

Utopia or Catastrophe?
Reflections on the 40th anniversary of *Ecotopia's* publication¹

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Abstract

Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* was published 40 years ago, in 1975. It appeared in a period of ferment and social innovation, imagining a California leading the world into an idealized future. This was not the first times such imaginaries were proposed, both utopian and dystopic. *The Earth Abides* (1949) imagined Berkeley as the birthplace of a new humanity; Tomorrowland (1955) imagined California as the site of a new technotopia. There are many other examples. But the 1970s stand out as a time of particular ferment; as Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft puts it in "The Future of Futurism," "The rise of organized and professionalized forms of futurism, beginning in the 1960s, was coeval with the rise of the computer and consumer electronics industries."

In the event, we are here and California hardly resembles anything imagined before 1975 or since. Nevertheless, California remains the site of futurist ecological imaginaries and longings. We have only to consider the recent bestseller *California*, by Eden Lepucki and the promised Silicon Valley "Singularity" of Ray Kurzweil. But why? Why has California been such a fruitful site for futuristic imaginings, in film fiction, media, design, architecture, design communities, counterculture and social movements? And what kinds of future worlds has California come to represent? How do the futures of the 1960s and 1970s compare to those of today? Does California remain a Promised Land, or has it become a Land of Squandered Promise?

This paper takes Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* as a jumping off point for reflecting on ecological imaginaries of California, as they appear in science fiction and "conventional" novels and films, as well as state politics. California is not (yet) *Ecotopia*, but that does not mean it does not remain a vibrant site for both utopian and dystopian longings.

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They drove through Tehachapi in the morning glow, and the sun came up behind them, and then—suddenly they saw the great valley below them. Al jammed on the brake and stopped in the middle of the road and, "Jesus Christ! Look!" he said. The vineyards, the orchards, the great flat valley, green and beautiful, the trees set in rows, and the farm houses.... The distant cities, the little towns in the orchard land, and the morning sun, golden on the valley.... A windmill flashed in the sun, and its turning blades were like a little heliograph, far away. Ruthie and Winfield looked at it, and Ruthie whispered, "It's California."
--John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*--²

I. Introduction

"California" has long exercised a powerful hold over the world's imaginaries. Few places in North America and the world have generated such a plethora of imagined futures. From the black Queen Califia, who ruled an Amazonian society on the island of California in *The Adventures of Esplandián*, a 1510 Spanish novel by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, to the 1955 film "Seven Cities of Gold," starring Anthony Quinn, Michael Rennie and Rita Moreno, which displaced Cibola from the Sonora Desert to futuristic visions of water-sipping, vertical green cities, the imaginary of California as utopia (or dystopia) has become well-established in film, fiction, myth and advertising. There have been few efforts to disabuse outsiders—even dystopias are made to seem attractive, as we see in Eden Lepucki's recent bestseller, *California*. Among the many utopian imaginaries is "Ecotopia," that mythical land lying along North America's West Coast, running from somewhere around San Luis Obispo into British Columbia—according to the maps found on the Internet.

This year (2015) marks the 40th anniversary of the publication of Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, an opportune time to reflect on California's eco-utopian history and future. Eco-utopian stories are generally classified as "science fiction," but many are not, although they may be as unrealizable as science fiction.³ Callenbach's novel is famous for having been rejected by two dozen publishers before finding a home with Banyan Tree Books in Berkeley. However, it is estimated that there are over one million copies in print, so someone has

² New York: Penguin, 1976, p. 227.

³ For a list of California-based ecological counterworlds, see the interview with Kim Stanley Robinson, "Planet of the Future," *Boom—A Journal of California* 3, #4 (Winter 2013), at: <http://www.boomcalifornia.com/2014/01/kim-stanley-robinson/> (accessed April 10, 2015).

been reading the book. In many ways, *Ecotopia* was a seminal one, catching a particular time, place and sensibility that, despite the quality of its writing and its seamy protagonist, still captures the imagination and hopes of those who read it.⁴

Utopias are usually written as “traveller’s tales,”⁵: a stranger arrives in a totally-unfamiliar place, and describes a new, utopian society (e.g., Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 1887) or sets about creating a new and idealized society (see, e.g., *Robinson Crusoe*; “Cast Away”). In such a tale,

the narrator is an “alien” who has dropped in on the utopian society, either through time travel or by crossing a physical barrier. As readers, we learn what the narrator sees, hears, and most importantly, what he/she is told by a utopian citizen. In other words, the narrator is dependent upon a native citizen’s knowledge and perspective for any kind of information. So too is the reader. Thus, readers are also “aliens” who have dropped in on a strange, new society and in need of context and history.⁶

