

“We Do This at Dancing Rabbit”: Recruitment and Collective Identity Processes in the Ecovillage

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Abstract

This article outlines the various ways members of an intentional community erect barriers to entry in their village and lifestyle, and how they use boundary maintenance tactics to both protect their own personal spheres as well as the integrity of their mission and vision. Members of Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage (“DR”) seek to create an alternative model for a more just and sustainable world. They face twin challenges in seeking to expand that model through recruitment to their community and retaining the integrity of their unique lifestyle that makes it possible and enjoyable. DR utilizes processes of recruitment and retention to construct and defend a collective identity based in accommodating for personal and political concerns, one characterized specifically by the values of egalitarianism and environmentalism as focal points for their shared lifestyle. Yet they also erect barriers to keep out potential recruits who may compromise that identity.

Keywords

social movements, collective identity, intentional communities, ecovillages

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Why do people join? This pressing question has animated scholarship on collective identities for quite some time and has produced a variety of answers. This question has a cousin, though, that has not garnered similar attention: when someone wants to join, what are the barriers to doing so? In this essay, I examine active processes of collective identity meant to exclude new members even in the face of a group's recruitment efforts. The group, an intentional community named Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage (henceforth "DR") and its membership (henceforth "Rabbits," a demonym of their choosing) seek to grow while also maintaining the boundaries of their shared, collective lifestyle.

I examine the major aspects of the Rabbit lifestyle, which contribute to the development of a collective identity at DR: initial interactions with the village, the recruiting visitor program and the major barriers it presents; and candid discussions about human waste. Rabbits run potential new members through a program that communicates "we do this at DR" and that there is a range of behaviors and preferences one must conform to in order to fit in. While Rabbits want people to join in order to increase the size and effectiveness of their organization, they simultaneously guard the integrity of their lifestyle through some exclusionary practices. The group balances the concerns of growth, commitment, and stability through these collective identity-building processes.

Collective Identity in Lifestyle and Movements

Intentional Communities (ICs) are many things and, much like other forms of collective behavior, have been somewhat nebulous to define at times. Historian Timothy Miller offers the most complete definition as a group of people who (a) are gathered for the purpose of enacting some shared vision that sets them apart from mainstream society, (b) live together in close physical proximity, (c) practice some form of material or economic sharing, and (d) must be comprised of a least five unrelated adults who have joined voluntarily (2010). The case study in this paper, DR, is a form of IC known as an ecovillage, something Gilman and Gilman described as "human scale full-featured settlement in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future." (1991, 10). Importantly, not all ICs or ecovillages are engaged in outward social change like the case study of this paper. Many instead were or are a form of retreat for members who believe that the only way to establish a better world was to shrink it to the size their group (Forster and Metcalf 2000).

Whether they are a means of retreat or engagement, ICs are a mechanism for social change. Theorizing about this impact has focused on how they are a focal point for larger currents. to Pitzer's (1989, 2009) theory of "developmental communalism," which describes ICs as a generic social change mechanism, one used by the formative stages of a larger movement (social, religious, or political) as an opportunity to ground their ideas and as a base for expansion, is formative to this. If said alternative ideas fail to catch on or do catch on to the point where they become mainstream in a society, the IC form dies away as it is no longer a necessary base for those ideas. In response to this, Lockyer (2009) proposed that we see ICs through a networked lens of "transformative utopianism." He notes that members of ICs come and go, often between communities, and there are often large constituencies for a particular IC who do not actually participate in the communal aspect.

Sargisson and Sargent describe ICs as a means of engaging "lived utopianism," connecting the goal of a perfected place with the transformative nature of everyday actions. They go on to describe the experience of creating an IC backed by a utopian vision as a clear form of prefigurative politics, that "[m]any intentional communities are undertaking an experiment that they hope will prefigure a better way of life." (2017, 10) Such utopian thinking has been frequently described as a form of political thought (Goodwin and Taylor 1982; Hansot 1974) because it reflects real or imagined attempts at changing the social order. As Sargent puts it: "[a] central issue for utopia is whether a better social order allows people to become better or better people create a better social order" (Sargent 2010, 111). Studies of ICs both historical and contemporary demonstrate their capacity to challenge an unjust social order in such areas as women's liberation (Hughes 2001), racial inequalities (O'Connor 2005), gay rights (Hennen 2004; Morgensen 2009), and environmental degradation (Jones 2014; Lockyer 2017; Schelly 2017). The overlap between utopian thinking and IC is almost a prerequisite: though many ICs would not outwardly describe themselves as utopian, they nonetheless form guided by visions an alternative world made better (if not "perfect") outlined and enacted through their shared lifestyles. And the agglomeration of collective living across the global landscape is built on widely divergent views of what the "good place" looks like, such that Smith (2002) has described the state of the movement as "eclectic" for the varieties of IC that exist on the landscape.

Existing research has established that ICs have much in common with social movements, and though they are not the same, there are processes that overlap these social forms (Brown 2002; Ergas 2010; Lockyer 2017; Rubin 2020). Like social movements, many ICs must balance a desire to grow with a desire to be effective in their aims to push change. This overlap is highly

focused on the attributes of so-called “new” social movements (NSMs) and the interpretation of said movements as focused on conditions of social production and self-actualization of movement members (Buechler 1995; Pichardo 1997). Members of ICs move to them in an effort to more fully realize their ideals by making them an everyday part of life.

