

# “And the world will be as one” - John Lennon, Yoko Ono and Nutopia [1]

Matthew Bannister

## AUTHOR BIO

Matthew Bannister is a musician and academic who lives in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, Aotearoa/New Zealand. He has written three books: *Eye of the Taika: New Zealand Comedy and the Films of Taika Waititi* (2021), *White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and Indie Guitar Rock* (2006), and *Positively George Street: Sneaky Feelings and the Dunedin Sound* (1999).

[1] Pronounced “New-topia”.

## ABSTRACT

In 1973, John Lennon was fighting deportation from the US by a Nixon administration that deplored his anti-government activities, when he and his wife Yoko Ono came up with the concept of Nutopia, an imaginary state with no borders or laws, to publicise his plight. So was Nutopia the last breath of the hippie dream, a final attempt to “get back to the garden” as Joni Mitchell put it, or rich cosmopolitans’ presumption that they should be free to move wherever they pleased? In this essay I will briefly review strains of utopian thought in the 1960s counterculture, examples of micronations from that period and Lennon, Ono and the Beatles’ own history of associations with micronations, islands and alternative communities, in life and art, to argue that for Lennon at any rate, they filled a deep seated need to belong, without necessarily recognizing corresponding obligations to his compatriots.

## KEYWORDS

John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Nutopia, micronations, counterculture, cosmopolitanism, nationalism

## Introduction

By the early 1970s, John Lennon was seeking to settle in New York, the ultimate cosmopolitan city. Moving announced his rejection of British tradition and the allure of the “promised land.” Arguably this had been the case since he first heard Elvis Presley’s “Heartbreak Hotel” back in 1956. But there were two problems – Lennon had a 1968 UK conviction for marijuana possession (supposedly he pleaded guilty so his partner Yoko Ono, a foreign national, would not be deported) (Riley 422). Secondly, on arrival in the US, Lennon and Ono fell in with Yippie (Youth International Party) activists Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, who enlisted him to fight the right-wing Nixon administration with a series of media provocations. Lennon and Ono did some benefit concerts, one of which, on December 10, 1971, led to the release of MC5 manager and White Panther John Sinclair, imprisoned for two years on a trumped-up drug charge. The couple also launched themselves on US TV, appearing in a widely syndicated series of interviews on *The Mike Douglas Show*, where they introduced radical guests such as Jerry Rubin, Tom Hayden and Black Panther Bobby Seale (Riley). The couple soon found themselves under FBI surveillance, and their phone was tapped. In November 1972, Nixon won the election, devastating the anti-war left. All Lennon had keeping him in the US was an expired visitation visa. In March 1973, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service ordered him to leave within 60 days (Riley 559). Such was the situation on April Fool’s Day, 1973 when Ono and Lennon issued a press statement:

We announce the birth of a conceptual country, NUTOPIA. Citizenship of the country can be obtained by declaration of your awareness of NUTOPIA. NUTOPIA has no land, no boundaries, no passports, only people. NUTOPIA has no laws other than cosmic. All people of NUTOPIA are ambassadors of the country. As two ambassadors of NUTOPIA, we ask for diplomatic immunity and recognition in the United Nations of our country and its people (“John Lennon and Yoko Ono write the Declaration of Nutopia”),

which they publicized at a press conference the next day in New York. By this time, Watergate was heating up and Nixon was well on the way to impeachment. Lennon had also appointed an attorney Leon Wildes, who was instrumental in winning Lennon’s immigration battle in 1975. But, perhaps partly due to these struggles, Ono and Lennon separated and, in August 1973, Lennon moved to LA for his 18-month “lost weekend.” But Nutopia did not entirely disappear, the “Nutopian International Anthem” being listed on Lennon’s *Mind Games* LP, released in October 1973, a track consisting of three seconds of silence. Once Lennon got his green card and returned to Ono, he retired from public life for five years, re-emerging in 1980 with the *Double Fantasy* album. On December 9, 1980 he was shot dead by Mark Chapman, outside the Dakota Apartments, Manhattan, his home since 1975.

