West Coast Ecotopias

Green Futures at the Intersection of Speculative Fiction, Environmental Literature, and Bioregionalism

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1. Introduction

West Coast ecotopian novels offer the reader visions of a green, utopian future in Northern California, Oregon, and Washington. In this dissertation, I will contextualize that literary phenomenon within the larger contours of utopian literature and science fiction, as well as within environmental literature, by means of a close reading of four selected ecotopian novels: *Ecotopia* (1975) and *Ecotopia Emerging* (1981) by Ernest Callenbach, *Pacific Edge* (1990) by Kim Stanley Robinson, and *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993) by Starhawk. I will then examine how the genre interacts with bioregionalism, an environmental philosophy that favors natural regions as cultural and political units. This will help determine ecotopia’s position within its two major traditions, the one immanently social, the other ecocentrist. By taking eco-fiction as my subject, instead of the more common environmental non-fiction, I try to address one of the greater lacunas in ecocriticism, while making a case for the contemporary relevance of environmental literature.¹

1.1 Environmentalism and the Search for Compelling Visions

“Where there is no vision, the people perish” (KJV, Prov. 29.18).

If liberalism is the ideology of personal liberty, and if socialism is the ideology of social and economic equality, then environmentalism can be defined as the ideology that puts sustainable management of the natural environment center stage. This ‘green’ philosophy is about caring for and maintaining our environment and the creatures that inhabit it. While it is evident that environmentalism is positively concerned with several aspects of society and politics, it is also clearly a movement posited against something else. It is a reaction to the patterns that shape our economies and societies, including population growth, ever-increasing and wasteful consumerism, and the false assumption that natural resources are unlimited. In fact, ‘nature’ in its most pristine form, wilderness, exists only in the absence of civilization, in the total lack of development (Howard et al. n. pag.). Like Saussurian

¹ Ecocriticism or environmental criticism is a relatively young field in literary studies. In its most simple definition, ecocriticism is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii). For another definition, see p. 73.
signs, nature and the environment are as much about what they are not as about what they are.

Since the seventies, when consciousness about mankind’s negative impact on the natural world became a primary concern for a growing minority, the dominant position of farmers and fishers in both Europe and North America has been to label ‘the greens’ as troublemakers and regulators, tree huggers who stand in the way of the agrarian common-sense lifestyle, impractical idealists or ‘utopians’ hindering the way it has always been done, for the sole sake of preserving hard to be seen bird species or rare flowering plants and grasses. The not unproblematic legacy of the sixties and early hippie-inspired environmentalism has furthered the stigma. While the media have absorbed a lot of these prejudices about the green movement, public opinion has shifted considerably in favor of green politics over the last decades. Many people now share a concern for the state of our natural surroundings. Awareness about global warming, especially, has become widespread. However, when ‘the environment’ makes headlines anno 2013, it is still usually bad news: another natural disaster due to global warming, another failed international convention, another dubious carbon emission trading scheme. Arguably, both ‘environmental disaster’ and ‘green impracticality’ have been turned into ‘media templates’ that continue to shape our discourse, regardless of whether that discourse is justified (Kitzinger 61). Furthermore, corporate practices such as ‘greenwashing,’ falsely adopting the terminology and imagery of the green movement, have also made it hard for consumers to distinguish between sane environmental stances and those promoted by corporations looking for a green image.

Environmentalism, as a social force, compels us to rather radically change habits we have come to appreciate over the years, such as taking the bus instead of the car or eating less meat and fish. Only seldom do we see environmentalism at work as a positive force that offers us precise and attainable prospects. Attempts have been made, however, to overcome that obstacle and to create a credible, holistic worldview that incorporates solutions to our environmental worries. Part of the problem that had to be overcome is, in my view, inherent in green philosophy: its ecocentrism – the centrality and primacy of the environment. It defies the anthropocentrism that permeates Western society. Conservative, liberal, progressive, socialist, and nationalist ideologies have always been able to reach out to people through a shared self-interest in the survival and welfare of a group, be it a community, a class, a nation, or the species. Environmentalism’s ecocentrist position, by
contrast, requires a thorough revision and reshuffle of our priorities, a new “state of mind” (Buell 1). A strong case can be made for the argument that everyone benefits from a healthy environment, making some particular causes attractive even to non-environmental ideologies, and making them ‘eligible’ for mainstream acceptance. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), for example, has been very successful in creating awareness about pesticides. It remains difficult, however, to promote an overall, coherent green philosophy, precisely because of its ecocentrism. In the words of historian Richard Andrews, quoted by ecocritic Lawrence Buell, what is needed is “a coherent vision of the common environmental good that is sufficiently compelling to generate sustained public support” (Buell 1). This is what Buell calls the ‘environmental imagination.’

### 1.2 Ecotopian Fiction: Visions of a Greener Future

In one literary genre, authors have tried to deal with the challenges of our planet and to devise a new, original worldview, in answer to Buell’s call. As a marginal subgenre of utopian literature, ‘ecotopian’ novels have formulated incredible visions of a future on planet Earth in which people have actually achieved the goals environmentalists have set, or have at least tried their hand at it. ‘Ecotopian fiction’ is a handily transparent term: it encompasses literary works of fiction – mostly novels – that are either utopian or dystopian in nature (or both), and that deal with the ‘ecological.’ That means they explore the consequences of human activities on the environment, the occurrence of environmental disaster, as well as environmental checks on our daily lives, but also possible solutions to the environmental crisis and the social and political processes that could effect change for the better, or the worse.

According to Marius de Geus in his study of Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* and its predecessor “utopias of sufficiency” (Thiele 18),² these ecological utopias appear to be an

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² In *Ecologische utopieën*, de Geus identifies several texts as ‘utopias of sufficiency’ (original Dutch term: ‘soberheidsutopieën’), including Thomas More’s utopia of self-limitation, Henry Thoreau’s utopia of simplicity, and William Morris’ utopia of sober beauty (see below). Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* and a number of other contemporary texts are then situated within that same framework. For de Geus, the main criterion is whether society ought to be based on contentedness
exception to our habitual postmodern and no-nonsense attitude, which is altogether weary of ideology (de Geus 13). Considering the urgency of drastic measures in the fight against environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, global warming, the lack of environmental justice, and the continuing challenges posed by overpopulation, carbon emission, nuclear waste, pesticides and GMOs, we can see a certain value in these ecotopian novels. As de Geus points out, they can enrich the sometimes impoverished field of ideas, and they may further the spread of such ideas from its original niche – ecologists, philosophers, scientists, but also artists and activists – to a more mainstream audience. It remains true, as it is for all utopian novels, that the reader can reject the prophetic vision that is offered in the novel on account of it being incredible, farcical, or just implausible. To provide a vision alone does not suffice – it does not solve the crisis – but it can do two things of great value to the environmental movement: rally readers to the cause and provide people with new and bold ideas.

1.3 West Coast Ecotopias

Within the field of ecotopian literature, there is a disproportionate amount of ecotopias set on the American West Coast. It is those novels, the West Coast ecotopias, which I have selected as the basis for this dissertation. The selected texts are Ecotopia (1975), the genre’s starting point and focal point, and Ecotopia Emerging (1981), its prequel, both by Ernest Callenbach; Pacific Edge (1988) by Kim Stanley Robinson; and The Fifth Sacred Thing (1993) by Starhawk. Always Coming Home (1985) by Ursula K. Le Guin and The Gate To Women’s Country (1990) by Sheri S. Tepper can, to a somewhat lesser extent, also be seen as West Coast ecotopias. More examples of texts on the fringes of ecotopian fiction are provided in section 1.3.5.

All of the novels in this selection take place in the Pacific Northwest, including Oregon, Washington, and Northern California, with the exception of Pacific Edge, which is set in Southern California. The fact that the Pacific Northwest region, also referred to as ‘Cascadia,’ or as ‘Ecotopia’ in Joel Garreau’s popular The Nine Nations of North America and sufficiency, in which case we speak of ‘utopias of sufficiency,’ or on abundance and luxury, in which case the text is a ‘technological utopia’ or a ‘utopia of abundance’ (de Geus 14-15).
(245), seems to be the preferred setting for novels in which an alternative, green future is
developed, is in itself intriguing. In the texts themselves, traces are to be found showing
the reasons why this region, and not any other cultural or geographic region of North
America, is chosen. This will be the focus of section 3.3 on bioregionalism.

In this dissertation, I will explore the position of the small and rather marginal
literary phenomenon of ecotopian fiction, and more specifically West Coast ecotopias, in
relation to broader literary frameworks. Upon introduction to the texts, one can imagine
that ecotopian novels are connected to the broader phenomenon of utopian and dystopian
fiction. Related to that genre is, since the late nineteenth century, the genre of science
fiction. How does ecotopian fiction relate to these literary traditions? Does it form a
continuation or extension of these socially oriented genres, and how does it fit within their
hard to define boundaries? I will also position ecotopian fiction in relation to another broad
genre: environmental literature. To which extent does ecotopian fiction borrow from the
American tradition of nature writing, and how does it deal with the environmental issues
brought to the fore in the sixties and seventies? As mentioned above, bioregional ideas
play an important role in West Coast ecotopias as well. Bioregionalism, a contemporary
ecological and regionalist movement in North America, builds upon the notions that place
determines culture (i.e. societies are shaped by their location), and that communities are
better off if grouped biogeographically\(^3\) (i.e. government at the level of a topographic or
ecological unit is more successful). Bioregionalism, as a philosophy that studies the
interaction between ecology and society, thus presents an interesting case study of how
ecotopian fiction is situated within its two main literary traditions: the environmental
aspect of eco-literature and the socio-political aspect that lies at the core of the utopian
tradition. Throughout, textual evidence from close readings of the novels will shed light on
the concrete relationships between ecotopia, utopia, science fiction, environmental
literature, and bioregionalism.

\(^3\) Biogeography is the study of the geographic distribution of ecosystems and species. This “study
of the geography of life” “explores a great diversity of patterns in the geographic variation of
nature – from physiological, morphological and genetic variation among individuals and
populations to differences in the diversity and composition of biotas along geographic gradients”
(website of the International Biogeography Society).
For a good understanding of the novels, and of the genre in its proper context, I will first provide each of the West Coast ecotopian novels in my selection with a description of its plot and structure and the crucial ecotopian propositions in them (sections 1.3.1 to 1.3.4). Short mention will be made of a number of other texts related to the genre (section 1.3.5).

1.3.1 Ecotopia (1975)

Any overview of ecotopian literature begins with the eponymous short novel Ecotopia (1975), subtitled The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston. Ernest Callenbach (1929-2012), the author, was born in rural Pennsylvania and later moved to California, where he began to edit the Film Quarterly in 1955. While at Berkeley, his interest in environmental issues and sustainable living grew, and in the early seventies he published the guidebook Living Poor With Style. It is not so much Callenbach’s rural background, but rather living in Berkeley, right in the intellectual heart of the post-sixties countercultural movement and the budding environmental movement, that formed the ideas present in his novels. In 1975, Callenbach self-published Ecotopia. It became a bestseller and a cult book and it is now taught at several colleges in environmental literature classes. In 1981, Callenbach released a prequel to Ecotopia, called Ecotopia Emerging, a dramatization of the social processes that could have created the environmental and liberal consensus that led to Ecotopia’s birth.

Ecotopia is a short novel that consists of newspaper reports, all of which, except the first and last, are written by the American journalist Will Weston, alternated with Weston’s private diary entries. Callenbach originally set the story in the year 1999, a mere twenty-four years after the novel’s publication. Weston is a mainstream reporter for the fictional Times-Post and is sent to “darkest Ecotopia” (9) with the consent of the president of the United States. Ecotopia, in 1999, is a highly isolated nation on the American West Coast, encompassing the former states of Washington, Oregon, and the northern half of California. It broke away from the United States twenty years earlier. The reasons for this secession are sufficiently clear – the West Coast was fed up with American imperialism and laissez-faire capitalism, and with its environmentally devastating course. It is not revealed, however, how Ecotopia came into existence exactly (Ecotopia Emerging fills that hole, partly). What is revealed through Weston’s diary notes and to a lesser extent through his official reports, is that in those twenty years, the United States have continued
on the way to ecological damnation, while Ecotopia has not. (In Callenbach’s vision of 1999, Belgium, interestingly, has split into three different nations.)

Will Weston, whose name resonates American ideas about masculinity and westward expansion, enters Ecotopia via Reno, Nevada, equipped with an admirable portion of goodwill and a reasonable amount of preconceptions and prejudice. Since the United States have not received any reliable intel on how Ecotopia is run, or even how the people fare west of the Sierra Nevada, Weston is sincerely surprised when he boards the timber-made train from Tahoe to San Francisco (17-18), when he sees “recycle bins” (19), and at his arrival in the Bay Area, where he observes that “a lot of Ecotopians look like oldtime westerners, Gold Rush characters,” but not as “crazy-looking or sordid, as the hippies of the sixties were” (24-25). Together with Weston, the reader is introduced to some of the habits and policies in Ecotopia, including its prohibition of vehicles with an internal combustion engine (i.e. fossil fuel-powered cars), its extensive high-speed rail network (a dream still in the works in the non-fictional California), Ecotopia’s recycling and energy technologies, and its sustainable farming practices. The novel is centered on San Francisco, Ecotopia’s de facto capital, which has been reduced to a more compact city, the suburbs of which have been abandoned in favor of more self-sufficient “minicities” (56-65), in which people both live and work. Ecotopians engage in politics on a local level and the “Ecotopian constitution is city-based” (200). Furthermore, marihuana has been legalized, while Ecotopians have not been able to find a consensus on the prohibition of tobacco smoking, or eating meat. Economically, Ecotopia has made a number of far-reaching changes, including abandoning polluting industrial activities as well as absentee ownership (197); 4 the proliferation of worker cooperatives; the reintroduction of personal accountability for goods produced and delivered; the introduction of guaranteed minimum incomes, and – by consequence – much shorter work days. Ecotopians furthermore devised an entirely new tax and revenue system, introducing a tax solely upon “production enterprises” (194), as well as a land tax to encourage population concentration, and abolishing the socially stratifying practice of inheritance. Income differences have been largely eliminated. Ecotopia’s economy has been made openly protectionist, with “draconian tariffs” on socially and environmentally

4 Absentee company ownership is collecting the company’s profits without working there.
unsustainable imports (199). The result of all this, according to Weston, has been a serious drop in the country’s GNP after its independence, a “sacrifice of present consumption [that] ensure[s] future survival” (98). Ecotopia’s economy — a “cross between Scandinavian socialism and Northern California back-to-the-landism” (Timberg 1) — is referred to as “stable-state” (41), a term that seems to fuse renewability, recycling, and sustainability. Though the still very controversial idea of a zero-growth economy, or a steady-state economy, is never mentioned, Callenbach’s stable state definitely points in that direction. Ecotopia is, unlike some other visions of an environmentally sound future, not technology-averse — they are even ahead of their American neighbors in adopting a two-way, C-SPAN-like television network and inventing a typewriter-like proto-computer. Wasteful technology, by contrast, has been consciously abandoned under a self-imposed regime of “technological austerity” (68).

Racially, there is a startling form of voluntary segregation in Ecotopia, with African Americans living in what is collectively called “Soul City” (209) and other minorities living in their own “city-states” (313). In an interview with The New York Times, Callenbach retrospectively indicated he was influenced by the then powerful Black Nationalism and the then common skepticism of integration (Timberg 2). Like some of the other ecotopian novels, Callenbach’s also addresses issues of gender. Ecotopians are sexually liberated, and there is a lot of sex and seduction going on, but the novel’s status as liberating the genders, or blurring the gender essentialism, is very dubious. I will return to this issue in in more detail in section 2.4. At last, Ecotopians have adopted new forms of cohabitation and family, often living together in small groups of people who are not necessarily related by blood.

De Geus (150) notes that Weston’s constant surprise at the customs of Ecotopia, and Weston’s exciting adventures, which make him reconsider his own ‘consumptive

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5 The term is unrelated to the ecological concept of alternative stable states, the hypothesis that ecosystems can exist in more than one stable condition. ‘Stable-state’ economics is more part of Callenbach’s own diction than of a more general environmental discourse.