In this paper, I examine four California eco-utopias—*Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1939), *The Earth Abides* (George Stewart, 1949), *Ecotopia* (1975), and *Pacific Edge* (Kim Stanley Robinson, 1990). *Grapes of Wrath* might seem an unlikely member of this group but it anticipates a workers’ utopia in a generous and fruitful California, an almost Edenesque vision, in which socialism and religion come together. But Steinbeck, at least, considers politics. The three latter novels bracket the Cold War: all recognizing the possibility of holocaust, all hopeful for the future, yet all apolitical (as utopias are wont to be). Stewart imagines the rebuilding of civilization in the wake of a plague that eliminates virtually all of humanity—hardly a new theme. Callenbach writes about a post-secessionist country, driven by energy innovation and resisting *reconquista* by the United States though the strategem of nuclear munitions strategically placed in American cities. Finally, Robinson’s *Pacific Edge*—part of the Three Californias Trilogy set in the OC (aka, Orange Country)⁷—is much more upbeat,

⁴ See Paul Buhle, “Ecotopia,” *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 12, #3): 149-53. As Provost of College Eight at UC Santa Cruz, I assign the novel to 350-400 incoming frosh every year. Some of them hate it, some of them love it. But by the time I step down, there will be at least 2,000-2,500 new readers of the book.

⁵ Angela M. Gulick, “The Handmaid’s Tale: More Than 1984 with Chicks,” Pacific Rim Studies Conference, February 1996, [www.engl.uaa.alaska.edu/gulick/HTML/pubthtpr.htm#The Handmaid’s Tale: More than 1984 with Chicks](http://www.engl.uaa.alaska.edu/gulick/HTML/pubthtpr.htm#The%20Handmaid%27s%20Tale%3A%20More%20than%201984%20with%20Chicks) (accessed March 10, 1998).

⁶ Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516/1901) is an early version of a traveller’s tale, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888) a more recent one.

⁷ The other two novels in the Trilogy are *The Wild Shore* (1984), a post-holocaust story of survival and *The Gold Coast* (1988), a vision of a dystopian, fully “automobilized” society in 2027. The genesis of the Trilogy are addressed in Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, “Pacific Overture: An Interview with Kim Stanley Robinson,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Jan. 9, 2012, at:

depicting a society that has managed to get through the ecological bottleneck, although it is faced by continued threats, especially from the outside (and we are not told much about conditions in the rest of the world). With drought, climate change, bankruptcy and disease so much in the news,⁸ it is increasingly difficult to imagine Californian eco-utopias; certainly they are not part of the contemporary *zeitgeist*. In many ways, however, the promise of *Eco(u)topia* is closer than ever before.

What room remains for eco-utopian thinking in the contemporary California imaginaries, given that most are organized around catastrophe (*San Andreas*), on the one hand, and digital escape (the "Singularity"), on the other?⁹ Are we bereft of hope, or are other worlds possible? I begin this paper with a summary of the four novels, setting each in its own political, economic and ecological context. In the second part of the paper, I discuss the politics of eco-utopias (and utopian thinking in general). In the third, I consider the problem of (or lack of) politics in utopian thinking. Finally, I reflect on *Ecotopia* and how we might go about working toward Eco-utopia.

II. Visions of Heaven or Hell?

Grapes of Wrath would hardly seem to be a utopian novel, given the Dust Bowl, refugees from the Midwest, and the abysmal treatment of the migrants as they seek work and homes in California. Yet, the book is suffused with a utopian promise, reflected in both religious and socialist themes. The dream imagined by the Joads and others is a small house and a plot of land that they can farm; the utopia imagined by Steinbeck is one in which the workers control the means of production and are no longer bound by and to the landowners. But *Grapes of Wrath* is also a novel whose mysterious religious ending promises a "Second Coming" of labor, so to speak. In truth, California is an Eden to which the migrants are denied entry, until such time as Tom Joad "returns."

For the Joads, California is hardly a Promised Land, much less an eco-utopia. As green as California appears from the Tehachapis, at every turn the Dust Bowl refugees encounter a hostile and near-dystopian environment. It is one that offers plenty but not for their kind. Indeed, for the Joads and their

<http://lareviewofbooks.org/interview/pacific-overture-an-interview-with-kim-stanley-robinson> (accessed June 8, 2015). See also Carl Abbott, "Falling into History: The Imagined Wests of Kim Stanley Robinson in the 'Three Californias' and Mars Trilogies," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 34, #1 (Spring, 2003):27-47.

⁸ Robert Costanza, "Four visions of the century ahead: Will it be Star Trek, Ecotopia, Big Government or Mad Max," *Futurist* 33, #2 (1999): 23-28.

