Chapter Two

Ecotopia Revisited in Image

The Imagined (and Enacted) Peril and Promise of Portland

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We need utopias to help us see, envision rather, the possibilities and perils that face us intragenerationally and intergenerationally. Envisioning and enacting sustainability in place-based ways is more essential than ever, as the stakes are more dire than ever. Our very existence is at stake, not to mention the existence of any future generations. That said, it is overwhelming to think about climate change, degradation of our various environments, and increased scarcity of resources like food and clean air and water. This chapter will show, through student practices of image-based invention strategies, how sustainability, stewardship, and environmental gratitude can come together as meaningful curricular components in the space of a writing classroom. Such ambition faces a daunting task.

Close to twenty years have passed since Christian Weisser and Sidney Dobrin published their opening salvo into the field of ecocomposition with their edited collection, *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches*.[1] Since the publication of *Ecocomposition*, much has been written on the relationship "between nature, place, environment, habitat, location, and discourse," and I'd assert that both those inside and outside the field of composition understand the saliency of ecological inquiry from a humanistic, as well as scientific perspective.[2] This track record should not come off as a dismissal of the reality that many students (like the broader populous) often find themselves bleary-eyed from the barrage of platitudes about sustainability and basically anything "eco." The importance and opportunity for environmental consciousness and action are as imperative as ever, even if attitudes conducive to felt and effective change ebb and flow. Granted, we find ourselves amid environmental crisis, but we also find ourselves with tools and curricular foundations to make solidarity and success possible.

The development and multivarious trajectories of composition have enabled ecocomposition to sustain and be sustained. The advent of writing in the disciplines and writing across the curriculum, combined with concern over environment and issues of environmental health, plays well with the multidisciplinarity of ecocomposition. That said, there is an unfulfilled prophecy of ecocomposition, one that hinges on drawing attention "to the ideas of context and social construction of identity to include physical realities of place, and of natural and constructed space, both ideological constructs that often seem ignored in favor of more conceptual ideological structures such as gender and race."[3] This partition is a false one and need not exist.

Thinking geographically, spatially rather, necessitates ecocompositionists underscore new conceptualizations of how situated materialities and contestations of materiality enable engagement with the local aspects of place and environment, without neglecting the multitude of ecologies that make up our identities and dictate our envisioning of possibilities. Previously, I have asserted the need for a new conceptual frame, one required to reroute the scripts and texts of our everyday realities, so that we can achieve new possibilities predicated on dismantled systems of oppression (e.g., race and gender) as well as realizing heath and healing of our environments.[4] This visioning of utopias, this "calling in" of better realities, means interrupting and rearticulating systems of oppression while attending to the health of our land base and waterways. Dobrin argues in *Ecology, Writing Theory, and New Media: Writing Ecology* for a preference that we think expansively about ecology and writing; I read his call as a mandate to make our conceptual thinking anchor to a real situated environment if we are to have any sort of praxis or real-world impact.[5]

Ecocomposition has to make an argument, through rational inquiry but with extreme passion, nothing short of speaking for "the soil, and for nerve and muscle."[6] From my vantage, this plea for urgency is situated and focused argument, and rhetorical acumen is the unfulfilled promise of ecocomposition as a field. And, at least curricularly, this is what I aim to suggest is possible with this chapter's ecotopian engagement through a themed composition course focusing on Ecotopia. Pedagogically, students are stymied when asked to write essays from an unsituated rhetorical position. Teaching composition, intentionally or otherwise, from a modes method, one that "focuses on formal practice without an understanding of the purpose for the practice" leaves the student "divorced from any real reason to write."[7] Even though composition has evolved tremendously over the past decades, there are often classrooms and assignments where students develop writing skills, often as technical expertise or craft, but fail to make the connection to skilled rhetorical assessment. Such a charge is always already present, regardless of the theoretical

progress any field or discipline has made. Effective engagement with the challenges of our day means that one must be able to deftly execute rhetorical assessment, and reach an audience with meaning and message, then hopefully see movement into action. Conceptualizations of ways to achieve this rhetorical situatedness are plentiful. For my themed composition curriculum I have chosen to go the route of combining students' everyday practice with the possibilities and thoughts of a better, more utopian, environment.

