NOWHERELANDS

Utopian Communities in B C Fiction

JUSTINE BROWN

I N HIS 1984 OVERVIEW of British Columbia fiction, "West of the
Great Divide: Man and Nature in the Literature of British
Columbia," Allan Pritchard (1984, 41) asserts that "although BC
has attracted a number of utopian experiments, utopian hopes and
dreams have not been prominent in the literature." He then discusses
the status of utopianism in Jack Hodgins's *Invention of the World*. At
first glance, Pritchard seems to contradict himself. And, indeed, a long
list of BC authors rears up to oppose him — including Malcolm
Lowry, Hodgins himself, Audrey Thomas, and now Douglas Coup-
land, to name a few prominent examples. All of these authors engage
the question of "utopian hopes and dreams." But Pritchard is correct in
at least one key respect: few BC novelists exhibit the unreflexive, naive
idealism commonly associated with utopianism. Pritchard equates uto-
pia with ideological naiveté: "BC writers have seldom held any illu-
sions that migration to a new land allows escape from the realities of
human nature and human history" (p. 41). Pritchard places BC litera-
ture in a sceptical, as opposed to a strictly idealistic, vein. I propose to
show how BC fictions actually challenge that very opposition.
Whether or not BC writers are "utopian" is debatable. But they
certainly *deal with utopianism*, and in ever-increasing numbers, par-
ticularly in the wake of the communal experiments of the 1960s.

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A UBC classroom, circa 1986: we are absorbing a lively lecture on
some aspect of American literature. It is the professor himself who
sticks in the memory, above all, with his playfully irreverent manner,
his greying beard, and his 1960s reminiscences. While the tone of his
voice on that particular morning lingers on, the matter of his lecture
has disappeared. But it must have concerned psychic geography, for

suddenly, gesturing at the foggy landscape with a dramatic sweep, he challenges us: "Do *you* people know where we *are*? Because I certainly don't." Our professor, an Englishman, had touched a sore spot. He seemed to confirm our half-acknowledged fear that our university — our city, our region — did not even register on the cultural map. Teachers like this one, however beloved, stood as a reminder of our inadequacies: in more ways than one. For just beside them hovered the reproachful ghost of vibrant student radicalism.

This scene accounts for the glum atmosphere in the bar after classes. All over the campus, disgruntled BC youths grumbled that this place was *no place at all*. And as they made their way through the rain to the bus and home again, day in and day out, they became convinced that life was indeed elsewhere. And yet, and yet . . . in all our eastward travels, we remembered British Columbia as the place most tinged with *possibility*. Where is this, but a region in which a fluid sense of place lends latitude to experience and to the future? It is arguable that BC's identity lies precisely in this "nowhereness." This phantasmagoric coastal terrain — its mists, its watery greys, its bluegreen heights and depths, and above all its imagined limitlessness — has long given rise to dreams of utopia. I want to delineate a strong current in BC culture, one which runs, paradoxically, against the impulse to represent it definitively. BC writers, in particular, have resisted this impulse; for example, as Laurie Ricou (1993/94, 118) argues, "one writer after another has refused to define British Columbia writing." In exploring this trend, I hope to bring out an aspect of utopia which has been underemphasized in political discourse (though not in the literature of fantasy). This is the aspect that works to dissolve the rigid idealism which one sees in the play, encoded in Sir Thomas More's title, between *eutopos* (a good place) and *outopos* (no place).

Begin to imagine a history of BC utopianism. Virtually every local resident knows of one or two utopian communities close by, and many have had direct experience of one. "This island is littered with failed utopias," remarks a character in Jack Hodgins's *Invention of the World*. The same can be said for the province as a whole. Not all of them need necessarily count as failures, however. Some are ongoing, and new communities emerge regularly.[1] (But in the face of the collapse of so many utopian card-houses, utopia has come to signify a "hopelessly naive prescription for disaster." Today's utopians prefer the term

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[1] See my book *All Possible Worlds: Utopian Experiments in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1995) for the historical side of the question.

"intentional community.") A graph of such experiments would show two peaks: one occurring roughly between the two world wars, and the other in the late 1960s. And British Columbia fiction, from Malcolm Lowry onwards, reflects and ties into this long history of utopianism. Traversing, as it does, the borders between history and fiction, utopianism is a truly *cultural* phenomenon in BC.

A few examples: in 1862, William Duncan established a Christian utopia at Metlakatla, leading many Tsimshian away from their Fort Simpson settlement to found a community which briefly rivalled Victoria. Sent by the Church Missionary Society, Duncan, a lay minister, arrived at the fort to find the Native way of life seriously undermined by the proximity of the Hudson's Bay Company, with its guns, liquor, and disease. His plan was to save Native peoples from alcoholic debauchery, but his community, which attempted to remake Native culture over in the image of Victorian propriety, did a different kind of damage. Scandinavian settlers — Norwegians, Danes, and Finns — built isolated experimental communities at Bella Coola, Cape Scott, and Malcolm Island around the turn of the century. As Gordon Fish (1982, 2) notes in his concise history of the Scandinavian experiments, the combination of socio-economic innovation and the settlers' particular "dreams and aims" set them apart from ordinary communities. Sointula ("place of harmony") was the last of these, built by Finns under the leadership of the controversial thinker Matti Kurikku. The community developed under his leadership from 1901 to 1905, at which point, accused of various improprieties, mainly financial, he departed, taking a great number of the settlers with him. In "Sointula: Salt Fish and Spuds Utopia," Scott Lawrance (1974, 13) describes the way in which Kurikku, nevertheless, was remembered by those who stayed as "a dreamer and an idealist." The descendants of these settlers still live on Malcolm Island today. The Doukhobors, or "spirit wrestlers," a group of pacifist Christian agrarians, emigrated from Russia, with Tolstoy's help, at the turn of the century. Their communities in the Kootenays flourished for a time, before they were demolished through a combination of governmental pressure and internal dissent — their radical arm, the Sons of Freedom, was famous for protesting through nude marches and house burnings.

Numerous such colonies have sprung up in BC over the years, from Ruskin near Mission and the Star Construction Company or "Star Brethren" at Sooke to the hippies of Yalakom and the CEEDS farm near Williams Lake. Few utopian schemes have provoked as much interest as the Colony of Truth founded by Brother Twelve, a.k.a.