⁹ Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) is set in a dystopian, hypercapitalistic and hypercommodified Los Angeles, in which the United States hardly exists and every facet of life is subject to contract. There is no ecotopia evident there, but both catastrophe and digitalization are.

working class comrades, California promises nothing and gives very little. Only the chapters set in the WPA camp in the San Joaquin Valley offer visions of utopia and that is something of a socialist one.¹⁰ Not until the final paragraph of the novel, with their lives threatened by Flood, is any sign of hope, as Rose of Sharon, with a mysterious smile, feeds a starving man with her breast milk, recapitulating a Madonna without Jesus. Nonetheless, throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, there is a utopian promise: that when the oppressed migrant workers finally acquire consciousness as a class in themselves and organize, the corporate masters will be driven off the land and the fruits of the field will become theirs. Eco-utopia will be realized as History comes to an end. But Steinbeck is an outlier; there's not much socialism to be found in other 20th century utopian novels.¹¹

* * *

In George Stewart's *The Earth Abides*, Isherwood Williams ("Ish," reminiscent of Ishi, the last surviving member of the Native American Yahi), is a geography graduate student at UC-Berkeley. He goes on a solitary camping trip in the Sierra Nevada, where he contracts a measles-like disease that lays him low for many days. Once recovered, he returns to Berkeley to find that almost everyone has died from the plague from which he has recovered.¹² Ish embarks on a cross-country trip to New York, meeting small groups of survivors but finding nothing to compel his settling down. He returns to Berkeley, where he meets a female survivor. Together, the two become progenitors of a tribe that quickly falls back into "primitive" ways. Subsequent generations remember "Ish" as their creator and god. In the book's final scenes, the tribe migrates across the crumbling Bay Bridge in search of greener pastures (presumably to Silicon Valley where they will rebuild civilization). Meanwhile, "the Earth Abides."¹³

* * * * *

Ecotopia is subtitled "The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston." Weston is a reporter for *The New York Times*, who has been sent West, 20 years after California, Oregon and Washington have seceded from the United States, to

¹⁰ The camps greatly offended the good burghers of the surrounding region, who saw them as hotbeds of communist indoctrination and conspiracy.

¹¹ Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) addresses anarcho-syndicalism.

¹² A theme that first appears in *Le Dernier Homme* (1805), by Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville and subsequently in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Richard Jeffries' *After London* (1885), M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901) and Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1915), among many others.

¹³ Undoubtedly, Stewart drew upon *The Scarlet Plague* (1915), also set in Northern California.

found the new country of “Ecotopia.” Since that time, Ecotopia has had no diplomatic or economic relationships with the United States—akin to the status of Cuba until this year—with only occasional and distorted reports seeping out about life, society and politics on the West Coast. The American public has been fed a steady diet of opinion about the horrors of the new country: it is socialist, feminist—the president is a woman!—hot-headed and warlike, and even prone to cannibalism.

After being secreted across the state line from Reno, and taking an eco-bullet train from Tahoe, Weston arrives in San Francisco. There, and in other parts of Northern California (he does not travel to Oregon or Washington), he finds an ecofriendly population, deeply committed to Green values and practices, and an infrastructure heavily-reliant on the “appropriate technology” that makes it easy to engage in ecofriendly practices. Weston is treated as a bit of an oddity, since he finds it difficult to shed the norms, biases and preferences that dominate the United States. But, he interviews people, writes articles about the new country, and even engages in the Ecotopian version of “war” by groups of young men. By the time his trip is over, Weston’s view of Ecotopia is considerably more favorable than when he arrived. Predictably, perhaps, he falls in love and, at the last moment, decides to stay in Ecotopia rather than return to New York.

* * * * *

Pacific Edge is set in El Modeno, a fictonal town in Orange County (where Kim Stanley Robinson grew up),¹⁴ in the year 2065. The plot involves a variety of different characters, living in a water-constrained California that has adopted the structures and practices of an eco-utopia. The book contains two complementary narratives, one historical (the 2010s and 2020s), the other contemporary (in 2065). In the historical section, Tom Barnard—Robinson’s alter ego and the only character to appear in all three volumes of the Three Californias--describes his epiphany about utopias that turns him into one of the architects of and activists behind an ecological revolution—a “long march” though American institutions—aimed at a complete overturning of the ideological underpinnings of 20th century American society. Unlike Ecotopia’s, however, this revolution has been relatively peaceful albeit deeply reformist.

