

**A Research Agenda for Studying Native Communities and Disaster:  
Toward an Anti-Colonial Disaster Methodology<sup>1</sup>**

**Quick Response Grant Report  
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This Report<sup>2</sup> provides an overview of research funded by a Quick Response Grant of the National Hazards Center. Fieldwork was conducted during two site visits to the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Southeast Montana in Fall 2012. The Report has three parts. Part One introduces the Tribal community and sketches a brief overview of the disaster. Part Two describes the methods of the project. Part Three summarizes key findings and is written in the form of a research agenda for further scholarship.

**Part One: The Northern Cheyenne and the Ash Creek Fire of 2012**

*The Northern Cheyenne*

The Northern Cheyenne reservation consists of 444,000 acres in Southeast Montana. There are 4,939 residential members living on the reservation and an additional 5,111 living elsewhere (<http://www.cheyennenation.com/>). The Northern Cheyenne trace their origins back to South Hudson Bay on the Eastern seaboard and the Great Lakes region, before the Tribe split into Northern and Southern bands. Pushed westward and then south, they were herded onto the land that became Montana and eventually into

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly entitled, “Government-to-Government Disaster Policy as the Northwest Burns: Housing Recovery on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation.”

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Oklahoma. In the great hero story of the Tribe, two leaders, Dull Knife and Little Wolf, decided to walk back to the band's favored territory in the Tongue River region.

Followed by 1,500 of the Northern Cheyenne, the band made it to Montana where they fought General Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876. Eventually taken into custody by General Miles, they persuaded him to petition the U.S government for a reservation. By Executive Order in 1884 the Northern Cheyenne were awarded 450,000 acres of land.

In 1934, after passage of the Indian Reorganization Act, the Tribe filed a U.S. District Court suit for the original fifty one million acres they had once inhabited. They received a judgment at a penny an acre. With the funds they purchased back, at a dime an acre, their almost half a million acres so that by the 1990s the Northern Cheyenne reservation was "98 percent Indian owned and 77 percent tribally owned" (Lopach et al.1998:86). Near total Indian reservation ownership is rare; the original action and subsequent efforts to maintain it demonstrate, according to Lopach et al, that "[a] traditional and persisting Northern Cheyenne value is that the Tribe and its land are identified with each other" (Lopach et al. 1998:86). According to Ernie Robinson, known on the reservation as one of the Tribal historians, "Homes were built with the rest of the money for different individuals. And they called those Judgment Homes. Many of them stand today." At least one of these Judgment Homes, built in the 1960s, burned in the Ash Creek fire.

Today the Tribe has seventy percent unemployment and a severe housing shortage. The Housing Authority of the Northern Cheyenne (HANC) says there are over two hundred families on a waiting list for homes and many others are living in insufficient and crowded structures. Tribal members note, however, that despite these

conditions there is almost no homelessness on the reservation as people without housing are usually taken in by family members, producing extended and multigenerational families under one roof. While possessed of rich coal deposits and desperately in need of capital and jobs, the Tribe has for over forty years sought to avoid major incursions by the coal industry.

### *The Ash Creek Fire*

Summer 2012 saw massive wildfires throughout the Northwest. Sixty-seven fires raged in Montana alone. The Ash Creek fire began on June 25, 2012 and was contained on July 10, 2012 after burning 249,562 acres or 390 square miles (<http://inciweb.org/incident/article/2989/15050/>). On June 27, 2012 Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer signed an Executive Order proclaiming an emergency in the Rosebud and Powder River counties and the Northern Cheyenne Reservation; on July 25, 2012 he requested a Presidential disaster declaration. On August 2, 2012 President Barack Obama declared the event a major disaster. A Public Assistance award of \$1,602,905 was granted for damages that consisted primarily of power lines, utilities, communications, and fencing. Hazard Mitigation funds were also awarded.

