Patterns of Vulnerability
A Brief History of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Anthropology

We accept this thesis as conforming
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Abstract

The theme of this paper is vulnerability, situated within the context of an ethnographic account of a grassroots community organization called the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance, which evolved in Nelson, BC in late 1998. The objective of this thesis is to describe the local construction of Y2K – the Millennium computer problem – as a technological risk and how these factors influenced the mobilization of a community emergency preparedness and awareness effort in the Kootenay region. The perspective is political ecological and the approach allegorical. Sociocultural factors have been addressed from both a micro and macro level, providing insights into the manner in which the totality of social life plays into the intensity of disasters, and the speed of recovery from their impacts.

Key Words: **Disasters, Emergency Preparedness, Kootenays, Nelson, BC, Technology, Vulnerability, Y2K**

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the individuals whose concern and cautiousness about the potential risks posed by wide-scale computer systems failure prompted my attention in late 1998: The West Kootenay Y2K Alliance.

I would also like to express my appreciation to my thesis committee – Dr. Peter H. Stephenson, Dr. Margot Wilson, and Dr. Harold Foster – for their continued encouragement of my research. I would especially like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Peter H. Stephenson for his faith in my proposal, allowing me to travel into uncharted territory.

There are many individuals who have contributed their support to this project through their interest, encouragement, and patience: Ross Crockford and Pam Blackstone assisted me in reaching a larger audience for this research; John Hall provided a place to stay on my travels between Victoria and Nelson; Claire Stannard shared her home and garden during my fieldwork; Lisa Weeks helped with the logistics of my fieldwork and was gracious company in Nelson – to all of you, my sincere thanks. I would also like to acknowledge Dylan von Gunten, for his friendship and invaluable insights, as well as the support of all of those I am fortunate enough to call my friends.

Finally, but by no means least, I would like to express my gratitude to my family, especially the two people closest to me: my partner, Jennifer Maxwell, and my daughter, Tejana, for their patience and understanding, and for enduring the perturbations and distractions of the author during the research and preparation of this paper.

For Jennifer and Tejana, and in memory of Kelly Thompson

Prologue[1]

Washington, D.C.. Spring, 1970

The cherry trees along Pennsylvania Avenue are heavy with blossom, and an early morning rain has left the pavement painted with wet petals as a dark sedan turns down the drive separating the White House grounds and the compound housing the offices of the United States Treasury Building. Not far away, hunched under damp cardboard, a clutch of homeless Americans watch as another group – crippled men, mostly, in camouflage jackets – organize themselves for another day of protest.

By now, the charcoal-coloured clouds are aloft, separating off towards Virginia, as the dark sedan carrying Presidential Science Advisor, Edward. E. David, is waved through a second gate and into a parking garage below the White House. David steps out of the back seat into the fluorescent light of the subterranean compound. He seems charged with a sense of urgency, gripping his briefcase as he follows two Secret Service agents to the President.

Richard Nixon is on the phone to Henry Kissinger as David arrives at the Oval Office. The President motions his science advisor to sit while he continues his call, turning to gaze out the large windows behind his desk as the White House lawns, luminescent in the sunlight, glisten towards the deepening blue above the nation's capital.

"Hello Ed, sorry, I had Henry on the line, how are you?"

The President is aware that David has come to talk about computers.

In a nearby park, a bus-load of young people begin unfurling banners, securing signs and placards with duct tape, painting letters on cardboard. An effigy of the President is tied to a 2x4 and hoisted into the sky. The morning air is sharp with the fragrance of blossom and the odor of kerosene.

Edward E. David begins to relax in the Oval Office, sitting across from the President as the sunlight splays over the carpet between them.

Over the next few minutes the science advisor briefs Richard Nixon on an issue that had emerged some years earlier, about the date code within computer operating software, specifically, the COBOL programming language.

"What has happened," David explains, "is that computer systems have ended up with only two-digit date codes, instead of four."

The President brushes some lint from his pant leg.

"It's not a problem right now, but what we are concerned about is the year 2000, when we will *need* four-digit codes. I have 86 technical societies proposing, well, actually, pleading, that we adopt a four-digit standard. The National Bureau of Standards rejected this proposal in 1967. We're asking for a second shot, here."

Nixon puts his hand to his chin, reminiscent of Rodin's famous sculpture. The astute science advisor is optimistic, though he wonders if all the technical language has meant anything to the President.

"This is interesting, an interesting problem, and I want to thank you for bringing it to my attention."

David takes a sheaf of papers from his briefcase and hands a large envelope to the President.

"There's a few points you may want me to run through, but basically …"

The President appears distracted, then briefly changes the subject. A moment later, there is a pause and Nixon stands, extending his hand. Almost simultaneously, a buzzer sounds from some hidden speaker – indicating an important phone call – as if to underscore the expiry of David's moment with the President.

"Thank you, sir."

Looking out the window of his chauffeured car as it drove him back along Pennsylvania Avenue, Edward David thinks about NASA, and physics, and the duties of the National Science Advisor as he envisioned them. There would be, he rationalized, other champions of the date code cause – the real "problem" *was* three decades away. He was also aware of other issues that were hounding the Nixon administration, and his thoughts turned to the fragmented, wounded, and radically changing America that existed right then, out the window of his car. What was a computer problem in the face of this chaos, he wondered, and what did it take to get the attention of deeply distracted government? He remembered the Quaker who had immolated himself outside Defense Secretary McNamara's office, and the Buddhist monk in Saigon a few years earlier,

recalling the haunting photograph that had appeared in Western newspapers. He could not forget the look of calm on that monk's face, his composure amidst the flames.

As David's car turns out of sight, some chanting, and the sound of hand-drums diffuses from a Washington park, and another yellow bus arrives with more banners, more voices.

Introduction

June, 1999

Along the Trans-Canada highway where it cuts a wide swath through the alluvial basin of the Fraser Valley, a coyote lurks from the grassy meridian, waiting for a chance to cross, as I cruise by in my Mazda.

Young cornfields, and dairy pasture, raspberry canes, and hothouses filled with peppers and tomatoes cover this fertile gap created by millennia of river water with its cargo of soil. Such a welcome view compared with the chaotic conurbation of the Lower Mainland – highways thick with 18-wheelers, suburban-dwelling office workers gripping Starbucks cups, their expressions poised in the attitude of war as they battle towards the glass skyline of Vancouver.

It's just before noon and I contemplate a stop for lunch as I pass a sign indicating the distance to the town of Hope, the last chance for a bite before I swing onto the Crow's Nest highway for the next leg of my journey. To my left, I catch glimpses of the Fraser River, swollen from the runoff of a record snow pack; back-eddies swirl just below the touch of alder leaves along the ancient river bank.

This highway will follow the river another 100 kilometres up the Fraser canyon before they diverge – the river splintering into a fan of veins stretching well into the Yukon, while the road reaches its end at an old Hudson's Bay Company trading post in the far north of BC.

Since I left Victoria early this morning, I've felt that electric tingle that road trips induce – the idea of travel, movement, action. I wind down the window and take note of the air, the contour of the river – a liquid text moving towards its denouement at the edge of the sea.

The vastness of my home province is a source of awe to me - a diverse wilderness of forests and mountain peaks stretching parallel to an expansive coastline. Before long I'll be travelling through semi-arid landscapes of antelope sage brush, populated by rattlesnakes and desert owls. In all, 3,360,000 square kilometres called British Columbia. And the swirling brown river below me drains half of it (Bocking 1997).

I pull into a café in Hope as a flatbed truck bounces past, laden with sand and burlap sacks. There is risk afoot.

With a melting record snow pack, the potential for trouble lurks in every dark cloud; I heard on the news recently that, further north, the city of Kamloops spent over $1 million on flood prevention this spring, while in Vancouver, dykes have been reinforced with tons of rock. I suspect there are memories here that still speak about floods and the hazards inherent to life along rivers.

It was, in fact, the Fraser River flood of 1948 that initiated the present-day federal government disaster assistance program, while, as Bocking notes, by 1994, the combined expenditures of the provincial and federal governments on Fraser River flood protection had reached almost $300 million (Bocking 1997: 212).

Overhead, the clouds threaten. Low bands of mist have coalesced in the trees, and the air is still with the thought of rain as I enter the café, finding a seat near the back. I make a quick decision from the menu and take out my notebook to write an entry on this, my first day as an anthropologist 'in the field.'

I recall sitting in my thesis Supervisor's office at the University of Victoria back in February, discussing my research proposal. I had, I believed, struck upon a unique opportunity to situate disaster preparedness within a local context, and to also inquire along the way into the very nature of disasters and how they are made manifest in society.

The 'disaster' that was motivating the preparedness response I wanted to investigate was also interesting from a number of anthropological perspectives. It was a combined manifestation of a calendrical event, human error, and a cultural dependency on technology, and was being called at the time, the Millennium Bug – or, more ubiquitously, Y2K.

My intention, as I explained to my Supervisor, was to document a community that had been influenced by a different kind of uncertainty – the uncertainty about what might happen when the year 1999 came to a close – specifically, how computer systems would handle the date roll-over to the year 2000.

It was an uncertainty that had captivated a lot of attention, and was negotiated by many different agents – the media, different levels of government, businesses, and private citizens.

Towards the end of 1998, and into 1999, I found myself formulating speculations about Y2K, perusing some of the thousands of Internet sites dedicated to a diverse range of perspectives, and trying to assess what Y2K meant. I found a morass of inconclusive, vague, often unsupported and contradictory information, and slivers of substance. There were "experts," mostly from the fields of computer programming and engineering, and a few economists. There were futurists, evangelists, self-help gurus, investment advisors, and all manner of merchant attempting to align the Millennium with their particular brand of rhetoric.

There was no cultural "norm" guiding the collective construction and interpretation of Y2K. It was *tabula rasa* – a kind of quasi-problem, or the end of the world as we know it, depending on how you were willing to analyze it.

In the beginning, my own analysis was perhaps more critical of the cultural dependency on technology, which Y2K highlighted, because I realized how the post-modern world is inured to the nature of its own *habitus* - the way knowledge is absorbed through every day activities that now invariably involve computers. I began to think in terms of vulnerability – dependency as vulnerability, lack of insight into the consequences of untested technology as vulnerability – and that drew me to disaster research.

In its ultimate shorthand – Y2K – all language for coherency is obscured, and, though disaster and natural hazards are nothing new to human kind, there was no experience with which to evaluate Y2K-inspired emergency preparedness – or lack thereof. There is, however, a growing body of literature on disaster – from forecasting, mitigating, and recovering from severe events – to historical accounts of great disasters like the Halifax harbour explosion of 1917.

Tentatively, I formulated an objective to reclaim some meaning from the nebulousness and inadequacy of the term Y2K, by situating its impact within a local milieu, and by describing the factors that informed the social construction of Y2K in that location. I also believed I might be able to integrate two levels of analysis – the micro

and the macro – and after some thought and serendipity, concluded that an ethnography would be the best way to operationalize and synthesize my research.

To this end, I set out for the rural Kootenay community of Nelson, BC, where a November 1998 symposium on Y2K had attracted over 400 residents, as well as the attention of one graduate student of anthropology. A direct outcome of that symposium was the creation of a citizen's group committed to emergency preparedness through a mutual concern for how Y2K could effect their community.

After my first e-mail contact with the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance (WKY2KA) in late 1998, I realized that there was something more going on in Nelson than just Y2K awareness and emergency preparedness. Y2K had motivated a response in the community, exactly what that consisted of, and if it might be seen – as some have argued about disaster mitigation – as an influence for social change (Halstead and O'Shea 1989) became one of the questions I hoped to answer.

Back at the café in Hope, under the vague specter of flood, I find myself intrigued by the disharmony of perceptions of hazard, and the notion that CNN or the Weather Channel can bring disaster into every living room as it unfolds. If a spring freshet came suddenly - like it had in 1948, or like the tornado that ripped through Oklahoma in April, 1999 – I could be the guy stranded on a roof top awaiting rescue as the five o'clock news crew circled in their helicopter.

We live at a time declared the "Age of Information," and yet, we seem at odds to appreciate just how all of our new information technology is changing our society. The very fact that Y2K eludes attempts to pin down its real threat speaks to the inherent contradictions, if not the limits, of rationality as it pertains to risk perception.

As an instrument of culture, much of our new technology has distanced contemporary populations from the environmental variability that once threatened survival, and has lead to an over-reliance on high-tech warning methods as opposed to mitigation measures and sociocultural adaptation. High risk areas such as southern California and hurricane-prone Florida continue to attract new residents, despite high profile recent disasters like Hurricane Andrew and the Northridge earthquake, near Los Angeles. The logic of this trend might be explained by the notion that Americans are willing to live with greater risks in exchange for a warm climate.

To those in Nelson, Y2K appeared on the cultural landscape like an amorphous hand threatening to dislocate the pattern of daily life, raising timely questions about vulnerability, and inspiring an assessment of local resilience, as well as the development of regional community emergency preparedness. But the residents of the Kootenays received media information from all the same channels as the rest of us; corporate and government statements about Y2K readiness, and sound-bite reportage, made their way as effortlessly to Nelson as they did to Kitimat or Ucluelet.

My interest in Y2K and the community of Nelson – from an anthropological perspective – is inspired by a recognition that humans take risks, and that they perceive risks, but to variable degrees; risk perception influences vulnerability, while culture plays a significant role in shaping risk perception (Palm and Risa 1998). It holds then, that "patterns of vulnerability" (Oliver-Smith 1999) are in large part cultural constructions.

The Nelson symposium and the activities of the Y2K Alliance suggested a unique awareness was at work in the Kootenays; I wanted to answer the question, "what factors made the Kootenays respond towards Y2K – what influences heightened their perception about the threat represented by the Y2K computer glitch?"

At a deeper level, I was interested in wading into the cultural ephemera of the Millennium, with a hunch that I might find something novel, or cohesive in its chaos and obliqueness, and if not, then to at least benefit from the process.

* * *

Y2K has had a profound impact on my worldview, on the way I think about technology, society, and the nature of disaster. It influenced my behavior, and challenged my assumptions and beliefs, and, in the end, I believe it has had a positive impact on my life – anxiety and confusion aside, for they were merely part of the process.

The point of no return in my own Y2K journey occurred when I happened to notice a little orange booklet published by *Utne Reader* (1998) – a respected magazine billed as the "best of the alternative press" – entitled, *Y2K: A Citizen's Action Guide*. I purchased a copy and read it with great interest and growing concern. It was my first real encounter with what I conceived to be trustworthy, unambiguous information about Y2K. The

Action Guide, and the subsequent information-seeking it inspired, troubled me, and set in motion a process that has lead to this thesis, which, in personal terms, translates into a rather complex catharsis.

Apart from providing a technical synopsis of the Millennium Bug, the *Action Guide* delineated strategies for mitigating the impact of a wide-scale computer systems failure. It also provided figures: an estimated 30 billion embedded chips worldwide - including those embedded on technology-heavy oil drilling platforms, 767's, nuclear facilities, and hospital equipment. On the back cover, and inside the publication, I found quotes from various well-connected and high-profile individuals including the founder of VISA, Senator John Glenn, and the Dean of the Yale School of Management. One quote, however, was attached to a name I did not recognize, nor did I recognize the institute he founded and represented. His name was Tom Atlee, and the organization the Co-Intelligence Institute. The quote read: "If life is a process of discovering who we are, Y2K is when we find out."

I met Tom Atlee one warm July evening in Nelson, as a group of us relaxed in lawn chairs on the patio behind the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance Information Office. He and his wife had just arrived from Spokane, and, before that Eugene, Oregon, though their home was in Oakland, California. The Atlees had the easy mannerisms, tanned skin, and warm cadence of speech that seemed suffused with the image of the California coast.

Tom had been invited to attend the first Millennium Café - a biweekly discussion held at the Info Office, and open to the public - to share his insights on Y2K as an active social observer, social activist, and writer. Tom offered one insight in particular that resonated strongly and which offered a compassionate understanding toward the variation and ambivalence of responses to Y2K.

He said: "We all have stories – our lives, ambitions, our dreams – stories that are created for the purpose of providing reference backward and forward in time. Y2K presents an obstacle in its potential to disrupt the visions we have of ourselves as individuals. It interferes with our stories."

After a year of reflection, and months after the moment of truth, there is still something lucid and anecdotally profound in Tom's statement about personal narratives and the human ego as an ordering device. After all, it is largely through the lens of the

ego that we hone in on what we favour, and while convenience and verisimilitude rank high, uncertainty does not. (The Zen masters might agree that it is uncertainty itself that must be cultivated on the path to enlightenment).

I went into the field speculating that perhaps culture operates as a kind of collective ego, influencing the attitudes and perceptions of society through a similar momentum of memory and belief about the essential conditions of existence; culture produces its own rhetoric – often grandly narcissistic, uncritical, ephemeral – flawed.

What is also clear to me is that there are two sides to the Y2K coin; for some like the members of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance, biographical circumstances brought them closer to the uncertainty of Y2K, rather than repelling them into the tepid waters of complacency. For these individuals, the process and the outcome was empowering – generating new social dynamics and relations, but also a profound and fulfilling recognition of the fundamental strengths of their community.

What follows, is a story about stories. A story about a phenomenon unique to our times that was a focal point for both individual skepticism and community cohesion – an allegory of the discontents and ebullience of our age, of the ruggedness of our collective history, suggestive of our future.

I have included a chapter heading, "A Brief History of Danger," which provides an extensive review of relevant disaster literature. This review is evolutionary and is intended to illustrate the significance and development of human adaptation to variability. I have also adopted terms from disaster research in my analysis of Y2K preparedness; *buffering strategies*, and *coping mechanisms* are delineated in the review – starting from an archaeological purview and moving towards contemporary issues of disaster research.

Key terms such as *risk*, *hazard*, and *vulnerability*, are defined, their problematics revealed with the purpose of challenging readers' notions about what constitutes a disaster. A number of theoretical debates surrounding the study of human responses to extreme events, both natural and human-made, are also highlighted.

Kenneth Hewitt has argued that communities contain the "seeds of their own destruction" (1983); do they also contain the seeds of their own adaptability?

The West Kootenay Y2K Alliance was formed in recognition of the inherent ability of a community to mitigate disaster – only the threat was yet uncertain, formless, except

where it took shape in dialogue and within imagination, or where it coalesced in anxiety, and, occasionally, fear.

In the same manner that disasters reveal the bare bones of human bias and prejudice, and the inequalities of social relationships, – the potential scale and magnitude of Y2K as an emergent crisis has, in its rhetoric, many of the same features.

The ethnography that follows is structured around themes which emerged from the narratives of members of the Y2K Alliance, and which, collectively, contain the holistic elements that informed the local construction of reality (Berger and Luckman 1966), but which also highlight some of the contested aspects of intra-cultural "meaning-making" (Button 1999), as well as the significance of memory and experience as they articulate with an emergent phenomenon.

I have arranged, within these narratives, excerpts from my fieldnotes; observations; quotes; and marginalia arising from my own meaning-making process during the course of the fieldwork. This material adds context and historical depth, and because Y2K itself has served as a second, larger fieldsite. Y2K was both a private and public a public phenomenon, indicative of what Marcus describes as "those unseen worlds" affecting local ethnographic subjects (1998: 8).

Y2K, as a secondary fieldsite, was private because it was amorphous, strange, new – because it lent itself to speculation; it was public because it was everywhere. Y2K was used to sell everything from cars to ideology, firewood to composting toilets, while Millennium marketing produced a new benchmark in the commodifaction of calendar events.

The relationship between Y2K and the Millennium is the relationship between two technologies: computer software and the mechanical clock. But it is more than that. Y2K is a cultural construct, a product of a particular worldview, visible only under certain conditions, in certain locations. As an anthropologist, if not a cultural voyeur, I have been fortunate to have been witness to, and participant in, this unique event.

This has been an inspiring journey for me, intellectually and otherwise, though I can only attempt to reproduce that journey here in a limited manner. That being said, it is my hope that the reader will appreciate the reflexivity and overarching significance that I have attempted to convey in this project.

Methodology

In recent years, anthropology has added significant breadth to the study of disasters. In the first place, anthropology has contributed to disaster research its keystone methodology – ethnographic fieldwork. (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999: 3)

> Cultural variations in societal adjustments to environmental risks are clear. Using ethnographic evidence, sociologists and anthropologists have been able to link a society's notions and values of risk taking with its response to natural hazards ... in addition, response to hazards may vary according to tendencies within the culture to act collectively to reduce losses or to leave the burden of responsibility to the individual or family unit, or to the authority of a governing body. (Palm 1990: 32-33)

This thesis was conceived and developed as an ethnographic project, as an inquiry into the question *why was the response to Y2K in the Kootenays unique compared to other communities of similar size?*

The operative methodology employed to gather the *qualitative data* utilized in the ethnographic account to follow, was *participant observation*.

I spent two months (July-August, 1999) conducting fieldwork in the community of Nelson, amongst members of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance, supported by an 18-month long correspondence with its members.

Participant observation within the Y2K Alliance provided an opportunity to witness the activities of the members, and also the dynamics that existed between the Y2K Alliance and the larger community of which it was a part.

The perspective of my participant observation was humanistic, in the tradition of what has been termed *idealism* (Palm. 1990: 67). By idealism, I refer to the argument that reality (and culture) is a mental construct (Berger and Luckman 1966); to get at the heart of the matter, so-to-speak, involved playing multiple roles: sleuth, investigative journalist, and historian, while operating within the context of ethnographer. As Johnston writes: "to approach the truth, the historian is constrained by three rules: the subject matter must be localized in place and time; the pieces must be consistent with one another; and the construction must be consistent with available evidence" (1983: 56).

That evidence, in my case, involved the emergency preparedness activities in Nelson, and the personal narratives behind those activities.

The emphasis of my fieldwork was to evoke individual thoughts through *semi-structured interviews* with 12 *key informants* whom I identified through e-mail correspondence prior to leaving for the field. These key informants represented the self-identifying *core group* responsible for the *key event* – the November 1998 symposium that lead to the genesis of the WKY2KA – and others identified through their active role in the day-to-day operation of the groups' information office.

Individual thoughts collected through semi-structured interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms have replaced real names, as per the consent agreement with the informants.

These narratives have been contextualized and localized "in place and time" in order to describe and situate the influence of such factors as *local ethos*, individual experience, and personality with regard to perceptions of risk in the context of Y2K.

What emerges is a collage of subjective experience and historical fact capable of transcending assumptions "embedded in place and social behavior" (Palm. 1990: 66).

Interviews (see Appendix B for sample questions) were designed to uncover motivations for involvement in the Y2K Alliance; what that involvement entailed; reflections on the outcome of involvement; and how informants viewed the legacy of the WKY2KA as a force influencing social change in the area.

The interviews captured demographic information, and also included a simple *Likert scale* rating of computer skills and knowledge, and an estimation of frequency of computer use (see Appendix C for Informant Data). This aspect of the interview offered an estimation of technological sophistication as well as general dispositions toward computer technology, utilized, ostensibly, to affirm or disqualify a prevailing myth in the media and popular culture that characterized Y2K-preparedness advocates as Luddite fear-mongers and technophobes.

Micro and Macro Analysis

Many empirical studies of technological and natural hazards have emphasized and focused on one of two areas: individual decision-making in situations of uncertainty, or

the larger social structures that facilitate or hinder hazard response and recovery (Palm 1990: 18). These two areas fall into the categories of *micro-level* and *macro-level* analysis respectively, and are generally viewed as end-points on a continuum, commonly defined by anthropologists based on the size and complexity of the group under study (Palm 1990: 18), as well as the location relative to other groups.

John Bennett has categorized the micro as local, contrasted with the macro as external, arguing that anthropology's principal effort is to study "how people solve their problems in a milieu of relationships and adaptive coping" (1969: 24). One aim of this thesis is to locate and define a local system of coping and adaptation within a larger, more complex macro system.

To this end, the members of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance and their households, and the ethos of their community constitutes the micro level, while the macro level consists of the social and political-economic milieu within which those individuals and households function. Macro here encompasses not only North American political-economic spheres, but much of what may be considered Western cultural values and norms including, among others, individualism, optimism, technological determinism, cost-benefit modes of analysis, capitalism, and risk-taking. The micro level includes the geographical and historical context of the Kootenay region, along with the biographical circumstances that have influenced and informed .

As Palm notes, the issue of "distinguishing micro- from macro-level analysis is at the center of serious debates on theory and methodology within the social sciences. These debates have led to parallel and sometimes competing theories of society at the individual or societal level" (1990: 20). This thesis attempts to collapse some of these academic boundaries by producing an account that exposes the chaotic interrelations between the personal and the collective milieus.

While research on hazards has been most fruitful at a micro scale, the focus has often involved the relationship between individuals and a given hazardous environment (Palm 1990: 20). In this study, however, the parochial definition of environment is extended to encompass the *built* environment of embedded chips and complex, integrated information technology systems. As this study of Y2K implies, hazards dwell in the physical landscape as well as in what Ursula Franklin has coined the "bitsphere" (1990).

In this respect, local and individual (micro-level) values and perceptions can be compared to the centralized mechanisms established to deal with disasters, as well as in comparison with macro-level cultural values and norms of behavior.

Differences identifiable through behavior demonstrate different attitudes towards where burdens of responsibility and perceptions of risk within one cultural milieu are placed with regard to mitigating potential hazards – in this case, represented by a wide-scale computer systems failure, but, by extension, any potential disaster.