Edward Arthur Wilson, in 1927. The lurid accounts about Brother XII, clamouring with contradictions, resonate deeply in Hodgins's *Invention of the World*. Brother XII is a major inspiration for Hodgins's iconoclastic protagonist Donal Keneally, as Joann McCaig (1984, 128) has shown. (Matti Kurikku, with his folk-hero status, is another obvious model for this character.) Hodgins mediates 1960s-generated utopianism through its 1920s antecedents, thus bridging the two peaks. His work will also bridge my two-part discussion. The first part will focus roughly on Brother XII's "enchantment" of the BC coast; the second will focus on the revival of utopian hopes and dreams in the wake of the 1960s, when BC hippie communes flourished in their hundreds. In this second part, I will offer a further articulation of the consciousness of those who grew up in the wake of that utopian spirit. As children we were brushed by its wings — sometimes roughly. It haunted our undergraduate classrooms and bars. What can be said about the spirit of utopia today?

I.

Brother XII is "widely rumoured" in the echo-chamber of BC fiction. Malcolm Lowry (1970, 314) names him directly in *October Ferry to Gabriola*, when he has Ethan's wife reminisce: "Daddy used to tell me there was a black magician who lived on [one of the Gulf Islands] with his disciples, practising evil rites." By the 1950s, then, he had become a figure of folklore. Hodgins (1977, 255) makes a similarly historical reference in *The Invention of the World*: "There was another colony around here . . . Rich people from everywhere . . . but they got into a lot of trouble . . . when they discovered they were literally slaves to a madman and there were rebellions and murders and things." A great deal has been gossiped and written about Brother XII. For sixty some-odd years, the story has evolved out of a confusion of whispers and bizarre newspaper reports. A spare version: in 1927, Edward Arthur Wilson, a charismatic disciple of the theosophist Madame Blavatsky, who probably knew Aleister Crowley at Genoa, led a group of wealthy and influential individuals to the Gulf Islands in order to build an ideal community. He claimed to hail from the planet Aquarius and to be an envoy from his eleven Aquarian brothers — hence his name. The colony would be the only safe place when the world ended on 1 January 1934. Then the chosen few would usher in the Age of Aquarius and live for a thousand years. Brother XII held sway through regular displays of illusionism and vibrant orations

The wizardry of Brother Twelve, woodcut, *Vancouver Sun*

about his synthetic religion. The community flourished for several years, attracting new members and copious donations, but began to disintegrate as Twelve's self-assured messianism ran out of control. Utopian order exploded over charges concerning Twelve's alleged rank adultery, cruelty, embezzling, gun-slinging, and murder. When his followers revolted and fled for help, Twelve and his current mistress, Madame Zee, destroyed the compound and escaped by boat with as much money as they could carry.

Much of what is intriguing in Twelve's story derives from the overlapping notions of Renaissance magician (magus) and contemporary magician (illusionist). While the Renaissance magician is perceived to possess real powers, today's magician is acknowledged to be a trickster. A contemporary audience expects only an *impression* of magic. Twelve may be understood as an illusionist who styled himself as a sorcerer, then lost his grip as he began to believe his own press. The play between Twelve's bountiful religious cynicism on the one hand, and his belief in his own supernatural powers on the other, is particularly striking in the biography written by the man who claimed, probably erroneously, to be his brother, Herbert Emmerson Wilson. Published in 1967, apparently in response to a renewed public interest in the occult, *Canada's False Prophet* entails what W. J. Keith (1987, 84) calls, in his important article, "Jack Hodgins and the Sources of Invention," "a refreshingly vigorous blurring of the boundary lines between fact and fiction." Herbert Wilson's suggestive reportage raises infinitely more questions than it settles, notably that of the author's

own role in the events narrated. Herbert, a Baptist minister, seems at first to play the angel to Edward's devilish maniac. His account of their small-town Ontario boyhood and Edward's subsequent travelling hucksterism recalls nothing so much as Robertson Davies's *Fifth Business*, dovetailing neatly with the tradition of early-century circus tales and, in particular, the genre of "popular fake biography that . . . Davies describes so amusingly" (Keith 1987, 83). Herbert's life as a travelling evangelical constitutes the other side of the coin. By his account, he and his brother form a clear antithesis. His information comes mainly from Edward, crowing about the "suckers." But as the reports grow more and more lurid, the line between confessor and voyeur begins to blur, and it is virtually obliterated when we hear that the outrageous Madame Zee was an ex-mistress of *Herbert's*: he had introduced Zee to Twelve.[2]

Herbert wryly recounts Twelve's first reported vision: "It seems that on one of his trips to his beloved Vancouver Island, he was struck by a blinding light. He looked around him, and saw all the trees on fire, although none of them burned" (Wilson 1967, 18). Here, as elsewhere, it is unclear where hucksterism ends and sincerity begins. Herbert holds the visionary at arm's length ("it seems"). But from Twelve's viewpoint, this is a genuinely experienced vision, albeit one he retailed to his followers in a wildly manipulative way. Twelve's story presents itself in highly literary terms. The youthful Twelve seems to spring from the pages of *Fifth Business*, while the adult Twelve revives Prospero. Herbert Wilson describes his brother's increasing reliance on magic-show spectacle to keep his restless followers in place. Another source, Ronald MacIsaac's (1989, 34) *The Brother XII: Devil of DeCourcy Island*, describes hidden microphone cords running through the compound (shades of *The Wizard of Oz*). All of this underscores the complex problematic of authority any utopian project — many argue, for instance, that such communities can succeed only with charismatic leadership. Such charismatics, however, typically fly out of control. Herbert's characterization of growing disillusionment within the colony seems ironic to us: "Gradually, it dawned on [them] that perhaps Guru had only spouted religious matter to enable himself to build a utopia" (Wilson 1967, 103). What is wrong with building a

[2] John Oliphant, the author of perhaps the most authoritative book on Brother XII, *Brother XII: The Incredible Story of Canada's False Prophet* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), reports that Herbert Wilson was indeed a fake. Living on a houseboat outside Ladysmith, he heard the stories about Brother XII from eyewitnesses, hired a ghostwriter, and cooked up the book. This is very much in keeping with the Brother XII genre.

utopia, after all? The snag is implicit. Twelve was trying to construct a *personal* utopia.

