Sustainable Paths

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Sustainable Paths

The Division of Social Studies
Of Bard College
By
Caila Flores Drew-Morin

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2019
“Nature” is what we see—
The Hill—the Afternoon—
Squirrel—Eclipse—the Bumble bee—
Nay—Nature is Heaven—
Nature is what we hear—
The Bobolink—the Sea—
Thunder—the Cricket—
Nay—Nature is Harmony—
Nature is what we know—
Yet have no art to say—
So impotent Our Wisdom is
To her Simplicity

-Emily Dickinson
Acknowledgements

This project is made possible by a vast community who has believed in me and supported me beyond measure. To my mom, who gave me my love of writing and storytelling. To my dad, who gave me a thirst for adventure and inventiveness. To Nicola, whose passion for social justice and community action in the face of climate change is inspiring. To my big brother Maël, who always has by back no matter what. To Professor Stamatopoulou-Robbins, who introduced me to anthropology and has been key to nourishing my love for the subject. To Nathaniel, my loving partner, who has been at my side throughout this project, engaging in innumerable thoughtful discussions, editing drafts, and being a creative force in the face of the ethical dilemma that is climate change. To Izzy, who is passionate and conscientious and whose perspectives so often give me new ways to consider the world. To all my friends and family who make up a support system that gives me the strength to leap into the unknown sure that I always have people there to catch me. To the community at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage, who welcomed me graciously into their homes and lives, offering the empathy, vulnerability, and passion that made this project what it is. Thank you for allowing me to study the admirable efforts you have devoted yourself to, and thank you for all you have taught me, for I move forward in life changed by the lessons I learned in community. To you all I say that I would not be where I am without you and I am filled with gratitude. Thank you.
Photographic Preface

The following photos display what Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage looked like while I was there. Having a visual of how the village is designed is important to better understanding how design shapes the lives of the people living in this community. As you look at these pictures notice the numerous paths that make connections. Also notice the lush plants that are plentiful and the unique buildings that each approach sustainability in their own ways.

Figure 1. A kitchen cooperative.
Figure 2. A private home.¹

Figure 3. A kitchen cooperative.²

¹ Photo by Natasha Amirova.
² Ibid.
Figure 4. A private home.\textsuperscript{3}

Figure 5. The entrance to Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage.\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
Figure 6. The Milkweed Mercantile Bar and Inn is on the left next to the grocery store in the center of the image. On the right is a shelter with hammocks in it. The road at the forefront is the main entrance to the village. The path between the Mercantile and the grocery store leads to homes, campsites, and connects back to other paths that spread throughout the community.

Figure 7. A path that can be viewed on the map in figure 9 stretching from the homes called Hermitage to Aubergine.
Figure 8. Various maps hanging on a wall in the Common House of Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage.
Figure 9. This is the most recent map of Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage. Note that for each path included there are often numerous smaller and unofficial paths that branch out and connect.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Map created by Natasha Amirova.
Figure 10. A poster hanging in a bathroom in the Dancing Rabbit Common House. It is an edited World War I poster which said “Daddy, what did you do in the Great War?” This image captures the conclusion that I come to in this project.
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Introduction

Though my partner and I had printed directions and looked at a map, once we got off the highway we became quite lost. The roads were not named or named differently than the maps. Later I would hear stories from others who had also have the backtrack many times in their search for Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage. Finally, after stopping in a tiny town and asking for directions from a friendly man with a heavy accent who idled his truck to speak to us, we arrived. Pulling in later than we had expected I walked into the village to see if anyone knew where I should be going. I ran into someone barefoot and cooking in an outdoor kitchen. I was comforted by the lack of shoes, something my friends make fun of me for. After a tearful goodbye I piled my thing by the entrance to the community and was taken inside the common house, which was full of activity in preparation for that evening's potluck. A little girl came up to me and told me that she had been sent to meet me. I started talking with her, asking if she could tell me where I am supposed to go. She was hesitant to give me directions, which I soon understood when a woman came along to lead me to where I would be staying, bringing my things with us by wheelbarrow. Though there is a gravel road going through the community, we took the much more commonly used paths, that curve behind houses, and through dense plants growing up all over the place. We went over little bridges, and made turns in the paths, a chicken coop here, a cob house full of glass designs there. Though it is a small place, I was disoriented by the winding ways the paths took me and did not feel comfortable finding my way on my own. Going back to the common house I was accompanied by Ada. We talked while waiting in line for food. We ate as a community before I had a chance to unpack.
That evening I would go for a swim with another work exchanger who had arrived before me. Lying on my sleeping pad that night I realized that I had left an earing on the dock. I got up to go get it, knowing it was just close by. I took a few wrong turns getting there and could not retrace my steps to get back. I wandered in the dark with my dim solar camp light, trying to hold it up and see farther ahead. The foreign paths felt like a maze. Nearly in a panic I ran along the paths, wanting just to get to my tent as soon as possible. Finally, I found the gravel road and followed it, though taking me along a longer route, I knew it would eventually get to my hosts house and from there I could find the path to my tent. Just as I found the building and had the realization of where I was my little solar light went out. With relief that this had not happened a moment sooner, I found my way to my tent and lay down in relief. Though a small community, it took me many turns of the village before I fully understood where I was and could take directions to where I needed to be. This challenge was furthered by having to learn the names of houses, which people referred to them by. Until the very end of my stay I was still finding different paths that I had not gone down yet, and shortcuts that I had not known about. Because many paths go right close to people’s homes I generally would not investigate them unless someone else took me that way. I was nervous to go down a path and realize it only lead to someone’s home and perhaps find myself being intrusive. Often people live large parts of their lives outdoors and paths cross through these living spaces. Over the course of my time studying Dancing Rabbit I have come to see the paths there as key to defining the ecological and social sustainability in the community. The intimacy of the paths is part of what make them function the way they do.

Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage is an intentional community in North East Missouri, with a common ethic of sustainability. An intentional community is made up of people who have “chosen
to live or work together in pursuit of a common ideal or vision. Most, though not all, share land or housing.”¹ In the case of Dancing Rabbit, people have come together in efforts to create a socially and ecologically sustainable community. Dancing Rabbit is a hub of “international intentional community networking,” and a base for the Fellowship for Intentional Communities.² Many people within Dancing Rabbit work for this nonprofit to promote cooperative culture beyond their own community. In 1998 Dancing Rabbit was created by a group of five college graduates fresh from their education at Stanford University. After having lived in a student co-op together at school, they saw the practice of living sustainably as a way for them “to move beyond protesting ecological destruction and begin taking more concrete actions.”³ In search of a place without building codes to build an ecovillage (so they could experiment with ecologically sound building,) land they could afford, and within proximity to travel by train, they arrived in Rutledge Missouri, which has been home to Sandhill Farm since 1974, an income sharing intentional community nearby. With 280 acres in the Dancing Rabbit land trust, the initial group of ecovillagers at Dancing Rabbit set about building homes and rehabilitating the land which had previously been industrial farm land. The goal was to create a community of 500-1000 people (currently there are about 55 people there⁴) who would share the land, and work on it cooperatively. Land is leased for about $50 a month⁵ when people live there, and is relinquished back to the community when someone moves away. Anything built on that land can be sold. Today, the founders no longer living in the community so it is in the hands of all those who have arrived since its conception.

² There are over 2,500 intentional communities world wide of every shape and size.
³ Lockyer, Community, Commons, and Degrowth, 524.
⁴ This fluctuates and is an estimation based on what various people in the community have estimated to me. There are people who spend most of the year outside the community, and people come and go.
⁵ This varies based on the land that people are leasing.
I was drawn to Dancing Rabbit by the prospect of learning how to live in a way that felt more aligned with my own morals of how we should be treating the earth than what the system I currently live in offers. Over the course of the time I have spent studying Dancing Rabbit I have come to look closely at the way they are creating a response to climate change. I was curious about what day to day life looks like in such a system. This project explores the everyday interactions that happen at Dancing Rabbit in which people often engage in acts of favor doing, bonding, and learning about communication; I argue that these practices show us a mode of ethical living despite a global system that perpetuates climate change, every day bringing us closer to apocalypse. By examining the intricacies of these practices, which are significant in their pursuit of sustainability, we may be able to reveal paths toward mitigating some of the practices that lead to perpetuating climate change. My introduction to this project is helpful for the framing of the community that I am writing about so that my readers can understand the context in which my descriptions and analysis are taking place. By introducing the broader context of both climate change and anthropological theory I position the reader within the type of analysis I am doing.

Community Expectation

In order to join Dancing Rabbit an individual's compatibility with the community is gaged, both in terms of how well the community will meet the individual’s needs, and what the individual will bring to the community. There are a variety of expectations, both implicit and explicit, that a person takes on when they move to Dancing Rabbit. There are obvious adjustments such as a rule against personal vehicles, meaning that about fifty people share four vehicles. There are expectations that people join committees and partake in consensus decision making. There is an expectation that
people will do their best to be sustainable, both socially and environmentally. This means a variety of things depending on the person and is continuously discussed and redefined. Though sustainability does not mean one thing to everyone, it is agreed that people should be moving toward it. This can mean making varying levels of commitment for different people. Some people quit traveling by airplane, others educate themselves on mediation and communication, some have an approach which entails both or neither of these things. Some go completely off the grid and focus on agricultural pursuits in efforts to produce rather than engage in an unsustainable system, while others do all their work online, marketing “eco” to the world. From these examples we see that being sustainable is closely linked to the labor people do and is contributed to differently depending on what a person has to offer and their perspective on sustainability.

Key to these differing approaches is the ability to communicate and engage with one another’s ideas, especially when they are not shared. I witnessed many conversations in which two people approached the same issue by trying to put forward their community’s ethics in completely different ways. One example of this is the issue of housing. Some approach the sustainable house as one which is made of natural materials from the area (thus with few travel miles) and which is compostable. Others build houses out of materials that would be harmful to put into the environment, but which create a long term and well insulated structure. These different approaches exist alongside one another at Dancing Rabbit and neither is agreed upon as the superior one. One housing issue that came up while I was there regarded the question of mobile homes. How insulated is the home? They do not want it to be inefficiently heated all winter, polluting the community’s air. Do they want people to be able to drive their home away? What does that mean for the culture?
How much do these things matter in relation to the specific person who wants to move in? Could their skills override any of these concerns?

Jobs at Dancing Rabbit range widely. There are many people who work in the surrounding area: firefighters, EMTs, midwives. Any remote job is an option, from social media work, to teaching English, to selling crafts. People work within the community: at the FIC (Fellowship for International Communities), as part of community governance, in the inn and bar, producing food, creating items such as clothing, and creating crafts such as insulated curtains that other members of the community would want to buy. People work hard to hold workshops and visitor programs in the community. Community wide systems such as recycling must be maintained by someone. There are builders and carpenters. There is a wide variety of jobs people at Dancing Rabbit work, displaying how a range of interests and lifestyles have integrated into the community. Oftentimes the labor people do would not be what one thinks of as a “job” because people embark on projects to do things for themselves. Putting in one's own cistern is a job that may involve getting advice from others in the community and educating oneself on cisterns, though without specialization or continued practice after the project is finished, one would not label it as their job. Many supplement their groceries with food they grow themselves on a small scale.

Group Held Values

This summer there were ongoing discussions attempting to define community values. Frequently “community values” are brought up as a reason for or against a decision, though they are not explicitly defined the way community goals are. In one meeting the subject was defined as: “a broad concept that most people at Dancing Rabbit agree is a value of our community, a shared idea
that connects/unites the community. In addition, a Group Held Value is the underlying reason a block⁶ may be deemed valid.” The values listed informally at a meeting on the subject include: “Being a model of sustainability, Cooperation, Education, Feminism, Following group, agreements, Health of the Whole, Integrity, Localized food production, Non-violence, Open and transparent decision making, Participation in group process, Resolving Conflict Peaceably, Sharing resources, Social justice, Sustainability, and Transparency re: group finances.” These are not official values, but they offer an idea of what the community more broadly wants to stand for, and are being defined so that they can be used as reasons for not going forward with decisions that are counter to the values.

Dancing Rabbit has grown over the years, and the 2010 opening of the Milkweed Mercantile Eco Inn and Cafe helped attract more people from the surrounding area to visit and socialize at Dancing Rabbit. A constant online presence and offering many visitor programs and workshops has made Dancing Rabbit a place with frequent visitors over the course of the summer. The Mercantile attracts people from the surrounding community to their pizza nights and offers a social spot for people to come have a drink. Interaction with the surrounding community is important to many of the people at Dancing Rabbit. Though the ecovillage is a blip of liberal in a conservative area, the members share a lot in common with their neighbors. The surrounding area has a large population of Mennonite and Amish communities. These groups value laboring for their own livelihoods and low consumption patterns. Local farmers are more long term residents than many of the ecovillagers, making them more stable relationships. Friendships have been built with these people in the surrounding area. They often have similar interests in agriculture and gardening, provoking

⁶ A “block” is when someone halts the passing of a decision. Reasons have to be given for this action.
easy conversation about what is in season and of course when it last rained and when it will rain again.

**Governance**

In the past Dancing Rabbit would hold community wide meetings to make all decisions by consensus. However, attendance was inconsistent and more interesting topics would result in higher turn out, meanwhile the same few people ended up making the choices for at meetings that were poorly attended. In order to acknowledge that the community was not making decisions as a whole and a smaller group was making more decisions anyway, the community decided to create the village council. This is a group of five people who are chosen by the community to make decisions, thus making the smaller group of decision makers intentional rather than based on who volunteers on a given day. The village council has staggered two year terms. People who are more widely agreed to be good candidates for the position are asked to be considered and then these options are considered in relation to how well they would potentially work together and chosen through a consensus decision making process. The village council hears proposals that committees or people responsible for various parts of the community put forward. Members are encouraged to participate in committees, which generally are made up of two to four people who are interested in a particular part of village discussions. Committees can hold wider community meetings to draft proposals to give to village council. There seems to be a committee for anything you can think of at Dancing Rabbit. Some examples include: “Kid Committee, Pet Committee, Land Use Planning and Policy, Process Team, Membership and Residency Committee, Visitor Team, Debt Committee, Outreach,
Eco-Progress Committee, and Land Management." These offer people many avenues by which to be involved in governing the community, as well as the ability to focus on what is more important to a given individual.

Methods

From late June to late August of 2018 I lived at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage and participated in their work exchange program. Living in a tent (on a platform,) I ate every meal in the kitchen co-op my hosts belonged to. Contributing to the co-op, I prepared a dinner and a lunch once a week. This involved using their system of cooking solely with wood fires or a solar oven. My responsibilities varied day to day depending on the needs of my hosts and their homestead. I helped with their two children, ages two and nine, as well as with their pigs, goats, chickens, ducks, quail, dogs, and gardens. Apart from working with my hosts, I also worked with other members of both the kitchen and goat co-op that my hosts participate in, the most significant example being Monty teaching me to make goat cheese.

While living in the community I participated in social events, went to meetings, and entered rotations for the weekly cleaning of the common house. My main research method was to take notes each day on my participant observations. Near the end of my stay, I conducted eleven interviews, asking questions that my participant observation, over the course of the summer, had brought forth for me.

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In order to interview people, I sent an email to the community wide list asking anyone who would be interested to contact me. I interviewed everyone who responded to my request and no one else so this may have biased my interview material toward people who volunteer to do the favor of giving me an hour of their time to be interviewed.8 This also allowed me to interview a variety of people throughout the community, rather than simply those I worked more closely with and would have had the most opportunity to speak to. This, I believe, offers range to my perspective, as I am already most influenced by those who I interact with most. Because I spent the vast majority of my time at Dancing Rabbit with the subcommunities my hosts belonged to, which were generally more interested in agricultural pursuits than the rest of Dancing Rabbit was. While my months of participant observation offered me the bulk of my understanding of the culture at Dancing Rabbit, interviews were used more heavily as the material which I directly analyse. Because the interviews were held at the end of my time in the field, they serve to answer some of the main questions my field work had brought me to pondering such as, what role do favors play in life at Dancing Rabbit? Additionally, the ability to record answers in these interviews became important to the close analysis I eventually wrote, looking at ways things were specifically worded.

My first two chapters are based on what I discovered in the community. I construct my entire project around the words and actions of the people at Dancing Rabbit, rather than approaching it through a lens to discover the material, I let the material guide me and the lens becomes a supporting piece. This basing in the community has been important for me to constructing a thesis grounded in what I experienced there. In my third chapter I use more

8 Though I saw it as them offering me the interview, at the end of many interviews people thanked me, having enjoyed the conversation and introspection about their community. Furthermore, some people saw it as doing publicity for their community, something that I was offering them in return. Thus, we can see here even in the process of attaining interviews I participated in an exchange of favors. This will become relevant to my discussions to come.
anthropological theory than in the other two, having done the work of establishing the community I am discussing. Though theory is important to supplementing the work, I see ethnography as core to my analysis.

I was originally drawn to the community because I find the issue of climate change to be of the utmost importance. I was curious about the options that are out there to disengage with a destructive system that will increasingly produce suffering world wide. Though I began my research mostly interested in the ecological sustainability end of their efforts, I soon discovered that social sustainability is inseparable to the way ecological sustainability is approached at Dancing Rabbit.

Broader Conversations

In my analysis of Dancing Rabbit I use Karl Marx’s theory of alienation of labor occurring in capitalist society. This theory has long been used to critique capitalism and put forth socialism as a system which avoids the harms created by alienation of labor. Rather than engaging in conversation between these two systems, I use Marx to better understand how capitalism is presenting itself at Dancing Rabbit. The alienation that is inherent to capitalism is redefined through practices which orient people away from a focus on capital and towards the relation between the self and the labor. This mitigates alienation of labor and gives us insight into how capitalism appears particularly at Dancing Rabbit. This has effects on the psyche of members of Dancing Rabbit and the way they interact with their community and ecosystem.9

Structuralist theory in anthropology presents an understanding of culture as a system of distinct parts that appear in their own ways across various cultures. It is based on Claude

Levi-Strauss’ idea that all cultures have equitable parts. For example Mary Douglas identifies the concepts of order and disorder as ones which appear in every culture and define a community. I observe at Dancing Rabbit that their are concepts of order and disorder that people are redefining in the process of creating a culture at Dancing Rabbit that is distinct from that which they came from. I see this process as core to understanding Dancing Rabbit and consistent with Douglas’ structuralist approach to culture.¹⁰ I use Douglas to understand one members observation that wearing clothing with spots and holes on it is acceptable at Dancing Rabbit, while is feels unacceptable in many places in the United States outside Dancing Rabbit. It is out of place in one context and not in the other. These are comparable cultural practices which makes them applicable to a structuralist approach.