On the Northern Cheyenne reservation the fire destroyed nineteen homes. A third of the territory was also damaged, including destruction of forest and grazing pasture. The HANC garnered 22 trailers from the General Services Administration.<sup>3</sup> Though the

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<sup>3</sup> FEMA has “partnered with other federal agencies to support tribes with their housing needs. In a successful one-time program that began in 2007, tribal governments across the nation partnered with FEMA to use government excess manufactured housing. In accordance with Congressional guidelines and following excess property regulations, unused manufactured homes were transferred to tribal governments. FEMA worked in consultation with the General Services Administration and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), as well as tribal governments, to develop a distribution

trailers are referred to as “FEMA trailers,” HANC leadership emphasized that they received nothing from FEMA but got the trailers through personal relationships with national HUD administration. While I was told by Scott Logan, Senior Advisor of Tribal Relations for FEMA (Region VIII), that HANC had paid for the trailers to be transported to the reservation with an Imminent Threat Grant, HANC directors insisted they had paid for their transportation with their own non-program funds. Explained Michael Speelman, Deputy Director and Construction Division Manager, HANC, “We dipped into our rainy day fund because it was a rainy day.” The trailers had been previously used for interim disaster housing after the tornado in Joplin, Missouri and flooding in Minot, North Dakota.

## **Part Two: Methods**

I made two fieldwork trips to the Northern Cheyenne reservation. The first was October 26-27, 2012, two and a half months after the Presidential Declaration, and the second was November 16-18, 2012. I interviewed fourteen people, four of whom I interviewed twice for a total of eighteen interviews.

What follows is a further breakdown of respondent identity. Eleven respondents, including two non-native residents, lived on the reservation, one Tribal member lived off of the reservation, and two respondents were state and federal emergency managers.

Three of the respondents lost homes in the fire and one had pasture land that was

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plan so that all tribes had an equitable chance to participate. These homes met all HUD housing regulations for air quality with specifications equivalent to units purchased off-the-lot. As a component of the partnership, tribal governments did not pay to purchase the units, but were responsible for transportation and unit set up. HUD determined that the costs were considered eligible for reimbursement under the Indian Housing Block Grant program” (U.S Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. July 21, 2011:17).

damaged. Four worked for the Housing Authority of the Northern Cheyenne, one worked for the reservation fire fighting unit, two were young adult residents who jumped into post-disaster leadership roles organizing the relief effort, and two were state or regional emergency managers. Nine respondents were Native, one was Mexican, two were white, and two were racially unidentified (these were phone interviews with state and regional emergency managers; I did not ask their race). Eleven respondents were male and three were female. The youngest respondent was in her late twenties, and the oldest who volunteered his age was seventy, though another elder might have been older. Interviews lasted between 10 minutes and two hours and 45 minutes, with most taking about an hour. Eleven of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a graduate assistant; I took written notes during the seven other interviews and typed them up each evening.

### **Part Three: A Research Agenda for Further Scholarship on Tribes and Disaster**

Part Three of this Report summarizes project findings and presents them in the form of a research agenda for future scholarship. Two brief field visits cannot produce definitive conclusions but did raise valuable questions worthy of future research. A full-length article for a peer-reviewed journal is in progress from the current research and will be shared with the NHC upon publication.

I have clustered preliminary findings into three categories, moving from the level of policy to the phenomenological to the methodological. The first has to do with the status and meaning of government-to-government relationship between Native Tribes and the federal government in the context of disaster. During the course of this research the Stafford Act was amended to allow Tribal governments to make their own requests for

Presidential declarations instead of having to go through state government. The second category regards the meaning of home and loss for a people whose recent modern history includes decades of nomadic existence and forced displacement. Initial observations indicate that Tribal members describe loss due to wildfire more in terms of *treasured belongings* and *land* than in terms of *housing*. My previous disaster research focused on Hurricane Katrina where the language of home as house was more central to expressions of loss than I encountered on the reservation.