Twelve's colony did fulfil the basic prerequisites of utopianism: a unifying idealism, a degree of communalism, and *isolation*. Sir Thomas More's text, a fantasy travelogue, recounts a visit to "the Island of Utopia." Both *The Tempest* and *Utopia*, island texts each one, were in some sense occasioned by the age of exploration. They parody the kinds of travel texts which emerged in the Renaissance. Neither would have been quite possible without the "discovery" of America, which, for all its dubious results, certainly expanded the frontiers of European consciousness. *Utopia* may be understood equally as a secularization of the Heavenly Jerusalem, the renewal of Eden promised in Revelation.

The profound confluence of the New Eden and *Utopia* merits attention. On the surface, the notions of Eden and utopia appear dissimilar in that one is retrospective, while the other looks to an ideal future. We speak of "a return to Eden." We imagine retracing our footsteps to the garden. But this backward-gazing conception of Eden ignores the fact that Christianity has traditionally anticipated the apocalyptic Eden emblematized in Revelation 22:1. Today we equate apocalypse with absolute end: the bomb. Renaissance Christianity, however, equated apocalypse ("unveiling") with the inauguration of the Heavenly Kingdom, anticipating this with a shiver of fear and exaltation. Eden can therefore be seen, like utopia, as associated with the notion of the future. It is in part this secularization of the Heavenly Jerusalem, evident in More, that enabled the Renaissance to develop ideas of futurity and progress.

Both Eden and *Utopia* thematize the quest for the good life. In each case, the good life requires isolation. Brother XII, an apocalyptic thinker, predicted that "great wars were to ravage our planet, but that Vancouver would be protected from the worldwide fire and holocaust" (Wilson 1967, 18). A similar expression of Twelve's (Vancouver Island is "a land of . . . sky-blue waters, when the world is no more" [p., 76] closely resembles Malcolm Lowry's fantasy of a cool blue British Columbia in *Under the Volcano*. As Lowry's doomed drunkard stumbles his way through the dusty Mexican landscape, he is treated by his memory to snatches of northern imagery. British Columbia is always implicated in Lowry's dreams of escape and sanctuary. *October Ferry to Gabriola*, an Ur-text of Gulf Island literature, is an optimistic complement to *Under the Volcano*. R. W. MacDonald (1981, 49) notes that the novel "explores the new beginning that Lowry's hero fails to choose in *Under the Volcano*." The novel's protagonist, Ethan Llewelyn, realizes
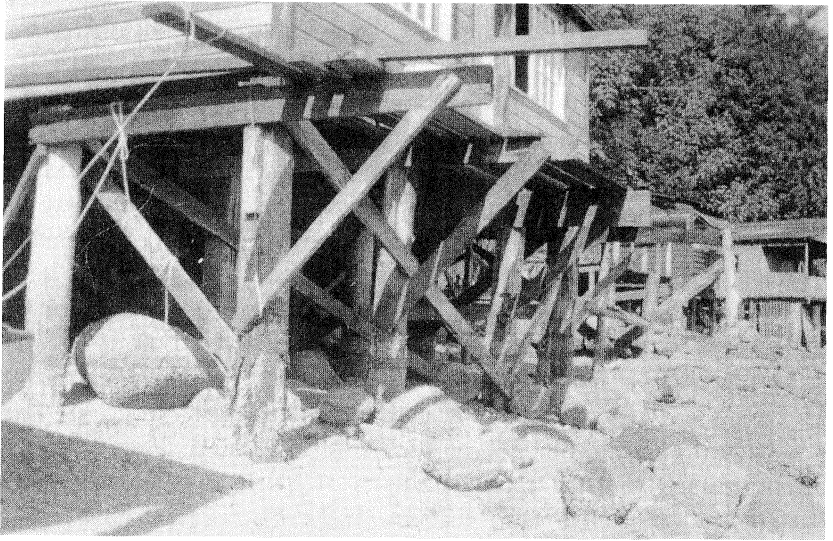
Malcolm Lowry's corner of Burrard Inlet

Geoffrey Firmin's tantalizing daydreams. With his Miranda-like wife (her father is a white magician), Ethan exits poltergeist-ridden Ontario for the fresh fields of BC. The narrative is more or less autobiographical. Like Malcolm and Margerie Lowry, Ethan and Jaqueline live for several happy years in a squatters' settlement on Burrard Inlet. Faced with expulsion as the city of Vancouver and its tightening bylaws encroach, the couple plans to move to Gabriola Island. The bulk of the text takes the form of memories recalled by Ethan as the two of them ride by bus towards their possible new home. Because the action unfolds between one home and the next, the mood is highly "purgatorial."

   October Ferry is edenic/apocalyptic rather than strictly utopian. The text is saturated with religious imagery, heavenly and hellish in equal measure. Like a medieval mystic, Lowry sees earthly life as a thorough comixture of divine and demonic influences. Humanity's position in all of this is radically unstable. Ethan and Jaqueline are cast as Adam and Eve. They live as one in a mostly paradisical environment, accompanied by harmless wild creatures:

   Behind the cabin, which had been sold to them lock, stock and barrel
   for $100, were forty acres of forest to wander in: sometimes at night
   curious raccoons came right into the house, and in spring, through
   their casement windows, they watched the deer swimming across the
   water. (Lowry 1970, 62)

In the garden-like village of Eridanus ("a place that said: You are mine!" [p. 53]), Ethan is haunted by life's hellish potential. A different view through the casement windows reveals the nearby Shell Oil refinery, which appears as an alien city, sparkling and menacing by turn. With its "cylindrical aluminum retorts and slim chimneys like organ pipes against the green grass," it was "a fairy city at dawn," while at night it seemed

> ten times fiercer and taller . . . a fiendish light coruscated from the whole refinery . . . While they watched, a coarse cerise light switched on, illuminating in large capitals erected against the green grass slope below — someone having omitted to supply the initial S — the word HELL. (pp. 158-59)

The written word assumes a shifting, spectral quality. We can speak of an actual haunting by language.

Ethan grows to hate and fear the Shell Oil plant. But he reserves most of his bitterness for the city of Vancouver, and it is in connection with Vancouver-as-dystopia that Lowry's utopianism begins to come clear. Ethan loathes BC officialdom (he is particularly scathing on the subject of its liquor laws). We get a portrait of Vancouver in its last passage from joyfully undisciplined frontier town to 1950s propriety. The new city is puritanical, fatuous, and stuffed with police. The lonely, undernourished octopus in a tiny tank at English Bay is an emblem of life in a place where society flourishes at the expense of *community*. Neighbours report one another to the police. Solid citizens root out eccentrics, writing letters of outrage to the editor. And in the dreary, dreary bars (Gentlemen to one side, Ladies and Escorts to the other) solitary gents loiter like sad octopi, drinking lousy beer.