### **(N)utopia and Lennon as an artist**

So, what was Nutopia, and where did it come from? It was the culmination of a series of public performances or events, staged by Lennon and Ono to draw

attention to political issues, and some would say, to themselves. While only Nutopia can be strictly understood as an “imaginary nation” or micronation, elements of this concept had been developing for a while in their performances. Lennon had proven himself adept as the Beatles’ main media spokesperson throughout most of their career, and of course the Beatles as a collective had an incalculable effect on the 1960s counterculture; Ono had a history in performance art. But the true citizenry of Nutopia was not everyone, but rather Lennonno, the company of two (also the name of their music publishing company). Ono and Lennon constructed a self-fulfilling, self-justifying world to insulate themselves from prejudice and controversy, but also as a means of secession from the powerful state of Beatledom. This is not to deny that “the personal is political,” but to argue that when the “person” is a celebrity, the terms of engagement must be rethought. Moreover, there is a big difference between an “imagined” and an “imaginary” nation: the former is always/already based on a substantial group of people with common interests and (possibly) heritage, whereas the latter is basically an individual project, in this case a fantasy of modern liberal individualism: “a concept of the person as liberated from all particular relationships, memberships, or identities,” as incarnated in Lennon and Ono’s formulation of “Imagine no...” (Anderson; Tamir 53) Jason Toynebee provides another possible template for thinking about the relation of public and private, altruism and self-interest in popular musical production:

In popular music, more than any other cultural form, musicians claim to act on behalf of the community, and for the common good... most popular music makers have some notion of music as a common language capable of bringing people together.... We should see the field of popular music both as the site both of a struggle for individual position and a utopian drive to make the world a better place through music... musicians tend to have a “fuzzy” worldview which can encapsulate contradictions of this sort (Toynebee 37).

Arguably it is the artist’s privilege is to contradict him/herself, indeed “performative self-contradiction” as argued by Thomas Elsaesser, is a key strategy for the modern global auteur (Elsaesser 37). Lennon’s artistic career was a series of volte-faces that can be understood as artistic strategies, but also as public manifestations of private insecurities, careering between passionate idealism and equally passionate disillusionment, e.g. his litany of renunciation in “God,” ending with the pathetic “I just believe in me (pause), Yoko and me, that’s reality.” He would junk religion one day and follow a guru the next. His songwriting and musical approach moved successively from rock and roll to teenage romance, to literary, Dylan-influenced introspection, to psychedelic whimsy, then back to basic rock as “primal therapy.” Nutopia was the latest in a long line of worlds Lennon had imagined, from his first song recorded for the Beatles’ first LP, prophetically titled “There’s a Place” (1963) to “Strawberry Fields Forever” (1966), the “marmalade skies” of “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” (1967) and perhaps most famously, 1971’s “Imagine,” a vision of a universal, secular, socialist utopia. But for each Lucy there was a grumpy “I am the Walrus” (1967), “Revolution 9” (1968), or, in the case of “Imagine,” “How Do You Sleep” (1971), a vicious attack on his former songwriting partner, Paul McCartney. From a young age, Lennon was obsessed with authentic community, while also desiring limitless individual liberty: in his

first experience of LSD he was “struck by great visions,” but also recalls doing “some drawings at the time of four faces [saying] ‘we all agree with you,’” alternating between grandiosity and mutual affirmation (Davies 316; Wenner 74-5). LSD can be thought of as a “trip” to utopia, as in Aldous Huxley’s novel *Island* (1963), which combines a working utopia with psychedelic therapy, much like the hippie communes. This tension between reality and dream, individual and social, echoed the concerns of the youth counterculture of which Lennon was both a member and harbinger.