The NSM tradition is a focus here particularly because it is useful for illuminating the connections between lifestyle and political work. It would be easy to dismiss ICs “either as ‘utopian’ or ‘communal’, that is, as non-movements, even the antithesis of a movement. Or. . .incorrectly identify them as a social movement in the classical collective behavior tradition.” (Schehr 1997, 3) But ICs are a form of collective behavior seeking social change at the level of the lifestyle, while members are cognizant that personal efforts can have larger sociopolitical effects. In other words, ICs “can never fully abrogate their association with dominant culture. . .contemporary ICs *are* relatively integrated into their communities. They participate in lifeworld activities and engage lifeworld issues all while the continue to practice alternative modes of living.” (Schehr 1997, 146). Some work has been done already to show that the Oneida IC, which existed for 30 years in the latter half of the 19th century, demonstrates the relevance of NSM concepts. The community was founded “upon constructing a social and economic system that would provide an alternative structure within which the self-actualization of the members. . .could occur.” (d’Anieri, Ernst, and Kier 1990, 450)

Another reason to draw from NSM literature is for its foregrounding of collective identity, which implies a set of characteristics that create a shared sense of belonging to a group, the same characteristics that distinguish that group from others and are a fulcrum supporting efforts at change. Melucci notes that collective identities “contribute to the formation of a more or less stable ‘we’ by rendering common and laboriously negotiating and adjusting at least three orientations: the *goals* of their action; the *means* to be utilized; and the *environment* within which their action takes place.” (Melucci 1989, 26). They are, more than anything, a way of identifying with the group and of disidentifying the group from others. A collective identity is distinguished through at least several features: the use of boundaries, which construct a positive identity for the group; consciousness, which is an interpretive framework for defining common interests of struggle; and negotiation points, which are the ways in which activists resist negative social definitions characterizing their participation in the movement (Taylor and Whittier 1999).

Other research has posited this connection as well, as with Ergas’ observation that members of one anonymous ecovillage “actively create a collective identity through a process that includes generating a collective vision by agreeing on common values, establishing goals, and converting them into

action” (Ergas 2010, 33). This is also the basis for Lockyer’s (2009) argument of transformative utopianism, except his is built on the formation of community for action primarily through lifestyle while social movements are typically characterized through political action.

Collective identities are also barriers. They have been shown to hinder change within social movements due to such factors as collective memories (Gongaware 2012), to prevent people from joining movements due to such reasons as access and knowledge in internet communication platforms (Buyukozturk, Gauden, and Dowd-Arrow 2018); the hyper-individualism of neoliberal ideology (Girerd and Bonnot 2020), or cultural capital (Lyson 2014). On the other hand, collective identities may require shared communal spaces to support a movement, such as concerts for the white power movement studied by Futrell and Simi (2004) or the National Women’s Music Festival supporting the radical lesbian feminist movement studied by Eder, Staggenborg, and Sudderth (1995). The collective identity of DR is active and all-encompassing because it is a lifestyle and not something intermittently negotiated in temporary spaces of mobilization. It is ongoing and omnipresent to Rabbits as well as their visitors.

As Polletta and Jasper (2001) note, is always in interplay with individual identities and the aggregate of individuals, but is something more—fluid and relational. Scholars should be wary, they warn, of reifying collective identity as representing either only the individual *or* the group. In some cases, like online message boards, collective identities are made possible because individual identities are anonymous and hidden and therefore any actions of individuals in the group are interpreted by the group as action by the group (Sparby 2017). However, collective identities are not conterminous with individual identities, as individuals move between collectives in space and time, and groups change to recruit or expel members with certain characteristics. Rubin (2019) elaborates on the importance of seeing individual ecovillagers as having a wide variety of individual opinions about the right way to approach sustainable living, but that by joining the ecovillage they agree to submit some personal autonomy towards the collective mission. The individual, in each case, exists within the larger community.

Methods

The ecovillage can be a foreign place to visitors, as they embrace a wide variety of norms that stand in contrast to more mainstream culture. It is a place where the daily life and built environment embody a set of alternative values centered on ecological sustainability and egalitarian decision-making. There are a number of other existing studies of DR (for example, Jones 2014;

Lockyer 2017; Rubin 2019; Sanford 2014; Schelly 2017) and this paper contributes to a longstanding tradition of Rabbits welcoming researchers to study the community. While I changed several of the names in the reporting at the request respondents, all of the Rabbits included in this paper readily agreed to have their perspectives shared for this project.

The data collection process I engaged in was multi-staged in adapting to and understanding the norms of the community through participant observation. Over the course of three years, I went through the recruitment process outlined below to become a resident of DR. I lived in the village full time for a total of eight months, collecting ethnographic data in the form of field notes and journaling. I also did a series of 18 interviews with current members. Rabbits lead their own lives in addition to living in the village. So in addition to the latter's need for meetings, logistics, and presenting a face to the public, they readily chatted about the weather, gardening techniques, gossip about their non-communal neighbors, and current events, among other topics. In this context, I spent a great deal of time letting Rabbits steer the conversation in my everyday observations and used interviews to focus more specifically on special topics. These ranged in duration from 15 minutes to one hour.

