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# Canadian Countercultures and the Environment

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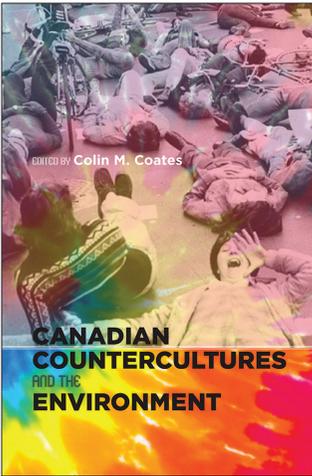
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## CANADIAN COUNTERCULTURES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

by Edited by Colin M. Coates

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# Canadian Countercultures and their Environments, 1960s–1980s

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*Colin M. Coates*

“Happiness,” declared twenty-three-year-old hippie John Douglas to a *Toronto Star* reporter in 1967, “is hauling water from the stream.”<sup>1</sup> For the former Torontonians, then living on a farm in the Madawaska Highlands in northern Ontario, this communion with nature was a novelty. It is not inconceivable that Douglas’s parents and, even more likely, his grandparents spent part of their days fetching water and carrying it into their houses. Whatever they thought about their living circumstances, they were likely more inured to and less ecstatic about the task. But for the young Douglas, the physical chore involved a spiritual component, illustrating the links that many people who chose a counterculture lifestyle consciously made to the environment. A direct experience of nature represented a moral choice for many during this period of cultural upheaval associated with the counterculture from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Covering a range of case studies from the Yukon to Atlantic Canada, this book explores the ways in which Canadians who identified with rural and urban countercultures during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s engaged with environmental issues. This awareness covered

a broad range of areas, from celebrations of the human body to concerns about environmental degradation. Throughout Canada, groups of young people established alternative communities and consciously embraced new practices. Their choices led them to connect with environmental issues in innovative and committed ways.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section explores examples of environmental activism and focuses on innovative local organizing and advocacy. The second section examines countercultural life choices and the environmental perspectives these entailed. Technological options, relations with the state, and encounters with hostile and curious local populations all held particular implications for people espousing alternative lifestyles.

This chapter presents the broad contours of countercultural environmentalism across Canada and introduces the key themes of this collection of essays. In exploring the broad connections between the Canadian counterculture and environmental issues, it makes the point that this truly was a pan-Canadian phenomenon, including Francophones and Anglophones from coast to coast to coast. At the same time, this was an international movement, and the influx of American men and women, many of whom were critical of the Vietnam War, reinforced the oppositional stances of Canadian youth. Many were inspired by utopian sentiments, and they moved to rural communes to live out their ideals, in places where they engaged of necessity with the natural environment in a very direct way. Scholars who deal with utopian societies tend to focus on the ultimate failures. In contrast, this book insists on the legacies of the Canadian counterculture. Much of the countercultural critique of contemporary attitudes to the environment has become mainstream today.

Of course, not all back-to-the-landers chose to live in communes. The majority homesteaded. Nonetheless, as this collection illustrates, commune-dwellers and non-commune-dwellers shared many utopian and environmental perspectives and experiences. This chapter draws on my research on Canadian utopian settlements, and therefore it accentuates the experiences of counterculture communes.

## COUNTERCULTURES

Drawing from earlier generations of youthful disaffection, people across North America and throughout the Western world in the 1960s and 1970s engaged in activities associated with the “counterculture.” Three key contexts in which the counterculture developed were the Vietnam War, the baby boom demographic bulge, and the connected rise of 1960s youth culture. The Vietnam conflict heightened both anxiety about Cold War military confrontations and fear among many young American men of being drafted to fight in a distant and unpopular war. American men and women took refuge in Canada, whether from the military draft or simply from the politics of their country. The decision could reflect more of a personal decision to escape the troubles of the period: writer Mark Vonnegut left the East Coast of the United States in order to acquire land in British Columbia, positing, “I think the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, and war and assorted other goodies had so badly blown everybody’s mind that sending the children naked into the woods to build a new society seemed worth a try.”<sup>2</sup> Americans and Canadians moved to relatively remote areas, searching for affordable land. National identity was not irrelevant, but young Americans and Canadians shared a dislike of American military policies and both participated fully in a broad Western international youth culture.<sup>3</sup>

Often associated with “hippies,” the term “counterculture” flattens many differences. As Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle point out, the concept encompassed a wide variety of attitudes, practices, beliefs, and styles.<sup>4</sup> One of the key Canadian activists of the period, Greenpeace founder Bob Hunter, sums up the variety of people in Vancouver, British Columbia, who supported countercultural environmentalism:

We had the biggest concentration of tree-huggers, radicalized students, garbage-dump stoppers, shit-disturbing unionists, freeway fighters, pot smokers and growers, aging Trotskyites, condo killers, farmland savers, fish

preservationists, animal rights activists, back-to-the-landers, vegetarians, nudists, Buddhists, and anti-spraying, anti-pollution marchers and picketers in the country, per capita, in the world.<sup>5</sup>

Greenpeace was itself one of the major Canadian contributions to environmentalism in the late twentieth century; its story has been well covered by Frank Zelko.<sup>6</sup> But beyond this large, soon-to-be international organization, many people organized on the local level to make innovative choices concerning the environment. Moving “back to the land” reflected one expression of the counterculture, and the destination required a deep engagement with ecological realities. However, as this collection shows, people who remained in urban centres also contributed to changing perspectives on environmental issues. Many of the people whose stories are recounted in this collection rejected an affluent and consumer-oriented urban culture and chose a different, usually rural, path. Political scientist Judith I. McKenzie provides a helpful definition of “counterculture”: a “deliberate attempt to live according to norms that are different from, and to some extent contradictory to, those institutionally enforced by society, and oppose traditional institutions on the basis of alternative principles and beliefs.”<sup>7</sup> It is significant that many of the people at the time adopted the term “counterculture” to describe themselves and their choices. But historian Stuart Henderson adds an insightful coda to definitions of counterculture: “In his or her rejection of [the] dominant culture, the hippie is in fact operating within, *not without*, the same culture. . . .”<sup>8</sup> Whether urban or rural, counterculturalists in Canada challenged societal norms by choosing to live differently, often in communal arrangements.

The prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s and the demographic bulge of children born after 1945 had created rising expectations and enhanced a youth culture that was rapidly commercialized, but which nonetheless revelled in oppositional perspectives.<sup>9</sup> Youth culture took many forms in the decades that followed. Most youth did not participate meaningfully in the counterculture, though they may on

occasion have participated in some of its apparently defining characteristics, such as enjoying the music of the period and smoking marijuana or taking other hallucinogenic drugs.<sup>10</sup> This book focuses on those who determinedly attempted to create new social norms.

## THE UTOPIAN IMPULSE

John Douglas's counterculture generation was not the first to locate their vision of utopia in the embrace of nature and rural labour and the rejection of the amenities of urban life and consumerism. Throughout Canadian history, utopian dreamers have located their perfectible worlds primarily in the countryside, and therefore one key feature of Canadian utopianism—much like its American counterpart—is its connection to an agrarian, “natural” world. Inspired in part by utopian thinkers, such as nineteenth-century writer Henry David Thoreau, or by twentieth-century nature writers, such as Aldo Leopold in the United States or Grey Owl in Canada, young people in the late 1960s and 1970s streamed into marginal areas throughout North America, away from the cities in which they had been raised. Their preferences had a practical side, as land prices were much lower in the countryside than in urban areas, and there were particularly good deals on lands where agriculture represented a marginal, declining activity. To achieve a utopian society, groups set themselves outside of larger centres and away from consumption-oriented mainstream Canadian society.

For some individuals, Canada offered isolated regions far from the tribulations of urban life. New England professor Feenie Ziner's son Ben escaped to a remote forested island off the West Coast. When she went looking for him in the 1970s, she believed—as he likely had when he arrived there—that she was “flying over the last and final untamed wilderness in North America.”<sup>11</sup> Writer Mark Vonnegut ended up in a corner of the Sunshine Coast, not far from Ben's island: “This was virgin frontier, unspoiled except for ugly scars left by loggers here

and there. Man was here but not many of 'em and he was certainly not master."<sup>12</sup> Some chose their lands specifically in order to be at some distance from state authorities. The participants in a commune near Powell River, BC, spoke wistfully of the "freedom of the country" to a CBC reporter in 1969 who promised not to reveal specifically where they were located.<sup>13</sup> They had reason to be circumspect. Not only could the sudden arrival of enthusiasts overburden a commune's resources, government officials sometimes were very dubious about their efforts. As one of the early scholars of the movement, geographer Terry Simmons found building inspectors who had the job of enforcing local housing regulations could make life very difficult for commune-dwellers.<sup>14</sup>

