Prologue

An Urban Ethnography for Our Times

Sketching Love, Sorrow, and Rage

THIS IS A STORY about a group of poor women who live in Woodhouse, one of dozens of facilities designed to provide housing and other services for the destitute in New York City. Their life stories unfold as I sit with them at a kitchen table, preparing meals, talking, sharing intimacies. In this setting, we hear from women like Nora Gaines, Hattie McFarrell, and Dixie Register about what it is like to live on the street and how it feels to lose your mind, about the taste of crack cocaine and the sweetness of friendship.

Some might consider this an unpopular subject—no one wants to know about poor women, they think, and no one wants to read about poor women. I strongly disagree. In various guises, the general topic of this book gets front page coverage in daily newspapers and magazines across the country: the growing gap between rich and poor in America, inner-city crime, problems of welfare "dependency," drug addiction, and the spread of **AIDS.** This coverage and the debate it raises reflect a yearning **to** understand, to explain, and to solve the human crisis that surrounds us.

And it will not go away. In fact, we will be hearing more and more about poor women as welfare "reform" is implemented state by state, bringing with it more poverty, more homelessness, more social suffering.'

I have written this book to challenge all of us to look at the ways in which our society and the workings of our political, economic and popular culture contribute to the suffering experienced by our most vulnerable citizens. Historically, politicians and the media as well as social scientists have distorted findings regarding vulnerable populations; the politics of the day promise to follow this tradition. I am compelled by an ongoing politic of "blaming the poor" to offer intimate portraits of the women and to reflect on political and economic processes that contextualize the lives of the women and the institution in which they reside.

In a specific sense, this book is based on more than two years of ethnographic research I conducted **as** part of a larger effort to develop an AIDS prevention program for a population identified as at high risk for infection.' In a broader sense, my personal and professional background has also been an important influence in fashioning my perspective on these social and political issues.[3]

However difficult it is to demonstrate the connections, *all* our individual life stories are linked to larger social and historical processes that are beyond the control of most people. This theoretical insight is central to this book, and to the social critique 1 offer in it. The women of Woodhouse are among those the tabloid press, popular politicians, and some social scientists suggest are "the undeserving and disreputable poor." They would have us believe that women like these are nothing more than victims of their own or their families' weaknesses and sloth—social burdens, with no clear productive role. In the popular imagination, such

women are "street people," "mad women," "disease vectors," "whores," "dope fiend crack addicts and alcoholics," "the underclass"–all of them wretched, bizarre, and amoral. Added to this public image is a belief that, collectively, the women of Woodhouse make up some kind of poor people's subculture, imbued with exotic rituals and strange behavior.

The prevailing stereotypes of the poor constitute a collective cultural fiction–an ideology about the poor. This ideology serves a central purpose: to obscure structural inequality and to help maintain our existing social arrangements. The excluded, marginalized, and disvalued internalize the harsh messages directed at them. Ideology, a powerful mechanism by which social forces become embodied as individual experience, is a social and political project. Meanwhile, as personal identity becomes muddled with dehumanizing ideologies, human suffering only intensifies.

In many ways, the women of Woodhouse share with other Americans the most treasured and basic assumptions of our times. By way of ethnographic portraits of the women and through their own words, this book seeks to dispel myths and stereotypes about our "social problems" and "problem populations." The stories attest both to the personal and social complexity of their lives and show that the women are, for the most part, quite ordinary. Ironically, it is their very ordinariness, as well as their diversity, that opens the door to defying, then shattering, our assumptions.

Confronting Myth and the Circulation of False Images

Because "culture" has been called the special domain of anthropologists, I might be expected to analyze the lives and experiences of Woodhouse women in terms of culture or,

more specifically, "their culture." How simple that would be. Many such analyses have been accomplished and, particularly when applied to troublesome social groups or "alien" societies, they leave us with what seems a satisfying explanation: these people are products of their cultures.