Finally, the methodological challenges common to white study of Native peoples loomed large in this research. While emergency and housing directors were quite receptive to speaking with me and generous in sharing their time, it was difficult to obtain precise information about key aspects of the disaster's impact and the Tribe's response. Specifically, I received many competing accounts regarding the houses that had been destroyed, the distribution of trailers, and the current whereabouts of fire survivors. While frustrating at the time, I consider these messy encounters a critical part of the project's findings. The inability and unwillingness—I assume it was both—to provide clear-cut answers to my questions bespeaks a history of power and resistance. Tracking the obfuscations and protective gatekeeping is useful to the annals of white/Native relations and can contribute to an important knowledge base for future scholars hoping to document Native experience, particularly in a post-disaster context.

#### *Government-to-Government Declarations*

*I don't think that FEMA really recognized the government-to-government relationships that they have, for the government with our Tribal government.*

—Lafe Haugen, Director, Housing Authority for the Northern Cheyenne Reservation (11.16.12)

On July 21, 2011, the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs held a hearing

called “Facing Floods and Fires: Emergency Preparedness for Natural Disasters in Native Communities.” Seven witnesses were called, including Craig Fugate, FEMA Administrator, and Michael S. Black, Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Midway through the proceedings, Chairman Daniel Akaka, the first Native Hawaiian in the Senate and the first Native person to chair the Committee, referred to the striking way in which witness statements were peppered with the language of “government-to-government relations”: “In all of your testimonies you acknowledge that Tribes are sovereign governments with a government-to-government relationship with the United States, and that the United States has a trust responsibility toward Tribes. However,” he continued, “you also are aware that Tribes must go through the governor of a State to be eligible for Federal assistance under the Stafford Act. In your opinion, do you think the Stafford Act should be amended to allow Tribes as governments to request a declaration of emergency from the President?” (Akaka, U.S Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, July 21, 2011:47). Two months before, in May 2011, legislation had been introduced to the House (H.R. 1953) to amend the Stafford Act to allow federally recognized Tribes the right to request a Presidential disaster declaration without having to go through state governors. Five months after the Hearing, Fugate announced that FEMA “supports amending federal law to allow federally recognized Tribal governments to make disaster declaration requests directly to the president” (FEMA 2011). Just over a year later, on January 29, 2013 President Obama signed H.R. 152, the Hurricane Sandy Supplemental Appropriations Bill, with a provision to amend the Stafford Act to allow Tribes to make their own presidential requests. The provision had broad support from the National Congress of American Indians, the Inter-Tribal Long Term Recovery Foundation and the Inter-Tribal Emergency Response Commission as well as many Tribal leaders.

While the legislation had not yet passed at the time of the Ash Creek fire, it had been introduced in both the House and the Senate. I presumed tribal members would enthusiastically support it. It is not only politicians who lace their remarks with reference to the government-to-government relationship between Native people and the U.S.; Tribal members frequently use this language as well and the role of sovereignty—both as ontological status and as a quantifiable political variable—is often invoked. The legislation seemed a straightforward way to broaden Tribal authority and self-determination. However, on the reservation I encountered two kinds of concerns about the increased responsibility.

The first was from Ed Joiner, Coordinator of Emergency Services for the Northern Cheyenne. He had been in the position five years, and had extensive work in fire fighting before that. A white man, he was married to a Cheyenne woman and seemed generally respected by Tribal members. He had been living on the reservation for 22 years. When I asked him about what was at the time pending legislation to allow Tribes to make their own requests for Presidential declarations, he paused. It appeared he had confused Presidential disaster declaration requests, the right that would only be granted to Tribes several months later, with the already existing provision that allowed Tribes the choice, once a declaration has been made, to receive emergency funds as a sub-grantee of the state or as a direct grantee<sup>4</sup>: “I hate to say, but that Stafford Act they have, it kinda makes it so they’re trying to make the tribal nation sovereign so it can go straight to the president. But when you skip the state, you’re missing your twenty five percent, and

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<sup>4</sup> “[A]s sovereign nations, tribes may elect to apply for federal disaster assistance either directly or as part of a state’s disaster request. As direct grantees, tribes manage their own projects and work directly with FEMA officials through the recovery process.” (Fugate, U.S Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. July 21, 2011:16-17).



