



Chapter 1

“Say Commodity Cheese!”

Thomas was not surprised by Victor's sudden violence. These little wars were intimate affairs for those who dreamed in childhood of fishing for salmon but woke up as adults to shop at the Trading Post and stand in line for USDA commodity food instead. They savagely, repeatedly, opened up cans of commodities and wept over the rancid meat, forced to eat what stray dogs ignored.

Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues*

This book is about the way federal policy has repeatedly targeted American Indians through time, and the way American Indian women creatively resist outside efforts at ravaging their way of life. Beginning with treaties, and now through state welfare reform, American Indians have re-formed their families and communities to cope with social and economic constraints while fashioning new cultural meanings from the remnants of colonial intervention. Drawing from Spokane novelist Sherman Alexie's satirical description of reservation life, the snapshot of Thomas's and Victor's struggle over a can of commodity food symbolizes the residual effects of more than 150 years of structured dependency that began when the first parcel of Native American land was exchanged for ration tickets dispensed by government agents to obedient Indian subjects. The terms of surrender negotiated and codified by treaties specified the means of dispossession, which frequently involved payments to individual Indians “in lieu of the privilege [to build roads and military posts].”¹ With the final removal and relocation period of prereservation life, treaties became the tool for containing Native unrest, and as such, can be understood as the first policy pacts with American Indians.

Charlene, a Hidatsa elder whose grandparents were among the last settled on the Fort Berthold reservation in the late 1800s, recounted the terms of resettlement as told to her:

At that time, the government gave stoves and furniture to these people. . . . They make a fire outside and cook and they [settled Indians] always laughed at them, [they'd say,] "they're poor, and us, we got a lot of money," like that. . . . When they [the Indians] got that per cap [government disbursement], they [the government] took some money back to pay for the commodities, to pay for the stove, the axe . . . so they [the government] didn't give it to them [the Indians], they paid for it!

More than thirty years ago, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Clowen (1971) convincingly argued that the expansion of welfare policies can be positively correlated to the state's need to contain social unrest. Following from their argument, the expansion and contraction of American Indian welfare and federal assistance programs can be viewed as extensions of federal policies to contain resistance to dispossession and assimilation (Deloria and Lytle 1984; Wilkins 1997; Wilkins and Lomawaima 2001). Since nineteenth-century treaties, American Indians continue to live within the most bureaucratic communities in the United States—beginning at birth on receipt of a tribal enrollment number, the symbol of the federal-trust subsumption of sovereignty that validates entitlement to government programs, such as annuities and housing subsidies.

This book examines the tensions between the kinds of policies that impact the reservation economy and the cultural commitments that maintain community life on a reservation—specifically, among the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara of Fort Berthold, North Dakota. At Fort Berthold, the centrality of women's roles as provisioners is underscored by matrilineality, which prevails as the dominant mode of reckoning kin among all three tribes.² The persistence of matrilineal kinship arrangements likewise influences the ways that matrifocal (i.e., woman-centered) contours of community relations flow. One of the points I raise in this book is how structural inequalities that create matrifocal households can sometimes be masked by traditional matrilineal forms of kinship arrangements. The descriptions of reservation life portrayed here echo other reservation histories, and also, I expect, resonate with anyone who has ever had to work for a living wage, look for adequate housing, or provide one's family with food. For American Indian women, the daily ways of achiev-

ing these goals intertwine with the complex ways that kinship ties perpetuate ceremonial life.

Although ceremonial life is key to understanding how these tensions get worked out, this is not a book about ceremonies. My own partial understandings, partial truths (Haraway 1988) remain informed by my participation in all aspects of community life, including as an audience for the stories Fort Berthold women told me about their own approaches to work (Nirayan 1993; Rosaldo 1993). Together these stories form their own kind of oral history about work in a reservation community. By infusing Fort Berthold women’s narratives with an analysis of the reservation economy, they lend their voice to the telling of the tale, and in this way, write themselves into the larger history of Indian policy.