While isolation was a tremendous draw for a number of political and practical reasons, Ben Ziner's case was more extreme than some. Most back-to-the-landers located in previously settled areas, places where they could grow at least some of their own food. This reflected a political choice addressing fears that global annihilation was at hand: "Time is rapidly running out for Mother Earth. In order to save her we must get our shit together [sic] and begin building agricultural communes . . . the base [sic] of the revolution," declared the Marxist-Leninist Ochiltree Commune, near Williams Lake in the interior of British Columbia.<sup>15</sup> Ochiltree was one of the most intensely political communes of the period, but many people elsewhere shared a belief that the political and ecological environment in which they lived was about to explode. Americans Barry and Sally Lamare relocated to New Denver, in southeastern BC, in the mid-1970s because of the apparent security it offered in the case of nuclear war: "It was over fifteen hundred feet in altitude, you see, so it was above radiation levels. You could grow vegetables and survive."<sup>16</sup> Such apocalyptic fears would ultimately serve to weaken the back-to-the-land movement. Historian Michael Egan points out that, when the jeremiads failed to translate into reality with the speed predicted, environmentalist messages lost much of their impact.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, in the short run, self-sufficiency seemed to offer the solution to social instability and ecological fears. In the Bas-St-Laurent

region of Quebec, three men and one woman established La Commune de la Plaine in the spring of 1972, based on shared property and a rigorous egalitarianism. They wished to create “the most wide-ranging self-sufficiency possible.” Like their counterparts in other parts of the country, their choices involved a spiritual reawakening. As Marc Corbeil, one of the participants, reflected in an academic study some years later, “It was a search for a healthy lifestyle, in contact with nature, for us collectively and individually, where work would regenerate us, and bodily and spiritual pleasures would have their place.” The commune survived until 1985, and Corbeil estimated that about one hundred people passed through it during its time.<sup>18</sup>

Even an apparent exception to the “back-to-the-land” ethos provides confirmation of the healing propensities of rural life. Therafields was a large therapeutic commune based in the Annex area of downtown Toronto. One long-term member proposes that it was “arguably the largest secular ’60s commune in North America,” with about nine hundred adherents in its heyday.<sup>19</sup> Houses along Walmer Road provided the urban residences for the people involved, but many of the key therapeutic sessions took place on the Therafields farm the group owned in Mono Mills, near Orangeville, and from which the community took its name. While on the farm, participants engaged in hard labour, often divided along gendered lines, while spending other times in encounter sessions. For some members, the farming labour seemed more significant than the psychological benefits, even if they resented the hard work. The physicality of the work was conceived as improving the mental health of the individual. In an article explaining the philosophy of the group, the leaders of Therafields juxtaposed their belief that “Society as it has evolved is a robot beyond control”<sup>20</sup> against organic and biological metaphors that show how the group helped individuals overcome the issues they faced. Mind and body were well served by the encounter with nature, even if one had to leave Toronto temporarily to experience it. In August 1978, the group held a “Therafields Country Fair” on their rural site, where they sold organic produce and crafts.<sup>21</sup> Even the most urban commune needed a rural retreat.

Whether the young men and women taking part in the counterculture were looking for a refuge or a spiritual nirvana, their engagement with their location and their choice of economic activity forced them to confront environmental issues. Such concerns had indeed begun to achieve greater prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, but not exclusively because of the counterculture. Yet it is interesting that a number of observers, including key contemporary figures, point to environmental consciousness as being one of the principal legacies of the counterculture.<sup>22</sup>

## ENVIRONMENTALISM

Late-twentieth-century environmentalism has many origin stories—but, normally, it is not closely associated with the organized youth movements of the 1960s. Historians have argued that environmentalism was not a key theme of New Left politics in the United States in the 1960s. The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society made only a brief reference to environmental issues, linking economic growth with ecological problems:

We cannot measure national spirit by the Dow Jones Average, nor national achievement by the Gross National Product. For the Gross National Product includes air pollution. . . . The Gross National Product includes the destruction of the redwoods and the death of Lake Superior.<sup>23</sup>

Such concerns were fairly mainstream in the 1960s. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* had inspired a great deal of the period's environmental consciousness, often focused around pollution and reaching a broad swath of the North American public. Many middle-class, suburban mothers played key activist roles in supporting environmental protection and improvement measures. They worked alongside government and social leaders such as Lady Bird Johnson, wife of American President Lyndon Johnson.<sup>24</sup>