Of course, there is more than one form of cultural analysis. Yet the analytic concept most favorably received, at least when applied to inner-city people of the United States, has ignored years of criticism thrown its way (Valentine 1968; Leacock 1971; Stack 1974; Aschenbrenner 1975; Susser 1982; Williams 1988, 1992, 1994; Katz 1989; 1995; Reed 1991; Waterston 1993; di Leonardo 1994). Popularized in part by twentieth-century anthropologists, this notion sees cultures as "discrete, bounded entities," "value-saturated and timeless," "internally homogeneous and coherent units, each capable of producing its own worldview, its particular patterning of mind," and "uniform essences, replicated through time" (Schneider 1995:9–13). Applying this notion of culture to the subjects of this ethnography would lead me to offer up a label, such as "the subculture of ———," and an analysis that confuses explanation with behavior.

I might have some difficulty composing a befitting term, however. Would it be the subculture of "Woodhouse"? of "homeless women"? of "the mentally ill homeless"? The difficulty lies in determining the boundary of inclusive and exclusive traits. If a subculture is a discrete and bounded entity, what composes it? And what lies outside it?

Despite this dilemma, many before me have succeeded in identifying subcultures all across America. For example, who has not heard of the drug subculture, the underclass, or the culture of poverty (Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Becker 1964; Lewis 1966; Johnson 1980; Moynihan 1986; Jencks

and Peterson 1991; Wilson 1987, 1989)? Also, don't we *just know* what constitutes those subcultures and *who* their members are?

I find it impossible to ignore the inadequacies and superficialities of the concept of culture used in this way. In addition to the shortcomings already noted, much seems to be missing. Where did the subculture come from? When did it come into being? Why did it show up in the particular places it appears? How does it keep going? According to the culturalist approach outlined here, one need go only as far as the subculture itself for answers. Critics consider this approach sophistry – an example of circular and specious reasoning.

If the culturalist explanation is so wrongheaded, why does it continue to enjoy popularity? Do so many journalists, policy makers, ordinary people, and scholars continue to fall for this fallacious explanation because it is deceptively beautiful and superficially plausible? A look at some implications that flow from this culturalist model might provide some insight.

First, it is important to say that the culturalist model works with other social forces to "construct" social groups (Blumer 1971; Stern 1984). Like everything else, scholarly practice does not operate in a vacuum but develops within and is responsive to the social and political context in which it operates (Schneider 1995:12). Following the culturalist model, the "scholarly" practice of naming, classifying, and defining facilitates building a social group on the basis of one or more things its members may have in common. Those one or more things may include just about anything: circumstance, behavior, skin color, geography, age, sexuality, and so on (Valentine 1968).

Once a line has been drawn around "the group," however

it is constituted, certain possibilities open up: constructing symbolic representations, political mobilization, psychological relief (identity and belonging), political and economic claims making, collective resistance, legitimization, visibility and voice, and nation building, any or all of which may be played out in various local and global arenas (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Ignatieff 1993; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Khan 1995). As the line is drawn, so difference is enlarged, and the possibility of "an-other" also opens up (Gilman 1988).

This is not to say that difference is necessarily problematic, but the paradoxical uses to which difference is put in particular historical junctures and political situations call for exploration. In any given situation, multiple interpretations, competing definitions, and a myriad of interests are at work. If a pattern can be discerned across time, space, and place, perhaps it lies in the relationship between social location (access to material resources and power) and particular consequences of "difference." The more limited the access **of** a particular group to material resources and power, the greater the likelihood that difference will translate into harmful consequences for the group and its purported members. As Edward Said observes, "difference can become an ideological infection" (1995 : 105).

In the exaggeration of difference, the other is born, objectified, and perceived as exotic, strange, frightening. In powerful hands, ideologies about particular "others" have real and painful consequences, contributing to everyday oppression, stigmatization, and ethnic cleansing.

It is not difficult to see how the culturalist model outlined earlier contributes to the production and reproduction of particular "others." Its taxonomic objective in hand, the ap-

proach proceeds as if there is some external, objective reality "out there" to name and classify. This makes it a safe approach, for it works under the assumptions of and in tandem with mainstream ideologies and dominant institutional practices. Whether they do so deliberately or unreflectively, culturalists do not merely describe, they help construct "discourses of domination" and reproduce "hegemonic discursive frames," to borrow from a discussion between Yvonne Zylan and Nancy Fraser (Zylan 1996:515–16; Fraser 1996: 533). Here we have a clue as to its continuing popularity. It doesn't matter if it is wrong headed, it matters that it does not threaten.