On the macro side of the coin, I have attempted to approach these considerations anthropologically – from a holistic and evolutionary perspective. I have also endeavored to engage the reader in the ethnography through the use of a "New Journalism" style of writing, to produce a text capable of evoking the real story within the social reality described.

Ethnographic Considerations

> "Nothing so well defines our world as the absence of a synthesizing allegory."
> (Tyler 1986:132)

Writing ethnography involves a number of issues and considerations, many of which are outlined in recent publications by noted anthropologists (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Van Maanen 1988; Atkinson 1992; Emerson 1995; Hastrup 1995; Okely 1996; Denzin 1997; Marcus 1998).

Topics range from the preparation and significance of fieldnotes in the production of ethnographic accounts (Emerson 1995) to issues of genre (Van Maanen 1988), and from problematics generated by anthropology at home (Hastrup 1995) to notions of an ethnographic imaginative for multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus 1998).

I have endeavored to synthesize a number of textual and representational concerns, adopting a style influenced by the New Journalism (Wolfe 1973; Van Maanen 1988; Denzin 1997) which treats fact as social construction; melds writing genres, "combining literary and investigative journalism with the realist novel, the confession, the travel report, and the autobiography" (Denzin 1997: 131).

The ethnography produced here is a portrayal of living facts as revealed in local genres of meaning and significance. These are the themes which emerged from a

combination of interviews, fieldwork observations, local forms of memorial and celebration, conversations with locals, museum exhibits, colloquialisms, and some secondary references. This list is not exhaustive. It also includes mystery, rumor, and self-reflexive asides into the personal and cultural semiotics of Y2K. This is how the text was informed – by all these influences, in different degrees and intensities.

It is through ethnography that I have endeavored to meld micro and macro levels of analysis, grounding the Y2K phenomenon in a local context, but keeping it buoyant enough to be seen as the moveable phenomenon that it was.

Y2K frames this ethnography within a specific, emergent crisis – albeit an uncertain and highly contested one. The appearance of such a phenomenon on the cultural landscape exposes the unconscious, overlooked, or otherwise subverted dimensions that exist within the culture. These are the features that slip most effortlessly through structural-functional ethnographies, and which escape the grasp of ethnographies whose focus is on describing "normal" conditions.

Disaster research – specifically the political-ecology school of Hewitt (1983; 1995) – has produced a body of work that clearly delineates the capacity of "normal" social conditions to expose societies to unnecessary vulnerability. Furthermore, by outlining the perceptual division between the construct of "normal," or "ordinary" social life and the elements of disaster events, Hewitt's political ecological, or vulnerability approach provides an analysis of the weaknesses of statistically-based disaster management.

The narratives of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance articulate an awareness of a culture of vulnerability present in the larger cultural narratives of Y2K. The vulnerability that motivated the Nelson efforts has its source within the everyday momentum of culture; their response is a metaphor for a broader, unrealized cultural critique – a stop-gap to the cultural momentum of complacency and dependency.

These factors predispose ethnography as the methodology *par excellence* for understanding and describing the nuances and complexities motivating and mediating the grassroots preparedness efforts of the WKY2KA.

For reasons related to the ways ethnographies have traditionally been written and read, cultural critique, as Clifford (1986) suggests, is an aspect of cultural description that has been minimized in ethnographic descriptions. To minimize cultural critique in an

ethnography of the WKY2KA would be to subvert a profoundly moral, ethical, and ideological statement about very real issues with serious implications to the well-being of hundreds of millions of human beings; rather than minimize it, I have used cultural critique as a binding thread, linking not only individual narratives, but also my own self-reflexive commentary.

Y2K – despite whatever else may be said of it – was a real cultural event. At the macro level, billions of dollars were committed to (largely unseen) technology infrastructure upgrades; at the micro level, social performances like the Nelson symposium were enacted around individual and collective expectations and emotions.

Y2K symbolized not only a range of uncertain outcomes, but also the social tensions that cross-cut them. In this context, this ethnography may bear comparison to Geertz – specifically, his phenomenological-hermeneutic treatment of the Balinese cockfight, where the cockfight becomes a metaphor of disorder which the ethnographer overcomes through a transcending story. Y2K is to contemporary, Western culture as the cockfight is to Geertz's interpretation of Balinese culture; a portal into the logic and paradoxes of culture.

The transcending story of my ethnography – the genesis of grassroots community emergency preparedness in the Kootenays – similarly attempts to unite a cluster of chaotic themes without subverting description.

As Clifford argues, "ethnographic texts are inescapably allegorical, and a serious acceptance of this fact changes the ways they can be written and read" (1986: 99). Thus distinguished, what may be derided as mere textual abstraction or literary experimentation becomes integral to the meaningfulness of ethnography.

Culture – itself an abstract notion – occupies a central position in this story – sometimes as protagonist, sometimes as antagonist – appearing and reappearing in the narratives like a trickster figure, a presence amidst my fieldnotes. I had gone into the field perceiving Y2K as embedded in technology, but soon realized it was, in fact, deeply embedded in North American culture.

New Journalism

Deeply embedded in North American culture, as Denzin notes (1997: 284), is the legacy of North American ethnography, a realization that motivated me to seek alternative legacies to draw upon for my textual reproduction of the field.

The style of this ethnography is influenced by the New Journalism[2], in that it willingly breaks with old routines – structural-functional chapter headings, genteel commentary, and the objectification and exoticism of the anthropological 'other' – and, as Denzin writes, "evidences a desire to connect with people (citizens) and their concerns and biographical problems" (1997: 280).

During the turbulent 1960s and 70s, writers such as Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and Truman Capote began producing 'non-fiction novels.' Equal parts investigative journalism and realist fiction, New Journalism utilized the ethnographic technique of participant-observation to "gather the facts and meanings of a particular situation or experience" (Denzin 1997: 133). Borrowing literary devices like scene-to-scene montage, interior monologue, and juxtaposition from social realist novelists like Balzac, Dickens, Gogol, and Fielding (Denzin 1997: 134) the New Journalism produced an engaging style that challenged assumptions about the relationship between fact and fiction. Like the circumstances that fostered New Journalism, this ethnographic project demanded a more experimental style, one that benefited from what Capote described as "poetic altitude." The reader can discern from the imaginary dialogue of the prologue that the advantages of certain fiction techniques contribute an added dimension to the historical and social context surrounding the Y2K phenomenon.

Postmodernism

Critiques of ethnography in anthropology have often focused on the twin notions of inquiry and writing. George Marcus (1998: 181-82) notes that "the emergence of various styles of reflexivity in ethnographic writing has come to stand for, accurately or not, the influence of … postmodernism," defining postmodernism as a condition spawned by various, rapidly emerging forms of social diversity. In terms of ethnography, postmodernism refers to a style of knowledge production that is informed and influenced by the conditions of the postmodern world and by a more reflexive, critical anthropology

contextualized during the decolonization of European empires, and, particularly for American anthropologists, the Vietnam War (Marcus 1998: 182).

This ethnography is decidedly postmodern, as Y2K may be described not only as a metaphor for a cultural critique produced by the conditions of postmodernity, but as a symbol that bears witness to the hidden dangers of our ubiquitous new technology, and the social alienation it can produce. Y2K is likewise a symbol for Millennial angst, for the rhetoric of doomsday cults, fundamentalists, and opportunistic fear-mongers. All of these influences, however peripheral, required some degree of consideration, and admittance into the scope of my research.

Tyler (1986: 125) suggests that postmodern ethnographies are "cooperatively evolved" texts:

> consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect.

The postmodern ethnography aspires to integrate the turbulent chaos of everyday reality and disoriented consciousness, by *evoking* the essentially unknowable, rather than producing an artificial synthesis. As an individual with an interest in the literary field – in poetry and fiction writing – these features of postmodern ethnography appeal to both my intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities. But, more importantly, the notion of transcendence is integral to the subject matter - Y2K being intrinsically linked and intertwined with broader conceptions of Millennialism, technology, time, and a plethora of attendant religious, occult, and conspiratorial interpretations; a vortex of fragmented rhetoric, speculation, optimism, and paranoia.

I also found myself intrigued by the idea of a "therapeutic potential" vis-à-vis the self-reflexive, postmodern ethnography – with its capacity to evoke a "participatory reality" (Tyler 1986: 128). As an ethnographer, I realized I could satisfy an ethical desire to cooperatively produce something meaningful from the fractured, postmodern world.

My ethnographic approach to the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance couches its development as a metaphor for a deeper and richer cultural critique that also maps onto a larger geography. My aim has been to work the participatory reality of my fieldwork

experience – my time with the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance – into a reflexive journey where, as Tyler (1986: 127-129) suggests, co-participants in the journey may experience a restorative vision of the commonplace world.

Reflexivity

The reflexive movement developed in the mid-1980s, out of a recognition of what was then described as a "crisis of representation," brought about by the way the world had changed, and thus, the conditions under which ethnographers wrote (Ruby 1982; Rose 1982; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Rabinow 1986; Tyler 1986; Denzin 1997; Marcus 1998).

The choices that I have made to include personal speculations, insights, and biases were influenced by the New Journalism's inclusion of such literary devices – as scene-to-scene movement and interior monologue – but also out of a desire to allow the reflexive reader an opportunity to challenge the structures that distinguish fact from fiction.

Like such New Journalists as Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and Tom Wolfe, my style casts doubt on the authority of what passes for "truth" and "knowledge" in the culture – not only by contrasting news media interpretations of Y2K with narratives about community preparedness, but also through my own participation with the media as I found myself cast as the "anthropologist studying Y2K." And where the media offered sensational or anecdotal sound-bites, I countered with the biographical, epiphanal, investigative, and even conspiratorial details of my fieldwork, including my own musings.

Allegory and Symbolism

Several anthropologists have written about the allegorical nature of ethnography (Clifford 1986; Tyler 1986; Van Maanen 1988; Denzin 1997). In fact, Van Maanen (1988: 31) argues that it is through allegory that ethnography becomes most salient to a general readership, while Denzin (1997: 284) writes:

> The ethnographer's tale is always allegorical, a symbolic tale, and a parable that is not just a record of human experience. This tale is a means of experience and a method of empowerment for the reader. It is a vehicle for readers to discover

> moral truths about themselves. More deeply, the ethnographic tale is a utopian tale of self and social redemption – a tale that brings a moral compass back into the readers [sic] (and the writer's) life. The ethnographer discovers the multiple "truths" that operate in the social world.

Y2K is a symbol for the maladaptive character of our high-tech society – for the surrender of culture to the determinism of technology at the expense of all that a wide-spread computer failure would put at risk – hospitals, schools, banks, and every other social institution; social relationships, food production, and access to resources. Y2K is a symbol for the vulnerabilities built into the technological infrastructure of contemporary society. Finally, Y2K is a symbol for all that is nebulous, inchoate, and chaotic in what is culturally produced.

The West Kootenay Y2K Alliance is a metaphor for an acute consciousness of the nature of human vulnerability, and for a cultural critique of the specific conditions that generated Y2K. This ethnography describes some of the ways which culture mediates the vulnerability it fosters, and the ways that culturally-generated risks are perceived, communicated, and mitigated. It is an allegory about the conditions of postmodernity – what an increasingly fragmented and disjointed North American culture reveals, what it hides or denies, and what it inspires.

I confront the symbolism of Y2K, map it into the world that produced it, the world that has shaped my own views and the perceptions of the WKY2KA. What follows is an allegorical tale, a tale that is animated by the presence of an urgency, a serious undertone whose form cannot be fully traced, where imagination complements epistemology. Whether Y2K offers a *synthesizing* allegory for our times, I leave for the reader to decide.

A Brief History of Danger

The following section is intended to provide a holistic context to what is meant by the notion of disaster and its significance to anthropology. The approach to this literature review is evolutionary, providing archaeological evidence supporting and illustrating the development of human adaptation and interface with their environment. This discussion also provides insights into the linkages and complexities which have attended cultural adaptation. Specific examples have been drawn from Neolithic Europe and Archaic Greece which have significance to the discussion of contemporary Euro-North American risk perceptions and buffering mechanisms.

The review then moves towards a discussion on disaster and the social sciences, outlining key concepts, and debates about theory and methodologies. This section also deals with the distinctions between natural and technological hazards as they have been generated by researchers from the fields of geography, psychology, and sociology primarily. Careful attention is given to the literature pertaining to issues of risk perception and response, providing examples of inter- and intra-cultural variation, as well as highlighting some of the research theories and findings utilized studies of risk perception and communication.

From this background, the reader is introduced to the notion of vulnerability and the role of sociocultural factors inherent in every disaster. A political ecological perspective is identified and examined as a new approach recently employed by anthropologists working in the area of disaster research.

Finally, this review concludes with an analysis of issues regarding technology and technological determinism, as the theme of this research documents a perceived, emergent technological hazard.

Cultural Adaptation to Scarcity

From time immemorial, humans have had to adapt and cope with a great range of diversity in their environment. Such diversity includes periodic deprivations induced by climatic fluctuations like drought, late frost, and floods. Generally, such adaptation represents the articulation between humans and the environment they inhabit – a pressure that has generated a vast array of cultural responses designed to lessen the impact of scarcity during hard times.

Variability, in most cases, refers to food scarcity, and in this regard is related to the three diagnostic features: timing, frequency, and intensity of food shortages - though other limiting factors vary from location to location depending on cultural and environmental conditions, and the scale of archaeological analysis utilized.

As Halstead and O'Shea note, the boundary between environment and culture is often difficult to draw, insofar as adaptive strategies have evolved as products of local conditions within specific sociocultural contexts (1989: 2).

The three major components of environment which constrain human activity are: the abiotic (physical-chemical); the biotic (organisms of other species); and the social (other humans). These components are interrelated insofar as there is interaction among them, and some degree of interdependence. Humans live in the environment, have evolved with it – modifying and exploiting the landscape (Ingold 1992), an association that continues to present challenges, risks, and variability.

Weather patterns and larger cycles of drought and flood have, and still do, effect, and in turn are reflected in the cultures shaped by their influence. Cross-culturally, human societies – from small bands of hunter-gatherers to complex states – have developed strategies to deal with seasonal and inter-annual variability in food supplies.

Collectively, such adaptations have been termed *buffering mechanisms* and *coping strategies*, all based on the principle of exploiting the three diagnostic features of resource scarcity: temporal structure, spatial structure, and relative intensity (Halstead and O'Shea 1989: 3).

Temporal structure refers to the life span of a risk, as well as its frequency over time. Spatial structure concerns the area over which a given impact is concentrated, as

well as the homogeneity of impact, and intensity refers to the relative variation of severity realized by a given impact.

Archaeologists have found evidence supporting the types of buffering mechanisms employed in prehistoric times – mechanisms that can be grouped into four major categories: 1) Storage; 2) Mobility; 3) Diversification; and 4) Exchange (Rowley-Conwy and Zvelebil 1989; Garnsey and Morris 1989; Halstead and O'Shea 1989).

Among hunter-gatherers, for example, mobility and exchange were effective strategies that exploited large, flexible territorial boundaries, as well as extensive kinship networks between bands, thus working the spatial features of seasonal or inter-annual resource scarcity. The significance of such kinship networks and related ties of reciprocity and exchange are well documented in the anthropological literature (Barret 1996).[3]

Diversification operates to mitigate scarcity by expanding the resource base of a given subsistence system. Within this strategy, Halstead and O'Shea define a continuum between *passive* and *active* diversification, exemplified in the first instance by so-called famine foods, which they describe as a "passive form of banking" (1989:4), illustrative of the cognitive structures which identify relevant aspects of resource variability; on the active end of the continuum, are such practices as dispersed field cultivation which mitigates risk by, essentially, spreading it around.

Exchange, as noted above, involves systems of reciprocity and the sharing of resources among an identifiable social network – often kin, clan, or band-based. Such buffering mechanisms are "virtually universal as social values and have been suggested by some investigators to be at the very core of the origins of human culture" (Halstead and O'Shea 1989: 4). Similar to physical storage, exchange seeks to exploit the temporal dimension of scarcity by converting present abundance into a future reciprocal obligation. This method of conversion has been extrapolated through time into our modern cash economy.

Physical storage is a coping mechanism that exploits the temporal dimension of variability. It is effective for seasonal and inter-annual resource fluctuations, but not for long-term scarcity, though it is widely agreed that storage is a leading contributor to

social and economic complexity, especially for agricultural societies, but also as a stabilizing factor within non-agricultural societies (Rowley-Conwy and Zvelebil 1989).

Although direct evidence for storage is unlikely to survive in the archaeological record, Rowley-Conwy and Zvelebil (1989) suggest that indirect evidence may be demonstrated in a) resource specialization; b) permanent settlement; and c) mass capture technology - all features which have been identified among the archaeological records of prehistoric hunter-gatherers.

As may be inferred from the above delineation of buffering strategies, not all options may be employed simultaneously. Obviously, mobility interferes with storage and diversification, and also complicates exchange. The type of buffering mechanism adopted involves decision making, and emerges from the sociocultural context of the group or society that is faced with such decisions.

In the case of storage, there are a number of sociocultural corollaries informing and extending from physical storage as an adaptive strategy. Rowley-Conwy and Zvelebil examine three aspects of storage as it relates to prehistoric hunter-gatherer societies in Europe (1989). The first consideration involves a correlation between length of occupation of a settlement and likelihood of storage.

Second, technological factors play a role in storage, specifically, mass capture technologies that enable the production of a surplus to be stored. Rowley-Conwy and Zvelebil highlight the development of tool technologies that facilitate mass capture and harvest, stating that such technologies are themselves forms of storage, in that they *store labour* from outside the capture period which is then re-deployed *during* the capture or harvest of resources (1989: 49).

This leads to the next related point, the notion of *social* storage, or the socially-embedded value invested in prestige items. Storage of surplus resources facilitates the development of prestige goods – usually craft goods, including such items as the feather cloaks of the Maori, Kwakiutl coppers, or the jade body ornaments of the Maya elite (Hendon 2000). Prestige goods can be exchanged for food, which, in turn, can lead to an accumulation of prestige and status for some individuals and families; the linkage between storage and social stratification is functional, and perhaps inevitable.

The anthropological literature on the Northwest Coast provides an excellent example of the relationship between resource reliability and social status (Donald and Mitchell 1975). The potlatch, for instance, demonstrates an ostensible buffering mechanism embedded and culturally elaborated into a ceremonially significant event. Again, access to resources and accumulation of wealth objects are correlated with status and prestige. In the case of the potlatch, surplus is employed as a factor in future exchange, as the social expectation involves reciprocity; the potlatch is a response to the temporal and spatial dimensions of scarcity on the Northwest Coast.

Hendon goes a step further in her analysis of storage, arguing that it "acquires a moral dimension because it is part of the process connecting resources with people's needs" (2000: 45). Seen this way, storage is a process of evaluating the needs of a group and then linking these needs back to the practice of storage. Hendon also suggests that storage creates and expands locales of meaning and knowledge on the landscape and within individual households. "Knowledge of the presence of caches, burials, and stores of useful or valuable commodities inside rooms or storehouses represents knowledge of a hidden dimension of social and physical space" (2000: 49).

The social dynamics generated by storage, mass capture, and harvest technologies cannot be underestimated. As Diamond has noted, food production and societal complexity stimulate each other by "autocatalysis," creating expanded opportunities for organizing the public labour and surplus resources they provide (1997). Once food has been stored, labour becomes available for centralized political uses – public works or war, for example.

Interfacing social and technological complexity - arising in response to environmental constraints, and accelerating into the late Mesolithic/Early Neolithic horizon, can be seen as linking the development of civilization to early hunter-gatherer risk buffering strategies. Such evidence as the remains of large nets like the one found at Lundfors, on the northern coast of Sweden dated to 4000 BC (Rowley-Conwy and Zvelebil 1989: 55) suggest that the dynamics of risk-buffering among European hunter-gatherers at that time that demanded an alliance of mutual assistance of an increasing scale.

Settlements, as expanding manifestations of social and physical space, became the dominant pattern, with storage the main buffering mechanism over mobility and exchange; new relationships arise foreshadowing civilization.

We can trace this trajectory, which is to say, cultural evolution, to the palatial grandeur of the Mycenaean civilization of around 1200 BC with its centralized redistributive apparatus, through to the emergence of states in Medieval Greece, to Imperial Rome, to the Industrial Revolution of Europe. All the while, buffering mechanism and coping strategies have become more embedded within a context of greater stratification and external management. In essence, the relationship between the individual and the state began to take on increased significance, a relationship which in many cases perpetuated social conflict and revolution (Garnsey and Morris 1989: 103).

We may interpret the 'autocatalysis' of mass food capture and storage technology along with sociocultural complexity as providing increased protection against food scarcity, but we must also note that the same processes contributed to increased variability generated from within the social environment. It may be argued that the growth of the state was, and perhaps still is, derived from its ability to exploit the need for buffering mechanisms beyond the scope of individuals and communities.

It is not difficult, even in modern times, to provide examples of what results when centralized governments fail to meet such needs, as revolution may be said to exploit the failure of buffering mechanisms and coping strategies to generate satisfactory social relations and institutions.

Humans continue to cope with variability, though forecast and warning technologies have vastly improved. Still, each year, thousands of people are killed by geophysical and climatic phenomena, while thousands more are crippled by grief and loss in the wake of severe events. Our perception of this condition is prominent; the United Nations designated the 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, although no less than 68 presidential declarations of disaster were issued in the U.S. during fiscal 1998 (Platt 1999: xv-xvi). Nor could disaster reduction rhetoric improve the damage experienced in Miami in 1992 when Hurricane Andrew[4] made landfall (Alexander 1997; Oliver-Smith 1999; Platt 1999).

The Study of Disaster

In 1879, a wall painting was discovered in the ruins of Pompeii, depicting lush vegetation growing up the steep slopes of Mt. Vesuvius (Carrington 1936). This scene – an agricultural town under the shadow of a dormant volcano – was abruptly altered in late August of AD 79, and although most scholars recognize Prince's (1920) study of the Halifax harbour explosion as the first systematic social science account of disaster (Dynes and Tierney 1994), Pliny the Younger provides us with a tragic account of the Vesuvius eruption – the vapor cloud black with ash, broken by "tortuous streaks of fire" (Carrington 1936) – that took the lives of some 2,000 residents of Pompeii (Conte Corti 1951: 81).

Most of the victims had time, it appears, to seek cover before the city was buried by over two metres of pumice stone, or *lapilli*, and a substantial layer of ash. Their bones are found in cellars, under colonnades and doorways of the excavated city. One man apparently sought refuge in a tree near the *Portia di Nola*, where tourists now marvel at the detritus of tragedy.

* * *

Much of the early work on disaster research was conducted by geographers, sociologists, and psychologists (Fritz 1961; Barton 1969, 1970; Drabek 1971, 1986; Edgar and Mukerjee 1974; Murton and Shimaburo 1974; Rowntree 1974; White 1974; Mileti et al. 1975; Foster 1980 Lowrance 1980; Hewitt 1983; Quarantelli 1985; Mitchell 1989; Marx 1994; Alexander 1997), or as projects funded or coordinated under the auspices of military and/or emergency management agencies (Auf der Heide 1989). The "anthropology of disaster" is a relatively recent field of study (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999).

Accounts such as that recorded by Pliny document the antiquity of human interest in and awe of the destructive capacity of natural events, but it was not until the last 30 years that social science engaged in a more comprehensive examination of disaster, though, as we shall note, there is still much discussion and development of methodologies and new ideas occurring within the field of disaster research.

The multidimensionality of disasters has generated a proliferation of scientific perspectives that may be brought to bear in disaster research. Such richness and diversity is at once both a strength and a weakness.

To begin this review, I will start with the basic terms employed under the purview of disaster (or hazards) research, where debates have coalesced around definitional, theoretical, and methodological issues.

The definition or concept *disaster* has provided much ground for discussion among researchers (Fritz 1961; Barton 1969), and lack of consensus thereof (Quarantelli 1985). Part of the divisiveness arises out of the contexts under which studies are situated.

Four basic elements used to define disaster include: number of deaths, value of damage and losses, impact on the social system, and geophysical definitions (Alexander 1997).

There are also several locations from which to identify and describe disasters: in the physical agents (hurricane, earthquake, etc.); the physical impacts of the agents (deaths, structural damage); assessment and analysis of those impacts; social dislocations and upheaval resulting from impacts of physical agents; the political definition of disaster (Platt 1999); and the sociocultural construction of reality in situations of crisis. The concept of political ecology emerges as a fresh approach to the study of disaster (Hewitt 1983; Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999). The political ecological, or vulnerability approach introduces the notion of *vulnerability* and its relationship to the everyday lives and modes of interaction of people.

Two other terms in need of elaboration are hazard and risk. Within contemporary research, *hazard* is defined as an aspect of the environment "that threatens the well-being of individuals or society" (Palm 1990: 3), while *risk* is generally associated with the proximity of a group to known and unknown hazards. As Alexander (1997: 291) notes, risk is often confused with vulnerability, which "are two sides of the same coin … generally, the former is an active concept and the latter a more passive one: risks are taken, while vulnerability merely exists".