Historian Keith M. Woodhouse argues that a sudden shift occurred after 1969, leading to the first Earth Day in 1970. This event, sponsored by Republican Senator Gaylord Nelson and supported by President Richard Nixon's government, demonstrated how environmental concerns could be seen as liberal rather than radical issues.<sup>25</sup> Contemporaries advanced cynical interpretations of this embrace of environmentalism. Speaking before the Men's Canadian Club of Toronto in 1970, geographer F. Kenneth Hare evaluated the US government's sudden focus on pollution issues thus: "it is convenient for central governments to have an issue that doesn't really divide the electors, that doesn't antagonize the campuses, and that so often doesn't involve any concrete action."<sup>26</sup> In Canada in the 1960s, debates over environmental issues tended to focus around issues of access to wilderness park-like areas.<sup>27</sup> Refracted through the lens of leisure, ecological issues became part of the public agenda.

Perhaps because of its broad appeal, environmentalism quickly entered into popular culture. These are only a few striking examples: American musician Marvin Gaye may have penned one of the best-known environmentalist anthems, "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)" in 1971, but he was preceded by Saskatchewan-born Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi" in 1970, a critique of excessive urban development. The 1975 album of the Quebec folk group Les Séguin, "Récolte des Rêves," provided similar, nostalgic celebrations of agrarian lifestyles. Many other musicians adopted ecological themes.

Concerns for the environment may of course take many different forms of expression, ranging from the designation of new park areas, to struggles against pollution, to changing the way one grows food. The archetypal countercultural environmental group of this period, Greenpeace, had its roots in Vancouver's Kitsilano neighbourhood, where it had organized to oppose testing of nuclear bombs on the Aleutian Islands of Alaska. Some of the key figures in the organization took inspiration from oppositional attitudes, drawing on Quakerism along with New Left and peace movement perspectives as well as Marshall McLuhan's communication theories.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to the worldwide organization that Greenpeace became, the countercultural groups discussed in this book tended to focus on more grassroots local issues, though many participants may have agreed with the founders of La Commune de la Plaine that they were involved in revolution. Certainly the Ochiltree commune in BC did. In fact, as Ryan O'Connor points out, the recycling efforts begun on a small-scale basis in Toronto in the 1970s have become very large worldwide businesses indeed. At the same time, the Ark experiment in sustainable living on Prince Edward Island, which Henry Trim examines, failed to have the broad impact its founders had desired.

Commune-dwellers' beliefs in "voluntary simplicity" and self-sufficiency encouraged and facilitated the adoption of environmental approaches. Having accepted a less materialist lifestyle, labour was consequently fairly cheap. Many communes adopted organic techniques; this choice saved money on the costs of chemical fertilizers and herbicides, and it provided even more work for the people living on the farms. Local commune-dwellers read their copies of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and other works such as Helen and Scott Nearing's *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World* (1954). A Canadian Council on Social Development survey of communes in Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes found that farm communes "were predominantly interested in agricultural subsistence with their main objectives being to farm organically, to have the land meet as many needs as possible, and to make the commune independent and self-supporting."<sup>29</sup> Taking inspiration from the *Whole Earth Catalog* and using a sumac branch as a maple syrup tap, back-to-the-lander Mark Frutkin reminisced about his choice: "I was enamoured of the old ways because they used what was in the environment. For me it was a statement about self-sufficiency."<sup>30</sup>

Choosing self-sufficiency often entailed opting for a fairly marginal economic existence. While many of the youth had their advanced education to fall back on—and of course they knew that—for the time that they lived on the communes, they accepted a different and unfamiliar lifestyle, and for most, it was not an easy one. For instance, some had to wrestle with practical husbandry issues for which

they were not prepared. Members of La Commune des plateaux de l'Anse-Saint-Jean, in Quebec's Saguenay region, found it necessary to keep their animals inside on the ground floor of their dwelling during their first winter, while they lived on the top floor.<sup>31</sup> Moving back to the land required direct confrontation with agrarian realities and an environmental consciousness.