Studies of urban poverty in the United States offer a case in point. Journalists and scholars of the culturalist ilk seem never to tire of presenting what di Leonardo calls "fake ethnography," distorted portraits of the poor in inner cities (1994:6). As David Maynard observed (in an electronic communication to me on December 18, 1995), these accounts "are made palatable to a range of middle class, mostly white, 'educated' audiences by exoticizing, pathologizing and racializing the inner city." From these portraits, we now have a vast store of "telling metaphors for the poor," mean stereotypes embraced by policy makers and the popular press (Williams 1994:166–70).

"Through the prism of underclass ideology," the pages of my ethnographic narrative are stories about former bag ladies, the mentally and physically diseased, bad mothers, crack addicts, alcoholics, prostitutes, government dependents, the racialized and undeserving poor (di Leonardo 1994:13). Captured in stereotype, the women of Woodhouse are emblematic of all our social problems. Any one of these "attributes" signals the pressing social problems of our day;

collected under one roof, they form its powerful symbol. Woodhouse women are the quintessential "other"; for them, difference has become an ideological infection. Focused as we are on the women of Woodhouse, we cannot see past them to discover, then oppose, social inequality and injustice.

Critics of the culturalist approach offer alternative methods of thinking about and interpreting the lives of the urban poor in U.S. cities. Standing outside the particularistic categories of current American political life, these alternatives cannot be tagged "liberal" or "conservative." Unlike the culturalist model, these approaches are not propositions characterized by elegance and parsimony, nor are they particularly palatable to mainstream audiences. Instead, complicated and messy, they require us to look hard at common sources of both wealth and well-being, of misery and suffering. In ways complicated and involved, these analyses challenge accepted and acceptable definitions of problems, seeking to connect human lives **to** larger systems and processes.

In **a** chapter titled "Connections," anthropologist Eric R. Wolf has written, "[T]he world of humankind constitutes a . . . totality of interconnected processes, and inquiries that disassemble this totality and then fail to reassemble it falsify reality. Concepts like . . . 'culture' name bits and threaten to turn names into things." Wolf then urges social scientists to investigate "wider linkages"—"'webs' or 'nets' of relations that connect actors in local social fields to **a** wider context" (Wolf 1982:3, 23, 385; also see Schneider 1995:7). Similarly, Leith Mullings argues for studies that examine "vertical links that connect the social groups studied to the larger society" and ask, "[H]ow are these groups embedded in the political economy of the wider society?" (1987:**6).**

"To connect" means that we reassemble the bits that have been disassembled. This is a difficult task, in large part because the practice of splintering is so common, it is hard to keep an eye on the bigger picture. "The manner in which knowledge and institutions are organized in the contemporary world," argue Kleinman, Das, and Lock, "reifies the fragmentation of [social phenomena] while casting a veil of misrecognition over the domain as a whole." They go on to ask, **"[Is** it] because if seen as a whole it would be too threatening?" (1996 :xix–xx).

To concern ourselves with the political economy of the wider society suggests we focus on a feature of social life touched upon earlier: differential access to material resources and power. Today, this directs our attention to the dynamics of capitalism and to how relations of production and processes of capital accumulation are experienced in the inner city (Wolf 1982; Harvey 1989; Sassen 1991; Maynard 1995; Schneider 1995). "Contemporary North America," Jane Schneider writes, "is a corner of the world where capitalism flourishes as nowhere else" (1995:20). In a sense, capitalism is a glue that binds social actors to each other in relations marked by inequality.

These relations, as Wolf points out, "take clout to set up, clout to maintain, and clout to defend." This kind of power Wolf calls "structural power," one of four modes he delineates. Structural power "is power that structures the political economy. . . . [It] shapes the social field of action **so** as to render some kinds of behavior possible, while making others less possible or impossible" (1990 :587). The other modes of power operate in relation to structural power; they are "power as an attribute of the person, as potency or capability," power "as the ability of an ego to impose its will

on an alter, in social action, in interpersonal relations," and "[tactical or organizational] power that controls the settings in which people may show forth their potentialities and interact with others." These forms of power transpire in social interactions and are played out in institutional settings where the basic groupings of society are reproduced: the family, the neighborhood, the school, the workplace, the shelter, the streets, the community residence, the prison. Even though "the notion of structural power is useful precisely because it allows us to delineate how the forces of the world impinge upon the people we study," it remains the mode neglected in the most popular understanding of the urban poor (1990:587).