you're getting a ton more paperwork to do." Joiner had linked the ability to request declarations with a responsibility to be their own grantee for funds. It was the later issue he was worried about. Being one's own grantee comes with increased financial and bureaucratic burdens. Additionally, before the Sandy amendment, states met damage thresholds by combining reservation damage with damage to non-reservation land; the combined impact makes it more likely a disaster will reach the eligibility for assistance. Joiner referred to this point as well, particularly in light of the jigsaw-like jurisdictions over public areas within reservations:

And then really if the Tribe ever declared a disaster on their own, we never meet the [financial] threshold really with this Tribal, this Tribal property because most of the....roads, the houses, and all that, are basically...some are HUD houses, the roads are all, around here, they're all state highway, county roads on the outside and then the BIA road system on the inside....[W]hatever help we can get, FEMA will give us seventy five percent. But there's a lot more paperwork involved [in being a grantee and not a sub-grantee]. So if we go in as a sub-grantee, with the rest of the state and counties, if we go in with them as a sub-grantee, we get our seventy five percent from FEMA and we get twenty five percent from the state...*So we get twenty five percent more by playing the game with the rest of the people than if we went through as a Tribal nation....* [In the case of the Ash Creek fire, as a sub-grantee, the] PDA [Preliminary Disaster Assessment] team comes in and they do their work and then it got declared a disaster. And then they came in and they did their work and then we got our worksheets and we got two out of three of them back already from the Ash Creek fire. So it's a pretty good, it's a pretty easy process when you follow. [emphasis mine]

Joiner raises several substantive concerns about the added responsibilities that might attend declaration authority: cost-sharing obligations, assessment responsibilities, and density thresholds. As rural communities with very low population density (Carroll et. al. 2006:264-5), Tribes are already at a disadvantage for both Public Assistance and

Individual Assistance, where eligibility is calculated in terms of overall impact to the state and not to the Tribe.<sup>5</sup>

As the Stafford amendment was passed during the writing of this Report, analysis has not yet been conducted to determine the relationship between direct Tribal declaration requests and cost-share regulations, PDA responsibilities, assistance funds management, and damage thresholds. Joiner raises valuable concerns, especially in light of reduced infrastructural capacity on the part of many Tribes. His lack of clarity about

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<sup>5</sup> This excerpt is an exchange between Senator Murkowski from Alaska and Craig Fugate, FEMA Administrator, regarding the structural bias against rural—and therefore Native—communities regarding disaster impact assessment:

Senator Murkowski: [D]o you agree that we see a situation more often than not with our smaller, more rural communities, including some of our Alaska Native communities that are disadvantaged when it comes to FEMA providing the individual assistance?

Mr. Fugate: Senator, the assistance is based upon impact to the State. And again, when you deal with small communities, those numbers oftentimes don't show that it has overwhelmed the State's capability.... That never takes away from the impact to the homes and the people that were impacted, but it is a recognition that the Stafford Act was not designed to be the first line of provision of assistance for any level of disaster. So there are many disasters that occur in this Country that will not be declared by the President, or they may only be declared for one area or category. But you do point out one of the challenges that we have, that in these reviews we do try to look at and factor in the unique case of the ruralness, the impacts to the communities, but it is judged based upon the way the Stafford Act directs us to, a statewide impact. So in small communities, rural communities, and coming from the State of Florida, where I have a lot of big cities, but I have some very rural counties, I saw many times, when you went and saw the damage, you are going this is really bad, but in context to the population of the State of Florida, it would not warrant the President declaring it.

Senator Murkowski: It just seems like in so many situations you can read the writing before you have even made the application, that even though the consequence to that small village, that remote community is considerable, is devastating, that the way the system is built, that individual assistance just can't be there, and your example of the Florida one is spot-on; it just causes me to wonder if we need to look at perhaps a different approach, a different model here. [U.S Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, July 21, 2011:42]

the status of the current law and the distinction between disaster requests and assistance management only underscores this point:

They passed some laws a few years ago, and I'm not exactly, I'm still not exactly sure how it works but we can declare an emergency and go through the state and get money. And there's a way lower threshold.... And then also if we want to declare, if there's a federal declaration—like the presidential declaration—we can, we can, we can declare an emergency and if we chose to be a sovereign nation, be our own grantee, then we can go through and request straight to the president. So if we have a big emergency, we can declare—we don't have to go through the state, we can go to the president.

