

# Culture Clash

## Cultural Diversity in Intentional Communities

by Adriane Dellorco  
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### Introduction

Intentional communities are experiencing a new wave of development nowadays in response to society's increasing trend towards individual isolation, high costs of living, and environmental destruction. Communities magazine, a magazine devoted to intentional communities, defines an intentional community as the following:

a group 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. Intentional communities come in all shapes and sizes, and display an amazing diversity in their common values, which may be social, economic, spiritual, political, and/or ecological. Some are rural; some urban. Some live all in a single residence. Some in separate households. Some raise children; some don't. Some are secular, some are spiritually based, and others are both. For all their variety though, the communities featured in our magazine hold a common commitment to living cooperatively, to solving problems nonviolently, and to sharing their experience with others. ( qtd. in "In Community, Intentionally" 16)

For all the diversity in structure that exists among intentional communities, however, there is very little diversity (especially cultural diversity) within intentional communities individually. The well-educated white middle class is represented in a greater proportion in intentional communities than in mainstream society ("In Community, Intentionally" 18). This paper will attempt to explain the reasons for and the implications of the lack of cultural diversity within the intentional community movement. It also gives suggestions for ways intentional communities can change to be more accessible to people of color.

### The Value of Cultural Diversity

In the Communities Directory database, 103 communities (nearly one in four) mention "diversity" in their listing- and these are only those groups that emphasize it. According to Geoph Kozeny, a seasoned and well-traveled communitarian who has spent 30 years living and traveling to different communities, an upwards of 80 percent of today's groups would agree that diversity is an important and desirable goal ("Diversity' Intentions" 10). Since so many communities value diversity and so little of them have it, where does the problem lie? Does it lie within the communities who have not done enough to eliminate structural racism within their community? Do culturally diverse people desire the life on an intentional community in the first place? The explanations for the lack of cultural diversity in intentional communities can be

divided into those regarding structural barriers within intentional communities that limit access to people of color and those regarding the individual needs of white people and people of color.

## **Differences in Ideology**

In order to understand the structural barriers of intentional communities that prevent more people of color from joining them, it is helpful to begin by analyzing the broadest interface between the values of intentional communities and the mainstream and work one's way into the communities themselves.

What keeps communities together is a certain ideology that separates them in some way from mainstream culture. In order to believe in a certain ideology, one must be educated about it and have the motivation to act that ideology out. Not surprisingly, many sociological reports show that education is very related to formal group participation. In a 1956 study of 749 people in the Detroit area, for example, 3/4 of all people with some college experience have some formal group membership, while only 1/2 with grade school education do (Axelrod 40). In 1997, with the exception of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (who exceed the college attainment of whites by at least 10 points), an average of only 33.9% of all blacks and Hispanics of at least 25 years of age have some college education or more, while 49.1% of whites do ("Difference in Educational Attainment"). Consequently, those with more education, which tend to be whites, are more numerous in intentional communities.

Though the ideologies vary tremendously among intentional communities, a great number of them espouse ecological values that encourage people to minimize the destruction of the environment. Members of the white middle class thus far have been the leaders of the environmental movement. Only recently, with the advent of the environmental justice movement, have people of color become more involved with the environmental movement, especially where it affects their home communities. Thus, ecological values have tended to be more important to white people than people of color, and act as another filter that reduces the number of culturally diverse people in intentional communities.

The other part of this environmental ideology is the value of living lightly on the earth with presumably fewer resources through sharing and cooperation. Most of the people who favor this voluntary simplicity are white and at least middle class people who have already tasted life with material comforts and have found it harmful and unfulfilling. People of color, on the other hand, who have poverty rates of an average of 21.4 % as compared to 8.2% for whites in 1998 ("Poverty and Race"), have generally enjoyed far less material comfort than whites and are less inclined to give up their pursuit of the "American Dream". (Paiss 142)

## **Culture Clash**

The inherent culture within many intentional communities today repels many people, and a disproportionate number of these people are people of color. The stereotype of intentional communities that many people have (that is very often true for some communities) is that of a "hippie" commune where people frolic naked and filthy in the country with tofu in one hand and a peace sign in the other. For the most part, white people dominate the "hippie" culture because very few people of color share many radical "hippie" values. Less and less intentional communities that are being formed today resemble this stereotypical "hippie" commune. Many

intentional communities are being formed in urban areas that are not so markedly different than the mainstream. Thus the "hippie" commune stereotype hurts those communities who want to attract people of color and may not have such radical values. Since the stereotypical "hippie" commune is the image that most people have of intentional communities, it is worthwhile to examine why this type of community repels people of color so disproportionately.