The bleak monolith of Vancouver stands in opposition to the marginal community of shacks under threat of demolition on Burrard Inlet. I have briefly sketched out the intersection of Eden and utopia. The two begin to part ways around the concept of community. The fantasy of Eden is bound up with a nucleus of husband and wife. Whereas Eden involves the isolation of two people, utopia involves the isolation of a community. Although they resemble Adam and Eve, Ethan and Jaqueline find themselves enmeshed with the community of squatters enfolding them. Irregular, modest, and ex-centric, the "tiny village" of Eridanus exemplifies the kind of *fortuitous* order which so attracted Lowry to British Columbia. These opposing constructions of social order — prescribed versus fortuitous — form the

backdrop for the novel. Locked in the grip of overdetermined civic planning, Vancouver's citizenry is blind to the beauties of Eridanus. Whereas top-down authority reigns in Vancouver, Eridanus is self-regulating, possessed of an inner logic. One may mind one's own business there without becoming a hermit. This mostly happy inter-dependence of individual and group — which will come up again in connection with Jack Hodgins — forms the basis for the quasi-anarchic, open-ended utopianism that I perceive in British Columbia culture.

Such open-endedness is scarcely at odds with More's *Utopia*. That text, as I mentioned, is understood by many to be prescriptive. However, BC utopianism may be seen to recover the strain of utopia-nism that developed into the literature of fantasy and science fiction. Open-ended utopianism, manifested in the *eutopia/outopia* oscillation of More's neologism, is reduplicated at the end of the book as More's narrator closes his "reverie" on a note of doubt. He admires much of what Hythloday has told him of the Utopian commonwealth, but he cannot accept everything:

> In the meane time, as I can not agree and consent to all thinges that
> he saide, beyng else without doubt a man singularly well learned, and
> also in all worldlye matters exactly and profoundly experienced, so
> must I nedes confesse and graunt that many thinges in the Utopian
> weale publique, whiche in our cities I maye rather wishe for, the hope
> after. (More 1953, 239)

The current of Lowry's text, rather like More's, runs against fixity. Lowry is unwilling to define British Columbia as a fixed entity, and this has earned him the reproaches of critics like R. W. MacDonald (1981, 52), who insists that "Lowry's making of Canada is incomplete; the social and physical setting exists only to reflect the spiritual growth of his fictional personae.". MacDonald gets bogged down in the *reductio ad absurdum* enterprise of quantifying "the real" in a given text. In fact, Lowry champions the nebulousness of BC identity. Ethan laments their imminent eviction while at the same time intuit-ing "insecure security" as his only possible home. We learn that "once or twice they had thought of calling their cabin the Wicket Gate, after the gate in *Pilgrim's Progress* . . . But why call it anything?" (Lowry 1970, 67). Definition is a fleeting impression in these surroundings; it simply evaporates. BC identity is a passing projection: "Ethan Llewelyn looked out of the window at Vancouver Island. He saw

nothing at all . . . Suddenly the landscape began to take on a sort of reality but it wasn't its own reality, but the reality of a landscape seen from a train window, in the sunset, in a film" (p. 61). Ethan sums up the situation as follows: "part of what's so wonderful there is that it isn't properly anywhere at all, it's like living right out of the world altogether" (p. 325). Echoing Brother Twelve's designation of the BC coast as space apart from the world, Lowry suggests that negation is the only form of definition available: British Columbia is *nowhere*. Negation is, of course, paradoxical, swinging between presence and absence: *I am/not*. In the play between the two, an infinity of possibilities can be glimpsed.

In his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk (1987, 74) celebrates Odysseus's strategic response to the query of the blinded Cyclops ("It was Nobody who blinded you!"). Sloterdijk discusses the way in which identification may simultaneously be accepted and refused through the notion of Nobody. BC utopian fictions operate similarly, destabilizing the region of cultural identity through the notion of Nowhere. The stories and novels of Jack Hodgins offer a prominent example of this trend. With *The Invention of the World*, Hodgins amplifies the themes introduced by Brother XII (via Herbert Wilson) and Malcolm Lowry. British Columbia is fictionalized in terms of isolation and negation, imagined as a limitless never-neverland. Much of BC's indeterminacy has arisen from the fact that it was a frontier space, imagined as non-stop forests and unknown "Indian" villages. It had not entered the annals of popular representation as a "positive" entity. In the 1970s, while Canadian intellectuals longed for official recognition for Canadian culture, Jack Hodgins put BC "on the map" by sliding it off the edge of the earth.

Geography plays a complicated role in Hodgins. We sense ourselves at the borderland of representation. Linda Hutcheon (1988, 3) remarks, in *The Canadian Postmodern*, that "the periphery is also the frontier, the place of possibility. Hodgins's Vancouver Island is self-consciously at the edge of the continent.". Part of his project is to sharpen that edge. With *The Invention of the World*, he draws multiple parallels between geography and history. Becker, the novel's historian, tries to construct a coherent history of the Revelations Colony of Truth — which Hodgins, as noted, based largely upon accounts of Brother XII's colony. Becker's tape-recorded oral histories are offset and undermined at every turn by his evasive subjects (with their elisions, lies, and oblivion); by mythmaking, by derision. As he approaches the facts, they disperse and recede into the distance.

Hodgins compares history-writing to map-making, pointing to the way in which the history, or map, can be said to reside within the maker:

> Sometimes the god-man [Becker] almost believes that he owns this island, that he has perhaps invented it. He believes that he should be able to conjure it up for you out of the thick air above the kitchen table: twelve thousand square miles of rugged stone mountains and timber. . . (Hodgins 1977, *x*)

The narrator unrolls a panoramic view of Vancouver Island, pulled right out of "thick air." The effect is paradoxical. Even as he minutely describes the BC coast, the narrator scrambles our co-ordinates. The idea of *location* is undercut by doubt: is this island nothing but Becker's colossal fantasy? Hodgins's magic geography, complete with illusory landscapes, parodies the Canadian literary tradition of locating identity in the Land. Like Lowry, Hodgins revels in BC ambiguities.