As a partial member of the reservation community, I situate myself within the cultural matrix of fictive kin, friends, and a community that only partially embraced me. Likewise, I propose that the fragments of Fort Berthold women’s voices (spoken to me directly or through the distilled rumblings of the “moccasin telegraph”³) reflect their own partial truths—as only a fraction of collective assent—about what it means to be Mandan, Hidatsa, or Arikara in the twenty-first century. This question of partiality speaks also to notions of identity, a central theme of the book. Here, narrative fragments are not meant to suggest fractured notions of identity, but rather, a more complex mosaic of kinship, community, ceremonial, political, economic, and personal relationships. I focus on how a particular community of Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara women negotiates specific sets of power relations between state structures and community obligations that in turn inform cultural identity. The work histories I elicited from Fort Berthold women help to shape their representations of themselves, as well as mine of them. Anthropologists continue to inscribe their experiences, even as we write culture onto the walls of academe. In these respects, although the assumptions of anthropology may have been effectively dislodged in their reception within emerging multinationalist global economies, the practices of systematically observing, recording, and reconfiguring the daily lives of Others (from Rhode Island factory workers to African griots) remain our disciplinary trademark (Lamphere 1987; Stoller 1996).

Dakota Sioux scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (1996) has asserted that “an examination of the dichotomy between the stories that Indian America tells and the stories that White America tells is crucial to the current literary criticism wars . . . and who gets to tell the stories is a major issue of our time” (p. 64).

Although Cook-Lynn refers primarily to works of literary fiction, her observations speak equally, if not originally, to anthropological representations of American Indians as “vanishing” (cf. Barker and Teaiwa 1994), and the generalized crisis in representation within the discipline of anthropology, flagged by a self-critique and reexamination of the kinds of texts ethnography produces (Marcus and Fischer 1986). In answering the many calls for authorial authenticity, this book situates itself among the considerable critique of anthropology as a colonial discipline, but reasserts and insists on an ethnographic rendering of everyday life as a critical opening to understanding the way that power relations become expressed in the daily tasks and rituals of making a living on a reservation. I therefore do not presume in this context that “writing about” constitutes “speaking for.” Rather, by analyzing the effects of state structures on women’s everyday lives, I offer only a glimpse into the everyday resistance strategies that inform social life and help to ensure economic and cultural survival.

The Impact of Federal Policy through Time

Although American Indian women’s status within domestic political and religious life varies across cultures, in general, American Indian women were respected in complementary gender roles that characterized many Native American societies prior to colonization (Jaimes and Halsey 1992; Leacock 1978; Medicine 1993). Throughout the early reservation period (1890s to 1920s), government policies were aimed at restructuring American Indian life through assaults on Native American religious practices and gender-based relations of production. The overall trend in American Indian policy has been to isolate and then to assimilate American Indians (Deloria and Lytle 1984; Pommershein 1995; Wilkins 1997), first by dispossessing them of their lands, and then by converting them to a variety of Christian religions that reinforced the values of the colonizers. Despite these attempts at Fort Berthold, as in many other reservation communities, women’s roles remained centered around kinship relations, in spite of the break-up of the land base into private holdings and the reorganization of consensus-oriented governance into federally chartered government bodies (Biolsi 1993). As a result of U.S. policy changes, women’s public status in matrilineal societies, such as among the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras, declined in direct relationship to the selection of male leaders by U.S. agents and the increase in wage labor, particularly

