is ridiculed by his own family: "His wife teases him without mercy, as do his children. 'He's waiting for it [the tree] to do something interesting.'" (13); as well as Patricia Westerford, who is ostracized by the scientific community: "For three agonizing days of the conference, people nudge each other as she passes them in the halls of the hotel: *There's the woman who thinks that trees are intelligent*" (160, original emphasis). Some of the protagonists, such as Adam and Douglas, are reluctant to become activists in the beginning, but sooner or later overcome their aversions. Douglas, who asks himself if the "green crazies" might be "right" (256), later joins the movement with Mimi Ma, and Adam Appich, who, having lost his preconceived ideas about activists, is still struggling when he joins the "Free Bioregion of Cascadia":

> They start in on the songs. Adam fights down his hatred of virtuous singing. The shaggy nature-souls and their platitudes make him queasy. He feels ashamed, the way he does when remembering childhood. […] Maybe it's okay. Maybe mass extinction justifies a little fuzziness. Maybe earnestness can help his hurt species as much as anything. Who is he to say? (419)

Through these characters, the novel not only speaks to possibly reluctant readers, but also debunks stereotypical images of hippie-environmentalists in favor of a more diverse picture.

Moreover, *The Overstory* negotiates the notion of 'ecoterrorism,' playing with questions of definition and historical changes in meaning regarding terrorism proper. Allusions or even direct references to the 9/11 attacks are often found in discussions of "terrorism" as a criminal category (cf. Vanderheiden 2005, Sumner and Weidman 2013, Miller et al. 2018), but also in cultural products concerned with the Green Scare. In Marshall Curry's Academy Award-nominated documentary *If A Tree Falls – A Story of the Earth Liberation Front* (2011), for example, New York City and the Freedom Tower work as a silent, yet constant, reminder of "genuine" terrorism and thus function as a point of comparison for its 'protagonist's criminal deeds. In *The Overstory*, 9/11 figures less prominently but nonetheless significantly towards the end of the narrative. The attack on the World Trade Center happens and Dorothy, watching it live with her husband, thinks "[s]he has seen this before: monstrous columns, too big to be felled, falling" (496), alluding to the cutting of giant sequoias and redwoods during the protests—a rather problematic, yet powerful comparison. Ten years later, Adam Appich finds himself in New York City to study the Occupy movement, where "[j]ust beyond the square's far corner is the wound that won't heal. The hole in the canopy has long since filled in, but it still oozes" (533-34). Again, the city's "canopy" alludes to the canopy of a forest. New York is also the city in which Adam Appich is later arrested by the FBI for a series of crimes the group of five committed almost twenty years earlier: "Then they told him what he was facing: domestic terrorism—attempting to influence the conduct of government by intimidation or coercion—punishable under the Terrorist Penalties Enhancement Act, the apparatus of a whole new security state" (562). Thus, it becomes clear that 9/11 is the prerequisite for Adam's 140-year sentence; it is not instrumentalized, however, to depict Adam's sentence as an "ecoterrorist" as illegitimate. Rather, the novel plays with the notion that the meaning of terrorism changes over time (cf. Gage 2011) and the fact that some "terrorists" were later exonerated:

> What had they hoped to win? Wilderness is gone. Forest has succumbed to chemically sustained silviculture. Four billion years of evolution, and that's where the matter will end. Politically, practically, emotionally, intellectually: Humans are all that count, the final word. You cannot shut down human hunger. You cannot even slow it. Just holding steady costs more than the race can afford. The coming massacre was their authority—a cataclysm large enough to pardon every fire the five of them lit. The cataclysm will still come, he's sure of it, long before his seventy plus seventy years are up. But not soon enough to exonerate him. (598)

While Adam is sure that he will never leave prison again, he is also convinced that he was one among few to recognize the obvious—and that the climate catastrophe will one day change how his activism and the crimes of the group are perceived. The ecological catastrophe that the novel's environmental activists have been pointing to all along will thus one day legitimize radical environmental activism.

Conclusion

The environmental movement certainly had its successes in the US and around the globe. Different interest groups have reached different goals, such as the establishment of protected areas (National Parks, Designated Wilderness Areas, etc.) in the early twentieth century or the banning of harmful toxins or plastic bags more recently. Moreover, the climate emergency and the devastation of ecosystems are more present in media and public discourse than ever,[28] which, even if measuring the success of social movements is difficult, can probably, to a certain degree, be attributed to emerging activist movements such as *Fridays for Future* or *Extinction Rebellion*. The decline of forests around the globe, with fires in the Amazon and the boreal forests of the Northern hemisphere, and changing conditions for trees due to climate change, moreover, seem to have inspired a growing appreciation of trees and their (non-economic) value for human life.

Nevertheless, environmental activists still face backlash, opposition, and in some cases even their lives are in danger (cf. Godin, "Record Number"). The cultural revisit of previous forms and groups of forest activism, as analyzed above in the examples of "For Forest" and *The Overstory*, should thus not necessarily be viewed as nostalgic or regressive. Rather, this revisit of previous periods of eco-activism is also future-oriented in that it raises important questions on how solidarity with the nonhuman is portrayed and perceived. This look back on previous activism and art inspired by different threats to forests (logging, toxins, urban sprawl, and industrialization) points to discursive and representational mechanisms that slow and/or block the development of an ecological consciousness vital for a more sustainable human life "on a damaged planet" (Tsing et al. 2017). In case of *The Overstory*, it also directs attention to the silencing of dissent and activists through the terrorist-label. The novel furthermore plays with the idea of activists being those who have been/are "unblinded" (295-96) to the consequences of environmental devastation, in the end portraying the climate catastrophe as the event that might one day exonerate 'ecoterrorist'

[28] According to yaleclimateconnections.org, media coverage on climate change (in the US) increased yet again in 2019.

Adam Appich. While *The Overstory* is concerned with backlash against environmentalists in the past and suggests that humanity will soon pay the price for this backlash, the "For Forest" controversy points to the fact that the mechanisms to discredit environmental activist efforts are still in place. Despite the recent global wave of climate activism, these mechanisms, which are also discernible in the portrayals of *Fridays for Future* activists as "lazy," are threatening to block attempts at a more sustainable lifestyle and the development of an ecological consciousness. Certainly, not all forms of activism by environmentalist groups were/are appropriate or intended to further the development of a sustainable way of life for all of humanity (cf. Guha); misrepresentations and populist attacks, however, obfuscate the highly important environmental issues that activists point to and thereby inhibit necessary discussions and change. Revisiting 1970s forest activism and the Timber Wars can thus, as the two examples analyzed here show, be a way of reflecting upon lost chances of the past and inspire a re-evaluation of environmental activism.

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