The tension stemmed from Lennon’s childhood, where he was removed from his birth mother and father and raised by his Aunt Mimi and Uncle George. He commented: “The worst pain is that of not being wanted, of realising your parents do not need you in the way you need them” (Red Mole). Successive parents, parental figures and friends died, suddenly and tragically, throughout his youth – his Uncle George who taught him to read and whom he regarded as a father figure (in 1955), his idolized birth mother Julia, hit by a car in 1958, and his artist friend Stu Sutcliffe of a brain haemorrhage in 1962. From childhood, Lennon formed gangs to give him a social collective that he could control, unlike his family – the Beatles were an extension of that impulse. In this he typified his post-war generation’s tendency to form youth subcultures, whose “latent function... is... to express and resolve, albeit magically, the contradictions... in the parent culture... [by retrieving] some of the socially cohesive elements destroyed in their parent culture... through symbolic structures... dress and music” (Cohen 89-90). Or as Lennon put it, “When I started, rock and roll itself was the basic revolution to people of my age and situation. The only reason I went for that goal is that I wanted to say: ‘Now, mummy-daddy, will you love me?’” (Red Mole). In forming a band identified with the rocker (and anticipating the mod) subculture, Lennon was forming an alternative community. Indeed, the Beatles became a model for (homosocial) youth community in the 60s – their collectivity, as opposed to traditional society’s emphasis on aging individuals, was central to their appeal, although their male exclusivity limited possibility.

### **The Beatles and cosmopolitanism**

The Beatles were the first truly global pop stars, in an era marked by the rapid advance of modernity “shrinking” the globe through air travel and new technologies of communication. When John Lennon sang “Nowhere Man” in 1965, he could have been lamenting his fate as a Beatle, part of a new liberal business elite that routinely globe-hopped, at home everywhere and nowhere. “In the cosmopolitan constellation sociology is... concerned with the formation of post-national and cross-national bonds, or who belongs and who does not, and how inclusion and exclusion arise” (Beck and Sznaider 20). It was this new cosmopolitan class that both Lennon and McCartney married within – both Linda McCartney and Yoko Ono were Sarah-Lawrence educated, [2] artistic women from privileged backgrounds, “jet-setters,” to use a period term. It was arguably this same privileged position that allowed Lennon to move from the teenage romance of “I Want to Hold Your Hand” to broadcasting such “universal” imperatives as “All You Need is Love” (1967), “Give Peace a Chance” (1969) and “Imagine” (1971). Janne Mäkelä comments that “a national spirit, which had been a vital part of Beatlemania,

[2] A prestigious liberal arts US college.

was replaced with an internationalist and therefore largely placeless idealism” (175).

In *Why Nationalism*, Yael Tamir argues for the utopian potential of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” against transnational or global perspectives, while simultaneously acknowledging that the nation is always a fabrication, two points directly relevant to micro and imagined/imaginary nations. She argues that attitudes to nationalism and globalisation can be traced back to social class:

Marx was, then, wrong about the century in which class struggles will take place. If such struggles will erupt they will be in the twenty first century. And they will not feature the international solidarity of the proletariat. They will be struggles in which the immobile classes fight against each other as well against their own mobile elites... It is easier to be a globalist if you are likely to enjoy the benefits of an open market, or to support free immigration if you feel secure in your social status and do not fear that newcomers are going to take your job (Tamir xiv, 10).

For Tamir, Lennon’s global utopianism is part of his privileged cosmopolitanism:

The influence of “Imagine” on a whole generation and its perception of an ideal world cannot be overestimated. Yet, like all utopian fantasies, this too was a dangerous one. A borderless world is far from ideal; it can be neither democratic nor just. For a democracy to work, individuals need to form an ongoing union, allowing members to test and trust one another’s intentions over a considerable span of time. While writing “Imagine,” Lennon aspired to get an American visa; for him the idea that his request could be rejected was inconceivable. Like other members of the elite who have the means to move from one place to another, he believed he had the right to travel freely around the world and live wherever he chose (33-34).