The other narrative in the book is about environmental conflict in one California town and the daily lives of the residents of El Modeno. The City Council is debating whether to endorse a new development and overturn the town’s “no-growth” policy in order to allow a new commercial center to be built on Rattlesnake Hill, the last open area in the town. Kevin Clairborne, Tom

¹⁴ There is a city called “El Modena” in Orange County, not far from the El Modeno plutons, which are extinct volcanoes.

Barnard's son and the protagonist of the novel, is strongly opposed to the project as inimical to the town's Green commitments. Kevin and Tom lead the struggle against the proposal but, after Tom drowns in a storm, the Council votes in favor of development and the promise of economic growth and jobs. Kevin does not let this stop him: he and his colleagues turn Rattlesnake Hill into a memorial to Tom, knowing that the town's citizens will not now countenance its destruction. The struggle continues.¹⁵

III. Utopias? In California?¹⁶

There is no shortage of science fiction about California utopias, eco-utopias and dystopias¹⁷; it is one genre among many that takes the state as a site of both promise and disaster, often at the same time.¹⁸ As a general rule, utopias (and dystopias) are "nowhere" because they are rooted in the here and now, and are commentaries on the societies in which their authors live.¹⁹ Michael Ziser notes that many of the great science fiction authors—Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, Ursula Le Guin, Philip K. Dick—hailed from California and used it as the basis for their stories and novels.²⁰ Kim Stanley Robinson has called California "a working utopia" and "a science fictional place. The desert has been terraformed. The whole water system is unnatural and artificial. This place shouldn't look like it looks..." Over the past two decades, however, science fiction has taken a decidedly dystopian turn, with California often at the epicenter of catastrophe.²¹

Both utopias and dystopias evince the desire to escape the trials, travails and politics of daily life. Not infrequently, utopian societies are governed by intellectual, scientific or religious elites, who make all decisions.²² In others,

¹⁵ Robinson is a master of the mundane in many of his novels: how daily life is conducted, for example, even when one is on an interstellar flight (as in his latest book, *Aurora*).

¹⁶ Those who grew up in Berkeley or spent time there before 1990 will remember the Berkeley Farms' dairy slogan "Farms? In Berkeley?" Well, not any more. The company is now based in Hayward, California.

¹⁷ Ursula K. Heise, "Introduction: The Invention of Eco-Futures," *Ecozon@3*, #2 (2012): 1-10, at: <http://www.ecozona.eu/index.php/journal/article/view/310/644> (accessed Dec. 19, 2014).

¹⁸ Kristin Miller, "Postcards from the future: Utopian north, dystopian south," *Boom: A Journal of California* 3, #4 (Winter 2013):12-26.

¹⁹ David Landis Barnhill, "Conceiving Ecotopia," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 5, #2 (2011): 126-44.

²⁰ Michael Ziser, "Living with Speculative Infrastructures: Reading our present dilemmas in science fiction's past," *Boom: A Journal of California* 3, #4 (Winter 2013):27-34.

²¹ The apotheosis of this mix can be seen in the 2013 film "Elysium," which situates utopian California on a space station and dystopian California on the ground in Los Angeles (filmed, however, in Mexico City). For a general discussion of dystopian tropes, see Janet Fiskio, "Apocalypse and Ecotopia: Narratives in Global Climate Change Discourse," *Race, Gender & Class* 19, #1-2 (2012): 12-36.

²² For example, H.G. Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come* (New York: Macmillan, 1933).

politics has been trumped by technology, with the Survivalist Party firmly ensconced in power, as in *Ecotopia*. In treatments such as *The Earth Abides* and the many dystopias appearing over the last few decades, political society is decimated to such an extent that whatever groups and individuals are left alive cannot afford or have no need of politics. Even the coming millenarian climate catastrophe is best left to science, we are told. Each of the three authors offer a different path to eco-utopia: Stewart opts for *deus ex machina* and purification of the human race. Callenbach hopes for a cheap energy technology that can change life. Only Robinson chooses a political path, although it is one strewn with pitfalls, as we shall see.

The dream of return to a pure Rousseauvian “state of nature,” with its “noble savages,” has its roots in the myth of Eden, an eco-utopia if there ever was one.²³ Civilization is corrupt and humanity is infected with a wasting disease (industrialism and capitalism), and the only ways to cure the patient is to kill her, by flood, fire, famine or flu. The chances of survival in the radiation-dosed rubble of a nuclear war are daunting, and the genetic and moral curse may persist through many generations.²⁴ The disease scenario is much like the fabulous neutron bomb: the plague kills the people but leaves the buildings, and their contents, intact. The ruins of civilization can be mined for all kinds of manufactured necessities, although the capacity to reproduce them is virtually nonexistent.²⁵ What, then, is left except a return to Nature, a Nature that, with time, regains its balance and permits humanity to reclaim Eden?