For a utopia to be meaningful enough that individuals feel compelled to enact it, to turn spatial practice and aspirations (e.g., behaviors, practices, expressions, and values) into a real place, the utopia must evoke some sort of emotion. Jacques Cousteau's famous observation that "people protect what they love" rings true here. If a curriculum can evoke emotion through investedness, situatedness, and collective envisioning of place, then we are well on our way to making strong appeals and observations that may foster utopias. For sure, we are well on our way to harnessing pathos in our rhetorical maneuvers.

Concepts of language, text, and emotion must soar beyond historical definitions that have been given play in the classroom; a new path to make connections between realities and possibilities must come to bear in ways that exhilarate and encourage our threatened generations to dream and behave passionately so as to call in new worlds and ways. This is an emotional path, one that does use the head space but ultimately sinks into the heart space. Emotion and environment, fortunately, work quite well together. Emotion somehow gets connected to a physical place, where things happen, memories get made, and hopes or goals get played out. One could argue that the terrain of really good curriculum does this same thing. Impactful curriculum evokes emotion—so much so that one embodies the curricular tenets—the curriculum inspires us on a variety of levels and registers. Psychologically, we are "rooted in place" by our dreams and emotional connections to the various environments of our place and what we want it to be.

This chapter sets course based on a "need to recognize fundamental interconnections between culture, survival, body, and place."[8] For teachers, the aim is to highlight the ongoing usefulness of literature and image as a means to enact and perform place-based inquiry and possibility. By using the historical and pedagogical precedent of place-based inquiry and action, one can articulate a curriculum that can avoid the default to a modes-based composition that Sumner so thoroughly warns us of in his insistence upon "argument pedagogy" fostered by a classroom that is really a "community of inquirers."[9] I use a place-centric piece of literature, *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbahk, that has been referred to as the novel that predicted Portland[10]; Ecotopia, as a manifesto and as a piece of fiction, has seen a renaissance in recent years just

as population and "pride in place" have increased in the Cascadia region of North America. However, the utility of this text as a springboard to sustainability and environmental connectedness, as well as a text for envisioning better futures, can be much more expansive in geographic resonance. My hope is that *Ecotopia* can be used anywhere, in any classroom.

ROOTED IN PLACE, ROOTED IN TEXT

Here, I pause to note that my own engagement with place vis-à-vis *Ecotopia* is impacted by my positionality as a relocated southerner. Portland has been my home for close to a decade, but I'm still learning about "The Rose City" and digging in . . . still becoming rooted. One of my favorite Gary Snyder quotes is, "Find your place on the planet. Dig in, and take responsibility from there."[11] There is a mythos to any place, with Portland being no exception. I'm still unpacking, juxtaposing, and discerning the real, the fictional, and the imagined Portland as I try to calibrate my daily experiences with what I thought Portland was before I moved here, how it's represented in the news and media, and even how it's envisioned in others' texts. *Ecotopia* is a useful text for such consciousness-raising juxtaposition as it examines the prescience, and absurdity, of the ecological utopia portrayed in the novel.

My assumption is that most readers of this chapter possess at least a passing familiarity with the plot and storyline of *Ecotopia*, as well as a bit of awareness as to the reception and renaissance of Callenbach's novel. As I mention, *Ecotopia* could function as a core text in curriculum regardless of geographic location; however, I did choose the novel quite frankly because of its prescience in "predicting Portland" with the hope that as my students go through their daily lives they might note "much of Portland, Ore., with its public transport, slow-growth planning and eat-local restaurants, can seem like Ecotopia made reality."[12] When placing my order with the campus bookstore, my aspiration was that reading and writing about themes and everyday life in Portland in *Ecotopia* would be a "way in" for students to look closely and critically at the place in which they live, specifically through an environmental and aspirational/utopian lens. My essay sequences were designed to facilitate such an inquiry, and were set up so that composing would occur through a variety of registers (logocentric and otherwise). By sharing compositions that examine narratives of ecological utopia and possibility, my composition classroom would aspire for daily presentations that profile how student critique vis-à-vis ecotopian literature enables a situated environmental reflective practice and approach. Sometimes this noble goal was met, and other times things just dragged.

Our first step, as a class, was to read and simply synthesize *Ecotopia* as a novel. Prior to introducing our classroom takeaways of key themes and interactions, I will start with a brief summary of the novel. Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* is set in 1999, which is twenty-five years after it was written in 1974. Callenbach's novel consists of diary entries and reports from the protagonist, journalist William Weston. Weston is the first American reporter to visit Ecotopia, a small country that seceded from the United States in 1980. Ecotopia is made up of what used to be Washington, Oregon, and Northern California. Ecotopia has been an independent nation for nineteen years, and most Americans, including the US government, still do not know very much about their northwestern neighbor. The Ecotopians are secretive and cut off from their American counterparts, and this has bred hostility from many on both sides of the border. The Times-Post of New York, with the approval of the president of the United States, sends Weston to Ecotopia.