For example, Lennon’s drunken, violent behaviour on his “lost weekend,” which was extensively reported on, seemed incompatible with his mission to convince the US authorities that he should be granted permanent residence (Coleman 167-171). Arguably, such inconsistencies are the preserve of a few privileged “cosmopolitan globalists... [who] have managed to revoke their responsibilities within their home nation without in fact taking on corresponding obligations anywhere else” (Tamir x).

### **The Beatles, the counterculture and alternative communities**

The 1960s witnessed a flowering of alternative forms of community, as traced in Adam Curtis’s documentary series *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* (2011), which argues that the counterculture drew on the relatively new science of ecology, specifically the idea that Nature is self-balancing. Eugene and Howard Odum’s *Fundamentals of Ecology* (1953) argued that ecosystems always tend to correct themselves, and this influenced the counterculture’s belief “that the old hierarchies of power can be replaced by self-organising networks,” an

early example being the hippie communes, a later one the internet (Curtis). Works like Buckminster Fuller's *Operating Manual for Planet Earth* (1969) embraced a new concept of the planet as an organism, reflecting a growing global consciousness (in turn Fuller's buckyball structure was used in the design of geodesic domes, a feature of alternative communities) (Curtis). The period saw the establishment of a number of alternative nations, commune-based such as Christiania in Copenhagen (1971), and offshore such as micronations Sealand (1967) and Abalonia (1967) "territories that have been declared independent by individuals or groups despite the minimal likelihood of their being recognised as independent by any established nation state or international body" (Hayward 1). Generally, such territories function as a protest (e.g. a territorial dispute) and/or offer some kind of alternative existence (allying themselves with aesthetic or political ideas and practices). Sealand, set up in 1965 by former army major Paddy Roy Bates, was the offspring of Radio Essex, UK's first 24-hour pirate radio station (Serpell). Pirate radio stations, like micronations, operated offshore (on boats or on foreign soil), outside territorial and legal boundaries, in order to escape regulation. The BBC had a monopoly on radio broadcasting until 1973, creating demand for commercial radio stations that played more pop music. Radio Luxembourg, for example, was an important source of new music for the adolescent Beatles and the group supported pirate radio throughout their career, recording Christmas messages for Radio Caroline and Radio London in 1966 (Lewisohn 88; "Recording: Christmas radio messages, When I'm Sixty-Four"). There was an ongoing relationship between pop music, alternative communities and ideas of how living beings relate to their environment. In this sense, Nutopia was an extension of contemporary ideas and practices.

The Beatles were involved in attempts at communal living. One day in 1967, the Beatles' "minder" Peter Brown received a phone call:

It was John calling to say that the Beatles were moving out of England! The idea had come to him the previous night in the studio, when Magic Alex was attending a session. [3] The Beatles were talking about how sick and tired they were of notoriety. John suggested they escape it all by creating their own little kingdom, like an island. On the island they would build beautiful houses and the best studio money could buy and even a school, where Julian could be taught... with the children of Bob Dylan, who would be invited to join. Alex, hearing opportunity knocking... said he knew just the place off the coast of Greece, where there were thousands of islands the Beatles could buy "dirt cheap" (Brown and Gaines 227).

Beatles publicist Derek Taylor recounts how:

We were all going to live together now, in a huge estate. The four Beatles and Brian would have their network at the centre of the compound: a dome of glass and iron tracery (not unlike the old Crystal Palace) above the mutual creative/play area, from which arbours and avenues would lead off like spokes from a wheel to the four vast and incredibly beautiful separate living units... "They've tried everything else," said John realistically [sic]. "Wars, nationalism, fascism, communism, capitalism, nastiness, religion – none of it works. So why not this?" (Anthology)

[3] Yannis Alexis Mardas was a Greek Beatles hanger-on from 1967-69. Claiming to be an electronics engineer, he fascinated Lennon with his proposed inventions and general loquaciousness.