One suggestion to better distinguish risk from vulnerability is to consider risk as the "product of hazard (the physical agent and its impact) and vulnerability (the susceptibility to damage or injury)" (Alexander 1997: 291); risk = hazard + vulnerability.

Vulnerability is described in terms of a people's ability to avoid, cope with, and recover from disasters. It brings into focus the social conditions which mitigate or exacerbate the intensity of a disaster and the speed of recovery from its consequences. Vulnerability is thus predicated by awareness and understanding of the hazards in the environment, including the strengths and weaknesses of the social environment such as people's ability to anticipate catastrophe, and to coordinate their recovery efforts.

Other significant debates have focused on the level of study – situated in the micro, or the macro – and how to develop models to integrate these levels (Palm 1990). Such studies have also been used comparatively, between cultures, as in Palm and Carroll's (1998) research on earthquake hazard response in California and Japan.

Methodological concerns also include innovative approaches to assessing risk perception. Tversky and Khaneman (1974), for example, underscore the complexities of judgement during situations of uncertainty, and the more difficult task of assessment. Other researchers have attended to the significance of rumoring as a form of risk communication and information-gathering (Stallings 1994).

Another important issue to arise from the disaster literature is the recognition and distinction made between natural versus technological hazards (Zeigler et al. 1983; Perrow 1984; Palm 1990). Different in origin, technological hazards implicate the built environment as its own category of risk. The 1979 Three Mile Island and 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accidents (Monmonier 1997) provide perhaps the most sanguine examples of such risks, but as Zeigler et al. (1983) suggest, much remains unknown with regard to the potential threats of new, often untested technologies.

Research on human-made disasters such as the 1993 and 1996 oil spills off the coast of Great Britain also illustrate the conflict born of the "meaning-making" processes that follows such an event, as people struggle to understand, and mediate technological disaster by locating it "in a set of cultural logics" (Button 1999: 116).

The impacts and outcomes of low probability, high-consequence technological hazards like nuclear accidents, "can usefully be compared with low-probability but high-consequence natural hazards such as earthquakes" (Palm 1990: 14), however, although they share many features, technological hazards differ from natural hazards in some important ways.

Perhaps most significant is the tendency to analyze technological hazards on the basis of *de minimis*, a principle that recognizes that some exposure to risk is inevitable, or even natural (Perrow 1983; Palm 1990). From the technological *risk management* viewpoint, concern arises when exposure levels exceed a predetermined threshold beyond what is deemed "natural" (Palm 1990). For example, radiation occurs naturally in the environment (as do germs and viruses), thus, the logic of risk management argues that *de minimus* thresholds be evaluated not by what is safe, or healthy, but what is natural.

A growing number of researchers have questioned the notion 'natural disaster,' leading one scholar to describe it as a "convenience term that amounts to a misnomer. Neither disasters themselves nor the conditions that give rise to them are undeniably natural" (Alexander 1997: 289).

Perceptions about what is natural and unnatural and where the boundaries are demarcated lead towards a larger discussion about perception and the cultural as well as individual variations in risk perception.

Risk Perception and Communication

Risk perception involves risk communication if, at a community level, mitigation and preparedness are to occur. A large body of research (Drabek and Stephenson 1971; Lowrance 1980; Hewitt 1983; Perrow 1984; Drabek 1986; Palm 1990; Fitzpatrick and Mileti 1994; Turner 1994; Monmonier 1997; Palm and Carroll 1998; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999) illustrates not only the link between risk perception and disaster preparedness, but also the complexity and variability in perceptions, and obstacles to communicating risks. It is generally agreed, however, that the public lacks knowledge about the hazards of its environment and consistently makes errors in risk evaluation (Palm 1990; Monmonier 1997).

Fitzpatrick and Mileti (1994) delineate two categories of communication: *Hazards communication*, which they define as being concerned with communicating risks associated with an area, for example, those risks relating to earthquake fault-lines in California, or hurricane risks in coastal Florida. The second category of communication

involves that which arises in a time of impending crisis, described as *warnings communication*. As the authors note, "central to both … are the perceptions that the public holds and forms about the risk" (1994: 71).

In all situations of risk communication, those who perceive the risk attempt to individualize it based on a number of factors related to frames of knowledge and frames of reference, experience, values, and the social conditions in which they live, but also by the framing of hazards by the news media (Button 1999). Furthermore, the cultural context of risk communication may increase or reduce risk perceptions, and even condition the range of acceptable responses (Palm 1998: 23).

Different cultures, and different groups within the same society may vary in the degree of concern directed to losses of life or property. For example, the deaths of 250,000 Bangladeshi in a 1991 typhoon (Alexander 1997; Zaman 1999) received little attention in North America, while the deaths of 80 passengers in an Alaska Airlines crash in early 2000 was attended by weeks of news coverage, ceremonies, and the inspection of hundreds of aircraft.

Psychological aspects to variations in risk perception are also illustrated in the impact of a single plane crash over the Pacific, versus the tolerance to the 50,000 American fatalities each year on the country's highways (Palm 1990: 26). Palm suggests that acceptability of such risks are related to the Western, market-oriented concept of the cost-benefit analysis. Public preference for *certainty* over *probability* may account for the tendency to reduce anxiety by "denying the existence of low-probability events, or by wishfully believing that the hazard is being handled by some external group such as the government" (1990: 37).

In North America, the news media tends to act as the primary filter through which information is disseminated to the public. The media act as a force of modification or reaffirmation, and as a force of subversion, depending on the political-economic orientation of the source, as well as the nature of the hazard. The news media play an especially important role in providing information about technological disasters. As Button argues, "technological disasters, which do not seem to arise from nature, but rather from human error or carelessness, particularly perplex people and leave them to struggle for explanation or meaning" (1999: 114), suggesting that the way the news

media frame such events subverts attention from the real ecological and social impacts by reducing the analysis to sound-bites and anecdotes.

Information subversion relates to the control, or management of information, often due to high-level fears of inciting 'panic' in the public, even though, as Quarantelli (1985) suggests, and as has been validated in other research (Stallings 1994), panic behavior is extremely rare and is almost non-existent in most disasters. Despite this fact, many emergency managers continue to justify the withholding of threatening information as necessary to prevent panic, while some journalists continue to describe rational, collective flight as evidence of an atavistic herd mentality, or as some type of regressive personality trait (Dynes and Tierney 1994).

Warnings, however, often involve a series of dilemmas about the management of public reaction, and the literature acknowledges that emergency authorities have had to "manage the confusion and equivocality resulting from publicity given by the mass media to charlatan earthquake predictions" (Alexander 1997: 296).

With the advent of the "Information Revolution" (Drucker 1999), opportunities to claim ignorance about disasters have generally diminished. In fact, disasters increasingly offer opportunities for the media to capitalize on human interest and awe toward the power of extreme events.

Technology has provided tremendous gains in forecasting and predicting extreme weather events, such as hurricanes and tsunamis, enabling warning time and evacuation. Alexander (1997: 295), however, points out, one exception concerning slow-onset disasters such as drought, where "preparedness depends in large measure on the behavior of individual households … data that would enable them to make informed decisions may be withheld from them for reasons of political control". In many other parts of the world, those most at risk do not benefit from high-tech forecasting improvements, nor massive engineering projects such as embankments, cyclone shelters, or flood canals (See Zaman 1999).

Values regarding individual and collective responsibility, in particular, have been shown to produce variability in hazard response even in situations of known and communicated risks (Palm 1990; Palm and Carroll 1998; Alexander 1997), while in other

instances, socioeconomic constraints condition individual and household responses to communicated risks (Zaman 1999).

Anthropological studies have illustrated the value contrasts between the North American cultural preference for private, single-family households and their assumed self-sufficiency, and traditional communities such as the Hutterites (Stephenson 1991: 65-96), but also alternative communities such as those arising out of the '60s and '70s counter-culture, as well as Mormon communities. It is the "unusualness" of mutual assistance and routine cooperation within such communities that reflects the absence of these qualities in the majority of North American society (Palm 1990: 105).

Researchers have focused on value judgements and their role in creating differences in awareness, both at the individual and cultural level. In the latter case, such factors as worldview, beliefs, myths, norms, and cultural time frames can facilitate or hinder awareness and response (Palm 1990; Palm and Carroll 1998). For example, Palm and Carroll's (1998) study of earthquakes in California and Japan demonstrated a high degree of cultural specificity in emotional and cognitive aspects of perceived vulnerability.

At the individual level, Palm suggests that personality characteristics are useful in assessing differences in perception and response – the most salient of which are outlined as "(1) past experience with the hazard and (2) belief in the capability of the individual to reduce risk through a set of behaviors" (1990: 35).

While previous experience may create a false sense of security, or what Drabek describes as "misplaced invulnerability" (1986: 324), a belief in the human ability to mitigate disaster transcends any one scenario and has broad implications for response behavior. As Palm notes, "when individuals feel a responsibility not only to themselves but also to the wider community, they are far more likely to take action" (1990: 36). Fitzpatrick and Mileti couch similar personality traits in terms of *locus of control*, with *internal* locus correlating with self-determination, while those with an *external* locus of control are more likely to be fatalistic in their outlook (1994: 81).

Hewitt (1983) has made a strong case for situating hazard awareness and response as a function of local values, indigenous knowledge, social organization, and the way in which historical circumstances have influenced social interactions. This approach marks

a departure from previous research with its focus on geophysical factors, and has been described as a paradigm shift, or "radical critique" of the study of disaster (Alexander 1997: 289).

This discussion about the dynamics of risk perception, communication, and response provides an effective segue into the next section of this review, highlights the nature of competing objectives within the sociocultural milieu. Starting with the radical critique of Hewitt and his colleagues, the discussion leads toward a growing recognition, especially within what is now being called the "anthropology of disaster" (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999), of a fresh approach to understanding what constitutes a 'disaster,' and how it happens.

The Seeds of Disaster – A Political Ecological Approach

The study of disaster has recently benefited from the influence of political economic and cultural ecological approaches (Hewitt 1983), perspectives that have been furthered by anthropological inquiries (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999; Hoffman 1999b; Button 1999; Bolin and Stanford 1999; Dyer and McGoodwin 1999; Zaman 1999).

A key concern within this perspective involves the notion of disaster as "an objectively identifiable phenomenon or a subjective, socially constructed process" (Oliver-Smith 1999). Within this purview, questions have been raised as to the application of the term 'disaster' to a social construction of situations or events where no physical destruction has occurred, but where there is evidence of social disruption (Oliver-Smith 1999: 22). This may be described as the objectivity-subjectivity debate over what falls under the rubric of a true 'disaster.'

Other concerns have been raised with regard to what Hewitt has called the "tacit assumption of an unexamined normality" (1995: 322, quoted in Oliver-Smith 1999) – in effect, the embedded vulnerability of everyday life. Dynes, for example, suggests focusing on community perceptions and responses as defining features of disaster (1994). Through this approach, Oliver-Smith notes, "a disaster becomes an array of socially derived effects,"

but also cautions that behavioral definitions "provide less a starting point, than, perhaps, a mid-point" (1999: 25) into the most anthropologically compelling aspects of disaster.

Disasters are not simply geophysical or climatic forces out of equilibrium, nor are technological "accidents" measured simply in terms of costs and benefits or acceptable levels of contamination (Perrow 1984); rather they are "grounded in the intensely political world of social relations" (Button 1999: 114). As Zaman argues, studies of disaster are studies of society and culture struggling to recover community and manage loss; they illustrate folk or local knowledge and adjustment strategies (1999: 195-96).

Key to the political ecological, or, vulnerability approach, is the relationship that exists between a disaster and the conditions of everyday life. As a concept, vulnerability is best characterized as the particular social and economic reality of individuals, households, or groups in terms of their capacity to cope with or recover from the impacts of a disaster; vulnerability refers to the totality of social life.

In many situations, and especially prevalent in the developing world, as witnessed in the Venezuela landslides in the fall of 1999[5], exposure to risk is often connected to poverty. This symptomatic condition is illustrated most vividly in Bangladesh, where land scarcity and the remnants of colonial land tenure compel millions of poor to live in high-risk coastal lowlands (Islam 1974; Zaman 1999). The estimated 250,000 fatalities from a 1991 cyclone are thus "more a function of the social and economic characteristics of Bangladeshi society than of the actual physical repercussion of the catastrophe" (Zaman 1999: 195; Alexander 1997).

Zaman notes that current Bangladeshi practices – risk mapping, impact assessment, emergency planning and engineering projects – "generally ignore the social and economic dimensions of vulnerability" (1999: 198), focusing instead on the ability of physical infrastructures to withstand geoclimatic stress.

Along with newly emerging definitions and approaches, disaster research has increasingly elucidated the relationship between hazards and environmental degradation and pollution. Long-term sustainability, or lack thereof, raises questions about the adaptive fitness of industrial societies, and the irreversible consequences that manifest from an increasingly modified environment (Ingold 1992; Oliver-Smith 1999).

The causes of vulnerability may reside in a myriad of locations – they may be based in beliefs, values, worldview, norms, and the networks and institutions that link individuals and groups, as well as the forces that keep them separate (See Table 1). Vulnerabilities are interconnected and form patterns (Oliver-Smith 1999: 30); economic vulnerabilities such as unemployment impact social vulnerabilities like health. Information vulnerabilities like inadequate emergency planning, heighten public expose to physical hazards, but are also characterized by bureaucratic information management, and poor or inadequate public hazards communication.

Such issues as knowledge of local risks, warnings communication, and individual preparedness heavily influence the structure of disasters, along with such macro- and micro-level factors as media response, government preparedness, and the overall effectiveness of centralized buffering mechanisms. Some researchers have found disparities in the structure of disasters that suggest gender, age, ethnicity, and economic status have a major influence on who suffers most in the face of disaster (Palm and Carroll 1998; Hoffman 1999b).

Focusing on the conditions that prefigure disaster is one method employed within a political ecological approach. Thus, the emphasis lies not in describing and analyzing the effects of disaster as the net result of human-environment interaction within an after-math setting, but in understanding the sum of vulnerabilities resident in that location prior to any physical or crisis event (Hewitt 1983; Zaman 1999; Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999).

Those same elements of vulnerability can also be brought to bear in the wake of a severe event, requiring researchers to look closely at the spatial and social distribution of damage, loss, and relief assistance, as Dyer and McGoodwin succinctly illustrate in their examination of Hurricane Andrew (1999: 213-32).

Table 1. Vulnerability types, features and social manifestations[6]

TYPE	FEATURES	MANIFESTATIONS
Physical	• Exposure to risk	• Loss of life • Property damage • Crop damage • Disruption of daily life
Economic	• Loss of income and/or income opportunities • Loss of economic status	• Poverty • Unemployment • Unequal land/resource distribution
Social	• Fragile or weakened: – social organization – institutions – kin ties – health status	• Helplessness • Apathy • Conflict • Disease and/or ill health
Information	• Early warning systems • Evacuation and emergency planning/preparedness • Training of response personnel	• Withholding of information by decision-makers • Poor preparedness • Obstacles to effective communication • Exacerbation of crises
Environmental	• Environmental degradation • Pollution • Deforestation • Over-intensification of land and resources	• Rapid population growth • Migration to high risk/ marginal areas • Toxic imperialism

Technology

Rosalind Williams asks, "what is technology?" stating that, more recently, the meaning has expanded to favour technological systems and not merely machines as the basic unit of analysis (1994: 218). Such is certainly the case with that broad category of machinery, termed , in common parlance, information technology, or simply IT.

Williams also argues that "the concept of technological progress was gradually extrapolated to history as a whole," and that history became redefined as the "record of socioeconomic progress" (1994: 221). This is the very problematic which Wolf posits as producing, in his assessment, "people without history" (1982) because it perpetuated a colonial era agenda to develop pre-industrial societies. Traditional knowledge was discounted, and today the social, environmental, and economic fabric of many so-called developing nations illustrate the consequences of imposed "progress."

Technological priorities have thus defined history, conditioning a view that is void of the processes and activities, the trade-offs, and conflicts that have been more recently recognized as crucial (Franklin 1990; Postman 1992; Bulliet 1994; Misa 1994).

Nuclear technology provides a clear example of a technology which is beyond the bounds of social control, which tests the abilities of a society to accept the costs implicated in nuclear accidents, bringing into focus the burdens of responsibility and tacit assumptions of 'normal' industrial life. Commenting on the freedom of choice for societies with regard to nuclear weapons, but applicable to a range of technologies including genetically modified foods, essayist Wendell Berry writes that "we can choose nuclear weapons as a form of defense, but that is the last of our 'free choices' with regard to nuclear weaponry. By that choice we largely abandon ourselves to terms and results dictated by the nature of nuclear weapons" (Quoted in Williams 1994: 227).

There are also less visible implications to technology, seemingly less benign than acid rain or radiation, but nonetheless significant in their impact upon society and social relationships. Neurolinguist John L. Locke, for example, comments on the effects of information technology on community, citing fragmentation and social isolation produced by the information revolution, with its "potential for miscommunication and mistrust," and the "deepening conflict between biology and culture" (1998: 19). Locke's insights focus on and highlight the social distance produced in new modes of living which are quite removed from the sociocultural context within which human communication evolved (1998).

Many of the concerns raised in the literature on technology reveal parallel recognition within the field of disaster research. Hoffman, for one, notes that a number of causes, including perilous technology, has increased the frequency and scale of human tragedy,

while at the same time diminishing human cultural heterogeneity, and thus elasticity and adaptive flexibility.

Zeigler et al. (1983) also point out that along with the widespread adoption of new, often untested technologies has come an increase in the scale of impact of technological hazards. The same authors argue that the consequences of technological disasters are difficult to assess: "The larger the scale of potential impact, the more difficult it is to measure risk quantitatively" (1983: 50).

I have, in this regard, taken up the study of an unprecedented, emergent threat to IT, to the information technology that facilitates the everyday affairs of the Western world. What follows is an ethnographic account of one community's efforts to mitigate potential hardships of a computer infrastructure collapse, by attending to what Hewitt (1983) describes as the "seeds of disaster," through advocating prudent community emergency preparedness.

A Brief History of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance

Nelson

The Kootenay region lies west of the Rocky Mountain trench, and includes the Columbia basin, as well as watersheds draining into the Fraser, Columbia, and Thompson rivers, in the southeastern interior of British Columbia.

Nelson was founded by a party of American prospectors in August 1886, after they had traveled up the Columbia River in search of gold. It was an expedition born of hope and desperation: hope that the Kootenay valley would reveal a rich claim; desperation because their arduous journey by raft and pack horse culminated in no such discovery.

The town-site founded by these early sojourners was known first as Salisbury, and then Stanley, before taking the name Nelson after then Lieutenant-Governor of BC, Hugh Nelson.

In 1888, a single log cabin occupied the town-site of Nelson. By 1889, Nelson's first post office came into existence, operating out of a tent, but by 1890 there were 40-odd buildings along the lake shore, including hotels, general merchants, and the offices of three notary publics, three real estate agencies, and mining brokers, a blacksmith, a restaurant, and a laundry (Basque 1990: 41).

Nelson quickly became a commercial hub for the area, its banks – including the first branch of the Royal Bank in BC – merchants, and saloons servicing a steady flow of gold rush prospectors and claim-stakers. It was the rush for quick fortune in the form of gold that opened up much of the BC interior, starting in the mid-1800s, and which influenced the motives for settlement in most of the province east and north of Vancouver.

A black and white photograph taken in 1898, not far from Nelson (Bondar 1986), depicts a landscape denuded of vegetation, a mess of blackened stumps, logs, scrap wood, and discarded wagon wheels. In the background stands a clap-board shack, and a clothesline draped with 34 pairs of men's long underwear, hung out to dry. The men in the foreground have the customary gaunt, expressionless faces typical of photographs of the time. I have always assumed that was the temperament of the day – tough, stoic, emotionless – but as I gaze more carefully at the landscape, I consider that they were, in fact, an unhappy lot.

The town site of Nelson is located on the south shore of the west arm of Kootenay Lake, roughly 500 kilometres east of Vancouver, and about 300 kilometres north of Spokane, Washington.

With a present-day population of 9,000 Nelson remains a major commercial centre for the West Kootenays. Outlying communities include Ymir, Salmo, Proctor, Harrop, New Denver, Slocan City, Nakusp, Ainsworth, Kaslo, Johnson's Landing, and Argenta.

Tourism and the resource industry – forestry and mining – are the main economic activities.

Along Baker Street, the restored historical buildings – once home to late nineteenth century purveyors – are now home to trendy cafés, bookshops and electronics stores.

Nelson was made famous in the 1980s by the film *Roxanne*, starring Steve Martin. More recently, scenes of the movie adaptation of David Guterson's novel, *Snow Falling on Cedars,* were filmed in nearby Kaslo.

* * *

I park outside the Co-op as I arrive in Nelson, on a warm evening, my back sticky from the drive. There is a cluster of young people out front – a twenty-something couple with a new baby sharing conversation with another couple, a glint of sunlight off someone else's nose ring, the scent of patchouli mixing with the aroma of bread from the open doors of the Kootenay Baker.

The Kootenay Co-op occupies a large single-story building near the foot of Baker Street, with the Kootenay Baker adjoining it. One of the longest-running health food stores in BC, the co-op seems to have a centripetal influence. As I move through the aisles, I notice young women with nursing babes, middle-aged professionals, and all manner of citizenry in-between shopping for organic produce, freshly-grated Regiano parmesan, bulk nut butter, and homeopathic bee-sting remedies to name a few items stocked. There is a large board for ads and messages, and benches to sit and gather for coffee outside.

My landlady, Claire, works at the Co-op, and I have come to let her know I've arrived, pick up a key to the house, and settle in to what will be my home for the summer.

I exit the Co-op, and walk up Baker Street, bright-eyed, a little like a tourist, sizing out my fieldsite. I pass a bookstore and decide to poke around the local books section. By

the time I leave, I have a copy of *Plants of Southern Interior British Columbia*, and a thin, locally published book by John Norris, titled, *Wo Lee Stories: Memories of a Childhood in Nelson, BC.*

On the corner of Baker and Kootenay Streets, I spot a sushi restaurant. After a hot drive through antelope sage brush and ponderosa pine, a plate of California rolls beckons, and I take a small table by the window. As a wait for my order, I open my new copy of *Wo Lee Stories*, which begins with a map.

Each chapter of *Wo Lee* is a "memory-world," a reminiscence of a scene, a place, or a person from Norris' childhood in Nelson. The opening chapter, *Wo Lee*, is named after and describes the Chinese market gardener who grew vegetables on a section of land, which, looking at the book's map, is right about where my room on Fifth Street is located. And though it doesn't say, I suspect that Wo Lee was one of the thousands of Chinese who came to BC in the late 1800s to work on the western leg of the Canadian Pacific railway which broke through the Crow's Nest Pass in 1896.

It is not difficult to understand the influence that steam locomotives had on the area, bringing first the railroad crews, and then new settlers, but also a new economic imagination born of the Industrial Revolution; by the turn of the century, the mines around Nelson were shipping mineral to Montreal (Basque 1990). In fact, it was the railroad, more than anything, that created Canada.

I wondered about the indigenous people, the Kootenai, who had lived in the Kootenay Valley prior to their first encounters with Europeans in the 1790s (Basque 1990), certain from what I know about the history of BC that the incursions of gold prospectors and railroads were strong forces of displacement.

My own curiosity about the Kootenai was matched over one hundred years ago when another anthropologist visited this area. He was an intense man, with a German accent, and a scar across his cheek from a duel he had fought years earlier in Europe, before he immigrated to New York and established the first department of anthropology in North America.

Franz Boas came to the Kootenay region in 1891, from the coast of Vancouver Island where he had been studying the Kwakiutl. His objective was to record the myths and

legends of the Kootenai as part of his grand endeavor to describe the native cultures of the Pacific Northwest.

By all accounts, the Kootenai are the most enigmatic of all North American aboriginal groups. In spite of the efforts of Boas and others, little is known of their culture apart from scattered archaeological details and historical records such as Linderman's collection of Kootenai legends (1954).

The Kootenai name itself is vague. There are 70 recorded variations of its spelling, and no concise translation of its meaning.

A few days after I arrive in Nelson, I make my way to the local museum, tucked into a nook just off Nelson Avenue, near the Hume School. There I find an exhibit of Kootenai artifacts and crude reconstructions of their material culture. I read that the name 'Kootenai' means "water people," though I take this definition with a grain of salt.

The Kootenai were bilateral, matrilocal hunter-gatherers who lived in bands, fishing and hunting the abundant game in and around Kootenay Lake and the upper Columbia River, though their range also stretched into Idaho and Montana. Their language is described as a linguistic isolate, different from that of the Interior Salish people to the west of them, and the plains Cree and Blackfoot groups to the east (Jenness 1977).

The Kootenai were, in many ways, intermediary to those cultures they bordered: they fished, which the plains natives did not; and they hunted buffalo which the Salish did not. They apparently wore buckskin clothing, paddled sturgeon-nosed canoes and worshipped, above all else in their cosmology, the sun (Gidley 1976). Their numbers in Canada were estimated at 1,200 before contact with Europeans, reduced to some 500 individuals by the early 1970s (Gidley 1976).

Along one wall of the Nelson museum there is long a glass exhibit case containing some archaeological remains of Kootenai culture – mostly projectile points carefully knapped from chert and jasper, and a few obsidian scrapers and micro-blades. I learn that the oldest artifact found in the Kootenays dates to 840 BC (Gidley 1976).