It is worth noting that there is a possibility that Joiner's white racial identity makes him less inclined to support increased sovereignty above all else. Collection and analysis of other Tribal emergency manager reactions to the new legislation will be an important part of anticipating unintended consequences of the new legislation as well as assessing its substantive contribution to increased sovereignty.

The second concern regarding broadened disaster authority on the part of the Tribe was raised by a young woman who had grown up on the reservation and recently returned from completing an M.A program at Stanford University, funded by the local Catholic St. Labre school. Together with Allen Fisher, another young adult resident who recently returned from college, Desi Small-Rodriguez had worked around the clock during and after the fire to assist with relief efforts. She had been appalled at what she called the failure of her Tribal government to respond to the disaster:

There is an emergency plan and it wasn't followed. The Council didn't even know what it was, hadn't even read it.... I learned my whole life to respect elders. I was taken to Tribal Council meetings when I was young. My aunt was the first woman on Tribal Council. But when this happened I couldn't listen anymore. The Tribe is two thirds young people, but no one on the Council is under thirty. You are failing to step up. At the level of the Tribe, the state, the federal government, they are all failing to step up.

Small-Rodriguez was not the only person to express disappointment at the response of the Tribal President and Council to the Ash Creek fire; four months after it

was contained, during Tribal elections, the President and most Council members were voted out. The particular limitations of that administration, combined with the general and pervasive lack of infrastructural and technical resources signals the way in which increased Tribal disaster responsibilities come with increased stakes. In the case of the Ash Creek fire, Small-Rodriguez was concerned that the Tribe would not be able to maximize the opportunity of the damage assessment, even with sub-grantee status. She explained, “There is such a small window, I kept telling them that...Our community already has nothing. We’re already so poor. And now after the fire people who had nothing are now destitute.”

After the fire, Small-Rodriguez decided to run for Tribal Council. Launching a spirited campaign in the months before the election, she won the most votes in her district during the primary.<sup>6</sup> Noting that she had three strikes against her—being young (late twenties), female, and well-educated—she nonetheless wanted the fire to lead to change in reservation politics. While extremely critical of the current Tribal administration, a criticism that took on greater significance when the law broadening Tribal disaster power was signed, her views should not be taken as an argument against Tribal sovereignty. For Small-Rodriguez the solution is not to rely more heavily on federal bodies. Unlike Ed Joiner, Small-Rodriguez felt that “FEMA offered no support doing the assessment, they just gave the deadline. They can so easily turn a blind eye. We’re so isolated here and they can do this because we let them.” Instead, her concerns point to the importance of increasing infrastructural and technical capacity on reservations such that increased political authority genuinely contributes to greater sovereignty.

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<sup>6</sup> Desi Small-Rodriguez lost the general election for her district seat on the Tribal Council, but the new President created a special position on policy for her.

*Home is Land and War Bonnets*

*[I]t's different here. I always tell my kids: where can you go that you can get on horseback and ride all day and never see anybody? Where can you go that you can go fishin' and nobody'll say anything to you?....  
[A]ctually I'll guess that we're really, really... we're really well off, in certain ways.*

—Lloyd LittleBird Sr. (11.17.12)

*My war bonnet—[I lost] everything in that fire. [The] shield—it was built [for] my Uncle. He was in service for about twenty five years. Maybe thirty, thirty somethin' years. He called me up and wanted me to come after it. Wanted it to come home so, he was getting sick so I brought it home. And [it was used] when the Sioux came and road across the reservation to Little Big Horn....The war bonnet [has] been all over. It's been to almost every battle that we fought in... I was a Sun Dancer. And I was in the Marines for a while, and...so he decided to give it to me to keep. Now I don't have anything, you know? I lost everything in the fire.*

—Lloyd LittleBird Sr. (11.17.12)