I became interested in how DR was engaged in and imagined their relationships to social change, but let the experience guide further inquiry leading to the results outlined further. I based the analysis of the following data on an inductive, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) style of research, where I used the gathered data first and examined it repeatedly both during and after collection for the presence of important themes. These form the basis of the various subsections.

Setting Boundaries

Collective identities are distinguished by how groups set boundaries and act together. This paper is written in the interest of demonstrating how Rabbits set boundaries around their lifestyle through what I describe as “what we do this at DR,” and introducing the reader to some basic aspects of the village in the same order that most people who visit come learn about them. The phrase “we do this at DR” is my own creation to summarize how the Rabbits work to communicate the boundaries of their shared lifestyle, and not a common saying of the village.

Rabbits find themselves in a challenging state. They want visitors, even new Rabbits. They want to spread their own message of sustainable and egalitarian community, have other ICs emerge following their example, and even see structural changes that are born out of their set of ideals. Yet they also want to live their lives, experience stability, and have some privacy from time

to time. Being the center of attention is great for spreading a message, but it's also difficult to turn off without setting boundaries around its availability. In order to be an effective actor, the group needs their message to be heard, and more people to be activated or brought into the fold of their ideological leanings and practices. When that involves someone's daily habits, preferences, and choices, members of that movement predictably put up significant barriers to entry.

Just as living in the village longer will bear continual revelation about the complexities of it, the further one reads into this paper, the more complicated their understanding of the village should become. My ethnographic encounter with DR leads me to conclude that they have successfully constructed a collective identity that functions simultaneously as a group of individuals, each with their own characteristics, beliefs, and behaviors, and a lifestyle with enough in common to set clear boundaries between who belongs in the group and who does not. The following section presents results and discussion in tandem, as is typical of ethnographic reporting.

The First Approach

DR is hard to find unless one has a GPS or has been there before. No matter what direction one takes into northeast Missouri, it requires leaving the interstate highways behind, then state highways, state roads, and finally the pavement for the last mile and a half as you crunch along the gravel up to the village. A colorful purple sign swirled in tie-dye style welcomes you to park in the lot at the front of the village. Another sign insists that from this point onward, the road is for walking rather than driving.

Once you have parked and disembarked from your vehicle, the first sights are a garden along the path, leading to a shed in disrepair on the right and a better maintained barn on the left that is covered in vibrant murals on three sides. Further down the paths is a courtyard with picnic tables and sun-powered outdoor ovens, a place people gather to eat in. On the left and right, two-story living structures stand reminiscent of Colonial architecture but made of natural materials. You can hear the sound of a windmill whooshing to generate electricity somewhere in the distance. Ahead is a more conventional looking building covered with solar panels, and a path that continues forward towards residential buildings.

A new visitor would be unsure where to go, or how to proceed and find the right person to talk to about your purpose for being in the village. This is the first hurdle that people face upon arrival to DR. Because it is a real village—with a group of people, all with jobs and daily chores they must attend to—and not a tourist destination, there is no kiosk, no visitor's center, and no

guide to direct people where to go unless their arrival is part of a planned group. Yet there are new people who arrive in scores every year, sometimes even daily, at the invitation of Rabbits in order to experience the functioning village and the lifestyle that is particular to DR. Visitors will face several more hurdles to know where to go and who to talk to as your time at DR progresses, though they will vary based on why you've come.

There are only a couple of reasons one would be in this situation, arrived at the front of the village and unsure what comes next. First is for a weekend tour, which is the most cursory of visits and lasts only a few short hours. Tourists come from all over the country and world, but just as often are locals from the region, curious about this strange place their friends talk about from time to time. Second is because they are more intrepid tourists come to stay at the bed and breakfast for a night or two. Third is if they have come as a personal guest of a Rabbit, often old friends of members come to reconnect or potential recruits they've met while traveling. Finally, there is the visitor program, which is a topic of discussion later in this paper.

A person cannot arrive at DR with no reason to be there, no invitation, and no scheduled activity to partake in. They would be asked to leave. Rabbits guard their privacy zealously, even as they invite hundreds of people to see their village every year, because it is fleeting under such an arrangement. A Rabbit named Sparrow noted in a meeting the importance of this attempted standard, saying:

It's a lot different to say we're going to live this way and we're going to be really insular, not going to open our doors, this is us and we're putting up the walls. But we don't, we live in this community, and we open up our doors six months out of the year and have so many people come through, probe at us, ask us these questions, and learn from us. It is hard to be under scrutiny, even when the question comes off as light, it's still the questions that we're constantly being asked.

Similarly, Aaron noted in a planning meeting for upcoming programs that, "it is a form of activism to live the way we live. We have to have people coming here to make a difference." While they want to be on display as a "demonstration community," as Sparrow calls it, that exists in tension with the need to build and maintain existing interpersonal relationships, and have time for the introverts of the village to rest and recharge.