I was also heavily influenced by Marcel Mauss’ The Gift which helped me to see the exchanges of favors at Dancing Rabbit as a system of reciprocation. Though I do not employ a specific theory from his work, his influence appears when I write about the pressures that people feel to do favors for one another and especially when the reason to offer someone something is because one knows the other person would do the same for them. Understanding these exchanges as part of a system that ties the community together and allows it to function cohesively, with people continuing to engage with one another was due to having had Mauss’ perspective on the importance of such actions.¹¹

Last but not least is my participation in the conversation surrounding climate change. Climate change is a global problem which to be effectively fought must be taken on at a large scale. It has become a much debated political topic and an issue that large corporations and governments have the most power to fight. Many people who are aware of climate change feel they do not have

agency to make a difference. Dancing Rabbit offers people not a way to change the fate of our planet, but an alternative system to opt into which perpetuates climate change less than living within the broader system that encourages continued use of fossil fuels and ecological destruction. The community demonstrates that humans can live outside of this destructive system while maintaining a high quality of life. By unpacking what holds the community together and how the social systems present create sustainable systems that help people to build their lives around caring for their environment together and learning how to improve how they do so and how to embrace those practices, I enter the climate change conversation. While the conversation is global in nature, I address here how a group of individuals can come together to do their own part in fighting the fight.

Summary

Sustainable Paths is an ethnography based on two months of participant observation and interviews with community members. The community seeks to be a demonstration of sustainable living and is designed to be walkable, with small homes close together and paths connecting everything, bringing people close to their neighbors as they navigate from one place to another. Many kitchens, bathrooms, and recreational spaces are shared beyond the family unit. The paths that connect them all have been compared to the hallways of a home, a metaphor that I build upon. This all serves to bring people into frequent incidental social interactions and thus in a position to ask for or offer to do favors. The high level of interaction requires people to set their own boundaries when they do not desire the interaction and to communicate expectations and feelings. In the end we see these aspects of the community giving us a picture of what a sustainability oriented life looks like. With sustainability prioritized, labor and time are resituated. People support one another through
favors. A high value is placed on people achieving resource conservation rather than consumption which gives people the freedom to act sustainably.

I.

I begin chapter one by discussing the incidental social interactions that take place at Dancing Rabbit. The design of the village facilitates frequent interactions both due to the dispersal of the home to various parts of the village as well as the paths that connect everything, winding past every home and bringing people into close proximity with one another. With parts of the home in various places, the community as a whole becomes an intimate space with paths as hallways and a group of fifty plus people sharing closely. The interactions at Dancing Rabbit are juxtaposed with the experiences that people in the community have had prior to living there. The contrasts that they see allow me to understand how members are experiencing interactions in a unique way when they are within their community. Overall interaction with others becomes a default occurrence that no individual has to directly facilitate. Some see this as contrasting with life outside of Dancing Rabbit where the default has been to not have social interactions with their community throughout their day, but only when interactions were intentionally sought out.

Learning to adjust to the interactions at Dancing Rabbit means learning to choose not to have interactions when they are not wanted, or to communicate the type of interaction that is needed. People learn to navigate this in their own ways and feel varying levels of comfort with it. People learn to shape the interactions that they need and manage the expectations that they share with others. This takes communication and learning to address how the needs of many people fit together.
A common thread through all of this is the favor doing that people engage in when they have incidental interactions. Having people around and available frequently comes in handy due to the many projects that people participate in and which are enabled by the availability of others. However, having people around can also be helpful in the sense of making people feel safe with and connected to their neighbors. Favors pull people together, compelling them to return generous acts and creating spaces for neighbors to work together and bond over completing a common task. People in the village are intimately involved in one another's lives in all these ways.

II.

Chapter two builds on the incidental social interactions that I observed and delves into how they affect the freedoms people at Dancing Rabbit feel they have. These freedoms vary, but largely seem to involve decisions and discussions that some people at Dancing Rabbit previously understood to solely concern the nuclear family unit. The village provides increased intimacy both spatially and socially. Inseparable from this intimacy is an altered relationship surrounding one's “personal freedoms” that an individual has with their community. The community develops shared understandings which are constantly in flux based on continuous communication which allows people to grow and change alongside one another, always negotiating the effects they are having. People must learn to give and receive favors and find a balance within the system of favor doing. Expectations to do and receive favors are likewise negotiated through communication. People feel the drive to move the community forward, and participate in this system of sharing for the communal good. It connects people and produces social trust. In the end I see these social interactions as a key part of what sustainability looks like at Dancing Rabbit.
III.

In my final chapter, I use Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* alongside Marx’s theory of alienation of labor to look at how Dancing Rabbit is organized and the cultural developments that have taken place to allow the system to exist as it does today. Douglas helps me to understand how sustainability has shifted people’s understanding of ‘dirt,’ normalizing the use of materials in a sustainable way as the means by which to make things ‘ordered.’ Marx helps to explain how labor at Dancing Rabbit becomes stimulating to one’s inner life, connecting them to the sustainable practices they enact in their lives. Dealienation of labor happens at Dancing Rabbit as people strive to move away from a consumerist culture which heavily contributes to environmental destruction.\(^{12}\)

Conclusion

Over the course of this work I discuss the structure of the community that invites people to be sustainable. The space that people are living in, the expectations of neighbors, and the high levels of sharing create dynamics of sustainable living. These dynamics which result in and are produced by sustainability at Dancing Rabbit can give us insight into what culture can look like when people choose to change in reaction to the environmental destruction that is currently causing global climate change with catastrophic implications for life on earth. In *The Uninhabitable Earth*, David Wallace-Wells explains that all communities will inevitably be drastically altered by climate change.\(^{14}\)

\(^{12}\) Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

\(^{13}\) Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*.

\(^{14}\) Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*. 
Lives will be radically altered. By looking at Dancing Rabbit, we are able to get a glimpse at what a shift can look like when it is intentional rather than based on the immediate demand of rising sea levels and food scarcity hitting ones community. The community seeks to demonstrate that sustainability is possible and that people can begin to opt out of a system they disagree with, pushing back against the common practice of engaging in environmental destruction without deep concern for the implications. The people at Dancing Rabbit strive to educate others on how life can be organized sustainably, and though they do not believe they have the power to change the direction humanity has taken the planet, they do have the power to control their own actions and do what they feel is just.
Chapter I
Incidental Social Interaction

Dancing Rabbit is a densely clustered European Style village, meaning that it is interwoven with many walking paths around small relatively close together houses. Homes, community buildings, and kitchen co-ops make up the village with peripheral garden and agricultural land in surrounding rings. Many in the community rely upon bathrooms and kitchens in separate areas of the village from where they sleep, which promotes frequent movement about the village. The intricate network of paths, which connect people to the places they are going as well as many places and people they are given opportunity to interact with along the way, function as social infrastructure creating a more connected community.\textsuperscript{15} I see this proximity and the design of the village facilitating the enactment of favors which serves to interpolate people into the system of favor doing they confirm. Also created are bonds between people which are closely linked with favor doing. By examining how the system produces these bonding moments and favors, we can understand how they function in relation to one another.

On Everyday Communication and Contact

It was a sunny day and Dylan\textsuperscript{16} and I sat outside his house, me on an armchair, him on a wobbly metal chair in front of a little garden table. He ate his lunch while we talked, wrapping


\textsuperscript{16} All names in this work are pseudonyms to protect the identities of participants. Because of the intimate nature of the community, and details that are often person specific, this anonymity is surely vulnerable to breach by those who know the community. Without personal details I believe my work would lose dimension which gives life to the people I write about, which is why I have chosen to include this information.
morsels in nasturtium leaves which he replenished from his garden close by. I ask him about the design of Dancing Rabbit and how the necessity to walk everywhere affects his experience in the community. He tells me about the tendency of the wider culture to avoid incidental social interaction and how this is perhaps comfortable but, “ultimately it's not that healthy in maintaining umm, you know maintaining meaningful everyday communication and contact.” He says that to do this maintaining one must create a balanced healthy amount of interactions, having more than the wider culture, but not too many.

Dylan says that the wider culture is conducive to avoidance and I think of Olive not wanting to default be at home alone with her child unless she made the effort to drive somewhere and socialize. I think of that street one drives along on the way to a park full of strangers. I connect what Dylan describes to that car carrying people straight through a neighborhood. There is no way for incidental social interactions to present themselves. I understand the default avoidance Dylan talks about as referring to a “wider culture” that has normalized the private home as including kitchen, bedrooms, bathrooms, and recreational areas. People who are not inhabitants of the private home are expected to stay outside unless otherwise invited. People most often leave the home with a car which passes through the landscape too quickly to interact with it or the people inhabiting it. Thus, the home blocks out outsiders and the car avoids these between home and a destination. This avoidance I understand to exist in all sorts of ways. Neighbors not knowing one another, or interacting only when they knock on one another's door or make plans, means that not socializing is expected and socializing is a concerted effort in the “wider culture.” When Dylan refers to default avoidance, he seems to be referring to a system where one avoids other people unless a decision is made to seek people out. Of course this system is not homogeneous throughout the country, but the
concept more generally is something Dylan is contrasting Dancing Rabbit with. Thus, the “wider culture” roughly seems to represent all that has been normalized to the people at Dancing Rabbit before they moved there and which is being questioned and denormalized by the community.

Dylan describes Dancing Rabbit as a community which promotes incidental interaction rather than the default being people avoiding one another. I experienced this as people using paths to get from place to place and along the way having an interaction with whomever they come across. This acknowledgement of one another can be as simple as a “hello” or can become a request to stop and talk or participate in a task. Passing by people offers opportunity to tell one another something rather than having to email or call. People can become more aware of how others are doing, catching up on each other’s lives. People can take care of one another, offering help with something one is aware they can help out with. An example of this that I experienced was Rosemary walking her dog past Sam’s open air kitchen and him coming out to inquire about electrical issues he was aware of her having and offering to stop by and see if he could help fix the problem. In this example, as with many instances, people being outside a lot allows for interaction. Dylan tells us about the pros and cons of the Dancing Rabbit system of incidental interaction and gives us a view into how he experiences it from different angles, both in the position of instigating interaction, and from that of wishing to avoid it. In the following section I will write about how Lydia shows what the avoidance Dylan describes looks in practice. In a system where high rates of incidental interaction are the default, one must avoid interaction and become better at communicating not wanting to interact. This allows for people to express a need for a particular amount of socialization. Otherwise, one will be expected to engage with a high frequency of incidental social interactions. Both Marie and Lydia describe the village paths as hallways and that sometimes one needs to
navigate within one’s home without socializing. This can demand a level of direct communication that is not necessary when avoidance is the default and thus does not have to be requested as it does for people at Dancing Rabbit. Diane also discusses how proximity affects her socialization. When she wants to eat alone she has to do so purposefully and defy the default and assumed action of eating socially. When socialization is the default, new tools must be used when socialization is unwanted. I see Diane defying the pull towards eating socially is expected at Dancing Rabbit. Perhaps that which pulls one to eat socially is related to that which pulls people towards agreeing to do short favors generally described as taking 2.5-10 minutes. Lydia describes favors as deepening relationships. She says that when she is not social with people on the path, they will “forgive” her for it. The default is social, one can go outside that norm but it is still pushing away from some cultural center. One breaks expectations and in the act of forgiving it seems the departure from what is encouraged is acknowledged.

Based on Dylan’s discussion of incidental social interactions, we can understand them as those interactions that are not previously planned and agreed upon by both parties. One can intentionally seek such an interaction, or it may randomly occur for everyone in the interaction. These ISI may range from a passing word to hours of conversation.

Dylan gives me a hypothetical in an effort to explain this process he is experiencing: “say there’s a hundred people here. And everyday I have incidental contact with like ten of them.” Here he is proposing a desirable balanced amount of incidental social interaction (ISI) in relation to the community size. I understand this hypothetical as his representation of the positive side of the balance he talks about previously. His following description conveys to me what “maintaining meaningful everyday communication” looks like. Dylan goes on, “I say ‘oh hello how are you
doing? and maybe some of them will honestly actually reply with how they’re doing and I can sort of get a better window into their life, so it just makes me a better neighbor, I’m more aware you know of my surroundings and I can more easily empathize with what other people are going through: something that's positive.” It is noteworthy that Dylan says some people will honestly answer with how they are doing. This is key to the process of becoming closer to one’s neighbor and something that departs from a broader cultural practice of treating a question of how someone is doing more like a greeting such as “hello,” than a question to be answered at length. We see this displayed in the common greeting of “what's up” which in “wider culture” is mostly rhetorical. This practice of genuinely answering the question is connected with understanding one’s surroundings. When people live within such close contact with frequent ISI they are more part of one another’s surroundings. Other people’s wellbeing and their emotional state become vital information to how one will act in the world. I build on this concept later when I discuss body language and how people use it to act appropriately based on what another is expressing. This practice of becoming a tune to one another and connected through an empathetic process is what I am looking at when I discuss “bonding.” I use this term to evoke the experience that Dylan for one describes as part of what his interactions along the paths at Dancing Rabbit produce. When I refer to moments of bonding that others experience I am referring to instances, such as what Dylan describes, of being able to have an empathetic connection. Bonds appear in various ways such as in the form of people feeling needed or by creating a drive to contribute to one's community. A feeling of connection and empathy is key to how I understand favors functioning at Dancing Rabbit.

Dylan gives a hypothetical that displays his idea of when the system is a bit out of balance. If there were a hundred people in a community he may have “incidental contact” with fifty people a
day, twenty-five of whom he sees three times. One part of repeated interaction with someone is that it can be awkward greeting people over and over again. He says that people just need to grow up and learn to be okay with the awkwardness of running into each other three times in a couple hours. To tell someone to grow up seems to imply a childishness, it seems to refer to a person who needs to learn. It makes me think of how everyone who entered the community at Dancing Rabbit has had to learn how to exist in the culture there. Perhaps we can understand getting used to these little interactions all the time as part of growing up and learning to be a member of Dancing Rabbit. It is a feature of what it means to be a mature person there. This knowledge can help us to further understand what the social dynamics surrounding the paths at Dancing Rabbit entail. To learn to belong to the culture of Dancing Rabbit one must learn to accept awkwardness. That does not mean that everyone does it, only that it is the direction Dancing Rabbit culture seems to be pushing one toward. Dylan tells me that some people are “prone to rambling about anything” which can be a big “time sink”. If these interactions take five to ten minutes “that can be draining.” Though Dylan talks about these things using a hypothetical, he is pointing toward a real issue of when ISI can become draining for people at Dancing Rabbit. He describes a vivid and recognizable scenario of having the same conversation again, and getting caught in the interaction, when he says, “if you see Bobby Sue and she wants to tell you about her new dress, you know, and maybe she’s senile and she forgot that she told you the other two times.” He says that “we sort of need to grow up,” meaning that the awkwardness of having little awkward interactions is part of what the system surrounding I.S.I. at Dancing Rabbit can be. Dylan concludes that Dancing Rabbit has found a balance between the positive and negative aspects of frequent ISI. He says that Dancing Rabbit has done a pretty good job for the most part of designing a space that “has some incidental contact designed into it but also
has some designs that allow people to go on their way, I think that's a good balance.” He is able to experience both being able to enjoy walking through the village greeting neighbors and also have the option to “intentionally take a slightly longer route to avoid see people, so that I can get more expeditiously to my destination.” When Dylan talks about the design he is referring to the way Dancing Rabbit as a space is laid out. He refers to the multitude of paths all about the village that create opportunities for avoidance while maintaining a default of frequent ISI.

Dylan notes the importance of how the communities design effects ISI which brings to mind Eric Klinenberg’s Palaces for the People in which he discusses the idea of social infrastructure. He says, that social infrastructure brings communities together, and makes people safer, but has been neglected in our society. What he calls “our society” seems indicative to what people at Dancing Rabbit might refer to as “wider culture.” Social infrastructure is “the physical conditions that determine whether social capital develops. When social infrastructure is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbors”17

In the following section of this chapter we can see the paths at Dancing Rabbit as social infrastructure bringing the community together and making Lydia feel safe because of the presence of her neighbors. The paths that bring people close to one another’s homes and project and spur the opportunity for interaction serve to bring people into contact.

Klinenberg writes that social infrastructure is the difference between life and death in situations such as the 1995 Chicago heat wave, which killed far more people who did not have good social infrastructure than those who did. He writes about a community which was particularly resilient because, “They knew their neighbors--not because they made special efforts to meet them,_____________________________

17 Klinenberg, Palaces For The People, 5.
but because they lived in a place where casual interaction was a feature of everyday life. Thus, we can learn that the built environment has a major effect on community members being in touch with one another and thus available in times of trouble. He writes that “social cohesion develops through repeated human interaction and joint participation in shared projects, not merely from a principled commitment.” The paths at Dancing Rabbit are what brings together the people within the community and has the effect of building social cohesion. This cohesion I believe is expressed by Dylan when he says ISI creates bonds between himself and his neighbors and when Lydia says she feels safe in her community because of the presence of her neighbors. With natural disasters on the way to becoming average weather, having a community who keeps tabs on its individual members can be the difference between life and death for many. People at Dancing Rabbit live amongst one another and expect to see each other frequently. It is noticeable when someone is not around. In fact I experienced this first hand when someone stopped coming to their kitchen co-op this summer. Some in the co-op went to check on her, some brought her food. There was an acknowledgement of someone possibly needing help and a group of people prepared to step in and do what they could.