6 A steady-state economy is one where there is no economic growth or loss, but mere stability. Within ecological economics, ‘degrowth’ signifies a downscaling of the economy, going even beyond what zero-growth economists propose.
lifestyle,’ are trademark characteristics of utopian fiction. Among those adventures are living in a San Francisco community housing project together with other journalists; meeting with Ecotopian officials, including president Vera Allwen (Ecotopia is led by women, though not exclusively); visiting a forest camp, a thermal energy plant, and a school; falling in love and having a sexual relationship with Marissa Brightcloud; observing and then participating in the notorious Ritual War Games; being treated in a rather sexually liberated hospital; and finally getting ‘kidnapped’ by friends and family of Marissa and being brought to a hot springs resort. From all the evidence Weston has received from Ecotopians, through the many discussions he has had and by experiencing the Ecotopian lifestyle first-hand, he comes to the insight that Ecotopia is not dark at all. Though it is partly because of his love for Marissa that Weston sees the country’s virtues – “I begin to see that I have fallen in love with her country as much as with Marissa” (341) – the reader will probably already have come to the conclusion that Ecotopia is, in some important ways, a better place than the unreformed United States. Offering the reader Weston’s apparent prejudice, against the apparently sound arguments of the Ecotopians, is a technique Callenbach employs to make us part of those who want to convince Weston. In the end, that is what happens: Weston writes in his diary that he is “ready for it at last” – he stays in Ecotopia.

1.3.2 Ecotopia Emerging (1981)

With Ecotopia Emerging Callenbach tried to fill some holes and sketch some of the ways ordinary people could have played a role in the coming about of Ecotopia. Appropriately, Ecotopia Emerging takes a different form than Ecotopia. It is a multi-strand novel in which we are presented with the stories of different people in different areas of the Pacific Northwest (which, for Callenbach, includes Northern California) in the period preceding the struggle for independence. The narrative is supplemented with cursive bits that detail some of the actual facts and figures of the environmental crisis, as well as with a few

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7 One of Ecotopia’s most curious ideas, the War Games are an event in which participants primitively fight each other to rid themselves of their aggression, and to prove their manhood. Participants are often wounded by spears – Weston ends up in hospital after participating in the games – and are sometimes even killed.
fictional newspaper articles. The revolutionary birth of the nation is only marginally part of the novel; *Ecotopia Emerging* is about changing attitudes – the prerequisite for a bottom-up independence struggle. The novel ends with the nation’s declaration of independence, and the reader is told about Ecotopia’s success in seceding from the mother country, but sees very little of America’s reaction or the violence that has been part of almost all secessions. Since Ecotopia breaks away from the US unilaterally – unlike one of the few actual examples of a peaceful state dissolution, Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Divorce – one would expect to receive more information about this event than Callenbach’s minimalist ending. At least, it shows the author’s priorities in writing *Ecotopia Emerging*: to recreate the social processes that *could* lead to popular consensus and the uprising, not the uprising itself or instructions on how to secede from the US.

The novel differs from the original in that we are given many perspectives, of which almost all are female. One of the central characters, Lou Swift, is an adolescent, which has led to the novel being labeled ‘young-adult fiction,’ not without reason, because the Lou Swift strand of the novel does deal with issues of growing up, sexuality, and adulthood. As in *Ecotopia*, much of the action is set in the Bay Area, but unlike the 1975 novel, *Ecotopia Emerging* does make an attempt to pay attention to the more northern areas, including Upstate California, Oregon, and Washington. I will return to the issue of the novels’ settings and their relevance in relation to bioregionalism, in section 3.3.

Lou Swift is a teenage girl and a physics prodigy, who lives in Bolinas – the well-known reclusive art colony northwest of San Francisco – and who is working on a technology to generate cheap energy from solar cells. She discovers that one of her cells is working because of a chance interaction with seawater, but cannot figure out how or why. With the help of friends and family, she eventually manages to understand the process and to popularize it. The second protagonist is Vera Allwen, Ecotopia’s future president, who is still a Democratic California state senator in *Ecotopia Emerging*. She forms a group of same-minded people, disillusioned in both the Democratic and the Republican Party and their capital-serving policies and practices. Her at first informal group eventually becomes

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8. While Northern California or ‘NorCal’ generally encompasses the upper two-thirds of California, from San Luis Obispo to the Oregon border, the term Upstate California only refers to the northernmost third of the state, to the north of the urban areas of San Francisco and Sacramento.
the Survivalist Party, gradually becoming the leading party in Washington, Oregon, and Northern California. The name refers to the Survivalists’ willingness to survive, as a species and as a planet, in a responsible and non-destructive way. Through the actions large and small of Survivalists and associated people, we see how the attitudes shift from what could be called post-sixties countercultural, progressive ideals and a deep distrust of American politics and capitalism, to a more coherent theory about living and working in harmony with one another. The strength of Ecotopia Emerging lies in its stress on the possibility for individuals to impact society through public discussion, activism, and nonviolent resistance, changing attitudes throughout the different layers of society through a domino effect. While Ecotopia gave readers a vision of a possible (still imperfect) ecotopia, Ecotopia Emerging is an attempt to fight off the pessimism of powerless individuals, trying to show how small actions can lead to big changes. The realistic setting, at least at the outset of the novel, reinforces that: the Survivalist movement seems to grow out of existing social forces in the Pacific Northwest.

1.3.3 Pacific Edge (1990)

Kim Stanley Robinson (b. 1952) is one of America’s major contemporary science fiction writers, and as the author of Pacific Edge and the editor of the ecotopia short story collection Future Primitive: The New Ecotopias, he is one of the people most associated with ecotopian fiction. Robinson was born in Illinois, but grew up in Southern California and now lives in Davis, California. He earned a Ph.D. in English at UC San Diego with a dissertation on the novels of the important science fiction writer Philip K. Dick. While Robinson is now best known for his award-winning Mars trilogy, his writing career began with another trilogy. It is referred to as the Orange County or Three Californias trilogy. The first novel and Robinson’s debut, The Wild Shore (1984), depicts a post-nuclear war, pastoral utopia in Southern California – although not conclusively a utopia, since it is an imposed, involuntary situation. The second volume, The Gold Coast (1988), explores what might happen to Southern California if it continues to be car-dependent and highly (sub)urbanized, and thus differs immensely from The Wild Shore. It is best understood as an ‘autopia,’ a term from the novel’s opening line, stressing the overdependence upon technology.

While The Wild Shore incorporates some ideas of a sustainable future, the trilogy’s concluding volume, Pacific Edge, comes closest to an ecotopia. Pacific Edge is set in the
El Modena, Orange County of the 2060s, which has already evolved into an ecotopia. (The ecotopian characteristics will be discussed in more detail in the last paragraph of this section.) The story revolves around Kevin Claiborne, who works as a house renovator and who is a freshman town councilor for the Greens. His friends include the town attorney Oscar, Kevin’s grandfather and former activist and legislator Tom Barnard, the retired but energetic Indian-Russian teacher and diplomat Nadezhda Katayev, and Ramona, with whom Kevin has fallen in love. They discover that the town’s mayor, Alfredo, who is Ramona’s ex-boyfriend, is trying to slip by measures that will allow his own company to develop the last wild hill in the area, Rattlesnake Hill. Kevin and his friends set out to find out how they can stop this development, in doing so learning about the details of California water and environmental law. While the green activists are initially successful, Alfredo prevails in the end. His rezoning proposal is approved by the people of El Modena, who believe the economic growth will increase their ‘shares’ in the town. At the very end of the novel, Tom dies at sea, having left on a ship with Nadezhda. As a final act of symbolism, Kevin erects a memorial plaque for his grandfather on the rezoned top of Rattlesnake Hill – leaving the novel’s readers with a sense that, even though the protagonists lost the fight, there is still hope.

The novel consists of eleven chapters. The perspective is almost exclusively Kevin’s. There are contemporary letters from Oscar at the closing of three chapters, and older diary passages by Tom; the latter are italicized. In those paragraphs, a younger Tom sheds light on his own attempts at writing an inspiring and agitating utopia.

Pacific Edge differs from Ecotopia in that it takes place in Southern California, not the Bay Area. Also, this relative ecotopia is set in the United States, not in an independent, isolated nation. The novel’s geographic setting, furthermore, is an inverse of the other ecotopias, taking place almost exclusively in Southern California and the state’s desert East up to Mono County. Robinson’s Ecotopia is, like Callenbach’s and Starhawk’s, a mix of new green technologies and sober, back-to-the-land lifestyles. Houses, for example, are

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9 The tendency to shy away from technology, shared by some factions in the radical green movement (e.g. deep ecology, anarcho-primitivism, and some alter-globalist factions), is often referred to as ‘Luddite’ or ‘Neo-Luddism,’ terminology referring back to the nineteenth-century English Luddites, who protested against new machinery that made human labor expendable.
equipped with an intelligent “house computer terminal” (240), and usage of two-way television or videophones, as in Ecotopia, is widespread. With car usage heavily taxed and limited, biking is on the up, and generally, the inhabitants of El Modena are very athletic. Among the changes brought to Southern California during the legislative battles and economic reforms of the 2020s and 30s (43) are an upper limit on company size, effectively banning corporations, and a rather thorough localization and democratization of government. While counties and states still exist, towns seem to have received the largest share of the political pie – it is “where the real power [lies]” (27). These communities are run by democratically and representatively elected councils, but there is also the option to consult the people directly. Each of the inhabitants, furthermore, has a ‘share’ in the town (91) – and the same applies to some companies that are owned cooperatively (e.g. 49). Another innovation is the “legal floor and ceiling on personal income” (52). The urban planning of Robinson’s Southern California can be best described as sustainable urbanization mixed with the benefits of rural life, a “communalism” in which people live in many rather small cities, often living in sustainably-built communal housing complexes (91). The story’s central narrative – the fight against the development of Rattlesnake Hill – is in essence about water management, one of the most crucial but complicated policy matters in California. While one of the characters admits “California water law is [still] a swamp” (42), the Orange County Ecotopians have been able to make some changes to this legal quagmire. They have, for example, introduced a board that sets “groundwater policy,” called the ‘watermaster’ (28), akin to what is known in the Netherlands as a ‘waterschap.’

1.3.4 The Fifth Sacred Thing (1993)

Starhawk is the pen name of Miriam Simos (b. 1951), an American theorist of paganism and ecofeminism. She was born in the Midwest as the child of second-generation Jewish Russian-Americans, but grew up in California. After a failed attempt to become a novelist in New York, she returned to the Golden State, where she became engaged in the Bay Area neopagan movement. Her best-selling non-fiction book on Goddess religion, The Spiral Dance (1979), has become one of the classic works of Wicca, neopaganism, and
spiritual feminism. She published several other works on witchcraft, feminism, and the relationship between humans and the environment. She is also a permaculture activist. In 1993, she tried her hand at fiction again and published The Fifth Sacred Thing. In 1997, Walking to Mercury was published and in 2009 Starhawk published her first children’s book and “eco-fable” (Starhawk’s website), The Last Witch Hunt.

The Fifth Sacred Thing depicts a California in the year 2048 that has suffered under environmental degradation and political polarization. America has apparently broken up in parts, and so has California. The Southland, roughly synonymous with the sprawling Greater Los Angeles Area, has come under the control of the authoritarian, capitalist, and racist ‘Stewards,’ who are religiously supported by the Christian fundamentalist ‘Millennialists.’ An evident dystopia, Southern California is a crime-ridden, toxic place where life is reasonably hard for those who enjoy the favor of the authorities, and absolutely unbearable for those who have fallen out of favor. Northern California, by contrast, is an independent state where the mostly female leaders have made the choice about twenty years earlier to opt for an ecologically sound society. (The country has no name, except for ‘the North.’) The people believe in “the four sacred things:” air, fire, water, and earth, recognizing the primacy and interconnectedness of the land (in the Leopoldian sense of the word). The fifth sacred thing, then, is spirit. This ecotopia, centered in San Francisco, is still far from perfect, though, and due to the Stewards’ biological warfare, the ecotopians are too busy defending themselves to be concerned with further perfecting their society. The plot revolves around three figures: the 98-year old Maya, the musician Bird, and the healer Madrone – each equipped with symbolical nature names. Bird, a young man of dark skin color from San Francisco, has been locked in a hellish Los Angeles prison for many years after having gone to the Southlands to fight the Stewards. At the start of the novel, Bird somehow awakes in prison out of an induced state

10 Goddess religion is the product of the Goddess movement, a second-wave feminist rejection of organized, patriarchal religion, worshipping a female god figure instead.

11 Permaculture is an ecological approach to agriculture, striving to design sustainable agriculture modeled on natural ecosystems.

12 About Aldo Leopold’s ‘land ethic,’ see Nash (182-199).
of numbness. He escapes to the mountains around the Los Angeles Basin. With the help of two fellow prisoners and the rebels in the mountains, he manages to return north to San Francisco. Bird then wants to return south to lend his new allies in the Los Angeles mountains a hand, but is too weakened. Instead, Madrone decides to go south to assist those people medically. Madrone is a healer, meaning she professes both regular, scientific medicine and alternative medicine, working on the ch’i – the life spirit or energy, a concept taken from traditional Chinese medicine. In the meantime, the Stewards’ eugenically bred troops march on San Francisco. Since the North has no standing army, the city is quickly occupied. The citizens decide to practice nonviolent resistance, instead of physically fighting back. They also give the Stewards’ soldiers a chance to ‘join us at our tables.’ Those soldiers are of colored skin and they are treated as inferior by their own leaders. The San Franciscans hope that offering them a free and healthy life in San Francisco if they decide to leave the occupying forces, will convince them to defect. The tactic is not entirely successful, though: the soldiers kill several citizens and they take Bird as their prisoner and force him to collaborate. *The Fifth Sacred Thing* ends rather abruptly, but on a positive note: the Stewards’ troops suddenly do defect to the North, convinced that their prospects will be better there. The tactics of nonviolent resistance thus worked slowly, but successfully.

*The Fifth Sacred Thing*, a capacious novel that consists of 37 chapters, is the only of the four selected novels that overtly combines utopia with dystopia.\(^\text{13}\) In the North, conditions have ameliorated in the direction of an ecotopia. In the relative ecotopia that the San Francisco Bay Area has become, streets have been broken up and replaced by gardens and free-running streams. (In typically California fashion, freely available water is what sets the utopian North apart from its dystopian counterpart.) The city and its watershed provide the citizens with plenty of food. Though the economic hardship and environmental destruction that have ravaged the entire United States have also hurt the Ecotopians’ wealth, they lead happy, diverse lives. There is no racial, religious, sexual, or economic discrimination or segregation and everyone is free to choose their occupations. As will be

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\(^\text{13}\) In *Ecotopia*, the United States function as a dystopia compared to the blissful new country on the West Coast. Only in *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, though, do the novel’s actions take place in both the utopia and the dystopia, openly pitting them against each other.
discussed in more detail in section 2.4, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* deals with issues of gender in interesting ways, clearly influenced by the counterculture and the sexual revolution of the sixties. One of the strengths of Starhawk’s novel is that the characters from the North are in constant dialogue with each other: every proposal is debated and almost every achievement is questioned. While Callenbach’s novels stress the organic process of forming consensuses, Starhawk’s novel emphasizes that consensus is never that self-evident. Every change requires debate and in every debate, there are those who oppose, sometimes on grounds that are as reasonable and justified as the supporters’.

1.3.5 Other Texts

Considering the diversity of the green movement, and the way writers often explore similar topics in wildly different ways, there are a number of other novels that could be labeled ‘ecotopian,’ but that differ considerably from the four novels described on the preceding pages. *Ecotopia, Pacific Edge*, and *The Fifth Sacred Thing* are all set in the rather near future, in places that are still considerably recognizable to a contemporary readership: *Ecotopia*’s San Francisco is a continuation of the contemporary San Francisco of the 1970s, *Pacific Edge*’s setting is still recognizable as Orange County, and the same goes for the places in *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. (*Ecotopia Emerging*, of course, does not depict an ecotopia yet.) While *The Fifth Sacred Thing* is post-apocalyptic – the events take place after an unspecified catastrophe has balkanized North America – the setting is still very recognizable. Most of the towns we know in California still exist in some form or another (though Central Coast cities like San Luis Obispo, especially, seem to have suffered a great deal from the tensions between North and South).

At least two others novels have explored an alternative green future – set in an era farther removed from the reader’s, and in a setting that bears less resemblance to the American West Coast culture that the reader is familiar with. One is *Always Coming Home* (1985) by the popular American science fiction and fantasy novelist Ursula K. Le Guin (b. 1929), best known as the author of the award-winning science fiction utopia *The Dispossessed* (1974). *Always Coming Home* is not a traditional novel, formally. In Bernardo and Murphy’s words (19):

*Always Coming Home* reflects Le Guin’s anthropological interest. Drawing on her childhood growing up in the Napa Valley, *Always Coming Home* sees the Napa Valley fictionalized in the Valley of the Na, a landscape that has
survived a natural catastrophe that has flooded and sunk coastal cities throughout the United States. The novel then merges a fictional narrative style with an anthropological excavation of the matrilineal Kesh, a near-future Native American tribe [...]. The novel is a pastiche of anthropological resources and offers drawings of Kesh instruments and tools, a mythological accounting by Stone Woman Telling, instructional tales [...], recipes [...], and tales of the Coyote trickster.

