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"Hambi Stays!":

DWELLING AS ANTI-CAPITALISM IN HAMBACH FOREST

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Abstract

This photo essay explores the activist occupation of Hambach Forest (Hambi) in western Germany, a forest threatened by the expansion of a massive lignite mine. The extractive relationship to the Hambach landscape of RWE (*Rheinisch-Westälisches Elektriziätswerk AG*), the utility company responsible for the mine, has drawn strong opposition, most prominently in the form of a community of local and international activists who have occupied the forest and squatted abandoned houses in several of the ghost villages since 2012. An ethic of mutual solidarity holds the Hambi activists together and distinguishes them from what they perceive as a destructive and uncaring outside system. This ever-shifting collective of punks, squatters, tree-climbers, and saboteurs structures everything with the goal of continual obstruction to RWE's plans. Their oppositional yet communal collective activity reveals the political potential of a movement rooted in the imperiled forest landscape. Activists turn "trash" into building materials, use found food for creative cooking, and sustain one another through mutual dependency in their commitment to living with and for Hambach Forest. This photo essay uses ethnographic description, interviews, and photography to offer a window into the world of Hambi.

Keywords Activism, Forest, Extraction, Capitalism, Anthropocene, Anarchism, Materiality

Yawning, I peel my sleeping bag away from my overheating body. It has been an uncomfortably warm night, one of the warmest in Germany's history, I have been told. The sun is beating through the open doorway of the small treehouse where I have been sleeping for the past week or so, a reminder on my skin of the

chemical reactions occurring in the atmosphere causing the excruciatingly slow warming of the planet. But from my vantage point, I can perceive a more immediate sign of ecological disruption: the incessant humming of large mining machinery, like a high-pitched wail or a monstrous mosquito's whine, carried by the wind to my ears in this oak tree forty feet above the ground. I stretch and move past the miniature stove, food supplies, and hand-framed photographs left by the many past occupants of this treehouse. I take my water bottle from atop what looks like a tile-covered table but is actually a lock-on – a chunk of concrete embedded with twisted rebar, pieces of plastic, and other random objects that has a hole where one can lock one's arm to impede removal from the treehouse by police. Sitting on the tiny balcony outside of the doorway, I look out over the landscape: the other trees in the forest that neighbor mine, many of them visibly dry or dying; the bright blue sky; and the silhouette of massive diggers rising from the ground where the mine begins.

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Figure 1. View from a treehouse

Hambach Forest in Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia has existed in some form for thousands of years, with a unique ecology of old beech trees, hornbeams, and oaks. The forest was once shared by nearby villages as a cherished commons and source of food (Hambach Forest 2019). Unfortunately, nine-tenths of Hambach forest now no longer exists because an open-face lignite mine the size of a small city has consumed the ground where it once stood. The pit left by the

extracted lignite yawns 1,500 feet deep, revealing stratified layers of the earth's crust and other-worldly swirls of unused material that the massive diggers have cast aside in search of the black bed of coal beneath. The mine has created several ghost villages in the area, entire towns emptied of people who lived within the projected perimeter of the mine.

Figure 2. View of Hambach Mine from a lookout point. The sought-after lignite is visible as a black-colored substance at the bottom of the mine.

As the utility company responsible for the mine, RWE's (*Rheinisch-Westfälisches Elektrizitätswerk AG*) extractive relationship to the Hambach landscape has drawn strong opposition, most prominently in the form of a community of local and international activists who have occupied the forest and squatted abandoned houses in several of the ghost villages since 2012. Over the past seven years, activists have populated Hambach Forest (or Hambi, as they affectionately refer to its remaining clump of woodland) with a wide array of hand-built structures intended to make communal living possible and to keep RWE's loggers out of the forest, including barricades, tripods, ground-tents, shrines, compost toilets, anarchist banners, fire-pits, work sheds, and fully-outfitted kitchens. The most impressive of these structures are the fifty or so treehouses scattered throughout the forest, which remain occupied every night of the year, upholding the blunt logic of direct action: if RWE cuts the trees, they should be prepared to put the tree-sitters in harm's way as well. In fact, the expansion of the mine has been temporarily halted, at least in part due to

the treehouse occupation. An ethic of solidarity holds the Hambi activists together and distinguishes them from what they perceive as a destructive and uncaring outside system. The punks, squatters, tree-climbers, and saboteurs of this ever-shifting collective structure their lives with the goal of continual obstruction to RWE's plans—the spatial set up of their home, their habits of eating and resource consumption, and their everyday interactions with others in the community are designed to hinder RWE's security guards, the police, and the actual expansion of the mine itself. This oppositional yet communal collective activity reveals the political potential of a movement rooted in the imperiled forest landscape. Activists turn what others deem trash into building materials, use found food for creative cooking, and sustain one another through mutual dependency in their commitment to living with and for Hambach Forest.

Figure 3. Potted plants and an outhouse at one of the Hambi base camps.