Visitors of many backgrounds come to DR, but those that are most interested in the message tend to appear as part of the visitor program—a two to three week intensive stay designed to be fully immersive of the ecovillage experience. This was the first deep exposure I had to the village, when I came as part of the

program in 2014 to see if a longer study was possible. The prospect of moving to a rural community with notably different norms warranted such a pilot, and fulfilled the need to build contacts within the community to identify gatekeepers as well as reason and means to return for a more in-depth study.

Participants in this program come from all over the country, and even other countries on rare occasions. They have to fill out a lengthy form beforehand with questions ranging in complexity from “How did you hear about DR?” and “What do you hope to get out of the experience?” to “What experience do you have with consensus-based decision making?,” which is then sent to the entire community for appraisal. According to Danielle, the Rabbit who coordinated the visitor program at the time of this study, the program seldom gets such an abundance of candidates that the community needs to be picky about who they choose to let in. Usually the form itself works as a fastidious initial barrier for the unserious.

Visitors arrive in groups of 12–15, some bringing children, some camping and some staying at the community's bed and breakfast; some young, some old, and some poor enough to be reliant of public assistance while some are middle class; few rich and few not white. In my program, there were two Navy Veterans, a film engineer from Italy, the owner of a small solar energy firm from Canada, a software engineer, and an anthropology professor (not conducting research), among other backgrounds. Because we had a reason to be there, and because we were told to arrive in a certain range of hours on a certain day, there was a Rabbit there to greet us as our group arrived, show us our accommodations, and tell us when and where to find dinner that evening. My field notes during my pilot project to the village as a visitor belie a great deal of confusion and feelings of being overwhelmed. I'm not sure these feelings were intentional on the part of Rabbits but more likely rather simply from my lack of familiarity for the region, the building styles, and the people—in other words, the trepidation of first arrival seems less likely a barrier by design than an unavoidable culture shock.

It was interesting, then, during my residency at the village the following year, to witness subsequent waves of visitors (an average of five groups per year) as part of the full project from my positions as resident and observer. The looks on their faces of wonder and amusement, and certainly confusion, very closely approximated my initial feelings, and what I certainly must have looked like. That mix of excitement, confusion, and eagerness seemed to be incumbent to the first experience one has with the visitor program. After the visitors arrive and find their accommodations, some wander the village for a time, or stick trepidatiously to the front courtyard for fear of getting lost. The next day, they'll take a tour and discover that getting lost is nearly impossible, given the size and layout of the village.

Meal Times

One mix of feelings gives way to another, or more of the same but to fluctuating degrees, as dinner time descends upon the village. Visitors are brought to one of the several kitchen co-ops, where they are fed by one of the Rabbits who make a spectacle of the meal provided that night. On my first night, Sparrow prepared my groups' meal, and she produced a "nettle-strone" soup: a minestrone variant that included the leaves of the local forageable stinging nettle and various root vegetables. We formed a circle, held hands, and sang a simple non-denominational song of grace before digging in. Perhaps it was the wild emotions I was feeling upon arrival in the new setting, or a deep sense of the need to be accepted, but the soup left me warmed and full.

From the other side, though, I saw how this was an informal barrier to entry. Much of life at DR revolves around food—growing it, obtaining it, cooking it, preserving it, composting it, and discussing the comparative ethics of what one eats are all components of the visitor program in various ways. Could the visitors stomach unfamiliar foods, or ones prepared in a perhaps more austere way than they were used to? Rabbit chefs are very accommodating of common dietary restrictions like gluten-free, dairy-free, vegetarian, or vegan, but this was also rather easy because so many meals were based on simple grains, beans, and a mix of whatever other vegetables were on hand or cheapest to acquire. I watched visitor groups subsequent to my own eat meals much leaner or simpler than I regularly saw on my plate as a resident and observed the same in many of the other kitchen co-ops. Of course some people at DR *do* eat quite the lean diet: Oliver (who often dined alone), for example, lived often subsisting on Nutella and toast or oatmeal with raisins, while the Webelos kitchen co-op fluctuated between enormous feasts of fowl when it was time to slaughter their chicken flock and of rice and beans in the time between when the roots cellars started to run low before Spring harvests. In contrast, the Milkweed Mercantile kitchen co-op, which was integrated in to the bed and breakfast, regularly had meat, imported or unseasonal fruits and vegetables, and other fancy fares because they often had to accommodate guests of the business who were not interested in becoming new Rabbits, only curious about seeing it for a night or two.

Some of the lean-ness of visitor meals comes from the challenge of cooking for so many people at once, but moreover they reflected food ethics of DR. Quite simply, the meals that visitors received reflected meals atypical of many Rabbits, but nonetheless meals that they should expect to be ok consuming as a Rabbit themselves. Once, when I was entrusted with cooking for visitors, I reached for the jar of dried shitake mushrooms only to be told that those were too expensive an ingredient to be feeding them despite being something we

regularly consumed in the co-op I ate in. Thus, that first meal is a “we do this at DR” barrier that posed to visitors this question: *can you eat like us?* The answer, quite often, was no. As the program proceeded, visitors often found that the lack of meat and overabundance of beans led to uncomfortable digestion, or they balked at the unfamiliar homemade fermented foods the Ironweed kitchen co-op produced, among other mealtime concerns.