The novel, thus, is a combination of novelistic narrative and an anthropological interest in folklore, structurally alternating each other. The little narrative there is, dispersed over the novel, and revolving around the Kesh woman Stone Telling, is totally subordinate to the other fragments, which portray the Kesh in rich detail. All the critical praise Le Guin’s novel has received was aimed at exactly those fragments. *Always Coming Home*’s ecotopian quality, furthermore, lies in the Kesh’s rejection of population growth, and their closeness to the land. As the stereotype of Native Americans has it (Hughes 4), the Kesh are very much in touch with the land, in the Leopoldian sense of the word. While the Kesh are a post-industrial, low-technology culture, some advanced self-reproducing technologies have survived into the era in which the Kesh are living – but the Kesh show remarkably little interest in them.

A second post-apocalyptic, but very different ecotopian novel is *The Gate to Women’s Country* (1988) by Sheri S. Tepper. It is one of Sheri S. Tepper’s (b. 1929) many science fiction novels with an ecofeminist theme. *The Gate to Women’s Country* is set in a distant future after war has drastically changed Western society, causing a return to primitive strategies and the balkanization of what used to be the United States. The narrator never explicitly reveals the location of Women’s Country. It has been remarked on the Internet, though, that the novel appears to be set in the Pacific Northwest. References to rivers running westward to the sea, coming from hills in the east (53), among other things, seem to corroborate this suspicion. The novel’s central focus is not on sustainability, but rather on the way society has been split into halves based on gender: Women’s Country, a matriarchal state where women produce foods as sustainably as possible, and the warriors, bands of men living outside the city walls. The story is told from the perspective of Stavia, the daughter of a leading figure in Marthatown, and the mother of Dawid, who was sent off to the warriors. Upon seeing Dawid back, Stavia begins to recount her life, from the events of her own childhood up to her adult life, and
this forms the main part of the novel. One of the more notable motifs in this novel is the performance of *Iphigenia at Ilium*, a reworking of Euripides’ *Troades*. In general, *The Gate to Women’s Country* is highly historicized: Women’s Country’s society seems to tie back to the mythology of classical antiquity, rather than to the pre-apocalyptic (presumably American) culture.

There are of course several other literary texts that fuse the utopian desire, or the dystopian fear, with an ecological awareness. The following books, all located at the crossroads of these traditions, will not be part of my analysis of ecotopian literature – but any other, more extensive study of the genre could take them into account. Some of them will be mentioned in sections 2.2 and 2.3 on the history of utopian literature and science fiction.

Among the predecessors of ecologically aware utopian literature are W.H. Hudson’s *A Crystal Age* (1887), a pastoral and anti-technological utopia; William Morris’ *News from Nowhere* (1890), which portrays a harmonious rural socialist utopia; and William Dean Howells’ *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894), a utopian critique on American capitalism. Marius de Geus also counts the non-fictional *Walden* (1854) by Thoreau and *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1898) by urban planner Ebenezer Howard among the ‘utopias of sufficiency.’ Malthus’ *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) has also been a crucial text for those writing on the consequence of overpopulation in modern times.

Twentieth-century utopian, dystopian, and science fiction novels dealing with environmental deterioration include George R. Stewart’s *Earth Abides* (1949), a post-apocalyptic novel set in Northern California; John Brunner’s *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968) and *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), two dystopian science fiction novels about overpopulation and the environment; Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), *The Word for World is Forest* (1976), and *The Telling* (2000); Marge Piercy’s modern classic of feminism and

14 *Troades* or *The Trojan Women* is a tragedy by the Greek playwright Euripides (c. 480-406 BCE). It details the fates of four women of Troy after their city has been sacked in the mythological Trojan War, and, written during the Peloponnesian War, can be read as a commentary on the brutality of the latter.

15 See p. 34-35 for more about these and other utopias.
utopia, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), about a figure from the future who tells about the utopian (environmental) achievements of the countercultural movements, as well as her later novel *He, She and It* (1991); Margaret Atwood’s *A Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), one of the most acclaimed dystopias of the last decades, about a totalitarian theocracy not unlike the one in *The Fifth Sacred Thing*; Richard Grant’s eco-fantasy *Rumors of Spring* (1986); Pat Murphy’s *The City, Not Long After* (1989) about a dystopian, disease-ridden San Francisco; David Brin’s *Earth* (1990), a science fiction novel addressing a variety of environmental issues; Daniel Quinn’s philosophical novel about sustainability *Ishmael* (1992); Kim Stanley Robinson’s popular Mars trilogy (1993-1999) about the terraforming and settlement of the red planet; Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), set in an anarchic Southern California; Molly Gloss’s *The Dazzle of Day* (1997), in which humans colonize another planet to escape over-polluted Earth; Jean Hegland’s *Into The Forest* (1998), a story about two sisters who live isolated in the woods as society begins to fall apart in a near-future Northern California; T.C. Boyle’s bleak but quirky eco-dystopia *A Friend of the Earth* (2000); and *World Made by Hand* (2008) and *The Witch of Hebron* (2010), novels about a return to local economies, by James Howard Kunstler, a well-known critic of American industrialism and of suburban sprawl. The list of novels – ranging from celebrated science fiction classics to pulp literature – dealing with themes such as these, is enormous and constantly growing.

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16 A well-documented concept in the literature of science fiction, terraforming is the hypothetical process of shaping a planet or another object in space into a place habitable to humans, altering its atmosphere, climate, topography, and biosphere (cf. Zubrin & McKay). In science fiction, the planet Mars has frequently been ‘terraformed.’
2. Historical Roots: Ecotopian Fiction as a Continuation of Utopian Literature and Soft Science Fiction

Given that ‘ecotopia’ is a portmanteau of ‘ecology’ and ‘utopia,’ we can assume that the phenomenon borrows from, or stands within, at least two traditions: utopian literature and environmental writing. Ecotopia’s historical roots, as an extension of a long tradition of Western utopian literature and, more recently, science fiction, will be the topic of this chapter. It is crucial to our understanding of ecotopian fiction to identify the workings of utopian literature, and the changes the genre has gone through. I will then relate ecotopian fiction to utopia and soft science fiction through their shared sociological interests – in gender and sexuality, for example – using textual evidence from the selected novels.

2.1 A Note on Terminology

The origin and meaning of the term ‘utopia’ is well known. Utopia, coined in Thomas More’s 1516 eponymous book, is both a ‘good place’ (Greek: eu-topos) and a ‘non-place’ (ou-topos), suggesting that a society such as Utopia’s, where seemingly some level of perfection has been achieved, is ultimately out of reach.17 The Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 370-371) gives the following definitions for ‘Utopia:

1. An imaginary island, depicted by Sir Thomas More as enjoying a perfect social, legal and political system.
   b. *transf.* Any imaginary, indefinitely-remote region, country, or locality.

2. A place, state, or condition ideally perfect in respect to politics, laws, customs, and conditions.
   b. An impossibly ideal scheme, esp. for social improvement.

Other, less comprehensive, dictionaries make similar distinctions, defining ‘utopia’ as a “condition, place, or situation of social or political perfection” or “any idealistic goal or concept” to achieve that kind of reform (American Heritage Dictionary 1411), and as

17 See Vieira’s essay “The Concept of Utopia” for a more comprehensive discussion of the term, its origins, and its shifting meaning.
“[any] literary work describing such an ideal state or system” (Webster Universal Dictionary 1645). Snodgrass’s *Encyclopedia of Utopian Literature* (523) provides a greater range of possibilities: “A utopia is an imaginary golden age, haven, come-hither island paradise, isolated valley, planet, retreat, or perfect world.” Utopian scholar Lyman Tower Sargent defines utopia as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space” (qtd. in Fitting 135). Darko Suvin is more restrictive in his definition: utopia is “the verbal construction of a particular quasi human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author’s community” (qtd. in Fitting 135). Suvin’s definition of utopia as any community of people that is conceived as a better alternative to existing social organizations, is probably the best available working definition, since it is general in terms of the kind of place or community described, but specific in its function.

The meaning conveyed by definition 2b in the OED recurs in each of the dictionaries, and is especially prevalent in colloquial usage of the adjective ‘utopian.’ Signifying the “impossibly ideal, visionary” (OED) or the “excellent or ideal but existing only in visionary or impractical thought or theory” (AHD), I will not use the term ‘utopian’ in this meaning, though it is arguably the most common usage outside academia.

Throughout this dissertation, I will use ‘utopia’ without capital letter to signify created worlds or countries that are conceived as ‘utopian,’ i.e. either without any flaws and in perfect harmony (an absolute utopia) or ideal in comparison to the actual world (a relative utopia). When capitalized, ‘Utopia’ stands for any individual place so called, most notably the utopian island society as envisioned by Thomas More. The same distinction will be used in relation to ‘ecotopia’ – any ecologically sane place or situation – and ‘Ecotopia’ – any individual so-called country and primarily Callenbach’s.

### 2.2 Development of Western Utopian and Dystopian Literature

It is temptingly easy to interpret any and all cultural products that include some version of a ‘better place’ as a utopian text and a predecessor to the Western literary tradition of utopian novels. In Levitas’ words (1): “Utopia is about how we would live and what kind of a world we would live in if we could do just that. The construction of imaginary worlds, free from the difficulties that beset us in reality, takes place in one form or another in many
cultures.” To keep the focus on the literary tradition that preceded the American ecotopian novels, I shall not go into the history of non-Western utopias. Neither will I attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of European and American utopian writing – rather, I am interested in the genre’s key characteristics and its evolution as a genre primarily concerned with community and social organization.

The first exponents of utopian literature can already be found in classical antiquity, well before the term appeared in More’s seminal work (Biesterfeld 1, Vieira 3). Most commonly, Plato’s Politea (The Republic) is seen as the first text in this tradition. In it, Socrates and his fellow citizens discuss the meaning of justice, ultimately arriving at an ideal state in which unselfish philosopher-kings rule and in which money and private property are abolished. Plato also introduced the legendary island Atlantis, a key concept in later utopias. The Greek mythologist Euhemerus, in his Sacred History, describes the utopian island of Panchaea and from the scarce fragments that survive, we learn that Panchaea was “rationally planned and well thought out,” a harmoniously organized society with hardly any private property, without apparent money, and very little economic inequality (Pinheiro 151-153).

Many of the first “forms of literary escapism” were proto-utopias centered on God or the gods and on heaven or the afterlife (Snodgrass xiii). We find elements now associated with utopian literature in early Christian eschatological and apocalyptic writing, including in Augustine of Hippo’s De Civitate Dei (The City of God), a text from the early fifth century in which the Church Father elaborates on his ideal of the New Jerusalem, a concept taken from the Book of Revelation, as an alternative to the corrupted and decaying Roman Empire (Donnelly 111, Snodgrass 41-42). Similarly, texts like Dante’s Divine Comedy (1320) and later John Milton’s Paradise Lost (1667) portray a setting where “the soul finds and unites with God,” a Christians’ heaven (Snodgrass xiii). For Snodgrass (xiv), medieval chivalric literature can be seen as another phase in the history of utopia: “The Stories of the Round Table supplanted the godly utopias of early times with a pervasive, all-encompassing study of earth,” creating utopian settings in which people were contented and their surroundings idyllic and pastoral. Both Camelot and the

18 Snodgrass (523), however, disagrees, seeing “the creation of perfect worlds” as an “almost exclusively […] Western proclivity.”
legendary Welsh island of Avalon functioned as utopian loci in the medieval folklore of Britain and, through translations and adaptations, Western Europe.

More’s *Utopia* (1516), in which the term was coined, marks a pivotal point in this literary history. Written at the beginning of the sixteenth century, *Utopia* exemplifies some of the changes the Renaissance and its dominant cultural philosophy, Humanism, brought to Western Europe. It “involved a rebirth of letters and arts [and] unleashed new ideas and new social, political, and economic forces that gradually displaced the spiritual and communal values of the Middle Ages” (Norton 488). Renaissance Humanism allowed for “unleashed curiosity, individual self-assertion, and a powerful conviction that man was the measure of all things” (Norton 488). While in Italy the Renaissance was primarily an artistic and architectural flowering, in England it was a thorough intellectual and literary reform, and Thomas More’s *Utopia* should be seen as belonging to this turbulent intellectual climate, with Columbus’ discovery of the Americas twenty-four years earlier and Luther’s publishing of his 95 theses in 1517. Though *Utopia* preceded the Protestant Reformation, the book was conceived and released at a time when the Church and its medieval practices, but also scholastic learning, were already being criticized (Fox 3). Both *Utopia* and the Reformation were, though on an entirely different scale, products of the same intellectual climate.

With *Utopia*, More set the benchmarks for several generations of future utopias. First, More’s *Utopia* is, like his friend Erasmus’ *The Praise of Folly*, a work of irony and satire, and it should be read as a critique of society, and by consequence, as a proposition for change. As is the case in all literary utopias produced after More’s, his is both strikingly similar to the world he actually lived in, as well as markedly different, seeing the abolition of money and private property and the establishment of free and universal education. The unfamiliar elements can serve both to criticize the established values and practices in real-life society, as well as to effect change in the future, to reveal alternatives. Secondly, like so many utopists after him, More employed the conventions of existing genres to shape his utopian novel. In More’s case, travel literature provided him with a proper framework, and writers after him let their work follow the conventions of “the novel, the journal and science fiction” (Vieira 7). Travel writing has had a major influence on utopian fiction: the genre exists on the premises of “faraway, undiscovered countries and remote uncharted islands and planets” and the “imaginary voyage” (Pohl 52-53). Equally characteristic of the genre is its ambiguous geography. While utopias are
fantastical and imaginary, most utopian loci do operate within the existing universe of the author and the reader; it is only because a character from contemporary England (in More’s case) or the United States of the near future (in Callenbach’s case) is able to visit the utopia that we know about it. The temporal removal in Ecotopia, of course, creates an extra layer. This is characteristic of many science fiction stories (see below), where the setting is often more distant, either in time or space, or both. Traditional utopias, by contrast, are usually contemporaneous ‘enclaves’ within the reader’s universe. In that sense, utopia is both close to home and perfectly unreachable. This is what Vieira (8) refers to as the genre’s relationship with reality:

Utopists depart from the observation of the society they live in, note down the aspects that need to be changed and imagine a place where those problems have been solved. Quite often, the imagined society is the opposite of the real one, a kind of inverted image of it.

According to Fredric Jameson, it is a mistake “to approach Utopias with positive expectations, as though they offered visions of happy worlds, spaces of fulfillment and cooperation, representations which correspond generically to the idyll or the pastoral rather than the utopia” (12). Utopia, rather, offers “diagnostic interventions” that “aim at the alleviation and elimination of the sources of exploitation and suffering, rather than the composition of blueprints for bourgeois comfort.” Utopias, then, are “plans to be read negatively” (Jameson 12): utopian visions are best defined by the oppositions they represent and by the injustice they expose through the creation of parallel but inverse situations.

Some of the authors who were inspired by More’s visions and who borrowed the concept of a utopia, only used it as a ‘decorative’ element. After the publication of Utopia, the term quickly spread across Europe and, as Biesterfeld (1) notes, underwent a random “Etymologisierung,” whereby Utopia came to stand for ‘a land of good living.’ It also gained the connotation of an exotic, fantastic place. It appeared as such in Rabelais’ episodic satire Gargantua and Pantagruel (c. 1532-1564), in which the author not only mentioned More’s Utopia, but in which he also created his own Renaissance utopian monastery, the unconventional mixed-sex abbey of Thélème (Snodgrass 3). Though decidedly more serious and elevated, some of the pastoral literature of the early modern period, in part building on the tradition of the Biblical Eden, Hesiod’s Works and Days,
and Virgil’s *Bucolics*, also portrays a utopian society in which good living, romantic love, and harmony are central. Sir Philip Sidney’s *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* (published 1590), for example, offers us a view of a pastoral, almost Edenic Arcadia.¹⁹

The frivolization of utopia in literature – using it as a merely decorative element – proved to be less durable than the strain of utopian literature that, like Thomas More, saw the concept as an opportunity to scrutinize, criticize, experiment, and dream, giving the genre its “insistent critical function” (Wiegmann 10). A serious investigation into utopias after More seems to have begun in Italy, the birthplace of the Renaissance, where a translation of More’s text by Ortensio Lando appeared in 1548. The publisher, Anton Francesco Doni, came up with his own utopia in 1552, *I Mondi*. Tommaso Campanella generalizes “the space of the monastery” as a utopia and prophesies a theocratic monarchy in his *Civitas Solis* (*The City of the Sun*), written in 1602 (Jameson 12). In 1621, the Italian scholar Francesco Sansovino included More’s Utopia, with excerpts from Lando’s translation, along with other (non-fictional) state forms, in his “compendium of comparative politics,” *Del governo dei regni et delle repubbliche così antiche come moderne libri XVIII* (Manuel & Manuel 151, Biesterfeld 1-2). In Germany, the theologian Johann Valentin Andreae created another Christian utopian vision in *Christianopolis* (1619), offering its readers a democratic, scholarly alternative to *Civitas Solis*’ strict theocratic society.