## ISSUES

Perhaps one of the key ways in which countercultural environmentalism differed from other forms was its emphasis on the body. As recalled by theologian Gregory Baum, who maintained links to Therapeutics in the early years, the commune's work therapy was inspired by Reichian psychiatry: "The body was taken seriously."<sup>32</sup> People who had made the choice to join the counterculture willingly distinguished themselves from their urban counterparts. They rejected some urban, middle-class niceties, and so chose long hair for both men and women, refused to shave, and practiced public nudity. One member of La Commune des plateaux de l'Anse-Saint-Jean remembered how they differentiated themselves visibly from other locals through their dress and hair.<sup>33</sup> Gardening in the nude did not likely impinge upon neighbours, but bathing without clothes at the beach tended to annoy other members of the community, as was the case on Denman Island in the 1970s. Des Kennedy remembered that nude swimming became a "kind of flash point for a lot of people."<sup>34</sup> Public nudity fed into assumptions of looser sexual norms, which were becoming more prevalent far beyond the counterculture.<sup>35</sup> In fact, members of La Commune des plateaux de l'Anse-Saint-Jean, as well as many others, complained that the perception of wanton sexuality that was attached to many commune-dwellers did not in fact accurately reflect their more moderate lifestyle.<sup>36</sup> Mark Frutkin recalls the lack of debauchery on his commune in the Gatineau region of Quebec:

Everyone wanted to partner up as soon as possible, although there was almost no sharing of partners and no attempts

at group marriage at the Farm. We must have been the straightest, dullest commune on the face of the planet if the articles in *Life* and *Time* were to be believed.

Nonetheless, the commune-dwellers also practiced public nudity at a nearby lake and in the group saunas. But, Frutkin points out, the prevalence of cold and insects restricted nudity to about two months of the year.<sup>37</sup>

Opting for nudity reflected the desire to reduce the distance between the human body and the environment, an enhancement of authenticity. Following the same logic, many women celebrated the natural process of birth, attempting to reclaim knowledge that in Canada the medical profession had monopolized in the twentieth century. Childbirth had become a medicalized and hospitalized procedure. As Megan Davies shows in discussing underground midwifery in southeastern British Columbia, activists in the 1970s and 1980s fostered the growth of a cadre of trained, but non-professional, midwives, fully engaged with local communities.

As other chapters illustrate, countercultural youth often harboured a suspicion of local development and its potential effects on healthy bodies. As Nancy Janovicek shows in this volume, local counterculture settlers opposed large-scale logging in the Kootenays, in southeastern British Columbia, pointing out how little of the profit from the industry remained in the area. In a complementary chapter, Kathleen Rodgers explores American influences on environmental protest in the Kootenays. With their goals of self-sufficiency, counterculture youth demonstrated an anti-consumerist bias in much of what they did. Daniel Ross shows how cycling activists in Montreal decried the overuse of the car, a message that took hold in part because of the shock of the oil crisis of the early 1970s. In contrast, as Ryan O'Connor argues, recycling advocates in Toronto achieved their greatest success not in reducing consumption, but rather in dealing with the effects of consumerism in a novel way.

In some cases, back-to-the-landers aimed at a highly simplified lifestyle, rejecting modern conveniences. In Carleton County, New

Brunswick, a group of Americans revelled in their marginal and isolated farmstead: “In an electronic, thermostatically controlled world it is all too easy to let insensitivity dull all the sense of feelings. I suppose what we are mostly trying to do here is give these kids a chance to react to their environment and to become more sensitive to living and to the land.”<sup>38</sup> Marc Corbeil recalled nostalgically how, at La Commune de la Plaine, “the commune-dwellers had the erroneous impression that old means of production were less complicated.”<sup>39</sup>

But equally typically, counterculture youth embraced what they considered appropriate technologies. *Little House on the Prairie*-type technologies still required advanced understanding and skill. Many sought to integrate newer technologies with an aim to self-sufficiency, sometimes taking inspiration from the *Whole Earth Catalog*, which provided scientific models to assist in living off the grid.<sup>40</sup> Quebec readers had their own version of this publication in *Le Répertoire québécois des outils planétaires*. As Henry Trim argues, the Ark experiment on Prince Edward Island grew out of concerns in the 1960s and particularly the early 1970s with spiralling energy costs and rural decline. In this case, the founders tried to develop a sophisticated technology to address issues of self-sufficiency and provide a model that could be replicated elsewhere. For many people drawn to the counterculture, as Walter Isaacson shows in the case of Californians associated with the development of the personal computer, “a love of the earth and a love of technology could coexist.”<sup>41</sup> The high education level of many counterculture youth allowed for a deep engagement with environmental issues. On Denman Island, as Sharon Weaver points out, protesting pollution involved not merely a “not-in-my-backyard” opposition to particular types of economic activity, but also a scientific evaluation of chemical reactions. Emphasizing the body, self-sufficiency, and appropriate technology, counterculturalists fostered new approaches to environmental issues.