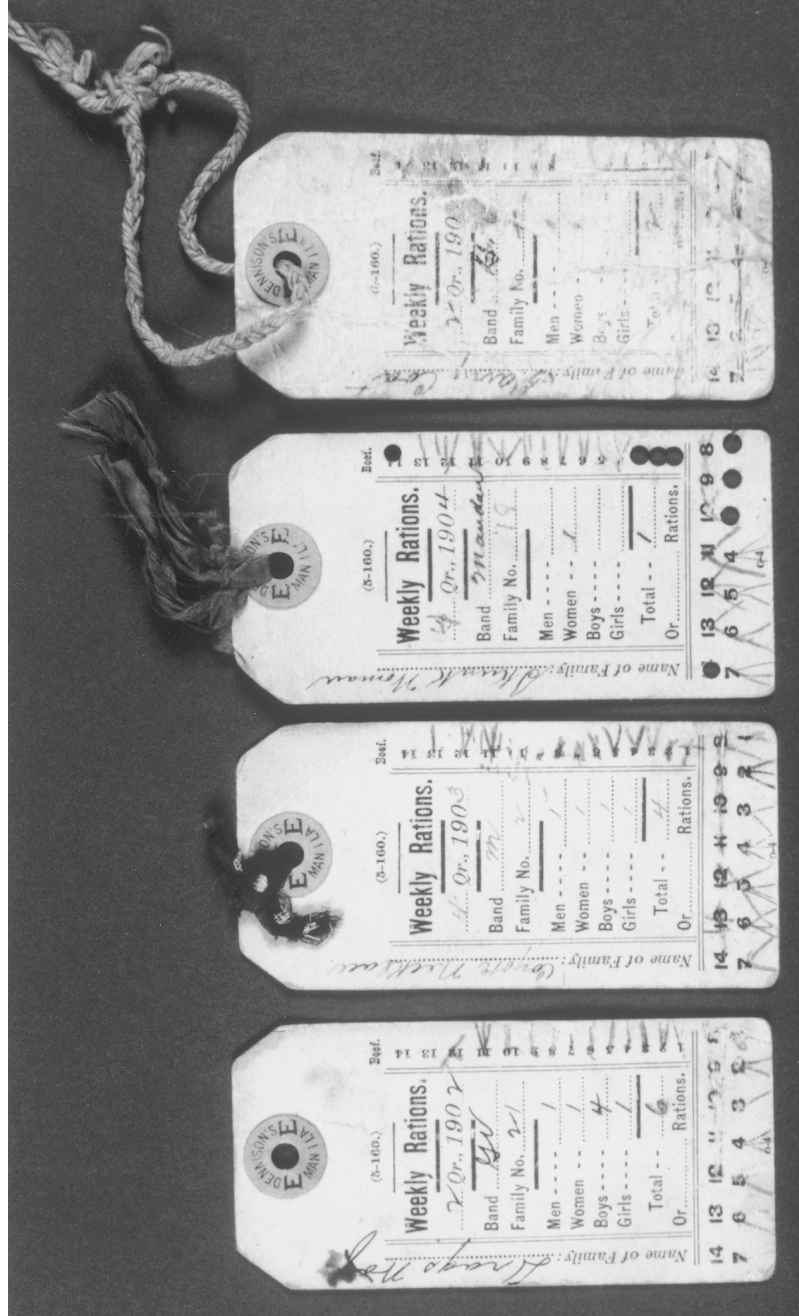


Figure 1.1. Ration Tickets (Dancing Bull), 1902.

for men. Loss of traditional sources of livelihood, in which women's roles were equal to men's, were not compensated. These structural changes in social organization, fostered by early-twentieth-century Victorian family norms of the nuclear family, further eroded women's collective status and security. This was especially true for Mandans and Hidatsas, among whom missionaries and government officials worked in concert to convert a horticultural people to a ranching economy (cf. McLaughlin 1992), thereby devaluing the work of women who controlled their families' garden plots. However, in the areas in which women maintained control over their subsistence activities or developed new strategies based on modified modes of subsistence, they retained a relatively high status in relation to men.