The most notable void in the ethnography of the Kootenai relates to their religious practices, and healing methods, though there is also debate about their leadership structure, relations with neighbouring groups, and kinship organization.

Looking at the landscape around Nelson, I think about the Kootenai, but there is nothing in the green fastness of the heavily wooded hills that speaks to my curiosity, and I resolve, reluctantly, to accept their enigma, just as I have, to a large degree, with Y2K.

I will have time to interview members of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance, though I find myself "chomping at the bit," to get started. There's a meeting – a Millennium Café – at the Y2K Alliance information office in a few days, and I am hoping to schedule some interviews then. For the time being, I adjust to my new role of participant-observer, affecting the posture of an investigative journalist, or maybe a travel writer, as I begin searching out the unique attributes of the location that have made it a hot-bed for Y2K-inspired emergency preparedness.

The Kootenay Valley is, by all standards, a beautiful place. The lake sparkles languidly beside the historic City of Nelson as distant, castellated peaks glint with sunlight. It is a valley asterisked with osprey nests, steeply forested, and dotted with rural settlements and slowly decaying evidence of its past: rotting sluices, rusting railway spikes, crumbling trestles, and deserted mines.

Under the surfaces of the physical and the spoken, there are clues, and between the two is the territory of imagination, rumor, and mystery. I have come here to turn over rocks, to draw together all the pertinent layers and elements that influence those who dwell here. This is my ethnographic mandate, I remind myself, though in my innocence and inexperience, I see margins for omission, and margins for interpretation. There is no formula, and so I proceed by feel and intuition into this new terrain.

Symposium

Two events drew my attention to Nelson, BC, in November of 1998. The first - a tragedy - occurred about two weeks before the second event – a weekend-long community symposium on Y2K.

On the morning of November 13, 1998, a small group of back-country skiers made a decision to descend from a camp at Kokanee Lake, in Kokanee Glacier Park, near Nelson.

Conditions were poor. Fresh snow had built up along the slopes of the lake, burying the largest talus boulders, with more snowfall in the forecast. As the group snaked its way along a ribbon of trail beside the icy lake, a shoulder of snow and rock suddenly collapsed, rushing toward the skiers, hurtling one of them deep into the water. His name was Michel Trudeau, only 21, the youngest son of Canada's most popular Prime Minister.

The unfortunate death of Michel Trudeau in the mountains outside of Nelson brought national media attention to the area, as a lengthy search effort was eventually called off when winter took firm root in the Columbia-Kootenay region. In Montreal, the media turned their cameras towards the sad and aging face of an ex-Prime Minister who had once slid down banisters and cajoled with celebrities. Pierre Trudeau was now a father in the implacable grip of greif, mourning a son lost forever in a tear-drop-shaped lake.

Two weeks later, at the Prestige Resort on the shores of Kootenay Lake, 420 people gathered for the opening night of what would be a focal event in the genesis of a group that became known as the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance.

The Symposium, as it was called, included a panel of city "managers" – the Mayor, council members, representatives from the local utility providers, bankers, the chief of police, the fire marshal, and the BC government Y2K "guru," Leonard Trisko.

Though the symposium – the largest public Y2K meeting in Canada, attracting almost five per cent of the Nelson population – was a success, it attracted little attention from the media – local and otherwise. It did, however, pique the interest of one aspiring anthropologist.

When I decided to research the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance, I realized that the November symposium, more than anything, would be central to understanding the genesis of this new organization that had appeared on the local landscape.

From the information I was able to collect via e-mail prior to leaving for the field, I knew there was an initial "core" group that had coalesced sometime around September of 1998, and which had organized the symposium. I was able to identify these individuals and verified, through triangulation with other informants, their role in the symposium, and, thus, the evolution of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance.

I was interested in what had transpired in those crucial months before the symposium, before the seed of its inception was planted. I wanted to hear from the organizers of that event what had motivated and influenced their individual and collective intentions. I wanted to know who they were, how they came to merge their energies around Y2K; their experiences and how they influenced their perception of the issue

* * *

Sally Hazleton was selling her Prairie Sun line of roasted hemp seeds and hemp oil products at the Saturday market near cottonwood creek, below the foot of Baker Street soon after I arrived in Nelson. I introduced myself, glad to finally put a face to the several months of intermittent e-mail correspondence we had shared. We arranged an interview for the following week and I let her focus on her customers, while I perused the market for an acquaintance of mine.

Lisa, a young woman originally from my hometown on Vancouver Island, is talking with Claire, my landlady, who sells hand-made stamps at the market. It's a bright morning and the crowd is growing. On a patch of grass behind the vendors' stalls, a group has gathered to drum. Like the market itself, this impromptu drum circle is a sort of Saturday ritual for the mostly twenty-something, mostly long-haired men and a few earthy-looking women. I think of the paradox entailed in the new uses of this rustic setting, formerly the site of the Nelson Electric Light Company, founded in 1891.

Within a few days of my arrival in Nelson, I have obtained a library card, attended a Millennium Café at the Y2K Information Office, and scheduled several interviews. One of my first interviews is with Sally, and I drop by the Eco Centre on Ward Street where she works – operating the Kootenay Barter Bank and publishing the Barter Times newsletter, as well as coordinating her involvement in on-going regional environmental issues.

I'm early and Sally is out of the office. Around the Eco Centre there is an open atmosphere to go with the open door that fronts the street, not far from the City library and police station. There are pamphlets and books, bulletins and newsletters on an array of environmental topics ranging from the diminishing habitat of the Kermode bear, trophy hunting for grizzlies, and literature on the general edification of the fates of North American wildlife and the mismanagement of natural resources. On one wall I spot a familiar poster depicting a blackened, denuded landscape with an avenging quote from Shakespeare below it.

Sally arrives before I can get too nostalgic over my own tree-hugging days[7], apologizing for the hectic pace of her altruistic schedule that has kept her from the office. I deflect her humility by suggesting we conduct our interview out of doors to enjoy the weather.

"Sure," Sally agrees, "There's a tea house next door with a patio."

Comfortably ensconced at a table in the back of a charming little establishment that doubles as an antique shop, I test the batteries of my tape recorder and pull out a consent form in advance of our interview.

My interview is designed to evoke what I have dubbed "the Journey" – a narrative account beginning with the moment Y2K first gained purchase in the consciousness of the interviewees in a way that made them respond. From there, I ask them to take me up to the present, along the way outlining in their own fashion, what occurred, what their thoughts were, who they spoke with about it, and where and how they gathered information.

It's a deliberately open design, because I saw no benefit in allowing my own assumptions to guide the interviews, conscious of how social science has been known to construct its object of study. Instead, I wanted the stories, as raw as possible, that would allow themes to emerge and guide the tenor and scope of details.

I had no real baseline to work with when it came to Y2K, other than the existing literature on disaster, which, until quite recently, had focused more on the physical events and impacts themselves, rather than the sociocultural context within which the events occurred. My interview group was also small enough to manage, so I felt I could afford to relinquish the reins and just get into a really acute mode of listening.

I already had established a degree of rapport with Sally, as she had been my main contact in Nelson prior to my arrival in the field. I also knew that her involvement with the Barter Bank was important. If Y2K did cause massive computer failures, including within the Canadian banking infrastructure, the $30,000 worth of Barter currency that Sally had helped build up over the years would take on a new significance.

A healthy-looking woman in her early 50s, Sally has lived in the Nelson area for 13 years, raising a family, running a business, and generally maintaining a high level of involvement with her community – through the Barter Bank and Eco Centre, but also as a fund-raiser, ever ready to assist individuals and families in need. One person described her as a "matriarch … definitely one of my heroes."

After collecting some basic demographic information, I ask Sally to take me back to the weeks leading up to the symposium.

> Probably about mid-September, I turned up at a house that I'd never been before, along with probably 40 other people all in the living room, and we went around in a circle … when it was my turn to speak, I said I have no doubt that we're – as a species – capable of tripping ourselves up. So, out of that circle … we asked, what's our obligation here now that we know that this is possible, what responsibility do we have? We were all kind of called there as people who are activists, who take initiative …. so what is our responsibility to people out there? We decided that our initial responsibility was to let them know and we decided that a public forum was the best. At that point we thought we would call the civic leaders and put them in front of other people, anybody that we thought would be to the benefit, and we made one rule and that was this was inclusive – there was nobody on either side.

I ask Sally if she had felt anxiety over Y2K when the scale and significance of it first entered her mind.

> Back in September when the big picture kind of hit me – I would get these kind of waves – it was a mixture of anxiety and anger, because I immigrated from the U.S. - this is a beautiful life here and I have a wonderful family, and my husband has a job teaching – I have an incredible life, and I don't want to give it up, I don't want to lose it, and it's just a matter of time – and so I would get all rolled up in it and just like, "oh, man!," you know, like we have lived - I've had friends die in Vietnam, but never had anyone drop bombs on me – none of us have seen that – and it was more a fear of 'can I measure up, … how am I going to hold up on this?' I realized I don't know enough. As a result, for example, I asked my graduating daughter to consider going to our local college here for a year, and not be in Quebec or somewhere – just for this year – and she was okay with that.

It became clear to me, as I listened, that for Sally, her experience as a social activist had a significant influence on the way she perceived and approached the issue of Y2K, but her obvious social conscience also framed the way she thought about communicating the risks to her community. Her account of those formative days of Y2K meaning-making also reflected her recognition of the obstacles to effective communication.

> Any opportunity I have to bridge into another part of society so we can work together I take it – that's what I saw. I'm fully convinced you can't make it alone; we're not supposed to be fighting each other, we're supposed to be working together and acknowledging our differences and using them, but we get ourselves segmented.

Sally also articulated her recognition that many of the concerns which radiated from Y2K were there before the specter of the Millennium Bug emerged, issues like the Hanford nuclear facility about 300 kilometres south in Washington State. "You see," she says, "Hanford is a liability regardless of Y2K – it's the largest nuclear storage dump on the continent, it means death to the Columbia River."

Recognizing her own strengths, Sally focused her energies in two areas: the Hanford Nuclear facility and seed-saving:

> Because those were two areas I wanted to know more about, and by helping others in that area I was also helping myself. Neal and I formed the food committee, and ran that out of the Eco Centre and started doing things like putting together a 9 or 10- part food production course, and advertised that, and got people out to learn all kinds of things from composting to seed saving. We had 75 people come to a two part, 7-hour seed-saving workshop alone … and I put on two barter fairs that had seed swaps. We started a garden share program, putting people together, which truly was the most active part of the Y2K group, because we had a focus … After the spring, I started nattering at Leonard Trisko [head of BC government Y2K remediation program] about Hanford.

When I ask what it was like working with the "core group" prior to the symposium, Sally is quick with her response:

> I got to work with people who were able to work really well together, and we went through – whenever you go through an emotional project like that and come out the other end successfully you have a bond with those people. I think

> we were changing ourselves, our neighbourhood, how you relate to your neighbours, people you wouldn't normally have dealt with. There were a lot of people I wouldn't have come into contact with … we'll never be worse off for it … the whole thing was worth it for the process that we've gone through. I wouldn't change a thing, and I'm not disappointed - only it's just the most puzzling phenomenon that I've ever been involved with.

As we near the end of our interview, I ask Sally about the consequences of the symposium, about what happened after and how it changed the structure of the group that had been meeting up until that point.

> 350 people signed cards saying, 'yes, I want to do more.' We had a big group saying, 'now what?' This, then, became difficult, because, how are we going to work this? And we had got a grant for $10,000 U.S., which I think amounted to $15,000 Canadian, to help pay for the speakers at that event, and we could use the left-over for whatever we wanted.

I was able to establish the source of the $10,000; it came from the Tides Foundation, a San Francisco-based organization with a Canadian chapter. The money obviously helped to defray the costs involved in putting on the symposium, which had amounted to about $2000, but it was also clear that the next step in the evolution of the Alliance would revolve around developing a coherent plan of action.

It was the puzzling nature of Y2K that ensured such a plan would involve grassroots incursions into contested areas of community management and the hierarchy of decision-making. These were also questions I would have to tease out, but, in the meantime, I wanted to know more about the Tides Foundation. Sally told me I would have to ask Timothy about that, because he was the one who facilitated that process.

Sally has a busy afternoon ahead of her, and I have a notepad full of clues and further questions that will occupy a good portion of the summer, as I try to uncover and fit the pieces together into something resembling an ethnographic account of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance.

I thank Sally for her time, knowing I'm certain to see her around town in the weeks to come.

* * *

I had last seen Timothy at the Millennium Café in early July, when Tom Atlee was up from the States. It had been a lively meeting – a lot of sharing of thoughts, and a surprising level of calmness and hopefulness considering the theme which had drawn us together.

Following the meeting, I meant to catch Timothy before he left, to set up an interview with him, but he had ducked out the door as I sat talking with Tom Atlee. Tom sensed my reflex.

"Do you want to chase him?" he asked.

"It's okay," I replied. "I'll find him."

A moment later, Timothy reappeared, handing me his business card.

"We'll talk," he said, disappearing once more into the Kootenay night.

Tom Atlee looked at me with a smile.

"I can see you have a strong intent," he added.

Driving out to Timothy's place – about a half hour drive, and a quick cable ferry ride from Nelson – I consider the trajectory of my strong intent. I know it did not begin, nor will it end, with Y2K. I recall what another early Alliance member had said in regard to my research, "Oh," they had responded, "You've really got a tiger by the tail."

I could see that, too, only so far it's all tail. The teeth – somewhere up ahead – are at present extant only in imagination.

The road shoulders along the route to Proctor, where Timothy lives, are covered with chicory, the lavender corollas undulant as I motor by.

I turn up a gravel road to Timothy's house, a three year-old post and beam design set amidst 20 acres of pasture land, with a thickly wooded mountain to the back.

I pull up to the house as an ebullient yellow lab runs towards me with a bucket lid in its jaws, dropping it for me to throw, while a chestnut-coloured mare looks on from a nearby paddock.

A voice calls "hello," and I turn to find Timothy approaching.

He is a lean, handsome man in his early 50s, his face and arms tanned, and wearing faded blue jeans. He extends a callused hand as he greets me, gesturing towards the house where I meet his wife and daughter.

Their home is full of light and natural wood tones, with vaulted ceilings and a tastefully modern kitchen. We take a seat on the back deck, out of the breeze, and begin our interview.

I am aware of Timothy's background in health food retailing, and of his success as evidenced in the surroundings, but just how that fits into Y2K I am curious about. I ask Timothy to take me through his Y2K journey, from the nascent of consciousness about the issue up to the present.

Surprisingly, I learn that for Timothy the journey began on a small island in the Strait of Georgia – at the Hollyhock Centre annual invitational retreat on Cortez Island, in July of 1998.

> The theme of the conference was 'The Power of Community' … and there were about 100 people there, about 80% Americans, from all over – sort of an on-going network of friends and associates who've been real serious sort of counter-culturalists or more currently 'cultural creatives.'

I underline the word in my notes, listening as Timothy describes the significance of a three-hour video that was shown at Hollyhock, a video of a Y2K conference featuring Senator Robert Bennett, head of the U.S. Senate Y2K committee; Peter de Jager, a computer consultant who became almost a household name through his association and early concern with Y2K; Edward Yardeni, a prominent economist; and Ed Yourdon, also a respected analyst of the implications of Y2K for businesses and governments.

The conference, broadcast by C-Span, was held in June 1998, in Indiana, and sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies which shares its anachronism with the Canadian spy agency, CSIS.

Timothy conceded how he was struck as much by the credentials of who was on the panel, as he was by what they were saying, noting that at the time, Bennett's committee had a budget of $2.4 billion.

That video, as Timothy put it, "kind of dominated the Hollyhock conference," and spurned enough interest in him that he found himself ordering a copy of it from a payphone at Kwathiaski Cove, on his way home from Cortez Island.

> And it was just kind of like you get warning that there's a forest fire coming over the mountain, or a plague, or Ghengis Khan was coming, I mean it felt that intense, and I couldn't just not attend to it.

"I just kind of knew that that was going to be my focus for a while," he says as I scribble in my notes.

"I brought this video back and we started showing it around, and our Y2K group emerged out of people seeing that video, a group of us came together having seen that," he adds. I jot down and circle the words CSIS video.

By early September enough people had seen the video of that conference, that small, casual meetings were being organized in living rooms around the Kootenays.

I ask Timothy about those early meetings, about what was discussed, and the overall mood of the gatherings.

> The first month we just sort of told each other Y2K stories that we were gleaning primarily off our reading and web sites, and then we decided we'd like to take some action with it. We started meeting with city officials and we went before council and in pretty short order determined to put the symposium together last November … Up until the symposium, the Y2K group had been just a small group of us, about 10 of us, and we got really intimate, really connected, we had really good chemistry. It was really quite wonderful, just in terms of the people that came together, and everybody just meshed really nicely. After the symposium, we could no longer keep that core group intact – there were a whole lot of people that wanted to be part of the thing, so one phase definitely came to a close, and we never really recovered the chemistry or the geometry of that initial group. So, a combination of going from 10 people meeting kind of intimately and really coherent around the task of putting on the symposium – we just connected in a whole lot of ways, I mean, Y2K was just part of the fact that we were all, I would say, pretty serious social activists, each in our own way – Y2K was just part of a bigger picture for us … Y2K in its own right never was big enough or had enough depth or glue to sustain much for very long, that seems to be the theme almost everywhere. Y2K was just sort of a particular manifestation of cultural vulnerability, you know, culturally out-of-balance.

Our conversation turns to the strategies that those initial ten or so individuals adopted in order to organize the conference, which highlights many of the issues generated not just from Y2K, but from the contested terrain of risk perception and communication in general, and the even more imposing prospect of bringing city officials into the light of the public scrutiny. I ask Timothy to describe the process, and how it all unfolded that night last November.

By the time we did the symposium, the council was pretty much in the loop, I mean we had every core infrastructure person, manager, at the symposium – head of utilities, head of the local Provincial Emergency Program, head of the hospital, the RCMP – these guys were all on duty, they were there to speak and answer questions at the symposium. The mayor came and – we got his attention enough that he realized that it was an issue and he insisted that he do the opening to the symposium. It was kind of funny that he was there, kind of welcoming everybody and saying what an important issue this was, and how neat he thought it was that this was happening – he was pretty stand-offish at first – a good politician, you know.

I am intrigued about the dynamics of concern, how it was mediated among and between the local officials.

"Did willingness to recognize the issue break down along the more traditional political polarities of right and left?" I ask.

"It broke down in terms of people who were just believing in the culture as it is and people who understand that there are some problems and that changes need to occur and certain transformations," Timothy replies.

Moving from those awkward, 'what now,' moments following the symposium, I try to get a feel for the types of emergency preparedness tactics the people of Nelson thought would be prudent in advance of Y2K. Timothy responds by addressing the recognition that Nelson, as a rural area, has specific, local strengths as well as weaknesses in terms of its infrastructure and its ability to respond to emergencies.

> Here there is a reasonable scale, I mean Nelson's a fairly contained kind of place, it would be much more challenging in a place like Victoria or Vancouver, or New York City, but here it was like, let's address the basic infrastructure issues around Y2K and see that they're attended to: Power, water, sewage, fire department, police department, hospitals. The first thing was to see if they were aware of the issue, and if they weren't aware of the issue to try to get them up to speed and then to give a status report. Out of this, the city council itself created their own Y2K committee with one of the councilors heading it …

I make a note about the city councilor. It would be good, I conclude, to collect some insights from someone on that side of the Y2K issue.

I ask Timothy to characterize the energy and organization that evolved in Nelson following the symposium and if the coherency that emerged to facilitate it was transferred to other forms of specific response.

> We had two or three meetings – weekly meetings – after the symposium, and about 75 people came to those meetings – we had three in a row – and, you know, by the time 75 people have gone around and sort of introduced themselves, and said a word or two on where they were at on Y2K, that's almost an evening, so after three of these sessions – and the last one was held about a week before Christmas – it was really hard to know how to mobilize all these folks, it was like, so what are we going to do, because to such a great extent on this issue, we're so much at the mercy of the larger-scale cultural infrastructure.

I already know that the Alliance emerged from the symposium, and those subsequent meetings, and that by the end of February they had opened the information office on Victoria Street. I get the sense that, for Timothy, the work of putting on the symposium and getting the message out to the community and to the city managers had taken a lot of time and energy. There were also new faces coming forward to carry the momentum that was created by the awareness. I ask him where he is it at, personally, with Y2K. There is a pause as he contemplates the question. In his response, I note the recognition he holds about the relationship between Y2K and other issues which seem to be embedded within it, issues that have interested him and others like him since well before Y2K appeared.

> The people who cared about Y2K are the people who cared about all kinds of other things, and those other initiatives are on-going. At one point, I know, we were saying, well should we change the name of the Alliance and take on a broader sphere of activity, and when we looked about we thought those activities are already on-going, why would we do that, we just be diluting the initiatives that we're all parts of anyway, so there was no need to create a group for the sake of creating a group – there was no need to justify the existence of the Alliance by having it take on a different task outside … it came together around Y2K, and when that work's done it's done - there's nothing wrong with saying our job is done.

Articulate, speaking into the warmth of the day, and the quiet rustle of the tall grasses and horse hooves that is almost soporific, Timothy ponders how his feelings about Y2K have transformed in the months since the symposium.

> in my mind I thought, hey, here we are a whole lot of us for years and years, like 30 years, identifying the need for some major changes in terms of human

> culture. And this looked like definitely a relatively benign and wonderful shock to the system.

There is a pause as Timothy's gaze takes in the quiet movement of wind-bent pasture. He is relaxed, at home in the country, his family nearby, the dogs stretched out in the shade of some low bushes as an osprey climbs a warm gyre high above us.

"I just got kind of peaceful with it," he says.

There's one last question I want to direct to Timothy, and it relates to the Tides Foundation grant.

"It was an anonymous donation, ear-marked for a community Y2K project in BC," Timothy tells me.

We talk for a while with the tape recorder off – about anthropology, horses, and details of our lives outside of Y2K. Then we say good-bye, and I drive away, watching through my rear-view mirror, the slow arc of a green lid flying, frisbee-style to a yellow dog.

After the cable ferry, along the highway past Kokanee Glacier Park, I contemplate the interview, looking for the nuances as well as the larger details.

I focus on the notion of "cultural creatives," and what it implies. What, I wonder, is contained within that notion? The power of community also intrigues my attention – the "idea" of community. I think of Franklin's remark that community is the location where democracy has its deepest, most active roots (1990).

Red Sands

There is time between interviews to observe the community of Nelson, and I take advantage of noting anything it wants to show me – from the statues in Lakeside Park, to old photographs on the walls of an historic pub. I taste the local micro-crafted beers, test the waters of the lake, and hike in the surrounding hills.

I have my own, temporary card for the Nelson library, and have spent part of an afternoon poking around the local museum. Mostly, though, I try to find those clues that help explain the success of the November symposium, evidence of the counter-culture, of the back-to-the-land values that I've heard people talk about when they speak of Nelson.

I remember, on my first logistics excursion to Nelson in early June, meeting a young couple from England at the Saturday market. They had driven from San Francisco to Nelson while on a tour of the west coast because someone they had met in Bali, Indonesia told them about an enchanting town in the Kootenays.

That seems pretty typical, I have come to realize – the word-of-mouth notoriety that appears at times to rival the Internet in its ability to make known certain kinds of information. Like secret hotsprings, or forgotten orchards. A particular line from a poem. A distant protest.

I understand, as I move about Nelson – popping in and out of the Alliance office, talking with people as my tape-recorder rolls, busily writing away in cafés, or appearing at the lake for a swim during the heat of the afternoon – how it is that anthropologists are sometimes taken for spies. My presence can only remain inconspicuous for so long before people begin to ask questions of me; I prepare my answers in advance.

More than anything, I begin to see the nuances of knowledge, local knowledge like the length of the growing season; carpenters or dentists who trade for vegetables or mead; where to fish and hunt; how to read the risks of avalanche; the significance of fire. I am transient, a guest for the summer, but I may, I realize, fall into the false luxury of thinking that, because I only drove 700 kilometres and crossed no boarders or linguistic boundaries, I 'know' what is going on. This can happen to anthropologists at "home" (Okely 1996), where the 'exotica' of the every day fails to impress; it is scenery, not ritual nor commemoration; mundane – Wal-Mart and summer barbecues, not social interaction.

I find this is how it is with Y2K, that there are a myriad of locations within my culture in which to hide or deny the possibility of error. This culture absorbs its own

criticism the way the butter lettuce and arugula in Claire's garden absorb their nightly waterings.

One evening, I mention to Claire my interest in a group that came to the Kootenay Valley almost one hundred years ago, the Doukhobors. Claire tells me how she once lived on the property of some independent Doukhobors, and she pulls out a book which was recently published by the Canadian Museum of Civilization in honour of the Doukhobors and their heritage.

"There was a train explosion a long time ago," Claire tells me. "I don't know much about the details, but I know people still talk about it. The leader of the Doukhobors was killed. It's still an unsolved case. Some even speculate that the police were involved."

As I lie awake later that night, restless with the notion of local conspiracies – intrigue, and violence – I try to imagine what legacy such events have left in the local perception of authority, what hidden scars has the violence produced. Will I have time, I wonder, to ever understand the evanescence of time and circumstance? I am still at a loss to note the original inhabitants of this country, the Kootenai, as eerily conspicuous by their absence as I am self-conscious of my own presence. Now, I realize, there are other ghosts.