## EXCHANGES

Stereotypically, the arrival of counterculture youth evoked hostility between them and their neighbours. On Lasqueti Island, BC, local farmers did not appreciate the way that commune leader Ted Sideras allegedly convinced his followers that local livestock was fair game. Sideras was charged with and tried for cattle rustling.<sup>42</sup> On the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia, Wally Peterson, the mayor of Gibsons, complained about the funding that local “longhairs” received from the federal government through the Opportunities for Youth program, suggesting that the money was being used to grow pot rather than potatoes.<sup>43</sup> As Matt Cavers shows, such hostility was fairly common, particularly in the Sunshine Coast region.

In some places in British Columbia, however, counterculture youth encountered people from older generations who had made similar choices in the past. American draft resisters on Malcolm Island met ageing Finnish socialists who knew their Marxist literature much better than the student radicals did. Groups moving into the Kootenays encountered Doukhobors and Quakers who shared similar concerns about the presence of the state, the rejection of war, and the desire to live simply off the land. One neighbour of Doukhobor farmers in southeastern BC recalled, “Their own kids weren’t interested in Doukhoborism but here we were, middle-class ex-professionals from California, putting the garden in in the nude, looking for alternatives to materialism and possessive relationships, and working very hard.”<sup>44</sup> Likewise, draft resister Marvin Work, who arrived in 1970 in the Kootenays, found ready allies in his Doukhobor landlords, who shared his pacifism.<sup>45</sup> Hippies moving to Hornby Island met the formidable Hilary Brown and her husband Harrison (HB). Hilary had published pacifist and feminist works in Britain in the 1930s before moving to the remote island in 1937. Until her death at ninety-eight, in 2007, she played a key role in founding local co-operative ventures and providing community leadership. The members of La Commune de la Plaine found a perhaps unlikely advocate in their local priest, who preached tolerance and openness to the newcomers.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, despite their beliefs in their revolutionary praxis, counterculture youth often built upon a variety of antecedents, some dating back many decades: socialist perspectives that criticized the inequities of capitalism, pacifist tendencies opposed to militarism, and even long-standing rural distrust of urban centres. Many new commune-dwellers co-operated with and learned from those other groups, and over time they managed to reduce the tensions with other members of the communities.

Perhaps one of the more surprising themes to emerge from this collection is that of the complex links between the counterculture and the state. Many of the individuals displayed tremendous entrepreneurial skills, and in the context of the 1970s this could involve applying for government funds for a range of projects. It is true that funding was relatively accessible at this time—more so than would be the case by the late 1970s, as the financial retrenchment that typified the rest of the end of the century took hold. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's close ally Gérard Pelletier served as the minister of state in the early 1970s. Pelletier's department, concerned about the youth-led ferment of the period, offered small-scale funding in Opportunities for Youth and Local Initiatives programs to provide more meaningful work opportunities, he claimed, than a sterile summer job in a government ministry.<sup>47</sup> As Matt Cavers shows, these programs could be fairly lax in standards of application and reporting, and they attracted a lot of local criticism. Indeed, while one arm of the government could dole out grants, other branches, including immigration and police officials, kept tabs on various groups. In 1977, N. S. Fontanne, director of the Intelligence Research and Analysis Division of Canada Immigration corresponded with the Nashville Metropolitan Police Department to acquire information on the famous Tennessee commune "The Farm," because some of its former inhabitants proposed setting up a similar experiment in Lanark, ON.<sup>48</sup>

Government programs involved, to be sure, very small-scale funds, but given the desire to live fairly simply and in areas of the country with inexpensive land values, these funds could make the difference between success and failure. After all, the back-to-the-landers

faced the same difficulties almost all utopians confront: how to reconcile spiritual or ideological enthusiasms in a context of collective ownership with a need for the necessities of life. The Ark project on PEI relied on fairly substantial financial support from the federal and provincial governments, having managed to combine concerns about regional development with fears of energy insufficiency, but other projects were built on much smaller sums. The people behind the recycling efforts in Toronto managed to stack application upon application to maximize the subsidy they received, and thus they remained afloat longer than less astute groups. Likewise, cycling activists in Montreal, prospective midwives in the Kootenays, and anti-pollution activists on the West Coast all used small summer funds to bolster their activities.