Extensions of women's collective power bases allow them to fill new roles in contemporary work worlds. For instance, Albers (1983) showed the way the increase in Spirit Lake Sioux women's public leadership roles is consistent with prereservation society, which was never sharply divided by a "public" and "domestic" split (Berman 1989). However, formal policy-making bodies effectively overlooked women's contributions to traditional leadership politics and consequently left them out of formal political decisions. In an attempt to bridge tribal and national politics by instituting constitutional governments, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA) effectively wrote women out of tribal leadership. By accepting the IRA form of government, the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nations joined political forces and became constitutionally chartered as the Three Affiliated Tribes. As with most IRA governments, men hold most of the formal positions in tribal politics, with notable exceptions, such as first time tribal Chairwoman Rose Crow Flies High, former tribal Chairwoman Alyce Spotted Bear, and several elected councilwomen in the decades since the IRA. Although the IRA formally recognized the authority of tribal governments, former modes of tribal decision making were often transformed by new constitutional frameworks, but practiced nonetheless in extralegal forums that continue to carry community sanction, such as revised forms of women's sodalities (cf. Powers 1986). Community halls, medicine society meetings, clan gatherings, and powwow committees today remain sites for reinforcing customary rules and practices, despite the colonial legacy that attempted to extirpate traditional ways of life.

The 1950s termination policies took aim at tribal sovereignty by attempting to dismantle political structures that upheld the federal-trust relationship of tribes and the U.S. government, a relationship that continues to signify treaty responsibilities. At Fort Berthold, the termination era was marked by two kinds of relocation: one, the result of the Garrison Dam, the

other the result of urban job training programs. As one Hidatsa elder proclaimed, in his view, three things have had the greatest negative impact on his people: the 1762 smallpox epidemic, television, and the Garrison Dam.

At a point of remarkable demographic and economic recovery from disease, social reorganization, and dispossession of Indigenous lands, plans for damming the Missouri River were drawn within reservation boundaries throughout North Dakota and South Dakota, lands that had been protected from encroachment by treaty since the 1800s. The final remapping of Fort Berthold was accomplished through joint “compromise” legislation that birthed the 1947 Pick-Sloan Plan, brainchild of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The final plan to dam the Missouri River, which for centuries had been the life vein of the three tribes, was put to a mock vote of the people. The result of this vote is captured best in a well-known photograph of the signing of the bill. In the photograph sits former Tribal Chairman George Gillette. His hands cover his face, his words express his pain: “The truth is,” he remarked, “as everyone knows, our Treaty of Fort Laramie . . . and our constitution are being torn to shreds by this contract” (quoted in Meyer 1977, 217). Billed as an issue of energy development in a postwar development boom, the Garrison Dam (which created Lake Sakakawea) generates most of its hydroelectric power for export, fueling cities as far away as Chicago. It also serves to cool the coal refinery plants along its banks. The imposing refinery operation looks on just miles from the reservation boundary in the coal town of Beulah, where long-abandoned subsidiary housing stands hollow at the edge of this company town. The parent company, North American Coal, is one of the largest coal companies in the world, thus situating the reservation economy squarely within the global economy of energy export.

To accommodate construction of the dam, the Army Corps of Engineers relocated more than 90 percent of the reservation population (Reifel 1952). What once was an artery running through fertile bottomlands is now a holding tank that has resulted in five discrete land segments surrounding the water, which rises and falls like a lost ocean in the middle of the prairie (see Figure 1.3). The compensation to tribal members for the taking of tribal lands remains a contested point of dispute, especially between the Army Corps of Engineers and tribal members, as well as between Indian and non-Indian residents (as I illustrate in chapter 4). Most of the Tribes’ total compensation funds were spent within the first governmental disbursement period. The Three Affiliated Tribes contested initial monetary reparations when compared against the real value of land, and since the 1986 Joint Tribal Advisory Committee investigations into just compensation for the tribal taking areas. In



Figure 1.2. The Four Bears Bridge.

1994 former Tribal Chairman Wilbur Wilkinson requested more than \$30 million in infrastructural compensation through stipulations in the Equitable Compensation Act (PL 102-575 sec 35). Sara, an Arikara woman whose family lands were part of the taking area, explained:

There was a settlement . . . all enrolled members [received] . . . after 1951; since then we've had two other ones; the largest one I remember was in about 1980 or '81 . . . about \$4,000 to all enrolled members; but the money we got during that time, my folks left it in the Agency, so we could get school supplies.

