Preface

In the summer of 1983, a large number of women established the Seneca Women’s Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice near a military nuclear weapons storage depot in Seneca County, New York. There, women gathered to protest nuclear weapons and to critique the “patriarchal society” that created and used those weapons. During that summer the protests led to verbal and physical clashes between the encampment and the people residing in surrounding communities. The encampment became a major regional news event of the summer and was noted regularly in the national media.

This book looks at the conflict between the women in the encampment and their neighbors, at the strategies these people used to deal with their differences, and at some particularly intense confrontations during which their conflicting views and positions came into play. Both groups found the differences between them very disturbing, but perhaps even more upsetting were the differences within each group. As the events of the summer revealed these differences and forced public acknowledgment of them, deeply held assumptions about what constituted membership in each community were challenged. In emphasizing conflicts and disagreements, however, I do not mean to suggest that only disharmony existed in Seneca County or the women’s encampment. Rather, I hope these confrontations can provide a window on our social mechanisms, for these kinds of differences between and within communities are not unique to this set of events; they should be seen as an expected part of social life.

In negotiating their differences, both internal and external, each group attempted to build a coherent identity, to define who they were and to state their place in a confusing and threatening world. To this end, they constructed representations of themselves and the “other,” which they used to defend their identities and communities. Here, I analyze the processes involved in building and using these self-representations, I ex-
amine a wide range of narratives and actions that made up social, psycho-
logical, and political dramas.

In the tradition of Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman’s Small Town in
Mass Society (a study conducted in the 1950s in a community near Seneca
County), this book is concerned with the often uneasy relationship be-
tween local communities and the larger society in which they exist. But
contrast with the earlier study, which took place before the globalization of mass
communication and the massive presence of multimedia forms in the
home, this book does not assume that mass culture is an “external agent,”
somewhat separable from the local community into which it “transmits”
policies and information (1958:82). Instead, all the aspects of mass so-
cieties intricately intertwine, generating much confusion and tension in
citizen members, who then try to separate these intertwined aspects of their
lives into identifiable communities and influences. These attempts are
what interest me here. I want to understand how people defined and
juggled what came to be seen as separate personal, community-based,
and mass-culture narratives as they were trying to make sense of the world
around them.

The question that arises for an anthropologist studying these events is
not who was right and who was wrong but how the participating commu-
nities defined all that was happening around them that summer. This book
analyzes constructed texts, identities, and narrative representations in
order to show their rhetorical composition and the discursive constraints
that affected their production and utilization. I conclude that constructing
representations is a powerful political act that controls not only the
crucial definition of self and other but also the differential access to power,
resources, influence, and status.

The results of my work are presented here in the form of an experiment-
ial ethnography that employs, at the same time that it is exploring, a
variety of textual forms and voices. Such textual experiments are becom-
ing more common in anthropological texts. Myra Bluebond-Langner
(1978), for example, uses the same technique of organizing narrative
information into the form of a dramatic play that I have employed in
Chapter 13. The fictionalized narrative in Chapter 12, though not com-
mon in standard ethnography, is being seen more often as anthropologists
turn their field experiences into novels (Barbara Tedlock, Billy Jean
Isbell, Dan Rose, and others are actively exploring this genre). Even the inclusion
of substantial transcripts of conversations and written textual produc-
tions of the community under study is still relatively uncommon in eth-
nography. Peter Davis’s portrait of an American community, which com-
bines "social research with techniques of storytelling" (Davis 1982:10),
covering events from a wedding to a murder in a small town, perhaps
comes closest to the project attempted here. These experiments in tex-
tuality, wedged into more traditional analysis, are designed to demon-
strate the complexity of textual production not just in ethnographies but
also in the everyday lives of the people anthropologists study.

The events described and analyzed here took place in 1983, at a time
when there was much concern and discussion about the nuclear threat to
the world. When events in Europe in 1989 and 1990 signaled the "end"
of the cold war, concerns about nuclear weapons and policies came to seem
almost unnecessary. Suddenly it seemed as if we could put behind us the
powerful cold-war narratives of self and other that had been sustaining
and driving us. The attempts to replace these old stories with new narra-
tives of a neutral, unthreatening world were short-lived, and the war in the
Persian Gulf brought back in full force the types of narratives discussed
here. I hope this analysis helps the reader to make sense not only of the
events of 1983 but of the similar processes of narrative construction and
sexual self-defense that continue to rule our understanding of the world
situation.

My research was conducted in two communities in conflict with each
other, yet both encouraged and supported my project. I thank all the
women of the Seneca Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and
Justice who were willing to share their experiences, ideas, and written
accounts. Seven I only know by first name and others are identified this
way for anonymity. I particularly thank Jodi, Shad, Andrea, Donna, and
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vided materials from their encampment archives. The Boston Women's
Video Collective provided me with copies of their extensive videotape
documentation of the encampment, which proved to be extremely valu-
able.

Residents in and around Seneca County also were willing to share their
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Seneca County sheriff Tom Cleere generously gave me access to the records of the events of 1983 and the facilities to study them. Dale Arcangeli, also of the sheriff's department, provided a fascinating orientation to life in Seneca County and was an excellent source of information and reflections.

The men and women of the Waterloo VFW Post made me feel welcome in their community, and my special appreciation goes to Ron and Nancy Bush, and to my friend Benny Udahowane, for all the help they provided.

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In Seneca Falls, Mary Curry was a wonderful source of historical information for women's activities in the area, and Gwen Henderson (pseudonym) provided a moving and significant account of life in her town. Howard Van Kirk, Jr., shared his perceptive observations in an ever-delightful manner, and Pam Quiggle provided excellent photographic documentation of the encampment as well as her friendship and an introduction to a softball team in need of another player. My thanks to the members of that team for the chance to participate in another aspect of Seneca County life.

My apologies to any at the encampment and in Seneca County I may have forgotten, and my thanks to some very helpful people who have chosen to remain anonymous.

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The Auburn Citizen also made its records available.

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