A further technique that many counterculture activists used effectively was theatre. In other words, they attracted attention for their causes by playing to the media. Oppositional groups have long attempted to achieve public exposure by such methods, and in this way their practices were not much different. Bringing a coffin to the BC Legislature in 1979 to draw attention to pollution on Denman Island or staging a funeral for the putrid Don River in Toronto were not in themselves particularly innovative actions, but they did attract media attention, and they were likely more successful than similar approaches would be in today's oversaturated media cycles.<sup>49</sup> Street theatre could create focal points and moments in which to convey environmental messages, and the theatre of La Commune de la Plaine drew upon *situationniste* models, just as Greenpeace found inspiration in yippie guerilla theatre and the cycling activists in Montreal drew on a range of European and American influences.

Some of the most effective practices involved collaborations with other locals who shared the same appreciation of landscape aesthetics. The most successful attempts to control pollution involved counterculture activists teaming up with local loggers and farmers. In all rural locations, if the young back-to-the-landers had children, they offered the opportunity to keep small schools alive. As Alan MacEachern shows, the counterculture children provided a bridge between the

newly arrived and the long-standing inhabitants. Increasing familiarity, and labour and other economic exchanges, eventually broke down many barriers. Of course, many back-to-the-landers experienced only a short stay in the countryside, soon returning to the city. Some, like the people involved in Therafields, never really left the city. The farm may have been central to their therapy, but they lived in downtown Toronto. In other locations, the back-to-the-landers raised their children alongside locals, and public schools provided a ground where all groups met—and often worked out their differences. Influences spread both ways, as back-to-the-land children desired bologna while their classmates enjoyed the freedoms the hippie children experienced on their own property. Despite the desire for isolation, the counterculture period also necessarily involved cultural exchange.

## CHALLENGES AND LEGACIES

While they may have seen themselves as revolutionaries, in some ways counterculture groups did not challenge the social and racial status quo. Kathleen Rodgers's study of the Vietnam War-resister community in the Kootenays underlines its primarily white and largely middle-class nature.<sup>50</sup> As a number of the chapters discuss, back-to-the-landers encountered neighbours who had never left the land, whether these were farmers in Prince Edward Island or First Nations in the Yukon. David Neufeld explores the complexity of the relations between counterculture youth and Indigenous peoples near Dawson City. In the Yukon, both groups recognized their own countercultural challenges to prevailing opinion and were able to find common ground on some issues, while in many places in the south, counterculture youth embraced ersatz images of Indigenous peoples. One Quebec commune produced its own "native" handicrafts.<sup>51</sup> A meeting of intentional community representatives on Cortez Island, BC, in 1979 began with "Sunrise fires—Indian tobacco ceremony—Sauna and sweats."<sup>52</sup> Indigenous imagery often inspired and informed countercultural worldviews. As Philip Deloria comments in the case of the United States, communalists "promoted community, and at

least some of them thought it might be found in an Indianness imagined around notions of social harmony.”<sup>53</sup> Many groups were unlikely to connect with First Nations communities close at hand. Feenie Ziner noted the irony of her son’s and his friend Buddhi’s belief that they had a right to the island where they were squatting:

How profoundly American both of them were, how middle-class, taking the extravagant promise of their country at face value, converting “I want” into “I have a right to,” just like the most avaricious of our fellow countrymen! Neither of them took the exiled Indian population into account in their debate over the right to the land.<sup>54</sup>

One counter-example is noteworthy: Ochiltree, in BC’s interior, resolutely engaged not only with the local Aboriginal population, but even more with the poorest Aboriginal street people, creating a joint garden that proved very effective.<sup>55</sup> But partially for this reason, Ochiltree attracted a good deal of local animosity. Locals and the police joined in their dislike of the Marxist commune. Rejecting the idea of private property, Ochiltree members squatted on public lands, and the police attempted to evict them in the 1980s.<sup>56</sup> But Ochiltree was perhaps exceptional among communes in its level of direct engagement and its open defiance of authority.

Communes often remained as strongly gendered as the rest of North American society. Journalist Myrna Kostash points out how communal living experiments failed to challenge gender roles. At La Commune de la Plaine, women went on strike in 1973, withdrawing from the property for a month and leaving the men to care for the children and the household.<sup>57</sup> Commune member Corbeil believes that the male members learned their lesson.