Magic Alex did not inform the Beatles that Greece was ruled by a military dictatorship, not that the group was concerned. The Beatles duly went to Greece, but their interest waned after a brief, drug-drenched holiday (Brown and Gaines). The band's trip to Rishikesh in early 1968 could be viewed as another attempt at alternative community, but it broke down when Lennon lost faith in the Maharishi's leadership. By the 1970s, new ecological studies showed that there was no natural equilibrium and that the balance of nature is an illusion (Curtis). This echoed what happened in the communes – they all failed, torn apart by power, as strong personalities dominated, while self-organising rules, of equal right of reply, prevented collectives organizing to stop them. Or as Paul McCartney, more realistic than Lennon, reflected: “Probably the best way to not buy a Greek island is to go out there for a bit... It's a good job we didn't do it, because anyone who tried those ideas realised eventually there would always be arguments, there would always be who has to do the washing-up and whose turn it is to clean out the latrines” (Miles 380).

Lennon was often the ringleader in these communal expeditions. Of course, he regarded himself as leader of the group, but paradoxically he was also the member that needed the group most. Once the band stopped touring, he rapidly became isolated and depressed. “I have to see the others to see myself. I realize then there is someone like me... I have to see them to establish contact with myself” (Gould 321; Brown and Gaines 193–4). The group was essential to his sense of self-identity. Taking LSD copiously (Wenner 76; Coleman 8; Brown and Gaines 193ff; Riley 288–91), increasingly withdrawn, he created a power vacuum which McCartney filled (Coleman 36; Riley 428; MacDonald 172; 192). The death of Brian Epstein worsened matters. In order to transform himself as an artist and a star, Lennon needed to transform the world and make “the project of sixties radicalism... his own: a simultaneous struggle for personal and political liberation” (Wiener xvii), and in Yoko Ono he found the means to do so. At the same time Lennon and Ono were bonding, May 1968, student revolts were erupting across the West. Mäkelä suggests, “The year 1968 did not mean the revolt of the oppressed but the revolt of the privileged,” a comment that he applies to Lennon (144).

### **Yoko Ono - “High Priestess of the Happening”**

Lennon's relationship with Ono became his ticket out of the group: “when I met her, I had to drop everything ... it was ‘Goodbye to the boys in the band’” (Coleman 28). With Ono, Lennon found the replacement family he'd always craved, apparently free of the creative burdens, responsibilities and rivalries of the group. Lennon's boyhood friend Pete Shotton, who was staying at Lennon's house in Weybridge at the time, recounted how Lennon came down to breakfast one morning and, out of the blue, asked him to find him and Yoko a house to live in. “Just like that?” Shotton asked:

Yeah, just like that. JUST LIKE THAT. This is IT Pete. This is what I've been waiting for all of me life. Fuck everything else, fuck the Beatles, fuck me money.... I'll go and live with her in a fucking TENT if I have to. (Riley 386).

Lennon immediately conceptualized his relationship in terms of a place, a dwelling. Throughout his life, he wanted a place to belong, but this was inseparable from his artistic vocation, something also true of McCartney. “Both these former partners... insisted on dragging [their wives] onstage and having them co-authoring songs. This suggests how reliant Lennon and McCartney both were on collaborators, how each viewed the creative process as a form of intimacy, and how a wife replaced the other Beatles once the group sundered” (Riley 530). For Lennon’s “drive to make the world a better place through music” (or art) was inseparable from his own personal happiness in his domestic situation. And in Yoko Ono, he found a partner who, albeit in a different way, was interested in fusing life and art. Ono brought her own agenda of creating imaginary communities through art: “Ono’s artistic practice has engaged with conceptualism and performance, using text-based works, events and ambitious installations to create situations that are participatory and interactive, inviting response and engagement from her viewers” (Kent). More pithily, she was “High Priestess of the Happening” (Gaar 93) and an important avant garde artist who could offer Lennon alternatives to pop music stardom. Indeed, Lennon was influenced by her book *Grapefruit*, originally published in 1964, which used the “Imagine...” formula and even featured a possible prefiguring of Nutopia in the line, “There is a transparent peace tower in New York which casts no shadow, and therefore, very rarely recognized” (sic). Nutopia was announced in New York, was pacifist (its flag was the white flag of surrender – Fig. 1), and “transparent” in the sense of being invisible. Lennon also playfully gave Nutopia a “great seal” (Fig. 2)