Among BC novels, *The Invention of the World* is the one most concerned with utopia — as the title suggests. God creates the world; humanity invents it. Vancouver Island becomes More's faraway island, with one difference in particular: More's commonwealth is homogenous, while Hodgins's is a complicated mix of communities. Utopias past and present trace "the Island" over in slightly overlapping spheres: an unnamed millenial mountain commune, the Jimmy Jimmy Arts and Crafts Commune, a variety of Doukhobor and Mennonite settlements, a Finnish community (Sointula?), the Revelations Colony of Truth, and Maggie's own patchwork utopia erected on the same site. The novel takes on the question of the good life in an extraordinarily complex fashion, mirroring and counterbalancing its examples at every opportunity. This process is played out partly through characterization. Set against Donal Keneally's authoritarianism, for instance, is the healthy solitude and independence of Wade Powers. Fearful, unenlightened, Keneally's followers work blindly and endlessly in the name of an unknowable perfection; Wade avoids work altogether. In this pairing, Hodgins sets up an opposition between individual and community.

We learn that Wade has hated work since infancy, much to the dismay of his work-obsessed family. He is "bone lazy"; his mother observes that "he would still be in his crib if we hadn't burned it!" (Hodgins 1977, 138). Antiprogressive and ateleological, Wade is going

nowhere fast — and that is just how he wants it. He achieves the work-free good life by simulating a nineteenth-century fort and opening it to tourists for a fee. Wade and Keneally mirror each other in one key respect: both become conmen/conjurers in the pursuit of an ideal existence. Through the figure of Wade, Hodgins renegotiates a "failure" that is typically British Columbian. Wade is an unmitigated failure in the eyes of his family. But while they get crippled from overwork, ending their lives in wheelchairs and under tractor wheels, his health remains excellent. It is possible to live reasonably well on the BC coast while doing next to nothing. In *October Ferry to Gabriola* Ethan picks driftwood ("gay salvage") off the beach, while Wade and his adopted grandfather let fruit fall into their laps in "the land . . . where nature gave you a little help" (p. 141).

Wade abdicates power while Keneally assumes the role of God before the astonished eyes of his followers. These Irish people rather resemble Wade's family, striving relentlessly for the sake of the future. W. J. Keith (1987, 87) rightly remarks that Wade's "protest against work is not just a matter of laziness, but a counter to the appalling prospect of ceaseless work without adequate reward that is the lot of Keneally's enslaved colonists." Thus Keneally's teleological edifice is fragile, and, as in "The Emperor's New Clothes," scarcely defended. He paints his huddled masses a word-picture of a future so enchanting that they leave Ireland for *the ends of the earth*: an evocative phrase, suggesting "historical convergence" as well as "the end of the world." Utopias fail because both adherents and detractors harness utopia to *telos*. Utopians expect, and are expected, to step outside of process and bring history to fruition. Utopia is supposed to catch up with the future at some point and stretch that perfect moment into eternity. These projects crack under the weight of the *eutopian* (good place) tradition, which typically inclines towards literalism. Hodgins favours the *outopian* (no place) tradition, which recognizes fantasies as playful thought.

The Invention of the World suggests a utopianism that is neither rigidly idealistic nor cynical, but process-oriented. It is typified by the state of affairs at Maggie's House of Revelations at the close of the novel. Maggie's community echoes Lowry's fortuitous utopia at Eridanus. It develops with a minimum of planning, relying on self-organization and sheer luck. As a meeting-ground of eccentrics, it is both communal and individualistic. Through no very focused will of her own, Maggie offers a haven for a variety of boundary-dwellers, many of them refugees from other experimental communities. Each

one makes his or her own strange contribution. The silent Anna
Turner, who does housework, ran away from the millenial mountain
commune; the filthy-rich Lily Hayworth is Keneally's third and last
wife; and Madmother Thomas, a child runaway from the Revelations
Colony, finds shelter in its ruins for her mad old age. These liminal
characters emphasize the theme of becoming, of process, that dis-
tinguishes Maggie's utopia. Dissolving the individual/communal
opposition, Maggie's place reconciles Wade and Keneally. Maggie and
Wade marry and live on at the House of Revelations, where Keneally
lives on in myth and memory, as persistent as his "ancestor" Brother
XII. Hodgins enables the utopian past to linger alongside possibilities
for a utopian present.

II.

> "You're so *cynical*," Peter said. "Why are you so cynical?"
>   AUDREY THOMAS, *Intertidal Life*

No-one has articulated the contemporary fate of utopia more clearly
than Peter Sloterdijk. In *Critique of Cynical Reason*, he offers a striking
diagnosis of the West and, in particular, of its intellectuals: "Discon-
tent in our culture appears as a universal, diffuse cynicism"(Sloterdijk
1987, 88). He describes the nostalgic/melancholic attitude as "the
stance of people who realize that the times of naiveté [the 1960s] are
gone" (p. 5). As utopianism has come to be associated with a sort of
flat earnestness, so cynicism has been linked to irony. We seem to be
presented with a choice: to be *either* utopians *or* cynics, either earnest
or ironical. Sloterdijk's solution to this dilemma is to attempt to
dissolve this rigid opposition by discovering two contrary traditions
within cynicism itself (*cynicism* versus *kynicism*). Against the dark,
melancholy backdrop of contemporary cynicism, with its too-know-
ing, defeated individuals, Sloterdijk sets up the *kynical* figures of
Diogenes and his descendants. *Kynical* laughter is seen to be in the
service of individual agency and social critique; irony in the service of
empowerment. It is not enough to simply say "we should stop being
cynical and be hopeful instead." Better we create a positive strategy
from within cynicism itself.

The critical project of reinvesting "utopia" with an all-but-forgotten
meaning (the no-place) is roughly complimentary to Sloterdijk's.
Utopian ideas are difficult to negotiate in these times, which come in
the wake of the counterculture and all its disappointments. This is

particularly true for those born in the 1960s and early 70s; a generation born terminally *late* gazes back resentfully to an era when everything seemed possible (at least for the middle classes). Parents reminisce: in their twenties, the world broke wide open. They never considered the somewhat mundane idea of being unable to find desirable work. It seemed that things could go on changing for the better. But today consciousness is bound by the idealist/cynical opposition. Utopianism is pre-empted by lateness, by the belief that disappointment must inexorably follow upon hope. As Sloterdijk remarks, "After the decade of utopias and 'alternatives,' it is as if a naive élan had suddenly been lost" (p. *xxxvi*). One way out of this binary trap is to open a space for indeterminacy within utopia itself, through the essentially ironic *eutopia/outopia* doubling within More's title. En route to that delicate position, let us retrace a path through the last three decades.