In our popular and political culture, personal responsibility is the theme of the day. Indeed, the new welfare law is titled "The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996" ("President Signs" 1996; Uchitelle 1997). But individuals are accountable and have "agency" only to the degree that their potentialities have been nourished and allowed expression (Wolf 1990:587). As the poor and working poor have been pushed deeper into the "inner city" by means of "structural power," "organizational" power is unleashed in various social institutions: the school system, the marketplace, the criminal justice system, health and mental health care systems, the housing system (including shelters and residences), the family. To talk about personal accountability without considering those external forces that rein it in is to place an impossible and unfair burden on the individual concerned.

Despite pervasive rhetoric about individual responsibility, many scholars are taking a closer look at "external forces," for instance, examining cities as "loci of capital

accumulation and investment, as reservoirs of labor, and as nodes of intervention by the state" (Wolf 1982:423; Harvey 1973; 1985; Castells 1977; Sassen 1991). In a recent study, David Maynard shows that inner cities of the United States are "sites of intersecting circuits of national and global capital accumulation," and he specifies how "inner city people are themselves the loci of multiple circuits of capital accumulation." To illustrate, Woodhouse women are among those "inner city consumers" to whom "a variety of products are specifically targeted (clothing, shoes, tobacco, alcohol, drugs)"; they are also, as my own project represents, "objects of study **by** a substantial social science and urban social policy industry which provides employment for a large number of middle class academics" (Maynard 1995:1–2).

"These are most definitely not simply abstract structural processes and outcomes of capitalist inequalities," Maynard writes, "since they have complicated, direct and all too often painful effects on the daily lives of inner city people" (1995:2). Such painful effects are the subject of a recent issue of the journal *Daedalus* devoted to the topic and referred to there as "social suffering": it "results from what political, economic and institutional power does to people, and reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems" (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1996:xi).

In one of the *Daedalus* essays, physician/anthropologist Paul Farmer describes social suffering among residents of Do Kay, a rural village in Haiti (1996:261–83). In presenting the life histories of two people, Acephie and Chouchou, Farmer has us taste suffering. Refusing to leave it at that, he makes clear these stories "illustrate some of the mechanisms through which large-scale social forces crystallize

into the sharp, hard surfaces of individual suffering" (1996: 263; 1992; 1994). Structural power is at play, limiting, constraining, confining "power of the person" (Wolf 1990:587). Farmer asks, "By what mechanisms do social forces become embodied as individual experience?" (1996:261–62). As I reflect on the lives of the women of Woodhouse, I believe the answer, in part, lies in the way in which poor people internalize dominant images and negative stereotypes in the course of their everyday experiences.

I do not believe the struggles of the women of Woodhouse are simply the result of poor personal decisions or of their individual weaknesses. I realize that their individual "weaknesses" are handicaps, because, in our current social arrangements, they ultimately contribute to subjecting these women to the direct control of others. Material and power inequities are the real odds against which they have been struggling; internalized, they produce inner conflict.

Farmer also observes that "there is much more to it than can ever meet the ethnographer's eye" (1992:255), a critical point that directs me to alternate between the readily visible and the invisible. Listening to Woodhouse women recall their experiences, sharing their memories and hopes, I sense ways larger social forces circumscribe their lives: the intersection of poverty, gender, and race, and the cultural construction of sexuality, mental illness, and homelessness. These categories form the basis of their social, cultural, and psychological "identities" and only appear to be intrinsic, natural, normal. Manipulated by the policies and practices of the various institutional settings in which they find themselves, their "identities" become useful and imperceptible tools of social control.

