

## PREFACE

### FOREST TRACKS

This book's story began in the forest outside of Berlin. In the late 2000s, I embarked on a research project to study antiracist activism in Germany. This led me, quite literally, into the woods. In the formerly East German countryside surrounding the city, forest areas had become a transitory home to asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East, who found themselves living in derelict military barracks. After remaining in legal limbo for years, many African refugees, together with advocacy groups, began to organize protests to draw public attention to the everyday racism, spatial isolation, and violence they experienced. The refugees' encounters with German forests were the result of a series of transformations in national and European Union (EU) asylum policies, as well as the heated nationwide migration debates following Germany's unification.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of socialism ruptured and realigned Europe's political landscape. In the early 1990s, millions of people fled the war in former Yugoslavia (where my grandparents had grown up), while border conflicts and civil war increased in countries across Africa, such as Burundi, Mali, and Senegal. In 1992, close to half a million people sought refuge in Germany. Yet Germany's unification in 1990 also led to a resurgence in white nationalism: right-wing youth and neo-Nazis attacked refugee and migrant worker homes, setting them on fire in several cities. Soon after, EU and German asylum policies underwent sweeping changes that resulted in a sharp drop in the number of people seeking asylum and an increase in deportations. At the same time, local governments relocated

many refugee homes to the peripheries of cities or to remote forest areas in the countryside. By the mid-2000s, refugee activists and advocates were organizing against everyday racism and the spatial isolation of asylum seekers, who now often lived in secluded forest areas in Brandenburg and other parts of former East Germany.

For decades, scholars, artists, writers, and activists of color have highlighted the persistent legacies of racism and colonialism in shaping European social life (Gelbin, Konuk, and Piesche 1999; Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Steyerl 2003; Hügel et al. 1993; Kelly 2019; Nghi Ha 2010; Oguntoye, Ayim, and Schultz 2007; Red Haircrow 2018; Wekker 2016). Yet despite this important work, public and academic discussion in Germany often continues to focus on racism as a phenomenon of the past or as something that occurs elsewhere (Yildiz 2020), while largely ignoring the struggles of people of color against racism in Europe as well as the country's own colonial history. Addressing this silence, my first book, *InDifferenzen: Feministische Theorie in der Antirassistischen Kritik* (2004), tracked twentieth-century feminist, transnational conversations on race and racism in Germany and showed how these conversations shed light on the blind spots, as well as the privilege and power of whiteness in Europe.

Drawing on this earlier research, my next and new project initially sought to map ethnographically how antiracist coalition work on refugee rights exposed the ways in which structural racism infuses social institutions and migration policies in Germany. Participating in and engaging with antiracist networks in Berlin and Brandenburg, I had wanted to trace how activist movements build alliances while retheorizing racism and social justice on the ground. Yet when I arrived in Brandenburg, the forests themselves demanded attention. The landscape—the forest, the ruined military barracks, and the lack of access to infrastructure—was at the center of people's stories about what it meant to become a refugee in this place. A Kenyan activist spoke about having no access to warm water, having to walk through the forest every day, and encountering wild animals at night, all while being stuck in legal limbo for years. This was neither a fairy-tale forest nor the industrial forest that helped lay the foundations for Germany's economic power. This was a forest haunted by nightmares of colonial and racial violence—a space in which Europe's racialized others were administered into a refugee/savage slot, from which they were forced to prove their worthiness to be integrated into European society.

While many German Berliners and tourists saw Brandenburg's forests as a place of nature and adventure, to the Kenyan activist, the forest—which

she referred to as the German bush—was a space of unease and lack of possibility, crowded with uncanny creatures ranging from wild boars to bureaucrats to neo-Nazis (see also Stoetzer 2014b). Perhaps it is no surprise that people living in some of Europe’s most notorious refugee camps have called upon images of the wild, invoking terms such as *the bush* or *the jungle* as they found themselves inhabiting the ruins of military barracks or shaky tents, dwelling on the edges of windy ocean cliffs, facing police violence, or having their temporary homes go up in flames. The so-called jungles in Calais, France, or Moria camp on Lesbos Island, Greece, are just two cases in point. As Deborah Bird Rose (2004) reminds us, racism makes for “wild country.” The Kenyan activist’s experiences thus provided a glimpse of how landscapes such as forests can become sites of nation-making, dehumanization, racial violence, and exclusion. Her stories offered testimony to the ways in which colonial legacies and contemporary racial injustices materialize not only in bodies but also in relations to land. Yet, as this book will illustrate, these landscapes of exclusion and violence could also become the very grounds upon which alternative futures are forged.

While I listened to people’s accounts of feeling stuck in the forests of Berlin’s peripheries, I realized that the figure of the wild followed a different path in the city. In the mid-2000s, the media frequently reported on the city’s diverse flora and fauna. Many white Germans ventured out to explore urban nature in Berlin. Meanwhile, the country was riddled with public dispute over the presence of refugees and migrants of color. As parks became sites of debate over how migrant communities inhabit the urban environment, many urban gardeners created so-called multicultural gardens to cultivate plants and alternative communities across class and ethnic difference, thus hoping to escape increasing social divisions. These divisions and disputes over migration are certainly not unique to Berlin. Instead, they offer a window into the role that relations to urban lands and nature play in racialization processes in Germany and Europe. And they provide glimpses of what it means to live in hazardous environments of dehumanization—which is the central subject of this book.

In the 2020s, climate disasters have begun to wreak havoc across the planet, shaking a false sense of security held across the wealthy global North. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare and deepened the ways in which racial and economic inequalities affect whose lives become vulnerable and are exposed to risk. The Black Lives Matter movement has inspired protests across the globe. In Europe, these protests have reinvigorated the ongoing social struggle to confront anti-Black racism and police violence. The protests have

also initiated a larger debate about structural racism within mainstream society and have given rise to demands for reparations for colonial crimes and for truly decolonizing Europe (El-Tayeb 2020). Yet in Germany, too often, public discussion continues to see racism as something that is always “elsewhere,” contained as a phenomenon of the past or a problem of right-wing extremism. Although reflections of Germany’s colonial history have begun to be more common in various public arenas, the question of how this history continues to shape whiteness, anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, and other forms of racism today is rarely addressed. This is especially true when it comes to understanding how colonial history has informed extractive practices that have led to the contemporary environmental crisis.

As Carolyn Finney (2014) and Malcom Ferdinand (2022) teach us, the legacies of colonialism, slavery, and ongoing racial injustice continue to shape destructive modes of inhabiting the planet—while nature spaces and environmentalism are often coded as white (see also Linke 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). Nature can thus become a resource for cementing the nation, white supremacy, and settler colonial power. But, as I learned in the forest at the edges of Berlin, it can also become a site for confronting the violence inherent in practices of racialization, administration, and exploitation that shape Western relations to nature. This book thus embarks on a journey through the forests, parks, rubble spaces, and gardens of Berlin to seek out these openings and the alternative modes of inhabiting the world that people craft in them.