Despite the individualistic, sometimes anarchistic, natures of the communes, they also achieved a degree of institutional fixity. In British Columbia there was even an association of such groups, the Coalition of Intentional Cooperative Communities (CICC). These groups met on a regular basis, every three months, on the site of one of the communes. According to Jim Bowman, the coalition came into

existence in response to the then New Democratic Party government of British Columbia. The government was attempting to address issues of communitarian land ownership, but it called an early election in 1975 that it lost, thus ending the chance of passing legislation to allow communes to acquire cheap access to Crown lands.<sup>58</sup>

The CICC newsletters gave space for different communes to discuss their philosophy. Linnea farm on Cortez Island was one of the most ecologically focused communes in British Columbia during this period:

It is a pilot project focused on developing a harmonious relationship between man and nature in the areas of forest, watershed and eco-farm management. . . . The community members will live close to the land through voluntary simplicity, appropriate technologies, alternate energy and energy conservation. On-going activities are chickens, bees, raw milk dairy, vegetable and fruit production.<sup>59</sup>

For many BC communes, moving back to the land reflected a desire to achieve a simpler existence, although small-scale farming is by no means a straightforward endeavour. As in the United States, the wish for self-sufficiency built on the concerns of many about the military involvements of the American government, fear of environmental degradation, and a general concern that inflation and rapidly rising oil prices would lead to the full-scale collapse of the capitalist system.<sup>60</sup> Communes experimented with alternative forms of energy, sometimes because of a desire to live completely “off the grid” and sometimes only because their choice of an isolated region necessitated it. They also confronted problems of waste disposal, building composting toilets, recycling centres, and “free stores.” Hornby Island boasts a particularly famous example, which combines all three in one location, the community having been forced to take action once the local dump was condemned in the 1970s.<sup>61</sup>

Stuart Henderson argues that for some hippies, moving back to the land allowed them to pursue contemporary counterculture lifestyles more fully than did living in Toronto’s famous Yorkville

neighbourhood, one of the epicentres of the youth rebellion.<sup>62</sup> In general, despite an initial attraction to settling the countryside as a way of escaping mainstream realities, commune-dwellers came face-to-face with the same issues of ecological stewardship that their rural forebears had done. While wishing to establish self-sufficiency, communes also experienced the vagaries of economic life. For instance, in the 1980s the rapid rise in interest rates contributed to the financial difficulties, and ultimately the demise, of La Commune de la Plaine.<sup>63</sup> But the financial failures of some communes should not detract from the long-term impact of their ecological vision.

## CONCLUSION

Much of the environmental consciousness that was proposed as counterculture alternatives no longer occupies such a fringe status. The counterculture by no means invented bicycling and recycling, to take two of the issues covered in this collection, but they did popularize both, and they invested strong ecological ethics in the practices. Many current issues can be traced back to their efforts: countercultural support helped to popularize organic farming, controls on harmful chemicals, new attitudes to the human body (particularly in relation to childbirth), concerns about pollution and environmental sustainability, and critiques of technology. All of these have become much more mainstream today than they were in the 1960s. While the counterculture may not have exclusive claim to the parameters of current environmentalist debate, their perspectives created new ethical positions concerning these issues.

The Canadian counterculture was rooted in worldwide youth culture and oppositional stances. While the counterculture emphasized individualities, a larger picture of shared environmentalism developed. Participants engaged with the state—meaning local, provincial, and federal levels in the Canadian context—in an attempt to achieve their aims. Some embraced new technologies, while others eschewed them. They revitalized concepts of land stewardship that remain fixed in agrarian practices.

Like many social movements, the counterculture looked both backward and forward, and its views of the environment reflected both tendencies. Moving back to the land implied returning to a voluntary simplicity, like that proposed by Thoreau in the nineteenth century. John Douglas's rural idyll in northern Ontario in 1967 looked back to a time before electrical water pumps and forward to a spiritual and economic self-sufficiency that entailed a new ecological appreciation. Other members of the counterculture tried to fashion appropriate technologies that would permit sustainable living. As the counterculture foresaw, finding a balance between technology and environment remains one of the most pressing issues facing the world today.

## NOTES

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- 5 Robert Hunter, *The Greenpeace to Amchitka: An Environmental Odyssey* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2004), 16
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- 12 Vonnegut, *The Eden Express*, 33.
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- 15 Section on "Communes" from the "Revolutionary Hippy Manifesto" (1978), file 3, box 1, Intentional Community Collection, RBSC-ARC-1273, UBC Library Rare Books and Special Collections, Vancouver (hereafter Intentional Community Collection).
- 16 Quoted in Katherine Gordon, *The Slocan: Portrait of a Valley* (Winlaw, BC: Sono Nis, 2004), 238.
- 17 Michael Egan, "Shamans of the Spring: Environmentalism and the New Jeremiad," in *New World Coming: The Sixties and the Shaping of Global Consciousness*, ed. Karen Dubinsky et al. (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2009), 296–303.
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