I am amazed that Woodhouse women somehow manage

to tenaciously hold on to life in the face of "sustained and insidious suffering" (Farmer 1996:261). In my observation, each day brings examples of kindness and love: one woman offers another helpful advice; a younger woman runs an errand for an older woman; a very sick woman, distracted by other concerns, still remembers to ask about my children. Each life story also speaks of human courage and perseverance, the limits of which are tested by the wretched conditions of our contemporary world.

Setting the Stage for Woodhouse: Political-Economic Conditions in Social Suffering

Globally, we are now in a phase of capitalism characterized by relative deindustrialization alongside expansion of a low-wage/high-wage service economy (Barak 1991; Fraser 1993; Ami 1994; I. Susser 1996). Although regional differences abound in the United States, the past twenty years have seen a general shift from traditional manufacturing to the management and production of both high-tech and low-skill services (Sassen 1991; Fraser 1993). Economic restructuring has had profound social effects, including painful consequences for many workers and the poor, and the rise of homelessness in cities (Hopper, Susser, and Conover 1986). After all, the playing field is not level, and the results of political-economic shifts are shared neither comparably nor equally. For example, as Mullings documents, high unemployment among the working class is directly related to the outmigration **of** jobs (1994: 125). "Capital forever abandons older sectors **of** the economy and relocates in new and more promising industries and areas," and people are its

fallout. "Capitalism exercises an extraordinary destabilizing power in its continuous search for higher profits and sustained capital accumulation," and human lives lie in its wake (Schneider 1995:5, quoting Eric Wolf).

With economic restructuring has come economic dislocation for those left out of the loop. In the United States, working-class poverty increased, creating in the 1980s the "new poverty" (Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1992). Real wages declined, and, as greater numbers of women found work in the service economy, the ideal of the family wage lost its footing (Fraser 1993:13). At the same time, spending for social programs was slashed, pushing approximately 11 million Americans into poverty by the 1980s (Ehrenreich 1989:190).

In combination, economic restructuring and the restructuring of the welfare state set the stage for the enormous polarization of wealth we see across the United States in the 1990s. Housing gentrification occurs alongside housing displacement and homelessness. As support for public services declines (from health and mental health to schools and transportation), gross differences in the quality of private versus public services become acute (Hopper, Susser, and Conover 1986). These are phenomena we have been witness to over the past two decades:

> [During the eighties] the poor had become visible again. It is a sad testimonj to the middle-class solipsism of the eighties that the poor had literally to go outdoors to make their presence known. The homeless, who captured media attention in the middle of the decade, are not a special breed, as they are sometimes presented, but only the unluchiest of the poor. Their own homes had been torn down, or renovated and gentrified to make room for the rising corporate-administrative

> stratum represented by the yuppies. Or they had been driven out by sky-rocketing real estate prices, bid up by the rich and nearly rich. The homeless stood–literally, on so many city streets–as a shocking refutation of the ongoing consumer binge: the other side of the story. (Ehrenreich 1989:240; see also Snow and Anderson **1993)**

New York, perhaps the quintessential global city, has become, in Sassen's words, "[a] key location for finance and for specialized service firms [generating] the expansion of low-wage jobs," including those in the informal sector (1991*:3*, 10). Alongside its expansion as **a** leading global financial center, the city has seen a new class alignment **of** very high- and very low-income workers, and a labor market that remains segmented and segregated by ethnicity (Sassen 1991: *333;* Stafford 1985; Hopper 1988). During these years, poverty rates have risen and income inequality has increased, and affordable housing has declined while housing gentrification has intensified. At the same time, government entitlement programs for the poor have been cut back, ethnicity has become more politicized, and poor people (and taxes) have been increasingly demonized (Weitzman 1989).