Contemporary culture is in some measure constituted as the traces of 1960s utopianism, with all the magic and disillusion that utopianism engendered. This is particularly true of its children, the children of hippies and bohemians. Those of us who grew up knowing commune and alternative school have a troubled relationship to the 60s. The media has been abuzz in recent years with talk of Generation X, named for the novel by Vancouver writer Douglas Coupland. (This group might easily be renamed "the Postutopian Generation.") While I recognize in this the anxious attempt of capital to target an emergent market, yet the arrow does not entirely miss its mark.

Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture might have been written to illustrate sections of *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Coupland's novel, with its relentless anticipation of nuclear apocalypse, is saturated with cynicism. Its three desert-dwelling protagonists, all in their late twenties, imagine "tomorrow" as either nothingness or a nuclear bomb attack; Sloterdijk (1987, 98) speaks of a tomorrow which "assumes the dual character of inconsequence and probable catastrophe.". Coupland's Andrew fears the Bomb but also envisions it as offering a kind of liberation: the Bomb detonates and you are trapped in a supermarket. As the ceiling melts over you, your best friend leans over and kisses you on the lips. "There. I always wanted to do that" (Coupland 1991, 64). Sloterdijk, for his part, describes a mood in which the Bomb is celebrated as a transcendent event. In Coupland, the reduced expectations of a generation are presented in the image of the desert and the divestment of personal property. This, in turn, corresponds to Sloterdijk's notion of the kynical "minimum." (Kynical minimalism laughs off the mainstream and its enslaving accoutre-

ments.) Sloterdijk's reach is much wider than Coupland's, of course. But the measure of coincidence or overlap between them suggests a point of departure in the exploration of British Columbia utopianism.

A complex dialectic of magic and disillusion plays through BC utopian fictions. Jack Hodgins's *Invention of the World*, widely cited as an example of magic realism, explores the overlapping territory between magus and illusionist. Hodgins's Donal Keneally keeps a grip on his followers through a kind of sorcery, painting "glorious word-pictures" to fill their minds when they aren't working. If that failed, we learn, "he used magic" (Hodgins 1977, 118). Keneally's theatrical "god-plays" usurp the power of God. The episode involving Keneally's first wife's adultery recalls *The Tempest*, with Keneally the patriarch playing Prospero to her Miranda. Her true love, Christopher, is washed up on the shores of an enchanted island. Catching them unawares, Keneally murders them both. Hodgins bases this scene upon a fairly credible story concerning Brother XII. In fact, some of the most outlandish details in the novel are based on historical evidence.

The "real" and the "fantastical" interpenetrate in Hodgins's novel to the point that, within the rules of the text, they are virtually indistinguishable. Hodgins has responded to the magic realist label by blurring the distinction between fiction and everyday experience on Vancouver Island. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (1985, 190) quotes an interview with the novelist to support his own view that Hodgins's "representation of a fictional world from the angle of somewhat freakish individuals is [true] to the region." Hodgins's deadpan claim that he simply represents life on Vancouver Island points past the boundaries of magic-realist fiction to the playful notion of a magic-realist *culture* on the west coast.

Hodgins's narratives offer many competing versions of events, some more prosaic than others. But at no time does he fully rational-ize the magical elements of his narratives. Consider, for example, Wade's encounter with the stranger known as Horseman. Wade believes Horseman to be his *doppelgänger*. In a pattern which echoes Nabokov's tragicomic novel *Despair*, Wade becomes obsessed with Horseman, who appears here and there with ghostlike mobility. Wade locks him inside the fort, only to find that he has miraculously escaped. No explanation is offered for any of these events. Horseman seems to me to personify the mirror-world of utopian possibility. Asked where he is from, Horseman replies with characteristic indeter-minacy: "From? Oh, nowhere" (Hodgins 1977, 157). (*Nowhere* became a synonym for "utopia" in the nineteenth century — cf. Samuel

Butler's *Erewhon* as well as William Morris's *News from Nowhere*.)
The name "Horseman" suggests Swift's Houyhnhnms, the gentle
horse-men who represent the noble and cerebral potential of human-
ity. Horseman is Wade's utopian self in that he offers new realms of
possibility and challenges Wade's comfortable existence.

Magic is linked to the theme of human potential: how far can we
go? How much change can be achieved? Hodgins takes up these
questions of human potential again in "At the Foot of the Hill, Birdie's
School," a story from *Spit Delaney's Island*. The story concerns a
seventeen-year-old boy's departure from a near-deserted utopian
community high up in the hills. Webster Treherne longs to raise hell
in town. But his upbringing gets in the way:

> The trouble was, Webster Treherne was good. The old man had seen
> to that, had told him from the first that the image of a perfect God
> can't help but be good, was destined by definition to be humane,
> healthy and immortal. You couldn't just cancel out that kind of
> education overnight. (Hodgins 1976, 141-142)

Education is a central theme in this strangely hallucinatory short
story. Webster's mind consists of an intersection of three key texts: the
Bible, *Utopia*, and a pulp Western. The exploits of four gunslinging
outlaws crowd out new perceptions. Abandoned by utopians as a
child, Webster's "space for possibility" has filled up with the nearest
available narratives. Hodgins negotiates the boundary between mir-
ror-worlds of enchantment and disillusion.

"At the Foot of the Hill, Birdie's School" offers a resonant exam-
ple of the utopian ghost-town. *Eutopian* communities — earnest
attempts to realize an ideal existence in one lasting moment — are
remembered communities. BC literature, like the BC landscape, is
scored with the traces of such experiments, which become objects of
irony inasmuch as they are graveyards of the future, marking the
conversion of anticipation into regret:

> His mother and (perhaps) his father had retreated before that down
> the mountain in some other direction with all the twenty others and
> left the commune shacks to sag and bleach and catch no other voices
> but [Webster's and the Old Man's]. They were a small world but
> complete: a cluster of leaning sheds in a cedar valley, an old man and a
> boy, a cow, a dog, a garden, and a few chickens. (p. 138)

Hodgins's tone verges on the elegiac. The abandoned commune merges with the figure of the abandoned boy. It is worth noting that post-1960s melancholia is rather like the melancholia felt by the English Romantics, notably Wordsworth, in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Initially a supporter of the Revolution, Wordsworth retreated into saddened conservatism as it degenerated into a bloodbath. This change corresponds to changes in the image of the child. For the late eighteenth century, the child was an image of futurity. With *The Prelude*, s/he became an object of nostalgia, evoking one's own squandered hopes. Childhood plays a similarly crucial role in the 1960s. On the one hand, it became imperative to extend childhood into adulthood; on the other hand, children themselves were increasingly left to their own devices. Generally speaking, 1960s experimentalists displayed little interest in the historical past, preferring, like Rousseau, a timeless edenic past.