First of all, people of color tend to be more conservative in their values than white liberals. White liberals that live on intentional communities tend to be much more permissive about public nudity and slovenliness, for example, than most people of color. On the other hand, people of color tend to be more public about their impressions and feelings than white people. White people are usually more private about personal and interpersonal conflict. The cultural differences in communication between white people and people of color will be explored in greater depth in the "Internal Dynamics" section.

Second of all, the tofu-heavy vegetarian diet emphasized by most "hippies" does not jive with most people of color. People of color tend to take greater pride in their heritage than white people do and prefer to retain their cultural way of eating that may not exclude meat or incorporate strange health foods. A health-conscious diet also relates to education and income in a way that gives white people more access to health foods. White people who tend to have greater educational attainment and income than people of color have more of an opportunity to be educated about nutrition and can afford to purchase healthier food.

Third of all, due to the oppression that most people of color have experienced historically, many people of color do not seek peace in the world through the same means that "hippie" communitarians do. Many hippie communitarians who have not struggled all their lives to obtain what they have tend to favor cooperation and the sharing of resources as the way towards peace and justice. Many people of color, on the other hand, have experienced and recognize the struggle for justice and fight for equal opportunities for all people. Therefore, the sharing of resources that prevails in intentional communities contradicts the common belief of many people of color in the struggle towards justice and the tendency for people of color to desire their own personal resources. As one of the members of the Koinonia community in Americus, Georgia explains about their communally owned property, "One of the first houses we sold went to a Black couple. The husband was very impressed with our mission, and wanted to join. The wife immediately said, 'We've worked and saved all our lives to be able to own our own home, and I'm not willing to give that up'" (qtd. in "'Diversity' Intentions" 10).

## **Internal Dynamics**

Now that the broad differences between white people and people of color have been examined, it is possible to see how these cultural differences manifest themselves in the internal dynamics of intentional communities. These internal dynamics that can cause friction between white people and people of color can be explained by differences in communication and tolerance.

Earlier on I briefly described the differences in communication styles between white people and people of color. White people, especially liberal ones who aspire to peace and harmony with the people around them, tend to be more covert about their own personal problems and conflicts with others. Many white communitarians do not like to create waves in their community and will opt to keep personal matters private. They often seek to transform any personal or interpersonal

discord through rationality, distance, and self-control. People of color, on the other hand, tend to be more open about their personal problems and have a more emotional orientation towards them than a rational one. As one Latina member of the Los Angeles Eco-Village points out, "Latinos are more emotional. The Building Committee [decision-making body of the community] is overly rational and doesn't allow for emotions" (personal interview).

This rationality can also take the form of self-righteousness. Margo Adair and Sharon Howell explain that "those of us who were socialized with privilege tend to take our own ideas more seriously: we are the first to speak; we interrupt others; we are comfortable talking for long periods of time; we confuse technical skills with leadership abilities" (50). As it is typically privileged white liberals who begin and lead intentional communities, those with a different experience or different point of view (such as people of color) often feel intimidated from participating too much. Women, men of color, working-class, and poor people "know that if they are to be taken seriously, they too must be cool, calm, and collected, and confine their concerns to what those with privilege think is important. Their full experience and contributions are never brought out" (Adair and Howell 50). At the Los Angeles Eco-Village, for example, about one-half of the members are people of color (an unusually high amount), but the leadership in the community is made up of mostly whites (personal interview). As one member of the community describes their community dinners: "We can't bring meat or we will be criticized. It's as if we first have to have the right view, and then we can participate" (qtd. in Cooney 35). Tolerance of values different from the dominating values of a community is difficult to achieve in intentional communities. Yet it is often the homogeneity of thought that gets intentional communities built, keeps them together, and allows them to improve the world in some small way.

The lack of tolerance in intentional communities can be seen not only in their values, but also in the day-to-day living preferences of the members themselves. White people who have generally led lives with a lot of privilege and comfort tend to be less tolerant of anything that impacts their personal space. People of color, on the other hand, who have often been raised in larger families with less income have a greater tolerance level for things that affect their surroundings, like noise, for example. Great conflicts can arise among white communitarians about living situations that many people of color would simply scoff at. (personal interview)

## **White Alienation**

Intentional communities are not appropriate for everybody, nor are they necessary for everybody. People who join them usually feel marginalized in some way and seek a community in which they can feel supported. Those that tend to feel very alienated from their society, culture, and families are educated white liberals- who subsequently are the most likely to join an intentional community. People of color, on the other hand, who have been institutionally marginalized by society have been forced to create a support network among each other. People of color, therefore, may not feel the same longing for community as many white people do.