Meat and more familiar ingredients are never very far or necessarily difficult to acquire at DR. The on-farm grocery store (run out of a converted shipping container by one of the Rabbits) contains all the staples one could possibly need: gravity bins that dispense the dried bulk foods visitors were used to and Rabbits regularly refilled; refrigerators full of organic butter and tofu; and freezers containing meat produced on-farm and from a farming neighbor. All of these products, produced to organic or near-organic standards, were pricier than what one would conventionally find in that part of the country due to the emphasis on quality. Thus, most Rabbits opted for the beans and grains that are more filling per dollar than the expensive meats.

If they care to venture farther, visitors can find a local Mennonite-owned grocery store colloquially called Zim’s (short for Zimmerman’s) in the town of Rutledge two miles away that carries much more of the conventional groceries. But, informal sanctions awaited those who would drive there. Walking and biking are the only acceptable modes of transportation you should use during the visitor session at DR unless an absolute need appears. Rabbits take care to remind visitors that this isn’t good ecovillage behavior, and that if they need to go to town they should walk or bike, and at a minimum make sure their car is fully loaded to maximize the use value of burning fossil fuels. Alyssa recalled to me in a mealtime conversation that a former Rabbit in a previous year publicly called out at a communal dinner, by name, some visitors for using their personal vehicles to get about during the program. While she noted that it was unusual to do such public shaming, most Rabbits still politely suggest alternatives to driving if they hear a visitor is planning to do so.

Rabbits frequent Zim’s quite a bit, and more than they let on to the visitors. Meat eaters find satiation at the diner attached to the grocery, a place I started to frequent after a couple months into residency. Every time I walked or biked there for lunch, I inevitably ran in to other Rabbits, coming or going. But for visitors, to journey regularly to Zim’s was to miss out on the ecovillage experience offered by the program. And to miss out on the experience is to communicate that, as a visitor, you’re not ready to take the next step toward becoming a Rabbit. Therefore, while not strictly prohibited, going to Zim’s as a mealtime escape was prohibitive of future chances for becoming a Rabbit. If the diet of the visitor program seems austere, it is only because Rabbits want to prepare visitors for how they *might* live as a Rabbit.

Work Parties

Another aspect of the visitor program is work parties, which vary in intensity and nature. Visitors assist on various everyday projects that would take place in the village regardless of their presence, which fall in to two types: feeding the village and building the village. The former is a lot of gardening work like weeding, planting, harvesting, shoveling dirt, and repairing fences. It's work that most Rabbits do regularly to some extent, since almost all of them have at least some garden space. Often this work also entails picking ingredients that will be used later in their meals.

The latter is more varied, as are the building needs of the village. When I was a visitor, my group participated in a "cob-stomping party," which required us to take off our shoes and dance flat-footedly on a mix of water, clay, sand, and straw to mix them together for use as a natural building material on a house in progress. Other visitors were tasked with distributing an enormous pile of woodchip mulch across the footpaths of the village, sorting and stacking firewood, moving felled tree trunks through a team effort, and, perhaps most spectacularly, participating in controlled prairie burns out on some of the 280 acres DR owns.

Rabbits have these same build-the-village work parties as a community, though not as often as visitors are tasked to participate in. The work parties are a couple-of-times-per-year practice in the community as opposed to a couple-of-times-per-week practice for the visitors. Rather than being about the spirit of communalism and the willing spirit of helping one's neighbor or the commons as a means of eventually helping one's self, which is how they manifest in community-wide builds, they are more of a grueling trial of physical labor meant to dissuade the less physically fit or less willing from moving to DR, as they would be less likely to build a garden, build a structure, or contribute in other ways to the manual labor necessary to maintaining the village. The spirit of collective construction does stir in the village a few times a year, but from the perspective of a visitor, it's something they are expected to participate in near daily. The not-so-subtle message embodied by the work parties is *can you do physical work like us?*, even as the amount of arduous physical labor performed varies widely among Rabbits.

Workshops and Learning

Another challenge placed before visitors is the many workshops they are expected to attend. Workshops cover both the formal aspects of the village, like their complex egalitarian governance structures, and the informal aspects, like bonding through private emotional circles. A Rabbit who specializes

more in the given area runs each session, though I witnessed an often-rotating cast in many of them. The program, then, subjected visitors to a whirlwind of information communicating the complexity of the Rabbit lifestyle in a few short weeks despite it being impossible to learn in such a time frame. Even after my eight months at DR, I am still only moderately confident in my ability to explain in full depth how the governance structures work. The workshops, then, represent a third barrier to entry because they communicate that in addition to physical labor, strenuous emotional and mental labor are also expected: *can you do emotional work like us?* Among these workshops include ones on the local alternative currency, consensus decision-making, their ecological covenants and sustainability guidelines, permaculture, and something called “inner sustainability” that covers the co-counseling and emotional support techniques deployed by Rabbits.

If a visitor could transcend all of the other barriers placed in the path to Rabbinhood, they faced a final challenge: finding a host. As noted earlier, someone needs to have a reason to be at DR, and a person without a reason is asked to leave. When the visitor program comes to an end, so does a visitor’s reason for being there. Many of the visitors are ready when that time comes to move on, having gathered a wealth of new experiences but also ready to return to their jobs, air-conditioned buildings, and flush toilets. Others who wish to stay will ask a Rabbit they’ve befriended to sponsor them in staying long, while they either try to get more of the same experience or figure out the logistics of applying for residency.

