

KATHLEEN RODGERS

welcome to
Resisterville

American Dissidents in British Columbia



UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Rodgers, Kathleen, 1974-, author
Welcome to Resisterville : American dissidents in British Columbia /
Kathleen Rodgers.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-2733-1 (bound). – ISBN 978-0-7748-2735-5 (pdf). –
ISBN 978-0-7748-2736-2 (epub)

1. Americans – British Columbia – Kootenay Region – History – 20th century.
2. Dissenters – British Columbia – Kootenay Region – History – 20th century.
3. Counterculture – British Columbia – Kootenay Region – History – 20th century.
4. Vietnam War, 1961-1975 – Draft resisters – British Columbia – Kootenay Region – History – 20th century.
5. Immigrants – British Columbia – Kootenay Region – History – 20th century.
6. Immigrants – United States – History – 20th century.
7. Kootenay Region (B.C.) – Emigration and immigration – Social aspects – History – 20th century.
8. United States – Emigration and immigration – History – 20th century.
9. Kootenay Region (B.C.) – Social conditions – 20th century. I. Title.

FC3845.K7Z7 2014

971.1'6200413

C2014-900722-1

C2014-900723-X

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

UBC Press
The University of British Columbia
2029 West Mall
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2
www.ubcpress.ca

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Prologue

“Greetings from Resisterville.” This was the headline of the *New York Times* article about the small Canadian town of Nelson, British Columbia, whose tumultuous political affairs had come under the scrutiny of national and international politicians, observers, and news media in the fall of 2004. The article was among many from news agencies including the *Globe and Mail*, the BBC, CNN, and Fox News that provided coverage of events in the British Columbia community. But while the author of the *New York Times* piece explained that the town has “long been a haven for free spirits,” this doesn’t begin to account for how this “haven” of less than ten thousand people in the remote mountains of southeastern BC could inspire such intrigue.

The international interest in the town in 2004 stemmed from the efforts of a group of local residents who had unveiled a plan to erect a statue celebrating the contributions of the large group of Vietnam War “draft dodgers” who had made their way to the region between 1965 and 1973. Explaining their motivations, one of the organizers commented that “this monument will mark the courageous legacy of Vietnam War resisters and the Canadians who helped them resettle in this country during that tumultuous era.”¹ When plans for the statue were made public, however, controversy exploded locally and internationally. A firestorm erupted on the pages of the local newspaper, the *Nelson Daily News*, as reams of letters to the editor from residents either condemned or celebrated the idea for the proposal. At the height of the controversy, the public discourse echoed the divisive debate that had surrounded the actions of the war resisters since the war in Vietnam, alternating between descriptions

of the monument as “lunacy, “shameful,” and “cowardice,” and those claiming the resisters deserved “recognition” and respect.² When Fox News ran a story on the monument, Americans joined in, sending letters of outrage to Canadian papers, the Chamber of Commerce, and the mayor of Nelson. As US radio talk shows hosted inflammatory discussions on the monument, American citizens threatened tourist boycotts of the region. Even more powerful was the reaction of enraged American veterans’ groups, who argued that a statue honouring draft dodgers amounted to “memorializing cowards” and called on the then US president George W. Bush to intervene.³ This unanticipated reaction resulted in an about-face from some local politicians and community elites who had originally supported the idea for the statue. The local Chamber of Commerce successfully launched a campaign to keep the statue out of Nelson, citing its potential economic impact. In the end, many local residents turned against the statue, shocked by what had originally seemed to be a relatively innocuous proposal, and convinced that it could have an impact on tourism and the economy in the region.

Despite the large local population of war resisters and former Americans, the monument also failed to garner the unconditional support of the American expatriates in the community. Most of the former Americans had now been Canadian citizens longer than they had ever been Americans and were uninterested in publicly reopening the emotional and political battles they had waged in the 1960s and ’70s. One woman, who arrived in the West Kootenays in 1968 with her husband, who was avoiding serving in the war in Vietnam, commented:

I thought the whole statue issue was just a shame ... In our experience, when draft dodgers came to this country, people were so willing to have us and being offensive was not part of the deal. We wanted to be offensive to the US, not to Canadians ... What happened was from the heart and from the guts and it’s very private and it’s not something to just summarize into a statue – it could never say it. It could never tell the story.⁴

Others were ambivalent; some who originally thought the idea for the statue was a good one quickly backed down in light of the aggressive

reaction from inside and outside the community toward Americans and war resisters. However, others within the community saw the tribute as fitting, a symbolic proclamation of persistent resentment toward American foreign policy, particularly in the context of the American military incursion into Iraq. In a loosely fictionalized account of the events, Vietnam War resister and Nelson resident Ernest Hekkanen (2008, 9) stated that the statue represented a “middle-finger salute to the White House, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and all the other right-wing morons who determine foreign policy down in the United States.” In the end, the statue became a political hot potato; no public or private institution would agree to house the work, and it became part of a private collection, inaccessible to the public.

But the monument was only the beginning of the controversy. Fuelling further uproar, many of the same individuals involved in promoting the statue organized two reunions of Vietnam War resisters, in 2006 and 2007, that brought together respected international peace activists, academics, politicians, journalists, and former “draft dodgers” to commemorate the resistance efforts. Entitled *Our Way Home I* and *II*, the events included such peace dignitaries as Tom Hayden, celebrated author and 1960s activist, and Arun Gandhi, co-founder and president of the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence. Like the monument, the controversial reunions were provocative, inspiring conversation and conflict over the historic decision of the Americans who made the choice to come to Canada during the war in Vietnam.