Dylan contrasts wider culture being conducive to avoiding one another with the community’s spatial design being conducive to incidental social interaction. The various forms of this and how it is entangled with favors can tell us about the function of favors and how a community supports itself through a web of exchange and interaction. This contrast with the wider culture I see as a major difference in life at Dancing Rabbit. The majority in the United States move between destinations with modes of travel which cut through landscapes not allowing for the

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18 Ibid, 6.
opportunity to have a chat as one passes by and perhaps lend a hand. Wolfgang Schivelbusch points to the detachment people grew to have with the landscapes they passed through with the advent of the railroad.\(^{19}\) Perhaps what we are viewing is a reversal of this process and a renewal of interaction with the in between space. It is a formative difference that may be key to how things work for individuals and the system as a whole. Lydia discusses getting used to being able to accept favors and having to adjust to seeing the function of a favor as a act of social bonding that was particular to being at Dancing Rabbit.

Stopping to talk with people is part of a culture which is conducive to frequent incidental interaction. We see here that an interaction like this can take up the same amount of time as a short favor. Similarly, it seems difficult to say no to. Dylan’s description of the short favor brings this to mind. I see these things as fluid in the context of Dancing Rabbit, where the incidental interaction can sidetrack and turn into an exchange that both parties benefit from. Perhaps for some this is verbal, as Dylan describes. People need someone to talk to. They want to connect. Others form connection through a short favor. Lydia describes the short conversations that happen at the beginning and ending of doing a favor, that are a source of social bonding for her. What Dylan describes I think is widely reflected in Dancing Rabbit. The incidental interactions that he describes being at Dancing Rabbit are core to what doing favors looks like there. These favors are often spur of the moment and unplanned until two people cross paths.\(^{20}\)

A major function of frequent Incidental Social Interactions is the exchange of information, which creates bonds between people. Dylan describes how I.S.I. helps him learn at Dancing Rabbit.

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\(^{20}\) This makes me think of Ada borrowing gloves from someone in town while we were moving the triangle house to the road. He was the closest person around she knew she could get what she needed from. Afterwards she gave a beer to him as she returned the gloves.
This sharing of knowledge allows people time to socialize, and also offers a desired skill such as building, which creates a connection between the people who exchange the information. Both bond the individuals involved and allow for a unique kind of education. Dylan describes this with the example of how he learned about carpentry at Dancing Rabbit. When he first moved to the community he was inexperienced with carpentry, but knew enough to know he wanted to use it to build himself a shed. The presence of frequent ISI at Dancing Rabbit meant that it was expected and welcome for Dylan to have access to many people and ask them questions about things they know how to do. This support system of people and projects to be learning from all the time is what Dylan describes as “everyday physical and social resources that then you can translate into learning, and learning through doing, I think, especially.” Not only is walking on by someone's house and having an ISI expected and welcomed, but Dylan even describes benefitting from being able to chat with the people running a workshop. This conversation can be at length and is a benefit from the system of ISI at Dancing Rabbit. Dylan says, “you know within just an hour or less of sort of that same incidental contact that I was telling you about, you know you can learn a lot. So I learned a lot about building.” He brings it back to the incidental contact he had been talking about earlier and includes this discussion of how contact has served him in his life. We see here that learning can be part of this contact and that people can serve one another with their knowledge.

Dylan is telling me that interactions, talking to one another, taking from others around us is something that is different at Dancing Rabbit in comparison to the wider culture in the United States. He says that avoiding people is the default much of the time in other places, but here at Dancing Rabbit interaction and connection with others is the default. The norm is to connect and interact frequently. I see this reflected in the favor exchange that the community engages in.
On Paths

Lydia explains how the proximity people live to one another affects her social relationships by comparing Dancing Rabbit to Red Earth Farms, another community just down the road. At Red Earth community members have homesteads separated by “a half acre of tall grass and chiggers.” Lydia explains that this “impedes that opportunity for connection and asking to borrow a simple thing.” Though the communities are quite similar in intention the more intensive social infrastructure is apparent at Dancing Rabbit. I understand Lydia to mean that when it comes to impeding socialization and borrowing, an impediment to one is an impediment to the other. To have one is to have the other. Here Lydia begins to make a connection between the physical closeness between people and the frequency of available interaction and favors. She gives the example of borrowing something simple. This is connected to my earlier discussion of increased interaction being linked to bonding. When one borrows something from one’s neighbor a social interaction is inevitably created. These interactions that are being increased are sometimes educational, informative, or fulfill a need for social connection, which could make them favors in their own way. We see here heightened material favor doing as well as bonding and intellectual exchange. Lydia also tells me about friends she has at Sandhill Farm who she would love to spend more time with but is prevented from doing so by the distance. She says that Dancing Rabbit offers everything being closer together which is awesome for her. She explains how the close proximity of others at Dancing Rabbit has been compatible with her needs: “I’m building my house and I’m using the common house for my showers and toilets and then I was using Sky House as my kitchen, like, I have this beautiful walkway of nature that is my hallways. When I’m leaving my house or my tent and I’m
going to my toilet, or my shower, or my kitchen, I have this beautiful nature.” How can this make us rethink the boundaries of the home and thus that of one’s personal space? Lydia describes this liminal space of transitioning between places of sleeping, eating, bathing, and going to the toilet. These paths guide people through space and offer Lydia a moment to take a breath of fresh air and take in nature. These paths insert into everyone's day some moments in nature that require people to take the time to be in nature even if it is not convenient as a person goes from one thing to the next, all the while being forced to pass through this inbetween. A lot can happen in this in between including favors, ISI and as we will see in the final chapter: promotion of ecological sustainability.22

I use the term ‘liminality’ to describe the paths at Dancing Rabbit because they are a space of transition from one part of the village to another. The space is altered by the expansion of time it takes to cover given distance. The paths bring people past one another and render the status of the individual unimportant.23 When people discuss the frequency of which they have access to someone to do a favor, or simply alter the situation with their presence, the specific individual present is unimportant. Similarly, when people talk about being asked favors while navigating the community, the favors are not personalized to the person being asked. A favor is simply asked of whoever comes along. The path becomes the threshold that Victor Turner adopts from Arnold von Gennep’s definition of rites de passage as “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social change and age”.24 Here we see a transition from one place to another. The space of transition gives people the

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22 Perhaps this necessary moment to “take in nature” is connected to reinforcing an environmental ethic within the people experiencing it. It seems to confirm the place attachment that I observed occurring through being embedded in the ecosystem at Dancing Rabbit. This connection can be seen in the community doing their best to compost their waste and grow food as well as the ample conservation efforts to revitalize the prairie ecosystem that existed on their land before it had been used for industrial farming. The short walk outdoors between destinations seems to be an instance of connectedness with the natural world around them. For more on Dancing Rabbit’s connection with place see Josh Lockyer’s article “Intentional Communities and Sustainability.”
24 Ibid, 94.
quality of being equally present for others. This is avoided but also acknowledged to be the case when Ali wears headphones to avoid the interactions he becomes open to in this transitional space. One way that everyone can not be exactly equal in this space is varying ability to help, as well as different paths being more heavily traveled by some people than others.

Another way that we can view paths as liminal spaces is through the bonding process that Dylan describes when he connects with his neighbors, getting a window into their lives and feeling empathetic to their situation. When one interprets another's body language and acts according to what another person seems to need in a given moment one is empathizing with them as well. We will see this example play out in the following section of this chapter. The bond that is created when people understand each other better and care for each other in response to that understanding is a transformative process. Victor Turner identifies a liminal space as one with transformative power and the paths at Dancing Rabbit seem to bring people together to transform one another's understanding of each other and in doing so transform their relationships, building them up into a social bond that makes people feel taken care of and like they want to take care of one another.25

Lydia says that another aspect of taking these paths everywhere is that when she is sick and just trying to get to the toilet people understand if she looks uncomfortable or does not acknowledge them. Because they live in community they will understand those symptoms and will totally forgive Lydia for “not being social in that moment.” Lydia is remarking on the ability to walk past one another, empathize with another’s situation and through expecting a social interaction from those they come across will forgive the lack of one because of this empathy. Because Lydia remarks upon this being due to being in community together, I understood this as unique to how she

experiences the paths at Dancing Rabbit. Because people do not take the lack of interaction personally, Lydia does not feel nervous about having to interact with someone on the path. Presumably a nervousness that she would have if she felt she had to have these social interactions even if she did not feel well enough to do so. In fact, this nervousness seems to have existed for her in the past. She specifies that she feels confident about it “now that [she] can say ‘not right now’ and not have to explain any further.” Because she is given confidence that she did not have before easily being able to reject an interaction, Lydia is identifying a nervousness with rejecting interactions that she no longer feels. Another example she gives is of her being emotional while on a path. She can cry her eyes out and while someone may ask if she needs anything, she feels her emotions are accepted without explanation. She attributes this acceptance to the shared understanding that “there's not always a place where I can go to get solitude.” However, she also points out that the infrastructure at Dancing Rabbit does allow for people to find places to be alone. She mentions Mira’s currently unused cabin and the access to the land that allows her to find privacy. Lydia displays how avoiding incidental social interaction can build understanding and trust amongst people. Perhaps these interactions are not excluded from those that bond. Or are even at the forefront. Her examples of being publically sick or emotionally vulnerable display the personal aspect of these bonds.

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Being able to say “not right now” is something that can be learned while living at Dancing Rabbit. It seems that becoming part of a culture that is conducive to incidental social interaction people develop better ways to communicate about and exit from, these situations. People are more
used to dealing with them and must learn to be direct. This can be off putting for visitors that are wandering around the halls of someone else's house, not understanding that the people are at home. Incidental interaction is more of a novelty for visitors and they do not know the etiquette for it yet. Rather than avoidance being a default this displays the efforts people need to make to avoid. It is a more active thing. Because in mainstream culture we avoid by default, it can be uncomfortable for people to adjust to avoiding interaction in a direct manner. An example that displays this contrast is Marie pointing out that some visitors feel they cannot say no to an invitation even when they are encouraged to be honest and clearly do not want to accept.

On Expectations

However, not everyone at Dancing Rabbit quite has the hang of setting boundaries to balance out the exceptional levels of I.S.I. in their community. Diane experiences the community as a place where people care forced to consider their own boundaries and how to set them. Even though she knows she is welcome to set boundaries by, for example, eating alone, she says doing so would make her feel “a sort of social pressure and a social guilt” even though she knows members of her kitchen co-op will not think any less of her for doing so. She identifies her discomfort with drawing such a boundary as a part of her “own personal work around like valuing myself more than I value my obligations to others.” Because she is choosing the boundary I believe more pressure is placed on the individual to identify what is best for both themselves and their community, than they would have were they not in a position of determining such boundaries. The community is creating

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26 Lydia told me that she was part of a kitchen cooperative for a while when she moved to Dancing Rabbit. When she had her own kitchen she decided to no longer be part of the co-op. She really missed the social aspect of it. The opportunity to eat socially seems to create pressure to choose to do so. This seems to mirror the pressure the opportunity to participate in favor doing creates.
in some ways the ‘personal work’ that Diane is doing because it brings up these decisions for an individual to consider.

When social interaction rather than social avoidance is the default we see people being forced to learn how to deny social interactions, which outside of Dancing Rabbit would generally have to be sought by those wishing to be involved. At Dancing Rabbit most eat with a group every day, requiring one to intentionally eat alone if ever eat alone. In wider culture one would not have to directly turn down half a dozen people gathering to eating as a subcommunity if one wanted to eat alone on any given day. Diane explains that this is something she has to work on in herself. On the other hand there's Marie who talks about eating alone and feeling perfectly fine about it despite being in the same kitchen cooperative as Diane. Deciding against continuing ones routine socialization displays the learning curve needed to balancing the social time one needs. Having to address what one is able to give or take from others seems to be a trend paralleled in Lydia having to become okay with asking for favors when she really needed the help. She may have asked for the favor but the social aspects are inseparable. Any favor is inseparable from the social interaction that goes with it. These are social moments that Lydia learned how to create when she learned to ask for favors are similar to how Marie learns how to reject having a social moment at some meals. Diane is in the process of learning to take the offering of social interaction, that is open by default, and learn how to find a way to reject it at times.

Previously we see Lydia publicly displaying negative emotions and it being okay, but also something undesirable, something to be hurried because of. Diane describes being thankful to have the privacy to keep some emotions to herself. In combination we are seeing that high levels of I.S.I make emotional privacy not necessarily a given. Diane says that if she needs space at work she will
sometimes shut her office door, which is otherwise open to the rest of the common house. She also has her own home where she has space to express her emotions and “reset [her] emotional dial.” I think it is notable that Diane closing the door to her office is out of the norm, which is to otherwise hear all the noise of the common house. The office space becomes cut off from incidental interactions only in particular intentional moments. Being separate from one’s community seems to be exceptional.

Even with a certain degree of privacy, people navigate the paths of Dancing Rabbit so often that it is inevitable that people will cross paths while not in a position to be very social. Diane says this is not just about an individual who needs space communicating this information with verbal directness. She describes also perhaps becoming better at interrupting facial expressions and body language. This helps members of the community to adjust their interactions in accordance to what someone seems to need in a given moment. Greetings may become more toned down and quieter for people not seeming in the mood for an energetic interaction. Diane says that people learn to read one another while living at Dancing Rabbit more than in most places because, “there's so much social interaction and overlap and also because people are more transparent with how they are doing.” Outside of Dancing Rabbit, Diane finds that people will more often pretend everything is fine when it is not than people do at Dancing Rabbit. She loves this about her community and also acknowledges that this change is something one has to learn how to navigate. She says that the question of how to ask for space when one needs it is ongoing for herself as well as for others.

Dylan feels negatively impacted by short and frequent favors expected of him. He feels pressure to meet these expectations. This is similar to Diane feeling the expectation that to eat with
others. These pressures are produced by a tenancy by the community as a whole to be conducive to these interactions.

To be conducive to more of these social interactions seems to be creating certain expectations. These expectations do not necessarily have to be met but they determine what will be prepared for, what people will be ready for if nothing adjusts their expectations. How are these expectations related to personal freedoms? They make choices other than the expected ones more difficult to make. One must learn to change other’s expectations. This is perhaps a challenging because people do not know if others will be okay with having shifted expectations. It can also be challenging because people do not know if others will be okay with having shifted expectations. It can be challenging because one has to learn to communicate these changes, asserting their own needs and potentially creating an issue for someone who has been counting on the previously established expectations. Both the person asserting their own needs and challenging expectations, as well as those who are affected by said changes must learn to communicate with one another so that various needs can be taken into account. Because these are often subjects that people are not used to opening communicating about all parties involved must work to determine their own needs, how to communicate them and how they are valued. Because this sort of communication is encouraged at Dancing Rabbit but generally people come from places where it was not, I propose the social pressure that makes these negotiations uncomfortable exists at Dancing Rabbit because they have become engrained based on people’s life experiences with a broader society which does not discuss these matters. These questions of personal freedoms and expectations will be addressed in depth in the following chapter.
Transparency regarding one’s emotional state allows people to better gauge how to treat one another, resulting in more appropriate social interactions. When ISI happens regardless of one’s desire for it, one can still exercise the agency to make the interaction what one needs it to be for the participants in that moment. Understanding another’s current emotional and physical state can help to cultivate this desired interaction that involves each person responding to the other’s situation. Communication is demanded from this system, so that people can balance their needs. These people are generally coming from “mainstream” American cultural backgrounds, which as Dylan notes, are conducive to avoidance rather than communication, so this system can take some adjustment time, and people engage in communication in a variety of unique ways.

We see Diane in the process of transitioning from a response to social interactions that is consistent with that of wider culture. She transitions towards breaking this norm of not necessarily communicating her socialization needs, towards this DR system of balancing social needs based on heightened communication. The pressure Diane experiences may be similar to that which pushes people to feel the need to say yes to requests for short favors. In both cases one is expected to engage in the interaction and not to deviate from the norm.

On Favors

In response to being asked about favors at DR Dylan defined two different kinds of favor. The “little things” that “take like five minutes or fewer” and the “major favors” that take “more than an hour of [his] time.” Dylan says that he is “pretty good” at saying “no” to major favors, and it is the little things that are more challenging. This implies that he would perhaps like to say no to the smaller favors. He relates to me what happened when Jess interrupted our interview earlier on. Jess
and their six year old walked up as I began interviewing Dylan. They came up along a path emerging from a cluster of trees, behind which there are more houses. They were ready with buckets. Jess’ daughter could be heard, their high squeaky voice talking to their mom, as Dylan brought them back behind his house. Dylan says that they just wanted some clay and he showed them where it was. He gives me estimates of how much time it took: three, four, maybe five minutes. He says that helping out with little things like this can be disruptive and kill momentum. If this happens every hour then that can become really disruptive, taking one's focus away so frequently. However, he still does the favor because he says he can not feel good telling someone, “I’m sorry I don't have enough time for this’ because it’s like three minutes.” Overall people are being really disruptive to his day, though no single instance is the problem. This seems to be a situation in which setting boundaries is difficult because no single instance is the issue. This seems to be a case where the expectation makes one feel their individual needs are less important and so they get sacrificed rather than asserted.

Lydia tells me about how her relationship with favors has changed since moving to Dancing Rabbit. She explains that she felt uncomfortable asking for them and when she did she felt the drive to offer monetary compensation. Her partner taught her that the way to deepen a relationship is to, “either borrow something from someone, or ask something of them.” Lydia says that subconsciously people feel valued when they do favors, and that this idea was difficult for her to accept. Favors at DR, which consist often of doing things for others without money being involved, deviate enormously from how Lydia previously experienced doing things for others. Understanding the value of favors as mechanisms to building social connections was a key way that Lydia defined her experience at Dancing Rabbit. She says that, “It was a hard change in my mentality to really take that in and really believe it.” This change in mentality is closely linked to others doing favors and
feeling valued. However, the example she gives does not map directly to her explanation because people are also acting based on past and future reciprocation. Lydia give the example of borrowing someone’s planer and them not accepting payment for it because they previously borrowed her chop saw. In this instance it is like she is participating in a trade. But such a direct exchange is not necessary. The wider system of trading that is at work seems to be assumed to balance things out on its own. One does a favor because they know that someday they will be in the other person's position of needing a favor done and will be able to get that favor from someone who is also engaging in this favor doing system. The favors are thus not necessarily directly reciprocal, but part of a network of giving to a community that gives back. The act of giving to one's community in and of itself can be rewarding because one wants to see the community as a whole doing well. Lydia says that living in such a community made it possible for her to build her house. Every time someone was walking down the path she had a new thing to ask someone to spend a couple minutes helping her with. DR allowed Lydia to embark on the project of building her own house even though it involved many steps including things like moving around logs too heavy for her to lift on her own. Having access to favors made the project possible, and because it was dependant on these favors once begun she was “really forced to constantly be asking for help.” Thus, we see the access to favors creating demand for favors and on and on the system reproduces itself.