Despite the trials faced in the program, visitors more often than not left with a cheery attitude, having made friends and tried new things. But most of them felt the change to a Rabbit lifestyle would be too big for them to manage as only about a dozen of the hundred or more who come every year will stay for any length of time beyond the visitor program. The visitor program is not intended to make people hate the village, but rather more clearly inform them of the boundaries of the Rabbit identity.

The barriers established by the visitor program—its form, the food, work parties, workshops, and finding a host—thus charge the visitor program with a second purpose: even when visitors were not turned in to new Rabbits, they embraced at least a few aspects of the experience and decided to bring some of the norms and practices back home with them. And, as Angora writes in DR’s blog, the exchange is a two-way street because she finds herself “wondering who will come, what we’ll learn from them, and what kind of impact we’ll have on their lives.” Loren in an interview said that,

[I have] a strong interest in meeting all the visitors who come in—to engage them because these people are here to do more good and live better than how

they could. If they're looking for footing and connections to move here, I try to help them find those more easily.

Others relate to the visitor program as a necessary evil. One October evening over dinner, Lop told me that he was glad the visitor sessions for the year had ended, because that meant he could retreat from being social and more fully embrace his nature as an introvert. While he also loved the spring, he did so because of the stimulated growth in nature, and not the influx of people to the village.

For those still wanting to stick around, finding a host is the means of continuing to have a reason to be at DR. Typically, for someone able to transcend all the previous barriers, finding a host is the easiest of them. When a visitor finds a host, they become a guest of that Rabbit, much like the guests that Rabbits host on a more temporary basis, except with the understanding that this form of guesthood will eventually lead to Rabbithood. The host is someone willing to take responsibility for the actions of the visit, essentially to "vouch" for them as someone who is compatible enough with the community to continue staying there. The path to Rabbithood is long, as visitors become residents, and then eventually member Rabbits where they shed the need for a host, over the course of at least a full year.

Poop Talk

Visitors and guests, warned in advance, arrive to find composting toilets. Most visitors come from a world of flush toilets, where you simply push a lever to remove the products of digestion and other unwanted substances with a satisfying *whoosh*. But at DR there are no flush toilets, no satisfying whoosh, and certainly no "unwanted substances" that would normally be speedily carried away.

The community abides by a series of ecological covenants, one of which states that "waste disposal systems at Dancing Rabbit shall reclaim organic and recyclable materials," meaning that *all* organic materials get saved and reused, whether that be rotting wooden beams from an older structure, food scraps, chicken feathers after their slaughter, and, yes, even human waste. This is humanure, also known as "humey," and it is a significant practice that Rabbits use as a means of testing potential members' readiness to accept the lifestyle of DR. Many people are uncomfortable talking about poop, let alone encountering new and unfamiliar ways of doing it. The poop talk of DR is perhaps the most significant initial barrier to entry—lots of people are turned away almost immediately, and ask where they can find a "real toilet," to be told that the nearest one is nearly two miles away, in town at Zim's.

It's not just the practice that is intended to create such boundaries and hurdles, but Rabbits' willingness to talk about it with new arrivals. Everybody poops, and so when the question inevitably comes up about where to go, the Rabbit guiding the tour or orienting the visitors will explain, often in great detail, how their humey system works: there are buckets all over DR, many in private residences, some in outdoor outhouses, and two in the Common House. Most often, these buckets will have a seating apparatus built around them to make it easier to sit on like a conventional toilet. After one has relieved themselves, there is toilet paper to wipe and sawdust to scoop on top of it to reduce the odor through desiccation and hide the feces from the next person to use it. When the buckets are full, their owner will transport the contents to the "humey bins" several hundred yards outside the borders of the village, dump and rinse them out, and then return them to their apparatus.

This would seem unsanitary, at least to visitors coming from around the United States. After all, there is inherent risk that human feces carry and support loads of bacteria. But no one at DR has ever gotten sick from the practice, or at least no cases were ever discussed during my observations. They understand that much of the world is still without flush toilets and suffer from feces-borne illnesses. So they take steps to mitigate that problem. The careful application of sawdust, considered distance between the piles and the village, and careful study of compost maintenance has all but removed any vestige of worry about sanitation in the humey method among members of the village, even if they don't always succeed with visitors.

Those that stay receive a healthy dose of poop talk. In my experience of DR, it was more than just a practice to promote sustainability: it was a defining characteristic of whether someone was ready to commit to the DR lifestyle. Visitor groups inevitably contained some who were curious about the practice and asked about it with an open and eager mind, and even a few who had experienced humey previously. Since the early days of the visitor program are typically packed full of seminars and work parties, their first opportunity to ask about it was often at meals, and Rabbits were ready to answer. If a visitor could handle talking about what was going to happen on the other end with their food as they were consuming it, that was taken as a positive sign that they would be a good fit and potential recruit.