The effects of the dam on land and livelihood have been well documented elsewhere (Berman 1988; Lawson 1982; Reifel 1952; 1986 JTAC Report), including its impact on federally subsidized ranching (McLaughlin 1993) and housing. The reconfiguration of kinship and community through federal land and housing allotments continues to be the result of policy moves that dislocate tribal members from their tribal lands.

The postdam resettlement of the Fort Berthold population coincided with the national push to remove American Indians from their land base and train them to perform wage work off the reservation. To this end, the American Indian Relocation and Vocational Assistance Act of 1955 provided job training programs in urban areas across the country as part of a wider push to assimilate American Indians into the wage labor force. Thousands of American Indians left their reservation communities for urban areas, some of them for the first time. The narratives of Fort Berthold women mirror this trend, as evidenced by the testimonies of the women with whom I spoke. Among those between the ages of forty and sixty, almost all had participated in some form of urban job training away from the reservation. Both men and women participated in large numbers in the relocation programs, despite the fact that urban job training programs offered no preparation for the unfamiliar and often harsh conditions that migrants met with in places such as Chicago, Oakland, Los Angeles, and Dallas. Jane, a Hidatsa woman who went to California on the relocation program, recalled:

We were given \$90 a month . . . for a space a little bigger than a bathroom. It was all Indians, and [the others] were some of the worst people



Figure 1.3. "A lost ocean in the middle of the prairie."

you could think of . . . alcoholics and drug addicts . . . in that boarding school. I ended up getting kicked out of there . . . and went to live with my cousin in San Francisco. My mom was going to sue them [the Bureau of Indian Affairs]. She wanted them to pay for me to come home, but they wouldn't. I told her, "I'm not a failure; I've got to finish what I started." . . . After that, I stayed with my cousin.

Adjustments to new policies often depend on family resources. In particular, the maintenance of kin-based networks—both on and off the reservation—serves as an important determinant in women's collective action. Whether in reservation or urban contexts, American Indian women have always drawn on their kinship networks to resist the alienating effects of government policies. Furthermore, feminist legal analysts have noted the disconcerting ways that American Indian policies serve to limit women's adjudicatory power (viz. MacKinnon 1987). As I discuss at length in chapter 5, some Fort Berthold women I spoke with on the eve of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 viewed it as “Termination all over again.” *Termination* refers to those policies that attempted to terminate federal-trust responsibilities. In part, this sentiment suggests that welfare reform, constructed in a political mood of ruthless cuts to subsistence benefits, delivers a direct blow to American Indian women, who have chiseled a fine line of survival through a package of benefits outlined by treaties and legally protected by the federal-trust relationship.

The era of self-determination, beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the present, was ushered in through the reliance on treaties as the precedent and foundation on which legislative ground was won, especially in land rights and religious freedom. The inaugural days of the self-determination era drew increasing attention to women's claims, which in turn grew out of land rights and resource litigation in Indian Country nationwide (Deloria 1985; Stilman 1987). Landmark legislation of this policy era related to welfare policy included the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA) (Johnson 1993; Red Horse 1988).

Congress passed the ICWA as a response to social welfare studies that showed the way child adoption practices over time systematically resulted in the large-scale removal of American Indian children from Indian homes and away from their reservation communities. Data from the Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe of North Dakota (formerly Devil's Lake Sioux) reveal that by 1967, one-third of reservation children were in out-of-home placement in non-Indian homes (viz. Hirsh 1991). In many ways, this unwritten policy of removal was an extension of earlier assimilation policies that established Indian boarding schools at the turn

of the century in an attempt to resocialize Indian children to non-Indian ways (Lomawaima 1994; Archeluta et al. 2000). The effects of these practices reverberate today and find evidence in work histories retold here, especially among elders who remember their first jobs at the hands of government matrons. Carol, whom I introduce here, and whose story I thread throughout these chapters, recalled the predam generation of the early reservation days:

I was about eighteen when I worked in a dorm . . . a boarding school for the teenagers, run by the government. They had a dormitory there in Elbowoods. So that the people come from far . . . and this side of the river, they couldn't come across every day so they got them so they could stay in there, stay in that building. My job . . . to begin with I started as a relief matron. Those two white ladies, you know, when one leaves off, they give about four days off, when she gets off then I fill her place. I stayed there and worked clear through, day and night, you might say.