HISTORICAL, ECOLOGICAL, AND LITERARY CONNECTIONS

When I first began to grapple with my concern over what sort of eco-place Portland actually is, or what Portland's potential might have been (or will be), I nearly immediately thought of Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities."[13] There is one quote specifically that I find useful; it is when Anderson writes about the power of imagining as a process that unifies (as much as the actual product of the collective imagining). Imagining as process seems apropos to a classroom where there is much pedagogical attention given to writing as process. *Ecotopia*, and Portland, both serve as useful texts to examine how we compose our communities and their attendant possibilities. Anderson operationalizes a definition of nation in relation to community as follows:

> I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. . . . Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.[14]

It is useful, for me, to see Anderson's emphasis on "style." One could take such a notion to reading Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, namely in an analysis of the collective identity that the citizens project and enact. The same analysis could be asserted when reading Portland as a text and examining the qualities that appear to be foregrounded in Portland's dominant identities (e.g., real-life Ecotopia, hipster haven, liberal mecca).

For instance, before moving to Portland, I (like many others I've met) had bought into the notion of Portland as shining city on a hill . . . an ultra-creative, progressive, and eco-friendly place. I imagined Portland as a place that I'd love and fit right in with kindred spirits and like minds. And, yes, I was generally correct in this self-indulgent assumption. I do love Portland, and the people here are wonderful. I'm grateful and lucky to live here. I have become a Portland booster; and, I'd argue that Portland is not a city that shies away from self-aggrandizing and boosterism. There is a certain style in which Portlanders imagine themselves and how we choose to see and re/present our community. A discernable aesthetic to Portland exists; it's palpable. When students read *Ecotopia*, they remark on a similar aesthetic that permeates the imagined nation in Callenbach's novel. Interestingly, students are often turned off by the style of imaging and representation that takes place in *Ecotopia*; there is a smugness and self-righteousness that does not quite sit well with some students when reading the novel. When these same students turn to "reading" Portland as a text they sometimes discover contradictions as well as a similar smugness and self-righteousness, qualities of Portland's collective imagined identity that they may not have picked up on previously, enabling a new perspective on the reality and possibility of the place known as home.

While the use of Anderson's "imagined communities" premise by itself is productive, a bit of theoretical scaffolding allows an even more incisive critique of Portland's various place-based articulations. Here, I suggest a turn to other conceptualizations of the imaginary to serve as foil to my premise that Portland really was a reasonably apt manifestation of Callenbach's vision in *Ecotopia*.

In his work *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, coming from a Marxist tradition that emphasizes the imaginary as illusion and a Freudian one that treats illusion as fantasy, Lacan articulates an illusion as created in response to a psychological need.[15] Do we "need" Portland to be Ecotopia? To not be Seattle or San Francisco, or even Berkeley? Do we find ourselves beholden to an illusion that Portland is Ecotopia, even if the materiality of everyday life here shows us something different? Lacan's contention is that the unconscious functions linguistically (as opposed to symbolically or instinctually) and that the unconscious is fundamentally a discourse upon itself preoccupied with antagonism of the Other as a referent or foil. Such a foil can serve as an attraction or ideal, or oppositely as something to revile or toil against. As you will see from my students' narratives, there is a case for this assertion and application of both possibilities when figuring whether Ecotopia is an exacting illusion or sincere possibility.

THEMES AND ARTIFACTS:
A NOD TOWARD THE MULTIMODALITY OF *ECOTOPIA*

In my course, as we read and debriefed each class about what was "going on" in Callenbach's piece of fiction, my students and I collectively identified several key themes that drove the storyline in *Ecotopia*. Under each theme, the class became invested in noting specific exemplars of the stated theme. Later, when it came time to compose essay feeders, and ultimately formal polished essays, students returned to these identified themes as actionable touchstones. When returning to the themes and exemplars, I encouraged students to either write "against" the theme, in juxtaposition with what they might be seeing and experiencing on a daily basis in Portland, or to write "with" the theme as an affirmation of Callenbach's *Ecotopia* having become manifest in (or maybe even predicting) Portland.