Why might educated white liberals feel so alienated when it appears like they have it all? First, the values of many educated white liberals do not line up with those of mainstream society. Mainstream culture encourages people to make a lot of money, spend it in a way to impress others, and wreck the earth in the process. Many educated white liberals have come to the realization that there is more to life than just making money and have devoted some part of themselves to repairing society and the planet. Many educated white liberals who join intentional

communities have already participated in the "rat race" and have given it up for a more supportive and nurturing community.

Second, white people in general often have very little connection to their cultural heritage. Some may be such a mix of European nationalities that they do not have one culture to focus on, or they may simply be very far removed from their ancestry altogether. Adair and Howell explain why white people have found it difficult to connect to their cultural roots:

Principled people of European descent are faced with feelings of isolation and illegitimacy. The heritage from which they can take pride is gone, replaced only with privileges they know have been made possible through genocide and exploitation. The reduction of history to the victimization of the oppressed and the vilification of the privileged makes it impossible to draw upon the past as a source of pride, inspiration, and sustenance. (51)

This simplistic view of history has made it very taboo in our society to proclaim that one is proud of being white, especially for white liberals who aim for political correctness. Thus, many white people search for connection and depth in the traditions of other cultures because they feel an emptiness in their own.

Third, the "nuclear family in the suburbs" structure of many whites encourages a large degree of isolation from the rest of their family and the physical community around them. White people live in nuclear families far more than people of other races: 74 percent of whites live in two-parent households while only 36 percent of blacks do and 64 percent for Hispanics ("Family Structure"). The isolation of living in a nuclear family in suburbia motivates many educated white liberals to search for community elsewhere. This isolation also gives them the independence to leave their community if they want to because they have fewer obligations and attachments to their family and place.

## **Communities of Color**

People of color, for the most part, have a much greater sense of community with their culture, family, and place than white people. Since society has marginalized them socially and economically, people of color tend to have a greater connection with their culture. Elements of their culture have given many people of color support and familiarity in a society where white values dominate. Unlike white pride, ethnic pride has become much more accepted and desirable in communities of color since the Civil Rights movement in the pursuit for self-empowerment.

Many other cultures have much stronger family ties than white Americans have. The lower socio-economic status of many people of color reinforces the strength of these family ties by providing economic and social support. People of color also tend to have larger families (Hispanics have an average of 3.94 people per household, blacks have 3.41, and whites have 3.13 in 1997 ["U.S Household"]), which may limit the time they have to contribute to activities other than their family. Especially in the Hispanic community, the family is of primary importance and the source of the majority of support and obligation.

People of color in low-income neighborhoods often have less mobility and opportunity to change locations due to economic pressures. Thus, many are more firmly rooted in their physical community where people depend on each other to a much greater extent than they do in

suburbia. In low-income neighborhoods where material resources are limited, people in the community are what provide support and sustenance. By being so much more entrenched in their culture, family, and place, people of color usually have less of a need than white people have to be part of a different community. They also may not have the luxury to leave their community even if they wanted to. People of color often opt to improve their home community and empower their own culture, rather than pick up and leave to the country and practice yoga, like many white liberals.

## **Diversity vs. Homogeneity**

Intentional community supporters who believe that everyone can benefit from intentional communities may be disillusioned or critical of the intentional community movement if they are concerned about the movement's lack of cultural diversity. Intentional community proponents need to accept that intentional communities are neither appropriate nor necessary for all people, especially people of color. By having a more realistic expectation about who can really benefit from intentional communities, communitarians can focus their energies into what really works, instead of beating a dead horse.

With the understanding that people of color may not need or have the luxury to join an intentional community as much as white people, there are still ways that communities can make themselves more accessible to those people of color that may be inclined to join an intentional community.

In order for a culturally diverse community to work, the value of diversity must be of the highest priority in a community's ideology. Diversity of any sort demands tolerance of different views and experiences. An intentional community that truly seeks cultural diversity may have to relax their insistence of certain high ideals in the pursuit of tolerance. More theoretical ideals may have to take a backseat in an effort to focus on the maintenance of good relationships within the immediate community.

A community who really wants cultural diversity must decide which is more important: their ideology or a diversity of members. There is nothing wrong with a community whose homogeneity in thought allows it to live out its ideology and support its members. For example, a vegan intentional community is unlikely to attract many people of color due to cultural reasons. If such a community desires more cultural diversity, they need to decide if having the high standard of being vegan is more important to them than having a community that serves a more diverse group of people by allowing animal products. Opting to pursue cultural diversity will offer different advantages and disadvantages for every community, and it is up to the community to decide which is greater. A community that decides to compromise their values in order to attract more culturally diverse people also runs the risk that culturally diverse people still may not be attracted to their community for whatever other reasons.