Another seminal work of early utopian literature is Francis Bacon’s novel *New Atlantis*, published posthumously in 1627 (Biesterfeld 46-47, Snodgrass 376-379). It depicts a utopian island civilization in the Pacific, with great attention being paid to Solomon’s House, a science academy that is “the very eye of this kingdom” (Bacon n. pag.). *New Atlantis* “draws on, mixes and reworks a range of genres, most particularly […] the utopian fantasy and the travel narrative” (Price 2). In that same niche are works of fictionalized travel writing such as Defoe’s ‘one-man utopia’ *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), partly meant as a satire on Bacon’s utopia. James Harrington, in his political treatise *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656), set out to craft an ideal, republican version of Britain in which there is no despotic rule, not by kings and

¹⁹ See Snodgrass 25-27 for a more extensive treatment of Arcadia as a trope in the history of utopian literature.
queens and not by long-standing elected leaders (Snodgrass 389-390). In all of the works discussed here – be it a satirical travel narrative, a literary Arcadia, or an intellectually serious essay – the author takes the opportunity to craft a new society that is at least in some ways thought to be better than the existing, and is thus critical of the status quo. The changes consistently affect social, economical, and political issues.

As shown by Biesterfeld (48-51), the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced dozens of literary utopias. Only a few of the eighteenth-century utopias, however, have become popular classics. One dominant theme in the literature of this period, though, is very interesting in relation to environmental literature: the interest in human nature, primitivism, and the noble savage. In addition to Robinson Crusoe and the mock-utopia in the fourth book of Gulliver’s Travels, we find such primitivist elements in utopian-inspired books as Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas (1759), Voltaire’s Candide (1759), Diderot’s Supplément aux Voyages de Bougainville (1772), and the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In ecotopian fiction, there is a similar interest in how people connect with the land, and how that bond provides people with ethics and a moral vigor.

In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels – whose own texts on political theory, including The Communist Manifesto (1848) and Das Kapital (1867), can be considered utopias in the same way that Plato’s Politeia can – famously used the term ‘utopian socialism’ in contrast to the kind of socialists they themselves wished to be, ‘scientific socialists.’ They coined the term in 1848, with Engels later clarifying it in Anti-Dühring (1878). None of the so-called utopian socialists used it to describe themselves. Central figures in the utopian socialist thought included the Welsh social reformer Robert Owen, who put his beliefs about labor and education to the test in new idealistic communities, Charles Fourier, who envisioned collectivist communities called ‘phalanstères,’ and the French aristocrat Henri de Saint-Simon, many of whose ideas about industrialization, class, and science Marx picked up and fused into a more coherent socialist theory.

20 For a more exhaustive overview of early, post-classical utopian essays and novels, see Biesterfeld 37-39. See Pohl’s essay “Utopianism after More: the Renaissance and Enlightenment” for a thorough treatment of these periods.
One of the most interesting utopian novels of the latter half of the nineteenth century is *News from Nowhere* (1890), by the Pre-Raphaelite artist and active socialist William Morris. The utopian story in *News from Nowhere*, framed as a dream, involves a working class-based rural society where people live in harmony with each other and with the land, through the satisfaction the environment offers and through art and “non-alienated labor” (Jameson 12). Morris wrote his *News from Nowhere* in reaction to another utopian novel written by a committed socialist. Edward Bellamy, an attorney from Massachusetts, wrote *Looking Backward* (1888) as a prophetic vision of the United States in the year 2000 – an ideal classless socialist utopia. Morris reacted against Bellamy’s preference of technology as a means of making labor bearable, as well as against his preference of the urban over the rural. In this respect, Bellamy and Morris anticipated one of the arguments in environmental criticism and ecotopian writing: whether to concentrate population in cities or go ‘back to the land.’ In his preference of the rural over the urban, Morris is more with the early, bourgeois, and suburban-based conservationists than with the twenty-first-century environmentalists. In preferring simple living over technology to solve or anticipate social (and environmental) crises, Morris is very much in line with the deep green movement and the ecotopians.21 Other utopias from the late nineteenth century include Etienne Cabet’s *Voyage en Icarie* (1840), a popular utopian romance of voluntary socialism and an influence on Bellamy; Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1871), about a fantastic subterranean colony powered by a magnetic force called ‘Vril’; and the economic utopia that the Austrian economist Theodor Hertzka created in *Freiland* (1890).

Beginning in the latter half of the Victorian era and during the Gilded Age in America, increasingly more dystopian or ‘anti-utopian’ novels were produced. A common technique, also used in the ecotopian fantasy novel *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, is to present the reader with two contrasting worlds – one of which is intended as a utopia, the other as a dystopia. In *The Coming Race*, for example, the underground utopia is contrasted by the corruption of humanity above ground. The contrasts, however, are not always so clear, and

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21 While there are new technologies in all of the selected ecotopian novels, the Ecotopians have stopped the explosive expansion of technologies, opting for the development of useful, sustainable technologies and the discontinuation of wasteful ones.
usually, “the literary style departs from straightforward depiction toward parody, fable, fantasy, or satire,” in the tradition of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (Snodgrass 179). In many cases, utopian and dystopian elements are brought together in the same novel, producing an ambiguous text. Examples of such works include Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872), a satire on Victorian culture and a play on ‘nowhere’; Anthony Trollope’s *The Fixed Period* (1882); Mark Twain’s unusual satire *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1886); W.H. Hudson’s *A Crystal Age* (1887), both pastoral and apocalyptic; Anna Bowman Dodd’s *The Republic of the Future* (1887), a novella written in reaction to the huge supply of utopian novels; Ignatius Donnelly’s apocalyptic utopian story in epistolary form *Caesar’s Column* (1890); William Dean Howells’ *A Travel from Altruria* (1894) and *Trough the Eye of the Needle* (1907); H.G. Wells’ pioneering science fiction novels *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Sleeper Awakes* (1910); and many others. Wells ventured more clearly in the domain of utopian fiction in *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *Men Like Gods* (1923). In this same period, a number of feminist utopian writings were produced, including Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915), about an ideal society without any men.

After the turn of the century, dystopian novels became much bleaker. Jack London, best known for his popular wolf stories, but also recognized as an important socialist voice in the US, produced a seminal modern dystopian novel: *The Iron Heel* (1908). It makes use of the ‘rediscovered but incomplete manuscript’ plot device, as the reader is guided through the fictional events of the 1910s, and learns of the social and political changes the country goes through. The list of Western dystopian novels (and plays) after that grows exponentially. A few of only the most significant or well-known are Karel Čapek’s science fiction play *R.U.R.* (1920), which introduced the word ‘robot’ to the English-speaking world; Yevgeny Zamyatin’s bleak, urban dystopia *We* (1921); Aldous Huxley’s modern classic *Brave New World* (1932); George Orwell’s allegorical *Animal Farm* (1945) and the ultimate dystopia, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949); Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953); and Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). As we move further into the modern era, many of the great utopian and dystopian novels also come closer to what we would now call science fiction, with a greater emphasis on the workings of technology, the future possibilities and risks, and the social, political and environmental implications of those changes (see below).
As Vieira (3) points out, and as evidenced by the genre’s history, the meaning of ‘utopia’ has shifted over the course of history, acquiring new meanings in the “various epochs and currents of thoughts” it went through. During the Renaissance and then the Enlightenment, the genre underwent a gradual secularization. There has also been an increased interest in human nature and, since the arrival of socialism and Marxist materialism in the nineteenth century, in the workings of modern society, industry and economic growth, the state, and urban and environmental restraints and opportunities. Though there have been satirical utopias and anti-utopias since the eighteenth century (Vieira 16), there has been a definite turn toward dystopia in the past two centuries. In Jameson’s view, what has characterized most positive utopias produced since and including More’s Utopia, is that they offer a seemingly easy to implement “Utopian [program] that [can] be grasped with a single slogan” (12). Each of the texts in this overview attempts to identify a general flaw in society that can then be resolved with relative ease and through the application of one overarching principle. So too does Ecotopia identify the general problem – wasteful capitalism – and does it try to root out its negative consequences by proposing an alternative, communal, harmonious society.

What is really interesting is how the genre clearly favors the use of framing devices. In More’s Utopia, already, we discern several layers: written correspondence, the conversations between More (as a character in the story) and Raphael Hythloday (a fictional traveller), and Hythloday’s account of his stay in Utopia. Similarly, in Callenbach’s Ecotopia, the reader has to filter the actual information about Ecotopia through Will Weston’s diary notes on the one hand, and his newspaper reports on the other. In Kim Stanley Robinson’s Pacific Edge, the narrative is interspersed with letters from the past, giving us an exclusive, metafictional insight into the character’s second thoughts about his own attempts at writing a utopia. In The Gate to Women’s Country, the main narrative, framed as a flashback, is interspersed with preparations for the staging of a play, which casts light on the events in Women’s Country as well. The use of layering and framing devices has a couple of benefits for the author of utopian fiction – and this may be true for speculative fiction in general. We as readers are disinclined to believe a narrator

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who tells fantastical stories. If the author, however, creates a skeptical narrator, or at least one who is reasonably doubtful, that situation changes entirely. Usually, the skeptical narrator is confronted with an abundance of evidence indicating that the utopia is real and indeed ideal, making it easy for the reader to side with the ‘facts’ rather than the skeptical, but usually prejudiced narrator. The layering and framing also has the advantage that the responsibility for the fantastical story – which, in More’s day, was also a socially and politically controversial one – belongs to one of the characters in the story, and not to the author himself, allowing the narrator – supposedly speaking for the author – to cast his doubts about the utopia, although those may, as I have just indicated, serve exactly the opposite purpose.23 As such, utopian works usually criticize the status quo of the non-fictional world, convincing the reader that the utopia is indeed the better of the two.

Furthermore, the use of letters and diaries, as in Ecotopia, has the obvious benefit of revealing prejudices, preconceptions, doubts, and ambiguities. It also gives the author the opportunity to provide context and nuance. In a novel like Ecotopia, the diaries are crucial to the novel: this literary device allows us to see Weston’s initial prejudice against women and his preconceptions about gender and sex, and it is through the discrepancies between Weston’s official, published reports and his diary notes, which were originally not intended for publication, that we get to see how he struggles between allegiance to his American values and appreciation of Ecotopia’s new, liberated ways.24

2.3 Modern Speculative Fictions: Utopia and Science Fiction

As Peter Fitting (135) writes, “it is impossible to study the utopias and dystopias of the past fifty years or more without acknowledging the central role of science fiction.” Both

23 According to Roemer, “ambiguity and self-reflexivity” are characteristic of the narrative and authorial voices in “modern critical utopias” (91).

24 As Callenbach said in an interview on a radio program devoted to ecotopian thinking, locally broadcast in California: “the idea that it could have a diary part, gave me the idea that the formal reports and the diary parts could kind of bounce back and forth and maybe undermine each other a little bit or reflect on each other or at least explore different corners” (“An Interview with Ernest Callenbach”).
utopian literature and science fiction, together with genres such as fantasy, horror, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, and alternate history, belong to the ‘supergenre’ of speculative fiction. Any work of fiction that revolves around elements of speculation, including hypothetical histories and futures, or elements of the fantastical and supernatural, falls under this umbrella term. Defining science fiction, Fitting (135) notes, has proved a much more difficult undertaking than defining utopia. The Yugoslav-Canadian science fiction scholar Darko Suvin has famously but rather vaguely defined science fiction as the “literature of estrangement,” focusing on its function rather than its style and themes (qtd. in Fitting 135). A more practical working definition would be: science fiction is the genre in which past or current scientific or social advancements are logically extrapolated to explore possibilities in a different time and/or space.25 A popular distinction is that between hard science fiction, in which the scientific or technological premises are dominant, and soft science fiction, in which social concerns, including anthropological, political, and psychological ones, drive the story.

If utopian literature arose from the innovations of the Renaissance, then science fiction grew out of the Age of Reason (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and the Industrial Revolution (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). The former period produced a number of proto-science fiction stories, playing around with imaginary journeys and peculiar scientific discoveries. It is only in the latter period that modern science fiction arose. One of the earliest possible starting points for modern science fiction is Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), which features an eccentric scientist who – ‘playing God’ – creates a ‘monster’ (Fitting 137). But, as Jameson (284) notes, it is commonplace to see the genre of science fiction emerge only in the second half of the nineteenth century, “virtually full-blown,” in the works of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, including Verne’s Journey to the Center of the Earth (1864), From the Earth to the Moon

25 The element of extrapolation of scientific discoveries is based on Groff Conklin’s “What is Good Science Fiction” (16). The latter part of the definition is based on Sam Moskowitz, who writes: “Science fiction is a branch of fantasy identifiable by the fact that it eases the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ on the part of its readers by utilizing an atmosphere of science credibility for its imaginative speculations in physical science, space, time, social science and philosophy” (qtd. in Allen 1, my italics).
(1865), Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea (1870), and Wells’ The Time Machine (1895) and The War of the Worlds (1898). The young genre quickly expanded. Bellamy’s Looking Backward, Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee, and Jack London’s The Iron Heel, all of which I mentioned in the chapter on utopian literature, each contain strong science fiction elements. In the 1920s the genre became a recognizable unity, with its own name, coined by Hugo Gernsback, and with its own distinctive form, pulp magazines. The 1940s and 50s are known as the ‘Golden Age of Science Fiction,’ because of the many genre classics that it has brought forth. Writing in this period were Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert A. Heinlein. This Golden Age, in which hard science fiction predominated, preceded the New Age in science fiction, with its markedly more ‘soft’ approach.

Science fiction was initially very much related to utopian literature, and we could say that, speaking in terms of a genealogy of literature, science fiction branched out of utopian literature. (Science fiction, of course, borrows from several other traditions as well.) In terms of genre – approaching the issue synchronically instead of diachronically – both utopia and science fiction are part of speculative fiction. Some scholars, however, argue that the link between utopian/dystopian literature on the one hand, and science fiction on the other, is stronger than merely that shared membership. The British ‘futures fiction’ scholar Ian F. Clarke, the American critic and Marxist philosopher Fredric Jameson, and Darko Suvin all argue that utopian fiction is part, or has become part, of the genre of science fiction, that it is its “socio-economic sub-genre” (Jameson xiv). Utopias, indeed, explore possibilities of social, political, and economical organization, while operating within the confines of speculative fiction (i.e. utopias hypothesize and speculate) and science fiction (i.e. utopias extrapolate innovations). As such, utopian and dystopian literature could indeed be seen as companion-genres to soft science fiction. Both share a deep interest in the socio-economic, as Jameson put it.

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26 Fitting (136), however, deems this categorization “dubious.”
2.4 Ecotopian Fiction as an Immanently Social Genre: Gender and Sexual Liberation

It is not incidental that science fiction arose at the same time that dozens of utopian novels were produced, neither is it a coincidence that Callenbach and the later authors of ecotopian novels produced their work at a time when New Age soft science fiction dominated the speculative fiction market. Like the non-ecotopian soft science fiction of the seventies, the ecotopian novels explore a variety of social issues and complexities, including gender, sex, and reproduction; religion; free will versus determinism; housing and urban planning; environmental destruction; the impact of technology on humans; artificial intelligence; death and immortality; and many more. Clarke speaks of science fiction as "this eminently social literature" (118).