She is talking about helping for the sake of the community not the individual just as Dylan does when he talks about helping Jess and I. He is distracted from my interview, which helps the community’s publicity, by Jess, who is helping the community to have more natural building. He helps us to help the community as a whole. His understanding of the little favor fits with the type of favor Lydia describes herself benefitting from.
In *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss writes about a system of gift exchange in which gift reciprocation creates a system of responsibility to one another.\(^{27}\) I see the favors at DR holding a similar weight. The act of asking for or giving a favor creates a tie between people. Knowing that others would reciprocate a favor increases the sense of pressure to engage in favor doing. The responsibility that Mauss observes seems to be present in its own form at DR.

Mauss explains that social solidarity is produced through gift exchange which is made up of giving, receiving, and especially reciprocating. Just as Mauss see the power of the gift appearing from its connection to all aspects of society, I see the favor at DR most often relating directly to sustainability. This could be seen as one way the favors gain their power, spurring people into action. Sustainability as the central thing that relates everyone at DR is notably entangled with favors leading me to connect the process I observe to that which Mauss did.\(^{28}\)

We see the social solidarity Mauss discusses when Lydia describes frequent interaction making frequent favors possible. When I ask her about the role of proximity in favor doing, she confirms that it is absolutely vital to how favors work at DR. Only because they live so closely to one another do they pass by each other every few minutes providing the opportunity for favors. She says the she feels more able to ask for help when someone walks by her house and also feels safer knowing they are there which helps her to complete tasks she does not need help with but feels might be dangerous creating the potential for her to need help. For example, if she fell off a ladder while cutting down a tree branch, she knows she would be heard by at least one of her neighbors when she calls out for help. Another way that she can be helped out is when she is feeling unwell she can email a neighbor to ask for help getting a meal. Though when she did this the other day the

\(^{27}\) Mauss, *The Gift*.
\(^{28}\) Ibid.
person did not see her message in time this is still an example of how she is becoming more comfortable asking for help and able to do so because she has neighbors close by. When I ask Lydia if it is fulfilling for her when others ask for her help she says that it is mainly because of the five minute social interaction that she gets to have on either end of the favor doing. This is a time for her to connect and nurture her relationship with another person. Secondarily, she says it also makes her feel less bad about asking for favors in the future. Ultimately though she says, “My first thought is like yeah I want to help you because that gives me a reason to hang out with you and connect. And I want deep friendships and relationships in my community cause that’s what’s going to keep me living here, that’s what’s going to keep me content with my village.” This builds upon my conception of bonding at Dancing Rabbit and makes it clear that creation of bonds is a vital aspect of favor doing at Dancing Rabbit. Bonding can both be the reason to do a favor or simply a result that one experiences.

Community makes building a house possible, and forces Lydia to ask for help, that she can reliably expect to receive. Community makes it thinkable to start a project that one needs help with, without planning where that help will come from. Lydia makes a connection between people walking by all the time and the amount of favors she is able to ask for. This passing made building a house possible for her, because with every pass there was an opportunity presented to get some help. The safety that Lydia feels reminds me of Eric Klinenberg’s theory of social infrastructure that he connects with communities having lower death rolls in times of disaster. People checking up on one another and being aware of one another protects members of the community.20

20 Klinenberg, Palaces For The People.
For Lydia doing favors deepens personal relationships, and secondarily makes her feel better about asking for favors in the future. Favors are enabled by living close together, which also makes Lydia feel safe. This proximity gives her freedom to do different things even when no one is directly helping her. She benefits from the feeling of safety people being around gives her. Having so many people around makes different projects possible also because of the direct help that she can expect. People walking by “every two and a half minutes” can reasonably assumed to be available to do quick favors. She describes here a kind of exchange, which though indirect is promoted by a community sense that they make themselves available for others.

Dylan’s explanation of incidental social interaction must be understood clearly so we can go on to look at Lydia avoiding socialization when upset in public. I think the two understandings can enlighten one another. Diane choosing to eat alone is an active choice. The default option and thus more passive choice is to eat with the group. More ambitious projects were made thinkable for Lydia, both in the sense that she knew she could get assistance and in that she felt safe to take risks, because she knew her community would take care of her. This expectation of being taken care of may represent in its own way a favor that can be expected. If one gets hurt others are expected to step in. The silent background expectation of favors that would happen in various scenarios remains, whether it is working on a project or falling from a ladder. The ability to expect a favor is enough. It reminds me of insurance. People engage in favors and all share a group expectation that others will be there for them. Everyone chips in so that when one needs something it is there. Everyone is putting into this system based on what they can. Marie says that “If we all put in as much as we can and take out what we need we will be okay.” For her the system is not one in which you get back whatever you put into it but one in which one is responsible to ask when help is
needed and give when one can. Being able to help is all the reason she needs to do it. Also, people know that others would do the same for them. Even if it never comes to pass, the knowledge of this safety net is valuable in and of itself. It makes people perhaps more prone to do the same in return, and also makes people feel more comfortable asking. Establishing this kind of giving relationship seems to make people feel connected to one another. Everyone seems to refer to the community as a whole discussing how people want to be involved and contributing to the community, which is a project people are deeply committed to seeing succeed.

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Dancing Rabbit is organized in such a way that promotes interactions. People connect with one another during the everyday ISI, which connect people’s paths in various ways. This means that some people are closer to one another because they frequent the same paths. They encounter one another and talk. They are more often available for one another. If you walk by more often then it is more likely you will be around when your neighbor needs a hand. One will lend this quick favor. This may make a person feel needed and helpful to others, creating a bond through a mutual sense of relying upon one another. Lydia feels as though she could not have built her house without her community because every ten minutes someone was lending her a hand. She feels the support of the community which gives her a sense of social wellbeing. She feels safe, both physically and emotionally. Dylan talks about this being a bond that he has with his neighbors as well. He does mention that these frequent interruptions are not necessarily a positive experience for him. His assessment of one an hour and hers of when every ten minutes though rough also show the frequency of these interactions that when they can take five to fifteen minutes can encompass a lot
of one’s life. This social bonding with the people around us can instill a sense of belonging. This exchange of things buffers each other up and at the end of the day, whatever balance of gain to give one gets out of it, people agree that making the community work is an important endeavor to devote oneself to making work, and this contact is part of achieving that.

There seems to be a common understanding that people are linked through their everyday interactions that can take only minutes. These interactions seem to be what build relationships, which are stronger between those who spend more time with one another. This time spent with one another is determined by people's interactions that are determined by the spatial layout of the village. Where people are in relation to one another is based on choices that are not made with these interactions in mind. They can be random but also quite purposeful as we see in subcommunities, which are groups deliberately putting themselves in increased close proximity with one another. Perhaps the need for these deliberate subcommunities emerges from relationships being built with those in proximity whether intentionally or not. One’s neighbor is part of one's life. Within DR, where one is positioned in relation to others, there is a sort of relationship determining factor that we do not see so much in the “wider culture”. The proximity between habitations is a major factor in relationship building and comparable to sharing a house with someone. If our paths are our halls then the ones we share these paths with become housemate: walking the same halls of the same house. This connects with a feeling of giving up personal freedoms that are only generally given up for people we cohabitate with. A familial relationship can be built with people and these relationships depending on proximity of habitations with moving around. The convenience of daily life and what the patterns of this life gives us have large roles in who we become close with. This will be my focus in chapter two.
The web of connection is not a direct give and take but a fluid interchange that is not accounted for in any calculated way. Instead this web is maintained by a give and take that is maintained by a common understanding of its existence without necessarily defining it. Everyone conceives of it in their own way but all respect it.

I would consider the interaction Dylan has with Isaac coming up and talking to him during our interview to be an ISI. The frequency of our interview being interrupted displays what I am describing. Also because Isaac is a pretty young child Dylan has to play a fairly parental role with him. He shares his food and tells the kid what it is. He is helping raise this child in this one little moment. He is taking part. All these tiny little favors all the time build up the community. When they say it takes a village to raise a child they do not mean that every villager is a parent to the way nuclear family parents are. It means that everyone can play a small little part and come together to do something enormous: raise a child. This parallels Lydia building her house and her villages contributions to the effort. We see the people of DR coming together and creating a community that is able to meet significant ecological goals. We see people sharing so much, building their own system that functions in radically different ways than most of these people have lived their lives. It is a drastic thing that is being created and at the core of it are all these little moments. It is made possible by someone taking a moment of their time to ease the others labor. That moment is what makes the difference.
Chapter II

The Give and Take of Freedoms and Favors

It was August 13th and after we added the renin to the goat milk that Monty was teaching me how to make into an aged cheddar, he suggested we do our interview while it curdled. We walked out to a white wooden picnic table just across the path from his house and his kitchen, which is a separate building. We sat down across from one another at the table dappled with the light filtered through the treetops above us. The cicadas were loud and his chickens could be heard nearby. Monty wore grey shorts and no shirt. His long blond hair was pulled back messily into a bun. He had light facial hair and blue eyes. Sitting down he placed a bunch of garlic tied together by the stems on the bench next to him. He put a blue pitcher shaped mug with the handle broken off filled with coffee on the table on the other side of him. As I presented my consent form to him and began setting up for the interview, he took the copy of the form I offered for him to keep, folded it in half and put his cloves of garlic on it as he finished peeling them. As I interviewed him, he continued to slowly peel, sometimes using his pinky finger and thumb to get the thin lower layer of skin off.

Over the course of this chapter I will discuss much of what Monty talked to me about that day in August. While discussing his life, Monty frequently referred to the people in it. The relationships he has with these people are important context to what he said, so I will start off by describing them. Monty and Rachel are married and have a daughter named Oriana and a cat named Gerald. The three live together in a house. Because they sleep under one roof and share that space I call them cohabitants. This term is meant to express that they share their habitation. These three
people are also part of a subcommunity that shares a kitchen (though Monty and Rachel own the kitchen) which is its own separate building. Marie and Diane both eat in this kitchen and help to maintain it. Jess joined the co-op for a short time while they were on a diet that Jess wanted to be on that summer.\footnote{The kitchen got organized specifically for this diet that most people wanted to be on, but it was not mandatory. Monty and Oriana for that time just added supplemental things to their meals that we being eliminated in the diet the others were following.} In addition to this subcommunity being defined by a shared kitchen, the members all live relatively close together. Rachel, Monty, and Oriana live next to their kitchen, Marie is just access the footpath, Mira's\footnote{Mira was a member of the subcommunity until her death in 2010.} cottage is perpendicular to these two houses, and Diane is at the end of the path, perhaps a minute walk away. Living close together and with easiest access to the same path means this group of people have an increased likelihood of interaction on the paths. There is a picnic table and other seating in a grassy area in the center of four of the buildings making up the subcommunity. This area is where I interviewed Monty and saw members of the community passing by.

Before Mira passed away she, Monty and Rachel were trying to share income and labor. When Monty talks about the home of his late friend he gestures towards it just across the path from his own home. They shared the same kitchen, another building further down the path. Marie is another of their close friends who eats in this kitchen and lives on the same side of the path as Mira's old house, but just across from the kitchen. These people's proximity to one another coincides with relationships that carry expectation of heightened communication even regarding subjects that feel exceptionally personal to many of us. This physical proximity and sharing of intimate spaces, parallels the deep social connections they are building. We all affect the people in the world around us when we make choices, but when people's lives are intertwined to a certain
degree and they must manage cooperating in a multitude of ways, perhaps a certain level of heightened communication is necessary.

Cat

One thing from my discussion with Monty that day that stands out to me, is when I asked him if he had ever considered leaving the community and if so, why. Although he says that he has never seriously considered leaving, those things that bring him “even remotely into that realm” are compromises of personal freedoms which can be difficult for him. For him the most obvious example of this is the “negotiations and decision making process” regarding cat policy that were happening at that time. The community decided to limit the number of “free roaming” cats in the community. This means that no new free roaming cats will join the community until the current population decreased to the agreed upon desirable amount. Monty does not want to own a cat that he keeps inside, so the one he currently has will be his last cat for the foreseeable future. He tells me he “really love[s] having a cat” and see not being able to continue to have new pet cats after Gerald is gone as a compromise of personal freedoms.

How does a cat as a personal freedom help us define what a compromised personal freedom is for him? A cat is private property that has a will of its own and develops relationships with others, good and bad alike. The choice of owning certain property is compromised. The amount of cats in the community is limited, meaning that someone else's cat becomes a shared decision because it has shared effects. Many members in the community make a concerted effort to take into account how

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33 Outdoor.
their actions impact others, so this is a natural extension of having such a value.\textsuperscript{34} People in the discussions of cat policy in the community gave reasons for having a cap on the number of free roaming cats at Dancing Rabbit that would be far lower than the current amount of free roaming cats in the community. These reasons include the negative effects other people’s cats have on people, as well as on there shared environment. Because outdoor space is intimately shared at Dancing Rabbit, what is done to that space is a shared choice.

The free roaming cats live mostly in the communally shared spaces of their collective outdoors. We see here the extensive sharing of outdoor space sometimes needs to be regulated by compromise of personal freedoms which when exercised can have negative impacts for others using the shared space.

Part of what Monty is experiencing is an adjustment to what he regarded as a choice that was his and his cohabitants choice to make between themselves. Monty spent the majority of his life in spaces where this was the case. By pointing this out as a major shift for him to make, Monty is revealing an aspect of how the community redefines the position of the cat within a system of freedoms. The choice of how many cats to have becomes a community freedom rather than solely a personal one. The community has the freedom to choose a maximum desired free roaming cat population. The individual’s freedom is secondary and only exercised in the case that it does not conflict with the communities decision. With the maximum amount of cats determined to be lower than the current population, Monty is left without any free roaming cat decisions for the foreseeable future, taking this freedom out of his hands and into the community’s.

\textsuperscript{34} This is not to claim this as one of their shared values, which were in the process of being determined while I was there.
We can learn from this that Dancing Rabbit is a place where the community decision making process can replace or take a part of what people in the community formerly understood to be solely personal decisions. We are shown that sharing space means sharing decisions regarding that space. What is personal space at Dancing Rabbit becomes blurred and concepts of private and public are redefined through their often fluid intersection in this community. When I say public here I still mean private to people who are not part of the community. These spaces that are public amongst the community members are not necessarily public to people outside the community. People who visit without being part of a program that Dancing Rabbit offers are expected to stay on the gravel road that winds through Dancing Rabbit. The paths that weave intimately amongst people's houses in a tangle of vibrantly growing plants maintained so that the footpath will remain are more private. I recall hearing about a person who was not part of the community who had been wandering around on these paths, behind peoples houses and to where someone was camping and was used to having relative privacy. Everyone in the conversation agreed that the person should not have been there and the person camping felt like someone had invaded her space, a fact that was definitely dependant on the person being from outside the community. This uncomfortability with an outsider entering their personal space made me think of how Dancing Rabbit is its own private. These spaces that the wider public are not supposed to enter define those people as part of an outgroup. The community as a whole makes up a kind of private that has worked its way into being part of “personal decisions.” The range of the personal has expanded.

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Referring to the cat policy limiting his personal freedom Monty says that “a shade of that came up” when he and Rachel were choosing to have a child. At the time he thought of this choice as the most personal decision there was. He thought of it as a choice to be made exclusively by himself and his wife.

Gesturing to her house right by where we were sitting Monty tells me about Mira. He and Rachel were “cooperating in subcommunity with Mira whose cabin is there who died back in twenty-ten.” Monty explains that at the time he thought that no one apart from himself and his wife had a right to be part of the conversation in which they considered having a child. However, after Oriana was born Monty realized that the impact she had on himself and Rachel’s interests, availability, and more were such that he could see why Mira “would have liked a lot more conversation and inclusion in that processes.” He explains that this inclusion would not have been in terms of Mira telling them to have a baby or not, but a discussion about how this choice would “influence what [they were] trying to do together.” Monty reflects that this would have been a valuable conversation to have had; validating the premise that a certain degree of cooperation between people creates relationships where people should discuss decisions that will have a large impact on interests and availability. The more limited and intimate circle included in this familial conversation is being defined as those who one shares labor and income with. I see the conversation here as an example of how people are learning to adjust to increased cooperation. Because Monty and presumably Rachel were raised in families where labor and income sharing were relegated to a nuclear family, they are in the process of learning how communication about certain things might be
expanded beyond cohabitants when labor and income are. I define cohabitants as those sharing the building where they sleep, but perhaps the intimacy of living together and the dynamics of intimate conversations and personal freedoms is being shown to be determined by much more than this. To share labor, income, a kitchen, and even common outdoor space, not to mention all that is automatically shared with one's neighbors by the fact of living in the community in the first place, is to break down barriers that define a distinct “household.”

On Trade-Offs

To me the use of “personal freedoms” in Monty’s description denotes that there are some choices in life that uniquely concern him. He discussed there being “no more personal thing, person[al] decision [than] choosing to have a child.” Later, when he describes being in a situation in which there was expectation that he would converse with Mira, including her in the process of deciding to have a child, as a cost to his personal freedom. This tells me that personal freedoms are a spectrum. He says that having a child is the “most” personal thing for him, but also gives having a cat as another example of something he cared about. When he introduces choosing to have a child as another “shade” of choosing to have a cat, it also makes me think of personal freedoms as on a spectrum.

This is connected with the generally high level of communication that is expected at Dancing Rabbit. People check in with one another, often in group settings. An example of this is the kitchen co-op I was a member of this summer. Each week we would have a meeting at which we would go around and tell the group how we were doing physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. The
openness that was exhibited prompted me to take this seriously. Many people in the community make a real effort to be honest when someone asks them how they are doing. There will be a pause, genuine thought about the question, and an answer which can be quite personal. Community meetings will be stopped when someone seems emotional about something and there will be time taken to address what is going on. When there is conflict within the community everyone is encouraged to bring it to mediation. This way, a discussion can happen with a third party present who is trained in conflict resolution.