Children, and, as Linda Hutcheon (1988, 12) observes in *The Canadian Postmodern*, communes, were "manifestations of the 'natural.'" Hutcheon writes of Audrey Thomas's *Intertidal Life*, set on "a small, edenic BC island," that "in the background, as part of the social critique of the novel, is an entire period — the sixties and seventies, with its hippies and drugs, its gentleness, meditation, and peace that mask what Alice sees as a need for authority (gurus) and considerable aggression and pain" (p. 111). Indeed, the novel constitutes a very particular cultural archive, one that will suggest to coastal BC hippie kids that their childhoods were not particularly unique. It was an era of "us and them." In his aptly named 1964 study, *Utopiates: The Use and Users of LSD-25*, Richard Blum (1964, xii) describes society in the process of splitting, lining up "on the one side people who are out to indulge impulses ordinarily inhibited in our society and on the other side people who would strive to maintain the moral code and meet the requirements of law and order." But Thomas's heroine, Alice, takes a neither/nor position. Caught between generations, between the margin and the mainstream, Alice neither accepts nor fully rejects utopianism as practised by her hippie neighbours. In terms of a feminist utopia, Thomas's "vision" is neither prescriptive, as, for example, in the East Coast American tradition, is Marge Piercey's in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, nor bitterly cynical as is Susan Musgrave's in her dirge-like novel *The Charcoal Burners*. Thomas's notion of utopia as a process of negotiation has more in common with Jane Rule's *The Young in One Another's Arms*, a novel which combines individually

eccentric characters to form a nonconformist community in such a way as to critique and enlarge the definition of "family."

Intertidal Life opens with an image of the utopian ghosttown — a collection of beach shacks, appropriated and abandoned by wandering hippies. The local residents are dismayed: "Now those hippies have arrived. Always left everything unlocked . . . This year all our mattresses had been slept on and peed on and God knows what else. And our ax was gone" (Thomas 1984, 8). Alice smiles noncommittally, reserving judgment. She maintains ironic distance.

The ironization-from-within of ideological naïveté displayed by writers like Hodgins and Thomas retrieves the ironic (no-place) strain in the utopian tradition. To discover irony within utopia is to begin to dissolve the utopian/cynical opposition. The image of the utopian ghosttown, or graveyard of the future, represents here not the defeat of utopia as such but, rather, the futility of an end-oriented literalization: the place of perfection. In Thomas as in Hodgins, the place of perfection is *nowhere*. Either utopia lies in ruins (nowhere) or it is invisible (nowhere). We never see Raven's up-island commune in *Intertidal Life*.

In *Intertidal Life* Audrey Thomas elaborates a whole aesthetic of the in-between. Alice embodies the boundary of two realities. She manages to survive, even flourish, by treading a line between the realms of fixity and disintegration. (Hence her name, borrowed from Lewis Carroll.) A current of counterculture instability surges through the narrative, carrying off Alice's husband, Peter. Peter (Pan) leaves his wife and children in search of his lost childhood, starts a commune in their Vancouver house, and takes a string of lovers. This might make a reactionary of Alice, but it does not. Instead, she sits on the threshold between worlds. On one side lies the "straight" world of family and propriety, represented by the local residents; on the other side lies the hippie world.

Hippiedom brings liberation and infestation in equal measure. Raven personifies its considerable attraction and repulsiveness. Young, soft-spoken, closely resembling a Native, Raven, whose presence is intermittent, somewhat consoles the lonely Alice. Though quiet and gentle, he nonetheless brings the ghost of Charles Manson in tow. As Alice remarks,

> They make me uneasy, especially Raven . . . Raven says weird things
> . . . He says, of the Manson murders, that it was the victims' karma to
> die in that way. It isn't so much he condones it as that he "under-
> stands" it. I feel there is enormous anger in him. (Thomas 1984, 44)

Raven's affinity for Manson does not prevent Alice from taking him to bed. But she always keeps him at arm's length emotionally, maintaining her place on the threshold.

Thomas's boundary aesthetic is reflected, of course, in the title of the novel, which alludes to the liminal existence of life forms at the boundary of sea and soil — the coast, the edge. Thomas joins Jack Hodgins in using the coast as a metaphor for the happy nebulousness of BC culture. In many respects, Alice weathers life more successfully than does Peter. She draws benefits from the hippie world yet maintains provisional stability for her children. Peter, meanwhile, flies ever outward, moving farther and farther away. The key for Alice is to remain on the edge; the mistake is to go *over* it.

Alice is terrified when she takes drugs and loses control of her perceptions. She envisions "an earth fault, suddenly opening up . . . All kinds of things falling into it. Alarm bells and flashing lights. Warning shouts . . . 'I can't get back,' she said . . . 'I'm over the edge, Peter! I'm over the edge!'" (pp. 48-49). The errant Peter and his newfound drugs present Alice with a nightmarish infinity of change and loss: the possibility that nothing will remain of her former life. All the old structures are in danger of being swept away.

Intertidal Life deals with the problem of change in a complex and intriguing fashion. The eutopian (good place) discourse, championing change for some greater good, forms the historical background to the novel. Richard Blum (1964, 135) delineates this confident view of change with reference to the use of hallucinogens: "If the drug does . . . produce desirable changes in others, it is a Utopian tool . . . LSD can be used as a device for social engineering, a 'Utopiate' to construct more pleasing surroundings and to mold people to one's desire." The mirror world of hallucinogens can be read as a kind of metonymy for 1960s experimentalism. Alice's flirtation with this world expresses itself in a variety of ways, including drug-taking, as we have seen. It is also reflected in her views on names and naming. Are names subject to change? The hippies think so, and they change their names at will. Early in the novel, Alice imagines names as mere co-ordinates (Thomas 1984, 14). Later on, she toys with the idea of changing her name to Justine, after Durrell's adventuress, then laughs off the whole idea (p. 172). Paradoxically, changing one's name lends too much gravity to naming itself.