In a final contentious moment, the town continued to attract national and international attention during the Iraq War when it became known as a refuge for American military deserters. Between 2007 and 2009, numerous US deserters were covertly fed, clothed, housed, and employed for months by locals. Before a number of them were very publicly arrested and deported back across the border by the RCMP, the deserters were assisted by a local chapter of War Resisters International, which placed them with families, many of whom had come to Canada resisting the Vietnam War. Irene Mock, who came to Canada with her then husband in protest of the war in Vietnam, helped the deserters find jobs and homes and gave them money. The *Our Way Home* events in 2006 and 2007, she explains, helped to attract Iraq War deserters to the region

by demonstrating the strength of the resistance community that remains in the West Kootenays.⁵

In reality, the amount of attention that the statue and the subsequent events received from the national and international press gives a false impression. The statue was not the brainchild of a united community of war resisters looking to commemorate their own “brave decisions” and self-perceived lofty contributions. Rather, the idea for the statue came from a small number of individuals who may have shared the ideals of the former Americans of the West Kootenays, and respected their choice to come to Canada, but had never gained the express approval of a large number of the original exiles. Most of the Americans who came to the region have long been Canadian citizens, have contributed a great deal to their community, and were only quietly proud of the choice they made to leave the United States.

The extent of public debate around the issue of the monument hints at the continuing legacy of the Vietnam-era influx on the contemporary dynamics of the West Kootenay region of southeastern British Columbia, where Nelson is located. The events highlight the fact that the West Kootenays comprises a unique community in which the countercultural identities and ideas of the 1960s have become institutionalized into the daily life and politics of the town and the surrounding area, where many of the citizens remain committed to alternative lifestyles and leftist politics. And yet, despite the size of the migration to the region and its impact, collective memory of the details is fragmented and largely undocumented. This is in part because of the stigma attached to admitting one’s American heritage. This book attempts to get at the heart of the social and historical genesis of the migration, as well as its enduring outcomes. To begin with, the idea of “Resisterville,” a community with a large number of Vietnam-era resisters, barely scratches the surface of the origins, impact, and legacy of the American influx. In reality, the migration of draft resisters into southeastern British Columbia was part of a much larger influx of Americans motivated by the ideals of the 1960s counterculture and politics of the New Left. This group represented a complex set of ideas made popular by the counterculture – ideas about individualism and communalism; feminism; the rhetoric of peace, love,

and freedom; environmentalism; commitment to principles of democratic organization and civil disobedience; and a rejection of modern urban life. While the influx of Americans *did* consist of numerous men and women who can be defined as war resisters, their arrival intersected with the migration of other Americans motivated by similar political and social beliefs between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s who chose to leave American society and politics behind.

The ugliness of the statue debate was a direct by-product of the ongoing “hawks” versus “doves” politics of war in the United States. But the discourse also reinforced some unfortunate ambiguities in Canadians’ attitudes about, and treatment of, Americans in Canada. For the local American population, the statue debate further entrenched a long-standing view that the Americans who came to Canada as draft resisters had made a “shameful” choice. This opinion has long informed the unwillingness of American newcomers to identify themselves as American. Being known as an American, even one who has long been a Canadian, leaves one open to a long list of possible reprisals – as business owners, as professionals, as politicians, and as ordinary citizens. In turn, this intolerance has meant that a reasoned discussion of the real contributions of the 1960s influx, in the way that a community might proudly declare the historic importance of immigrants from Italy, Ireland, or China, has not been possible. It is the perspective of this book that whether the decision to come to Canada was based on cowardice or heroism is irrelevant; the relevant issues are what impact that collective choice has had and how the impact unfolded. This book explores these questions.



Welcome to Resisterville

They had just elected Richard Nixon as president. Ronald Reagan was the governor of California, and people were shooting at each other. The Black Panther Movement was pretty much the dominant political force in the area at that time, and they were armed. I felt that my choices were either to take up arms or get the hell out of the way. There didn't seem to be positive alternatives to leaving. Leaving meant a fresh start and doing things that were positive and giving my future kids and family a safe and healthy place to grow up. And we were very much involved in and determined to have a positive community. We were more interested in creating the society and the community and the values that we wanted for the future than in trying to change the ones that weren't working.

– *Bob Ploss, interview*¹

It was the school year of 1968-69 that we made big decisions. I got up. Came to Vancouver. I crossed the border station and I couldn't believe that I was really across the border. Because you've got a ways to go before you hit Vancouver. I was looking out the window. Is this Canada? Am I here yet? ... It was wonderful; it was a wonderful place to be, a wonderful time to be there. I felt for the first time in years, I felt free. I felt giddy with freedom. It was the first time I didn't think about having to get drafted or go to school and I got to do this and I got to do that.

– *Mike Culpepper, interview*

This book is about the endurance of idealism. It documents the story of a group of young American immigrants to Canada who sought to embody their vision of an egalitarian, sustainable, democratic, creative, and non-violent society in their everyday lives, and to build a community that reflected these ideals. Driven from the United States by personal and political concerns about the American war in Vietnam, the conservatism of American politics, and what they perceived to be an unjust and unfulfilling, consumer-driven mass society, they migrated to the West Kootenay region of British Columbia, Canada, between 1965 and 1975. Their exile and the community they came to shape in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia was therefore inspired by two key motivations: a personal pursuit of refuge and a more collectivist instinct to build community based on their idealism.² The young Americans who crossed the Canadian border between 1965 and 1975 were not necessarily radical leaders of student politics or even committed activists, but they had come of age during a period of transformative political and cultural change, and they brought with them their own personalized commitments to a range of radical ideas of the era. These commitments, combined with their experiences of migration, changed the course of their own lives and the trajectory of the communities in which they settled.