Ultimately, the things that are more personal are still more of a choice for Monty. Monty even says that he does not consider the personal freedom he is giving up relating to a possibility of being told that he can not have a child. Instead, discussions about having a child were wanted. However, in the less personal case of deciding to have a cat, Monty is expected to both go into conversation and also come to a consensus he does not necessarily like. He refers to these conversations as “negotiations” which denotes that he is making sacrifices and not necessarily getting all he wants. This word carries an oppositional message. He will then have to follow that decision. If someone tried to make a rule saying he could not have children, I think it would be an extremely different story. This is a different kind of personal freedom. So we see here that personal freedoms are varyingly personal and they are taken away to different degrees.

This brings me to the “trade off” in which he is exchanging his personal freedoms. He says that, “there are trade offs, nothing comes for free.” Living in a “cooperative culture” is what he is trading his “personal freedoms” for. Living in a community for Monty means gaining much more than he gives up, making the exchange worth continuing. There are always pros and cons to moving
to a given place. The pros must outweigh the cons for it to be worth it. Here, we see Monty weighing the pro of “cooperative culture” against the con of the loss of personal freedoms.

Monty makes it clear that these trade-offs are not necessarily directly related to one another, but more broadly represent the pros and cons of living at Dancing Rabbit. The cons are accepted because the pros exist and the pros can not exist without some cons. Monty reflects on his experience of this by saying, “I appreciate the good things in community so far much more than I feel at a loss for the things that I have to give up.” It is what the trade-offs add up to overall that counts. This shows Monty is not thinking that he should have a particular conversation because it will directly result in someone helping him move a heavy object that he can not manage alone. Rather, he participates in certain conversations because they are part of what makes the same system work, which he enjoys the benefits of in many other ways. The system as a whole is maintained by many factors, which various people interpret as costs or benefits.

Monty describes the cooperative culture that exists at Dancing Rabbit as providing the ability for him to, “find help to do whatever I want to do on very short notice whether it’s move a heavy thing or celebrate some event or whatever it is, it’s like there are always people here to do that with. And that comes at a cost and some of that cost is personal freedom of the sort that I was describing and so yeah there are trade-offs, nothing comes for free.” Being able to do things at short notice is an intriguing benefit. It is the access to other people who will support what each other are doing at the drop of a hat. This kind of flexibility and willingness to spontaneously put in the time is something that goes against many of the systems to which I have grown accustomed, specifically the “time-is-money” way of thinking. The drive of capitalism and profit does not leave room for cooperative culture ways of thinking. People are routinely expected to be able to do something for
one another. They continue participating perhaps just because they want to, or perhaps because they benefit from being in the cooperative culture in some other way that is worth the cost.

Being available to help can be costly and a threat to personal freedom. Perhaps the costs and benefits that people are experiencing are not in and of themselves costly, but are costly sometimes solely based on the way they are experienced. This point will be further examined with the help of Dylan and Ali later in this chapter. The benefits and costs of cooperative culture can be seen being experienced differently in other ways, like Lucy not caring much for the social sustainability part of living in a sustainable community, but being okay with it. Lydia, on the other hand, emphasizes the social sustainability aspect more than anything else when I asked her about sustainability. People experience different parts of the community in different ways, so when we talk about Monty’s costs and benefits we must remember that the aspects of community that some see as benefits others may not.

On Shared Understandings

Now that I have established the context and my understanding of what Monty denotes in this part of our interview, I will discuss how these ideas are present and often varied in the lives of others at Dancing Rabbit. Monty being expected to consider his co-op mate’s perspective and how she was affected by him having a baby was an example of a personal freedom being taken from him. But first, he used the example of the ongoing cat policy discussions that were happening at the time, and the outcome which wasn’t looking good for Monty ever getting another cat. At one meeting about it, Monty said that he thought of locking up cats inside, never again to interact with their own kind, as cruel. He much prefers to have an outdoor cat, or what they call a “free-roaming cat,” but
the decision they were coming to meant they were going to let the current cats at Dancing Rabbit die off until they were at the desired smaller number before another cat would be allowed to join the community. This decision was being made by consensus, but to have a decision that everyone would agree upon, not getting more cats for a while seemed to be a necessary compromise. People were having issues with other people’s cats pooping in their gardens and during ground bird nesting season cats were a particular danger to local ecology. There was enough concern within the community for the pet committee to start discussions about it. These discussions went on over the course of many drawn out meetings and people were starting to become eager for the process to end.

Having a broader than cohabitant range of people expect to be considered in life choices can be seen in the practices of Ada and Sam. They have livestock guardian dogs, but the concerns of these dogs are certainly not just between Sam and Ada. Similar discussions as those surrounding cat policy have been had in the past, limiting the amount of pet dogs in the community. In the cat discussions, “free roaming” cats were the only ones being counted in the amount of cats that they were limiting because indoor cats do not cause any of the problems they are concerned with. Similarly, livestock guardian dogs were not considered pet dogs because they had a different role in the community. Ada and Sam have two livestock guardian dogs. These dogs are expected to stay guarding livestock, and to not go into the village. In the past people have complained when they came into the village and Sam has sent an email notifying everyone in advance that he wanted to take the dogs to the pond.

Not only did Ada and Sam have the approval of the community to get livestock guardian dogs, they also felt the need to maintain this approval. They sent emails with updates on the dogs’
training, as well as one in advance of taking the dogs to the pond. From these interactions we can see that part of maintaining approval is maintaining communication. In these instances informing others keeps people on the same page so that changes are noted and can be discussed soon after they are made if people desire further communication. They are preempting people coming to them to complain, by inviting the discussion. There was an incident that happened before I arrived at Dancing Rabbit in which the two livestock guardian dogs ran in the direction of a woman walking her small dog on a leash. The two larger dogs did not hurt anyone, but the woman was frightened. She got upset with Sam about the interaction, but refused mediation. Sam was willing to go into mediation about the matter, showing the value of communication as well as the ways that this communication can be demanded. This also disrupted Sam’s personal freedom to simply have his dogs without the demand for community involvement. This involvement could also be seen as an advantage for Sam. He is not alone in his conflict. One day the woman he was in conflict with came angrily into his kitchen. Sam immediately told her that he did not want to talk without a mediator present. She left without trouble. This shows that a demand for heightened communication can be beneficial for those who are in conflict and are not comfortable dealing with it on their own. Most Americans outside of Dancing Rabbit get to have a dog and do not have to answer to others. However they do not get a chance at free mediation if there was an issue to discuss with a community member. In this way I see Monty explaining what has to be given up for community in order to also explain the personal freedoms of dog ownership that Ada and Sam give up. For Ada and Sam this is balanced by the benefits of circumstances such as having chicken coop lifters on short notice. This will be further examined shortly.
A similar example, much less formal but nevertheless a significant practice, I witnessed was Ada moving their rooster. The young birds are raised at the top of the hill where her house is and get moved down and away from the community when they grow up. Ada comments one day that she needs to move the rooster soon because it has begun crowing a bit and she knows that it will bother Ishmael. He has not mentioned it yet but he will. Like one having a dog, cat, or baby, having a rooster in community necessitates actions to make the situation work for those around oneself. By “work” I mean that in living closely together people at Dancing Rabbit try to be aware of how they affect those around them. This communication is something that Ada tries to consider and act upon before Ishmael is disturbed again. This makes it so Ishmael does not continue to have negative feelings about his proximity to Ada’s roosters. They have already had a conversation addressing what disturbed Ishmael’s life and determined how they could both move forward undisturbed. This little avoided disturbance makes Ada and Ishmael living alongside one another smoother. Their practices are more in harmony with one another. The system that their interactions are part of runs more smoothly. One could say Ada moving her rooster is one piece of a system that allows people to live in proximity to one another and engage in involved cooperation.

Monty’s explanation of how he feels personal freedoms can be altered by living in community helps us see how such situations happen in various ways for others. I think this feeling comes from one having lived a life in which there were personal matters that one was expected to deal with with a relatively limited group, such as cohabitants. However, at Dancing Rabbit people’s proximity, spatially and cooperatively, means the close personal circle is expanded. More expect to be considered in decisions that were formerly personal freedoms. One was free to have them be

36 Incidentally, this is the same person who was upset to have cat poop in his garden.
personal: concerning only themselves and perhaps one other person. Monty is experiencing an alteration to the range of people directly involved in the ‘personal freedoms’ that he had grown accustomed to. Though the scale is much larger, Monty and Rachel having a baby impacts the lives of others as Ada having a rooster does. In both cases communication is vital to integrating the new life into the community. We can also look at how Sam and Ada profit from the benefits Monty discusses. I will use the experience of moving a chicken coop to display this, which, incidentally, is an example of help moving a heavy object, which Monty used to describe the benefits of community.

I see the cooperative culture Monty refers to reflected in the process of moving a triangular chicken house from where it was disintegrating in the back of someone’s garden, long abandoned by a flock of chickens that had been killed off. Monty said that there were payoffs to the giving up of personal freedoms like being able to make one’s own choices regarding one’s animals. These payoffs come in the form of the cooperative culture that provides Sam and Ada with help moving a chicken coop onto their land. Thus we see that cooperative culture is both the reason for giving up freedoms and the reward for doing so. Giving up freedoms, which often comes in the form of giving up the freedom to act without communicating about the action, is a key part of cooperative culture. They are inseparable. Ada and I had spent a while one day working on extracting the chicken coop, because it had begun dilapidating into an overgrown area to the back of a garden plot. Ada says this is how they get most of their chicken coops. We could not move it on our own and even with Sam’s help a few days later we could not get it out of the garden gate. Another day, over lunch we asked some participants in a workshop to help lift and move it to a place where we could pick it up and into the truck bed. This process of moving the chicken coop, which happened over the course of
days, directly displays what Monty is talking about in terms of there always being people there to help. One can rely on the help of others. The ability to rely on others makes possible a change in the mindset with which one approaches something they are going to do. Whatever the project, one is able to think of it as a collective action rather than an individual action. This opens up the scope of the given activity. One can decide to try something out that they can probably not do on their own, knowing that an inability to complete the task alone does not mean failure, but simply means a new exploration with others. The realm of what is possible expands.

The previous owner giving their chicken coop to Ada in the first place displays willingness for sharing. Ada and I being careful to damage only the right plants and leave things nice showed our own respect for other people’s space. We were participating in an exchange between us and the owners of this chicken coop. We were each giving attention to what would be best for the other. Getting the coop out of where it was displays how living cooperatively works at Dancing Rabbit. There is a mutual respect in the sharing of resources. There is also a knowledge base that goes with this respect. One has to want to respect the others’ space and also have an understanding for it. Being able to identify which plants one would want to protect and which ones can be broken displays that there is a shared understanding. Sharing does not work if the person doing the sharing feels they were damaged in the process. Again, this system of sharing ‘working’ is when people have the same understanding of something and can act without conflict. The system runs smoothly. Where, in the case of the roosters, this shared understanding was established in conversation, a shared understanding of plant value is more implicit. I had to be told which plants could be damaged, so the value of different plants can be made explicit for outsiders, though seemingly common knowledge for insiders.
Monty discussed shared understanding in terms of how he and his wife were interacting with Mira, with whom they were living in cooperation. Monty realized that choosing to have a baby affected others and that having a shared understanding of the work and availability he would be able to contribute were inseparable from that of his intent to have children. Having a baby took a shared understanding of these things and altered them, with no new common understanding established. This upset Mira, and Monty, only after having his baby, saw how he had changed the situation without discussing it. In his example, Monty is pointing out how communication was needed in order to maintain healthy cooperative living. This communication can make his personal freedoms the concern of those outside of himself. In the case of having a shared understanding of how to treat someone else's garden, there is no communication needed because the understanding of how to do so is pre-established based on norms and values of the community. These norms and values give a common understanding of the values of various plants and the intentions one probably has for the plants they are growing. This is something that would have to be discussed if it was not already understood, or else it would lead to trouble if one person unknowingly destroyed a plant another had worked hard to grow. This exact incident happened when an intern killed most of Eliza's oregano because she was told to weed an area but not which plants were meant to be kept alive. Eliza assumed a shared understanding that did not exist. Here I am comparing the understanding of how one should interact with plants with a broader understanding of how people share their time and energy with one another. In both cases, it is important that some sort of shared understanding is maintained.

The example of the chicken coop allows us to see how these dynamics can take place without direct communication, when nobody is acting outside of a preconceived notion of how
things would go. In Monty’s example of not discussing him and Rachel having a baby with Mira, he changed what Mira could expect from him and Rachel without communicating about it. Shared understanding leads to expectations. When someone departs from a shared understanding without communicating about it, those who still have the expectations of the previous understanding will be taken by surprise. Mira, taken by surprise, wished that Monty and Rachel had communicated their departure from a shared understanding that they were living without children. Communication would have established a new understanding between those who they lived in close cooperation with.

These negotiations of expectation happen in my example of the livestock guardian dogs being brought to the pond. There is a shared understanding that these dogs will not be at the pond. Sam acknowledges this and requests a temporary departure. He leaves open the possibility of someone asking him not to and thereby does not force their understanding to change. If he simply brought his dogs to the pond, people may have been surprised, having had no communication to help them shift to an understanding that the dogs are permitted at the pond. People have certain expectations that must be altered if they are not to be breached and cause the surprise and confusion of expecting one thing and getting something completely different. Thus, we can see communication as maintenance of shared understanding.

Another way I witnessed in practice what Monty explains about living in a cooperative system is when Sam and Ada got help from workshop members. Helping one another move things seemed to be a recurring theme at Dancing Rabbit over the course of my stay there. This community of workshop members were asked to move something heavy. They were also participating in the Dancing Rabbit community. Even though they had been there for about a week,
they had entered into the cooperative culture of Dancing Rabbit and were participating in what that culture demanded. They had joined our kitchen co-op for many meals and the request for help was made over lunch one day. Being part of a shared group like this, as Monty said, demands a certain level of giving up freedoms. Though one has the opportunity to say no, there is strong social pressure to help if there is no good reason not to. This may be connected to having watched their hosts work hard to provide wonderful food for them all week. They have connected with people at Dancing Rabbit and within their own workshop they have bonded over experiencing Dancing Rabbit together. When they are asked to take a moment from their day to pick something up, as they eat a meal prepared by those who are asking the favor, when everyone is aware that nothing is scheduled after the meal, I imagine there is a certain amount that workshop members were influenced to agree.

It was the day we were finally getting the triangle house all the way back to Ada and Sam’s from where the members of the workshop had helped us get it. The three of us realized that we could not move it into the truck on our own. It was a hot day; just after lunch time we stood in the early afternoon heat trying to figure out how to move the falling apart chicken house. With no one around to ask for help Sam joked about everyone being inside watching football in the air conditioning. The World Cup was happening and much of the community had been excitedly keeping up with the event. I remember my first week Sam telling me that it could be hard sometimes to see everyone with their air conditioning while he does not have any. Sam went to the Mercantile, where people were watching The World Cup, to get some help, while Ada and I walked back to the garden we had taken the structure from to get the bits of old tangled chicken wire that we had left behind. The previous owners of the coop likely did not want it either, and we were not about to
leave behind just the parts of the building that we did not want for them to have to deal with. Sam came back with three people who helped us lift the coop into the truck. They came along to help us unload as well. When we got to where we needed to pull in to unload, Sam had to get out and move his mom’s car because it was in the way. Ali, who had come from the Mercantile to help, was in the passenger seat and climbed over to be in the driver's seat (where Sam had been) so he could pull the truck in while Sam moved the can out of the way.

This is another example of heavy lifting being an obligation and inconvenience that goes with all the good things about living in community. For Ada and Sam, this is an example of benefitting from cooperative culture. Days later Ali would explain his less than enthusiastic feelings about the help he gave that day. Even though it was the World Cup, a burning hot day, and he was just enjoying a cool drink in an air conditioned bar, this man decided to move the triangle house. We see some validation of Monty’s explanation in what Ali considers in such situations, though he also offers a twist, suggesting a new way to look at how people understand the favors they do. Following Monty’s logic, in this story we can see shared understandings which create a give and take. Ada and Sam move their rooster and send out emails about their dogs and the trade off is that they get help with their heavy lifting. However, seeing Ali's side of the story complicates this narrative of trade offs and goes deeper into how people who feel heavily relied upon within this cooperative culture are experiencing this system.

37 In the end we did actually end up keeping it.
On The Pressure of Favors

One evening I’m hanging out with Dylan, Ali, and a woman visiting Dancing Rabbit. Dylan says that he makes a list of things to do in a day and then steps out his door and someone is asking for help with something. He and Ali discuss how as they go about the village over the course of a day people will ask for help with things all the time and they can not say no. Ali says that he did not want to go move the triangle house the other day but felt like he should. One of them mentions that they do these favors knowing that these people will always reciprocate. However, one little thing leads to another and suddenly one is set back hours. Dylan says that he will spend all day doing so many things and at the end of the day feel like he has not gotten anything done. For example, he just told Jess that he would help them get a glass crusher, but that is just another thing on the list. There is always more to be doing. They also discuss it being hard to find space here, Ali talks about walking the three mile loop and how mowing is a nice way to have space. He also says that he will go around with headphones on so he does not have to talk to people. At first he did this with earbuds but people would not see them so they would think they were being ignored, so he started wearing his big headphones even though the batteries are out. Dylan says that having his wife living in Rutledge is really what helps. All this conversation is made in a joking manner as we sit in Dylan’s unfinished cob interior around a hookah, drinking beer after most of that evening's gathering had left. The sweet vanilla smell of the hookah hangs in the air, like the perfume of baked goods. We had come inside seeking the cool air of the earth building.