Character names are linked to the outopian (no place) discourse in the novel, which intervenes to render ironic the naive idealism pursued by Peter and the hippies. Thomas invokes the literature of
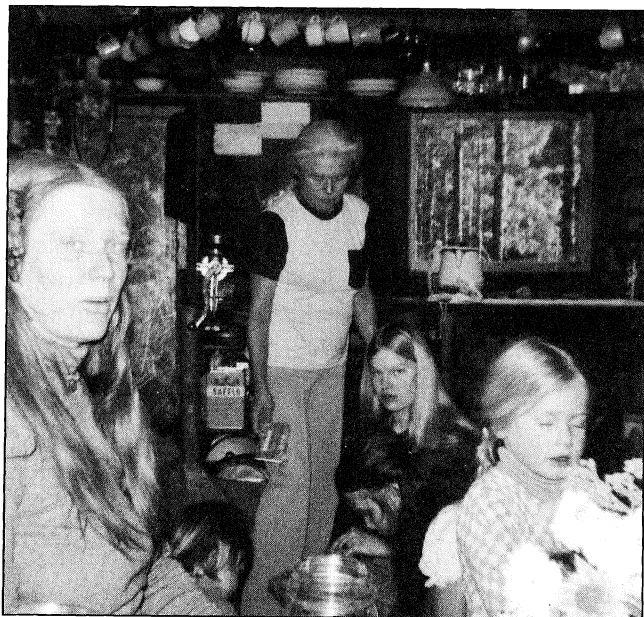
Three generations at the Crow Road Farm,
Roberts Creek, c. 1973

fantasy (*Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan*), and the no-place mirror
world in particular (Wonderland, Never-Neverland), which are partly
derived from More. The effect is to underscore the "literariness" of
utopia. While in hot pursuit of natural ideality, Peter and the "Lost
Boys" are revealed as explicitly constructed by the artifice of literary
texts. *Intertidal Life* thus works to erode the nature/artifice division.
The quest for childhood under the banner of the natural becomes
absurd, inasmuch as the idea of childhood is indissociable from
literary fantasy.

   All three authors — Hodgins, Thomas, and Coupland — emphas-
ize the links between childhood and utopia. I have suggested that the
two ideas share a curiously double quality, combining anticipation and
regret. The child signifies futurity and nostalgia. Similarly, utopia,
which has been yoked to *telos*, has, since the 1960s, been reduced to
the level of a ghosttown. The utopian ghosttown manifested itself
most recently in Coupland's *Shampoo Planet*. The author's treatment
of the 1960s is typically ambivalent. His young-adult protagonist,
Tyler, spent his early years on a Gulf Island commune: "Let me tell
you about a commune of hippies, of life as a child in the trees on an
island in British Columbia" (Coupland 1992, 20). Tyler remembers

"the future," a time when adults pioneered a new way of life, "their speech garbled with talk of Answers" (p. 20). The commune has long since broken up in a blizzard of recriminations and Vancouver lawyers. The family has moved to Washington State. Tyler's hippie mom — divorced, scarred, pleasantly impractical — is treated by her kids as something of a museum piece. With his dark, sleek, technophile appearance, Tyler presents a visual antithesis to his rumpled mother, Jasmine. He denounces glib nostalgia, claiming "the sixties are like a theme park" (p. 24). But much of the novel is taken up with Tyler's own nostalgic quest to revisit the place of his childhood: he is haunted by memories of the commune.

British Columbia appears in its familiar guise as the dreamt-of place. Tyler makes two visits to Canada. The first of these involves a classic flight from the city into an imagined pastoral landscape. Civilized life chokes Tyler and his girlfriend, and so, he claims, "that's why AnnaLouise and I are visiting BC the weekend after next" (p. 78). They drive north in a style which recalls the end of *Bladerunner* (Coupland's novels, set just slightly in the future, have a science-fiction feel about them), and descend at the site of a national park "like astronauts returning to Earth" (p. 82). Here Coupland produces a horrifically literal image of nowhere-ness: the entire forest has been clear-cut.

Tyler's second trip north is more successful. Travelling to the Gulf Islands by ferry, he visits the site of the defunct commune. Like Hodgins, Coupland merges childhood with the utopian ghosttown. Tyler finds the signs of human habitation only barely legible. The forest has repossessed the area: "the path I remember . . . [is] almost unfindable" (p. 188). The cabins have rotted away to nothingness. Greenery encroaches from all sides. Tyler is exhilarated, and crowns himself king of the trees, finding liberation in the fact that childhood utopia is nowhere to be found, that it is unlocatable. Childhood and utopia, which here amount to the same thing, exist primarily in the mind: no-place.

These British Columbia fictions revive the playful, indeterminate aspect inherent in utopianism. And it is precisely this eutopia/outopia space of play that makes the continuation of the utopian tradition possible today. The notion of nowhere, which is so prominent in BC fictions ranging from Lowry to Coupland, diverts the teleological drive behind "utopia" and, thereby, preserves an ongoing sense of possibility. Literalized as the good place, utopia is highly vulnerable. But utopia is not really a place at all. Utopia is no-place, a work of

fiction. To keep both meanings alive simultaneously is to retrieve utopia from the dustbin of ideas. The "intentional communities" of today might do well to remember this. Short-lived utopias need not result in disillusion — it is only the teleological expectation of an ongoing perfection that produces disappointment. Even a short realization of utopian dreams may be counted as success before utopia, perhaps inevitably, recedes back into nowhereness.

In this discussion I have tried to lay the groundwork for a theorization of British Columbia culture that does justice to its precious elusiveness. We have seen how BC's long history of utopianism is reflected in its literature. More to the point, perhaps, is the way in which literature — *Utopia* — is reflected in its history. Many critical thinkers have become accustomed, via Foucauldian (and other) theories of discourse, to merge texts and events. The result is described as culture, and the tradition of BC utopianism illustrates this merger in a particularly striking way. Utopia is, in my opinion, the most resonant metaphor for British Columbia. Being nowhere has long been a source of embarrassment in "the West beyond the West." Now we can begin to see it as our strong suit.

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