The number one source of socially relevant issues discussed in the ecotopian novels appears to be the American counterculture of the sixties and seventies. Sexual liberation, especially, is prevalent in Ecotopia, Ecotopia Emerging, and The Fifth Sacred Thing. Issues concerning gender and sex are always relevant to the study of environmental literature, since according to ecofeminism, "the very idea of dominating […] nature has its

27 Neither is it incidental, according to Fredric Jameson (285), that this period coincides with the moment the historical novel “[ceased] to be functional.” For Jameson, all these phenomena are symptoms “of a mutation in our relationship to historical time” and the genre of science fiction, at its best, uses a strategy of indirection – it “defamiliarize[s] and restructure[s] our experience of our own present” – to “bear on the ultimate object and ground of all human life, History itself” (284-287). What follows then is that science fiction’s authenticity as a genre does not stem from its capacity to embody the future, but rather to “demonstrate and dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future […] through apparently full representations which prove on closer inspection to be structurally and constitutively impoverished” (288-289). This is where utopia comes in sight again, because for Jameson, this state shows “the atrophy of […] the utopian imagination, the imagination of otherness and radical difference” (289). Paradoxically, Jameson (289) observes, at the very moment that we suppose entailed the “asphyxiation of the utopian impulse,” science fiction has come to embrace the impulse again, giving rise to a host of new works that are both fully science fiction and utopia – reinforcing the idea that the latter is in fact a subgenre or at least the progeny of the former.
origins in the domination of human by human,” i.e. woman by man (Bookchin, qtd. in Clark 2). I will discuss some of the sex and gender issues that are brought to our attention in two of the novels, Ecotopia and The Fifth Sacred Thing, to illustrate the novels’ concern for the social aspect.

In Ecotopia, William Weston is immediately confronted with the “manners” of the Ecotopian women, who stare him directly in the eyes, something he finds both uncomfortable and intriguing (25). In a foreshadowing of what Weston will discover later in the novel, he observes that the people are “very loose and playful with each other, as if they had endless time on their hands to explore whatever possibilities might come up” (25). This seems to go hand in hand with the Ecotopians’ “horrib[e] over-emotional[ness]” (51): Ecotopians are liberated from exaggerated politeness and social mannerisms, leading to a more direct verbal intercourse, which, as a result, is not restrained by limits on speech volume or the need for privacy (51-53). The “[little] emotional dramas” that are so “common in Ecotopian life” are, even to Weston, “delightful in a way, and both participants and observers seem to be energized by them” (96). “Evidently,” Weston notices, “restraints on interpersonal behavior have been very much relaxed here” (53). “The way people deal with each other – and with me,” Weston writes in his journal, “keeps reminding me of something – but I don’t know what” (66). Could it be he is reminded of the spirit of the Summer of Love, which took place in exactly the same city as the one Weston is staying in?

According to Tom, an Ecotopian magazine writer and a resident of the journalists’ community center in San Francisco, the personal and professional relationships between men and women have changed thoroughly on the West Coast. Weston writes that according to Tom, “women have totally escaped the dependent roles they still tend to play [in the United States]. Not that they domineer over men – but they exercise power in work and relationships just as men do” (75). It is one of the Survivalists’ achievements that “women’s objective situation is equal to men’s. Thus people can be just people, without our symbolic loading on sex roles” (75). Sexual liberation, too, seems to have leveled the playing field for men and women. In Ecotopia, the sexes are truly equal to each other, having radically empowered women to be able to take the lead in romantic relationships and make their own choices, just as men have always been able to do. An Ecotopian woman is independent of a man’s social and financial position, and men and women now have the same leverage in relationships. Weston, who is something of a typical American
male who is both cynical about the way so many marriages, including his own, do not work out, and engrained in Western conceptions about gender roles, experiences the “independent Ecotopian women” as unresponsive to his “signals” (96). Initially, he cannot figure out how it can be that Ecotopian women are so open-minded about casual sex and at the same time stand up for themselves and reject the traditionally expected submissiveness towards men. As Weston recounts: “‘Look,’ she said after a bit, ‘if you just want to fuck why don’t you say so?’ and marched off in disgust” (96). The American male, clearly, is not used to having to deal with women who now hold the relational powers long reserved for men only.

This gender equality in itself is an interesting element in ecotopian fiction, one that shows its commitment to progressive social innovation – but we cannot lose sight of some of the more troublesome ways Callenbach deals with gender and sex in Ecotopia. The gender duality or binarism, for example, has remained firmly in place. This is what Weston writes about the femininity of Ecotopian women and the masculinity of the men:

I notice [...] that Ecotopian women still seem to me feminine, with a relaxed air of their biological attractiveness, even fertility, though I don’t see how they combine this with their heavy responsibilities and hard work. And men, though they express feelings more openly than American men – even feelings of weakness – still seem masculine (75-76).

This awkward observation problematizes the way gender is dealt with in Ecotopia. On the one hand, gender roles have been eliminated in working situations, with both men and women doing the jobs they like, including physically heavy jobs for women. Men have also been able to give up some of their stereotypical and culturally determined masculine traits – it is now okay for them to express their feelings more openly. Yet, on the other hand, the gender dualism is still in place, as Weston uncovers: men still occupy the masculine end of the spectrum, and women the feminine. Apparently, the Ecotopians also regard feeling masculine as a need to be accommodated, which is what the War Games are for. As one of the Ecotopian men says after participating in the War Games: “I feel like a man” (159). Weston gets the chance to experience this himself as well: “I felt something like you do when a slot machine pays off: you have trusted yourself to the fickle fingers of fate, and instead of the expected loss, you get bounty. I have survived, the sun is shining, and somebody has sent around this marvelous woman to take care of me…” (291). While
the function is of the War Games is clear – recreate war situations to relieve macho behavior in real-life situations – the stress on masculinity and femininity, and the serving position of the female here, seem to point in the direction of an internal contradiction in the text. The text seems to imply that the gender issue has changed in Ecotopia, while at the same time, the gender binary is reinstated: Ecotopian women are more woman than American women, Ecotopian men more man than American men. Instead of closing the gap, the text makes it larger.

There are a few things to consider here. First, this raises the question whether the contradiction can be ascribed to the narrator – an American male visiting a foreign (and sexually exotic) country? Or is it a Derridian ‘trace’ in an ever self-contradicting text? Second, is the widening of the gender gap a ‘natural’ result of the Ecotopians’ return to nature? In other words: do women appear more female to Weston because he sees in them the fertility and naturalness that women in America have lost? As Weston puts it: “Ecotopians, both male and female, have a secure sense of themselves as animals” (69) and they are “remarkably healthy looking” (78). Arguably, their rejection of needless social and linguistic hedging has led to increased sex appeal, and a re-recognition of people’s very physicality. But is that causal link between naturalness (i.e. being in closer contact to the land) and a strong gender duality justified, or is it a fallacy?

(In Ecotopia Emerging, a few lines spoken by Lou’s friend Jan reveal that it need not be this way. Jan talks about sexual preference, but it just as well applies to gender diversity: “mostly you still have to choose between presenting yourself as straight or gay. There isn’t any in-between social world. Yet” (186, my italics).) The proliferation of casual sex – “a pleasant biological function” (190) – which is talked about in a direct and non-secretive way in Ecotopia, is as puzzling as the gender issue. Weston’s first encounter with Marissa Brightcloud, especially, is curious. After having written about his own sexual frustration in his diary just a few days earlier, Weston visits the forest camp, where he is introduced to Marissa, a “[strong], warmly physical woman – slender but with solid hips; dark curly hair, large intense eyes” (111-112). (Weston’s male gaze is noticeable throughout the entire novel. Here as well, the object of his gaze is described as a real female.) After only a very short time, she starts asking personal questions, taking Weston “off guard” (115). Then, as if Weston’s unspoken wish comes true, she asks: “Do you want to make love with me?” (115). Marissa’s
“assertiveness,” again, feels very uncomfortable to the American male (115-116), whose initial restraint is nevertheless easily overcome.\(^2^8\) What this shows is that Weston does not expect a female to make direct propositions; he is engrained in the American, more covert, socially regulated way of making court. Not only does Marissa bluntly propose to have intercourse, she apparently does not wait for a response either: “[I] found myself pushed down onto the wood floor of the bath house. Jesus, I said to myself, this woman is stronger than myself?” (116). This passage reveals, again, the full feminist emancipation of Ecotopia and the perfect equality between men and women. The abundance of casual and seemingly uncalled for sexual intercourse is nevertheless puzzling.

Starhawk’s *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (the only of the four selected novels written by a female author) is also notable for its treatment of gender and sexuality, and is far more ‘progressive’ than Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*. As in *Ecotopia*, professional gender roles have been largely abandoned in *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. Gender is irrelevant in job choices, and “the only Council restricted by gender,” the leading, all-female Defense Council, is in the end opened up to a new, male member, Bird (482). Not only is the country female-led, the novel is dominated by female characters as well. Among the few male key players are Cress of the Water Council, a machismo figure who is in opposition to the country’s nonviolent resistance position, and Bird of course. Bird is one of the story’s heroes, but he is – from a gender perspective – twice in an incapacitated role, first as a numbed and homosexually abused\(^2^9\) prisoner in the Southlands, then as a prisoner and forced collaborator to the Stewards’ troops. Prior to the occupation of San Francisco, the country’s leader decided to create a “pseudo-council,” fearing the southerners are “never in a millennium going to believe that the city is led by a bunch of old women” (243).

\(^2^8\) While Will Weston is never a very round character in *Ecotopia* – prejudiced but likeable – he is here reduced to the stereotype of the male who readily accepts any sexual proposition by an attractive female.

\(^2^9\) Bird awakes from an induced state of numbness in a Southland prison at the start of chapter 2: “When Bird awoke there was a boy in bed with him. They cuddled together with the ease of long-time lovers” (21). As that boy, Littlejohn, explains, “as if he’d explained this many times before”: “It’s okay […] You don’t remember so good. The bigsticks did something to your mind […] you’ve been fuckin’ me every day for the last year. You just don’t remember”” (21-22).
Various people volunteered to form this gender and racially mixed council – Bird among them. It is in his capacity as supposed leader of San Francisco that the Stewards’ soldiers capture him. As a way to break the North’s spirits, Bird is then sent in the city, accompanied by soldiers, as the “liaison” of the Stewards (351): previously a symbol of courage, now Bird stands for the failure of the strategy of nonviolent resistance. For Bird, there is really no other option but to cooperate, since the Stewards also hold a child captive, threatening to torture her. Bird, the story’s only male hero, is thus bereft of his rebellious character, his group identity, and his free will.

As in *Ecotopia*, social limits on sex have receded in *The Fifth Sacred Thing*: many of the main characters entertain numerous sexual relationships, which are seen as spiritually and physically healing and part of normal intercourse with selected close friends. In this web of sexual relations, no distinction is made between heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Openness about sex is another element in this hippie-inspired climate of sexual liberation. This is most clearly revealed when Madrone makes love to Hijohn, a former prisoner from the Southlands, who is offended when he finds out that Madrone expected him to casually inform his young wife and their mutual friend Katy about it (329-330). To Katy of course, who has been raised in the Southlands, this indiscretion on the part of Madrone and Hijohn is very painful and ruinous to her relationship with Hijohn and her friendship with Madrone. This is a conflict of value systems. Because elements like these are included in the novel, the reader is asked to compare the value systems of the utopian North and the dystopian Southlands. Sometimes, the values of the Southlands come across as not just totalitarian, but also far-fetched or hellish; think of the extensive prison system. In other cases, the South serves as a mirror of the actual, contemporary Western societies. Overt extramarital sex, for example, is a taboo in the United States and Europe, as it is in the Southlands. Therefore, the reader cannot just pit a simplistic utopia against a clear dystopia – he or she has to consider his or her own stance on this matter, to temporarily put himself at a distance from his own values and assess the alternatives more objectively. While *The Fifth Sacred Thing* is first and foremost an exciting story with elements of fantasy and young-adult fiction, it does require from its readers that they consider their own situation and values, and compare them to the ones presented in the novel. As utopias tend to do, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* has the potential to create a sense of estrangement from established values, and to question what is taken for
granted. At the same time, our own attachment to Western values as readers, and our skepticism of hippie-era beliefs, can always undermine the credibility of the utopia.
3. Ecotopian Fiction, the Environment, and Bioregionalism

What is environmental literature? Does a novel have to portray the natural world to deserve this label, or does it have to deal with environmental issues, such as pollution and overpopulation? Does it signify stories set in the wilderness, or can environmental novels be traditional psychological narratives about people and their actions? And how then does ecotopian fiction, which I have shown to be a genre that is very much concerned with the social, relate to the American traditions of environmental writing?

3.1 From the Nature Writing Tradition to Modern Environmental Literature

3.1.1 Defining Nature Writing and Environmental Literature

First, we need to establish what environmental writing is. There are a number of different terms and concepts in use, including environmental literature or writing, nature writing, eco-literature, environmentalist literature or writing, literature of environmentalism, environmental fiction or eco-fiction, green fiction, nature-oriented fiction, etc. (cf. Dwyer 2-3). To create some order, I shall use ‘environmental writing’ as the all-encompassing term for writings – be it scientific writing, non-fiction prose, fiction, poetry, or drama – that engage with the natural environment and/or man’s relation to it. One step down is ‘environmental literature,’ which limits itself to literary texts. Terms such as ‘environmental fiction’ or ‘eco-fiction’ exclude non-fiction writings.

The term ‘nature writing’ comes with a rich tradition in American literature, yet is nevertheless somewhat problematic. In his essay “A Taxonomy of Nature Writing,” Thomas J. Lyon, a scholar of the American West, tries to differentiate between the different strains of nature writing. Although he does not provide a clear-cut definition of the genre itself, his analysis is nonetheless useful for our understanding of it. Lyon (1996, 276) discerns three “main dimensions” to the genre: “natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature.” It is the relative weight of those aspects within a text, then, that determines the category of nature writing it falls in. The totality of those categories – Lyon identifies seven categories – gives a good overview of what is generally considered ‘nature writing.’ It ranges from field guides, handbooks, and professional papers, to natural history essays like some of John Muir’s or Rachel
Carson’s *The Sea Around Us* (1951), to “rambles” in which the author is noticeably more present, like in the beautiful John Burroughs essays. There are texts about living alone in nature, think of Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) or Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* (1968), and travel and adventure stories, which are “like a rambler gone wild” (Lyon 1996, 279). Nature writing also includes essays on farm life, and, at last, “the analytic and comprehensive works on man and nature,” in which both natural history and personal experience are subservient to philosophy (Lyon 1996, 280). In each of these subgenres or categories of nature writing, nature in its traditional meaning is present in the novel. That means that the events or contemplations take place in nature or that the text describes nature. While the differences between the categories are noticeable enough, it is fair to say that nature writing is very recognizable as a separate entity within American literature.

How then does nature writing relate to the larger concept of environmental writing? Bill McKibben, “probably the nation’s leading environmentalist” (Shivani n. pag.), writes (xxii):

> To a considerable degree, environmental writing can be said to overlap with what is often called ‘nature writing’ […]; but it subsumes and moves beyond it, seeking answers as well as consolation, embracing controversy, sometimes sounding an alarm. While it often celebrates nature, it also recognizes, implicitly or explicitly, that nature is no longer innocent or invulnerable.

For McKibben, what is lacking in most nature writing is controversy (i.e. the environmental crisis) and the quest for resolutions to it. Indeed, some of the more recent literature about the environment, and the consequences of our destruction of it, moves beyond each of the seven categories of nature writing. Nature writing does not seem to include the journalistic, argumentative, and political writing about contemporary issues of habitat destruction, pollution, health risks, sustainability, deep green ethics, and the like. Those more recent, environmentalist writings could be seen as a continuation of some of the nature writing classics, although there has clearly been a shift away from ‘nature’ toward ‘environmental crisis.’ An example of an early proponent of environmental writing beyond nature writing would be John Muir’s essay “Save The Redwoods” (published posthumously in 1920) (see below). Nature writing, in Lyon’s classification, does not include non-prose texts either, excluding the rather popular genre of nature poetry. Neither does nature writing encompass fiction writing beyond slightly fictionalized travel accounts.
– while in fact, “[experimentation] with genre characterizes environmental writing” (Clark 36).