Even when visitors were not around, poop talk was common. It could happen at any hour of the day, but most commonly I experienced poop talk at mealtimes since that's when people most often gathered in groups to discuss their daily concerns. The rotating responsibility of emptying the buckets in shared spaces led to constant checking as to whether the appropriate person had done their chore in a timely fashion, lest there be nowhere to poop when the time came. Maintenance of the humey piles was always a

topic of concern as the eventual application of the “rested” (fully composted) remains was not yet a settled topic. Should they use it on gardens? Even many Rabbits weren’t comfortable with that. For the time being the only settled use was silviculture, fertilizing trees planted by Rabbits across the land though mainly for landscape restoration. There also followed discussions about what pooping in a bucket meant in the context of the Rabbit lifestyle, either boosting visitors who successfully integrated in to the humey system or lightly teasing those who hadn’t, and answering the questions of those who were unsure how to feel.

For those passing through, with no intention of a full-time engagement in the lifestyle, there did exist an exception to the buckets: the composting toilets at the bed and breakfast. While these did not flush, they were much closer to conventional toilets, with the human waste disappearing into a dark abyss (rather than a 14.5 inch tall bucket) as it fell to the commercial apparatus specially installed in their cellar. Since the bed and breakfast was designed to accommodate travelers and short term guests, and was not open more than a few hours a day to the general population, the toilets there didn’t represent a viable alternative to any potential Rabbit hoping to avoid the bucket. The guests of the bed and breakfast—those typically not candidates for becoming Rabbits—were allowed a reprieve from the norms of pooping in a bucket, and later emptying it in to the humey pile. Thus, the boundary of pooping in a bucket as a lifestyle practice was firmly established as a norm for those wishing to become Rabbits, rather than anyone and everyone who visited.

Adding in Feminism

There’s nothing in particular that makes for the “right” ecovillager or right kind of Rabbit. Certainly, there are desirable characteristics for any prospect and a pledge one must make to adhere to community standards in their behavior. It helps if one is already primed with knowledge of consensus decision-making or comes to the village looking to participate in egalitarian decision-making, or committed to environmentalism and can poop in a bucket without a second thought. These sorts of considerations belie the necessity of a “consciousness” listed as central to the formation of a collective identity by Taylor and Whittier (1999). The environmental and egalitarian inspirations behind the visitor program and poop talk as barriers to entry are essential to showing recruits what points of struggle and self-identity they need to come to the village with or be willing to develop as a consequence of joining.

During the course of this research, a new set of circumstances converged to add a new desirable characteristic and, therefore, a new group boundary. It

began with an increasingly out of balance gender ratio. This is something that was the subject of frequent debate—a standard had been set that the village would allow no more than 60% of one gender in the village, and the population was coming precariously close to 60% male. The fears, shared among some men and women of the village, was that too much of an imbalance would make future recruitment of women more difficult and relationships between genders in the villages more difficult to navigate were there to be a clear minority. So, the prevailing rule was to not allow new men to start living in the village once that 60% threshold was reached, and put them on a wait list until the gender balance evened out. From my position as a researcher, this was problematic for a simple reason: my presence as a male contributed to the imbalance.

The opposite fear, to which a more vocal separate bloc spoke to, was the problems inherent in limiting entry by gender. For some, this was obviously a discriminatory practice. From a legal standpoint, such a barrier to entry would certainly fail any challenge in court, and the Rabbits did not want to have to endure such a trial. For another, some saw this policy as wrapped up too much in cisgender heteronormativity. What of agender or transgender individuals? What if a male-male same sex couple wanted to live there together, but one was barred because they would tip the gender balance too far? This group of critics also noted that masculinity and femininity are difficult things to quantify, especially among their pool of potential recruits, and therefore were bad measures to set quotas on. In the end, the debate bore little fruit and was settled without having to address the policy in a significant way. Danielle, who managed the visitor program, started having an all-female and non-binary visitor session every year, and that helped drive the numbers back towards the desired equilibrium through proactive rather than prohibitive means.

The gender imbalance debate was a salient event for analyzing the process of collective identity formation and re-formation. In addition to the barriers erected through the visitor program's "we do this at DR" bulwark, the village faced, in my time of observation, a watershed period for establishing their village being supportive of women as a centrally defining trait. As a result of this, the aforementioned all-women's visitor group was established, a question was added to the visitor form that reads "What does feminism mean to you?", a section on feminism was added to their website, and many people began calling DR a feminist ecovillage rather than the unqualified ecovillage moniker. Rae, reflecting on this to me in an interview, said

I've lived in a feminist ecovillage for three years now and I actually don't know what the word feminist means. I don't really know much of anything about

feminism, but then when I hear my neighbors talking about it I'm like "yeah, that's so outrageous when so and so does that". . . I'm getting to learn what feminism is through an experiential example of it instead of looking it up or going to class and studying it. Now we're forming a group that's going to meet and discuss this, so I get a lot of support from my community to talk about important social issues.

The barriers to entry are significant, but that is only because Rabbits value and zealously guard their unique lifestyle as a claim to the nature and future of society. Sparrow, using a public meeting called by the coordinator of the visitor program that sought to garner feedback on it, echoed this sentiment and preached that "DR is a gated community. We decide who gets in based on our covenants and guidelines." She expressed that her metaphor was born out of the concern that other people should see that gate as something they could close for undesirable people, for those unable to fully embrace the feminist aspect to the Rabbit lifestyle.