In "Cultures, Contexts, Images, and Texts: Materials for a New Age of Meaning Making," Kathleen Blake Yancey asserts that effective recognition of the tension between print and digital composition and representation is appropriate, much needed, and ultimately unavoidable. Yancey, in using the metaphor of geology, delineates the tectonic shift that has occurred due to technology, the digital turn, and multimodal composition. Writers are working differently and in tension with historical paradigms, curricular and otherwise, to create a dynamic and changed landscape. In sum, the digital and multimodal is comprehensively "re-forming the academy; pointing us to new ways to write, new kinds of projects, new ways of circulating scholarship."[16] To many a reader, such observations are stating the obvious. I agree. These are things that we all have known for some time. Such statements are passe. That is, until educators are pressed to identify how our curriculum has kept up with this shift both technically and cognitively.

In my curricular engagement with *Ecotopia*, the classroom analysis is informed by multimodal student reflections on Ecotopia, as used as a supplemental text in an undergraduate writing course. In addition to collectively discussing the themes of *Ecotopia*, students were to respond to the reading in a journal. This was as much an opportunity for them to engage in low-stakes reflective writing as it was anything else like textual analysis or interpretation. That said, I did ask (or mandate, rather) that they experiment while journaling with various invention strategies explained in class to explore and gather materials for class discussions and essays. We would use our reflections from journaling to suss out *Ecotopia*'s theme and juxtapose our everyday observations of life in Portland.

The first theme was "transportation." Students noticed specific examples of Callenbach's concern over sustainable transportation. Namely, our classroom

community kept returning to instances where citizens of *Ecotopia* utilized electric minivans and taxis, rode zero-emission trains or magnetic rail, and reveled in the omnipresence of free bikes for citizen use. We grouped architecture under the theme of "transportation." The reality of sustainable architecture, much like current LEED certification, struck a chord with students, as did Callenbach's preoccupation with connecting buildings by way of sky bridges. Portland is a city famous for its bridges, and the concept of sustainable, health-oriented activity inducing vis-à-vis walking, spatial connectedness resonated with each class I taught the novel in. As a new immigrant to Portland, this particular consciousness of bridge and salubrious lifestyle was striking to me. Students also remarked on the fact that air traffic over Ecotopia was forbidden.

As we read and discussed *Ecotopia*, students were also required to share photos of places and characteristics in their everyday life that, in some way, paralleled or contrasted what was being described and mapped out through the narrative. Students could share photos they took themselves or ones they discovered while information foraging on the internet. The photos that appear in this chapter are ones that were "discovered" on the photo sharing site Flickr. All the images in this chapter are available for sharing based on Creative Commons copyright agreement. Using such images in class also provided an opportunity to discuss issues of copyright and fair use in academic writing and publishing.

During the first quarter that I used *Ecotopia* as the cornerstone of curriculum, Portland's much anticipated new no-car bridge opened. Tilikum Crossing, aka Bridge of the People, is the first major bridge in the United States designed to allow access to transit vehicles, cyclists, and pedestrians but not cars; Tilikum Crossing has been lauded as the "bridge to the future" and to date has been embraced with the sentiment appropriate with such fanfare.[17] Portlanders like their bridges, especially when the bridge memorializes the city's commitment to cutting-edge architecture and sustainability. Many students made this connection immediately and submitted photos of Tilikum Crossing (see figure 2.1).

Other themes under the umbrella of transportation seemed to obviously fly in the proverbial face of everyday life in Portland. The two most striking were students' observations that there most certainly is air traffic in the skies over Portland and the fact that Portland's traffic is horrific. A couple of students noted that traffic in Portland was recently ranked tenth worst in the country as reported by the Oregonian.[18] (See figure 2.2.)

At the same instance, however, nearly every student in my courses remarks on the expansiveness . . . the comprehensiveness rather of public transportation in Portland, Oregon. It feels safe to say that there has been a bit of

Figure 2.1. Tilikum Crossing
Photo Credit: Eric Prado (no modifications made).

Figure 2.2. Traffic on I-5 Northbound
Photo Credit: John Russell (no modifications made).

self-generated hullabaloo detailing the alternative transportation options in Portland. Tri-Met, the metropolitan transit authority in Portland Metro offers robust mass transit services ranging from bus, light rail, streetcar, aerial tram, and bike programs. Students found ample images (as evidenced in figure 2.3) to generate comparisons between everyday Portland and Callenbach's *Ecotopia*.