The discussions of favors and the close proximity people live to one another makes me take note of how because of so many people living closely together in a walkable space, requests for
favors are made easily. One cannot go from one place to another without being exposed to others. These others are often working on something. In a community where do-it-yourself activities are encouraged, and consumerism is discouraged it is likely someone could use a hand. People are often doing things they have never done before but others in the community have. Oftentimes with larger projects an extra hand could be used. Furthermore, the environmental ethic at Dancing Rabbit encourages reuse of materials which necessitates moving them around and repurposing them. These two things can even combine as doing things for oneself is often a strategy to move toward sustainability.

Dylan and Ali voice their discomfort with the perpetual favors expected of them, displaying another side of the favors that are part of a trade off of personal freedoms. It is worth noting that they still always feel like they should say yes when presented with being able to help. They opt into this system that necessitates some negatives in order for one to enjoy the positives of cooperative culture. Whether okay with it or not, these people are all acting on a kind of normalization of social exchange. The reliance on one another and the connectedness make this relationship present even when people inhabit it in different ways. Monty explains giving up personal freedoms as something he experiences when he is expected to consult others about things like having a baby or a cat, things that conventionally people make choices about and consider the effects of on their own or within a family unit. He presents the type of favor doing that Ali and Dylan are talking about as the other side of this giving up of personal freedom. Being able to have people always willing to help and participate is what one gives up personal freedoms to have. However, Ali and Dylan present another side of this. They complicate Monty’s characterization of personal freedoms sacrificed within community by portraying the pressure to do favors as also a sacrifice of personal freedom.
I see Monty’s sacrifice as one of long term consideration of community in his decisions. The collective understanding of how to treat one another’s gardens and space which Ada participated in when we retrieved the triangle house, was a display of long term personal freedoms as well. One must understand which plants are okay to rip out of the ground, which ones can be stepped on, and which ones should be protected. In this example the personal freedom to value plants within a particular shared structure of understanding was not challenged because the understanding was not challenged by anyone within the situation. Everyone maintained this plant value system. This was still a long term understanding of the value of various plants. The lack of shared understanding displayed by an intern was only understood when it was too late for the oregano patch. The shared understanding was assumed, showing how it is expected to be implicit even though it does not always turn out to be.

Dylan and Ali present the case of personal freedoms as considerations that can be sacrificed in the short term; when on a day to day basis people's plans are altered by the needs of others. These needs are expected to be met, though the understanding that led to this expectation does not seem to be shared. Monty explains that this willingness is part of what he expects from his community. Dylan and Ali complicate this expectation, displaying that an individual's time on the smaller scale is another freedom they are “trading off”. Thus we see both long term and short term sacrifices of one's time and freedoms for the sake of one's community. Trying to understand how this system works leads to understanding the very processes which bind the community together. These binding systems may just be what makes possible the sustainable lifestyle which is overarchingly important for the people of Dancing Rabbit.38

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38 Dancing Rabbits Ecological Covenants:
- Dancing Rabbit members will not use personal vehicles, or store them on Dancing Rabbit property.
I see these social pressures as wanted by some and unwanted by others. Threats to personal and social freedoms are the price for the benefits of community. How these trade offs and benefits are negotiated is a complex process that individuals within an interaction do not necessarily view in the same way. Let us next consider the social freedoms that community offers. When they were considering moving to Dancing Rabbit, Olive was attracted to seeing her husband more, being able to socialize, not being stuck in her house alone with her child. In her other life Olive had to pay a price for all these things that are given freely at Dancing Rabbit. If she wanted to see her husband more they would not be able to afford their lifestyle. She was stuck at home with her child unless she expressly decided to take her to the park where she could play with children who were strangers.

Here, the children are like siblings. I have experienced what she describes, seeing young children able to go about the community on their own, safe around adults who, while not expressly watching them, are keeping them safe. I have seen Olive walking by with her child and when another child


➤ At Dancing Rabbit, fossil fuels will not be applied to the following uses: powering vehicles, space-heating and cooling, refrigeration, and heating domestic water.
➤ All gardening, landscaping, horticulture, silviculture, and agriculture conducted on Dancing Rabbit property must conform to the standards as set by the OCIA for organic procedures and processing. In addition, no petrochemical biocides may be used or stored on DR property for household or other purposes.
➤ All electricity produced at Dancing Rabbit shall be from sustainable sources. Any electricity imported from off-site shall be balanced by Dancing Rabbit exporting enough on-site, sustainably generated electricity, to offset the imported electricity.
➤ No lumber harvested outside of the bioregion, excepting reused and reclaimed lumber, shall be used for construction at Dancing Rabbit.
➤ Waste disposal systems at Dancing Rabbit shall reclaim organic and recyclable materials.
Sustainability Guidelines: Dancing Rabbit is committed to working in the following ways to make itself a sustainable system:
➤ Dancing Rabbit will look holistically at the issues of sustainability to create a sustainable culture that takes into account all impacts of its actions and acts to preserve the Earth for the future.
➤ Dancing Rabbit will strive to rely only upon renewable resources, and to use them at a rate less than their replacement.
➤ Dancing Rabbit will try to understand and minimize its negative impact on global ecological systems.
➤ Dancing Rabbit will attempt to preserve and rebuild healthy ecosystems and have a positive impact on biodiversity.
➤ Dancing Rabbit will try to create a closed resource loop where byproducts are reintegrated as useful resources, thus attempting to minimize waste products, especially those toxic or radioactive.
➤ Dancing Rabbit will try to avoid exploiting people and other cultures.
➤ Dancing Rabbit will strive to achieve negative population growth from reproduction.
comes along to play Olive has offered to take this other parent’s child to the pond to go swimming with them. This is a win-win as Olive’s child care becomes more entwined in social connections and the other parent unexpectedly has some time free of childcare duties. Olive does not have to plan this out to intentionally have socialization for her child. The default is not parent and child being alone with one another, as there is always the chance when they step outside their door that there will be other people there to interact with and connected to.

On The Freedom To Be Sustainable

Olive also sees herself as gaining the freedom to be ecologically sustainable through living at Dancing Rabbit. Olive says she thinks that the key to sustainability is doing it as a group. She didn’t feel as if she could do it with just her and her husband. The community creates a situation in which people are able to enact the sustainability that they want to embody but find difficult because of social pressures outside the community which discourage their sustainability. Though Olive does not elaborate greatly on the idea of group living and sustainability, this comes up again with other people. This pattern of people coming to Dancing Rabbit in order to realize their drive for sustainability makes me think that we can start to understand both what sustainability means to some members of the community, and also what Dancing Rabbit creates a space for.

Dancing Rabbit has social dynamics that make being sustainable easier. I think the system I am describing produces sustainability in the lives of its members. The pressure of this system, or “social pressure” is influencing people, compelling them to act in certain ways. I see social pressure encouraging sustainability. People communicating about personal changes that will impact
encourages social sustainability. People having help when they are trying to learn new skills and do things for themselves promotes inner sustainability. Often these skills and the projects they enable promote ecological sustainability. For example, if Ada and Sam had not had help to move their triangular chicken coop, the structure would have continued to break down in disuse. The materials would be wasted and Ada and Sam would have had to consume other materials to serve their purpose.

Dancing Rabbit makes possible people having the ability to be more sustainable in everyday life, adding another layer to the ideas about the freedoms offered and taken when one lives at Dancing Rabbit. These freedoms help to shape what the community is making possible for the individuals within it. Lydia explains how this everyday sustainability is offered to her at Dancing Rabbit. Being in a place that encourages sustainability over things like appearance gives her the freedom to act in ways that she was driven to act in but previously felt she could not.

When I interviewed Lydia in the house that she built with her husband, she explained to me how she is able to have a small ecological footprint aided by the support of her neighbors. This frames sustainability within this conversation of freedoms that are shifted when people move to the community. This is a freedom gained through the expectations of one's community, just like they can be lost because of community expectations. Lydia is free to do certain things because it is expected at Dancing Rabbit, while in most of the United States these things may be frowned upon. For example, Lydia says it is acceptable for her to wear clothes with spots and holes in them, to take

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39 Which is one of the three pillars of sustainability recognized at Dancing Rabbit: ecological sustainability, interpersonal sustainability, and inner sustainability. In our interview on July 30, 2018 Lydia described inner sustainability saying: “We need to nurture the inner sustainability so that each person learns how to fulfill their soul and rejuvenate themselves, and not get burnt out and work too hard. We need to learn how to take care of ourselves and nourish ourselves with the appropriate foods and drinks and then limit our intake of toxins.” Often times the skills people are learning help them to fulfill these various aspects of inner sustainability.
fewer showers, and to have piles of resources around until she is ready to use them. She does these things she feels are acceptable quite willingly. It is not that she did not always want to do them, but in her previous life living in LA she felt pressure and expectation not to do these things. Thus, I see the sustainability that she observes in her daily life, like that which Olive finds considerably easier to participate in at Dancing Rabbit, to be heavily influenced by what is considered acceptable and thus what they feel more free to do while in this community.

The personal freedoms to wear dirty old clothes and have supplies in one's yard are limited by social judgement in most places in the United States. People in most of the United States feel social pressure to pay for new clothes, and to get rid of the junk in their yard buying the same materials if they need them later. When people are pressured to act this way they must pay for these things economically as well as in the form of the environmental costs of these actions. Personal freedoms are shifted at Dancing Rabbit. In the following chapter I will discuss the concepts of order and disorder that are affecting what people feel they ought to do, which is experienced as affecting people's freedoms.

Lydia also mentions programs like collaborative recycling and vehicle sharing: that more of these things are easier for those who want to participate. This allows people who want these things in their lives to have them, and forces those who do not to have them anyway. Depending on how one views these programs, they offer the freedom to recycle and share vehicles easily and also take away freedom to not recycle and not to share one's vehicle. Where wearing an old shirt is something allowed or discouraged by social acceptance, these programs mandate practices related to ecological sustainability. This effort towards sustainability is based on rules that give and take freedoms.
On Social Judgement and Community Identity

In one cat policy meeting, community members discussed how to go about lessening the number of outdoor cats in the community. Rachel suggested that each year they could draw a cat’s name out of a hat and that cat would become an indoor cat. Ada reacted to this emotionally: tears brimming her eyes and a distressed expression across her face. Ishmael asked for the discussion to stop so that they could address Ada’s reaction. Ada had not realized how much her feelings were on display. She hates that she is always the one to get upset like this. Ada says that if her cat’s name was drawn, she would leave. She just can not imagine doing what Rachel suggests. Rachel responds that Ada’s words undervalue the project of Dancing Rabbit as a whole. Ada says that it is not a good project anyway if people are feeling that judged. She does not want people to be upset at her about this and she thinks that would just be too much control over others’ lives. Ada would later apologize and say that she was hyperbolizing, and also I think that her emotions were in response to an intrusion upon personal freedoms. She points to a bigger issue that people are grappling with: the benefits of community can come at the cost of some personal freedoms and these costs must be negotiated so that is does not become too much for anyone.

Ada already feels judged because of complains about her dogs getting into the village. Ada often leaves her door open in the summertime when it is colder outside than inside in order get the outside temperature into her earth house. She has two children who go in and out, including one who is two years old and does not know how to close the door behind himself, much less make sure the cat stays in. Based on these observations, I think it would be quite difficult for Ada to ever turn her outdoor cat into an indoors cat. Knowing that she would slip up and her cat would get out, Ada
can already foresee the feeling of being judged. To have everyone know which cats are allowed outdoor and who owns them may create a dynamic in which people are judging others when they see the wrong cats out. This goes too far for Ada and reveals how the taking of personal freedoms can go too far leading to someone like Ada rebalancing the system.

Upon this conflict, the mediator points out that the conversation is no longer just about cats but about the sense of identity that has been invested in Dancing Rabbit and is threatened by the conversation. I think this gets to the core of why the cat policy, while sounding like a small issue, is deeply important. It is reflective of the freedoms people have, and in that reflective of the identity based on these freedoms. Rachel sees Ada as devaluing Dancing Rabbit, and Ada is speaking to something at the core of how she wants to live at Dancing Rabbit, and what it is to her: the personal freedoms she feels she does or does not have in her community.

The negotiations of the cat policy represent a discussion of personal freedoms being defined. These freedoms are also defined in the actions people take such as moving a rooster or emailing about a dog without being asked to do so. However, in the cat policy meeting Rachel is directly suggesting a change of personal freedoms that Ada is directly contesting. It is acknowledged that the emotional turmoil this creates is not just about the cats, but is about identity and its relationship to Dancing Rabbit as a whole. Ada’s identity as part of the DR community is threatened when she feels excluded through judgement as well as the suggestions of policy which she so strongly disagrees with that if enacted would alter the community drastically enough that she would no longer feel ideologically compatible with it. The cat policy Rachel suggests would redefine personal freedoms, which are so core to the project as a whole for Ada that she no longer recognizes it as something she wants to participate in. Seeing how this push and pull the, negotiation of freedoms, and the helping
and benefit from this help that people enact gets to the core of what Dancing Rabbit is. This balance is an ongoing process that may be addressed directly in a cat meeting or pushed in a different direction by someone who feels they must wear headphones in order to have the agency to choose when they are going to be available to help others at a given time. It is important to look at this system which is rebalanced and redefined because it is core to the identity of the community. The shared understandings of freedoms and how people help and benefit from one another’s help hold the community together and make its benefits possible. While members are held together by a shared ethic of sustainability, they are also held together by the systems that make Dancing Rabbit what it is. This all comes together in that cat meeting where decisions create expectations. These expectations alter personal freedoms, both giving and taking them. Ecological sustainability is the consideration of the local birds that may be captured by pet cats. Inner sustainability is Ada voicing her need not to feel judged. Interpersonal sustainability is the issues that arise between neighbors when one is upset by cat poop in his garden. All these things are balanced against one another over the course of the discussion. The meeting displays a culmination of what I have discussed, with this meeting at which many personal freedoms were established through the explicit creation of expectations by talking these considerations out at a group.
Chapter III
On A Sustainability Oriented Life

Now that we have looked at incidental social interactions and favors at Dancing Rabbit, I will delve into what it looks like when people live their lives making an effort to be sustainable and how things are “just done differently” at DR. These are the words Monty uses to begin explaining to me what he is often at a loss of words to explain to people from outside the community, and will act as a springboard for analysis of how things are done at DR. I connect the way things are done at DR, that Monty identifies as changing the way he thinks about things, with a de-alienation of labor through a connection to the resources he is using. This includes a reprioritization made by the community to conserve resources when they can, consuming their own labor instead.

A theme in this chapter is the undoing of prohibitions people were formerly held to and making new ones. People build their understanding of their lives through doing things sustainably. This gives meaning to the new prohibitions introduced and shows that the community it not just rejecting unsustainable practices but creating alternatives.

I want to answer the question: what does life look like when it is moving towards sustainability? I can draw on the actions and words of many people, making connections and painting a picture of this life so that my readers can begin to have a deeper understanding of it. However, I want to be perfectly clear that the diversity of thought and action within DR is so wide and nuanced that I hardly begin to cover it. There are a multitude of variations and contradictions in how people are living their sustainability driven lives and no experience from one person can inform what we know about everyone. I only hope to share some of what people are experiencing and
reveal the processes underpinning their experience that seems to not be unique to only a single person, but involve a broad system of experience that is connected. Not generalizing the experiences of others is important both to the people living at DR as well as to me as an anthropologist who respects the people I work with and have enjoyed countless instances of people approaching sustainability in dramatically different ways. Part of the sustainability I have observed has been these contrasts and clashes, which add new opinions to the conversation and layer onto one another. To understand this community better is not to generalize any experience but to see how they are interconnected in a web of meaning⁴⁰, tightly wound and including many approaches.

We also see “the difference” Monty describes influences people towards a generalist way of being, a renaissance person if you will. The generalist is a person who does many things rather than specializing. Learning how to take care of oneself with labor rather than with capital and resources is prevalent at DR and even if one is not seeking it, there is always a favor to be done that offers the favor doer some knowledge about a new skill.

I begin by looking at the context in which Monty introduces this different way of being. Then I will look at how Lydia is understanding processes that I see as related and possibly informative to what Monty describes. Last, I speculate about what this makes possible and how relationships to time and labor are defined.

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Ecological sustainability is one of the three pillars of sustainability at DR and is specifically outlined in the community's ecological covenants. When I asked them about ecological sustainability

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people most often told me about the ways they were conserving resources. This comes in the form of people using fewer resources (such as turning off the tap when the water coming from it is not being actively used), reusing resources (such as pouring dish water on the garden), and not using resources (such as urinating outdoors and using a composting toilet rather than one full of clean water). Use less, reuse, and don’t use seem to be the three main approaches to resources that people engage in and label as efforts towards ecological sustainability.

We can see people enabling this through favors and ISI. How is creating something rather than buying it related? When we create something from the resources around us, rather than paying someone else to move around many resources in the process of getting that same thing to you, you are not using resources you otherwise would have, choosing a less resource intensive and more manually intensive process.

I think that what I observe here is what Marc Augé calls “planetary awareness.” It is the growing consciousness that we are all destroying this tiny planet we share with one another and doing so through a system of enriching the rich by increasingly impoverishing the poor. He says that “this planetary awareness is an ecological awareness, and an anxious one, that we all share a restricted space that we treat badly."\(^{41}\) It is also an exceptionally social problem by which we see the poor suffering the most due to climate change weather that we know is only going to worsen.\(^{42}\) When people at Dancing Rabbit are able to use less, reuse, or not use rather than purchasing something, especially something from far away, they are not paying the wealthy (likely the person owing the company they might purchase from and all those who are empowered in the fossil fuel industry by the transportation of goods) to get what they need at the expense of the poor who suffer


most from pollution. People are not just taking into account their own ecology’s well being but also those that they may effect.

When Monty talks about just doing things differently at DR he is describing this process of creating sustainability as well as creating as sustainability.