**Fig. 1** White flags - “On the Day of the Birth of Nutopia – 1 April 2020 by Yoko Ono”  
<http://imaginepeace.com/archives/10573>





**Fig. 2** “The Great Seal of Nutopia” by John Lennon, 1973.



Central to 1960s avant garde art was the “unfinished” work which required the audience to complete it, often taking the form of an event or situation rather than a discrete object (Mäkelä 141). But the consequent depersonalization of art often balanced against the performative aspect of events which might involve the artist as the artistic object, an approach Ono pioneered in her “Cut Piece” (1964). The avant garde both removed the artist and put them at the centre, following Elsaesser’s idea of performative self-contradiction, where artists present themselves as autonomous from commerce while simultaneously promoting themselves (Elsaesser 37). Examples of such situations include the various media events Lennon and Ono initiated, such as the two bed-ins in Amsterdam in March 1969 and in Toronto in June. The first occurred immediately after their wedding in Gibraltar, capitalizing on the publicity from that event, as did the *Two Virgins* album, on the cover of which they had appeared naked. *Two Virgins* obviously referred to Adam and Eve and was a response to the hatred and scorn, much of it explicitly sexist and racist, the couple experienced at the time, for the “innocent” act of falling in love. Yet the content of the album was an almost unlistenable audio-verité diary of the couple jamming in Lennon’s attic studio; was it self-indulgence, or a negation of the Beatles’ tidy music? Moreover, showbiz convention dictated that “the marital life of the star should be invisible,” hence “Ono’s ... presence ... was a catalyst for growing criticism towards Lennon,” comments Mäkelä (161). “In marrying Ono, Lennon became a traitor to his fans and his countrymen,” a “betrayal” which Lennon literalised by renouncing his given middle name of Winston (after Winston Churchill) for “Ono” (Riley 452; Coleman 64). The couple’s cosmopolitanism made them outcasts in Lennon’s country of birth. By mixing the conventionally private with the public aspect

of media exposure, the events played on the idea of a utopian community – just as utopia would be “borderless,” so bed-ins seemed to abolish the public/private distinction. And the couple were literalising their message – they were enacting peace by staying in bed. “We’re staying in bed for a week, to... protest against all the suffering and violence in the world. Can you think of a better way?” (Lennon quoted in Riley 446). This connected to a Fluxus concept (the artistic movement with which Ono is associated): concretism, or artistic practice that works directly with reality rather than symbolism, as John Cage worked with non-musical sounds, by making silent pieces which would then be filled with environmental sound by the audience – hence Lennon’s “Nutopian International Anthem.” “Art is sort of an experimental station in which one tries out living,” said Cage, making an explicit link between art and possible modes of existence (Cage 39). Fluxus also created artistic communes in Manhattan – from 1966, movement founder George Maciunas “wanted to establish collective workshops, food-buying cooperatives and theaters to link the strengths of various media together and bridge the gap between the artist community and the surrounding society” (Simpson). Likening these initiatives to Soviet kolkhozs (collective farms) Maciunas also illegally adopted the title of Chairman of Bldg. Co-Op (Kellein and König 131-2). Appropriating official titles and legal forms is comparable to the establishment of micronations or imaginary communities such as Nutopia.