Earlier today, I perused one of the local papers, learning that the human population has now reached six billion. Another column, by a local astrologer, delineates a larger schema of development, called a Saros Cycle, which may, apparently, be attended by heightened solar storm activity. The author suggests implications to satellites and telecommunications for the six billion of us on Earth.

Some have suggested that Nelson is a place with a "New Age" ethos, and certainly a superficial observation would confirm that there is a different value orientation operating in this locale. For instance, I have noticed the abundance of vegetable gardens (about 60% of the residences have vegetable gardens). I contrast this observation with Victoria, where the emphasis is not on growing vegetables, but in high-maintenance, decorative lawns and flower gardens.

A quick scan of the local Yellow Pages also reveals a plethora of lifestyle options including Akido, Karate, Tae-Kwan-Do, Judo, and Tai C'hi classes. There are a number of herbalists, naturopaths, homeopaths, and massage therapists. There are classes available in pottery, painting, sketching, and all manner of crafts. In Nelson, one can receive a sacro-

cranial massage and a wheatgrass enema in the morning; have a Vedic astrological reading in the afternoon; and grab a quick, organic meal in time for a session of Hatha Yoga in the evening.

I consider the term "New Age."

The New Age, is, of course, the Age of Aquarius, the astrological phase that is eclipsing the Age of Pieces, the fish, the era of Jesus. I want to dig a little deeper through this cultural ephemera because somehow it relates to Y2K, to the meta-historical substance of the Millennium buzz.

I take my anthropological queries with me to the lake, to a small crescent of sand just outside of town, across the CPR tracks. The locals call it Red Sands, though it's more a puce colour – Puce sands just doesn't have the right resonance.

There are mostly young people here this afternoon, mostly naked, many with long hair, worked into Rastafarian dreadlocks. Some have pierced body parts, and tattoos, all are tanned, and lean like children of the summer. One man plays a digerie-do made from a piece of PVC pipe while a young woman pounds out a beat on a hand drum. The sweet smell of marijuana drifts on the breeze, along with a fragile, less certain scent: compost, sweat, diesel – maybe it's the smell of human history, I muse, or human desire, but it's gone as subtly as it came, diffused into the day.

The self-described "New Generation Hippies" are remote to me, seemingly without ideological orientation, disengaged from the flux of politics and commerce. They incorporate some of the familiar paraphernalia of a past era – the symbols of a counter-cultural movement that some called a revolution. But I don't see the Aquarian idealism that would signify the emergence of a new era of cultural critique in their dread locks, Mendhi motifs, or Che Guevara T-shirts – an ersatz revolutionary movement; the simulacrum of rebellion. Like this summer breeze, their lifestyle seems diffuse, undefined, and variable, inspiring suspicion.

The girl with bare breasts, wrapped below her pierced navel in a batik sarong yells over to a friend.

"It's Arnold Schwazenegger's birthday today! He's 52!" she hollers.

These rebels of the information age absorb the trivia, turn in the sand, beat out rhythms that skip across the lake – meanwhile, back in Hollywood, a 52 year-old actor prepares for the release of his latest movie, aptly titled, "End of Days."

How do individuals decide what information is important? Why have so many people shrugged off Y2K? I've been investigating it for six months and have not been able to conclude that it represents a mere bump in the road, nor that it will mean the "end of days." What I have determined is that there is a profound difference between information and knowledge, that disaster as tragedy and disaster as spectacle overlap, and that in terms of public consumption, the risks associated with hazards like hurricanes and tornadoes are partially subverted by their entertainment value. Movies like "Twister," "Deep Impact," and "Armageddon," reflect popular culture's fascination with hazards, while the films themselves offer cavalier attitudes to the reality of such events, couching human triumph over the elements with an emphasis on technological ingenuity and individual courage.

* * *

This morning I follow the Kootenay River west of Nelson as the highway takes me out of town for my next interview. The valley is full of thunder clouds today, after it rumbled throughout the region much of yesterday afternoon, drenching the forests, and adding some turbulence to the rapids on the river.

I am greeted by a pack of happy dogs as I arrive at Kate's property just outside Nelson. I notice an immaculate vegetable garden with neat borders, rows of bright gladiolas, sunflowers, and calendulas. Near the garden, a straw bale studio in the final stages of completion stirs with the buzz of a finishing carpenter's saw.

A vibrant, clear-eyed 40 year-old woman, Kate is well-educated, runs a successful local business, and is currently completing a teacher training program.

Settled down at Kate's kitchen table, we begin discussing the weeks prior to the symposium. Kate admits that she was much more involved, more active, at least, in the fall and winter of 1998. She was instrumental, for instance, in presenting the issue to council, getting the city managers "in the loop" on Y2K.

As a business woman, Kate also concedes the advantage of her image when it came to getting the message across that Y2K was a community concern.

"Who we were also made a difference," Kate tells me, "and we were saying, 'we don't know what this is going to be, but we have some concerns, we think we need to educate ourselves and our community.' The people that supported us were open to that notion … in that moment they said, 'okay, that makes sense."

Her position in the community, as well as Timothy's, facilitated a willingness by other businesses to donate or subsidize goods and services towards the symposium. The Prestige Resort, for example, provided their conference room, while a local printer cut them a deal on the posters which advertised the event.

I ask Kate about the motives behind putting on the symposium.

"First of all, I'd like to say something about the word 'symposium,' because I think – there's two key words here – one 'symposium,' and the other is 'alliance'… Symposium is an ancient word, and it means 'where knowledge becomes known.' Plato used it."

We talk about the significance of the symposium, why she and others felt it was important to organize such an event. I wonder whether there was more to it than simply presenting Y2K.

As her teen-age sons, and various members of Kate's household, make intermittent sorties into the kitchen, she explains the motives behind holding a public meeting in Nelson about the potential risks posed by Y2K.

"The idea of creating a space so that community conversations could happen – that felt important," Kate says as we talk over coffee. "We had no money, we worked with no budget, and we did it anyway," she adds, with a tone of pride.

I ask her to provide me with some details about the core group that organized the symposium.

There was a handful of people who ended up being what turned out to be the core group - and I would say, we were able to converse at a level that went beyond the ability of the general group … not about content, but we were able to move into more of a Geertzian style of conversation, where the question becomes center stage and one begins to become very interested in listening, deeply, to the other, and reflecting to see if something more can be known. So, very quickly we moved beyond the outer symptoms of Y2K, to begin talking about what's behind, what is this about, what is this about in our culture.

I underline that word *culture*, and make a note to myself to go back to that again. In the meantime, I listen as Kate outlines some of what occurred at the symposium and how it was structured.

> We had keynote speakers Friday night and Saturday night, and then we had workshops focused on specific issues … there were presentations, but there was also open space, so there was discussion. Creative discussions in each one of the workshops – so, what do we do in our community? was one of the questions, what do we want to do?

"After the symposium, did you have a plan of action, and were there any difficulties arising from the discussions in terms of recognizing what needed to be done?" I ask Kate. She considers my question, and I sense her thoughts flowing back in time to those last weeks of 1998, and early 1999.

> We were left with a couple thousand dollars owing after the symposium, and then the grant came through, and cleaned up those debts, and enabled us to do a couple of things: to establish an office, to create a library in the community around Y2K, and then we created a community brochure. So, we thought at the very least we can do this. We can put out the most grounded mid-point information to just get people thinking – something that's sort of banal enough that it won't turn them off, but has something in it so that they might be interested to think. And I don't know what it's achieved, but I can tell you, every time it goes out it's gone, so somebody's taking it.

I ask about the reaction of the city managers. "Apart from participating in the symposium, and establishing a city council Y2K committee, what happened at that level?" To this question, Kate sighs, looks me in the eyes and I see a furrow of frustration cross her brow.

> Timothy and I asked for a committee to be struck that was to work on creating a plan about how we educate the city residents … the city police chief elected himself chair of that committee. Now, we hadn't even said we would have that kind of a structure, we hadn't even been invited into the conversation about if we did have a structure, what it should look like. But he took it on himself to create the structure – he was the chair, he absolutely controlled the meetings – and *nothing* happened. We had three meetings and he said 'I'll call the next meeting if I think we need one, and he hasn't called since.
> What we wanted to do, what we were suggesting is a door-to-door - working with the Block Parent format, which is already established – and doing education, block-by-block. Simple stuff, like 'have you heard?' …. 'Do you know who your neighbours are? Are there any elderly on your street that if

> power went out you would have concern for?' Basic stuff – basic emergency planning that has not happened in this community, and disaster planning. They said 'No.' Number one, they didn't want to scare people, number two, people won't do it … number three, security risk – 'if you've got people getting to know their neighbours, and getting to know who's vulnerable, somebody might take advantage of that, and steal from them.

I write down the word vulnerability in my notes, then skirt back to the other word I had underlined. I know that in the course of my academic training, I have become sensitive to the word *culture*, to what people mean when they refer to it. I listen as Kate explains what she means by culture and how it informs her concerns, how it radiates from Y2K.

> What have we got in our modern culture? We have incredible materialism to the point where it doesn't matter – 'I don't know my neighbour, I don't care about my neighbour, I don't consider that that child playing in front of my house is my responsibility as well, I don't consider that I have a responsibility to the natural world – it's just myself and my little family is only thing that I consider.'

A pattern forms in my notes. Kate raises issues voiced by others, like Sally and Timothy, issues that begin to cohere around a small number of themes: community, social responsibility and activism, environmental consciousness. But the theme that anchors them all, the big theme that draws my attention is the notion of *culture*. The sentiment I have heard thus far adheres around the notion that Y2K is merely a symptom of a larger cultural condition which is at once political, economic, ecological, and social.

Getting back to the term vulnerability, I ask Kate what personal preparedness measures she and her household have adopted. She lists the extra food she has stored – a couple of months worth of grains, beans, plus the root vegetables from the garden. There's a wood stove just off the kitchen, and several cords of wood stacked beside the house. Self-sufficiency, Kate tells me, has long been a personal priority for her.

I pack up my tape recorder and notes, as Kate takes me out to the hydro-electric generator a quarter kilometre behind the house, where a swift-running creek cuts through the property. Her dogs follow us as we walk, rain still dripping from the trees. I soon hear the hum of the generator from a little shed near the creek.

Kate talks about one of her assignments this summer, a project that involves an analysis of "evil." She shares some thoughts about this as we walk back from the creek toward the garden.

"What is evil?" she asks. I do not answer; instead, the damp silence of morning absorbs the question.

The sky above the valley is a tapestry of thunder clouds as I drive back towards Nelson. I stop at the co-op for some groceries, and to say hello to Lisa and Claire. My mind is full, my thoughts, like the sky, clouded.

Stanley's on Baker

Baker street has, arguably, the most numerous and best-preserved historical buildings of any community in British Columbia. It is a tourist attraction, but it is also the main street in Nelson, the hub for commerce, and the address of many local businesses.

Always busy with the flow of traffic and pedestrians, Baker Street still maintains a foot in the past, a consciousness of history that is also a source of pride and revenue. It allows the casual observer to imagine the days when prospectors and railway workers, men in Stetson hats and women in petticoats, traveled through this valley, some permanent residents, others dictated by a restless hunger.

At one corner there is, Stanley's on Baker, a restaurant that serves a hearty, economical breakfast, and even organic coffee to boot, but it's the location that also draws me in, and I have come often enough to have made acquaintance with Nick, an employee, and Nelsonite, versed in the language of Y2K.

Seated beside the large windows that overlook Baker Street, I have a perfect view onto the commercial hub of Nelson. Here I have found a suitable place to write fieldnotes, taking in, almost by osmosis the nuances of the town. I try to write as much as possible – two pages a day at minimum. In the field, I realize that my self-imposed hypergraphia has been worthwhile, and I play with the assertion that there is a parallel between ethnography and everyday observation (Denzin 1997). I have become comfortable in my role of participant-observer, less self-conscious about my presence; being an ethnographer is as much an attitude as it is an activity. Talking to Nick and other members of the community, in addition to my key informants, expands the scope of my research by incorporating some of the feelings and ideas we share – not simply about Y2K and technology, but about the notion of community, self-sufficiency, and democracy.

This morning, I consider the rhetoric that has evolved around concern about Y2K. In essence, that is one of the reasons I've come here – to describe the local culture of concern for Y2K and what informs it. Increasingly, I am becoming conscious of the territory of difference between the concerned and the unconcerned, and what it reveals about my own culture.

Culture, like reality, is in our heads, I remind myself, which is one of the reasons it is so difficult to note its unmanifest formations. I've been thinking about Y2K as a cultural

construct because IT is part of our collective coping apparatus, something we've created, and been proud of creating. IT, like other proud achievements, perhaps predisposes us to an unwillingness to accept that culture is so blind as to literally program instability into our adaptive strategies. Hence, I have found a tenacious quality to opinions about Y2K – both temporally and spatially, for even my own feelings about the threat posed have vacillated throughout my research. I have attempted to pay attention to those feelings, to inquire of myself the reasons why.

Sometimes, the answer has been fatigue – the pure weight of this thing (which is a combination of the research question itself plus the task of producing a thesis, and the fieldwork experience) – I was wrestling with formlessness, sheer uncertainty, ambiguity, and extremes of variation; frankly, at times it wore me out.

There was no way I could keep up with it. At one point, I was forced to unsubscribe to the Y2K listserv where I kept tabs on what the Internet uncovered about the phenomenon. By the time I was conducting my fieldwork, there were over 150,000 Wedsites searchable on Yahoo.com by entering the letters Y2K. I continuously talked to people about Y2K, eliciting opinions, sometimes inappropriately. I am certain that my choice to conduct research on Y2K earned me a particular reputation, which, in retrospect, has been productive; it provided me with insights into some of the ways ambiguity and risk are communicated and negotiated inter-personally. I suppose I became a Y2K preparedness advocate, simply through the way I rationalized my own research; my research had validity in part *because* of the ambiguity of perception and diversity of response within North American culture.

Alfred Kroeber (1948) described culture as modifying over time to absorb new challenges, while Victor Turner argued that active human agency – free will and innovation – were catalysts for cultural modification (1961). I try to implicate Y2K into these assertions, wondering if it will be a catalyst for adaptive human agency, or whether it will be absorbed by the status quo, its relevance subverted. I note my own struggle to absorb the nature of Y2K, which has become the nature of my own culture at this juncture in our history. Innovation. Was that what I was observing here on these summertime days in the Kootenays?

I write down in my notebook a question for future contemplation: Do democratic societies change more quickly in response to an inherent recognition of their fluidity to change? Are there also cultural creatives at work in Belgrade, in Jakarta, or Freetown? I know that there is likely no version of Hollyhock Retreat in China; cultural creativity implies cultural critique and a conscious desire to move in the direction of sustainability, and equality – a movement that would interfere with the agenda of totalitarian regimes. China, perhaps more than any other country, demonstrated the significance of cultural momentum through Mao's tightly-choreographed Cultural Revolution, which directed the trajectory of China's political evolution in the 1960s – the antithesis, perhaps, to the counter-cultural revolution taking place in the United States at the same time.

I make one more note to myself: contact a local politician for an interview about Y2K (eg the Mayor, city councilors, local MLA).

Street Fest

July 23, 1999

I arrive at the Information office early this morning – at 7:30 a.m. – to take advantage of the fresh-roasted coffee at *Oso Negro* and to write some fieldnotes before my next interview, scheduled for eight. I'm also preparing for a radio interview that I've been asked to do – a reversal of roles; this time I'll be the one on the receiving end of the questions.

Despite the hour, there is a palpable buzz around town. It is Street Fest weekend, an annual event which has consistently expanded in scope and ambition. The Y2K Alliance has offered up the information office to Street Fest organizers who have already begun setting up their command centre, while I have taken the opportunity to expand the scope of my participant observation by signing on as a Street Fest volunteer.

I base my decision to volunteer on the grounds that the experience may allow for greater insights into the community and maybe open doors of perception otherwise difficult to approach within the limited time frame of my fieldwork. As Emerson notes, it is important for the fieldworker to "take up positions in the midst of the key sites and scenes of other's lives in order to observe and understand them" (1995: 2).

My first volunteer assignment actually took place last night, when I picked up food donated by local restaurants for a gala evening which marked the beginning of Street Fest '99 held at the old Thompson college over-looking Nelson.

I had no idea what duties lay in store for me, but I was growing ever more comfortable in the climate of uncertainty, a kind of letting go, which, ultimately, is a form of liberation from the grip of expectation.

It's already quite hot, the sky a brilliant, cloudless blue. *Oso Negro* café has been brewing coffee and turning out cappuccinos for a couple of hours already, and now the traffic begins to pick up as Nelsonites begin their day – professionals who work in the offices nearby, carpenters en route to job sites, and residents of the adjacent apartment building – all drawn to a similar ritual which meets its fruition at the rim of a coffee cup.

Oso Negro – Spanish for 'black bear' – roasts its shade grown, organic beans which the proprietor, John, picks up green in Spokane every couple of weeks. I have on several occasions seen John – a tall, athletic man in his 40s – delivering coffee beans around

Nelson by bicycle. His coffee and business ethics have apparently consolidated a reputation that draws people from as far away as Rossland and Fernie. John and his staff are also supportive of their neighbour, the Y2K Alliance information office, providing coffee for the bi-monthly Millennium Cafes.

As a student of cultural anthropology, I recognize the significance of the 'café,' a location where people do more than drink coffee and relax away from the stress of jobs. These are spaces where cultural meanings take shape, or are challenged, confirmed, accepted; café is a space, but is also the activity which occurs within that space.

On more than a few occasions, here and elsewhere, I have caught fragments of conversation that have involved Y2K. I've also observed tension when opinions have diverged – Y2K illuminating the politics of difference that occur within the same cultural milieu – among friends, between families.

Earlier this summer, on my way out to Nelson from Victoria, I remember the older couple at Manning Park lodge where I'd stopped for lunch. Writing in my notebook, I overheard their animated discussion over a newspaper article which highlighted some ancient Apocalyptic prediction by Nostradaemus – something to the effect of the world being destroyed by a ball of fire. It was peripheral to Y2K, but appropriately Millennial in flavour. I don't know how the couple resolved the matter before they rumbled off in their motor home, but their conversation resonated with some of the rhetoric that had been heaped onto the Y2K debate.

From behind me, I hear my name, and turn to find Matthew who has arrived for our interview. I offer to buy him a coffee and we find a quiet spot in the morning sun.

I already know from our previous conversations and e-mails that Matthew is completing a Ph.D. at Gonzaga University in Spokane. I also know that Y2K, for Matthew, has become an important element in his intellectual life, central to his dissertation research on organizational leadership. This intellectual aspect, he confirms, was also shared by other members of the core group.

> We continually saw the issue was a large-scale, social, cultural systemic issue, and that the best way we could address it was by creating a forum and framework within which people could help learn new ways of thinking about it – to work on their mental models – to allow their innate creativity to emerge and not be covered up by this condition. So, that's part of our response to what's

> happening, and positioning ourselves to be ready to help this transition happen. It's not just about Y2K – it's about much broader issues of community, about the quality of relationships and life, and day-to-day what it's like to be in town, so those are the kind of issues that the specific focus on Y2K is embedded in, and in that context, I think there's an opportunity for it to carry on in the future.

Going back to the process of bringing Y2K to the attention of city officials prior to the symposium, Matthew provides some insights into the friction that seems to occur when citizens venture into the territory of management. Specifically, as I listen to Matthew, I recall a passage from the disaster literature that also brings into play the attitudes of officials as barriers to effective risk communication.

Palm notes, for instance, that managers can manipulate the communication of risk "by increasing or dampening public concern for … hazards" (1990: 38-39). A major factor influencing management, or "gatekeeper" roles in risk communication, and, thus preparedness, resides in the concept of public image. Conflict may arise where managers or policy makers wax apprehensive over the consequences of their decisions to communicate risk as detracting "from the perception of their performance as managers" (Palm 1990: 39).

Matthew is admirably empathetic to the situation of managers in the context of Y2K. Though he realizes that the role of such individuals as city councilors, the Mayor, and the board members of the regional district were crucial to the development of an effective emergency preparedness plan, he and the core group also recognized the nature of their position, a position that underscored the ambiguity of Y2K.

> What we realized was that's the frame of reference these people have, that's what they're trained to deal with, and so it went from frustration and exasperation to some kind of compassionate understanding that that is their job, their mandate, and what kind of information are they getting fed from their own hierarchy and system, you know, cause are they just going to believe us coming fresh off the street – where' s our credibility within their frame of reference?

I understand through Matthew's remarks how credibility and ambiguity are opposing forces in the professional milieu. Along the same line of conversation, Matthew relates to me a meeting that he and other members of the core group had with their local member of Parliament in the autumn of 1998.

> He was willing to listen to us … so it was nice that he admitted his ignorance, and he was willing to do certain things, but he said up front that this is the

> problem: 'if I come out with a public statement and say something and nothing happens, I look bad, and if I don't say anything – it's a Catch 22,' and he owned up that the game of politics is a game of image.

In a kind of foreshadowing to my own imminent radio interview, Matthew talks about the media and their role, as he perceived it, in communicating to the public the potential risks that might be associated with a technological crisis like Y2K.

> In January the public media started doing bits of stuff, for one example CBC evening news did one of their cover stories on Y2K the first week in January, and it typified a lot of the media coverage that we saw … And what it did was - they had Leonard Trisko [BC government Y2K chief] and they had some woman from UBC who was a computer type person, and they did man-on-the-street interviews, "what are you concerned about?" you know, and there were things like, "will my VCR work?" They took a long interview with Leonard Trisko, for instance, and cut it down to this little sound-bite that answers this question from some guy on the street, who has a superficial understanding, because unless you have time to research it, what else are you going to know? They then ran right after it, an interview with a professor from U of A in sociology or religion, who talked about fanaticism, millennialism, you know, cults, and how religious movements were trying to take advantage of this, and so it really discredited it. What happened was we started seeing a real wave of media who inherently need to deal with things in sound-bites, and Y2K is inherently irreducible into those kinds of black and white, sound-bite things … there was almost no media attention paid to the middle-of-the road people just trying to do common sense preparedness.

Writing in regard to two recent, massive oil spills in Europe, Button (1999) has argued strongly about the process of media framing in words that mirror what Matthew observed with Y2K back in January 1999. Button states (1999: 114):

> The news media play an important role in informing the public, policy makers, politicians, and emergency management officials about any disasters, but especially about technological disasters, which do not seem to arise from nature, but rather from human error or carelessness, particularly perplex people and leave them to struggle for explanation or meaning … Controlling information, whether in the media or in public discourse, is an attempt to control the social production of meaning. It is also an attempt to define reality in accord with a favored political agenda and, therefore, must be seen as a distinctly ideological process.

I am also reminded of what Neal, another Y2K Alliance member, noted about the local media's response to Nelson's November 1998 Y2K symposium:

"Shaw cable came, but they left before the conference started. And the *Daily*, they sent their sports reporter," he had said.

The "man-on-the-street" style of reporting is a way of creating a frame, or context, for the narrative in which the information is conveyed to the public. Though it may seem neutral or even natural to do so, Button argues that "an over-reliance on anecdotal, individualistic accounts serves to decontextualize the larger sociopolitical conditions" (1999: 115). Matthew continued:

> The whole thing about Y2K if there's any kind of fact, is that public leadership and expertise are not going to be available, it's not going to help us, we have to learn to have some resilience within ourselves to cope with the issues. Yeah, it was really clear that as the media did that – like we couldn't have done a symposium after January and gotten the same response, the reason we got such a response in November was because there was a lack of public awareness, but there's this bubbling – people hear about it and are talking, so people didn't know and wanted to know … After the media started covering it, the bulk of the people didn't have this need to know in the same way, the uncertainty was reduced down to this little sound-bite thing where they could go, 'oh, the army and Operation Abacus, they're taking care of it, or Industry Canada's taking care of it cause we got this blurb and all we have to do is make sure our VCR's going to work.'

Matthew seemed to understand what was occurring, and what had occurred in the mainstream media. Timothy had also articulated it rather succinctly when he said, "so much of it became the politics of getting people's attention."

I ask Matthew if he had seen the most recent issue of the *Nelson Express* newspaper, with an article under the heading "Y2K Alliance Gaining Respect." He smiles, nodding his head. The article provides a good example of just the sort of framing that we've been talking about. The editorial cites a recent power outage and a federal government study on contingency planning as factors legitimizing the Y2K Alliance's "low key, better safe than sorry approach to potential Year 2000 problems."

Matthew has another appointment, and so we wrap up the interview, but before he leaves, Matthew gives me a list of authors and publications that might be of use to my research – a considerate academic gesture which I gratefully acknowledge.

"See you at the next Millennium Café," he says as he departs.

In light of my interview with Matthew, I am left to wonder if the processes of media framing of Y2K, and the role of such techniques as the anecdotal, man-on-the-street narratives will subvert the sociocultural significance of Y2K.

As Button also notes, such processes illustrate the "underlying cultural logic of disaster narratives [which] … reinforce the hegemonic forces of society" (1999: 129).

Thinking back to the newspaper interview I gave prior to leaving for the field (Blackstone 1999), I realize that there is enough of a record in existence to provide future anthropologists with a sense of what is now going on. But that, I muse, suggests an archaeology of Y2K, rather than an ethnography.