This is the plot marked out by Stewart in *The Earth Abides*. Is his novel dystopic or utopian? A disaster or a gift? Today, the vast majority of films and novels depicting epidemics are distinctly dystopian, although for the consuming public, all hope cannot be lost—someone will save the day. Need I point out, however, that both utopias and dystopias are distinctly millenarian in tone? Most of humanity will be destroyed at the end of History, with only the chosen permitted to enter the new world (or Kingdom). The possibility that “California” might be permitted to return to its prelapsarian state, with no humans on the scene, does not figure into such narratives.²⁶

By contrast, *Ecotopia* has no need to wipe out humanity. The novel depicts the California and San Francisco Bay Area of the 1970s, as they might have looked 30 or 40 years later given then-current fashions and trends. Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* is far from a perfect society: African Americans have

²³ John Harlow, Aaron Golub & Braden Allenby, “A Review of Utopian Themes in Sustainable Development Discourse,” *Sustainable Development* 21, #4 (July/Aug. 2013): 270-80, pp. 75-76.

²⁴ Among many others, this theme is addressed in Walter M. Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (New York: Lippincott, 1960).

²⁵ See Margaret Atwood’s “MadAddam Trilogy.”

²⁶ As it does in Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (London: St. Martin’s, 2007).

retreated to segregated enclaves in the cities; sexism continues; aggression has been ritualized; people are not always happy.²⁷ There are even a few oppositional conspirators thrown in, who approach Weston in the hope of getting American support for an uprising against the government. Nor does Callenbach ignore international relations: the United States is deeply embroiled in interventions throughout Latin America, with the most serious one a civil war in Brazil. Ecotopians do not trust the United States to stay at home and stick to its own last.

But how to get to Ecotopia? In his Foreword to the 40th Anniversary Edition of *Ecotopia*, publisher Malcolm Margolin writes that, in the book,

I keep catching glimpses of a Berkeley I once knew. It was a world of experimental social and economic institutions: worker co-ops, consumer co-ops, food “conspiracies,” and communes. There were women’s groups; encounter groups that encouraged spontaneity, emotion, and honesty; the nation’s first recycling program; organic gardening and a back-to-the-land movement...²⁸

Those who lived in Berkeley in the 1970s and even the early 1980s (as I did) will recognize the place. But that Berkeley is a pretty far cry from today’s, which certainly does not look like Ecotopia. Most utopian novels are vague on what we call the “transition,” and so is Callenbach. In a prequel,²⁹ written a few years later, not only is the writing far better but the story is much more compelling (to me, at least; others detest it). Essentially, the key to the Ecotopian revolution is renewable energy “too cheap to meter.” Lou Swift (aka, Tom Swift), a Bolinas high school student, has invented an easy-to-build solar cell that will undercut the prices of alternative fuels, including oil, and make independence possible. Moreover, she is willing to release the formula to the public, who can make its own solar cells and free themselves from bondage.³⁰ In the 1970s, it was possible to imagine that (1) some new solar cell process would make it possible for every person to become an electricity generator; and (2) that oil was the linchpin under the control of inimical forces, at home and abroad. In the event, while number two still carries some currency, number one has not yet come to

²⁷ Naomi Jacobs, “Failures of the imagination in *Ecotopia*,” *Extrapolation* 38, #4 (1997): 318-26.

²⁸ Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia—40th Anniversary Epistle Edition* (Berkeley, Calif: Banyan & Heyday, 2014; foreword by Malcolm Margolin), p. iv.

²⁹ Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia Emerging* (Berkeley, Calif.: Banyan, 1981).

³⁰ We are reminded here of Amory Lovin’s seminal article published not long after *Ecotopia*, “Energy strategy: the road not taken,” *Foreign Affairs* 55 (1976): 186-218, and revisited in Ronnie D. Lipschutz and Dustin Mulvaney, “The Road not Taken, Round II: Centralized vs. Distributed Energy Strategies and Human Security,” pp. 483-506, in: Hugh Dyer & Maria Julia Trombetta (eds.), *International Handbook of Energy Security* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2013).

pass, notwithstanding the flood of low-cost PVs from China into the United States. Technology does not make history or utopia—at least, not yet.