That the migrants were motivated in this way is not a surprise; both the individualistic notion of the quest for personal liberation and the goal of building community were central ideas to the converging politics of the New Left and countercultural movements of the 1960s (Lyons 1996). In a call to arms for dissatisfied youth, Tom Hayden of Students for a Democratic Society famously articulated the growing angst among youth when he stated, “We are people of this generation ... looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.”³ Inspired by the victories of the American civil rights movement, New Left activists such as Hayden evoked the already widespread outrage and disenchantment of a generation of youth, and the collectivist thinking that helped to shape a decade of protest. But alongside these collectivist-oriented politics, the counterculture’s “do your own thing” ethic of self-reliant independence” instilled the idea in youth that they could make personal changes that represented political ideals (Burns 1990, 101). This “rugged individualism” (*ibid.*) gave youth the sense that their desire to act out their idealism was not limited to

participation in organized politics or geographically bounded and insular utopian communities.⁴

Historian Colin Coates (2011) has reflected, “Canada was, and remains, a place where one can imagine utopia.” And indeed, it was no accident that some of these disenchanting youth would arrive in Canada; Canada’s expansive wilderness, its liberal immigration policies, and the cultural similarities between the two countries held the promise of refuge for the young Americans looking to escape what they saw as a future with limited possibilities.⁵ American military conscription for the Vietnam War, combined with Canada’s 1969 legislation allowing eligible immigrants legal admission to Canada regardless of their military status, were at the forefront of the factors bringing young Americans to Canada, drawing more than 100,000 American men and women of draft age from the United States to Canada.⁶ For those who were part of this exodus from the military draft, Canada was an obvious destination. But these “war resisters” were only one part of a much broader exodus of young people looking for alternative lifestyles; the retreat from militarism coincided with hundreds of thousands of youth joining communes or making the decision to go “back to the land” (see Agnew 2004; Jacob 2006).⁷ Liberal immigration policies made Canada a logical haven for those Americans seeking refuge from militarism, and with its vast stretches of inexpensive, and sparsely populated terrain, British Columbia in particular provided a perfect context for Americans inspired by these ideals to live out their vision. Together, American conscription and the desire to resist elements of American society caused the Canadian wilderness to be inundated with young Americans.

As a consequence, pockets of American counterculturalists took root in some of the most inhabitable but least populated rural areas around British Columbia, building homesteads and communes and eventually drawing on staples of sixties idealism to establish schools, community centres, food co-operatives, women’s centres, protest organizations, and a range of other social institutions.⁸ In the West Kootenay region in particular, some sources have estimated that up to fourteen thousand Americans jumped on this “Underground Railroad.”⁹ And there are other indications of the magnitude of the trend in the region. First, while fifty thousand Americans chose to stay in Canada after the US government

offered an amnesty to draft resisters in 1976, a full 40 percent of them settled in BC. Even more striking is the contemporary statistic that in 2006, American-born immigrants to the West Kootenays accounted for 25 percent of the total foreign-born population in the region, compared with less than 5 percent for the province as a whole.¹⁰ In some areas, this percentage was as high as 41 percent.¹¹ Providing additional force to the influence of this migration were the many Canadian-born adherents to the values of the counterculture who arrived during the same period.¹² Indeed, while I make the argument that this American influx to the West Kootenays was essential to the impact of the counterculture, there were also many Canadians and nationals of other countries who went back to the land, contributing to the complexities of the countercultural community in the region.

Fundamentally for the West Kootenays, the influx was important in terms of its demographic, social, cultural, and economic impacts. It was like dropping the population of a large university campus into a remote rural community. Most of the migrants were young, educated, middle-class, urban Americans – rare attributes in a region that was historically a resource-based economy with a predominantly working-class population. The newcomers' points of origin ranged from New York to Vermont to Texas. The largest number of migrants came from California, owing in part to the process of chain migration, as friends and family were drawn to life in the West Kootenays by those who had already begun to build their lives and community there.¹³ Reflected in the local myth that there are more PhDs per capita than anywhere else in Canada, the migrants were also fresh from university campuses and, as such, were veterans of the political turmoil that characterized the period; in one way or another, *all* of the participants in this study had taken part in civil rights campaigns, anti-war protests, or war resistance activities. Not all of the migrants had extensive financial resources, but enough of them did to individually and collectively purchase large acreages, drive up land prices, and earn the animosity of many long-time residents. The influx, therefore, brought in money, skills, and youth and eventually created new demand for schools, services, and jobs. This was not the first time the region had acted as a refuge for immigrants; important populations

of Quakers and Doukhobors, themselves exiles from previous decades, had also settled in the area. These earlier exile communities served as a safe haven for the American refugees from militarism and were fertile ground for the development of a strong alternative community.

From these demographic and economic impacts, further questions emerge regarding the enduring social meaning and political effects of the migration and what they reveal to us about the potential influence of politically motivated migrations. More than forty years after the height of the sixties turmoil, observers of the period continue to debate the broad social, cultural, and political impacts of the sixties generation (O'Donnell 2010). For some, the era caused a "sea change" that produced a significant "transformation of politics, society, culture and foreign policy" (T.H. Anderson 2009, 412).¹⁴ Others contend, however, that the individualistic tendencies of the counterculture and the New Left actually limited leftist social justice projects rather than advancing them.¹⁵ For many, those Americans who left the United States to take refuge in Canada epitomized this lack of commitment to a greater social good. Even among those opposed to the war in Vietnam, the decision of dodgers and deserters was akin to "dropping out" and abandoning the cause; as prominent folksinger and anti-war activist Joan Baez famously commented, "These kids can't fight the Vietnam madness by holing up in Canada. What they're doing is opting out of the struggle at home" (quoted in Kusch 2001, 7). For others, the decision of the migrants was treason, pure and simple. As outlined in the prologue to this book, in the turmoil surrounding the statue in the city of Nelson, all of these attitudes resurfaced, unfaded by time.