* * *

I have a little time before my radio interview, so I stop by Stanley's on Baker for a bite of breakfast. Street Fest volunteers are placing barricades across Baker Street, which will be closed to traffic from this corner, three blocks up to Hall Street. In that space, performers – a trampoline troupe, clowns, jugglers, and other entertainers – will dazzle and delight the City of Nelson for the next three days.

In an attempt to prepare for my interview with Kootenay Co-op Radio, I think about what questions I might be asked: Why I am here? What is my perspective, as an anthropologist, on Y2K? What is Y2K?

Writing these things down reminds me of my own thesis proposal, when I had to think about what it was I wanted to get out of my research.

Originally, when I first started graduate school, Y2K was not a feature of the landscape. In fact, I was planning to write a thesis on the production of pharmaceutical knowledge – how indigenous knowledge from the Amazon, for example, becomes an ingredient in an over-the-counter remedy sold at Pharma-Save or London Drugs.

Things change, and here I am, about to be interviewed by a local radio station, eager to elicit my take on a different kind of indigenous knowledge, one that I am yet to fully appreciate.

After breakfast, I run some errands, then stop by the Alliance office to confirm my Street Fest volunteer shift for later this afternoon, and receive my official Street Fest '99

T-shirt. I find out that I'll be helping the performers set up their equipment along Baker Street for the majority of my three-hour shift. I check my watch. Time to walk over to the corner of Josephine and Baker where Kootenay Co-op Radio has set up their remote booth. Over the din of festival activities, the sound of bluegrass music drifts upward into a cloudless sky above Nelson.

* * *

I take a seat beside Jocelyn, the young woman who is hosting the live broadcast. Terry, the technician, adjusts the fuzzy black microphone to the level of my mouth as the bluegrass set twangs to a close, and Jocelyn picks up with an enthusiastic, "welcome back! this is Kootenay Co-op radio, we're coming to you live from Street Fest '99, from our booth at the corner of Josephine and Baker." I swallow the tightness in my throat, focusing on the red light that indicates "on the air," as Jocelyn wraps up her Co-op radio donation spiel, and turns her brown eyes toward me.

"We're now talking with Ken Howes," she begins, as I fidget imperceptibly in my seat.

"Ken is an anthropologist who is in Nelson doing some research for his Master's thesis at the University of Victoria. He's studying the Y2K phenomenon in Nelson, which is kind of a unique thing from the sounds of it," Jocelyn continues.

"Tell us a little bit about why you're studying Y2K, and why Nelson, and just what exactly is Y2K."

Gulp.

* * *

After the radio interview, Terry, the technician, handed me a cassette tape containing all that had transpired during those ten minutes of question and answer. No one had come over and thrown anything at me, nor scolded me for being a fear-monger, or Millennial fanatic, which I took as a good sign.

I tucked the evidence away in my bag, and prepared for the rest of the day. By this time, the streets were flooding with people dressed in shorts and sandals, sun-tanned, content – in all respects removed from any sense of impending doom. It was Street Fest. It was summer; living was easy.

My first volunteer assignment took me to the historic Hume Hotel, across from the Court House. I was to help one of the acts – Justin Case was his name – bring his equipment up to Baker Street.

Justin introduced himself to me. Noting his accent, I asked where he was from, and he answered that he lived in Melbourne when he wasn't on the road. Justin's equipment consisted of a mountain bike, a single-speed bike, and two large crates which we muscled up Ward Street to his performance circle on Baker.

As we waited for the previous act to finish, Justin asked me if I could improvise as a by-stander during his performance, which I knew by now involved bicycles. I said sure. My task was to pretend that the $1,500 mountain bike we had wheeled up with us was mine, and to hesitantly allow Justin to "borrow" it for his act.

I stood casually by as Justin set up his show, plugging a portable CD player into the sound system, and putting on his costume. Finally, it was show time.

When the moment arrives for my thespian improv, I begrudgingly let go of the handle bars and let Justin take the bike. To the thrill of the crowd that has encircled him, Justin hops up on the back wheel, balancing, then bouncing around the perimeter to within inches of spectators' bare toes. After several amazing feats, Justin returns the bike to me, and I continue to watch from the crowd.

For the finale of his show, Justin Case takes a small suitcase, about the size of a kid's lunchbox, from a larger trunk. Choreographed to Wagner's *Charge of the Light Brigade*, Justin reveals a bicycle – if you can call that – no more than 30 centimetres long. To everyone's amazement, he not only rides it, but performs surreal feats like headstands whilst circling the incredulous crowd.

After the show, I help Justin Case pack up his equipment. As we move through the throngs of kids and parents, Justin and I talk. I tell him that I'm from Victoria, that I'm doing fieldwork in Nelson. That I'm studying Y2K.

"What do think of it, mate?" he asks me.

In that moment all ephemera of anthropology melts away from me, and I realize I am but a citizen – thrust under the grueling weight of the very question I have resolved to understand – by this man, another citizen, with an Australian accent, who performs headstands on the smallest bicycle I've ever seen.

* * *

Towards the late afternoon, I bump into my friend Lisa's room-mate, a young man named Jeff who is on his way to work. He's a waiter at a local restaurant called the All Seasons Café, and he invites me to drop by later tonight before he gets off work, and join him for a drink.

Ethnography is an exercise in serendipity, I have come to realize, and the chance encounter or unexpected introduction often leads to insights that give an ethnography added depth and dimension.

Jeff had mentioned to me that he had recently served film director Atom Egoyan and his wife who had been visiting the area; a few weeks prior, a well-known hockey player had also dined at the All Seasons; and last winter, during the filming of *Snow Falling on Cedars*, several actors, including the star, Ethan Hawke, frequented the restaurant.

Arriving later in the evening, past the rush of dinner patrons, I pull up a stool at the little bar, as the breeze blows in softly from the open patio along with the sound of laughter and conversation from the few tables still lingering over aperitifs and espresso. I catch Jeff's eye and he offers to buy me a glass of wine, which I graciously accept, while he shuffles back and forth with tortes and cheese cakes.

As I sit at the bar with my glass of cabernet sauvignon, another man, in his 40s, sits down next to me and orders a latté and a bowl of sorbet. Inevitably, we begin to talk.

Brooke, I learn, is the organizing genius behind Street Fest. He and his wife also run the local hostel, the Dancing Bear Inn, at the foot of Baker Street. It is through my conversation with Brooke that I gain some insight into the demography and allure of Nelson.

Originally from Palo Alto, California, Brooke and his family moved to Nelson after visiting a friend who had re-located to the Kootenays. Leaving California, and a software

company which he had co-founded, Brooke described his decision to move to Nelson as being motivated by "quality of life" reasons.

"There's a quality of life that exists here, that you don't find in very many places," he says. "There are more artists and craftspeople in the Kootenays than anywhere else in Canada," he adds.

It is clear why Brooke left the stress of Southern California with its grid-locked traffic and air pollution, but I was also struck with what I recognize as his desire to give something to the community. That was Street Fest, a time to just have fun, close down a few blocks of Baker Street and be a community enjoying the quality of life that exists here. It also brought money into the town, and Nelson's economic profile is not lost on Brooke.

"At one point," he tells me, "during the mid-1980s, half the population was unemployed. The Socred government closed down Thompson college, the local sawmill had closed, people were hurting, and people weren't attracted to this area for economic reasons."

I enjoyed my conversation with Brooke, and the general ambiance of the All Seasons Café, so I return again the following week. Again, I sit at the bar. Again I enter into a conversation with another man, in his late 30s, with a south-England accent. His name is Oliver, another recent immigrant to the area.

Formerly an account executive for Goldman Sachs, the New York-based financial services giant, Oliver oversaw investment portfolios in Africa and the Middle East.

"One day," he says to me, "I traded it all in for a backpack and headed to India."

What I gather from the comments made by Brooke and Oliver, as well as others, is a sentiment best articulated as "voluntary simplicity." It is a particular 1990s notion that dove-tails with a broader *New Age* interest in re-kindling lost or forgotten relationships with nature, our emotional lives, and with creativity.

Once at the pinnacle of their respective careers in software and finance, Brooke and Oliver had what most strive for – money, status, and all their attendant trappings. These were, for them, means to an end, and not ends in themselves; what they really wanted, what really mattered, they found in the Kootenays.

I discovered in this attitude – that the accumulation of capital is subordinate to the appropriate allocation of capital. In the case of Brooke and his wife, community was something that they sought active participation in as organizers of the Street Fest.

Street Fest itself was indicative of what I perceived as the spirit of Nelson, a spirit that emphasized cooperation and enthusiastic involvement in the community, as illustrated by the 1,000 individuals who volunteered, ensuring that it was a success; that it would happen again, next year, and every year, if they had anything to do with it.

That being said, there are paradoxes to note here as well, that confront the quality of life values and community commitment that seemed to emanate from what I had heard. I also saw the glinting eyes of the developer in Nelson, signs of a fragile economic base, and political intransigence.

I also take note of the young, transient hippies who move through the area each summer and who – according to one informant, engender a general feeling of mistrust and frustration in their lack of consideration for the permanent residents. There are "no dog" symbols painted on the sidewalks of downtown Nelson, symbols that reflect the town's concern over the four-legged companions of the rootless youths wandering through the Kootenays. I've heard locals talk about how marijuana crops disappear with the finger of blame pointing towards the tanned and long-haired sun-worshippers that occasion the shores of Kootenay Lake.

They are the so-called new generation hippies.

While the 'real' hippies of the 60s and 70s constituted a preponderance of those who still keep alive the social values and activism of that era, along with still-potent criticism of the political economy – the new generation hippies appear almost exclusively about appropriating the symbols of a past radicalism, superimposing them onto a pastiche of lugubrious detachment, bordering on the *fin de siecle*.

I consider these impressions, wondering if it is the result of growing up under the specter of the Cold War, or the profanity of materialism, or a lack of appropriate cultural idols and mentors – I don't know how to interpret the lifestyle and behavior of this group. Is it fair to compare the contemporary hippie to the hippie of thirty years ago? All I can say is that, at 29, I am the youngest participant at most of the Millennium Cafes. Maybe

it is simpler than I want to make it, maybe more complex. I notice it all, try not to take anything for granted. This is fieldwork, I remind myself.

Theseus Ridge

Around all the business of fieldwork - interviews, and phone calls to arrange interviews – I've built a few personal rituals into my daily routine, or so it came to be, that I find myself with a pattern of behavior unique to my fieldwork experience: morning runs by the lake; breakfasts at Stanley's on Baker; coffee at Oso Negro; an afternoon swim on warm days; and a hike along a stretch of gravel trail that was once the track for the old Great Northern Railway on the southern slope of the valley, overlooking Nelson.

I usually come to this ridge on the north slope of the valley in the evening, often around sunset because the vista is impressive. Before the sun fully sets, it lingers for a moment, as though caught in the saw-toothed range of mountain to the west.

Malinowski had his tent and the veil of his mosquito netting to distance himself from the Trobriand Islanders. I have this spot, which I have dubbed Theseus Ridge, after the hero of Greek mythology who mastered the labyrinth laid by the architect of Minos. Y2K is, for me, both my Trobriand Island and my labyrinth, and I recognize, just as Malinowski did, the importance of space for reflection away from the flux, a place to let the data settle and analyze the blueprint of the maze.

In the cool air of the evening, there is room to contemplate, to organize thoughts and to let them disappear or congeal into insight. Mostly, I come up here because it is a beautiful spot, distant from my fieldsite, and yet within sight of it. I see these walks as complementary to the activity of writing, two halves set within a larger practice.

Perhaps I need to feel some intentional separation from what it is I am doing, to turn the inner anthropologist off for a while and just watch the sun go down.

After a few sunsets, however, I realize that the inner anthropologist does not turn off so easily, and that the boundaries between fieldwork and everyday observation are fuzzy.

Tonight, as the clouds turn opalescent and the last of the mating grouse has quieted its call, I find myself considering the notion of anthropology's prided sensitivity to what Hastrup has called "unfamiliar modes of life and reasoning" (1995: 5).

Y2K has me just as puzzled as the next guy. Even as I have been characterized as something of a specialist by way of the small amount of media attention I have received, I find that I am at once examining the unfamiliar modes and experiencing them. I wonder if this is a strength or a hindrance to my research.

I ask myself, whether my position is neutral?

No, I conclude, it is not.

I have an emotional and psychological investment in Y2K, apart from an intellectual one. As a citizen, I have real concerns about the potential impact of a large-scale computer glitch – how it might effect the economy, how the public will react … many lingering questions about how emergency management would handled in the event of a Y2K meltdown. As I walk along this route where the engines of the Great Northern once hauled coal and timber away from these mountains, the concept of reflexivity enters my thoughts.

Reflexivity implies that the privilege of access to knowledge – including knowledge of one's own culture – plays favourites with no one. Sometimes, I remind myself, anthropologists have to re-learn their own languages, or new contexts for old concepts (Hastrup 1995). *This* is Kootenay Time.

In light of these insights, I resolve to demand from myself an almost ruthless self-consciousness, to include all the raw meaning-making that I, too, have been experiencing.

Y2K is unique. Why, I ruminate, should I assume that any inquiry into it would not also involve innovation, if not rigor?

I scrutinize the language of anthropology, and not merely such terms as culture, political-economy, or reflexivity, but the more basic assumptions hidden in the terms past, present, and home.

The mosquitoes are nibbling on my bare arms and legs, in a crepuscular frenzy over the resource I represent. I slap my calf, erstwhile in the throes of what some have called "epistemological angst" (Hastrup 1995), realizing the process of rethinking old terminology holds potential for strengthening the relationship between anthropology and the real world.

As Hastrup has noted (1995: 10), theory has to catch up with the "often distressful fact that the world is chaotic, and not mechanical. The 'angst' must be faced, not evaded by means of disciplinary suicide".

I have a good notion from my graduate seminars and readings what the theoretical legacy of anthropology implies in relation to ethnographic representation, yet the question of how to incorporate chaos into the models is less salient.

How does one go about the investigation of something as amorphous and nebulous, something so given to speculation and imagination as Y2K? At what point does theory accommodate nuance? How do I brook the divide between anthropology as a discipline and the subtleties of every day life? How do I translate experience into words without losing all local meaning and significance in the processes of representation?

I consider the words that lie scattered like clues throughout my notes, words that map onto the landscape before me, with its hectares of woods, its grooves. Words like Vietnam which have come from the voices I have heard here. The Vietnam War 'modified' the social landscape, not only of the Kootenays, but of Canada. It initiated the largest exodus of Americans since the Revolution, when loyalists fled the colonies.

Pierre Berton, in the foreword to Alan Haig-Brown's Hell No, We Won't Go, acknowledges Canada's benefit from the young Americans who refused to fight: "During the Vietnam War we also benefited from actors, poets, educators, writers, social workers, musicians, publishers, and urban planners. Most of all we got people who had social consciences that they refused to betray" (1996: ix-x).

In Nelson, the most tangible example I can find of the legacy of Vietnam is the local MLA, Corky Evans, who is also Minister of Agriculture in the BC government. Evans, whose constituency office is located near Stanley's on Baker, came to Canada in 1969 from Arizona, after he was denied conscientious objector status. In those circumstances, in Tucson back in 1969, the local edifice of support offered little empathy for Corky Evans. His family minister had a quick response to his dilemma, saying, "if you don't want to kill gooks for Christ, you must be a Commie and I hope you go to jail" (Campbell 2000).

Estimates of the numbers who came to Canada range up to 125, 000 in the years between 1964 and 1973. Thousands came to BC, and of those many settled in rural areas like the Kootenays, where they opted for a back-to-the-land life style – people like Bob, who had sought asylum at Berkeley University during the height of the war in Vietnam. Introduced to me as a "Vietnam guy," Bob was apprehensive about talking to me, and I didn't think it was appropriate to press the issue.

Up here, at Theseus Ridge, I refuse to take Vietnam at face value.

What is it about Vietnam? I have come to know that it is a word charged with meaning, attached at some point to flesh, memory, and searing emotions. It was war, and like old railway sleepers and prospector's cabins that evoke images of the past, there are wounds of war scattered amidst this landscape.

In lieu of interviewing every draft resister in the area, I look to narratives collected by others like Haig-Brown, whose book was, in fact, recommended to me by my thesis supervisor, Dr. Peter Stephenson, himself a draft resister, who also suggested that the wounds of the American Civil War have yet to heal, let alone those of the Vietnam era.

I read Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1978) in order to try and understand what it was those young men had sacrificed everything but their lives to avoid.

Vietnam has purchase in this locale, it has meaning for Sally who lost friends because of it, and for others who became Canadians because of it. It is, in a quiet, subterranean way, like the enigma of the Kootenai Indians, and the rough-hewn ambitions of the gold rush, or the passionate resistance of the Son's of Freedom Doukhobors – a ghost troubling the surface of this rustic country.

More than anything, "Vietnam" was a movement, specific in time and place, of ideas, personalities, and skills that hide easily in the fabric of Canada. Those affected do not readily separate from the whole like the Doukhobor women do; but even with the Doukhobor, no visible evidence signifies the pain entailed by a hundred years of oppression.

The everyday momentum of culture absorbs all this, just as European culture absorbed the indigenous, as the British Columbia government attempted to assimilate the Doukhobor, placing their children in the same buildings that once housed Japanese-Canadian families interned during World War Two (Holt 1964; Stupnikof 1992; Tarasoff and Klymasz 1995).

I feel the chill of night in the air, as well as the incessant thirst of the mosquitoes, so I leave Theseus ridge before the pink fuses into a western horizon hungry for colour. These questions – this intellectual cat-of-nine-tails – will sleep with me tonight, and likely many more. The gravel crunches under my feet, and I brush past the swollen seed of fescue as I make my way back home, and I don't want to think about Y2K – for a

moment it leaves me, there is nothing but this moment, coloured by sunset, smelling of sprinkled lawns and barbecue. I can almost hear the bedtime stories being read to sleepy-eyed children, the sound of the last water-skiers slipping out of their neoprene suits, the paddle noise of some honeymooning kayakers. Despite the presence of Y2K's vague, but disconcerting imminence, the Kootenay Valley is at peace; there is no rumble from the distant hills, no sign of pale harbingers, no sense of impending rupture. The dusk drinks the last heat of the day, and the moon appears as it has for a long time, igniting a silver exclamation on the darkened surface of the lake.

A Doukhobor Funeral

Life is progress and everything tends towards perfection, in order that the seeds received should be returned to the source of life in the form of ripe fruit – Doukhobor Principle (Friesen and Verigin 1989:76).

July 28, 1999.

I arrive at the Alliance office before my next interview, with Andrew, which we've scheduled for eight-thirty a.m.. I can really feel the heat today, and I overheard someone on the sidewalk in front of *Oso Negro* say it was going to hit 35 degrees Celsius by this afternoon.

By the time Andrew arrives, I've already decided to conduct our interview on the patio behind the information office where the cedars cast enough shade to keep us cool.

Andrew is dressed in jeans and a button-down shirt, his long gray hair tied back in a neat pony-tail. When I first met Andrew, back in June, he had recently returned from India, where he and another Alliance member, Lindsay, had visited an ashram.

A contemplative, articulate man, Andrew has the easy mannerisms and composure of someone who has seen and experienced the benefits of meditation. We get comfortable out on the patio, and Andrew sets his wrist-watch to let him know when the time runs out on the meter across the street where he has parked his car. Without much delay, I begin the interview.

Andrew is 57, born in Pasadena, California. He holds a Ph.D. in botany, and currently works as an orchardist, though he taught university biology for many years in the States before coming to Canada. He admits to having a varied and eclectic career background.

"I occupy marginal habitats," he laughs, "I'm a weed."

As we move into the "journey" portion of the interview, it becomes evident to me that Andrew's academic background in botany continues to act as a filter for his understanding of Y2K as it first entered his concern in the summer of 1998, when a friend of his e-mailed him an anxious synopsis of the situation.

I thought this bears paying attention to, because it was interesting, and I didn't know why it was interesting in the beginning, except that anytime I would think about it, the problems or the specifics would suddenly branch out into a global issue: computers operate fuel supply what happens if the computers shut down? What does it mean to turn off the fuel supply to an entire culture? And all at once these scenarios began to unroll. It wasn't the specifics so much as it related back to the way I think about ecosystems, the way I think about any dynamic system. When you start to interfere with its inner relationships you

> quickly change the way it behaves, so it was an intriguing mental problem, or intellectual problem in the beginning, certainly.

I try not to interject too much during the journey section of these interviews, except to ask about details like time, so that I can sketch out the sequence of events. Today, I ask for more nuances of detail about the night of the symposium.

"Do you recall the night? Was there snow on the ground, was the sky clear?"

"I don't remember if there was snow or not. I just remember arriving and seeing the parking lot full. I had to park a long way away. It was like people going to a rock concert," Andrew replies.

"It gave me a gut-level thrill," he adds.

> I think that was one of the most enlivening moments … to see how many people were there. And it wasn't the same old faces, it was people from all parts of the town, and that really felt good to see. It was like you would only see that at Street Fest or something.

I ask Andrew to tell me about the evolution of the Alliance and how those involved mediated their individual and collective concerns into a plan of action.

> After the close of the [November] conference, as the Alliance began to reformulate itself from the group that made the conference to the group that was sustaining that, it was really becoming a broader scale alliance. And we'd keep trying to talk about details and two themes would come up, one is sustainability and resilience, and the other was the spiritual underpinnings of this whole thing. And those themes would re-emerge over and over again, and we couldn't seem to get away from them even though we needed to talk about where the next meeting was going to be, or who should we invite, and whose in charge here, or where are we going to get some money.

I engage Andrew for a moment on his thoughts about the origins of the themes sustainability and resilience, and what he perceived to be the spiritual underpinnings of those discussions. I anticipate something local, perhaps recent, in the memory of those involved. But Andrew's response comes from somewhere I'm not expecting; it percolates from a much deeper well of recollection, experience, and movement.

> This may have come, and did certainly come out of the 60's, and certainly what is happening amongst Y2K movements is a reincarnation of that spirit – I'm

> quite sure of that. And I think that if you strip away particular historical contexts, then social activism constantly re-emerges, generation by generation; social activism is informed and re-emerges.

Intrigued, not simply by the notion of a reincarnated social movement, but as someone born on the edge of all that transpired in the turbulence of the 1960s, I ask Andrew about his experiences during that era. Inevitably, our conversation turns to the Vietnam War.

> I was a conscientious objector, and I had a 2S deferment all the way through. 2S was student deferment. So, it was a deferment from doing my alternative service, not going into the armed forces. I think that might have been the first time that I really saw clearly how manipulative our government was in terms of creating its own. You know I was just getting old enough to see that. And as a Quaker growing up in southern California, and being exposed to – at that time as a teenager – to the McCarthy hearings, I understood that there were individuals within the government that were wonky. But it was the Vietnam War that made it clear to me that the whole structure was self-serving.

As we move towards the end of the interview, I pause to ask a question about fear, if fear and anxiety had a place in his search for what Y2K meant. Andrew's response reflects his awareness of those "worst-case scenarios," which are always within reach for anyone who wants to grab onto them, but this is not a place where he wishes to dwell.

> I can spin a scenario and I can get anxious as a result of it. I can think about my mother in a rest home in Pasadena totally dependent on external services, I can think about my sister embedded in the suburban life around Sacramento, again, totally, completely dependent, not even a garden, not even a garden … and I can get quite taken by that, and I lose sight of what's really going on.

Focusing more on what he perceives as the positive side of Y2K, Andrew offers some final comments which speak to the potential dividends of any kind of emergency preparedness. In local terms, this translates back to those notions of sustainability and resilience, words that I have heard before from others, themes which appear to resonante, for one reason or another, among the inhabitants of this location.

> The sustainability/community resilience movement is informed by Y2K. I mean that's a kind of self-sustaining organization through the efforts of

individuals, but it has a kind of organizing principle that will sustain itself beyond – well beyond – Y2K. And I think that, in conjunction with the Alliance, the mainstream emergency preparedness activities will be better integrated, and more obvious to the town – that the activities of bringing emergency preparedness to the foreground of people's thinking will sustain itself. Whether there are emergencies that will fuel this or not, I don't know. If there's a big forest fire, you'll really see it happen. That's the one emergency I see; there's definitely a major fire danger.

That's probably the most important outcome of this for me is the movement from this kind of intellectual puzzle into social contact back out into social activity that maintains that contact … All of us were making our way towards each other through our individual lives, and what we bring to this has been collected along the way, and we just happened. We did come together around that and pieces fit and they seemed to be going on and created a life of its own. I mean, if you're looking at cause and effect in a linear way, was it caused by Y2K? I think the story is that this is the legacy, even before it's happened .

* * *

August 2, 1999.

It is very warm again today, and I contemplate Andrew's comment about the risk of fire. I can see how devastating a forest fire would be, how quickly it could consume the valley, as it has in the past.

Driving west from Nelson the Kootenay river looks deep and cool below the highway. Orange hawkweed is flowering in tight bunches between the taller fescue and orchard grass along the ribbon of land that separates the asphalt from the river.