## **Increasing Diversity**

Nevertheless, a community that seeks cultural diversity can still adopt better ways of making people of color aware of intentional communities. First of all, a forming community whose initial leadership is made up of some people of color will probably have much greater luck in attracting people of color and building a successful diverse community. Word of mouth and face-to-face

contact is much more effective than mass communication in recruiting participants, especially if that face and mouth looks like your own. Also, a community that begins with cultural diversity starts with the advantage of forming a critical mass of people of color that will make even more people of color comfortable with joining.

The means of recruitment in a community also acts as a filter for potential members. In the creation of the Dancing Rabbit community, for example, the Internet was almost exclusively used for outreach. This skewed their audience to those with more money, particularly those in high-tech fields or academia. Their original information pack outlined their project in academic, high-level language. They are now experimenting with narrative, frequently asked questions, and graphic images in order to be more accessible to a diverse crowd. A variety of media is the best way to attract a variety of people to a community. (Sirna 55)

A formal decision-making process is also key to guarantee the opportunity for equal participation of members. A formal decision-making process ensures that no one person or group who is louder or pushier can dominate a meeting or the direction of the community. This allows people of color or others with minority views to feel more encouraged to participate because their voice will be heard. An efficient decision-making process can also reduce the length of meetings and allow even more people to participate. A formal decision-making process is essential for communities with people of diverse experiences and views by making participation in the community more accessible for everyone.

It is important to remember, amidst the zeal of forming a culturally diverse community, not to accept people of color into a community who would be undesirable if they were white. The Los Angeles Eco-Village experienced problems with this when they were first forming their vacant community. They gave preference to people of color and accepted virtually anyone who was interested in the community and passed a credit check. Now many of these initial residents participate very little in the community, while newcomers to the community must prove themselves under much higher standards in order to join the community. One member of the Los Angeles Eco-Village believes the community has reverse racism that makes it more difficult for white people to join than people of color (personal interview). It is important for a community to have a standard set of criteria that all potential members must meet in order to avoid unfairness.

### **Making the Decision for Diversity**

Nowadays, racism in America is not so much individual (though there certainly is that still, too) as it is structurally racist in terms of where the dominant values, money, and power lie. As liberal as many intentional communities may try to be, the people within them are not immune to this kind of racism. It is usually not an "intentional" racism, like calling somebody a racially derogatory word, but the "unintentional" kind that generally gives more money and education to white people. For a community that wants to be culturally diverse and anti-racist, they must ask themselves three series of questions:

(1) What can our community offer people of color that they may not have already? Is our community willing to change itself in order to attract more people of color if it is already serving its present membership well?

(2) Is our community willing to let our value system be one that does not dominate the views of all community members? Which values are we willing to compromise on in order to be potentially more accessible to people of color? Can we look into ourselves for ways that we can be less judgmental of those who do not hold our views?

(3) What can we change structurally to be more accessible to people of color? How can we change our structure in order to ensure that everyone feels safe enough to have his or her voice heard? How can we expand our recruitment strategies to reach more diverse groups of people?

As was mentioned earlier, there is nothing wrong with a culturally homogenous community that finds that it is working fine the way it is and believes that a common ideology is keeping the community together and serving the population well. Such a community just needs to stop worrying about why their community is not culturally diverse and kicking themselves over it.

If a community is willing to change in order to allow for more diversity, the community needs to decide what its limits are. If a community is not willing to compromise many of its values in the pursuit of cultural diversity, the community should not be too surprised if they are only attracting like-minded people with similar backgrounds. If the members of a community have decided what values they are willing to compromise in order to be more tolerant of others, they must examine the structure of their community in order to find where they can be more accessible. This may take a lot of self-reflection for a community, but may help to define and refine themselves in the process.

## **Conclusion**

The pursuit for cultural diversity is not an easy one. It requires an intentional community as a whole, as well as its individual members, to more clearly define their goals and values. Intentional communities are not for everyone- and neither are culturally diverse ones. An intentional community that has decided to have fewer formal values in order to have a culturally diverse community may not sound as impressive or as worthy as an intentional community with many lofty ideals because the maintenance of healthy relationships among diverse groups is not as quantifiable. Yet it is often our mundane interactions with people that really serve to transform the world. Those communities who truly desire cultural diversity and are willing to change themselves in order to have it will be rewarded with endless learning opportunities about themselves and others. Culturally diverse intentional communities can provide a small model for the world of how people with differences can learn to live together to make a difference.

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