And, Portlanders are known for their love of cycling. Many students circulated images of bikes. But, among the most striking was that of a "ghost bike" shared by one of my students (see figure 2.4). The ghost bike illuminates the night in this picture, warning passersby that roads are dangerous places. Ghost bikes are placed to memorialize a rider who has been killed or seriously injured in collision with a car, bus, or another motorized vehicle on the streets of Portland.

When discussing these memorials, students underscore the increasingly dangerous traffic conditions, worsening with Portland's population increase. The class sentiment (in just about every class) seemed to be, at least at the end of the quarter, that even though Portland still exudes an image of an alternative transportation Shangri-la, the reality is much different. With the city's popularity has come a critical mass of congestion, releasing the genie

Figure 2.3.   Portland, Oregon, Tri-Met Streetcar
Photo Credit: Jasperdo (no modifications made).

Figure 2.4.   Ghost Bike
Photo Credit: Sean Bonner (no modifications made).

of urbanization, placing Portland on par with other hip and popular West Coast metropolises like Seattle and forcing a reframing of how residents will see and experience their city. To be fair, (at least for now) the incidence of death, as well as serious injury, while riding a bike in Portland is well below the national and international average, according to the 2015 Portland Traffic Safety Report.[19]

Another iconic image that students would quite often share as their composition prompts, when discussing cutting-edge and *Ecotopian* transportation, is the Portland aerial tram (pictured in figure 2.5).

The aerial tram connects Portland's Southwest Waterfront neighborhood, and riverfront campus of Oregon Health & Science University with the main hospitals and education buildings of Oregon Health & Science University. I work at Oregon Health & Science University, so I ride the tram a few times a week, and I'm able to ride it free of charge. So for me, a bit of the novelty has receded. However, I seem to be in the minority here as each day Portland's aerial tram serves as a major tourist attraction for residents and visitors alike, willing to pay $4.50 for a round-trip ride. My students seem to like the tram as well, both for its exciting ride replete with vistas of Mount Hood and Mount St. Helens as well as what they described the tram to represent. Many students felt that the Portland aerial tram was quite similar to a type of transportation that one might encounter in the fictional world of *Ecotopia*. Such a form of transport intimates futurism, green transport, and a (quite literally) connection between nature, urbanization, technology, and health.

Figure 2.5. Portland Aerial Tram
Photo Credit: Paul Kimo McGregor (no modifications made).

The beauty of the rhetoric and mythos of *Ecotopia* is that it can be "read" and enacted anywhere. One of the curricular goals I have is to show how such reading can be put upon actual places as they exist as well as how we'd like for them to. Looking at the allure of the Portland aerial tram serves as a nice jumping off point for such an application. Place, even utopian mythical ones, can be enacted . . . making or producing preference and performance (aka space) and physical built place. An article in *The Oregonian* notes that Chicago may soon have an aerial tram network inspired by, but surpassing, Portland's. The idea is that there would be "a 17-story-high aerial gondola network that would ferry tourists and Chicagoans around the city's downtown, providing eye-popping views of its iconic skyline."[20] The description of Chicago's tram network sounds strikingly similar to the aerial bridges and connections of Callenbach's *Ecotopia*. Maybe there is mimicry at work here, but even if that is not the case there is a certain affective and inspirational sensibility present. During our class discussions, we would endeavor to apprehend the qualities and possibilities that go along with such a "structure of feeling."[21] Namely, we looked to such communal consciousness as "defined as social experiences in solution."[22] Students often remarked that a large part

of their social identity, as a resident of Portland (and more broadly as an Oregonian), was bound up in a certain orientation or advocacy for progressive attitudes and approaches to solutions for problems.

Our next theme epitomizes such felt advocacy and attitude as much as any area that I can envision. This theme, identified in *Ecotopia*, was "energy and technology," and I hazard that progressive efforts at energy and technology reflect the sort of shared historical consciousness of certain communities that Williams describes. In our particular case it is the nation of *Ecotopia* or the "green" and "sustainable" city of Portland. There is a consensus, seemingly, in certain geographic areas as well as virtual communities over the viability and necessity of alternative energy technologies and renewable energy (i.e., two of five themes students agreed upon). These two topics, of energy technologies and renewable energy, are, or can be, quite polarizing, sparking strong debates among individuals and groups. Certain places may tend to produce an identity that suggests a strong affinity for alternative energy technologies and renewable energy; students agreed that *Ecotopia* underscored this premise and that Portland (maybe even the Pacific Northwest categorically) made such preferences into reality.