Monty: On Contextualized Relationships and Resource Management

Contextualized Relationships

Before coming to Dancing Rabbit Monty worked at a farm in Maine, where he lived alongside the other people working there. This situation had a major influence in shaping his understanding of the type of community that he desired in his life. For him, living where he was working gave him so much more context for his relationships with people than he had ever had before. The people he was spending his time with were present not only in the context of his work life, but his home life as well. They shared more context and united the parts of his life that were formerly lived with completely separate groups. Monty describes this process to help me better understand how living at Dancing Rabbit changed the way he spends time with the people in his life. Through this mode of explanation Monty makes it clear that there are spaces outside of Dancing Rabbit where he sees the same process of relationships becoming increasingly contextualized through consistency across parts of one's life. Monty thus sets up this contextualized community structure as manifesting non-uniquely at Dancing Rabbit, but seemingly uncommonly in comparison to the “sense of compartmentalization that I see when I visit friends or family.” Because Monty
grew up with compartmentalized communities as opposed to contextualized ones, he uses the prior as a jumping off point of comparison to help explain his new status quo.

Monty describes these compartmentalized relationship he sees contrasting with the contextualized ones at Dancing Rabbit. He says, “they have their work friends, they have their gym friends, they have their, you know, whatever else they do friends. Those groups of friends are often overlapping but not all the same.” This separation of people to different aspects of one's life is understood by Monty as people interacting with different segments of who one another are rather than interacting with the entire unified person, with the context of all parts of that person's life on the table during the given interaction. He says that because he lives in the space where he works and plays and everything else there are more connections between the parts of his life. He concludes this explanation with the remark that, “the individual pieces of my life are much less farflung.” The contextualizing of the parts of his life that he is talking about seems to be a process of unifying parts of his life and sharing all of them with one community rather than each part with a different community.

I see the process Monty is describing exemplified in the attention that is given to people as a whole while people are in a space for a specific reason. The entire person is taken into account. It is encouraged to announce at a meeting that one is coming into the space with specific emotions or physical troubles. Check-ins are a process used in various spaces in which each person is given time to talk to the group about how they are doing mentally, physically, and spiritually. These moments are meant for people to put anything on the table that they are bringing to a space and can get deeply personal. This brings to mind the cat policy meeting taking a moment to address Ada’s emotions, and identity though it deviated from the direct purpose of the meeting. Emotions are
important context for the discussion. Spaces seem to be generally open to the idea that people have entire lives that should be taken into account in any given situation.

Previously I have discussed how the close familial relationship is expanded out to include many people and the home space is expanded to the entire village as people navigate the paths of their home to get from kitchen to bathroom to bed. When the number of people sharing one’s home life greatly increases the context people have for one's life increases as well. The same people one plays ultimate frisbee with are the some people that one may do a job with, eat meals with and sit next to at a meeting. These people are around when one needs help with something or to include one in their own project. Marie says that if she can not do a favor because of her physical constraints she will shout louder to the back of the room to find someone who can help. Everyone in the community has clean team\(^43\) responsibilities, humy shifts,\(^44\) and is likely in a committee or meeting with people that they share various other aspects of their lives with. This means that the majority of people in the community are appropriate in the majority of contexts that one finds themselves in throughout their day. The unified person who shares their entire self with their community is reflected in the process of favors, design and ISI at DR.

Doing Things Differently at Dancing Rabbit: Resource Management

Monty connects this contextualized community, that includes everyone in all aspects of his life, with his life being “overwhelmingly full of things.” Especially in the summer season Monty feels like he gets up every morning and just keeps going, having so much to do. Monty brings his

\(^{43}\) Every Sunday the common house is cleaned by alternating groups who take turns in a four week cycle. 
\(^{44}\) Humy means human manure and a humy shift is when it is one’s responsibility to transfer the communal composting toilet waste into the compost pile designated for it.
explanation back to the friends and family he has outside Dancing Rabbit, in their compartmentalized lives that separate them from understanding Monty’s life. He says that the busyness he feels in his life is hard to explain sometimes and he will find himself at a loss for words. In attempting to explain it to me Monty begins to describe some of the things that fill his life at Dancing Rabbit in a way that contrasts with what people outside of the community generally have in their own lives. He says that they just do things differently at Dancing Rabbit. This fundamental difference in how things are done is exemplified through his statement that, “it doesn’t happen all that often but every two months it’s my turn to go empty all the humy buckets for our house and, so I have to go spend an hour doing something that is physically dealing with this thing that other people spend their whole lives pressing a button and walking away from, and never thinking another thing about.” Monty defines this process as a contrast in that it is more manual and less resource intensive, meaning that people at Dancing Rabbit are spending time doing things that do not even show up on the radar for most people “in the American culture.”

Monty describes his life in a way that uses an imagined wider culture as a jumping off point for comparison. Composting his and his family’s humy is a process that most people who visit Dancing Rabbit or who he talks to about the community do not experience. Though this example clearly contrasts with what the majority of Americans practice in their lives, he attaches the example to a broader difference that involves using more manual labor and fewer resources. Monty thus reveals to us the imagined community of American culture as made up of a majority of people who use resources rather than labor to get what they want. When terms such as ‘wider culture’ are used I think they refer to cultural aspects that can be reliably expected from people living outside DR. I think this is how a contrast is drawn between life in the community amongst the Rabbits and any
other experience of culture outside of DR. It is not to say that these outside cultures are homogeneous, but that they have a number of qualities in common.

One way we can see this manual labor being introduced to people upon moving to Dancing Rabbit is in the way people describe adjusting to the community. People get used to doing things for themselves (though not without help available), such as building or growing food, that they did not do before moving to community. This process is intertwined with favors, which people describe alongside these activities as part of what makes the manual process they begin to engage in possible. Favors function as a part of transitioning people towards this different way of doing things that they most often had not engaged in while participating in the American cultural practice of intensive resource use that Monty says is more common outside of Dancing Rabbit. These favors help to facilitate doing things differently. One does not necessarily have to decide to do some things differently in order to engage in these practices. This is because when someone is walking around the village there is often the opportunity to help with this manual work and, in doing so to learn about how it is done. Similarly, one can not know how something is done but embark on the project anyway because of the security of being surrounded by others who can be referred to when questions arise. When Monty says that things are done differently at Dancing Rabbit I see this difference as being created by processes of ISI and favors.

When I ask Monty if this makes him more conscious of waste he answers quickly: “definitely.” When I relate this to having to look at a five gallon bucket full of water every time a bit less than five gallons of water runs down the drain (as many kitchens are set up,) I speculate that this makes people more conscious of their water usage. He adds onto this saying, “the impetus to figure out how to use less is always there because I put the cistern in the ground. I put up the guttering, I
built the house. . . . When I turn on the water I think about all those things. It has to last to get us through dry times. Every bit of it has more significance and more meaning in my psyche, more space in my considerations.” Monty sees this connection he has with his water use as something which was the norm, true for most people a hundred years ago. He says that what he is describing should not be a big deal, nor remarkable, and hopes “to feel more a part of the wider culture as they come to realize the importance of these little things. The impacts we all have for better or for worse.” Monty is telling me here that there is heightened significance and meaning in his water use because of how he engages with it in his life. When he compares his water systems to how water was managed a hundred years ago he does not propose a regression, but rather follows this idea up with the proposal that people move towards this with a new found importance placed on their resource use. He wishes for the “wider culture” to gain the awareness that he has and by extension adopt some of his values. This is a reflection of DR as a demonstration project seeking to involve others in their efforts.

When Monty says that water takes up “more meaning in [his] psyche” he is talking about “more” than something. Perhaps more than the “wider culture” and presumably more than his younger pre-Dancing Rabbit self as well. He grew up with the family and friends he tries to explain this to. This is his culture, part of who he was before. He is describing not just how he is now, but what he has become through transitioning to life at DR. Having resource use at the forefront of one's consciousness/ psyche means it is something he considers when he is using resources. When he talks about this process he is outlining the shift that his own psyche went through. Previously it seems he was thinking more in the abstract. Resources are abstracted when one does not have direct contact with them in order to use them, such as when one simply turns a nob or presses a button to
use water. Is commodification made up of this abstraction of resource use? How does it affect the consumer? How do they not realize what they are participating in? When we buy something and are unaware of the practices that go into making that thing, we are separated and do not feel the same responsibility for instigating the given practices. We do things like use exploited people and processes that poison water indirectly. DR creates a more direct connection that un-abstracts their actions and demands that people acknowledge the resources they are using to a higher degree than they likely did before moving to DR.

Some features of a sustainable life at Dancing Rabbit include: a shift in labor norms and shifting concepts of order and disorder, redefining what is out of place and thus ‘dirty.’ The former I address using Karl Marx’s concept of alienation from labor; the latter with Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* which describes the way dirt is defined in various cultures. She determines that ‘dirt’ is matter out of place and that the taboos we create against this ‘dirt’ creates order within a community. She says that all societies have concepts of ‘disorder’ and that ‘dirt’ is how this manifests in those things that are determined ‘out of place.’ The taboo that we have against dirty things can create strong rejections of the dirt which drives the society towards order. This appears in clothing and toilet choices alike, allowing for people to act in ways that were likely considered ‘dirty’ practices in their former communities.

An increased presence of waste in one’s psyche seems to be connected to what I will go on to discuss about “matter out of place.” The “waste” of water and other resources seems to imply that the resources are out of place. Instead of being wasted the place for water is reuse. Dishwater can go in the garden rather than down the drain. This means that a resource used to its fullest

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47 Ibid.
capacity, or left unconsumed and substituted with labor promotes a communal idea of order. Thus, people who came from a culture considering composting toilets ‘dirty’ may view things differently once their psyche is increasingly taken up by awareness of water wasted—meaning out of place and better used elsewhere.

This is all related to ecological sustainability because Monty is discussing the impacts he is having on the ecology when he talks about using fewer resources. He says that, “We make it more manual intensive and less resource intensive.” To him this seems to mean a shift in his awareness of these impacts towards a general consciousness. How is this an answer to a social question that is wrapped up in ecology making a statement about how the two are intertwined? When everyone is thinking about things differently there is a new norm of action. We see here that a direct connection between the walkability at Dancing Rabbit, which connects all the different parts of people's lives, with the waste people are producing. Monty then discusses resource management using this former idea of having a contextualized life as a jumping off point.

On Labor

Because manual labor is taken on in place of resource consumption, labor becomes part of an ethic, done often not for monetary reward, nor any greater physical reward than could be gained through resource consumption. Instead we see people putting in their own labor rather than extracting resources from the earth, seemingly making a trade off for an abstract well being of the earth as a whole. When asked about why people are trying to be sustainable, what the goal is, I was never told that anyone in the community thought it was to fix climate change. Most seem to just not want to participate in the destruction. Although community efforts such as those devoted to
restoring prairie on their land can definitely be aimed at fixing things, much of what people are doing seems to be an opting out of participating in a system that extracts resources without giving them back to the earth. Labor seems to be a method by which people can empower themselves to get what they need for themselves and participate less in a system that they disagree with. Of course we must not forget about the people who do specialize and focus their work on labor that makes them money, however these people also seem to devote time to this ethic of sustainability.

The way people help one another with tasks and share knowledge through ISI seems to be a system of sharing the knowledge of how to labor for the sake of this ethic. The knowledge that is being shared is useful for reducing resource consumption and thus seems to fall into a category of knowledge that has a moral function (sustainability being the moral.)

On Time

Wolfgang Schivelbusch uses the concept of space being shrunken by the invention and popularization of the railroad which connected places that previously had demanded long arduous journeys through landscapes. Now these trips cut straight through the landscape, making places not all that far away, accessible by a short journey.\(^4^8\) The paths at Dancing Rabbit have the opposite effect: slowing people down, a short walk (distance wise) taking much longer because of all that is along the way to slow one down. These paths expand space because of the time they demand to navigate. The labor that people at Dancing Rabbit put in rather than consuming resources means

that the time they need to do tasks grows. Monty offers the example of his water systems take up space in his considerations.

I witnessed many people at Dancing Rabbit putting enormous amounts of energy into building their own homes, growing their own food, collecting their own water and making their own tools. People are putting this energy into these everyday necessities that the “wider culture” Monty talks about does not. Food, water, shelter, they have all been systematized in American society to be paid for, rather than accessed through direct labor to create them. So long as one has money, immediate access is granted to these things. Resource consumption has the ability to shrink time spent on these matters and in doing so shrink the space they are taking up in our psyche. When we do not have to put thought into accessing food, water and shelter, even if we are concerned about accessing the money to get these things, our minds are taken up with the concern for the money rather than the things we need to survive. However, when these things are considered in a holistic way, when people are in touch with how they are produced and have the agency to act upon this production, devoting their labor to getting what they need, there is a lot more to think about. One's psyche holds within it the processes to get food, water, and shelter and these things are not so abstracted by their commodification. I think the space that water takes up in Monty’s mind is consistent with a lack of alienation from his labor. When we turn the nob and water appears in seemingly endless quantities from who knows where, we are alienated from the process the water goes through. The value of the water to us is the amount we pay financially for it, making it worth very little for many of us. Because water is labored for by Monty and he is considering the broader consequences of where is goes, the value of the water he uses is far more expansive.49

Lydia: On the Cleanliness of Practicing Ecological Sustainability

“The way that I live when I am living in a sustainable way feels more nourishing to my soul than when I am just shopping and being a consumer and not having deep connecting relationships with people.” Lydia seems to be saying that deep connections with people are sacrificed when we embrace being consumers. This connects with Monty discussing doing things manually rather than using a resource intensive process. This manual work is made possible by favors which allows for a less consumerist process involving people increasingly creating what they need rather than buying it and in doing so creating connections between people.

For Lydia, living sustainably isn’t just about the ecological footprint and the amount that she consumes and recycles. Rather than focusing on her own individual part in ecological sustainability, she portrays sustainability as a group action. Support from her neighbors is key to her sustainable practices. Lydia being able to do dangerous projects on her own because she feels safe which neighbors nearby is one example of how her sustainability efforts are supported by her neighbors, in this case indirectly. Lydia is able to act sustainably because of the environment that she is in. No one there has to be actively helping her be sustainable, just the presence of one another and a knowledge of shared ethics is enough to change the way Lydia is able to live her life. She says, “living in a village it is way easier for me to be sustainable and have a small ecological footprint because it’s supported by my neighbors. It’s acceptable to wear cloths with spots and holes, it’s acceptable to take less showers, acceptable to have piles of resources until I’m ready to use them with construction.” Lydia says that when she lived in LA she had a very different life than at DR. Making close personal
connections was difficult, especially when trying to do so while finding time in her busy schedule. By Lydia pointing out what is acceptable at Dancing Rabbit there seems to be an implication that she experienced these things being unacceptable. I can see how one running a business in LA may find it unacceptable to wear clothing with spots and holes, or shower less than every day. Resources piled everywhere may be unsightly in many circles. I propose that the contrast Lydia is identifying is rooted in a difference in community concepts of disorder.

Lydia tells me about ways she feels free to act while at DR that she previously felt she could not. She says that at DR it is acceptable to wear clothes with “spots and holes” in them. She is stating this acceptability in contrast to her life outside of DR. I suggest that while living in LA Lydia was in a community where some of her current actions may have been considered “dirty.” This would explain the unacceptability of certain clothing. The concept of disorder that she was operating under included these clothing attributes to be disorder. The spots and holes were out of place and thus ‘dirt.’ On the contrary, at DR spots and holes in clothing are not out of place. In our discussion Lydia connects this to the ecological sustainability she and her community attempts to promote.

Lydia says that it is easier to be sustainable and have a small ecological footprint because of the support she received from her neighbors. In the next line she discusses the things that are acceptable at DR. Thus Lydia aligns community support with community acceptance. This seems to be consistent with Douglas’ theory that there is an ordering to society that is maintained through the concept of ‘dirt.’ Lydia transitioned from being in a place where some actions she desired to take part in were ‘dirty,’ to a place where they were not ‘dirty.’ Being within the community’s concept of order lifted the pressure that goes with being considered dirty and thus deviant from the community. Being sustainable and having a small ecological footprint include clothes with spots and holes as well
as fewer showers and resources piled and waiting to be used. These are parts of Lydia’s life at DR that were previously hindered by their status as ‘dirt’ in her former community. Part of what defines ecological sustainability at DR is its concept of order which includes “spots and holes” on clothes, less showering, and piles of resources. Though one does not need to engage in these practices they are not dirty so people who would like to engage in them are free to do so.

The reference to “wider culture” or “mainstream culture” displays how the people at DR are defining themselves in relation, and often opposition to it. There is a system of differences that people use to define themselves through opposition. In *Non-Places: An introduction to Supermodernity*, Marc Augé writes that the way people define themselves within oppositional identities creates the whole that an individual is deindividualized by. ⁵⁰ For example, Lydia defines herself as a person who does not waste water washing her clothes after each wearing everyday or textile by getting rid of clothes with holes. She does so in rejection of her prior experiences in which her culture pressured her to meet a certain aesthetic standard in order to be considered “clean”. Thus her current cultural landscape and her former one are contrasted. When she defines her own experience of order and disorder at Dancing Rabbit she is telling us something much broader about her social world. Each individual expressing their experience of shifting personal freedoms reveals to us how Dancing Rabbit is defining itself.

These powerful processes that make people adhere to a cultural understanding of dirt, when turned in the direction of finding less showering and cloths with spots and holes to not be dirty, allow for people to save resources that they previously spent while adhering to a different standard of cleanliness. When one feels the demand of showering every day and washing clothes after wearing

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them once, throwing them out when they get holes, considerable resources must be spent to keep up with the demand for this “ordering.”

Previously I touched briefly upon the idea of how things such as Marie buying a new cushion could be seen as “dirty” within DR. “Dirty” possibly by the amounts of resources that are used up by that cushion. I wonder how this relates to people licking their plates, which at Dancing Rabbit is considered a good thing, while it would be considered rude in many places in the US. One new resident told me about feeling like he cannot engage in this part of Dancing Rabbit culture because as a child he was so thoroughly taught not to do so. When my mom visited she made a joke when I licked my plate at dinner presumably because this is clearly bad table manners, though she is never one to enforce such things. I tell her that it is perfectly normal here. I think this moment marks a difference between Dancing Rabbit and “wider culture.” An unlicked plate is wasted food. I remember Diane licking out a jar of fermented eggplant spread and her saying that it took her so much work to create that jar of food, she does not want to waste any of it. Having a “clean” plate is a virtuous quality. If one is about to waste food someone may ask if they would like to give it away instead. I had fat scraps taken off my plate and eaten. Different people at DR are more meticulous about cleaning their plates, but overall it seems agreed upon that a clean plate is superior. Looking around at the end of a potluck people really do clean off their plates completely and I feel a social pressure not to end the meal with food on my plate.