As with other cities, changes in New York's political economic landscape have also meant shifts in the sectoral location of jobs and housing, and "planned shrinkage–the denial of essential municipal services"–as responsibility for public maintenance shifted from federal to local or state governments (Harvey 1973; Wallace 1990, 1993). In one study, the authors document sorry outcomes for the poor as this shift occurs without sufficient resources at the local level to meet its new mandates (Jones, Turner, and Montbach 1992). Decentralization, coproduction, and deinstitutionalization are three interrelated policies implemented in New York City

that illustrate what happens as local-level institutions, without adequate resources, are mandated to solve urban problems. Deinstitutionalization, a policy of shifting patients from psychiatric hospitals into the care of family or community support systems, offers a case in point: "patients were returned to communities and families that lacked the facilities and resources to care for them. It is now well known that many of these patients joined the ranks of the homeless" (.Jones, Turner, and Montbach 1992:111; see also Baxter and Hopper 1981; Blau 1987; Dear and Wolch 1987; 1992; Burt 1992; Golden 1992; Wolch and Dear 1993). Baxter and Hopper note that by 1977, more than 126,000 mental patients were released from state hospitals to New York City (1981:31).

We also know that "[b]asic urban services are important aspects of the material resources necessary for survival, [and] their decline is threatening the ability of poor and working-class populations to maintain themselves. [But] in capitalist society there is a contradiction between human needs and the drive for profit" (Jones, Turner, and Montbach 1992:99–101). Inner-city residents don't have a fair share of the social resources necessary to maintain the "built environment" of the inner city–its houses, roads, work sites, schools, sewage systems, parks, cultural institutions (Harvey 1973; Jones, Turner, and Montbach 1992). Rayna Rapp poignantly explains the effects on human lives: ravaged by inequality, inner-city schools at once "distort children's potential [and] cannot prepare low-income youth for an economy in which they are basically redundant" (1995: 187; see also Kozol 1991).

The growing income gap between rich and poor is both

an indicator and an outcome of these processes. "Income disparity in the United States is now the widest it's been since the crash of **1929,"** according to Zepezauer and Naiman **(1996:11).** Data from **1996** show that the income share of the poorest 20 percent of Americans is **3.7** percent while that of the wealthiest **5** percent of Americans is **21.4** percent (Brock **1998).** Put another way, "the income of the top **1%** of Americans now equals that of the bottom third **(33%)** of the population" (Brock **1998).**

Poverty researchers Aaronson and Cameron consider the poverty rate "a rather blunt tool for understanding the actual living standards of the poor," because it fails to capture those in "extreme poverty" or those who live above the arbitrary povery-level mark of **$16,485** for a family of four **(1997:9;** see also Collins **1996).** Over the first six years **of** the **1990s,** the U.S. poverty rate hovered around **14** percent, with the highest rates in urban and rural areas as compared to suburban areas–21.5 percent, **17.2** percent, and **10.3** percent respectively in **1993** (Aaronson and Cameron **1997:9;** Henwood **1997:383).**

At **26.5** percent, the poverty rate in New York City means that three out of ten citizens are poor; unemployment hovers between **9** and **10** percent (Aaronson and Cameron **1997:2;** Rosenberg **1995:ii).** It is also well established that New York City's labor market is highly segmented and segregated by ethnicity, with blacks and Hispanics "concentrated in lower-level jobs in peripheral industries, many of which are declining" (Stafford **1985:vi).** The glaring division of resources by ethnicity and class has pushed New York's poor (the surplus) and working poor (low-wage proletariat) deeper into the "inner-city ghetto," that imaginary breeding place of

problem populations. In fact, the "inner city ghettos" are the sections (neighborhoods, census tracts) of the larger city hardest hit by the dismantling of services and infrastructural supports.

While economic restructuring has generated a surplus of poor people, it is the poor who appear to be abberant (Braverman **1974;** Derber 1995). Moreover, policies and programs designed to address "social problems" seem inevitably to fail. For such a highly developed and sophisticated nation as the United States, this dismal track record seems implausible, unless these practices are not failing when outcomes are matched against underlying objectives. We often assume that these objectives are to eliminate poverty, substance abuse, criminality, homelessness, and so on. If the underlying objective, however, is to contain the "surplus" in relatively controlled settings, then current policies and practices **do** indeed accomplish their mission: some of the surplus find unsteady and poorly paid work in the informal sector, some are warehoused in shelters and prisons, some are intoxicated by illegal drugs and legal alcohol. Lately, many are dying off in the AIDS epidemic.