For decades, the only jobs available to women on the reservation were through government-sponsored agencies, such as boarding schools, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and later, the tribal administration. State welfare programs that were instituted in the 1930s later assisted with provisioning household resources, especially in the face of agricultural decline. Where the ICWA was passed to redress more than a century of upheaval and social dislocations, the Social Welfare Reform and Personal Responsibility Act of 1996, by cutting welfare benefits to women and children, was a policy shift that required new safeguards in Indian Country where high unemployment, low mortality, and shifting economic structures (gaming industries notwithstanding) have always indicated that the stakes are higher. Evidence of this runs through federal housing policies, which resituate tribal members in new proximities to land, social services, and each other.

The House of Cards

As the Hidatsa man Good Bird told the anthropologist Gilbert Wilson (1924):

An earthlodge was built with a great deal of labor. . . . Certain medicine women were hired to raise [the] posts in place when a lodge was built. . . . The

four great posts that upheld the roof each had a buffalo calfskin or a piece of bright-colored calico bound about it to the height of a man's head. These were offerings to the house spirit. We Hidatsas believed that an earthlodge was alive, and that the lodge's spirit or soul, dwelt in the four posts. (p. 13–14)

Good Bird's words reflect several concepts embedded in Hidatsa social organization, which matrilineal Mandans and Arikaras share. For example, that earthlodges of the nineteenth century were “built with a great deal of labor” reflects the fact that community effort, as well as seasonal planning, was required for construction of a new house. Women who held the ceremonial rights and knowledge required to build a house were central to its site selection and construction. Where contemporary housing communities are planned outside of collective concern for ceremony and community, Fort Berthold women's kin networks provide a buffer to the fracturing effects of a fragmented land base and a mechanism for reconfiguring community.

To understand how women's networks reshape family and community in housing developments, the way in which land was divided at the initial stages of dispossession (and continues to be subdivided since the damming of the Missouri River) provides a necessary context for analyzing kinship arrangements. The actual and ideological relationship to land is a subtext that consistently emerges in everyday discourse and in specific claims to cultural identity and tribal authority, which the land claims case I discuss in chapter 4 shows.

In my analysis of housing communities, I draw inspiration from Sandia scholar Ted Jojola, who as early as 1973 (seven years after the establishment of the Tribal Housing Authority under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD]⁴) analyzed the relationship between HUD housing and Indian perceptions of their environment at Sandia Pueblo (New Mexico) and Northern Cheyenne (Montana) reservations. Rather than documenting the bureaucratic process of HUD's impact on American Indian communities, Jojola sought “an insight into attitudes” and “interpretations voiced about these housing programs.” Where Indian subjects of housing policies are “immersed in a complexity of decision-making,” they enact decisions that reconstitute their ethnic and tribal identities in relation to changing community structures (viz. Jojola 1973).

Although HUD project communities differentially impact kin groupings, the social tension lies in the push for “the regularity” of the practice of “being Indian” on the one hand, and the compliance with governmental structures on the other. Housing, especially in the context of planned communities,



Figure 1.4. Mandan Earthlodge, Slant Village Site, Mandan, North Dakota.

is the most intimate symbol of household and family organization. What people do to bridge households reflects new ways of reconfiguring community and reinforcing tribal identity, even in the most socially fragmented housing clusters at Fort Berthold, one of which is colloquially called “the Ghetto.”