In this respect, *Pacific Edge* differs from most utopias, in that politics and engagement play a central role in the emergence of Orange County's eco-utopia. This can be seen in the two narratives that comprise the text. Tom Barnard's backstory is written into the novel as a series of italicized excerpts documenting his *hegira* from an insular Switzerland, imprisonment as a dangerous radical on his re-entry into the United States and his decision to join the political struggle for eco-utopia. In deciding to "change the world in my mind" (p. 93), Tom rejects "pocket utopias," those that are nowhere and close their borders to outsiders. Instead, he recognizes that the struggle for utopia must be an historical one; it cannot simply happen: "*Utopia is the process of making a better world, the name for one path history can take, a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process, with no end. Struggle forever*" (p. 95, italics in original). As Tom Moylan writes in an article about the novel:

in tracing the politics of the movement, Robinson meditates on the need to disperse control by means of a structural division of responsibilities among transnational and local units, and a temporal one that extends the larger political project into succeeding historical periods. In addition, useful theoretical and practical analyses and methods are drawn from a range of sources: including ecological, feminist, and Marxist theory and practice, but also capitalist insights on self-interest and methods of market development.³¹

In today's hypercynical political environment, the notion of "struggle forever" seems exhausting, not to mention improbable. "Another world is possible," but we still have no idea how to get there, in California or elsewhere.

IV. California Eco-utopias today

Are California (eco)-utopias then a thing of the past? Perhaps not. Imaginaries of the future appear to have migrated to Silicon Valley and into cyberspace, informed by both the space operas of the 1960s and 1970s ("Star Trek," "Star Wars") and the cyberspace adventures that have proliferated since the 1980s. We are warned that our Earthly Paradise is threatened—by comets and asteroids, by environmental catastrophe, by some other extinction event—and that, to save the species, we must escape, to Mars, to Proxima Centauri, to the universe

³¹ Tom Moylan, "'Utopia is when our lives matter': Reading Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge*," *Utopian Studies* 6, #2 (1995): 1-24, quote on p. 9. For those who don't have the time to read *Pacific Edge*, Moylan provides a detailed summary of the two narrative lines.

beyond.³² Or our bodies need to jack into the Matrix, where we can exist as immortal, autonomous bundles of pure energy and...who knows what?

What has changed, it seems, is that utopia is, today, for each of us alone and not for all of us together.³³ This is a development prefigured in the 1970s, in the very same culture in which Callenbach was immersed.³⁴ According to Fred Turner,³⁵ it was Stewart Brand and *The Whole Earth Catalogue* who were the left precursors of what we would, today, recognize as neo-liberal, high individualism. In the first edition of *Whole Earth*, Brand wrote, that a “realm of intimate personal power is developing—power of the individual to conduct his [sic] own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested.”³⁶ And, observes Turner,³⁷

[In *Whole Earth*] we can also explore a world whose citizens have largely turned away from the traditional political mechanisms of law making and institution building toward the building of communities based on shared tastes and social networks... To the extent that is politics and techniques grew out of the communalism of the 1980s, however, the *Catalog* should also be a warning.

Such escape is exemplified in Brand’s Silicon Valley progeny and their endless efforts to “make life better” through the “Internet of Bodies and Things,” as well as the flood of apps that seem to inundate us daily. The apotheosis of this vision is Ray Kurzweil’s “singularity,”³⁸ that point at which, some speculate, it will become possible to upload individual consciousnesses.³⁹ The end of material existence will signal the end of hunger, poverty, scarcity, injustice AND politics—or so it is believed—which is characteristic of all utopian schemes, as I

³² Ursula Heise, “What’s the Matter with Dystopia,” Public Books, Feb. 1, 2015, at: <http://www.publicbooks.org/fiction/whats-the-matter-with-dystopia> (accessed June 9, 2015). In *Aurora*, Robinson describes a flight to search of Earthlike planets, but finding none. A portion of the expedition then decides to return to the only Earthlike planet known, Earth.

³³ Jon Anderson, “Elusive Escapes? Everyday Life and Ecotopia,” *Ecotopia Online Journal* 1, #1 (Winter 2007): 64-82.

³⁴ One of the devices Weston observes in Ecotopia is a curbside newsbox, linked to a central computer, which prints out the most recent editions of daily newspapers.

³⁵ Fred Turner, “The Politics of the Whole Circa 1968—and Now,” pp. 43-53, in: Diederich Diederichsen & Anselm Franke (eds.), *The Whole Earth—California and the Disappearance of the Outside* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), p.

³⁶ Stewart Brand, “Purpose,” n.p., in: Stewart Brand (ed.), *Whole Earth Catalog* (Menlo Park Calif.: Portola Institute, Fall 1968), Cited in Turner, p. 43.

³⁷ Turner, op. cit, p. 43, 44.

³⁸ See, e.g., Charles Stross, *Accelerando* (New York: Ace, 2005) and *Glasshouse* (New York: Ace, 2006).