The women of Woodhouse are part of this surplus—redundant in the economy, useful as an ideological tool. The "characteristics" of the women of Woodhouse—poor, homeless (have a history of homelessness), black (for the most part), mentally ill (have been diagnosed with a mental illness), prostitutes and crack addicts (some of them)—constitute that which the popular culture has handily demonized. In the popular imagination, these women make up the devil herself, to borrow from Frances Fox Piven's analytic description of poor women's role in America.[4]

The set of images behind each "characteristic" associated with Woodhouse residents works with other pervasive ideologies to further elaborate exclusion and marginalization. Powerful among these is the "cult of individualism" tied to the doctrine of private property and faith in "achievement" (Piven and Cloward 1971:47; also see Abercrombie and Turner 1982:409). Defined as "the doctrine of self-help through work," the cult of individualism has found a footing in the United States as nowhere else. The doctrine, these days considered a moral truth, helps consign the poor to the dustbins: hard work will pay off; poverty signals laziness. Independence, hard work, self-sufficiency are virtues, while poverty is "the obvious consequence of sloth and sinfulness" (Piven and Cloward 1971:46, quoting Robert H. Bremmer).[5]

For those not consigned to the dustbin, the struggle to remain welcome goes on. "Any class below the most securely wealthy [is] insecure and deeply anxious," Ehrenreich claims, speaking for most Americans. "[We are] afraid of misfortunes that might lead to a downward slide." We have learned from the cult of individualism, however, that any reversal can be overcome by inner strength and hard work. The doctrine, then, adds to our anxiety another layer of fear: "a fear of inner weakness, of growing soft, of failing to strive, of losing discipline and will" (Ehrenreich 1989:15).

From Ehrenreich's perspective, whether "looking down toward the realm of less, or up toward the realm of more, there is the fear, always, of falling" (1989:15). Something must be done with the fear to make it bearable. Sander Gilman finds a clue in the need for society to identify the "other": "We project this fear—the fear of collapse, the sense of dissolution—onto the world in order to localize it and, in-

deed, to domesticate it. For once we locate it, the fear of our own dissolution is removed. Then it is not we who totter on the brink of collapse, but rather the other. And it is an-other who has already shown his or her vulnerability by having collapsed" (1988:1).

The women of Woodhouse represent collapse. As formerly homeless women, their icon is the familiar "bag lady" who "does not fall within the range of what we have been taught to perceive as normal" (Gilman 1988:12). Gendered and diseased, Woodhouse women signify melancholia: as female, "especially prone to the exaggeration of emotional states;" as mentally ill, "(either) they suffer from the sin of lethargy (or) are maniacal, out of control, and running amok" (Gilman 2988:10–11).

Gilman reminds us that in the "world ofrepresentations" our own fears are banished, "isolated as surely as if we had placed [thatwhich we fear] on a desert island. 4nd yet in this isolation, these icons remain alive and visible to all of us, proof that we are still whole, healthy, and sane; that we are not different, diseased, or mad" (1988:271–72). Certainly, the women of Woodhouse are icons of many things we fear, not the least of which are poverty and illness. With fear, loathing, and dread, many believe that women like these– different, destitute, diseased, mad–do probe that the rest of us are whole, safe, healthy, sane. They are not us.

But they are us. We discover, after all, these are ordinary women who share our worries, our desires, our concerns. Whethcr they were born into poverty or have fallen into it, theirs are stories about struggles for the rudiments of subsistence and the emotional struggles they face. Of Course, all struggles are not identical. Paradoxically, by means of the women's stories, the reader may come to identify with these

not so different women. Still, it is true "we" are not "they" since, despite our fears, only a few among us will ever become as destitute as they are now.

Methodology and Organization of the Book

This book is based on the hundreds of pages of field notes and interviews I gathered on thirty-nine women and sixteen staff members during the course of the research. When the time came for analysis and writing, I coded the "data" on the basis of key themes that emerged from the material, including experiences with poverty, homelessness, work, the institutional setting, substance abuse, sexual violence, mental illness, AIDS, family and interpersonal relationships, sexuality, race, gender, and food. These general themes form the main portion of the book—the narrative of ethnographic description found in the following twelve chapters.