3.1.2 The American Tradition: From Thoreau to Eco-fiction

In part because of America’s geography and nature – the country was virtually untouched when the colonists landed, compared to European landscapes – nature writing (followed in time by environmental writing of another sort) has had an important role to play in American culture. No figure is so closely associated with that American strain of nature writing as Henry David Thoreau, who for all of them who came after him – from John Muir to Annie Dillard – has been the ‘type specimen’ of their genre (see e.g. Stewart xxii, 13; Slovic 3; Fritzell 3). As Fritzell (41) observes in his book *Nature Writing in America*, “it is still almost entirely customary for students of nature writing to begin their disquisitions by considering the problems of generic classification posed by Thoreau’s writings (particularly *Walden*) and then to work their way back to William Bartram and Gilbert White.” Indeed, we could see Thoreau as the one who crystallized and then popularized a tradition that had been around for a rather long time. Literary descriptions of the natural world abound since classical antiquity, but the modern form came into being in the work of the English parson-naturalist Gilbert White, who in his *Natural History of Selborne* (1789) made some original contributions to the field of natural history (Stewart 25), and who was one of the first to distinguish birds by live observation and listening to their song, rather than by collecting specimens. In America, at the same time, St. John de Crèvecoeur and future president Thomas Jefferson laid the foundations of the nature writing tradition (Lyon 2001, 36). Then came the American naturalist William Bartram, whose *Travels* (1791) detailed the environment of the American South, customarily including the Native Americans; Lewis and Clark with the journals of their westward journey (1804-1806); and the famed French-American ornithologist John James Audubon. Milestones from during Thoreau’s days include Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), though more significant as a work of biology than of literature, hugely influential on both nature writers and future environmentalists, and Thomas Perkins Marsh’s *Man and Nature* (1864), one of the first books to show insight into the then still non-existent science of ecology. Stepping, in part, in Thoreau’s footsteps were John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, and the very popular but now largely forgotten John Burroughs. Authors of the twentieth century who could still be labeled nature writers in the traditional sense
include Aldo Leopold, who laid the basics for modern ecological ethics; the eco-anarchist Edward Abbey, who actually refused the label; Rachel Carson, best-known as the author of *Silent Spring* (1962); and Annie Dillard, who is Thoreau’s rightful heir with her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974).  

As I have indicated using Bill McKibben’s quotation, environmental writing has grown out of nature writing in America. There have been predecessors of environmental literature that is not nature writing before the start of the twentieth century, especially in some of the early texts on ecology. However, I argue that it is only in the Progressive Era, roughly from the 1890s to the 1920s, that environmental literature as a concept distinguishable from the narrower genre of nature writing came into being. John Muir, especially, was a pioneer, writing not only about nature, but advocating a primitive form of environmental ethics (later developed into Leopold’s more coherent, de-romanticized ‘land ethic’) and defending concrete conservation efforts in his newspaper and magazine articles. It is hard to pinpoint the moment in Muir’s career that he first wrote or published essays arguing for the protection of nature by the government, thus outgrowing the elements that make for nature writing: natural history, emotional response, and philosophical interpretation. As early as 1876, Muir published an essay aptly titled “God’s First Temples: How Shall We Preserve Our Forests?” He continued to combine traditional nature writing – as he did in almost all of his books, and in most of his essays – with writing that we would now classify as environmental journalistic texts or activist pamphlets, very much like a Bill McKibben piece. In my opinion, Muir’s journalistic and activist writings are best exemplified by “Save the Redwoods,” which was published posthumously in 1920 in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*. In that essay, he argues against the destruction of the California redwood habitats, in his typical to-the-point style: “While the iron of public sentiment is hot let us strike hard. In particular, a reservation or national park of the only other species of Sequoia […] should be quickly secured” (Muir 830-831).

It took another few decades for environmental themes to be adopted by fiction writers in environmental fiction or eco-fiction. (Carson’s *Silent Spring* immediately comes to mind as one of the great popularizing books of environmental literature, but that is a

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30 This overview is of course far from complete; see Lyon (2001) and Fritzell for a more comprehensive examination.
work of non-fiction.) Very little research has been done on eco-fiction, and, as Raglon (97) writes, “[since] historically the underpinning of ecocritical theory was wedded to natural history and its writers, there has long been a sense that other genres have somehow been underrepresented in developing ecocriticism.” In 2010, Jim Dwyer published what appears to be the first bibliography of eco-fiction, *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction*. In it, he lists a great variety of possible predecessor texts, some of which have been listed in section 1.3.5 of this dissertation. Dwyer defines eco-fiction as a “composite subgenre made up of many styles […] which] can be found in many genres, primarily mainstream, westerns, mystery, romance, and speculative fiction” (3). Dwyer observes that eco-fiction has many “deep literary roots and a rich and growing canopy of branches,” with eco-fiction authors writing in many forms – poetry, narrative prose fiction, essays… (3). The phenomenon of eco-fiction crystallized in the early 1970s, when a “veritable fusillade of new fiction emanating from the environmental movement exploded onto the American literary scene” (Dwyer vii). Among the causes of this sudden growth are:

- accelerated population growth and the development of previously untrammeled land; resistance to the Vietnam War and the growth of the peace movement; the greening of the counterculture; popularization of the environmental movement; burgeoning of feminism, particularly ecofeminism; Native American and Chicano activism; and the emergence of a ‘small is beautiful’ philosophy and deep ecology (Dwyer 29).

The better known texts produced during this ‘fusillade’ include Frank Herbert’s *Dune* saga (1965-1985); Richard Adams’ *Watership Down* (1972); Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) and *The Dispossessed* (1974); and Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). The “banner year for ecofiction,” according to Dwyer (29), was 1975: among many others, Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* and Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* were published in this year. Ever since then, eco-fiction has continued to grow and expand (Dwyer 32).

### 3.2 How ‘Eco’ Are Ecotopian Novels? Nature Study and Ecological Awareness

As should be clear from the preceding overview, *Ecotopia* and the other ecotopian novels are fine examples of eco-fiction, part of this ‘rich and growing canopy.’ In this section, I will hypothesize two things. First, I argue that ecotopian fiction is only remotely related to
the more narrow tradition of American nature writing, paying little attention to wildlife and ecosystems and to the naturalist’s central occupation, nature study. Secondly, I will make a case for ecotopia’s greenness, despite its lack of major similarities to nature writing, answering the question ‘What is it that makes ecotopian novels ecological?’

Nature writing, picking up on Lyon’s analysis (1996, 276), consists of three main dimensions, being “natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature.” Natural history, the study, or rather the observation of organisms in their environment, is notoriously absent from each of the four ecotopian novels in my selection. (It is noticeably more present in Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home*, which is a much more descriptive novel anyway.) In *Ecotopia*, there is a good reason for this absence: the story’s narrator, the American Will Weston, is just not attuned to the intricate detail of nature. Describing his train ride from Tahoe to San Francisco, Weston writes:

> Once we reached the valley floor, I saw little of interest, but my companions still seemed fascinated. They pointed out changes in the field and forests we passed; in a wooded stretch someone spotted a doe with two fawns, and later a jackrabbit caused great amusement (22-23).

Natural history and personal responses to nature, as we find abundantly in a John Muir or Burroughs’ piece, are entirely absent from the novel. The only time Weston is in intimate contact with nature, he is having sex with Marissa in a hollow at the base of a huge redwood tree (118). While Weston himself is not attuned to nature (yet), he does remark on the Ecotopians’ understanding and appreciation of nature and the outdoors. The educational curriculum, for example, heavily emphasizes survival skills and an intimate knowledge of the local fauna and flora:

> The experiences of the children are closely tied in with studies of plants, animals and landscape. I have been impressed with the knowledge that even young children have of such matters – a six-year-old can tell you all about the “ecological niches” of the creatures and plants he encounters in his daily life (81).

In *Ecotopia Emerging*, a few references are made to the outdoors as well. Most interesting is a passage in which one of the characters, Marissa D’Amato (who is at the
end of the novel revealed to be same person as Marissa Brightcloud), reminisces about a week-long backcountry camping trip in the Sierras that she made as an adolescent. The language she uses is rather Muir-esque: the “open country […] exhilarated her,” “this stripped-down existence,” “[she] enjoyed the sensual feel of the mountain air,” “subtle smells, sounds, sights surrounding her,” “she was much more conscious of the sky,” etc. (99-100). Like Thoreau, Muir, and Burroughs, the wild equates the noble, the ethical, and the pure for Marissa, providing her with “a kind of standard by which to judge supposedly ‘normal’ living” (100). “Living in the wild,” furthermore, “made Marissa alert and tested her sense of self-preservation” (100). Marissa begins to reprioritize, realizing “that the so-called necessities of life looked differently in the Sierra” and that there was “a satisfaction in this enforced austerity” (100). This camping experience, we are informed, inspired Marissa “to do some serious nature study,” becoming particularly interested in ecology (100). The “university of the wilderness” is also present in Pacific Edge, as Kevin and his friends go visit Sally Tallhawk, a water law specialist who lives on “California’s great backbone,” the Sierra Nevada (98). Again, as in Ecotopia Emerging, people reminisce about camping trips in the Sierras and Yosemite (152-153). An explicit reference is made to “Muir’s night on Shasta” (152), an event that Muir described in the 1877 essay “Snow-Storm on Mount Shasta.” While the narrator of Pacific Edge puts more effort in describing the landscapes than Callenbach does in either of his two novels, there is still not much nature study present in the novel. At most, the characters or the narrator “[survey] the scene” (69). This is what Maya, too, does at the start of The Fifth Sacred Thing: she surveys the landscape around San Francisco from a hilltop to the south, admiring the North’s successes, but also casting doubt on some of their own policy choices (1-3). Otherwise, either personal responses to nature or philosophical interpretations of it are very scarce in each of these books. It would be hard, thus, to argue that these ecotopian novels are ‘nature writing’ at all, although there are certainly references to the genre, and although some of the novels’ characters are definitely inspired by nature in ways reminiscent of the naturalists’ responses.

31 John Muir was especially ‘conscious of the sky,’ constantly giving detailed descriptions of the cloudscape she encountered on his ‘first summer in the Sierra.’
While ecotopian fiction is clearly not a direct descendant of nature writing, it does engage extensively with a number of environmental issues. Among others, there are various passages in each of the novels dealing with pollution, herbicides, and pesticides; recycling, biodegradable products, and natural materials; sustainable housing and urban planning; renewable energy sources; environmental destruction; and exotic species. As I have focused on gender and sex to show ecotopia’s concern for social issues, I will here focus on ‘ecological awareness’ to evidence the novels’ attachment to the tradition of modern environmental literature. Ecological consciousness or awareness could be defined as the appreciation of the interconnectedness of life, and of humanity’s position within the delicate and all-encompassing mechanism of ecology. Since “nature is a web of relations,” ecological awareness is about the acknowledgement of our humble role in it – and of the dangers humanity’s hybris poses to the very system we are entirely dependent on (Skolimowski, qtd. in Agwan 238). “Denial of relationality,” the eco-philosopher Henryk Skolimowski posited, is thus “denial of being” (qtd. in Agwan 238).

Educators and researches in the Ecotopias have come to that insight. Biology and ecology, instead of physics or other academic disciplines, have become the most relevant studies. As an Ecotopian teacher says to Weston, “[we’ve] crossed over into the age of biology. Your school system is still physics-dominated” (244). As a result, the “experiences of the [Ecotopian] children are closely tied in with studies of plants, animals and landscape” (81). At the universities as well, some disciplines have fallen out of favor: “Neither in Ecotopian universities nor in research institutes can one find professors of several once flourishing disciplines: political science, sociology and psychology. Their practitioners evidently drifted off into other fields – philosophy, biology, and so on” (271). Interestingly, history and anthropology flourish, while economics is “still an active field, though of course its direction would seem questionable to most of [the American] economists” (272). In *Pacific Edge*, population biology has apparently become a significant discipline (86). Generally, biology and ecology are applied in many domains of life in this novel. Ramona is a biology teacher who takes her pupils to a construction site to “learn some applied ecology” (12) and Kevin sees construction and architecture as biological disciplines, using a “variety of biologic systems” (85). Kevin also mentions that human relationships, with feedback loops, are just “like any other ecology” (19). Further on, one character argues that lawyers – whom she naturally distrusts – “should [be trained] as ecologists before they’re let into law school [to] give them some decent values,” to
which another person responds that, in the Ecotopia of Robinson’s novel, “[lawyers] do take courses in ecology” already (41). What we notice in each of these cases is that biology and ecology, sometimes used seemingly interchangeably, have become the dominant disciplines. When Weston states that political scientists have ‘drifted off’ into the disciplines that study living things, it is not because the study of politics has become superfluous, but rather because politics, too, is part of the ecology of our society. The point is that you cannot study anything without acknowledging its place in the biosphere.

The ideal inhabitants of the West Coast ecotopias are of course also in closer touch with the land themselves – acknowledging the principles of ecology first-hand. At first, Will Weston mistakes this ecological awareness for “sentimentality about nature” (19). Later, in one of his reports, Weston admits the Ecotopians’ environmental policy decisions are not “only for sentimental reasons” (43). Still, he goes on to describe the Ecotopians as “sentimental about Indians, and there’s some sense in which they envy the Indians [for] their lost natural place in the American wilderness,” indicating they favor the supposedly close-to-nature attitude of Native Americans (67). Because “what matters most is the aspiration live in balance with nature, ‘walk lightly on the land,’ treat the earth as a mother” (68, my italics). The American Indians are again mentioned in reference to the Ecotopians’ relationship to technology:

Mysteriously, the Ecotopians do not feel ‘separate’ from their technology. They evidently feel a little as the Indians must have felt: that the horse and the teepee and the bow and arrow all sprang, like the human being, from the womb of nature, organically (106, my italics).

This passage indicates beautifully how people, according to the Ecotopians, should be fully aware of their humble position in the biosphere of planet Earth. All technology is essentially made from natural resources, and so the very existence of tools is dependent on the existence of ecosystems, animals, wood… So too is humanity part of this biosphere. Our future, too, depends on the health of the relational network we are part of. Hank, a character in Pacific Edge, puts it this way: “We come from the earth. We’re part of the earth” (151). In Ecotopia Emerging, this consciousness is referred to as “the biological welfare of the species,” and behavior contrary to ecological consciousness is called “non-survival behavior” (9). “[Taking] seriously the idea that the species should learn to survive on the earth in harmony with the rest of the biosphere” therefore becomes one of the tenets
of the Survivalist Party (37, 252). Starhawk’s “Declaration of the Four Sacred Things” 
*TFST*, n. pag.) acknowledges this too:

The earth is a living, conscious being. […] air, fire, water, and earth […] are symbols of the *interconnected systems* that sustain life, we know that *nothing can live without them*. To call these things sacred is to say that they have a value beyond their usefulness for human ends. […] All people, all living things, are *part of the earth life*, and so are sacred. No one of us stands higher or lower than any other. Only justice can assure balance: only *ecological balance* can sustain freedom (my italics).

This deep ecological ‘creed’ reveals that the ecological awareness prevalent in the ecotopian novels can be experienced as something sacred or spiritual. In *Ecotopia*, for examples, Weston speculates that president Vera Allwen is “as much a religious leader as a politician? Head of the state ecological church, chief priestess?” (86). More relevant, perhaps, is the stress on “tree worship” (122, 119, *PE* 229). Ecotopians apparently “regard trees as being alive” (127), in very much the same sense as the ‘Four Sacred Things’ declaration – they are sacred in that they have an intrinsic value. As such, ecological awareness becomes “their ecological religion” (299). Weston also observes that the work Marissa does as an ecological forester has “a holiness to it” (203). In *Pacific Edge*, altogether a grimmer book (the plan to save Rattlesnake Hills eventually fails), tree worship and tree huggers are not exactly taken seriously. One inhabitant of El Modena, for example, defends a stand of “old and sacred” trees that are ready to be cut, while in fact, they belong to introduced species (26). In another instance, Alfredo debunks Kevin’s sometimes naïve appreciation of wilderness by pointing out that Kevin is being overly “romantic” about it, and that “a return to nature” is just a fantasy (48, 50). It is dubious, even, whether is any wilderness at all in Orange County, as Alfredo points out.

### 3.3 Bioregionalism: Reorganizing Society in Natural Communities

The philosophy of bioregionalism provides me with another interesting angle into the relationship between ecotopia and its two main parent traditions, utopian and science fiction, which is naturally concerned with social organization, and environmental literature with its ecocentrist way of looking at humanity. Bioregionalism, as the philosophy that
links the land with social structures, helps us assess the relative importance of each of those traditions, and the way they intersect.

3.3.1 The Utopian Locus and Bioregionalism

As I have indicated in the chapter on utopian literature, utopias operate as enclaves within a universe that is relatively familiar to the reader, usually a representation of our own world, either in the present or at a future moment. By consequence, utopias can be situated either within the real-life geography of planet Earth, in which case the contemporary situation is transformed in the utopian or dystopian situation, or outside of familiar geography. The best-known example thereof is Atlantis, an imaginary island on a part of the map that was (and cognitively, still is) more or less blank. Other options within that category include isolated valleys in some ‘terra incognita,’ as well as, since the end of the age of discovery on Earth, far-away or invented planets.