The endurance of such sentiments provides an invitation to revisit a set of classic questions about the nature and consequences of political exodus. Many of the migrants had certainly left the United States on an individual quest for personal refuge. In the course of doing so, however, they discovered that "community" was a useful basis for a continued struggle in favour of a greater set of ideals. Becoming anchored in their new economic and social realities, they discovered allies and mentors – like the Quakers and the Doukhobors – who encouraged them to employ countercultural ideals to shape a community in which experimentation

in alternative lifestyles was normal, importance was placed on artistic self-expression, and there was support for the creation of democratic organizations. Within this context, the countercultural community in the region, including those whose original intentions were less about ideology than they were about personal survival, developed a strident commitment to protecting their ideals, routinely questioning established political and economic authorities and demonstrating their ideals through protest and community organizing. This book will show how their ideals changed with time, becoming tailored to their immediate context and to broader personal, political, and social changes. At the same time, the personal lives of the migrants and the community they joined became an embodied critique of the society they had fled.

The Global and Canadian Context

Many of the Americans who arrived in Canada felt a great certainty about their motivations for leaving the United States, as well as optimism that their choice to leave would provide them with a future they could not envision by staying. And while the certainty and optimism of youth are often fleeting, for the youth of the “long sixties,” both their frustration and their optimism were rooted in the political and social circumstances of the period and in the global social movements that arose in this context (Hayden 2009).¹⁶ Thus, while conscription to the American military during the Vietnam War may have driven 100,000 young Americans to leave the United States, their decision took place within a sweeping set of political events and cultural changes that had taken hold of youth on and off university campuses, and around the world. During the global protest wave of the 1960s, activists demonstrated in favour of civil rights, women’s liberation, and peace while promoting countercultural values and forging identities that symbolized an exodus from the restrictive social conformity and political conservatism of the Cold War era (Green 2010). Active dissent reached its climax during the protests against the Vietnam War, but the prominence of the political discourse of the New Left and the ideas of the countercultural movements continued to shape a range of subsequent movements, including seemingly individualistic movements, like those that led American youth back to the land into the 1970s (Hayden 2009).

The optimistic tenor of the early youth movements of the era was rooted in the movements and ideologies of political challengers of the 1950s and early 1960s. In the years preceding the protests against the Vietnam War, the American civil rights movement had radically transformed American society, bringing into question the established racial order and providing a model for nonviolent struggle. Many would-be youth activists of the sixties generation grew up amid images of Rosa Parks's bold stand and the triumph of Martin Luther King and the southern sit-in movement. Some of the most influential youth leaders of the 1960s cut their political teeth on the sit-ins, voter registration drives, and freedom rides of that movement, going on to form organizations like the influential Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and to lead the Berkeley Free Speech movement (see McAdam 1988). And this experience was by no means limited to American youth; the ideas advocated by New Left organizations like SDS were part of a widespread expression of discontent that had spread across the globe, taking hold of youth in nations around the world.¹⁷

One of the defining features of this era was that the political ideals of youth activists were not limited to elite bands of radical student leaders or confined to university campuses. Rather, the protest movements and political ideals of the era shaped the values and actions of the generation of youth that witnessed them.¹⁸ Importantly, the protest movements were accompanied by the emergence of a "counterculture," a cultural shift that saw youth begin to reject conventional values in favour of a sometimes confusing array of contradictory, oppositional ideals and practices. The counterculture's music, dress, drugs, sexuality, and "alternative lifestyles" defined the period. These practices were symbolic of a rejection of traditional values about work, money, family, and materialism, and of the growing importance that youth were placing on self-expression, personal freedoms, and social contribution. By the early 1970s, these ideas were mainstream, taking hold of ever larger numbers of youth, and consequently, some argue, losing their political clout. But the optimism that characterized the movements of the 1960s had also waned as factionalism tore apart the New Left amid the realization that the most complex political, economic, and social goals would be difficult to achieve. At the same time, the grievances of youth movements became broader

and more diffuse; in particular, the environmental critique of American industry and the consumer lifestyle was in full swing, and second-wave feminist movements were transforming societies around the globe.

These movements formed the backdrop to the American migration to Canada. Influenced by the collectivist ideals of the New Left, the countercultural expressions of the era, and the bitter and violent conflicts surrounding Vietnam-era protests, the migrants' departure was part of a quest for a better, more just, and more equitable life. Influenced by books such as Helen and Scott Nearing's *Living the good life* (1954), the *Mother Earth News*, and the *Whole Earth Catalog*, many of the West Kootenay Americans also epitomized rugged individualism in their attempt to go "back to the land," part of what Jeffrey Jacob (2006, 16) calls a "broad-based protest" against "the irrational materialism of urban life." Reflecting on his arrival in Canada, Ross Klatte, a West Kootenay author and former American back-to-the-lander, sums up the convergence of social forces that drove many like him north to Canada:

We felt like refugees from eastern Europe after having passed successfully through the Iron Curtain ... There'd been the Kennedy assassinations – both of them; the Detroit Race Riot of 1967 (I was a Detroit mail carrier that summer, walking streets strewn with broken glass and discarded loot to deliver to addresses that no longer existed because they'd turned to rubble overnight, while gangs of young blacks went by in cars with police cars following them, shotguns sticking out of the windows, and Army trucks carrying National Guardsmen trundled by, and police helicopters hovered overhead); Martin Luther King's assassination; the riotous 1968 Democratic National Convention; the much-protested Vietnam War ... this in the face of self-indulgent prosperity ... Somewhere in the boxes of books we'd hauled with us to British Columbia was a copy of Helen and Scott Nearing's *Living the good life*. It would be our bible.¹⁹