Let me be clear: when I discuss what is considered dirty at DR there is no one metric to judge this by. Everyone has their own concept of ‘dirty’ and none are isolated from the “wider culture’s” concept of dirty. There are indeed people living at DR who are horrified at the association of being “dirty hippies” and are scandalized at people thinking that they all do not take showers in
the summer and just jump in the pond instead. On the other hand there are people at DR who consider the pond a perfectly good place to clean off and acknowledge that they do not care to adhere to other peoples’ standards while they are in their own home. This is reflected perfectly by many people commonly referring to “town clothes” and “on farm clothes.”

Going to town would be anywhere outside of DR. There are many Mennonite and Amish people in the surrounding area who have expectations for how people dress and many at Dancing Rabbit use their grocery store in Rutledge. Similarly, when Ada went to visit her family she did not bring the clothes she wore everyday at home, but the ones with fewer tears or spots. Though it varies from person to person, there is definitely a different standard for what is worn in and outside of Dancing Rabbit which incorporates a different cultural definition of dirt. Thus we see the actions of the people living at DR defining a stark contrast between what they wear where.

What is made thinkable? Possible?

The support of one's neighbors to wear clothes with holes and spots and shower less makes it possible for people to choose sustainability without having to sacrifice a social acceptance that determines one to be “clean”. Without the threat of being considered a dirty person and thus an outsider, people are able to embrace these practices that their previous communities considered taboo. This same process also limits people, making Marie feel uncomfortable about buying things that are brand new when she could have found them second hand or had them made in the community. Though she will still buy new things, she is made to think twice about it, limiting the

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51 They call DR “on farm” even though the majority of the community is not a farm and not considered as such in the way that we might think of what a farm is.

52 Dylan grew up in a Mennonite family, so the communities do intermingle as well.
amount she will do it. Perhaps Lydia feels a social bond created over lack of consumerism because there is a common ethic around it. A common ethic can just as easily appear surrounding consumption, which Lydia experienced as an outsider who was held back by not wanting to participate in it. Just as Lydia did not want to wear her clothes full of spots and holes when she lived in another community, so Marie does not care to make known her purchasing of new cushions while living at DR.

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Most people at DR spent the majority of their lives in what they may refer to as mainstream or wider culture. They compare DR to this because they have transitioned and generally are still transitioning to life at DR. Most of what they experienced previously has been dissimilar to DR in some clear ways that seem to define the community as separate in relation to the wider American culture, which though diverse fairly consistently seems to be engaged in a system that DR tries to break away from. With frequent contact with people from outside the community, the way things are done at DR are constantly being contrasted with the various parts of American culture that are sharply different. Because DR is a demonstration project and so many tours, visitor session and workshops are held there, the people living there contend with these differences. When they talk about a wider culture I understand it to refer to where they come from or have lived in the US as well as the experiences they have had with various visitors. It can mean a wider range of experiences that these people have had with an American culture that generally differs from DR in particular ways. This contrast most boldly can be seen in different waste disposal systems such as humy buckets, or the dispersal of parts of peoples homes to all sorts of places around the community.
These are aspects of DR that, while not completely unique, are fair to assume the majority of Americans have not interacted with before. Perhaps when a ‘wider culture’ is referred to it is more a comparison to the culture people come from, which is the way they feel they are expected to act outside of DR and the things people from outside of DR react to as alien when they visit the community. When Monty says something had “more meaning in his psyche” I think he is talking about an increase in something’s meaning in his psyche and also making a comparison with what has meaning in the wider culture’s psyche, and I think both of these interpretations of his words are not at all mutually exclusive.

One thing that we can get out of all this is that there is an intricacy to the culture at Dancing Rabbit that goes way beyond buying solar panels. Sustainability has defined a whole new system of life for these people that shapes the way they are thinking and acting upon the world. Understanding what DR is demonstrating is increasingly relevant in our changing world. It is undeniable that climate change is having and will continue to have enormous impacts on cultures all over the world. The people of DR are choosing how they want to change their lives in response. Soon enough making broad changes will be forced upon us all. By taking a look at what DR is demonstrating for us I hope we can all better understand this as a response in the face of the seemingly insurmountable crisis of climate change.
Conclusion

One August evening a group of eco villagers and visitors gather to celebrate the choice a member of their community made that speaks to the power of the social systems they have created to shape a sustainable life. The No Baby Shower begins with Luke walking blindfolded next to his partner, who holds his hand, guiding him forward. He has a poofy teal sleeping mask on and a canteen sticking out from the back pocket of his shorts. She moves ahead of him, leading him forward as we each place a hand on him, guiding him along and into the clearing with a fragrant fire burning at its center. I notice Monty as well as some other people from men’s group 53 touch him more firmly than the rest of us do, squeezing his shoulder with one hand and touching his back with the other. People approach behind him, some retaining contact and walking with him further than others do. A drum beats as he walks. Within the clearing, we all gather in a circle around Luke. He stands with an open posture facing us in his sleeping mask, still wearing what he had been earlier that day. Some people have dressed up a bit for the occasion, most wear their regular clothes. Luke is told he can remove his blindfold. The facilitator, the same person who now and then replenishes the fire throughout the event, introduces Monty as the first speaker.

According to research done by the IPCC, we have twelve years to change practices contributing to global climate change to have any hope of avoiding the worst of the devastation. 54 While many countries have made efforts to combat climate change, the actions taken are not nearly enough to make the difference necessary and the United States, a key actor in global energy usage, remains in denial of the threat. Dancing Rabbit seeks to depart from this inaction and community

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53 Men’s group is made up of men in the community who come together to speak about their emotional lives and do what they call “deep work” in order to better understand themselves and each other.

members make their best efforts not to participate in the destructive system that has been normalized. Understanding how they have been able to move toward sustainability is an important step to better understanding the relationship between climate change and our social practices.

The negative environmental impacts that Dancing Rabbit opts out of are quantifiable and make it easy to celebrate their success at fighting climate change. However as we look at these successes we must not forget their connections to the less quantifiable, but no less significant, social changes they have made. Dancing Rabbit produces “18% the amount of total municipal solid waste of the average American,” recycling 73% of it compared to the average 34% of waste produced which is recycled by the average American. The number of vehicles they use per capita is 92% less than the American average and individuals consume 90% fewer travel miles in these vehicles than the average person in the US. Natural gas is used at a rate of approximately 5% of that used by the average American, instead relying mainly on wind and solar for electricity and wood for cooking and heating homes. Even with alternative energy, the community uses 18% of the average kilowatts per person as the average American. Water usage is estimated at 23% of the average American usage, though with unmonitored rain catchment systems throughout the community it is difficult to know the exact numbers. Overall these numbers should impress upon us that the system I describe is producing results. Sharing, communicating, and doing favors is vital to achieving these numbers because key parts of the system, such as the Dancing Rabbit Vehicle Cooperative make sharing communication and favors vital to achieving these numbers. However, being able to use less and

55 Lockyer, Community, Commons, and Degrowth, 528-529.
56 Ibid, 529-530.
57 Ibid, 532.
58 Ibid, 533.
59 Ibid, 535.
produce more for themselves is a quality found throughout the favors and incidental social interactions that I write about.

If I am right in my assessment that communal life and favor doing play major roles in enabling people to live ecologically sustainable lives, then we should all take note. Sustainable intentional communities make up a global community that is pushing against the norms that created climate change. They offer a way for people who do not want to further climate change to opt out, taking control of their own contributions to the world in the face of not being able to have control over the global direction we are going.

Like I did when I first learned about Dancing Rabbit, many focus on all the wonderful practices that people incorporate into their lives that are more obviously ecologically sustainable. I was excited about people producing their own food and finding new ways to avoid fossil fuels. I most valued the physical sustainability. However, the experience of one ecovillager choosing to get a vasectomy and later having a No Baby Shower to celebrate this choice reveals the vital social systems that make these physical impacts possible. The following description of Luke’s No Baby Shower is a display of people being offered agency to contribute less to climate change because of the social structure of Dancing Rabbit.

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Monty begins the event by telling us about how it came to be. He explains that this is something that Luke has been working on in Men’s Group. Luke has wanted to do something like this for awhile but was not sure how to go about it. Now he wants to take this work out to his community and share it with everyone. Monty talks about the carbon footprint of the many different
things we do. He includes the impacts of meat eating, driving a car, and flying on a plane. The last one he mentions is the impact of having a child and the approximately 58 parts per million of carbon emissions that they contribute, far more than any of the other things mentioned as being significant in producing negative environmental impacts. There is a reaction around the circle, and audible ‘aw.’ Monty says that these things are hard for him to say, especially being a parent himself. He explains how the choice Luke is making is connected with the other Dancing Rabbit covenants, which are a list of ecological principles the members agree to adhere to in order to be more ecologically sustainable.\(^6^0\) He speaks about many who can not make this choice because of biological circumstances, and of many in the United States who suffer because Planned Parenthood isn’t available to everyone. People often do not have access to the care they need. In developing countries around the world many people do not have the choice, sometimes because of living in war torn places, or due to access or culture. As Monty speaks across the circle from me, I see him through a sheen of waves of hot air above the fire. Little sparks are sent upwards turning into small white ash that drifts gently on those who are in the direction of the wind. This continues throughout the ceremony. With the fragrance it makes me think that there must be particular herbs placed in the fire to create this effect.

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The people of Dancing Rabbit are choosing to make a change in response to the destruction of our earth before we are all forced to change. David Wallace-Wells, author of recent New York Times bestseller, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, also addresses what the world will look like as climate

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\(^{60}\) See footnote 38.
change worsens, in an article published in New York magazine. In his article, also titled “The Uninhabitable Earth”, Wallace-Wells outlines what this destruction will look like, which is important to understand because it is what DR as a community is deciding to do their best not to perpetuate. He bases his work on “dozens of interviews and exchanges with climatologists and researchers in related fields,” reflecting “a portrait of our best understanding of where the planet is heading absent aggressive action.”

Though our choices along the way will change how things go, the following catastrophes will, more likely than not, occur in some combination.

With permafrost melting, the Arctic is set to release “twice as much carbon as is currently wrecking the atmosphere of the planet all of it scheduled to be released at a date that keeps getting moved up, partially in the form of a gas that multiplies ins warming power 68 times over.” Climate change scientist see little hope of us meeting the Paris climate accords dismal goal of only two degrees of warming, a number previously seen as the threshold for catastrophe. Climate change will raise temperatures, making much of the world uninhabitable, and along with drought this will prevent the vast majority of the world's current crop land from being productive. Both historic and prehistoric diseases will be released from melting ice, spreading plagues. Disease will mutate and spread rapidly. Carbon dioxide levels rising will likely lead to a 21% decline in human cognitive ability by 2100. Already in 2013 smog was responsible for a third of the deaths in China. Violence will increasingly break out due to economic and agricultural destruction, the resulting forced migration, and the individual irritability that comes with rising temperatures. Self perpetuating dead zones resulting from ocean acidification will rapidly wipe out sea life. A combination of these


Ibid.
possibilities will happen all because of the past three decades of abusing fossil fuels, releasing 85% of the carbon emissions emitted throughout human history. The climate refugees that will only increase in the years to come will suffer at the hands of consumers, living far beyond their means, enjoying the luxury of defecating in water, while the energy to make that happen is fracked out of the ground, leaching into the groundwater others depend on for survival.\textsuperscript{63}

Though community members at Dancing Rabbit have changed their practices in response to this bleak future that the normalized system in this country produces, social processes are vital to these changes. The story that Luke tells about making the choice to get a vasectomy displays how the social and environmental are closely linked. Going all the way back to the beginning, Luke starts his story by telling us about his childhood and how he had always assumed he would have children someday because everyone around him had them. This assumption was changed when he first lived in a cohousing community and became close with the children living there. The connections he built with those children totally changed his perspective, making him think that he did not need to have children to be fulfilled in the way one might by being a parent. Luke tells us a story of one child at Dancing Rabbit who used to be in the same kitchen co-op as himself and rememories about the times they spent together. The kitchen jumps out to me as the setting for this story, confirming my ideas about how the intimacy of the home encompassing a wider group allows for different relationships, creating opportunities and obligations alike. Having an intimate parent like relationship with a child generally leads to helping the child in some way. Just by paying attention to a child an adult will often be ensuring that child’s safety. Now that Luke and this child are no longer in the same kitchen co-op, Luke says he finds it sad that they no longer know one another as well as they

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
had before. This confirms the correlation between the intimacy of space and relationship. It also
marks the unique nature of a relationship between an adult and child who care for one another but
are not related.  

Though these relationships with children in the community gave Luke reason not to have his
own in order to have a close loving relationship with a child, all that Dancing Rabbit had taught him
since moving there convinced him. One example he gives of how Dancing Rabbit has taught him is
that he used to take flights home when he first started living in the community. He has learned
about how his actions affect the planet and has become increasingly aware of how he can change
them. This is a choice born of concern about climate change as well as social structure. Luke
emphasizes the importance of having openings for family time. He is emotional throughout his
discussion of making the choice not to have a child, and also the meaningfulness of these
relationships. He cries openly as he speaks and tears stream steadily down my face as I listen to his
story. Luke does not take the choice lightly and only has made it for the reasons and support that
DR has shown him.

In light of this discussion on climate change and the role of children in mitigating
participation in the problem let me draw your attention back to figure 10 from my photographic
preface. The image is overflowing with water, forcing everyone to wear diving gear, representing the
rising sea levels climate change will bring. Though there is water everywhere they are also enclosed

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64 Intergenerational socialization is more broadly seen at DR as a way to build community. We see this happening in
instances such as ultimate frisbee where all ages play together. Children at DR generally seem well practiced at having
conversations with adults they do not know well and often asserted themselves confidently into engaging me in
conversation as a friend in a way that took me aback at first. Many seemed to approach me not simply as an adult but as
another person who might share their interests and enjoy discussing them together. There is a belief at Dancing Rabbit
that we can all learn from one another and that intergenerational participation is important for community building.
65 “Every round trip ticket on flights from New York to London, keep in mind, costs the Arctic three more square
meters of ice.” (David Wallace-Wells, "When Will the Planet Be Too Hot for Humans? Much, Much Sooner Than You
in a building, the natural world completely obscured. The use of a World War I poster signals toward the enormity of the situation, along with the words “Climate War,” which tells us that the situation is violent. After having analysed Luke’s No Baby Shower, I look at this poster differently, considered how the children play a role in the situation. Them asking their father what he did in the climate war now draws my attention towards their role in climate change. We know one thing that the father did not do in the climate war: throw a No Baby Shower.

* * *

The facilitator asks if anyone else would like to say anything. Many people do and they volunteer at random by simply beginning to speak. The person who had made the sticks of incense that frame the end of the path into the clearing speaks. She says that she feels really embraced and lovely to have this choice that she too has made be validated by her community. She appreciates him leading the way in this. The event is helping to normalize the choice to not have children and this expression of thanks displays another person already feeling more accepted in her choice. A fourteen year old girl speaks of him bringing physical touch to her and it being really meaningful for her. I am struck by how taboo these words feel to be shared about a man with a young girl. The parent child intimacy extended outside of the familial unit at DR pushes against this taboo. Many others speak of him and offer words of gratitude and appreciation. The air darkens as we stand in the circle and some crouch or sit as the time standing goes on. The cicadas get louder and the air cools. It is not very humid out and the evening air feels crisp. Everyone is quiet for those who speak, except for a two year old who makes sounds and talks to his mom, sounding extra loud in the quiet.
At the end the facilitator explains that Luke will go around the circle, looking deeply into each person's eyes. He starts with his partner Marie. They kiss after their eye contact. The next person he goes to gives him a big hug after their eye contact. He breaks the quiet, after the first couple people hug him, to remind everyone that he has a broken rib and to be gentle with him. As he goes around the circle the pattern of giving him a hug continues. He has been open about his appreciation for physical contact and the group acts upon it. The only one who does not hug him is a small child who waves to him and he waves back. Some people whisper in his ear. Many of the moments he shares feel long and quiet and personal. When Luke gets to the two year old that had been talking a bit during the ceremony they hug and then do a fist bump. There are audible reactions around the circle at the cuteness of it. When he gets to the members of Men’s Group I notice a difference in the way they touch. Monty and Luke place their foreheads together and hold one another in a long moment that feels intimate. The facilitator kisses him for a long moment on each cheek. There is softness and genuineness with intensity and openness as well. Many start to look deeper into his eyes before touching. Luke and many of the men will touch each other’s chests, come into hugs or kiss one another’s cheeks. It feels as if these men are very comfortable with one another, more comfortable with this physicality than I see most men are with one another. I suspect this kind of touch is part of what they practice in their meetings. I am reminded of a story about Luke’s dad and how Luke expressed sadness at the difficult lack of physical touch that his dad offered him, especially given that this is his most vital love language.\footnote{Love languages are a way to define the different ways people show and receive love. From conversations while at Dancing Rabbit I understand the importance of love languages to be that people can better understand how to show and receive love by understanding which love language speaks best to them and their loved ones. The five love languages are: words of affirmation, gifts, acts of service, quality time, and physical touch.}
Part of what makes climate change such a seemingly insurmountable problem is that the practices that are creating it are difficult to stop because they are inseparable from many cultural practices. The nuclear family that, as a child, Luke imagined growing up to create is now something he sees as part of what is creating climate change. He understands that creating another person on this earth would be far greater of a contribution to climate change than flying on an airplane or driving a personal vehicle every day (both things that living at Dancing Rabbit had inspired him to cease doing). Because of the social systems at Dancing Rabbit that allow him to share in the experience of raising children and building the meaningful relationships that he desires out of having children, Luke was able to make the choice to get a vasectomy. The alteration of conceptions of family and who is allowed into the intimacy of familial relations were vital to this choice that was based in concern for climate change. This event displayed social intimacy and support that for Luke can replace creating a child. People are able to be there for one another in monumental ways, sharing their lives and together working out ways to be the people they want to be in the face of globally impending doom.
Works Cited