Each of the novels in my selection of ecotopias, however, is firmly set on planet Earth, in a place that is to us neither unknown nor unreachable. Following the conventions of modern utopian and science fiction literature, these Ecotopias are distanced from the reader in time: Callenbach’s Ecotopia takes place in a near future (that has already become the recent past to us), while Le Guin’s Always Coming Home and Tepper’s The Gate to Women’s Country are set in far-off post-apocalyptic futures. When the temporal distancing is limited, as in Ecotopia, there is an additional geographic distancing: Ecotopia has been made inaccessible to American visitors, adopting a radically isolationist position towards the United States (but not Canada, Asia-Pacific, or Europe). Isolating a utopia in time and/or space has the additional benefit of recreating society on a smaller scale, making concern for the interconnectedness of international politics and economics temporarily superfluous. (This isolating reflex in the ecotopian novels is not unproblematic, in that they, as I have just shown, actually revolve around ecology, the study of the interconnectedness of life.)

The region these novels take place in is not random. The choice for the West Coast or the Pacific Northwest, increasingly called Cascadia in the context of a growing regional awareness and a to some activists very sincere striving for autonomy, reflects a willingness to go beyond the arbitrary borders that give a map of the United States and Canada its distinct look. In the American West, especially, state lines were drawn along parallels and meridians. As Daniel Kemmis remarks in the foreword to Michael Vincent McGinnis’s
Bioregionalism, the artificial grid in which the national government has pushed state and local governments has created “political jurisdictions even less organic, less responsive to landscape than had been created in any other region” (xv). Kemmis’ statement signals his regret at having wasted the wonderful opportunity the American West – being so geographically diverse as it is – offered in “[organizing] human activity” (xv). This rejection of ecology and geography as formative principles of regional identity, as well as the lack of recognition of existing regional identities that do not neatly fit within the top-down drawn borders (as is most clearly the case in California, where a felt discrepancy exists between Northern and Southern California), have been challenged from the very moment the boundaries were drawn. It is only in the mid-twentieth century, though, that from a willingness to unite communities into more ‘natural’ regions, bioregionalism arose. According to Frenkel (290), bioregionalism originated on the North American West Coast in the early to mid-seventies, largely through the San Francisco-based Planet Drum Foundation, as a response “to the perception that human societies were becoming alienated from the natural environment.” Aberly (14-15) sees the movement originating from the winding-down of the countercultural movements of the long sixties, while Frenkel (291) notes an internal evolution from bioregionalism as social critique to bioregionalism as alternative lifestyle.

Frenkel (289) makes a more than fair attempt at defining and delineating the movement:

Bioregionalism is a contemporary North American ecological movement committed to developing communities integrated with ecosystems. […] one common element of bioregionalism is the belief that social relations ought to be derived and governed by the local biophysical environment.

Author and activist Jim Dodge (qtd. in Alexander n. pag.) offers the following set of more specific characteristics: “natural systems as the source of physical and spiritual sustenance; anarchy, or the decentralization of political institutions to a scale where face-to-face interaction and self-management become possible; and spirituality, a belief in the sacredness of the web of life.” Don Alexander (n. pag.) himself sees “a belief in natural, as opposed to political or administrative, regions as organizing units for human activity; an emphasis on a practical land ethic to be applied at a local and regional scale; and the favoring of locally and regionally diverse cultures as guarantors of environmental
adaptation, in opposition to the trend towards global monoculture” as characteristic of bioregionalism. The movement has also been called a “politics of place” that “turns (the) ‘bigger is better’ notion on its head” by focusing on the local (Parsons 3, Alexander n. pag.). For Frenkel (292), this indicates that bioregionalism is indebted to the tradition of American provincialism, and to the large body of academic literature on regionalism in the United States. The topic of Frenkel’s research paper, furthermore, is the relationship between bioregionalism, which “deterministically links political culture and the environment,” and environmental determinism, which runs somewhat parallel to bioregionalism (289). He then identifies some of the contradictory tenets of the bioregionalist paradigm. One of his findings is that bioregionalists advocate self-determination, while adhering a philosophy that stresses the deterministic character of place on its inhabitants.

One of the key discussions within bioregionalism concerns the definition of a ‘bioregion,’ and by consequence, the size and shape of such regions. For a good understanding, I should make clear the difference between bioregions on the one hand and ecoregions on the other. An ecoregion, short for ecological region, is a biologically and geographically defined region that encompasses several ecosystems. While ecoregions are not ‘fixed,’ with edges made up out of transitional ecotones, they are nevertheless scientifically supported approximations of the patterns that group several ecosystems, including patterns in soil, climate, vegetation, and hydrology. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of the United States federal government, for example, has provided an overview of rather well-defined and research-based US ecoregions on four different levels: ranging from areas as large as the entire Great Plains or most of the Eastern United States on level I to areas as small as the Point Reyes peninsula on level IV.

Bioregions, by contrast, have no generally agreed upon scientific basis. In Frenkel’s words: “These contiguous, mappable, geographic regions are defined primarily

32 Ecotones are “zones of transition between vegetation communities or regions that can be statistically shown to represent a change in species composition” (Senft 4). They are usually high in conservation value.

33 For the main reasons for “disagreement over how to delineate ecoregions,” see Omernik’s 2004 paper “Perspectives on the Nature and Definition of Ecological Regions.”
in biophysical terms […] might therefore correspond to a watershed, a biological community, a type of landform, an elevational zone, or less traditionally, a perceived spiritual milieu” (291). Watersheds, especially, have been prominent in North American bioregionalism, probably because of the easiness with which they can be defined, and because of their perceived naturalness. Dan Flores (47) sees ‘bioregion’ as a term that potentially covers several geographic units, including “ecoregions, biotic provinces, physiographic provinces, biomes, ecosystems.” Ecoregions, by way of conclusion, are designated by scientific standards for the purpose of e.g. environmental management, while bioregions are those biogeographic units that correspond to a mental construct of that natural and cultural region.

Obviously, definitions as broad as those provided by Frenkel and Flores fail to make proposed bioregions very convincing, because if you do not know how to determine a bioregion, what then makes it superior to arbitrary political geography? As Clark (136) writes: “The fragility of some bioregional ideas relates to the prior and crucial question: at what scale or scales should one think and work in environmental politics?” The somewhat deterministic linking of geography and landscape to identity, furthermore, is highly problematic when the very basis of this geography is contested. A thorough review of the merits and failures of bioregionalism, however, is beyond the scope of this dissertation. A relevant critique is provided in Joel Kovel’s The End of Nature (2002), in which the author discredits several branches of the environmental movement for not overtly attacking capitalism. (The only alternative, he insists, is eco-socialism.)

3.3.2 Bioregionalism in West Coast Ecotopias

As the Berkeley geographer James J. Parsons notes (2), the bioregionalist movement, regardless of its modest size, quickly began to produce several fiction and non-fiction texts that supported its ideas. Parsons (2) includes names such as Peter Berg, founder of the Planet Drum Foundation; the novelist Jim Dodge; the British author Tim Marshall; the Canadian novelist Michael Helm; Stephanie Mills, a Michigan-based ecology activist and writer; the Beat Generation poet Gary Snyder; and Ecotopia author Ernest Callenbach. Parsons is right in including Callenbach in his brief list of authors who have been

34 For more on eco-socialism and bioregionalism, see Pepper (185-194).
influenced by the bioregionalist creed, and who have contributed to the dissemination of its ideas. In *Ecotopia* and *Ecotopia Emerging*, traces can be found of this philosophy, and Callenbach arguably tried to make Ecotopia into a place that is ‘bioregionally legitimized.’ The same holds true for the other novels in this selection.

When Will Weston enters Ecotopia east of Reno at the novel’s onset, he is still unaware of Ecotopia’s actual environmental policies, including its bioregional tendencies. He nevertheless mentions that “the forbidding Sierra Nevada mountains,” and not the 120th meridian west, which is slightly to the east of the Sierras’ crest, form the nation’s border (10). Since the Ecotopian train that Weston boards leaves from the north coast of Lake Tahoe, and crawls up the notoriously steep eastern slopes of the Sierras past Donner Pass (21), we may assume the border between Ecotopia and the United States is drawn where the eastern foothills yield to the dryness of the Great Basin. Natural geography, then, and not random line-drawing, is what puts Ecotopia apart from the United States. The difference between the green Ecotopian territory and the dry desert in the east, is so striking indeed that Lou makes the following observation in *Ecotopia Emerging*: the “barren high desert of Utah and Nevada […] looked forlorn, treeless, uninhabitable, like the moon” (274). Elsewhere in that novel, one character expresses a feeling of being geographically and thus culturally different than the rest of the nation, a feeling that is generally shared by the Ecotopians, but never expressed quite as energetically as here:

‘Who would you want to keep out? That’s just Nevada over there.’

‘Everybody,’ said Ben abruptly. ‘This is the border – right up here along the summit line. Back of us is our country. It’s green, it’s reasonably sensible. Out there is the enemy – the desert crazies, the destroyers. Gamblers and land-rapers. Atom-bomb test grounds […]’ (101).

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35 The border between California and Nevada is drawn along the 120th meridian west from the state’s most northern point to Lake Tahoe, where the border takes a slight turn to the east. Though policy and politics have made the Californian and the Nevadan sides of Lake Tahoe into noticeably different entities – casinos being among the most obvious differences – both sides of the border were originally part of the same cultural region, formed by the same gold and silver rushes. In fact, there have been attempts in counties and towns on both sides of the border to secede and join the neighboring state.
As mentioned earlier, many proposed bioregions in North America correspond to watersheds. Most of the action in *Ecotopia* takes place in such a watershed: the San Francisco Bay Area, or the “hilly country around San Francisco” (23). Weston lives in San Francisco, but also visits rural West Marin, sails the Bay, and mentions places such as Oakland, Berkeley, Redwood City, Livermore, and the new minicity Carquinez-Martinez along the restored Suisun Bay (e.g. 63-64). In fact, almost all action in *Ecotopia* takes place in the Bay Area, as well as slightly to the north, but no farther than the Lost Coast in Humboldt County, and to the south, but not past Gilroy and Monterey (which is by today’s standards still firmly Northern California).

Though the non-fictional Bay Area of the 2010s is a cultural unit as well, we can see the Ecotopian Bay Area as a different sort of region. The typically American suburban areas on the Peninsula, or along the Carquinez Strait, connecting San Francisco with cities like Oakland, San Jose, or Vallejo, have been abandoned in favor of self-sufficient cities. The ‘unnatural’ conurbation of present-day America is therefore rescinded in favor of a region that is populated because of its benevolent geography alone (e.g. minicities at “favorable locations,” 136) – a bioregion.

Other parts of Ecotopia are likewise referred to as cultural-geographic units. It is mentioned that in “areas such as the Puget Sound, the Columbia and Williamette [sic] rivers near Portland, and San Francisco Bay and Delta,” all of which are regions defined by their largest bodies of water, “waterways [have become] useful for transportation” (187). Agricultural practice, too, including forestry and fishery, has been “reorganized and decentralized” (137). Decentralization, the process of dispersing political, administrative, and economic power away from a central authority, is a crucial concept in the Ecotopia of Callenbach’s first novel. Though Ecotopia is variously described as a “small country” (310) or a country that is “relatively sensible in scale” (44), Ecotopians still adhere what Weston calls a “dubiously fetishistic decentralism” (315). In one of his official reports, Weston writes that “[d]ecentralization [has] affected every aspect of life” (137) and this seems to be the case indeed. Production has been decentralized by city or region (20), and

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36 Though defining Northern and Southern California is not a sinecure, it is often agreed upon that the 48 northernmost counties make up Northern California. The line separating north and south, then, lies at 35°48’ north. Among the geographic features that separate ‘NorCal’ from ‘SoCal’ are the Tehachapi Mountains.
so has government (47). In phrasing that echoes Kemmis’ criticism of America’s arbitrary internal borders, Weston reports:

They then reorganized the governmental structures of the states and counties, which they considered outmoded because unrelated to the organic structures of production and consumption, and also inherently inadaptable for dealing with regional ecological systems. They divided the country into five metropolitan and four rural regions. Within these they also greatly extended many powers of governments of local communities (181).

Government has been made local again. Apparently, “the Ecotopian constitution is city-based” and “[the] Ecotopian main cities […] dominate their regions,” which no longer correspond to the inorganic counties, which have been “omitted entirely” (200). While Weston tries to portray this change as a “provincial attempt to construct a decent society” (202), it is evident that Ecotopia’s “decentralized society” (56) with “small government bodies” (201) actually supports the people in their wish to understand their local community, and to successfully participate in it. Even the dubious idea of voluntary ethnic segregation into “city-states” such as ‘Soul City’ (313) is seen as part of Ecotopia’s decentralist policy. Likewise, the media landscape has been decentralized, resulting in a “fragmentation” of both print media and television (231-233). Research universities have been broken up, too, and Ecotopia now witnesses a “proliferation of small research institutes” (267). The concept is even applied to economic and political responsibility. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, companies in Ecotopia are run cooperatively. Unlike in America, where CEOs can make major decisions impacting thousands of employees and not be held accountable for them, in Ecotopia every person is personally accountable for his or her actions. Ecotopians have really “[tried] to decentralize and personalize [responsibility] whenever possible” (236). 37 In Ecotopia Emerging, it is

37 Intriguingly, Callenbach does credit the Ecotopians with a far-reaching “standardization” in the country’s general stores, called “core stores” (204), as well as a “severe systematization” in things like train schedules and price lists, something Weston links to a “curious French influence” (174). Possibly, Ecotopia’s choice for centigrade (311) is another case of French or European influence.
revealed that decentralization has been a policy of the Survivalist Party since the very beginning (9).

Terms such as ‘bioregion’ and ‘bioregionalism’ do not occur in *Ecotopia* – they do in *Ecotopia Emerging* (see below) – but there is certainly a debate going on among the novel’s protagonists about bioregionalism and what could be called environmental separatism. Observing the conviction in Ecotopia that the idea of the nation-state is, and should be dead, Weston writes in one of his reports: “Ecotopians argue that such separatism is desirable on ecological as well as cultural grounds – that a small regional society can exploit its ‘niche’ in the world biosystem more subtly and richly and efficiently (and of course less destructively)” (315). Organization into regions that are ecologically and culturally justified, is seen as a choice in favor of efficiency, which can only be true when mass-production, generally seen as efficient in that it allows for high production at minimum cost and time, is discredited for its environmental inefficiency: high levels of waste, social unsustainability, etc. Economically speaking, the capitalist mode of production does not internalize most environmental costs. Ecotopians, by contrast, seem to realize that any mode of sustainable production must consider all costs, including ‘negative externalities:’ costs that are traditionally not monetized (cf. Buchanan & Stubblebine). When one considers the loss of biodiversity to be a part of our economy – since it results in the loss of resources – one quickly sees that economic ‘growth’ is counterbalanced by environmental loss; that what we consider ‘growth’ is merely a transfer from valuable resources into capital. When a lumber company, for example, cuts a patch of biologically diverse, old-growth forest, and sells that lumber on the market, they will report growth. They do not, however, take the loss of biodiversity into account: such a loss will aggravate the climate crisis, might cause harm to indigenous peoples, and will contribute to extinction of plant and animal species, some of which are valuable to humans in the form of pharmaceuticals. Various other ecosystem services – ranging from nutrient dispersal and crop pollination to water purification and erosion control – may be lost as well (cf. Costanza et al.). As Aldo Leopold put it in his *Sand County Almanac*, “We of the minority see a law of diminishing returns in progress; our opponents do not” (vii, my italics). That the Ecotopians see it this way – that they acknowledge that capitalist ‘efficiency’ is not nearly as ‘efficient’ as a holistic economics that internalizes environmental costs – goes to show their commitment to the environmentally sustainable
organization of society. Since sustainability is also about social development, the Ecotopians internalize “social costs” as well (Ecotopia 32).

The Ecotopians’ bioregional and separatist tendencies, however, are not altogether unproblematic. Callenbach makes sure to mention this – Ecotopia is an exploration of environmental themes, including bioregionalism, not a blind appraisal. In his diary, Weston mentions how some Ecotopian politicians think they should be tougher internationally. And indeed, pollution or global warming, as we know, do not stop at the border. Ecotopians know this too: “Ecotopian government is too tolerant of pollution coming in from outside” (145). There was a public debate after the declaration of independence as well, in which people asked themselves whether “Ecotopia’s own survival [hinged] on the exporting of survivalist doctrines to the rest of the world” (181). While Weston notes that those in favor of international eco-policing, abandoning the country’s deep isolationism, have been in the minority so far, “their strength keeps rising” “as ecocatastrophes overtake other countries with increasing frequency” (181).