It's over 30 degrees Celsius already as I roll down my window, realizing the turn-off to the Doukhobor Museum has flashed by in the periphery to my right. I am now on my way to Brilliant, across the river from Castelgar, where Peter Verigin purchased 6,000 acres for the Community Doukhobors who followed him here from Saskatchewan in 1908 (Janzen 1995).

It was here in Brilliant that the Doukhobors built a $400,000 jam factory, farmed and grew fruit, and influenced local history in often dramatic fashion.

After a detour, one wrong turn, and directions from a service station attendant I find myself pulling into a large gravel parking lot outside the Brilliant Cultural Centre. Next to

the parking lot, I notice an old Doukhobor wagon, cast as a monument to earlier days. I recall a comment my Supervisor, Dr. Stephenson, had once made with regard to his experiences as an anthropologist on Hutterite colonies in Canada. He had seen an old buckboard wagon on the outskirts of a Hutterite settlement in Alberta and when he asked about why it was left there, the reply was that it served the purpose of reminding the Hutterites that someday they may have to leave as quickly as they came (Stephenson 1991: 65). I wondered if the same sentiment of diaspora emanated from this Doukhobor wagon.

There is a faint sound of singing from the direction of the large building that houses the cultural centre. I approach, and open one of the doors. I am met by the gaze of several men and women. One of the women, like the other Doukhobor women, wears a floral dress, with a scarf around her head, fastened at the front by a broach. She introduces herself, and invites me in.

"We're having a funeral here today," says Doris, "but you're welcome to come and have a look around if you like."

Doris guides me around the large hall, pointing out and explaining some of the exhibits of Doukhobor culture that adorn the room, and providing me with some literature published recently in honor of the Doukohors' Centennial anniversary of their arrival in Canada from Russia.

Doris takes a phone call, leaving me to wander about. A group of older Doukhobor women sitting at a table nearby have noticed me and I say hello. I am invited to stay for the funeral reception and to have lunch with them. Before I can muster a reply, I find myself seated at a long table with the Doukhobors as the first course is brought out from the kitchen by a group of women.

Everyone stands and sings psalms as the borscht is brought out, and the Lord's Prayer is read in Russian by an older man with a booming voice who bears a resemblance to Boris Yeltsin. The Doukhobors bow their heads, and we sit to eat.

The borscht is not the rich, beet-purple kind I am familiar with; this borscht is a yellow-orange colour and flavoured with fresh dill. It is delicious.

Following the borscht, we rise again, and again there are psalms sung, as the next course is brought out from the kitchen. This dish, called *lupsha*, is made of rice noodles and butter, cooked to a thick consistency. Elizabeth, who sits beside me and who has taken

me under her wing, tells me that these two dishes, borscht and *lupsha* comprise the traditional meal at Doukhobor funerals and weddings.

Elizabeth asks me if I live in the Kootenays. "No," I reply, "I'm doing my thesis research in Nelson. I'm studying the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance."

Elizabeth fixes her crystal-blue eyes on me as I anticipate the queries that usually follow. Instead, she smiles kindly under her white embroidered scarf. Curios, I ask her if the Doukhobor community is preparing, in any particular way, for the potential hazards of Y2K-related computer failures. To this, Elizabeth replies, "we've always been self-sufficient. We have gardens, we put away preserved food. Our lifestyle has always been one of cooperation and simplicity."

Driving back to Nelson, I reflect on my serendipitous experience of being witness to the customs of another culture, the kindness and generosity the Doukhobors had shown me. I think about Elizabeth's poise with respect to Y2K, how it was embedded in the values of her Doukhobor community and its history.

The history of the Doukhobors is also marked by the symbol of fire – the "Burning of Arms," which occurred on June 29, 1895 in the mountains of Georgia. This critical event is locked in the minds of the Doukhobors. It was the event that set in motion a brutal period of oppression and the Doukhobor's subsequent migration from Russia.

The reaction by the Czar to the Doukhobors' renunciation of military service and refusal to pledge allegiance to Russia was swift and ruthless. 2,000 Cossacks came upon the Doukhobors as they chanted psalms, charging on horseback with lead-tipped whips (Stupnikoff 1992). Many were sent to Siberia where they died miserably in the labour camps, while the rest of the Doukhobor community suffered persecution.

"Toil and Peaceful Life" contains the essential ethos of the Doukhobors, whose emphasis on practical existence and communal solidarity under God, elicited a sympathetic response at the time of their greatest need, in Leo Tolstoy.

It was Tolstoy who financed the 1899 voyage of 7,500 Doukhobors to Canada, through the proceeds from his novel, *Resurrection*. English Quakers also contributed their support, but it is Tolstoy, more than any figure, to whom the Doukhobors maintain a profound gratitude (Maloff and Ogloff 1977; Stupnikof 1992). But the struggles of the Doukhobors continued in Canada in the form of prejudice and intolerance from the Federal

government, the government of BC, and Canadian society at large. There were also internal struggles within the Doukhobor community – ideological divisions that were at times paradoxical to the peaceful values of the Doukhobors; there were times of violence. Not far from the Brilliant Cultural Centre, I pass the site of an old jam factory which burnt down on December 12, 1943, presumably set on fire by a zealot off-shoot of the Doukhobors called the Sons of Freedom. In the 1950s and 60s many suspicious fires and explosions rocked the tranquil valley and their echoes still reverberate in feelings of misunderstanding and apprehension between Doukhobors and the rest of the community. But I have only seen generosity today, heard only the harmonious psalms sung by Doukhobor women.

Apocalypse *ex Cultura*

What occurred to everyone was how Y2K was really a reflection on how we, we as humankind, have set up our society, how we have made ourselves very dependent on distant food production, and leadership decisions made from afar, and how distant we were from what was going on in our immediate community … Most of us don't even know our neighbours anymore. (Tina)

What we have been looking for in the Apocalypse is something older, grander than the ethical business. The old, flaming love of life and the strange shudder of the presence of the invisible dead made the rhythm of really ancient religion. (D. H. Lawrence 1980)

Kali Yuga – "Our own corrupt and degenerate times" (Sanskrit, circa 300 B.C.).

Another run this morning before the sun gets too high, the same route – down Fifth to the old Norris house at Elwyn, then left to Nelson Avenue and across to Lakeside Park, where the crushed gravel trail winds along the shore toward the Safeway parking lot.

Occasionally, I have troubled a duck or two hidden in the reed grass – goldeneyes and buffleheads – as I jog beside the lake. This morning a group of youths are learning life-saving skills, water rescue and artificial respiration. One determined-looking teen moves slowly toward the shore with a 'victim' in tow, weighed down in wet jeans for greater authenticity. In the distance, an osprey circles, landing in a nest atop the orange girders of the 630 metre-long bridge that spans Kootenay Lake.

On the run back home, I pass the Church of the Redeemer and the Four Squares Gospel, as on past mornings, but today I think about some thoughts that have been troubling me in my efforts to situate Y2K within the larger cultural milieu. I consider the idea of talking to a priest about it. Not to confess, but to gain some insight and exegesis into one particular Biblical vision, one that, more than any other, continues to surface in the context of Y2K.

Each time I pass the churches on Fifth Street, my curiosity grows, but I can't decide how to approach the question, nor how I would fit such an interview into my research.

My curiosity revolves around what I have been categorizing as the Paradigm of the Apocalypse, the tenacious hold of the Revelation of St. John the Divine within the popular discourse of Y2K specifically, and Millennialism in general.

The Apocalypse has been described as a vision of divine punishment, or of rapture, depending on the interpreter, part of a larger rhetoric that emerges in times of conflict, engendering a kind of collective paranoia which has manifest itself in crusades, sacred wars, pogroms, witch-hunts and other attempts to achieve, by annihilating massed forces of evil, a final solution (Rissi 1972; Bloom 1987).

While on route to survey the damage wrought by Vesuvius, Emperor Titus was notified of a great fire in Rome which ultimately burned half the city and triggered a subsequent plague that killed thousands more. In what may be one of the earliest allusions to the connection between disaster and the Apocalypse, a Jewish prophet translated the

eruption of Vesuvius as God's punishment for Rome's assault on Jerusalem in the year 70 AD (Conte Corti 1951:85).

In terms of describing the significance of Apocalypse to Y2K – that is to say, as a macro force – I feel I should handle Revelation with kid gloves. As one scholar writes, "no other work in the New Testament benefits so enormously from translation" (Bloom 1988:1).

I am also reminded of the secular nature of modern interpretations of Apocalypse – Wacko, Texas; Heaven's Gate; and the Solar Temple Cult, to name a few.

Whatever it is, Apocalypse is a tension in the imagination of the West, a deeply-rooted theological model. And, apprehensions aside, I realize that it is one of the holistic elements in the anthropology of Y2K.

The tension which Apocalypse seeks to resolve is the deeply unconscious imperative for the regeneration of the human condition, the movement toward perfection, which offers ultimate redemption for the sins of history. The Millennium is, by all accounts, an arbitrary temporal notion, and yet, a very real one because it is invested with so much psychic, spiritual, and social possibility; the Paradigm of Apocalypse is engendered by the Millennium as both an end date *and* a new beginning.

Back home, I dig out my copy of *Time* magazine from January 1999, which I've brought with me. The cover features a Jesus-like figure wearing a sandwich board that reads: "The End of the World!?!" I've kept it handy because it graphically illustrates the tenor of theological and secular interpretations of Y2K; a leitmotif of Apocalypse.

"Apocalypse," I whisper to myself, as though the word itself contained a clue to its purchase in the western psyche, mindful of Wolf's remark that power is the champion of meaning (1990). Reading the fine print in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, I gain a sense of appreciation for the way power shapes the social field of meaning.

Apocalypse is derived from the Greek *apokalupsis* – to uncover, to reveal.

No mushroom clouds, no fire; this meaning, incongruous with the imagery it produces, is a starting point.

Almost every culture has its symbol, its manifestation of destructive forces in its cosmology. I am reminded of something Andrew said a few days earlier:

Well, it seems to me that there is a quality of destruction that needs to happen, that wants to happen. I can couch that in terms of the forces of destruction preceding any new emergency, that this is the side, the destructive side of the flow of reality, that there is a quality that is a tearing down quality. Of course, it's been personified by Kali, and many of the spiritual traditions all have personifications of this force in the world – the destructive force … There is a necessity for destruction seemingly afoot right now, and it starts around the issue of Y2K and then it penetrates, for me, outwards into what I would judge as the immorality of North American culture, the immorality of the way we use resources, the way we use the environment, the way we use human relationships in order to sustain our way of life.

I have a reprieve from interviewing today, which is fortunate because it's very hot, and I find myself drawn to the lake, to Red Sands.

After a cooling swim, I pull out a copy of E. O. Wilson's latest book, *Consilience*, an ambitious attempt to bridge the divide between culture and biology into a unity of knowledge. Nice light reading for the summer.

Around me, there is an air of hedonism: naked bodies stretched supine in the sun as cottonwood fluff drifts in the warm air. There are children and dogs, some of the "Neo-Gen hippies" pull out guitars and bongs, while others play devil sticks, or tighten the skins on their jimbe drums.

Almost lulled by the tranquility of the setting, the warm sand, the gentle lap of boat wake on the shore, I snap to attention on a line from Wilson: "Culture can indeed run wild … and even destroy the individuals that fostered it" (1998:171).

I take out my highlighter as a young man rushes into the lake, disappearing under the surface. When he re-emerges in the light of day, glistening, he shouts into the vacuum of valley, "I love you *Kali*!"

What is this quality of destruction? What informs it, and how does it relate to Y2K?

During the 1990s, two authors in particular wrote articles that attracted both interest and criticism, Thomas Homer-Dixon, from the University of Toronto, and Robert D. Kaplan, a political journalist writing for the *Atlantic Monthly*. What these authors drew attention to were the linkages between the logic of capitalism with its attendant rapacious consumption and exploitation of natural resources and the social vulnerability of poorer nations, many of them struggling democracies (1993; 1994; 1996).

Kaplan, in his landmark essay "The Coming Anarchy," focused on areas such as West Africa, where environmental degradation, disease, violent conflict, and the social disintegration they produced were cited as causal trends, trends Kaplan argued would engulf the world within decades (1994; 1996).

In a clear example of high-level inability to understand local dynamics, former Bush administration member, Andrew Natsios, writing in his aptly titled book, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Humanitarian Relief in Complex Emergencies*, is quick to criticize what he calls the "Kaplan Doctrine," describing Sierra Leone as turning the corner on conflict.

"Kaplan's choice of Sierra Leone," writes Natsios, "as a precursor of the future could not have been more misplaced: since his [*Atlantic Monthly*] article appeared, that country has held two democratic elections free of any serious election fraud, ended a destructive civil war, resettled its population displaced by the war, and commenced the road to recovery" (1997:6).

By all accounts, Kaplan was accurate, while Natsios could not have been more wrong; the same year he published his book, the elected government of President Ahmed Kabbah was overthrown by a rebel coup (*Economist*, May 13-19, 2000). Since then, anarchy has been the only consistent factor in Sierra Leone, a country with an average life expectancy of 25 years. In fact, it is barely a country, but more a lawless frontier of rebels and mutilated civilians, where UN troops, themselves at risk of capture, provide little more than a token of hope.

Natsios is, however, more astute in his statement that violence during complex emergencies reveals "a high incidence of atrocities and sociopathic acts against civilians" (1997:10), a fact reflective in the tactics of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, as described in *The Economist* as "barbaric, murdering supposed enemies and cutting off hands and feet at random" (May 13-19, 2000).

A similarity shared by all societies experiencing what Natsios terms "complex emergencies" is stress. As with other 'disaster' situations, there occurs an unraveling of the "fragile social and political fabric" (1997:14). Natsios, together with those other critics of the Kaplan Doctrine, does not seem to connect the dots which link human

tragedy to proximate causes – such as resource scarcity, or social inequality in access to resources – to the every day stress they produce.

The Paradigm of Apocalypse is thus, at least partly, influenced by an awareness of both the ubiquity of global violent conflict and its connection to environmental degradation and of the political economic and social dimensions of resource scarcity.

Water, often mentioned in the context of Y2K preparedness, illustrates a good example of an often taken-for-granted necessity. A 1995 World Bank report indicated that 40% of the human population lacks access to potable water (cited in Kingwell 1996: 89).

While it is perhaps easy to label Africa the cradle of Apocalypse, there are more local manifestations that foreshadow Kaplan's coming anarchy. Rusting ships, hardly fit for scrap metal, have been arriving almost weekly off the west coast of Vancouver Island with their cargo holds crammed with Chinese refugees. Meanwhile, British Columbia's political infrastructure groans under the unexpected weight of a new wave of diaspora that has found its way to our shores.

The end of the old millennium and the beginning of the new – Y2K – are insignificant compared to the awareness and concerns it engenders. There is a cultural momentum inspired by the energy of Millennium, a light that illuminates what we feign to deny: the reality of our culture and the cultural construction of reality. Why, I find myself asking, do we need the arbitrary notion of an End-time in order to appreciate what's going on in the present tense?

There is one word, more than any other which I have written down and underlined, that emerges from my interviews with the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance: *Culture.* That is the mosaic which appears from the fragments I have collected, a recognition of the ability of culture to lead human society astray from its relationship to the environment, to sustainability, democracy, and even obfuscate rationality to the point of no return. It is a mosaic that reflects the burden of responsibility that resides at the level of culture.

Culture, whatever else it is, it is an edifice for coping, a grand, mutable arrangement of beliefs, techniques, norms, values, and collective assumptions about the nature of reality. Culture itself is a tool for appropriating the world, a tool we keep in our heads.

Prior to 1952, there were at least 164 definitions of culture, before Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn cooked them down to one. They said, culture is a product, historically and selectively learned, and based on symbols (1952: 643-4, 656. Cited in Wilson 1998).

Is the Paradigm of Apocalypse – like Y2K – a metaphor for the collective fear we possess about the essential fragility of our condition, our collective memory of everything that has let us down, including each other?

Fragments of explanation emerge from my interviews, as the dialogue itself slows the kaleidoscope to a point of coherency:

> I was also very much reminded of the [1997] ice storm, and the floods during the past couple of years, and the famines in other countries, and rioting, and wars – it's sort of like all of this plays into the Y2K scenario (Jane).

For others, it was a sense of recognition about the ways Y2K revealed the pathology of emergent threats. Sally noted that at some of the initial meetings, "the tears were flowing, and some people said, 'I don't think I'm going to make it,' it was just as though somebody had said, 'wake up! the Nazis are coming!'"

What is it that we fear in such instances? Is it the uncertainty the event, or is it the fear of the chaos precipitated by an incoherent social response? Is it something built out of an intrinsic mistrust of others, those competitors in the social environment, and the increased alienation wrought by the modern lifestyle? Or is it something more basic, like a recognition of the human capacity for destruction?

> I mean there's so many scenarios – but I also noticed that there are people who enjoy the fear, and people like to be brave in the fear … that's the trick, I mean, what really exists and what doesn't, and what do we want to exist (Lindsay).

> I had wanted to be a doctor ever since I was a little girl. It was my dream. I was six months away from finishing medical school when the Nazis came (Paulina).

At Red Sands, the sound "*Kali*" no longer echoes over the placid, shimmering lake, but she is in my mind, nonetheless.

* * *

When Andrew made reference to the social consciousness of the 1960s, he also made a passing comment about the differences between the Woodstock Arts and Music Festival of 1969, and this summer's 30th Anniversary reincarnation held recently at a decommissioned Air Force base in Rome, New York.

It was, I realize now, an appropriate comparison, in light of what Andrew had described as a 'tearing down quality' of destruction, 'seemingly afoot' in the pre-Millennium cultural matrix – the image of Kali, the rhetoric of the Apocalypse.

I had only heard bits and pieces of details about the mood and behavior of the 225,000 North American youths that had attended this summer's Woodstock. I gathered, however, that it turned out less the love-in that the promoters-come-culture-recyclers had envisioned.

David Samuels, writing in *Harper's*, portrayed a scene cut heavily by the lugubrious undercurrents that seem to typify much of the younger generation:

> sullen, bare-chested guys push through the crowd with the elastic waistbands of their boxers pulled up hip-hop-gangsta-style above baggy shorts from Polo and Tommy Hilfiger … bare-midriffed girls counter the dirty girl allure of their tight shorts and white, pink, and blue baby-doll T-shirts by hunching their shoulders and staring blankly at the melting asphalt in ninety-degree heat. (1999: 70)

While the original event might arguably be characterized as a counter-cultural event, the weekend long festival in Rome, New York, this summer was (of course) a marketing event, complete with the Woodstock '99 Platinum Mastercard; Woodstock.com; Woodstock™.

It seems, to me at least, that the anathema of '60s counter-culture values is exactly what many ex-hippie entrepreneurs have built their fortunes on – peddling materialism to a new generation whose only exposure to turmoil has been edited by CNN, or packaged as entertainment á la Rambo by Hollywood.

There were incidents at the original Woodstock, to be fair. One involved a spontaneous protest over a hot dog vendor who had been over-charging. 30 years later, a quarter million kids have shelled out $150 U.S. to camp on a decommissioned airforce base amidst faulty portable toilets, forced to slake their thirst on $4 bottles of Evian water.

Radio and newspaper reports characterized the denouement of Woodstock '99 as a riot. Cars were flipped, and huge fires, fed by the ruined debris of camera towers and psychedelic murals, burned bright into the summer night, as rock stars clutched their cell phones and fled the mayhem in their air-bag equipped European sedans.

Up at Theseus Ridge, I muse about the irony and profanity of it all – of Rome yet ablaze.

I think of one writer who commented that our civilization's greatest threat is our inability to accept error (Zeigler et al. 1983). I wonder now if it is not also our unwillingness to locate the source of that error. Now that I have completed all my interviews, scoured the landscape of the past and the present, and touched and tasted all that I can within this space of summer, I reflect on what I learned.

I have come to Nelson to collect some meaning from the voices of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance, about what it entails to prepare a community for emergency, and how that process plays out against the larger backdrop of our sociocultural milieu. I came here to find out, why Nelson? What are those hidden elements that inform local constructions of reality, and thus, local responses to emergent risks.

One Y2K Alliance member cited the Quebec ice storm as informing her response to Y2K, noting that during that crisis, it was the people who were prepared who were able to help others. Another member of the Alliance recalled the death of a child and the journey of emotional recovery as preparing her for the uncertainty of Y2K.

Sally refuses to separate Y2K from the everyday risks of nuclear technology and environmental degradation, while Andrew couched the issue ecologically, and characterized Nelson's response as partly influenced by the social consciousness of the 1960's re-emerging.

"I think Nelson is a place where there is an unusually high rate of awareness, and an unusually high rate of willingness to become involved on a community level," said Tina as we talked in the Y2K information office one afternoon. Tom, another Y2K Alliance member said, "There's more free thinkers in this area than I've seen elsewhere, and the people that I see involved in this tend to be independent thinkers."

Their voices coalesce and what I hear moves me to the core of my being. Everything, these past weeks has been charged with a distinctive quality. It has forced me to

challenge most of the embedded assumptions I used to have about the accountability of culture, our primary adaptive strategy.

Realizing I have ventured into the question of adaptive fitness, hegemony, and the concatenations to Apocalypse, I breathe, feel the tension of it all slip away, for now, into the softness of night.

I'm losing the light as the first stars pulse in the indigo sky. This is my last night in the Kootenays, and I try to memorize the view, knowing I will be nostalgic for it, just as I know that I will take with me the products of the questions I have asked here.

Reluctantly, I leave this privilege of distance, and descend towards the electric glow of civilization – a little city, founded by gold rush at the edge of a placid basin in the hills. In the morning, I will pack up my fieldnotes, say good-bye to Claire, and then drive off into the Millennial horizon – a quester with a cargo of clues and impressions.

* * *

Conclusions: Patterns of Vulnerability

> In my mind I'm preparing resiliency in my emotions, I'm preparing to offer support to other people … I'm preparing to just live the experience and go through the experience which may be very severe, and it may be nothing. And if it's noting, then the food banks will have bonus food. (Tina)

> I believe that the groundwork has been done to benefit the whole regional community well into the future. (Alex)

> I think the effect of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance in the long-term will be that no matter what happens, as an outcome, Nelson – as a community – will have a greater degree of awareness and preparedness. (Matthew)

Technology has always been a key component of cultural repertoires for coping with variation in the environment. Beginning with simple tool technologies, developments in resource capture and storage capabilities enabled larger settlements and larger political and economic possibilities evidenced in the archaeological record of the built environments of antiquity: increased specialization, monumental architecture, standing armies, priests, and other elite.

From a Paleolithic foundation, buffering strategies against scarcity expanded to include the more centrally embedded mechanisms such as insurance policies and large-scale engineering projects. Thus extrapolated through history, technology as a cultural response to adaptation, has evolved into what some suggest is technological determinism and a culture that willingly surrenders to technology (Smith and Marx 1994; Postman 1992), arguing that such circumstances breed new forms of risk to human well-being.

In this thesis, I have shown that information technology has become a very significant aspect of the built environment of the developed West, demonstrating by way of Y2K that dependency upon such technology presents a unique consideration of vulnerability.

Like Three Mile Island (Baum 1987; Monmonier 1997) and Chernobyl (Monmonier 1997), Y2K represented a moment of doubt as to whether technology is more hazard than panacea, though a far more diluted and personalized doubt.

For millions of people, technology is simply accepted without contest, and in many cases, without adequate testing, as benign, progressive, good, and necessary – attitudes which are, in my opinion, a by-product of the evolution of technology as an embedded element in the triumph of culture over the risky potential of environment. But as we know, disasters – although triggered by nature – occur in society; an unwillingness to attend to human-produced hazards may pose as profound a risk as living underneath an active volcano.

Some disasters overwhelm the ability of entire civilizations to adapt to their impact. The destruction of the Minoans in 1623 BC, following a massive volcanic eruption on what is now the Greek island of Santorini, provides just one example[8] (Hoffman 1999b). Transformed into legend, the Minoan Civilization lives on in imagination as Atlantis[9], though the real detritus is scattered along the floor of the Mediterranean, or hidden in the fabric of contemporary Greek culture.

In the months leading up to January 1, 2000, the question of whether Y2K would provoke chaos in the world took on increased urgency, and had a profound impact on the behaviors and expectations of millions of people from Nelson to Tokyo. It was, indeed, a phenomenon, and yet, I heard many people ask in retrospect, "what was achieved in all the fuss and bother, apart from some software upgrades?"

I was able to answer this question in the context of what I had observed and heard in Nelson:

> These investments in preparedness are, in fact, investments in capital structure that will improve the business in the long-run, and so, they're not just hedges against loss, they are, in fact, improvements in business practice, and that's the kind of legacy that this will result in, and another one – on a social level – is that if we get to know our neighbours, that's a legacy that will sustain us past the Y2K horizon (Andrew).

> The efforts that we put into the symposium were very worthwhile, because what we wanted to do was to inform the community and galvanize them into doing some work to help themselves. We wanted to create an atmosphere where people would go out and help each other, would take care of the less advantaged in the community (Alex).

Utilizing a political ecological approach, this thesis has sought to understand Y2K in the context of the local, lived experiences of one community that perceived – more strongly

than most other communities – the risk potential of Y2K, and the importance of confronting the uncertainties that surrounded it.

Anxieties exhibited toward Y2K illustrated through the countless Web sites, books, public meetings, and public relations campaigns it inspired, reflect that, like other new technologies, computer systems are capable of producing dysfunctional consequences for society.

