

EXPLORING DAVID JAMES DUNCAN'S KALEIDOSCOPIC *SUN HOUSE*

# COMMUNITIES

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## Privacy and Transparency

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# ALL EYES ON US?

## Pondering How to Balance Privacy and Transparency while Dating in Community

By Emily Grubman



Photos courtesy of Emily Grubman

This past summer, I had the pleasure of living in an intentional community for three months as a permaculture intern. One of the biggest takeaways from my time there was how honest and transparent people were at all times, no matter the situation or subject matter. I loved how open and willing everyone was to share their feelings and opinions—which, in my experience, is not typical of the outside world. It was extremely refreshing and encouraged me to be just as forthcoming.

Being the new (and single!) girl on the block, I was naturally curious about the relationship status and sexual orientation of everyone I met, whether they were a resident, intern, student, or visitor. Not wanting to come off as aggressively nosy, I opted for the strategy of quietly observing/eavesdropping while diligently completing my intern work—and that paid dividends. What the community lacked in eligible bachelors (sigh), it made up for in bountiful insights into the various intra-community romances. By merely keeping my eyes and ears open, I was able to piece together the apparent couples, triads, etc. At

first, it was a bit hard to distinguish a lover's caress from the massage-as-currency culture, but patterns revealed themselves eventually—and if they didn't, people were surprisingly willing to share. Much to the delight of my inner gossip girl, I was soon well-apprised of the ups and downs of certain relationships. In fact, many work parties were spent swapping stories and lessons from our past and present relationships. But while I was now neighbors with some of the characters I was hearing about, the guys I mentioned remained anonymous to my new friends.

For the most part, I'm pretty transparent about my love life. Eight years ago, tired of repeatedly relaying the same dating stories to every individual friend, I put them all on a BCC email list and began efficiently blasting out updates as necessary. Whenever a new friend asked me if I was seeing anyone, I'd add them to the list. That list has since grown to about 150 "subscribers," now lives on Substack, and is still my main method of keeping my nearest and dearest abreast of the soap opera/rom-com (depending on the day) that is my love life. However, this

obvious transparency is balanced by a degree of privacy. Unless we partake in some offline girl talk, most of my “readers” aren’t privy to the names or faces appearing in my stories because 1) every guy gets a pseudonym, and 2) I’ve historically met most of them on dating apps rather than through friends/work/real life. This semi-anonymity is what allows me to feel comfortable sharing so openly. (And for the really juicy or sensitive details, I keep that content behind a paywall and comp access to my closest pals.) Basically, I’m only as transparent as I am because I’m also able to control my and my lovers’ privacy. So, as I made friends in the community, I naturally invited them to join my email list. Nothing update-worthy happened during my time there, but I definitely thought about how, if it did, I’d essentially be writing an email to community members *about* a fellow community member. And that seems weird!

So, let’s say I join this (or another) community as a resident in the future. My dating newsletter is still my preferred method of communicating my romantic updates to friends, and I have no qualms about community-members-turned-friends becoming readers. But what happens if I start a courtship with someone in the community? Would I finally decide to keep my private life private and quit sending emails? (Ha!) Or would I continue to update my outside-world friends but remove my fellow community members from the list? Would that counteract the spirit of transparency I so appreciate about living in community? I’m just not sure how I’d fare in a situation where everyone around me knows my business. (For context, I’m a Scorpio who’s only ever lived in big, anonymous cities before this.) I love community living, but is the lack of personal-life privacy just part of it? Is it “the price you pay” to live in community and reap the many benefits that come with it? Or is it actually an added benefit to know and be known so thoroughly? After all, I was

amazed and impressed by how open other people were with their feelings, relationships, heartbreaks, and struggles. It made me want to be that unabashed, too.

At one point during my three-month stint, I was chatting (gossiping?) with a fellow Single Lady about the love triangles surrounding us, and we both expressed how uncomfortable it would feel to date within community. On one hand, everyone would be witness to, and perhaps even involved in, your relationship arc. Eek! On the other hand, if you broke up, you’d still have to see that person around all the time. Ack! These risks of dating within community sounded so high, even as we acknowledged that the rewards (like falling in love with someone who clearly shares your values and way of life) could presumably be worth it. We both agreed we’d prefer to “import” a partner—i.e., meet someone on the outside, date and build a relationship away from prying eyes, and then invite them to join the community once it feels serious. To us, that sounded like the “safe” or “easy” option. But reflecting on that now, who’s to say that the relationship would remain private once the other party becomes part of the community, too? Regardless of how or where the relationship began, wouldn’t we eventually become just another community couple, naturally sharing our life stories—romance and all—with the next crop of interns?

To be open and transparent with a romantic partner is one thing—and something I’ve been working on for the last few years—but to do that in front of an entire community feels like a challenge all its own. I’d be curious to hear if anyone reading has their own experiences (or maybe even pointers) to share. 🌸

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*Emily Grubman is a writer, naming consultant, and permaculturist. You can find links to more of her writing—including that dating newsletter—at [www.emilygrubman.com/writing](http://www.emilygrubman.com/writing).*