This era was no less important in Canada, representing a period during which the anti-nuclear, student, and feminist movements rose to prominence, while Aboriginal protest and the nationalist movement in Quebec began to intensify and reshape Canada (see Kostash 1980; Levitt 1984;

Palmer 2009). Indeed, the 1960s was a period in which Canada struggled with its own national identity, while a multitude of groups simultaneously began to challenge “the establishment status quo” (Kostash 1980, 6). For its part, the Canadian government developed innovative approaches to dealing with the dissatisfaction of youth, creating programs that would inadvertently serve to facilitate the settlement of the young American migrants, including the Company of Canadians, Opportunities for Youth, and the Local Initiatives Program. In addition to its homegrown youth movements with links to national politics, there were also important links between the American movements of the mid-twentieth century and the radicalization of Canadian youth. Together, the bold proclamations of Students for a Democratic Society, civil rights protests, and the “contradictions within Western democracies” served as inspirational calls to arms for English-speaking Canadian students in the same way they did for youth around the world (Clift 2002, 20). In the period in which the young Americans arrived in Canada, therefore, a uniquely Canadian approach to sixties dissent shaped their experience, just as American dissent was shaping Canada’s youth rebels.

Prefigurative Politics

In this period of vibrant social turmoil, the choice to leave the United States for Canada remained a fundamentally private decision, reflecting, at the most basic level, the search for personal asylum. It was, however, accompanied by “an urge towards collectivism and community” that was characteristic of the movements of the era (Klatch 1999, 136). The New Left’s suspicion of large-scale organization, rejection of democratic centralism, distrust of leadership, and faith in small groups went hand in hand with an emphasis on collective action (Lasch 1984). As the politics of the New Left coincided with the counterculture values of personal liberation, artistic expression, and sexual freedom in the late 1960s, the attempt to combine “personal” liberation with “political” conviction became one of the period’s most characteristic features. The movements of the era dealt with these apparent contradictions by engaging in an ongoing struggle over the locus of social transformation, in particular whether the key to social transformation was to change society or to change oneself. Emerging from both viewpoints, a tremendous spectrum

of social experimentation arose, including institutions such as “free schools” and alternative living communities, such as communes and group marriages.

The back-to-the-land movement was yet another articulation of this struggle as young urbanites across North America settled on rural acreages to build sustainable and self-sufficient lives. With cheap land and vast stretches of sparsely populated terrain, the West Kootenays provided a perfect context for youth inspired by these ideas. Despite the seemingly individualistic nature of their decision, back-to-the-landers combined the more personal ideals of self-reliance and voluntary simplicity with an emphasis on collectivism through the creation of alternative institutions and political organizations. In this sense, going back to the land in Canada provided personal refuge for those young Americans seeking an escape from conventional life trajectories and from the expectation of military service, but it also created ideal conditions for social transformation.

This intertwining of the personal with the political played a crucial role in the outcomes of the migration and is usefully encapsulated in the concept of “prefigurative politics.” Wini Breines (1989) uses this concept to articulate how the New Left movements exhibited different ways of thinking and organizing as part of a rejection of conventional forms of political action. The New Left’s often utopian politics, she explains, sought to “build community,” but to do so “in lived action and behaviour,” or as Barbara Epstein (1993, 83) argues, to “construct a life based on one’s highest values.”²⁰ By the time the young Americans were making their way to Canada, youth of the era were embracing a view of political action that underscored the artificial nature of the boundaries between private/personal life and public/political life. As summarized in the classic feminist mantra “the personal is political,” this meant that all aspects of their existence, including the most private of choices, were seen as having direct political links and consequences for each individual and for movement building (Braunstein and Doyle 2002, 48). For the Americans heading north to Canada, their personal commitment to values chosen from the grab bag of ideas about communalism, “back to the land,” democracy and authority, ecology, nonviolence, and pacifism reflected their commitment to broader political goals.²¹ In her study of the

American direct action movement, Barbara Epstein (1993, 276) argues that the potential of prefiguration arises when activists build institutions and organizations that become the sites of “alternative sources of power.” I employ this concept as a means of exploring this bridging of personal motivations with the political mobilization that diffused into the region. As the migrants’ settlement in the region later demonstrated, both their personal and collective actions were firmly rooted in this approach to building a “better society.”

At the same time, the migrants also developed their views of the world and their commitments through their experiences of exile and their contact with the new surroundings and the people and communities they encountered. Most, after all, were only in their early twenties when they arrived. As Corky Evans, a former American who later became a long-standing New Democratic Party (NDP) member of the BC legislature for the region, a prominent cabinet minister, and a leadership candidate for the BC NDP, states, when he arrived in Canada, he “wasn’t yet sure” of his politics.²² In this sense, their prefigurative impetuses were by no means monolithic but instead were transformed as their values became institutionalized. Thus, while the migrants’ views of the world were shaped in the context of their American youth and influenced the community to which they moved, these ideas were not simply transferred from one location to another but were fostered, negotiated, adapted, and sharpened as the migrants settled.

Challenging political and economic elites *did* become a key activity of community members, but this only occurred after the prefigurative elements of the migration crystallized into institutions, networks, and a sense of community that facilitated these ongoing challenges. This makes the sociological endeavour for this book quite clear: to understand and explain the ways in which the actions of these individuals were transformed from exactly that – the actions of individuals – to shared, collective ventures with enduring political and social consequences.

Migration and Contentious Social Change

In most places in Canada you would have felt like an exile. You would have felt like you had a home country and this was not it and that

you were among strangers because you had been cut off from your groups. But here, the collection of intentional communities made it seem as though we might have been exiles from the United States but we were never exiled from what we wanted the world to be.

– *Al Luthmers, interview*

I don't feel like I'm a political refugee from the United States. It's like "I can't go home? No? Well, I never wanted to be there in the first place."