By relating notions of belonging to a particular land base, families recreate a sense of shared identity through both real and imagined community that often transcends geography (Anderson 1991). As both subtext and metaphor, land guides principles of social organization and identity and links these to a set of shared origins related to time (mythohistorical) and place (sacred sites) (Basso 1996). For example, Mandans associate with a community of common origin within the southernmost segment of the reservation, where the Boy Who Fell to Earth encountered the Old Woman Who Never Dies (viz. Bowers 1950), and where to this day the Lone Man shrine marks a sacred place in this cycle of Mandan cosmology.

Household residency does not necessarily reflect these communities of belonging. Instead, they remain tied to shared family, band, and tribal histories, marked by real and remembered ties to a land base of common origin. At Fort Berthold, the contemporary land base is a fragmented reclustering of communities redistributed around the Garrison Dam. Few families have benefited from land consolidations since the postdam restructuring of the 1960s and 1970s. Residents of population centers in the northern and western segments continue to confront poor water conditions and extensions of HUD policies that force the centralization of housing settlements in proximity to administrative agencies, while rendering a new class of reservation residents landless. Internal political corruption aside,⁵ HUD policies have resulted in a decrease in productive land use aimed at neutralizing sovereign land rights, coupled with an increase in land-based natural resource exploitation (such as gas and oil) since the 1970s (Ambler 1990).

Contemporary housing issues and social organization relate directly to the effects of relocation on village-level organization around natural resources—namely, water and timber—and the scarcity of these in the postdam environment. Water, in short supply on the arid grasslands, forces many residents to abandon plans for building on their inherited allotments in the country, settling instead on HUD houses in housing clusters closer to town and community services. This collective move creates stress on shared water resources in those housing areas and has resulted in deep social dissatisfaction, especially for men who are unable to run horses, a symbol of status and prestige, on the limited land provided in housing settlements.

Fort Berthold women's narratives echo contradictory themes of belonging and displacement. In the postdam, post-urban relocation resettlement programs, a house is not always a home. Cory, raised by her grandmother and grandmother's brothers on her grandmother's land in a Hidatsa community, has lived away from the reservation most of her adult life. She and her husband and daughter now live in her mother's HUD house in a rural area of the reservation with her mother and her brother's children. She owns land in scattered allotments throughout the reservation. While her elderly mother rested in an easy chair by the television, Cory and I sat in the kitchen and talked against the scattered punctuation of the slamming screen door as children and grandchildren filed in and out.

Some of it was my grandmother's and some of it was an uncle's [mother's brother] and some of it was through trading and purchases. The land's not consolidated. . . . It's just gonna sit there. None of it is being leased out now. There are no houses on any of this land; it's all grass range. . . . I decided against putting a house on it. This reservation, it's kind of a rough place—you put a house up somewhere, it's not gonna be there very long.

Karen, an Arikara woman living in the reservation hub of New Town, maintains 80 acres and recently had a HUD house built in a distant location, in front of her brother's house where another cross-cousin⁶ she calls "brother" lives. Her land is situated close to the shoreline, where she claims that the Tribe has begun survey work for a waterway without her permission. Her main concern is to keep the land in Indian hands, adding that "they're eventually trying to terminate us," once again alluding to the breach of federal-trust responsibility over Indian lands.

Lands that were protected by treaty have subsequently been reduced by government land deals and through federally condemned taking areas. Housing needs are critical on a shrinking land base where lack of potable ground water renders many sites unsuitable for housing construction. A 1987 panel discussed the health effects of the high alkaline water that many people have been forced to drink over the years. A woman from the western reservation segment of Mandaree remarked:

On the river bottom we had plenty of water to drink, wash and water our livestock. When we were forced to move to the upper plains, wells were

*dug so deep that you could not pump them by hand. . . . When we moved to the prairie, we could no longer eat the chicken eggs . . . they were blood red because of the water! The water was not suitable even for animals.*⁷

The housing “shortage” masks the real fact of a decrease in available land for the people, especially on reservations where the land base has been swallowed up by hydroelectric dams. In the 1970s HUD rental housing, constructed nationwide in the climate of a housing “crisis” in Indian Country, served the public agenda of meeting transitional housing needs. The public face of infrastructural accommodation to house “homeless” Indians now appears to have masked a different kind of agenda—one aimed at clustering tribal members closer to bureaucratic services and under the watchful surveillance of government agents. But even in this process of containment, uprooted subjects stand at attention to the details of everyday life.