3.3.3 A Natural Choice: The Pacific Northwest as Ecotopia

As bioregionalists are concerned with trying to identify North America’s major bioregions, and determine their locations using sound arguments based on both cultural identity and biogeographic unity, so too are the West Coast ecotopias. It is certainly striking that each of these novels is set on the West Coast. I could not find any ecologically utopian novels that are set in other parts of the United States, though it is not impossible that more obscure texts of that kind exist. The observation that all ecotopias are set on the West Coast in itself suggests a certain ‘naturalness’ to the authors’ choice, and there are several possible reasons to consider. First, more trivially, we could look at the authors of our ecotopian novels – where are they from? Callenbach and Starhawk, though born in the East, are indeed associated with the San Francisco Bay Area, and Robinson grew up in Southern California and now lives in Yolo County. This may account for the proliferation of West Coast ecotopias, but it does not answer the question why non-West Coast writers have not produced non-West Coast ecotopian novels. A second reason to consider is the region’s involvement in socially progressive movements and the environmental movement. While it is dangerous to make generalizations about the West Coast compared to the rest of the United States (and Canada), it is fair to say that voters in the three West Coast states (and in coastal British Columbia) have embraced a more leftist political
course than voters in the Rocky Mountains, the Great Plains, the South, and the Midwest (the Northeast, of course, being more progressive as well). This progressiveness, which has given the region its nickname ‘Left Coast,’ stems in part from the attraction it has historically exerted on young artists and activists. In the mid-fifties, the Bay Area became the heart of the Beat Generation, and in the sixties, the capital of the hippie movement. In the decades after that, San Francisco and the cities across the Bay – Berkeley and Oakland – continued to play a major role in gay rights and environmentalism, among other movements. Though present-day progressivism on the West Coast is a far cry from the countercultural movement of the sixties, the open-minded intellectual climate of that period definitely shaped the next generations of thinkers, in fields as diverse as New Age spirituality, feminism, environmentalism, liberal politics, marihuana legalization, and gay rights. Somewhat problematic, though, is how this explanation is almost exclusively centered on the Bay Area. It would account for the Bay Area’s progressiveness, but how does it relate to the politics of Portland or Seattle?

This brings us to a third explanation for the apparent ‘naturalness’ of the Pacific Northwest as an Ecotopia: the geographic composition of the region. Put simply: due to the region’s inherent geography and ecology, and the historical interventions in its landscape – development, irrigation, conservation, and so forth – the American West Coast has developed into a highly urbanized region, on the one hand, and a place with great tracts of pristine wilderness, on the other hand. First and foremost, these developments account for the region’s progressiveness: urbanization and progressive politics are positively correlated. No area west of the Mississippi is as urbanized as the West Coast, and this has been the case since the outburst of the California Gold Rush of the late 1840s (Pomeroy 48). At least since 1860, when the first reliable census in the Far West was

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38 This is a general observation based on American electoral results. There is no overall research within the field of political geography that corroborates this very general observation. Any map of election results in the United States, however, will confirm that large, ethnically diverse, and high-density cities vote more Democratically than rural and suburban places. Coastal regions, generally more urbanized, are also consistently more left-leaning. Any red-and-blue-shaded, county-level map of the 2012 presidential elections, for example, evidences that this is the way voters on the West Coast align.
taken, “California has been more urban than the rest of the nation” (Pomeroy 84). This high degree of urbanization sets the coastal strip from San Diego to Vancouver apart from the rest of the American West. The evolution towards urbanization this coastal strip has already gone through in the nineteenth century has only recently begun in other states in the West. As it resulted in progressive politics on the West Coast, so too will it result in an electoral change in the rest of the West – as The Atlantic reported in 2012, “Increasing Density and Diversity [is] Likely to Make Western States More Blue” (Berg n. pag.). The West Coast’s geography not only accounts for its political climate, it also holds the key to the proliferation of environmental writing and fiction. Not only is the coastal strip, roughly defined as the area west of the Cascades and the California Coastal Ranges, heavily urbanized, it also holds large areas of wilderness area. Washington, Oregon, and California have a high ratio of undeveloped land, concentrated around the mountainous areas: the Sierras, Shasta, the Cascades, the Olympic peninsula, and the coastal ranges. Though the West Coast states share this characteristic – high wilderness ratio – with all states west of the Great Plains, the coastal states overtrump the others, because of their greenness: nothing feels quite as ‘natural’ as the woods. The Pacific Northwest, of course, with its temperate rainforests on the Olympic peninsula and its stands of impressive Douglas fir, coast redwood, and giant sequoia, has plenty of that. It is my conviction that the combination of progressive urban populations and large tracts of pristine wilderness, forests in particular, make the Pacific Northwest the most ‘natural’ choice for ecotopia novelists.

The selected novels contain some evidence of this hypothesis, often in the attempt to justify why the transition to Ecotopia occurred where it did, and not elsewhere. In Ecotopia, Weston reasons that “the region that comprises Ecotopia had natural advantages that made the transition easier,” and he enumerates several social and economic factors, including the “higher educational level” and its all-round “major cities” (103). Weston also lists the region’s “temperate climate [which] encouraged an outdoors style of life,” which

39 It is in this context that Earl Pomeroy (3), historian of the American West, quips that “The Pacific Slope is both the most Western and, after the East itself, the most Eastern part of America. No other section is more like the Atlantic seaboard and Western Europe; no part is more different; and no part has wished to be both.”
made them “unusually well versed in nature and conservation lore, and experienced in camping and survival skills,” all of which are activities associated with forest wilderness, which is so abundant in the Northwest (104). In another report to the readers of his American newspaper, Weston calls the “Ecotopian circumstances” “unusually favorable compared to those in the rest of the U.S.” (140). He refers specifically to the “fertile agricultural land” (140), which is interesting in more than one way. The stress on agriculture, not the favorable state of nature conservation on the West Coast, seems to be motivated by Weston’s own utilitarian, American attitude. It need not be, though: the Ecotopian conversion of California’s export-oriented agribusiness into a smaller, sustainable economic activity is actually a major achievement from a green perspective, not exactly befitting the American ideals of endless growth.

No ecotopian novel is as explicit in its mission to understand why Ecotopia came into being where it (fictionally) did, as Callenbach’s Ecotopia Emerging. In one of the cursive sections, meant as factual background to the developing story, we read:

Since the waning of the last ice age – some fifteen thousand years ago – a green strip had lain along the Pacific coast. Cut off from the dry, desolate continental interior by the steep Sierra and Cascade ranges, this favored region received ample rainfall which sustained an abundance of plant and animal inhabitants. Because of its geographic isolation, the region came to boast many species found nowhere else. Unimaginable vast stands of redwoods, tallest trees on earth, covered the damp coastal mountains from Santa Cruz northward into Oregon, where they gave way to luxuriant stands of cedar (21, my italics).

This excerpt states in very clear terms why the Pacific Northwest is a “favored region”: it is remarkably rich in biological diversity. The section actually runs on for several more lines, extolling the richness of the Sierras, the chaparral, the grasslands, the rivers, the foothills, and the valleys (21-22). Unlike Weston, who praises Ecotopia’s agricultural achievements, the implied author here clearly indicates that it is ‘natural capital’ that makes this “green strip,” “this temperate and abundant land” (EE 21-22) or “fortunate watershed” (TFST 41) so Edenic.

In this novel – published six years after Ecotopia and four years after Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann wrote “Reinhabiting California” (1977), “the first classical
bioregional polemic” – Callenbach explicitly links the idea of a favored Pacific Northwest to the ideas of bioregionalism. He ‘traces back’ the birth of Ecotopia to prior appreciations of the region’s physiography and biogeography, including an 1870s botanical map by Thomas Porter that identifies the Pacific Northwest as “The Pacific Region,” which is defined as being west of the Sierras and north of the Tehachapis, just as Callenbach’s Ecotopia (EE 22-23; Map of the United States showing the Principal Botanical Divisions). The author then makes a jump to the present: “In more recent times, scientific refinements would adjust the boundaries here and there, and a new name, Oregonian Bioregion, would come into use” (23). Callenbach’s tone, here, is predictive: the implied author of this background piece expected the term ‘Oregonian bioregion,’ picked up from a 1980 bioregionalist text by Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann (435), to gain acceptance among scientists. It did not, however: an Internet search for the term reveals that only a few scientists use it, mostly in the context of marine ecology. When used in that context, the term ‘bioregion’ refers to an ecological unit – what is now usually called an ecoregion – and not to a bioregion in the bioregionalist sense. Intriguingly, it seems that Callenbach is using the term in the former sense: he sees the Oregonian bioregion as the culmination of a scientific effort to describe regional geographies. In a process akin to the logic behind bioregionalism itself, the implied author then builds upon the “biological unity” to assume cultural unity in the region (23). While transportation and communication networks have homologized the United States, regional identities still divided the nation:

the country never became altogether one organism. Beneath the smooth unified surface, under the patriotic rhetoric of national holidays, lurked persistent regional customs, attitudes, and loyalties (23).

“It was only the Pacific coast,” though, “isolated by immense distances and rugged topography, which constituted a separate socioeconomic system” (24). This last line should make clear that we move from a scientifically defined region, based on topography and ecology, to a socially and economically determined unity – the very essence of the bioregionalist discourse.

In at least two more instances, a direct plea is made for bioregionalism. Shortly before Ecotopia’s independence, the Survivalists declare that “each river basin on the coast should be a self-sufficient entity, living within the resources present in its own watershed on a sustainable basis” (287, my italics), and indeed, after the struggle for
References to regionalism abound in Ecotopia Emerging. Instead of enumerating each and every one of them, I want to end this reading with one more motif in the ecotopian novels: the region’s natural symbols. Throughout the selected novels, a number of specific plants are mentioned. Among them are the redwood trees, i.e. the coast redwood or *Sequoia sempervirens* and the giant sequoia or *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, both of which are recognizable symbols of California. Since their ranges are limited to California (the northernmost stands of coast redwood are located in the extreme southwest of Oregon), they do represent a biogeographic region, but not particularly the Pacific Northwest. In fact, the ranges of both species fall entirely within the California Floristic Province, a biodiversity hotspot\(^\text{40}\) that covers most of California except the deserts and that reaches into southwestern Oregon and northwestern Baja California. Another natural symbol repeatedly mentioned in the novels is the Manzanita brush, a group of species from the genus *Arctostaphylos*, recognizable by their soft reddish bark and twisting branches. Manzanitas, in contrast to the redwoods, occur all along the Pacific Coast from British Columbia to Mexico. Again, the range does not neatly cover Ecotopia, but it does stress a degree of ‘natural’ continuity from British Columbia to Northern California, and more problematically in this context, to Southern California and Mexico. One last symbol that deserves mention is the California wine, mentioned in each of the four novels. Wine is a product closely associated with California, and specifically with the North Bay area (Napa and Sonoma), but there are winemakers in Oregon and Washington as well. In the case of Ecotopia Emerging, a group inhabitants of Marin County drink “California wine” (9), which we are bound to assume was produced in the famous valleys to the east of Marin. This and other instances emphasize the possibility to produce foods locally and to take

\(^{40}\)Biodiversity hotspots are biogeographic regions with an exceptionally high degree of biological diversity, which is under threat. Norman Myers set two criteria for a region to be a biodiversity hotspot: great richness in vascular plant species and loss of at least 70% of its original vegetation cover (Myers et al. 853-858). Conservation International lists 34 such hotspots as priority areas in conservation efforts.
pride in that. Redwoods, manzanitas and wine – all of these motifs stand for some bioregional version of Ecotopia. Whether they are interpreted as symbols for a natural California, or for the high-biodiversity West Coast, or for local food production in the fertile valleys, they all set the West Coast apart from what is to the east of it. Only west of the Sierra crest are there redwoods, and only along the West Coast do we encounter the peculiar red manzanita bark, and only here are the rich valleys that produce, among many other crops, grapes.
4. Conclusion

I have contextualized the four most relevant novels of the phenomenon called ecotopian fiction. As I have shown in chapter 2, the novels fit neatly in the traditions of utopian fiction and soft science fiction, using formal and thematic elements from those traditions, including framing devices and a strong emphasis on the social. In chapter 3, I situated ecotopian fiction in the field of environmental literature. While the novels show little resemblance to the powerful strain of American nature writing, they clearly engage with environmental issues, very much in the way other contemporary eco-fiction and environmental non-fiction texts tend to do. Most intriguing is the way the West Coast ecotopian novels incorporate notions of bioregionalism. The novels set in the Pacific Northwest try to justify their setting – why are Washington, Oregon, and California such a ‘natural’ choice for these Ecotopias? As I have shown, the answer is manifold, but the choice certainly corresponds to a preference of more natural entities of government and community. Thanks to the right intellectual climate and a favorable geography, the Northwest seemed perfectly suited to carve out a bioregion. This realization also bears upon our literary contextualization of the genre, because by hauling in bioregionalism in their novels, the authors have chosen a social, political, and economic order for their Ecotopias that is more natural, more in balance with the environment, and inspired by the insights of ecology. This effort, indeed, lies at the heart of ecotopian fiction: to create a vision of society that incorporates a better understanding of the ecological.

As such, Callenbach, Robinson, and Starhawk have set their ‘environmental imaginations’ to work to create “coherent [visions] of the common environmental good that [are] sufficiently compelling to generate sustained public support” (Buell 1). We immediately see the extra-literary relevance of such an undertaking: the environmental cause, from a purely scientific perspective or from a politically motivated one, seems to be in desperate need of such compelling visions. This is something the Ecotopians, their observers, and the stories’ narrators understand very well. The question they ask is whether fiction, whether the books that convey their own voices, can do that:

Plausible? No. A story. But at least it’s possible, I mean we could do it! Nothing stopping us but inertia, ideology. Lack of imagination! […] History changed by a popular book, a utopia, everyone reads it and it has ideas, or
vague pokes in the direction of ideas, it changes their thinking, everyone starts working for a better world (PE 148).

Remember that one act can change the world (TFST 18).

There are a lot more things about Ecotopia that the rest of the world needs badly to know. Maybe I can help in that (Ecotopia 341).

The novel had a surprising impact, even on readers with little political or environmental consciousness. Something about its specific descriptions of everyday utopian life gave readers hope that a healthier, less stressful, more biologically comfortable way of living could indeed come about (EE 126).

Ecotopia, Ecotopia Emerging, Pacific Edge, and The Fifth Sacred Thing are all seriously concerned with change. How do we bring about change? What does it take to inspire people to aspire change? Can novels achieve something in this respect? This ties in with the age-old question of the (social) function of literature. Do we value literature because of its potential impact on its readership? Here, at least, the element of inspiration and agitation is crucial to our understanding of the novels. Novels such as Callenbach’s are seldom praised for their artistic value, but rather for their ability to infuse society with “ideas, or vague pokes in the direction of ideas” (PE 148). These novels were in part meant to provoke, to make the readers question their values, and while authorial intent is considered irrelevant in modern literary studies, we do find these very ideas in the texts themselves, e.g. in the preceding block quotations. Literature can effect change, these novels tell us. Not only does this seem to be the function of ecotopian fiction, ecocriticism itself can serve to effect change, too. In “Shakespeare and Ecocriticism,” Estok argues that ecocriticism is “any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function – thematic, artistic, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise – of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in materials worlds” (Estok 16-17, my italics). A definition of ecocriticism as Estok’s accommodates for a reading of ecotopian fiction as socially critical and functional literature.

There is still plenty of room for discussion and research in this field. In this dissertation, I have tried to engage with ecocriticism. Answering ecocritic Patrick D. Murphy’s call to “move beyond too exclusive a focus on non-fiction” (Clark 38-39), I
have chosen to focus on eco-fiction. Marius de Geus’ *Ecological Utopias* (1999) is a good starting point for further research into ecotopias, while Dwyer’s *Where the Wild Books Are* (2010) provides an extended bibliography of eco-fiction books. It may, for example, be interesting to look into non-Western eco-fiction and, possibly, ecotopias. Are there such texts in the Latin American, African, or Asian literatures, or in the literatures of minorities, and how do such visions relate to the broader context of colonialism, imperialism, and environmental discrimination? Research could tie in with what Fernando Arenas has called ‘utopias of otherness’ and the “shift from the grand narratives of nationhood” to a “proliferation of micronarratives of nationhood in the realms of literature, popular culture, and the political arena” (87). Furthermore, I personally believe an analysis of the geographies of ecotopias and other regionalist eco-literature may reveal interesting patterns as well: what do settings and places tell us about the environment, about bioregions, about social organization? I also believe there is more to uncover in the symbolic use of animal and plant species in literature: how do specific species frame the narrative in space and time and what is their symbolic value?
5. Works Cited