For their multimodal artifacts, submitted in support of this theme, students shared everything from the grandiose to the pedestrian. One of the more striking images of the Oregon landscape appears as one drives through the Columbia River Gorge on Interstate 84. Pretty much as soon as one passes the town of Hood River, beginning to leave the rain shadow of Mount Hood and the Willamette Valley and entering the edges of Oregon's high desert region, the sight of hundreds of windmills grips any observant traveler. At times, the windmills perched atop the walls of the gorge and not-so-distant hills, seem to go on forever. The windmills are numerous and striking; they are also huge, underscoring the totem-like quality and context of Oregon's windmills, as well as the undeniable reminder of a changed energy and natural landscape.

In class, we'd share comparisons of other similarly striking landscapes, such as oil derricks or fields of solar panels (neither of which populate a significant portion of Portland or the Pacific Northwest for that matter). But, all of these energy technologies possess a certain environmental rhetoric to them; just about all the students in the class got this concept pretty easily and were eager to map identity and attitude onto such places. Oftentimes, students perilously compressed the identity of entire states into caricature when discussing how a preference for particular forms of energy can be tied to collective consciousness and identity. Texas, for its oil, and West Virginia for its coal seemed to be favorites of the students.

In a sense, this is a glimpse into the art and practice of critical geography as advocated by Doreen Massey. I particularly like Massey's notion of stretched

out social relations, where she suggests places can be "imagined as articu-lated moments in networks of social relations and understandings."[23] Such envisioning is invaluable when mapping the affinity and felt connectedness of individuals and groups over polarizing issues like energy and technology. Individuals may congregate in certain places, like Portland, if they are lucky enough to be able to relocate (similar to the citizens of *Ecotopia*), or individu-als may find themselves relegated to a geographic environ that runs counter to their individual affinity for such things as alternative energy technologies and renewable energy. In such cases, physical distance mandates that such connections to community exist in Massey's "stretched out" way, but exist as an affinity nonetheless. Individuals with such affinities may even endeavor to enact their affinities counter to the dominant articulation of their physical sur-roundings. In sum, they would aim to produce space, making do in a tactical way against their (environmental) conditions of engagement. For such indi-viduals the community and promise of real places like Portland, or imagined ones like Ecotopia, may serve as a strong and consistently present inspiration.

Such inspiration sets in motion the city as "in process" and "as possibilities machine" as Henri Lefebvre would describe it.[24] Edward Soja decodes what Lefebvre intimates better than most when he suggests the power of "Third-space" thinking. Soja argues that Thirdspace "must be additionally guided by some form of potentially emancipatory *praxis*, the translation of knowledge into action in a conscious—and consciously spatial—effort to improve the world in some significant way."[25] When decoding themes in *Ecotopia*, the class would often come up with examples and particularities from everyday life—simple practices that define community identity as well as social and environmental possibility. One such example clarified the approach to waste management in the Portland Metro area, which still amazes me even though I have resided here for some time. Trash is collected every two weeks; how-ever, compost and comprehensive mixed-use recycling are collected weekly. This is a radical departure from some of the other places I've lived. In fact, the genesis for *Ecotopia* emerged with Ernest Callenbach deliberating over what could be done with all the waste that contemporary society was produc-ing. From image and compositional reflection, students did concede Port-land's preoccupation and outright zeal for low-waste production/recycling, sustainability, and renewable energy sources.

The fervor for low-impact waste is apparent in the options students have, including the drying of their hands at school with an air dryer versus paper towels; students submitted multiple images of this. Compostable products, including bags of all types, appear just about everywhere. In 2012, Portland also became one of several cities on the West Coast to limit, and ban in certain situations, the use of plastic bags in grocery stores.[26] Students, dur-

ing class discussion, often appeared to see this as a quite normal and logical existence. When the topic came up that other geographic areas lacked similar mandates there were always a few students to which this was surprising.