### Reaction to Lennon and Ono’s works

Lennon and Ono’s events apparently investigated the relation between private and public space, and consequently of concepts of community, but they were often regarded sceptically by the press and public, who had little understanding of the avant garde. At Christmas 1969, the couple ended their bed-in year with a billboard campaign, featuring enormous white spaces in Times Square, New York, London and eight other major cities. The signs read “WAR IS OVER! IF YOU WANT IT Happy Christmas from John & Yoko.” Clearly the format of a Christmas card suggested intimacy, but many questioned the cost of such gestures (Riley 467). Then there was the fiasco of Bagism, which the couple first practiced at the premiere of their film *Rape* at the Vienna film Festival, March 31, 1969, (a film about private/public space, where the camera pursues a woman relentlessly). They also appeared in a bag on TV on the *David Frost Show* in June 1969:

Lennon: If people did interviews for jobs in a bag they wouldn’t get turned away because they were black or green or long hair, you know, it’s total communication.

Frost: They’d get turned away because they were in a bag [Audience laughter] (“Television: John Lennon and Yoko Ono on The David Frost Show”).

Many of the couple’s events were regarded as jokes, and the timing of Nutopia certainly suggests that possibility. Lennon stated, “we’re willing to be the world’s clowns,” if it would help the peace cause, but many just thought them pretentious and self-indulgent (Riley 455), e.g. the notorious film *Self-Portrait* (1969), a time-lapse study of Lennon’s penis. The “You Are Here” exhibition (Robert Fraser Gallery July 1968), a release of white balloons with notes from

John and Yoko encouraging finders to write in, could just as easily be titled “We Are Here.” And their recordings from the period (*Two Virgins*, *Life with the Lions*), are basically diaristic documents, and fairly unlistenable. At the same time, they did help dismantle Lennon’s image as a Beatle – as he sang to his fans in “God” (1970), “the dream is over.”

Repeatedly the couple seemed to confuse their personal happiness or displeasure with the state of the world, for example, Lennon’s returning his MBE in 1969 “as a protest against Britain’s involvement in the Nigeria-Biafra thing... and ‘Cold Turkey’ slipping down the charts” (Emerson). This delusion linked to their privileged position, and possibly their drug intake, but was also characteristic of the countercultural belief that social obligation repressed creative expression and individuality, and that truth to feeling transcended communal duty: “For the majority (of the counterculture), self-contemplation became self-regard” (MacDonald 18). Meanwhile, although preaching peace in public, Lennon’s behaviour to ex-wife Cynthia and son Julian was anything but pacifying, accusing her of adultery and making a meagre settlement when Ono’s pregnancy gave the lie to this strategy (Coleman 26-28). A final example is Lennon and Ono’s idealistic attitude to New York (see for example “New York” [1972]), based on two years’ residence in bohemian Greenwich Village, and being politicised by the Yippies. The result was *Some Time in New York City* (1972), an album of “conscience rock” about causes that many felt that Lennon had little understanding of, named after a city nationally regarded as a “basket-case” (Mäkelä 179-181; Charyn 17-18). It was a critical and commercial disaster, showing that Lennon had misjudged his audience, while demonstrating (once again) his tendency to idealise place and community.