Before setting foot in Woodhouse, I prepared a 225-question guide formulated on the basis of the larger AIDS prevention research team's objectives. I was introduced to staff and residents as a researcher studying women's health issues. While keeping the larger agenda in mind, I opted for a more interactive approach to data gathering, as qualitative researchers tend to do (Agar 1996; Williams 1989; Sanjek 1990). During the course of my two-year project, I used various qualitative methodologies, primarily participant observation, informal encounters, and tape-recorded, open-ended interviews with staff and residents. I also arranged an HIV-related women's health series at the site; participants were surveyed for their opinions on the groups. By these methods, I was able to better get to know the women of Woodhouse.

A central goal in my writing this book is to share with

readers what the women are like and my experiences with them. I hoped to find a strategy for representing the results of this project that would not homogenize the women or neglect the broad social context that frames their experiences.

I began to get to know the women during the cooking group, an organized program held at Woodhouse. In the course of the research, I found the activities involved in planning and preparing a meal a lovely way to develop special ties with individual women. While that activity was a central feature of my participatory research, our conversations did not always occur in that setting, although they appear to have in the book. By using the narrative device of presenting conversations and discussions around the kitchen table, these chronicles may be called "historias," what Ruth Behar considers part "history and story, reality and fiction" (1993: 16). Although I have taken the liberty of rearranging the setting of the narratives, I have made every attempt to stay true to the words of Woodhouse women, their own descriptions of their experiences, and our conversations together. "Woodhouse" is an invented name, and I have given pseudonyms to all residents and staff I describe in this book. In most cases, the women chose their own pseudonyms for me to use.

This book is all about ambiguity and contradiction, and the story of my project can join the literature on ethical dilemmas of fieldwork. First, as Merrill Singer has persuasively argued, politics is always close at hand; therefore "scholarly distance" is an illusion (Singer 1993: 24; 1994). I pretend to no such illusion. My work as an ethnographer at a federally funded research institute attached to a major medical center, however, suggests that I am just as much a part of the problem as the solution. David Maynard situates

social scientists like myself in an urban social policy industry built around the study of the urban poor, an aspect of the capital accumulation process (1995: 2; Waterston 1993:29–30; Price 1992). Like Kostas Gounis, I cannot escape being "a representative of the discipline or institution," even as my objective is to increase understanding (1995: 12; see also Farmer 1992:xi). After all, my probes are not much different from those of welfare investigators toward recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), particularly those questions centered around sexual behavior and drug use (Piven and Cloward 1971:166–67). However else they may be described, my encounters with the women of Woodhouse are "power-laden between researcher and researched. . .[and]the researcher inevitably exploits her subject friendship for privacy-invading information" (di Leonardo 1991: 31–38; see also Crapanzano 1990: 148).

Other difficult issues trouble me. I wonder if the "historias" constitute data; if not, what happens to the women and my relationship with them as they become transformed into data? My social science training has taught me to keep the "I" out of things (i.e., leave the relationship out altogether), and besides, without data what do I analyze and interpret? Also, what aspects of these women and their lives constitute data important to analyze?

Perhaps the "historias" constitute "acts of moral witness." Such acts, according to Gounis, "however honorably intended, become 'deformed and indistinguishable from voyeurism by their ultimate ineffectiveness"' (Gounis 1995:12, quoting Michael Ignatieff). Like Thomas Foster, I struggle to negotiate what he calls "the double necessity": "It is necessary both to avoid appropriating the experiences of others by claiming the right to speak as an authority about their

stories and to avoid ghettoizing the experiences of others as unknowable or meaningless" (1995:70–71). These are dilemmas not yet fully solved, although I do hope that my narrative strategy of letting the women speak for themselves moves toward resolving the double necessity.

Despite my contradictory role and goals, I chose to press forward with the research and the writing of this book. When the time came for me to begin writing, I discussed some of these dilemmas with four of the women portrayed in the book: Nora Gaines, Dixie Register, Hattie McFarrell, and Susan Jones. The four women encouraged me to proceed. Later that day, Nora and I went out for a cup of coffee. I spoke incessantly about the book that now loomed over my head. Nora took my hands in hers. "The book, the book, the book, you'll write the book," she admonished, "but the really important thing is—you've come into my life and I've come into yours."