In the words of E.O. Wilson, it is possible for culture to run amok, "and even destroy the individuals that foster it" (1998: 171).

This is the essential realization inspired by Y2K – that technology, as an aspect of C*ulture*, in some cases threatens our *biological* capacities to adapt to its consequences, intentional or accidental; it makes us vulnerable in new ways by the risks it entails. But as a corollary, there is a growing acknowledgement by researchers about how the social environment represents both adaptive challenges as well as strengths to reducing vulnerability.

The West Kootenay Y2K Alliance information office closed its doors in late October, 1999 – the group low on funds, but, more importantly, recognizing that they had done all that could be done. The symposium, the workshops, the handbooks, the Millennium Cafes – all the dialogue and soul-searching, all the stockpiled lentils and cordwood, but mostly, the certainty of good neighbours, had weakened the threat of Y2K more than any government assurance or corporate readiness statement.

When I contacted my informants in Nelson early in January, 2000, there was general and unequivocal agreement that all the effort and energy that had gone into the WKY2KA had been profoundly worthwhile. My sense was that their community ethos had been reified, strengthened, and renewed by Y2K – that they entered the new millennium as a stronger community.

I spent New Year's Eve at home, with my family, but my thoughts were with the people in the Kootenays who had already shown me the significance of Y2K even as CNN's foreign correspondents struggled to document international Y2K glitches, and programmers congratulated each other, and while thousands of consumers made plans to return the emergency provisions they had purchased – as a purely cultural moment came and went, sputtering into the night like a roman candle.

Was Y2K just a bunch of hype?

New technological threats are confusing, and public perceptions about their risks are heavily managed, filtered, and framed by a variety of agents.

The short explanation for the ambiguity that characterized Y2K is that it is difficult for many individuals - in North America, at least - to perceive technology as a hazard. Cultural nuances such as the "thirst for certitude" (Palm 1990: 37), over-optimism about the hazards of the environment (Monmonier 1997), combined with structures of hegemony, and their influences on the way information is framed by the media factor into the social construction of reality and risk perception.

As Button writes, "disasters offer the social science researcher a fine opportunity to study the nature of the social construction of reality" (1999: 113).

Consequently, there are describable personality traits, social values, memories, experiences, and political linkages between and within locations that influence perceptions of risk and, thus, patterns of vulnerability. There is one over-arching variable that emerges from this study, which I might crudely term 'awareness,' though a better word may be 'consciousness.'

This thesis has recognized that the effects of uncertainty are not homogeneous across time and space, and that responses are informed by a variety of factors both regional and personal, noting the linkages that exist between localized buffering networks and centralized, high-level buffering systems like the Provincial Emergency Plan[10].

While the potential risks associated with wide-scale computer failure may have mapped more-or-less evenly across North America, vulnerability did not – for reasons related to the presence of localized buffering strategies and community preparedness such as was advocated by the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance.

At another level, this study may provide some insight into how high-level, centralized buffering systems may interfere with regional strategies, as was witnessed, for example, in the famine relief efforts in Ethiopia during the 1980s (Halstead and O'Shea 1989: 126).

Y2K may best be described as an artifact of a sociocultural near-disaster, but perhaps the most significant outcome of Y2K resides in the way our experiences with it will influence future perceptions and adaptations to similarly generated crises.

Some have suggested that Y2K was a 'non-event,' that there never was a threat, or only a minor one. Such failure to recognize – if not acknowledge – vulnerability is apparently also not enhanced by the estimated $300 billion global remediation bill. For this mentality, it is the body count that signifies a meaningful event.

After all, hardly a day goes by that some cataclysm does not pulse through our information infrastructure.

During 1999, natural events like the Oklahoma tornadoes in April, the August earthquakes in Turkey and Taiwan, Hurricane Floyd in September, and the winter storm that struck western Europe in the final days of 1999, all received a great deal of media coverage. But these events took a back seat to a different manifestation of 'hazard,' one deriving from the social environment.

Throughout the last 18 months of the 20th Century, the world has witnessed the horrors of Kosovo and East Timor, heard the equally horrific rhetoric where terms like ethnic cleansing and genocide anchored hatred, fear, and apathy. And in Canada, as with the U.S., school shootings have troubled our assumptions about the malignancy of suburban teen disenfranchisement.

We have observed the 25th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, saluted once again the heroes of D-Day, and draped our nationalism over the coffin of an unknown solider, returned to Canadian soil from the darkness of the Great War.

Theoretically, this thesis argues for further anthropological work in the area of disaster and vulnerability studies, and that a political ecological perspective appears a productive mode of analysis, capable of generating new insights into mitigation of disasters.

People make choices, or in some cases, are left with no choice about the risks they take. In the former case, one need only consider the million-dollar homes perched along wild-fire prone canyons in the earthquake zone of southern California, or luxury estates below the storm surge level in Florida and South Carolina. In the latter case, one need only imagine the plight of a landless Bangladeshi toiling to subsist along the estuaries of the Bay of Bengal.

Through the portal of CNN and the six o'clock news, we view the victims of disaster – and meet the gaze of the survivors, hear their voices crack with emotion. We see

the debris of what is left of their homes and communities, and often we see their tears. But seldom do we hear the silence which attends their slow, private recovery.

An important insight gained from this research came, surprisingly, from reading the accounts of disaster survivors (Bolin and Stanford 1999; Hoffman 1999; Oliver-Smith 1999; Rajan 1999). I found similarities between these narratives and those of my Kootenay informants, similar themes which gathered around notions of moving through a period of doubt, dismay, confusion, and fear, and how the process leads to a greater sense of awareness, articulated by one member of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance in the following quote:

"and here's how as we kept going with it, we managed to let go of some of this fear and deal with it and put it into context, to have a deeper perspective"

I compare this to a comment related by a survivor of the 1970 Mexico City earthquake:

> I think it had to do with a new way of looking at things because of our experience. You can call it like mystical, philosophical … but it was a new state of awareness, something like cathartic, a constant catharsis. (Poniatowska 1995 quoted in Hoffman 1999: 138)

Accounts of solidarity, and shared appreciation for the essential fragility of the human condition were often couched in terms of consolidated emotions, and that the behaviors inspired by that energy transcended all social barriers – gender, age, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity (Oliver-Smith 1999; Hoffman 1999).

> It brought together completely different temperaments, talents, and convictions, and -yeah, that's what I was, and still am, most fond about in my reflections. Especially in the food group. It was really diverse – young, old, gay, straight – it was really neat and inspiring, to see that. And we used it, too, I mean, we used that juice, or that energy, you know, it was a sexy issue – so all of a sudden we were talking about the environment, putting out our messages that we've been trying to get out all along – sustainability, community, food issues, all of that. It was great. (Neal)

"Working with the Alliance, I've gotten into some relationships with people that I wouldn't have otherwise, that are still sustaining me," Andrew had explained when I asked him how he had been affected by his involvement with the Y2K Alliance in Nelson.

In post-disaster situations, new forms of leadership emerge, while existing leadership is called into question (Hoffman 1999). This occurred in Nelson.

> Management has to look confident and say they know what they're doing with Y2K, and that's part of the problem – this whole way that management is conditioned to know what to do, that in itself gets in the way of dealing with the problem. (Matthew)

In the wake of disasters, individuals re-negotiate their relationships with each other. This happened in Nelson.

After disaster strikes, people gain new perspectives into the ways in which their relationship to the environment generates vulnerability. This, too, occurred in Nelson.

> I think that the Y2K Alliance has, just in its presence, made people think about how they are living, and how their lives depend on computer technology … that can only increase social awareness. (Tina)

Y2K attracted individuals with experience in activism – students, feminists, and environmentalists – just as in other disasters where authorities were slow or ill-prepared to assist (Rajan 1999), as well as those whose life experiences had provided them a context from which to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in situations of crisis:

> what was happening for me as a person was that I was being vocal, and I'm not usually vocal. Also, being pounded down by my life, I hadn't felt like I had anything much to say, so this, as I said, was wonderful to actually think that all this pounding had actually given me something to offer – and that to me was really important … I can give back to my community. (Lindsay)

In coming forward with their concerns, Y2K preparedness advocates also exposed themselves to social vulnerability – marginalization and ostracization, two of the most potent forces in the human universe; getting around the "politics of getting people's attention," required sophistication and tact.

> Disaster is news, recovery is not, nor is emergency preparedness.

Vulnerability, on the other hand, implies a critical assessment of the tacit assumptions of everyday life – an evaluation of *habitus*; it implies issues that are profoundly political, and which may suggest and inspire innovative, local arrangements to reduce its presence.

In a tangible way, the real 'disaster' born of Y2K was a true apocalypse, a disclosing of the level of our vulnerability and dependency, as well as the depth of our alienation from

one another. As Hoffman writes, "revelations spur corrections … that which changes in persons alters the social and cultural corpus (1999b: 320).

Clearly, the national response strategy for Y2K was altogether removed from public scrutiny – in the hands of the military, CSIS, and the RCMP, contained in an Ottawa "bunker" under the auspices of the Year 2000 Monitoring and Co-ordination Centre (*Globe and Mail* November 25, 1999). As one Y2K Alliance member quipped, "we'd be lucky if we got one pimply cadet," in response to the National Contingency strategy for a military deployment in the event of a Y2K meltdown.

This centralized approach did not include solutions that were tailored to local needs, beliefs, and social structures; it is reasonable to suggest that, had widespread computer failures occurred, national and local strategies may have conflicted and exacerbated disaster. Emergency preparedness is a function of perception and awareness, and it need not entail high-tech, centralized buffering mechanisms. As one Y2K Alliance member articulated, emergency preparedness is much simpler, and the dividends much more sustaining:

> The middle of an emergency is the wrong time to start developing relations – as a survival mechanism, it's a no-loss situation to make good relations with the people in your immediate area, because all it's going to cost you is a bit of time and attention, but the potential benefits are so huge – why not? (Tom)

We will never know how effective those mechanisms would have been, except by analogy to more concentrated, regional orchestrations of relief such as the Quebec ice storm of 1997. However, previous research indicates that government agencies and political leaders are often ignorant of local impacts from disaster (Dyer and McGoodwin 1999).

The response to Y2K in Nelson was all about perception, and a shared belief in the power of a community to take the matter of its own vulnerability in hand; in the absence of a coherent sociocultural context for mediating an emergent threat, one was created from the existing fabric of community:

> I think that the best part of all of this was that people were getting involved that otherwise wouldn't have been – it wasn't the same old people showing up to all the meetings. And it brought us together, you know, I've made a lot of great friends through this and I think, more than anything, that's the lesson in all this,

> people getting to know their neighbours more and establishing – re-establishing – some sense of trust and interdependence within the community. (Neal)

The binding narrative theme of this ethnography is the cultural critique inspired by Y2K – a cultural critique that has links to and is informed by other events and movements in recent history, namely, the Vietnam War, the back-to-the-land movement, the emergence of feminism, the peace movement, and environmentalism.

In asking the question, "why was Nelson so proactive towards Y2K?" the answer dove-tails with the region's historical and demographic profile – a rural locale populated by individuals who were involved in, or effected by the Vietnam War, and/or, who participated in the back-to-the-land movement, and/or who have been engaged in the peace, anti-nuclear, or environmental movement. Added to these historical and political facts, are the elements of personal experience and individual memory – the biographical truths.

The force, significance, and context of these contributing influences appear to have predisposed the Kootenay region to a more acute and robust awareness of vulnerability, as well as a cautious skepticism towards the trustworthiness of authority. I found tangible expressions of a mature social consciousness in the Kootenays – evidenced in the attendance at the November 1998 Y2K symposium, but also in such activities as volunteer participation in community events like Street Fest.

The explanation for the WKY2KA can also be attributed to its size and manageability in terms of developing a comprehensive emergency preparedness strategy. However, although population size may be a limiting factor, it does not account for why other small communities did not develop or discuss emergency preparedness in light of Y2K.

The explanation as to why Nelson took the measures it did towards Y2K is located most significantly in the community ethos, and it is within the context of ethos that meaningfulness is brought to bear on this ethnography – a meaningfulness captured in the cooperative and creative processes of the ethnographic project.

Behind all the voices collected against the rustic backdrop of the Kootenays, I found a consciousness sensitive to the complicity of culture in the manifestation of disaster, and an urgency engendered by the scale of human tragedy that is within recall, and not merely imagined. It is the sincere hope of the author that my efforts, in some way, contribute to the momentum and creativity of such a consciousness.

Epilogue

In the style of the New Journalism, I began this ethnography with a fictitious account of a meeting between Presidential Science Advisor, Edward E. David, and Richard Nixon in the spring of 1970. Though the details may be fictional the event *did* occur, the outcome of which had a direct impact on what would later become known as the Y2K computer problem. But blame for Y2K, it does exist, falls on a larger canvas of cultural values – values about risk, exuberance over technology, and technocratic management.

The fictional treatment of facts in the prologue suggests an omniscient narrative point of view, juxtaposed to the balance of the ethnography which relies mainly on a first-person perspective, with extensive second-person dialogue. The prologue, thus provides an element of suspense, evoking a conspiratorial tone, which foreshadows certain aspects of the historical and biographical realities of my Kootenay informants and the undercurrents of Y2K meaning-making in general.

Through the use of collage, literary devices, and other techniques inspired by the New Journalism, I have attempted to reveal an underlying culture logic which informed and sustained the WKY2KA, as compared to the culture logic of postmodernity that produced Y2K. I entered the world of the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance in order to "be there" within the scene, within the events as they unfolded, and to describe them as honestly as possible, while probing into the deeper symbolism of the situation.

At a certain level, I accepted that human understanding is disengaged from the epistemological process that converts perception into knowledge. Computer technology, the Internet, software, and databases do not touch us – they have no real form, taste, or distinctive smell – nothing that rubs against the subjective world of human experience. These facts were strongly affirmed through my journey into Y2K, and when it came time to produce a text of the field, my ambition was to produce a text that would embody subjective understanding, connecting the ambiguity of Y2K to a specific location, and to the historical and biographical truths that inhabited that space.

Throughout the process of investigating Y2K, I have wondered how my personal feelings and speculations may have coloured the fieldwork and, ultimately, the text of my ethnography. I also considered those private, ephemeral, and epiphanal moments not reported – dreams, and peripheral symbolism, conversations with hitch-hikers, and the like.

Though such details may not have appeared relevant, neither are ethnographies produced in a vacuum; they are shaped by factors and forces that influence the writer who provokes and evokes the reader.

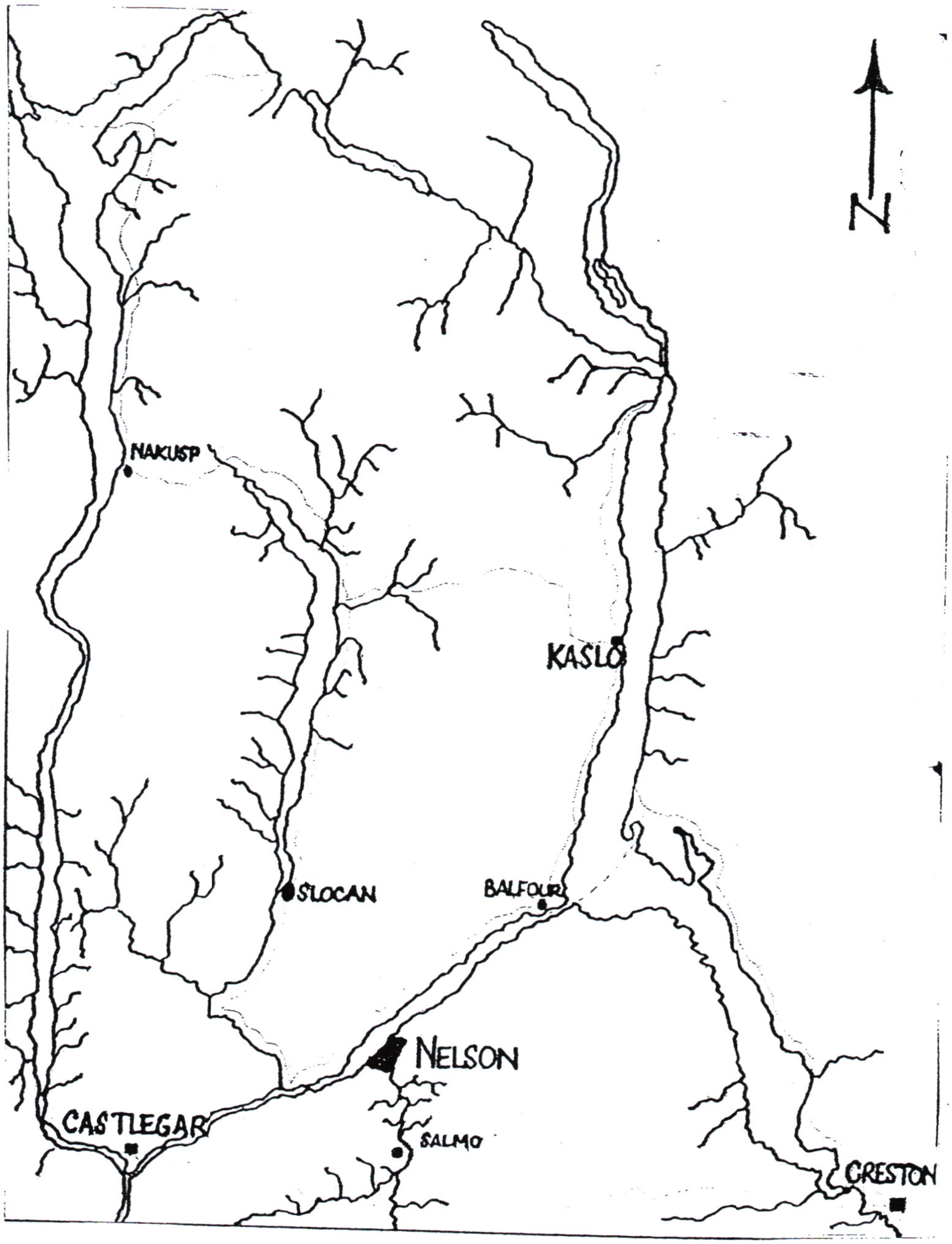
At one point, I proposed to my thesis committee that I write a novel in place of a thesis; what I did not realize then, was the allegorical potential of the postmodern ethnography.

The ethnography that I have produced confronts Y2K as a symbol of the postmodern world, and the West Kootenay Y2K Alliance as a metaphor for a cultural critique inspired by the conditions of this world. The choice for self-reflexivity within the text is not a luxury, but is present out of a recognition that an objective account of other's experiences is textually impossible. I have also recognized that it was on the basis of a mutual appreciation for what Y2K represented that I was able to secure a high level of trust among my informants, through which our most fruitful discussions were facilitated.

Y2K was a symbolic focal point where experience, memory, self-awareness, and discourse collided with meta-cultural assumptions, the media, and the political-economy. Y2K represented a unique, but not necessarily the last "reality check" to the postmodern world; as an allegorical and even therapeutic project, this ethnography offers a record of experience that may provide a moral commentary for humanity, contributing an historical and philosophical perspective to the study of disaster.

Appendix A

The West Kootenays



1 cm. = 10 kms.

Appendix B

Sample Interview Questions

Section I (Demographic Information)

1. How old are you?
2. What is your occupation?
3. Where were you born?
4. Where were your parents born?
5. How long have you lived in Nelson?
6. What is your educational background?

Section II Knowledge of (Likert scale self-rating) and frequency of computer use

How often do you use a computer and for what purposes?

How would rate your knowledge of computers on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being "able to find the on/off switch," and 10 being the level of knowledge of a computer scientist.

Section III "The Journey"

I would like you to take me on a journey, starting with when you remember Y2K first taking some purchase in your thoughts as a serious issue, leading me through the processes of information-gathering – where you looked for information, who you spoke to about it, etc. – to your involvement with the WKY2KA, up to the present. Tell me how you felt emotionally, what your reaction was to Y2K, how your feelings and understanding of it changed through time, how it impacted on your life, your relationships with family and friends. List some of the preparedness strategies you have adopted in response to Y2K.

Section IV "Wrap-up"

How would you characterize the impact of the WKY2KA on the community – what long-term effects do you think it will have? Do you envision the group sustaining itself in a new form beyond January 2000?

Appendix C

Informant Summary

Number of informants (N) = 12; six male, six female

Average age: 48.8

Average number of years of post-secondary education: 4.8

Average number of years living in Nelson/Kootenays: 10.35

Occupations of informants: Ship's captain; Ph.D. student; substitute teacher; homemaker; computer science student; health food retailer/entrepreneur; botanist/orchardist; businesswoman/entrepreneur; secretary; environmental activist; entrepreneur/activist; (one retiree).

All informants used computers almost daily, for e-mail, word-processing, Desk-top publishing, and Internet searching. Average (Likert scale) self-rating of computer knowledge/skill: 5.5 of 10 (indicates computer literacy and proficiency.)

Almost all informants had children.

More than half of the informants had previous experience in social activism and/or were engaged – at the time of this research – in socially-oriented projects (other than the WKY2KA), including environmental issues, education, issues of sustainability, and organic food production and retailing.

Appendix D

Summary of West Kootenay Y2K Alliance Emergency Preparedness Measures

The West Kootenay Year 2000 Alliance is a broadly based coalition of concerned citizens from the greater Nelson, British Columbia bioregion who have joined together to promote awareness, education, preparedness and accountability for Y2K. The Year 2000 computer problem in now widely acknowledged as serious and must be addressed properly and in a timely manner. Because the actual impact and outcome of the Y2K problem is uncertain and will not be known until it arrives, we feel it is prudent to gather and disseminate accurate information, build community resilience, and foster mutual trust and co-operation. (From The West Kootenay Y2K Alliance preparedness handbook, 1999).

The preparedness strategy of the WKY2KA can be broken down into two main components: 1) *community education/awareness* (illustrative of warnings communication [Fitzpatrick and Mileti 1994:71]); and 2) *physical storage* (buffering mechanisms [Halstead and O'Shea 1989]).

The first component – community education – began with the November 1998 symposium, through several community workshops, and to the establishment of the WKY2KA Information Office, Millennium Cafes, and the publication of the group's preparedness handbook in early 1999. I have grouped these activities under the category of warnings communication (Fitzpatrick and Mileti 1994), as they provided information to citizens about the nature of the risks under Y2K.

In the handbook, the WKY2KA advocates two to three weeks of food and water, as well as contingencies such as knowing how to operate a generator and being prepared to evacuate if the need arises. The handbook also advises citizens to consider personal hygiene needs, first aid supplies, prescription medications, communication equipment such as battery-operated radios, alternative transportation like bicycles, and other equipment such as fire extinguishers and pumps. The handbook also provides general information on selecting foods suitable for storage; safe storage of dry goods and canned food; and composting of human waste.

The handbook suggests storing foods with minimal cooking requirements, and includes the following:

Dry grains and potatoes, dry beans and lentils, pasta, canned foods, peanut butter, lard, honey and molasses, dry fruit, dry vegetables, salt, pepper, and bouillon cubes.

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Notes

[1] This prologue is a fictitious adaptation from details appearing in an article by Robert S. Anson, in the January 1999 issue of *Vanity Fair*. Edward E. David did meet with Nixon in 1970 to raise the issue of a date code standard after it had been rejected by the National Bureau of Standards due to intense lobbying by the Department of Defense; at the time, the majority of the world's computers were operated by the U.S. military.

[2] Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, and Joan Didion are credited with creating and developing the style that has come to be known as the New Journalism.

[3] Included among these are Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, Firth, and other social anthropologists for whom kinship was key to their structural-functionalist approach.

[4] Although considered by some the costliest hurricane in U.S. history at an estimated $24 billion, the Miami Hurricane of 1926 produced damages estimated at $39 billion (cost-adjusted to 1992). See Platt 1999.

[5] Most of the casualties occurred along the coast, north of Caracas and other areas where the land rises steeply from the coast. Of the estimated 30, 000 killed, most had lived in shanty towns behind the resort shoreline which simply collapsed under the torrential rainfall (Rotella 1999).

[6] Adapted from Zaman 1999: 195.

[7] I was arrested in July, 1993 at Clayoquot Sound. The subsequent trial of myself and the first 44 other protesters arrested that summer was one of the largest mass trials in Canadian history, second only to the trial of the Doukhobors in the 1950s, when 148 Doukhobors were arrested for participating in a nude demonstration. They were sent to prison for three years. 800 people were arrested at Clayoquot Sound in 1993. On May 5, 2000, Prime Minister Chretien attended the official UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve designation given to Clayoquot Sound, calling it, "a Canadian success story" (*Vancouver Sun* May 6, 2000).

[8] The eruption on Santorini (also called Thera) is thought to have been of a force seven times that of Krakatoa which killed 30,000 people when it erupted in 1883.

[9] The legend of Atlantis comes from a description provided to Plato from Egyptian accounts of the seafaring people that once inhabited the south Mediterranean. See Plato in *Critias* and *Timaeus*.

[10] The Provincial Emergency Program (PEP) formed the core of the province's Y2K management group, headquartered out of their Victoria offices. The province of British Columbia spent an estimated $80 million mainly on remedial upgrades to their 30,000 personal computers, and over 1,200 IT systems (*Times-Colonist*. 1999:A3).

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Title of Thesis:

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