³⁹ Of course, no one stops to ponder the number of servers and generation capacity required for this to happen, or the ecological damage it is likely to entail. Kurzweil is the Augustine of our age: City of Man and City of Google.

noted above. Still, a string of films and novels, most of which are NOT eco-utopian, warn us that, when the machines take over, they are not likely to be friendly to their creators or the environment. Machines won't much care about ecology, either, so long as they can stay out of the rain.⁴⁰

Ah, rain. There's a rub. The California drought, now in its fourth year, raises all sorts of apocalyptic fears and fictions. The latest installment of the "Mad Max" series, set in Australia and filmed in Namibia, almost certainly offers to audiences in California a jarring vision of the future, especially in its autopian aspects. In the setting of an endless desert, water is controlled by the mad leader of a quasi-religious cult, who doles out the precious bodily fluid in dribs and drabs to a desperately poor and oppressed mass of people (oddly enough, gasoline does not seem to be in short supply—at least we never see vehicles run out of fuel). But what would Mad Max be without cars and a two-hour chase? The wide open spaces beg to be traversed, marked and destroyed, and that is certainly what happens, in a kind of nose-thumbing to Angelenos trapped on slow-moving freeways. This is no eco-utopia but, hey, guys love car chases!

IV. Reflections on *Ecotopia*, 40 years later

The rise of sustainability discourse at the beginning of the millenium might be thought to have revived notions of eco-utopia, this time in the face of climate dystopianism and doom.⁴¹ In the 1960s and 1970s, faced with the specter of nuclear holocaust and a broad sense of powerlessness in the face of a seemingly-implacable technology, many believed they would die in a nuclear war. Out of this there emerged the peace and anti-nuclear movements, whose short-term impacts were readily observable but which were not revolutionary in any sense of the word. Over the past couple of decades, the specter of climate catastrophe has become as visible and inevitable as nuclear war was a half-century ago, and the failures of politics have left a widespread feeling that there is little each of us can do at a national or global level. As a result, there has been a turn to individual and community action, much as though the larger world did not exist, in the hope that community projects will, somehow, aggregate to a global strategy.⁴²

⁴⁰ As in "The Matrix."

⁴¹ Harlow, Golub & Allenby, "A Review of Utopian Themes in Sustainable Development Discourse," op. cit.

⁴² This appears in the form of communities such as "Ecovillages." See, e.g., Karen T. Litfin, *Ecovillages: Lessons for Sustainable Community* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) and the Global Ecovillage Network at <http://gen.ecovillage.org/> (accessed June 11, 2015).

But what else can we do? In 1983, a group of “wise men” [yes, all men] published *Living with Nuclear Weapons*.⁴³ According to the book’s website⁴⁴ at Harvard University Press (the book is out of print),

Living with Nuclear Weapons presents all sides of the nuclear debate while explaining what everyone needs to know to develop *informed and reasoned opinions* about the issues. Among the specifics are a history of nuclear weaponry; an examination of current nuclear arsenals; scenarios of how a nuclear war might begin; a discussion of what can be done to promote arms control and disarmament; a study of the hazards of nuclear proliferation; an analysis of various nuclear strategies; and an explanation of how public opinion can influence policy on the nuclear arms question (emphasis added).

Note that there is nothing in that blurb about opposing or abolishing nuclear weapons. Those who pursued opposition and abolition were ridiculed as being utopian and imagining a world that could never be. Climate change recapitulates this: a Google search for “Living with Climate Change” produces almost 97,000 hits; “adaptation” has become the favored, long-term response. We need to develop an “informed and reasoned response” to climate change. People who seek radical action and want to revolutionize the way we live are ridiculed as being utopian and imagining a world that can never be.⁴⁵

In both cases, a sense of powerlessness that drives the search for utopian alternatives, most of which are what was once called “modernist” and are attainable only by the wealthy.⁴⁶ These utopias feature tall buildings faced with hanging gardens and glass walls of solar PVs, served by bullet trains, personal rapid transit pods and autonomous cars, and set in a groomed landscape that would do Downton Abbey proud. Such visions are no more realistic than the high-tech, futuristic cities imagined during the 1930s, or the underground cities of the 1950s, and no one stops to ask what they would cost, in terms of money, materials and emissions.

The sustainability movement, such as it is on university campuses, has been more driven by visions of appropriate technology and voluntary simplicity,

⁴³ Albert Carnesale, Paul Doty, Stanley Hoffman, Samuel P. Huntington, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Scott D. Sagan, & Derek Bok, *Living with Nuclear Weapons* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁴⁴ “Living with Nuclear Weapons,” Harvard University Press, at: <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674536654> (accessed June 10, 2015).