When Women Stand, They Stand at the Center

One way to understand Fort Berthold women’s centrality in the matrix of HUD policies, resettled communities and reconstituted identities, is from their own positions with respect to communities of memory (Halbwachs 1992; Teski and Climo 1995). In this light, while “memory” may have its particular historical moment of origin—such as the smallpox epidemic or the flooding of the Missouri River—it also embodies a genealogical endpoint, where women rally to affirm kinship and community. *Genealogy* in this context does not constitute “pedigree,” but rather an agreed on commonality that links individuals within and across patterned geographies. Examples of both “closed” and “open” spaces reflect the patterned ways that Fort Berthold women reconfigure community in HUD housing projects. Closed spaces tend to be homogeneous communities, such as those configured along old-time band affiliations. Open spaces, such as newer HUD communities, reflect the newly configured ways in which women maintain their kin groupings across dispersed households, especially in the mixed Indian and non-Indian center of New Town.

Matrifocal residence in the context of HUD housing communities can be read within the cultural frame of traditional matrilineal family structures. On the other hand, matrifocality as an extension of matrilineal practices distracts from the daily realities that conscript women to keep up with demands for rent,



Figure 1.5. Rental Apartments for the Elderly.

pressures to sell family allotments and move into HUD communities (creating greater dislocations between land and work), while making ends meet across housing communities. Fort Berthold women do this through a variety of mixed economic strategies, combining formal and informal incomes from activities such as beading, sewing, cooking, and assisting with child care and transportation, and the shuffling of welfare-based incomes among household members and extended kin. In these ways, Fort Berthold women’s strategies more closely resemble the African American women described by Carol Stack (1975) in the urban “Flats,” where women stand at the center of (re)distributive networks, rather than as the cultural matriarchs of popular mythology.

In “open,” transitional, and tribally mixed communities, Fort Berthold women forge communities of identity based on common and agreed on points of origin. As an example, I take the women of the Shell Creek community, located southeast of the reservation hub of New Town. Community members are descended from a breakaway Hidatsa band who left the early reservation for more than thirty years until they were forced to return under U.S. Army escort in the 1870s—the final resettlement period of noncompliant dissidents. These Hidatsa returnees settled at Shell Creek at Fort Berthold. Although most of Shell Creek’s original residents now live elsewhere on the reservation, they continue to associate among themselves and relate collectively to their Shell Creek community of origin, despite geographic displacement. Shell Creek women and men link themselves through a common chain of cultural remembrances and have successfully reincorporated themselves in wider reservation life by maintaining their ceremonial links to the past. In tribally mixed communities, such as the reservation hub of New Town, members link households more by social action than by proximity. Women’s kin networks serve as the vehicle for reconstructing “old time” family arrangements that have continuing, if tenuous, ties to their common land-based community. These ties bridge the imagined community of the past to the actual maintenance of rural allotments that sit on the grasslands as a rolling reminder of the land that gives to people their sense of belonging.

HUD housing communities may not take on the structural organization of prereservation villages, but “Indian ways,” as Jojola (1973) reminds us, remain “practiced with great regularity.” Situated at the core of these practices we find “communities of belonging” that link tribal members to self-identity through real and remembered pasts that, in turn, inform cultural identity. The practice of kinship solidarity emerges as a locus where identity is tested and sanctified. Where women’s kin networks serve as the vehicle for



Figure 1.6. U.S. Department for Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Rental Homes.