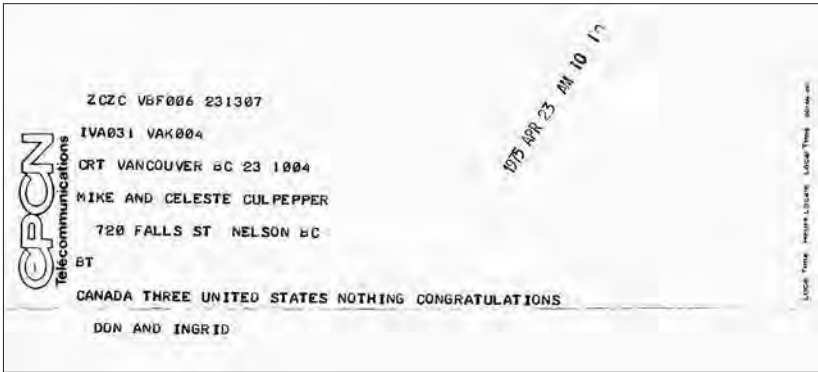
– *Philip Pedini, interview*

Despite the central importance of both phenomena to contemporary societies, few studies have examined the intersections of immigration and social activism. To some extent, the Americans defy categorization, but as immigrants whose life trajectories were shaped by the vibrant idealism of the movements of their generation, they allow us to consider a basic sociological question: how and why did the trajectories of individual immigrants, whose decisions to come to Canada were fundamentally personal, become transformed into an enduring collective and political project? Prefigurative politics gives a sense of the ideological basis of this shift, but the concept offers only a partial explanation of the process. The observation that the migration has had significant political consequences provides an invitation to revisit a set of questions of enduring interest to scholars about the importance of migration and political expression, especially given Carol Mueller's (1999, 697) contention that "flight, escape, exile, exodus, and the search for asylum have rarely been treated as forms of contentious politics." In one of the most famous explorations of the consequences of politics and exodus, Edward Said (2000) argues that formal expulsion, or exile, gives rise to a sense of personal loss. Exile in this sense is seen as an involuntary and backward-looking state, but also one that has the potential to give rise to "the consciousness of those who are 'housed' by virtue of being 'unhoused'" (Lal 2003, 112). The quotes from the American migrants above suggest their feelings may not have quite matched Said's understanding of exile. For some of

them, involuntary expulsion was certainly a factor; based on their objection to the war, for whatever reason, they were left with the options of serving in a war they objected to, going to prison, or leaving the country. Gary Wright, for instance, who took refuge from the draft in Canada and later became mayor of a small town in the West Kootenays, comments that the choice between going to Vietnam or going to jail was, for him, a “non-choice” that forced him into exile.²³ For others, as Ross Klatte expressed earlier, migration was voluntary, a response to their sense of discomfort of living in and contributing to a country engaged in a war they viewed as unjust and a way of life they deemed indulgent.

Thus, while the Americans may not be classic exiles, the idea that they were merely immigrants is also inappropriate; the choice to emigrate was at once private and inherently political. As Carol Mueller (1999, 701) asserts, “Escape, flight, exodus, and the search for asylum are all types of behavior that demonstrate through the action itself varying levels of dissatisfaction with the conditions left behind and claims on some alternative life space.” Celeste Culpepper, who came to Canada with her husband, Mike, to avoid induction in 1969, illustrates this point in her comments: “I was so happy to come across that border. I didn’t want to be an American anymore ... there were a lot of things we wanted America to be and that wasn’t it.”²⁴ Six years later, soon after Mike, Celeste, and their newborn Canadian son attended their citizenship ceremony in April 1975, they received a telegram from friends to celebrate the event that reflected the enduring political nature of their decision: “Canada three, United States nothing. Congratulations.”²⁵ And in the case of the American migrants, although their exodus was political, their politics weren’t exclusively about backward-looking loss; it became about forward-looking social change. For scholars who study immigrants and politics, such sentiments are important because, as sociologists Kim Voss and Irene Bloemraad (2011; see also Bloemraad 2006, 9) demonstrate in their work on the 2006 immigrant rights rallies in the United States, politically motivated migrant groups have extraordinary potential for political mobilization and transformative impacts in both their country of origin and their adopted home.

In what remains one of the most engaging heuristic devices for thinking about migration and politics, Albert O. Hirschman (1970) argues in



This telegram was sent to Mike and Celeste Culpepper in 1975 to celebrate their being sworn in as Canadian citizens. *Provided courtesy of Mike and Celeste Culpepper.*

Exit, voice and loyalty that when people are dissatisfied, whether it is with their job or their role as customers or as citizens of a nation, they have three possible responses: they can exhibit “loyalty” by choosing to remain quiet, they can “exit” the relationship, or they can “voice” their concerns in an attempt to change the situation. In the case of political dissent, citizens of a country who are dissatisfied with what they perceive to be repression can remain quiet, emigrate, or protest. In Hirschman’s classic view, protest is the ultimate voice of change, while emigration is the endpoint, devoid of voice. From this perspective, the young Americans chose to leave a social situation they found unsatisfying because an alternative life in a new land was a more desirable option than protest. The implication of Hirschman’s argument, however, is that the migrants’ decision was politically meaningless. Hirschman’s (1993, 177) subsequent work questions this basic mechanism, arguing that, in fact, the increased availability of exit changes people: “Once men and women have won the right to move about as they please, they may well start behaving ... as vocal members of their community.”