Oftentimes, progressives will lament the participation of neoliberal government or private enterprise when involved in environmental or social justice efforts. The preference seems to be that "real" environmentalism is organic (pun intended) and forms from the masses of like-minded grassroots organizers. Yes, this is true. However, one thing that Callenbach shows us in *Ecotopia* is that such groups create governmental (capitalistic even) organizations and institutions. In fact, Callenbach does not subvert the capitalist paradigm per se; rather, he envisions a functioning democratic socialist nation with strong eco-sensibilities and ethics. In *Ecotopia*, institutions form consensus when it comes to environmental ethics. Here, I quote at length a passage from an earlier article where I assert that ethics form and articulate in a dialectic, and engaging in a "purity debate" about such ethics negates the possibility for meaningful reform:

> Even if our agency has been reduced to what we consume, by shopping at Whole Foods Market and supporting their practices of sound environmental stewardship and employee equality we are engaging and experiencing different possibilities driven by different ethics and logics. The responsibility of the progressive in organizations of any kind is to direct the discourse to areas of importance, especially ones not predicated on the benefit of the minority at the expense and exploitation of the few. If this sort of economic participation is not palatable, one should entertain the possibility of supporting multiple economies on a community or local level (i.e., coops or alternative currencies). Regardless, it would be a mistake not to consider all possibilities (even ones with the "enemy" or "oppressor") when one is precariously positioned in undesirable hegemonic relations.[27]

In simple form, this statement asks that we aim to change (and support change) structurally and strategically, just and as we organize and maneuver tactically in conditions not necessarily of our own making. Participation and proliferation of environmentally minded practices must be tied to both strategy and tactics, predisposed to include individuals, groups, and institutions both public and private.

The next theme, addressed by the class, focuses on the "way people live" in the words of my students. It was at this point that I offered up an explanation of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus. In Bourdieu's *Distinction*, he suggests that habitus encompasses our "taste" for cultural objects—art, food, and clothing. He asserts that aesthetic sensibilities are shaped by the culturally ingrained habitus.[28] Upper classes, for instance, possess a taste for fine art due to the fact they have been socialized to appreciate art from an early

age. Conversely, the working classes lack historical access to "high art," consequently lacking cultivated habitus suited to play and "feel" the fine art "game." Bourdieu often reminds readers that habitus is so ingrained that people nearly always mistake the "feel for the game" as natural instead as opposed to culturally developed. One could extend such notions of distinction, taste, preference, and bias to the citizenry of Ecotopia and Portland.

Ecotopia's, and Portland's, zeal for local and often organic food and products was an obvious touchstone for students. Images depicting co-ops and farmers markets always abound when discussing and defining preferences for food and the relationship people have with it, be these people Portlanders or Ecotopians. Per capita, Portland ranks second in the United States for farmer's markets, just behind Washington, DC, surprisingly.[29] Even though Portland is number two, its locavore culture and boosterism "feels" (a la Bourdieu) unrivaled.

When Callenbach penned *Ecotopia* in the early 1970s, legalization of marijuana was a pipe dream, literally and figuratively. Legal pot in Oregon and Washington today, seems as much as any correlation to mirror Callenbach's fictional utopia. Students shared quite a few photos of "pot shops" from around the Portland area. In fact, marijuana dispensaries in Oregon now outnumber McDonald's and Starbucks.[30] Having grown up in a time where even medical marijuana was circumspect, I continue to be amazed at how my students view legal marijuana as "no big deal" and how they take for granted its ubiquity.

Ecotopians live in a land where foodways resemble those of present-day Portland. Significantly, Ecotopians privilege foods without sugar and preservatives, which students easily map onto the contemporary preference for clean, whole, and gluten-free (as well as local) food. Characters in Callenbach's novel also fetishize local arts and indigenous spiritual practices, both core components of habitus in present-day Portland. While Callenbach paints a utopian portrait on most fronts, the one piece of the novel that students always stumble with is the inconsistency of his insertion of the mock warfare games played by Ecotopians The enthusiasm for outdoor and athletic activity is characteristically Portland and Pacific Northwest, however the fake (supposedly more peaceful) war games played by Ecotopians just about always gets labeled as the dark underbelly of Ecotopia when we parse out themes as a class.

Gender, relationships, and race serve as hallmarks of Ecotopia's progressivism. However, like contemporary Portland, all is not as well as it seems. Ecotopians often live in extended families, and tend to live by choice in ethnically separated localities. Their economic enterprises are generally employee owned and controlled. There seems to be much tolerance and sincere empathy for multiple perspectives; however, segregation occurs along lines of race and ethnicity.