### The aftermath

Once settled with Ono in New York, his immigration battle won, Lennon’s (public) mood changes softened and his philosophical outlook became more consistent – basically it fell into line with Ono’s: “She’s the teacher and I’m the pupil” (Sheff and Golson 85). In their interviews to promote *Double Fantasy* in 1980, the couple’s philosophy seems to be that in an ideal world, everyone would have a relationship like theirs, a line that (tragically) became much easier to maintain with Lennon’s murder. As evidence, Lennon cites his conversion to feminism and role as house husband (Sheff and Golson) – a feminist utopia. Was Lennon’s feminism about sharing power or renouncing it to live in eremitic isolation? Some accounts of the couple’s domestic life suggest the latter (Rosen; Goldman). Another relevant term is New Age: originally utopian beliefs that owe much to the counterculture in their suspicion of science and technological progress (while generally still benefitting from same), mystical belief in the power of imagination, and the idea of inner as opposed to outer fulfilment, generally associated with individual rather than collective self-improvement (Hammer 372). Accordingly, Lennon and Ono reject all forms of collective political action as “isms” (Sheff and Golson 107). Lennon quotes Ono: “A dream you dream alone is only a dream. A dream you dream together is reality” (Sheff and Golson 15). There’s a slippage here between two people with common aspirations and the idea of uniting humanity. Discussing the meaning of songs, Lennon rejects the idea that songs tell people what to do but continues, “the idea of leadership is a false god.... Following is not what

it's about, but leaving messages... 'this is what's happening to us, what's happening to you?'" (Sheff and Golson 32). But not everyone is in a position to leave messages, and even if they were, who would read them? Most people do not have a platform (like celebrity) from which their message will be heard. Lennon and Ono both subscribe to the New Age idea that dreams and thoughts can influence reality: "wishful thinking will create a new reality" (quoted in Sheff and Golson 33). But this overlooks the objective conditions of existence which mean that for most, wishes do not become reality.

## Conclusion

In this article I have tried to position Nutopia, as an example of an imaginary (as opposed to imagined) community, in the context of Lennon and Ono's public and personal lives, where the relation of public and private, constitutive of community, is in itself part of the object of investigation. I argued that Nutopia is best understood as a product of modernity, in its contradictory notion of a global community, as all communities are defined by their differences from other communities. But it typified a kind of globalised thinking that was in the ascendant in the 1960s, partly a product of ecological concepts, but also of mass media that "shrank" the globe, instantiated in the 1960s counterculture. Lennon and Ono can be partly understood as "global citizens," as member of a new liberal elite, but also as artists (the two terms do cross over) who characteristically perform their identities in terms that can be interpreted both as articulations of conflicts and desires, on the private and public levels. There may be an expectation that artists perform these kinds of contradictions. Specifically, Lennon's adoption of avant garde practices was both a search for different ways of reaching audiences than those offered by his form of celebrity but also an attempt to exploit that celebrity. It also got him out of one lot of communities (The Beatles, Britain) but into another set of entanglements (with the Yippies and the US government).

Perhaps the greatest tension in the era was between community and individualism, historian Eric Hobsbawm noting that the post-war era marked "the triumph of the individual over society, or... the breaking of the threads which in the past had woven human beings into social textures" (334). But rather than marking the death of communalism, the era saw the formation of new kinds of imagined communities, specifically those offered by popular media, Beatlemania for example, and it is these shifting alliances that Lennon and Ono were negotiating, moving between ideas of communal living, nationalities, art forms, gender identities, and acting out these shifting identifications for audiences. In this sense, their careers typified another characteristic of the era – constant change, which Lennon characterises in a (mixed) metaphor of nation: "The Beatles had a social impact but then became sterile like a government that has stayed in power too long. When that situation arises, you abdicate" (Coleman 63). The slippage between individual and collective is manifest in "abdicate" – Lennon could never quite reconcile his desire to dominate with his need for companionship, and ended by symbolically handing power to Ono, which he framed as a feminist act, though it is not necessarily so, as a marriage depends on participants assuming responsibilities rather than insisting on rights, or ceding them to others. However, the concept of Nutopia is now undergoing a revival, as fears of

climate change and the Anthropocene led some artists to propose “an open conversation about positive future narratives that refute the inevitability of global dystopia” (Journey to Nutopia) whether manifest in popular music, artwork or architecture, and that the Internet has also been imagined by some as manifesting Nutopian possibilities, connecting to virtual micronations such as Wirtland (Lacasta 2019). Arguably the world needs Utopian thinking more than ever, but the key question is the degree to which it can be embedded in particular practices, times and places.

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