This nuanced framework presents us with two possible interpretations of the American migrants: while their exit can be seen as politically meaningless, it can also be seen as an opportunity to create new kinds of voice. The idea that when groups of dissatisfied individuals choose the exit option they opt out of, and even undermine, “voice” may remain the perspective of many Americans on the choice of the draft resisters to

leave the United States. But in terms of the importance of exit, scholars have shown the opposite: exit actually leads to the “externalization of voice,” as populations continue to redefine their identities, build communities, outline political critiques, and express feelings of discontent from abroad (Hoffman 2008, 10). In these situations where exit is not devoid of voice, however, voice is frequently externalized with the intention of influencing politics in the country of origin. The idea that exit can present new opportunities for voice as migrants settle in their adopted homeland thus presents an agenda with which to explore the impact of the American migration on their adopted home, as well as on the migrants themselves.

Research in the field of ethnic relations and immigration studies takes up similar questions, giving considerable attention to the question of migrants’ social and political impact in their adopted homeland (see for instance Brettell and Sargent 2006; Bloemraad, Korteweg, and Yurdakul 2008). The political incorporation of immigrants is seen as particularly important because it illustrates that newcomers have taken on a sense of citizenship and belonging (Brettell and Sargent 2006). But political incorporation depends on the cultural and socio-economic characteristics of the immigrant groups as well as the cultural context and policy infrastructure of the countries in which they settle.²⁶ In Canada, the political incorporation of immigrants is relatively standard, in part because of state policies providing immigrant groups with support to build organizational infrastructures, which leads ethnic communities to become civic communities that assist with political integration and express a political voice on behalf of their members (Wiseman 2007). This is, of course, a historically contingent conclusion. As Nelson Wiseman demonstrates in his examination of immigrants and their political outlooks in Canada over four centuries, immigrant groups vary considerably in terms of the extent to which their ideological outlooks influenced formal political parties or were shaped by Canada’s environment (ibid.).

In thinking about Americans as immigrants, it is essential to keep in mind that, as immigrants, Americans are unique, even *privileged* (Hardwick 2010). American immigrants to Canada in the 1960s and 1970s had the advantage of looking and speaking like the average Canadian, making their detection as immigrants or Americans more difficult and

making integration a realistic option (ibid.). This is not a realization exclusive to Americans who came during this period. More Americans did immigrate to Canada in 1971 than citizens of any other country, “unlike the non-English-speaking continental Europeans before the 1970s and the visible minorities after, [they] did not stand out as a distinctive cultural group” (Wiseman 2007, 22). In general, Americans who have political motivations for leaving the United States “cling most fervently to belonging to Canada and a strong sense of “being Canadian” (Hardwick 2010, 99).

The fact that American immigrants to Canada integrate so easily is what makes their impact so intriguing. Because Americans *do* have the ability to “pass,” they are unlikely candidates for the role of a politically organized ethnic group. Likewise, if they were simply politically motivated individuals, we might expect them to become integrated into more formal political processes. This they did. But they also chose to build a network of alternative institutions, to organize *outside of* formal politics, and to pressure political and social change through more contentious means. The groundbreaking work by Kim Voss and Irene Bloemraad (2011) demonstrates that this is not such an exceptional pattern. To account for the 2006 immigrant rights protests in the United States, Voss and Bloemraad show that the same networks of local immigrant organizations that encouraged incorporation into mainstream politics also encouraged immigrant participation in non-institutional, contentious forms of politics. Thus, while the Americans may have been privileged as immigrants, they were still immigrants, and their settlement experiences help to explain their subsequent patterns of social and political involvement. Part of the answer to the puzzle of their influence lies in this process of community building that took place, a process that centred on their shared values and identities.

Social movement analysis offers one of the best frameworks for understanding processes of community building, particularly in relation to political action, and therefore for explaining the displacement, diffusion, and re-articulation of the political voice that is at issue in this book. Scholars who study social movements have long examined social and political change in local, national, and global contexts, and have developed an array of concepts to expose links between migration and social change.

When understood exclusively as a phenomenon of individual immigrants, the American migration to Canada is not a straightforward episode of political contention, but by viewing the migration through the exit-voice lens – as a collective political act – the social movement framework is instructive. What becomes clear as this story unfolds is that the young Americans who came during this period did not have a *plan* to transform social life in the region; they were young and idealistic, and some had experience as leaders and participants in political activism, but there was certainly no blueprint for action. Moreover, the migrants were clearly influenced by the social and political movements of the era but did not in themselves present a unified movement that challenged elites or the state; they were a collection of individuals who had acted individually, making similar decisions in their shared social and political context. An attempt to explain why this disparate group of immigrants has been able to shape a community based on a shared vision requires looking at how they came to coalesce. Social movement scholars have excelled in explaining how groups come to share a common sense of themselves – a collective identity – and to then engage in political action based on this identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001).

In recent years, scholars have emphasized the underlying mechanisms and processes that explain political dissent. Though they were by no means the first to identify their importance, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly (2001) began to outline a cohesive framework of the mechanisms and processes, which facilitates our understanding of the commonalities of different forms of contention (see also McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2008 and Staggenborg 2008). This framework proposes that we can understand not just social movements but also nationalism, democratization, and other forms of “contentious behaviour” by identifying the “salient features” of these episodes that recur in different settings.²⁷ Many of the concepts that are used to explain the formation, development, and spread of social movements are useful here and will enable a systematic study of the processes involved in the case. Three mechanisms prove particularly helpful: brokerage, identity shift, and social boundary transformation. I draw on these mechanisms to understand how this group’s experience of migration and settlement encouraged individuals to see themselves as being part of a shared political

community. Over and above each of these mechanisms, however, I am attentive to contextual factors that influenced the events: the political and policy climate, nationalism, and local and national economic factors. Given their importance, these are considerations that can be found throughout the book, but Chapter 2, in particular, deals with some of these themes.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the mechanism of “brokerage,” which refers to the actions of people who act as “communication links” between different social sites. These people enable the transfer of information and ideas, and they also create new networks (McAdam 2002). Chapter 3 outlines how some of the earliest and most ideologically committed Americans acted as brokers between the newcomers and the ideologically similar but very distinct cultural groups that already lived in the region. The alliances that formed through this brokerage facilitated the settlement of the migrants, but the networks also created the potential for subsequent coalition work as well as a larger base for political mobilization. Brokerage, therefore, helps to explain the merger of the views of the countercultural adherents with the established dissidents of earlier generations in the region.