Feminism as an explicit value at DR didn't emerge out of nothing before this—pretty much everybody at DR would self-identify with some brand of feminism if asked about their beliefs. Yet, it lingered in the background as a shared set of beliefs not enumerated clearly by the group as a whole. Here we see the interface between individual and group that the concept of collective identity is designed to capture in this essay: many individual standpoints and worldviews converged to form a boundary shared by the group's collective identity. This boundary is nebulous enough to get all the group members on board with it, while still being distinct enough to separate the group from the larger society (and even other ICs). The boundaries of collective identity, once they become clearly articulated, then become barriers to entry in the community. In my time there, an active self-identification with the label of "feminist" became one such articulation.

Conclusion

The way "we do this at DR" is communicated through the visitor program is evidence of how visitors are expected to self-sort if they are unable to live up to the most rigorous demands of the community. Yana Ludwig (formerly Ma'ikwe Ludwig, reflected in the citation), a former long-term member of DR who lived there at the time this research was conducted, similarly concludes that "DR members rely on people's ability to self-sort. They trust that people will apply to live in a place like DR only if they have a generally high level of consciousness around ecological practices" (2017, 18). The shared framework of a collective identity expressed in the common Rabbit lifestyle

serves as a filter for who they want as new Rabbits and who they don't, and the barrier is an actively constructed one that relies on visitors to ultimately make the decision about staying in the community.

As people complete the visitor program, they spread the ideas they encountered to the places they return after leaving—ideas about living in more sustainable, egalitarian arrangements. That is the more notable function of recruitment: to fulfill the mission of influencing others. Rabbits would be quite delighted to see a flood of new members join the village as their stated goal is to grow to be 500–1,000 people. But in order for the village to continue functioning as they bring in potential new Rabbits, and in order to ensure that their lifestyle continues to exist as a means of agitation and medium for engaging social and political change, they enact barriers to entry. Few who visit end up moving to DR, and of those who do, the majority are usually gone within a year. Those who stay have their beliefs about what a sustainable lifestyle should look like, but submit some of their personal autonomy in the matter to the larger lifestyle they become a part of.

Affirming Lockyer's (2009) theory that ICs are a locus of larger networks of "transformative utopianism," DR has generated a larger support structure around the village, mostly as digital collaborators who support the ideals of the ecovillage and work to implement such practices in small ways in their own lives. Some end up becoming donors, which helps the village in a very tangible way. Others leave disenchanted, and often early, from the program, and return home questioning whether they were right to come in the first place. The latter are often more put off by the difference between what they were expecting to experience and what they actually encountered. At one point, Sparrow related to me that "[w]e're pretty capitalistic, and that actually turns some people off when they come here" because they are expecting a more communal, income-sharing experience rather than one where everyone must manage their own economic fate. I heard a least a dozen times from visitors that they were excited to see what life was like "off the grid" only to find that, while DR does produce much of their own electricity and captures much of their own water on site, they are nonetheless hooked up to the "grid" for the baseline provision of such commodities.

There are a whole host of barriers that turn people away to differing degrees. The initial confusion, visitor program's diet, work parties, and workshops, as well as the poop talk and feminist alignments, represent significant barriers to entry erected to protect the collective identity of the village. Few people end up actually hating the village experience. Most find that they just can't live up to threshold of "we do this at DR" and instead pivot to use their visit as a learning experience for their own lives as part of the larger community. For the Rabbits' part, they are engaged in a continuous struggle to

balance the outreach component that brings potential new Rabbits to the village with the self-actualization part of their lifestyle.

A community is typically a group of people who self-identify with a particular belief, background, and shared history. In this, the community that is DR spans far more than those who live just in the village. It includes the many allies and friends Rabbits have acquired over the years but who decided that the barriers of “we do this at DR” were too tough for them to climb, yet they could still support in spirit or financially. Those contacts and connections between people who didn’t end up becoming Rabbits and the Rabbits themselves form stems connected to the network where the cultural and political claims meet in a shared lifestyle.

Epilogue—Ethical Considerations

As a few years have passed since I originally conducted the research for this article, it’s worth noting that my relationship with the village has evolved from that of resident to one of collaborator. I’ve returned several times to the ecovillage and have presented various aspects of this and other papers in order to hear and incorporate their feedback. I remain friends with several of the Rabbits on social media, and have worked on a few writing collaborations with one former member. Finally, last year I was elected to the board of the non-profit arm of the village—the Center for Sustainable and Cooperative Culture—which oversees their outreach programs. These are potential conflicts of interest the reader should know about. I am invested in the ecovillage.

Most ethnographers practice a significant degree of participation in the everyday lives of their subjects, and it’s hard sometimes to separate feeling from fact when that occurs. I’ve done my best to base the conclusions in this paper from the data I recorded, filling in the gaps with their words and actions rather than my own. Even with their tightly guarded collective identity and barriers to membership, DR is an open community that regularly allows in other researchers. So if anything in this essay piques interest for exploration or for criticism, perhaps you could also pay the ecovillage a visit someday to expand on these findings.

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