⁴⁵ See comments on Pope Francis’s recent encyclical “Laudato si’—On care for our common home (the encyclical can be found at:

<http://www.news.va/en/news/laudato-si-the-integral-text-of-pope-francis-encyc>

⁴⁶ The equivalent of this during the Cold War were probably the underground cities and bunkers in which a remnant population might survive until “living with nuclear radiation” became safe.

perhaps raised to the level of ethical and legal obligations to nature. But I do not ridicule them: we do well to pay attention to such visions, inasmuch as significant and meaningful responses are more likely to come from visionaries than from politicians, economists and engineers. This is not a call to eschew politics, especially since utopian visions, whether ecological or not, are more a motivation to action than a really existing possibility. An *Ecotopia* for today would almost certainly differ from Callenbach's, although it might look something like Robinson's. That is not enough.

In *Spaces of Hope*, David Harvey⁴⁷ discusses the failures of *spatiotemporal* utopias, set in another time and place, and their apolitical and authoritarian nature. He is also critical of what he calls "process utopias," which focus more on the here and now in the hope that they will, someday, expand to encompass the world (along with the good feeling required). Harvey writes

What the materialized utopianism of spatial form so clearly confronts is the problematics of closure and it is this which the utopianism of social process so dangerously evades. Conversely we find that fragmentation and dispersal cannot work, and that the bitter struggle of 'either-or' perpetually interferes with the gentler and more harmonious dialectic of 'both-and' when it comes to socio-ecological choices.⁴⁸

Harvey prefers what he calls "dialectical utopianism," which does not and cannot create new worlds *ex nihilo* by the hand of God or via the social and technological miracles of which engineers dream. As he puts it,

The architecture of dialectical utopianism must be grounded in contingent matrices of existing and already achieved social relations. These comprise political-economic processes, assemblages of technological capacities, and the superstructural features of law, knowledge, political beliefs, and the like. It must also acknowledge its embeddedness in a physical and ecological world that is always changing.⁴⁹

But Harvey warns, once again, us to be wary of purely community-scale strategies:

Dialectical utopianism must confront the production of 'community' and 'coming together for the purposes of collective action' in some fashion

⁴⁷ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley, Calif.: UC Press, 2000).

⁴⁸ *id.*, p. 196.

⁴⁹ *id.*, p. 231.

and articulate the place and meaning of this phenomenon *within a broader frame of politics*.⁵⁰

What lessons for today and the imagined ecotopian future in California might we take from our three novels and Harvey's caveats? First, dystopia and despair are always easier to invoke than the hard political work of dialectical utopianism. The former don't require change or action, just business as usual. Barring a runaway greenhouse, those who are well-off today will likely be well-off in the future. Moreover, dystopias already exist across the Global South—as noted above, slums in Mexico City stood in for Los Angeles in "Elysium"—and we would do well to do more today in those places than fetishize our carbon footprints.

Second, the technologies and institutions that could help with dialectical utopianism already exist, although they tend to be dominated by the wealthy and powerful and are not very flashy. But heed Fred Turner's warnings about the utopianism of *Whole Earth*: that way lies individual madness. We must to mobilize for a "long march" through the institutions, some of which might survive and others not. In my view, an excellent example of how not to march through the institutions can be seen in the struggles over implementation of California's AB32—the "Global Warming Solutions Act"—and its progeny, under which centralized renewables are preferred over distributed generation by the state's utilities and energy companies, while individuals seek to break away from the grid (Brand, again).⁵¹

Third, there is no technical fix. Smart grids and internets of bodies and things yoked to cars, houses, appliances and all manner of energy-gorging machines and devices will only lead to more things bought and thrown away, more "kipple," in the words of Philip K. Dick.⁵² We are already confronted with a "crisis of underconsumption," as income growth stagnates, manufacturing is offshored, and robots take over more and more middle-class jobs; is there a way to develop a dialectical utopianism out of what is now regarded by some as one more looming catastrophe? Whatever the future, it will not arrive without politics and struggle: there can be no eco-utopias in California's future without them.

⁵⁰ id., p. 240. Emphasis added.

⁵¹ Kevin W. Bell & Ronnie D. Lipschutz, "Getting to Sustainability: Policy, Politics, Practices," Paper prepared for presentation at the 2015 AAAS-Pacific Division Conference, San Francisco, Calif., June 16, 2015).

⁵² In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Doubleday, 1968, another California science fiction dystopia that served as the basis for "Blade Runner," Philip K. Dick invents "kipple," which is "useless objects, like junk mail or match folders after you use the last match or gum wrappers of yesterday's homeopape. When nobody's around, kipple reproduces itself. For instance, if you go to bed leaving any kipple around your apartment, when you wake up the next morning there's twice as much of it. It always gets more and more" (Ballantine, 1982, p. 57).