However, much of the book is about identity and how it relates to community. In the study of social movements, the concept of identity and the mechanism of “identity shift” are crucial to understanding why groups come to see themselves as sharing a common purpose – in other words, how they develop a sense of “us,” and how this identity becomes a basis for action (Tilly 2005). This process involves “identity work” as groups engage in collective activities and projects that reflect their shared values (Snow and McAdam 2000; Einwohner, Reger, and Myers 2008). In Chapter 4, I outline the activities and projects that the migrants participated in collectively, describe how these reflected their existing and emerging values, and show the ways in which these projects helped to build a sense of common identity and solidarity, and to articulate a shared political ethic. Here we see how the migrants’ sense of identity shifted from that of individuals living out their political ideals in solitude toward a sense that they belonged to a community of individuals involved in similar struggles. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that

the development of identities is not exclusively in-group work, but is achieved through interactions with those outside the group, or “boundary negotiation.”²⁸ While Chapter 3 looks at the alliances that developed with existing groups in the region, Chapter 5 examines how the contentious boundary negotiation that took place between the migrants and more established (and mainstream) members of the community helped both groups define ways of thinking about themselves. The migration of a group with values and lifestyle practices that were distinctly different from those of other community members was at the root of this process.

Finally, the pervasiveness of the counterculture in the West Kootenays, and in British Columbia generally, brings forth an obvious question: how important was this group for diffusing these elements into Canada? As discussed briefly above, youth movements in Canada were already in full swing when the Americans began to arrive in the West Kootenays. In their role as brokers, however, the Americans drew on their knowledge of North American protest traditions and fostered a tradition of dissent in the region that had been almost completely absent. Chapter 6 demonstrates how this was particularly notable in the case of nonviolent strategy and environmental politics. Cutting across the process of migration and community settlement, therefore, I reflect on the process of diffusion. To some extent, these ideas were “in the air,” but as diffusion theorists have demonstrated, contentious actors borrow, adapt, and share the ideas, strategies, and tactics of previous generations and, in the process, encourage them to spread (Givan, Roberts, and Soule 2010; see also Chabot 2002 and Wood 2012). I argue that while this was clearly the case, particularly with environmental protest, the fact that these traditions took such a strong hold in the region resulted from the fact that these were not just activists but immigrants, whose settlement in an isolated region encouraged this institutionalization.²⁹

Considering the motivations, experiences, and consequences of exodus and the way in which the migrants *did* continue to redefine their identity, build community, and articulate their politics in the decades after their departure, the story of the American migration returns to a classic set of questions about migration and dissent. The goal of this book is to understand and to explain how exactly this migration could have

the social change impact that it did by examining the more predictable social mechanisms as well as the unique features of the story. By no means do I attempt to argue that one peculiarity in the history of North America can lead us to a general understanding of social life. However, what becomes clear is that this story of dissent and renewal relies on the same processes that occur in vastly different contexts.

In choosing to leave the United States, either as war resisters, communalists, back-to-the-landers, or a combination of these categories, did the group of Americans that settled in the West Kootenays express a political voice? It is a fair assumption that not all of the migrants were equally committed to building a new and better society based on the principles of the countercultural movements of the era. But as social scientists have consistently demonstrated, participation in even minor acts of political activism changes the course of individual lives and has enduring political consequences.³⁰ Overall, the American newcomers' experiences of migration and settlement gave the ideas of the counterculture new salience in the identity of the migrants. This observation helps to explain why, in later years, the migrants have come to see their decision to leave the United States as more political than it may actually have been.³¹

One thing should be clear: the goal of this project is not to debate the justness of the motivations of the migrants, nor is it to celebrate their choices. My goal has been to assess the impact of their decisions and, in doing so, to explore some of the questions that this history raises. Fundamentally, it is no coincidence that the migrants' choice to leave the United States came when the American Left had reached a crisis point, when the collective promise offered by the movement was dissipating and only the idealism that guided the movements remained.³² For better or for worse, prefigurative politics had become the last vestige for many. A generous amount of naivety was certainly part of this equation, and so people came and went from the region with each realization of the difficulty inherent in living off the land, in communal living, or even in running democratic organizations. Nevertheless, the migration resulted in the infusion of these ideas en masse in the West Kootenay region through the creation of organizations, institutions, businesses, lifestyles, and community values. The fact that this remains a stronghold of the

political left both federally and provincially, and that it has had some of the strongest showings in the country for provincial and federal Green Party candidates, speaks to the potential of political prefiguration. In addition, the region remains a hotbed of social and political experimentation as well as environmental conflict, testaments to the enduring influence of the counterculture. The story, therefore, is about a group of American immigrants who arrived in Canada, having made the choice not to become swept into a tide of war, unfulfilling consumer excess, and urban decay. Painfully aware of the social criticism that surrounded their decisions to leave the United States behind, they strove to create, and later to protect, a community that fostered their visions of an equitable, creative, and sustainable society. They did so by becoming community leaders, politicians, and activists; by shaping community discourse; by mentoring subsequent generations of newcomers; and by imbuing their children with the values they sought to protect. Their decision to come to Canada, Canada's acceptance of them, and the isolated nature of the community they chose to settle in allowed these ideals to diffuse and to become institutionalized. That the identities and ideas they fostered are now freestanding elements within the community attests to the influence of this migration.³³