By reading text, image, and place against (and with) *Ecotopia*, students can juxtapose the utopian and dystopian realities. Such critical juxtaposition can be set up to bear upon one of the United States' hallmark green cities (i.e., Portland) or any other place of one's choosing. Students would often submit photos that epitomize such juxtaposition when it comes to injustices centered on gentrification and discrimination along lines of race and gender. On the surface, all may seem well (and even progressive) in Portland, Ecotopia, and elsewhere; however, further (multimodal and multifaceted) scrutiny shows that systemic forms of oppression and exploitation thrive albeit with a different veneer.

The final set of themes we usually address, when dissecting *Ecotopia*, deals with political representation and economic relations. Again, Callenbach's prescience is uncanny yet flawed in parts. We saw the first nomination of a woman by a major political party in 2016; in Callenbach's *Ecotopia* the current governmental administration is woman-led (but not exclusively female) and government structures are highly decentralized. Strikingly and quite nonutopian, the national defense strategy has focused on developing a highly advanced arms industry, while also allegedly maintaining hidden weapons of mass destruction within major US population centers to discourage conquest and annexation.

Students usually seem readily available and capable of identifying these themes in everyday life, both locally and especially nationally. Ecotopia, as a nation, operationalizes a modus operandi that is contradictory but completely plausible (maybe palatable) with what many of my students see on a daily basis, either in person or through media.

In *Ecotopia*, science and technology aren`t related to economic growth, however students would often offer up images that show a (supposed) correlation between technology and wealth. In sum, such a correlation plays out, though it creates pretty significant income disparity (e.g., San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland).

To this end, notice figure 2.6, which depicts the homeless crisis that many West Coast cities are now endeavoring to grapple with. The crisis has reached epic proportion and has resulted in many states making emergency declarations.[31] This is certainly not very Ecotopian, where there is basic income for everyone.

ENVOI: CLOSING THOUGHTS ON PRAXIS

Lawrence Buell, in his seminal work of ecocriticism, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American*

Figure 2.6.   Homeless Camp
Photo Credit: UrbexNW (no modifications made).

Culture, emphasizes that the environmental crisis is "a crisis of the imagina-tion" and that solving the environmental crisis hinges on imagining nature and humanity's relation to it.[32] Buell underscores the role of the arts (espe-cially literature) in collective cultural imagining of our spaces and places in the natural world. The use of *Ecotopia* in a college writing course, where we are asked to show students the world through the lens of various academic discourses, holds the possibility for operationalizing a variety of experiential registers. Here, aptly, we might usefully turn to James Gee's advocacy for thinking expansively about discourse.

Specifically, Gee explodes the concept of *Discourse* ("big D" Discourse). For Gee, *discourse* ("little d") refers to language-in-use. When discussing the combination of language with other social practices (behavior, values, ways of thinking, clothes, food, customs, perspectives) within a specific group, Gee refers to that as Discourse. Individuals may be part of many different Discourse communities, for example "when you 'pull-off' being a culturally specific sort of 'everyday' person, a 'regular' at the local bar . . . a teacher or a student of a certain sort, or any of a great many other 'ways of being in the world.'"[33]

Ecotopia, and similar narratives of ecological utopia and possibility, can be read (and realized) through a lens of being and observation. Specifically,

such a lens would assert a privileging of emotional connection with, and action toward, imagined and enacted spaces. Through engagement with a variety of, both high and low stakes, writing assignments, students were able to build an experiential register with their own writing while developing voice and imagination as they relate to aspects and possibilities for sustainability. From my time with the text of *Ecotopia* and students' readings of it, I am left with a firm belief that *Ecotopia* can serve as a strong platform for the study of the relationships (and their implications) between human beings and the natural world.

E. O. Wilson, in his seminal work *Biophilia*, observes that the human mind is affected and shaped by an urbanized, modern, social world (saturated with image and information); the deep structure of the mind is inevitably adapted to, and informed by, the natural environment in which it evolved.[34] But, human beings have an innate instinct to connect emotionally with nature. In an extension of this analysis, my assignment is praxis driven and encourages (through text and image) that students articulate a connection with the pursuit of ecological utopias through a theory of ecopsychological "structure of feeling."[35] How does it "feel" to recognize, to look for, or to experience the opposite of what one seems to be conjuring in one's mind when reading *Ecotopia* and living our daily lives? Hopefully, my pedagogical sharing underscores ways that place-based readings of utopian texts enable, foster rather, student writing and reflection on situated ecological possibility and peril.

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