Extraction and displacement shape the landscape of Hambach Forest. The Rhineland lignite region has been a powerhouse of industry since the turn of the 20th century, when Germany began extracting lignite to fuel the country's modernization. The Hambach mine is the largest hole in the ground in Europe, with plans to be expanded until 2045. Before RWE's purchase of the land, Hambach Forest was considered a Bürgewald, a "commons" forest administered by local municipalities, which meant nearby villagers could forage and use the forest recreationally but no logging was allowed. Through sufficient bribes, RWE convinced the municipalities that collectively owned the forest to sell the land to the company for next to nothing—tens of pfennigs for an acre. Following its 1978 purchase, RWE began a process of clearcutting and mining that felled the majority of the forest before direct-action protests by activists beginning in 2012 interfered with plans to raze the remainder of the forest. In addition, multiple villages in the area have been completely relocated due to the expansion of the mine.

Figure 4. Graffiti on a squatted building in one of the abandoned villages.

The norm in Hambach forest is for newcomers to take a pseudonym or what they call a forest name when they arrive, and many people become close friends or even lovers without learning each other's real names. Most people carry balaclavas or bandanas with them that they use to cover their face in areas with police presence. This security culture prevalent throughout the occupation makes for interesting conversational norms, where asking about personal details such as family history is considered taboo, and talking politics or joking about sabotaging RWE's machinery resembles small talk.

Living in Hambach Forest, I quickly learned that this suspicion when it comes to personal matters goes hand in hand with a strong sense of communal care and solidarity. Collective anonymity does not preclude working together; in fact, the former enables the latter because activists do not have to constantly suspect individuals of informing for the police. Activists generously welcome newcomers, offering food, companionship and loose tobacco freely. Anyone who is injured or sick receives the support of the community. As an activist named Trio told me, "Everyone helps everyone else because we're so dependent on each other. If we didn't help each other out, [the occupation] wouldn't work." The sense of solidarity among activists also extends to the local Syrian and Iraqi migrant community that the government has relocated in the abandoned houses of the villages left empty by RWE's mine. As part of their commitment to building non-capitalist communal lives, activists have built a large free shop with clothes that anyone can use, a fully-outfitted tool shed, communal bikes, a yurt library, multiple informational booths for visitors, and relatively-upscale compost toilets. The aim-in-progress is to provide all the infrastructure needed for a good life, but without the need for wage labor.

Some of the most prominent manifestations of the chaotic creativity prevalent among Hambi activists include the political graffiti that covers almost every blank surface; activists' personal tattoos and hand-made jacket patches; and the barricades, ground structures, and treehouses themselves, which include all kinds of shapes, sizes, and materials. I was told the largest treehouse in the forest could sleep fifteen people, while Oaktown, the largest of the treehouse villages, boasts an extensive network of bridges, platforms, and traverses linking its dozen or so treehouses. Most impressively, almost all the structures in the forest are built from salvaged or recycled material, such as wood planks, old tires, and tarps found in dumpsters or stolen from RWE. One activist told me a story about how RWE's security guards tried to use bricks and cement to fill up a window that some squatters had been using to access an empty building in one of the villages, but the next day were surprised to find that the multiple bags of cement had been taken by the activists for use in their own building projects.

Figure 5. One of the largest treehouse villages in Hambach forest, "Oaktown."

Political reuse in Hambach is a consequence of people's attitude towards the value of a practical and imaginative relationship with objects that does not seek to regulate or accumulate objects, but to make the most of their potential. As an artist named Andy, who was living in a large base camp in one of the squatted ghost villages, put it: "Happiness doesn't come from having no trash lying around. Happiness comes from just being here together in a freer way." For Andy, solidarity emerges through freer relations among objects and people. Objects considered to be garbage by capitalist society take on whole new lives through their creative reuse. Gesturing towards an old carpet that had been serving as a yoga mat, and some weathered, dumpster-salvaged couches we were sitting on, Andy said: "People here don't think, 'that's trash lying around.' They think of it as material waiting to be used to build something nice." The assembled quality of the structures and

spaces in Hambach forest, and the possibility of their future reuse, gives them a vibrant and hodgepodge beauty that precludes treating them as commodities.

Figure 6. A lookout tripod made from recycled corporate banners.

The forest itself plays a key role in the formation of Hambach activist politics. The most widely used name and slogan for the movement is Hambi Bleibt! or "Hambi Stays!" which has also become a popular hashtag in the global climate movement. Compared with other anticapitalist anarchist groups, such as the alter-globalization movements described by David Graeber (2009) in his ethnography of direct action, the Hambi Bleibt! movement has been unusually rooted in the defense of one particular landscape. Most of the people I spoke with during my time there cared deeply about the forest and the nonhuman beings that inhabit the forest such as trees, birds, boars, bats, beetles, and deer. Living in treehouses for weeks or months on end, often with poor insulation in winter and meager food supplies, requires a commitment to orienting one's patterns of dwelling around the spatial layout and rhythms of the forest. Indeed, the anthropologist Sarah Pike has shown that radical environmental activists who engage in long tree-sits often develop close relationships with other nonhuman beings, sometimes describing an experience of their bodies merging with the trees where they make their home (Pike 2017). Trio, who I quoted earlier, told me: "We occupy the forest by living in it, but we also live with the forest. We try not to disturb the animals. You watch out for the other beings here and let the forest take care of itself." When I asked

another activist named Tempest about the significance of the forest, he told me that he thought the movement to protect Hambach will never wane as long as the forest remains in danger: "If you want to stop Hambi from being Hambi, you have to cut it, or you have to shut the mine." As the movement's symbolic and material matrix, the forest itself co-produces the forms of political dwelling that have been largely responsible for its continued existence.

Figure 7. A barricade.

In addition to the placed-based nature of the movement, Hambi Bleibt has demonstrated an uncommon permanence and resilience over its seven-year history. Since the beginning of the occupation in 2012, there have been three major evictions, the largest and most recent of which happened in October of 2018, when police destroyed and removed all the treehouses and barricades in the forest. The most striking aspect of the Hambach occupation may be the fact that it has completely rebuilt itself, repopulating the forest with over fifty treehouses over the last year since the October 2018 eviction. Roughly the same amount of structures existed prior to the eviction, but those original structures took three years to build. Many in the forest pride themselves on their industriousness. As Tempest told me, "You can never have enough infrastructure. We need more treehouses, more bridges between trees, more barricades."

Thinking about this remarkable staying power, I remember a party I attended one night in one of the squatted village houses, from which activists had been evicted by RWE three times. After each eviction, the squatters merely reentered the house through a new entrance and continued to live there. Flickering candles revealed a hole smashed in the wall, which led into the house. Inside, I could see a piece of freshly painted graffiti on the barren walls: a tangle of bifurcating roots framing the German word Unentwurzelbar, which means "un-uprootable."

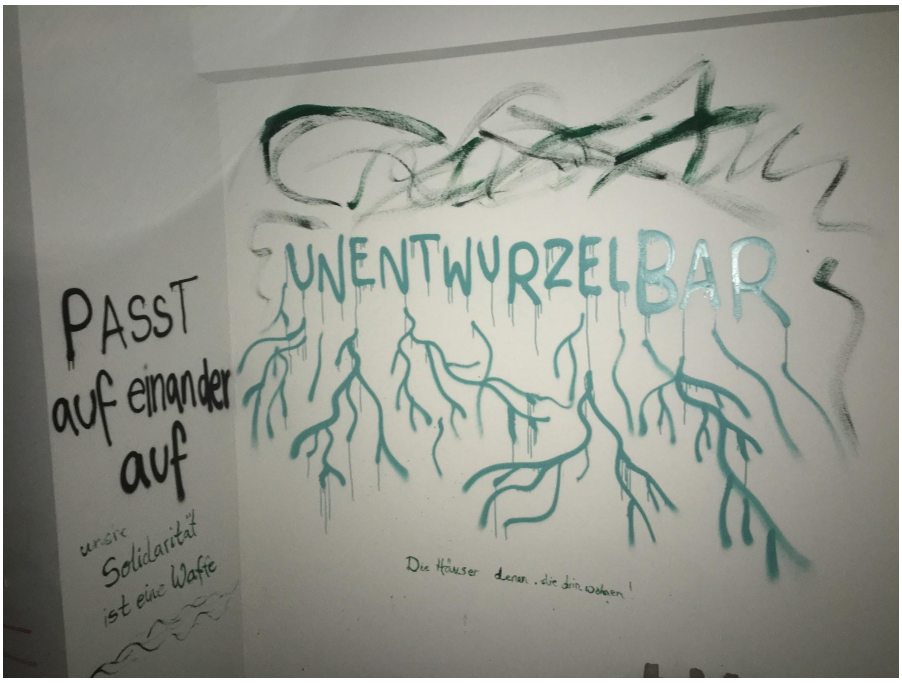

Figure 8. Graffiti in a squatted house.

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One night in the forest, I'm sitting around a fire with a couple dozen other people. It's a full moon, and the moon's light suffuses the space where we have gathered under one of the largest treehouses in the forest: Lluna. A traveling troupe of British punk folk musicians has just showed up hours before, and they are putting on a concert by the blazing fire, sending the eerily comforting sounds of flute and fiddle to the leaves above us. People crowd around the fire, clearly grateful for the warmth and the company. After the concert, walking alone back to my treehouse in another part of the forest, I stop in my tracks as the sounds of loud snuffling and tramping hooves come closer and closer from out of the dark. The night before, I had dreamt that I was speaking to a massive, bristling mother boar, trying to convince her not to kill me for interacting with her child. A pack of wild boar come rushing out of the trees nearby, grunting and squealing, then disappear back into the forest.

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