In the 1960s, when Lloyd LittleBird was a teenager, he helped to build a Judgment House, one of the Tribal residences funded with money from the Northern Cheyenne land judgment. It was supposed to go to his grandmother, but “she never did move in there. She was always used to the outside kind of life, like getting water and stuff.” Years later, after some disputes with relatives over the property, he moved in. It was a “one-room house. One wall, one living room and kitchen combined and then one bedroom.” Thirty years after, HANC received a BIA Housing Improvement Program (HIP) grant to remodel the substandard home: “They came out and they asked me if I wanted another bedroom for my granddaughter. So I told them yeah, so they built one, two bedrooms and a kitchen; the living room was still together. It was kinda small but it was, it was good enough for us, the two of us.”

In the subsequent two years after moving in to the remodeled Judgment Home, LittleBird was diagnosed with cancer, contracted pneumonia, and had a stroke. When the

Ash Creek fire roared through his neighborhood it destroyed the house, as well as his son's a mile away and those of several relatives. I interviewed him in the temporary, interim housing he had received from HANC, a blighted, boarded up HANC house in Rabbittown, which tribal members referred to as the “ghetto” of Ashland. After the fire HANC reopened several of these distressed homes to fire victims. Soon they had to pay rent; it was \$110/month for the place and \$46 for water and electricity. LittleBird had been given one of the GSA trailers and hoped to be moving in within a few weeks. The trailer would go on the site of the Judgment House.

I provide this brief, partial overview of Lloyd LittleBird's housing history to demonstrate that, contrary to traditional sociological notions of disaster, the fire was not an exceptional—nor exceptionally disruptive—event in his lifetime of housing experience (Luft 2009:506). Neither did the loss of the newly remodeled Judgment House appear to be the central part of his experience as a fire victim; he offered each chapter of his housing story in answer to my questions but they did not seem to be what he most wanted to talk about. When I first arrived at his house, before we had completed our introductions and while I was still standing in the entryway, he began to detail the loss of his sacred objects: the war bonnet, shield, pipe, and blankets. Another elderly male fire victim, Hubert Bearchum, did the same thing, beginning at once upon meeting me to describe his anguish at losing his treasured tool collection.

Despite—or perhaps because of—a lifetime of hardship, there was a kind of equanimity in LittleBird's description: “We are so used to being poor that we don't.... really raise Cain or anything. You know we're just glad that sometimes we get money and sometimes we don't....” What seemed to provide solace was the opportunity to

return to his piece of land. “I’m back out there,” he said, referring to the neighborhood of the Judgment House where the trailer home had been placed,

I’m pretty satisfied, you know....They gave us these [trailers] for emergencies. So now you can expect us to live in them, but for ten, fifteen years I guess....It’s pretty, pretty hectic around here....And, we just, kinda more or less live, you know, with the elements. Deer meat. Occasionally Buffalo. Elk. Whatever, whatever we can kill. We usually have dry meat, stuff like that....I guess I wouldn’t live any place else.

While my sample of fire victims was small, the characteristics I have identified in LittleBird’s description—a lifetime of disastrous circumstances; chronically unstable housing conditions; little sense of “home” as a particular structure; and strong attachment to meaningful sacred objects, land, and the way of life of the reservation—are consistent with those of the other respondents. Some of these patterns reflect the experience of socially vulnerable people more generally. The centrality of land and reservation living, however, are particular to Natives. Emergence of these preliminary associations warrants further exploration. They may have bearing on the contextual meaning of home, loss, and recovery for members of Indian reservations.

*Hidden Transcripts and Methodological Colonization: Toward an Anticolonial Methodology of Disaster Scholarship*

*My broad purpose is to suggest how we might more successfully read, interpret, and understand the often fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups. How do we study power relations when the powerless are often obliged to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful....I try to make out a case for a different study of power that uncovers contradictions, tensions, and immanent possibilities. Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a ‘hidden transcript’ that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant.*

—James C. Scott (1990:xii)

Over the course of the two fieldsite visits I spent more than four hours speaking with one or both senior HANC staff. They were extremely warm, welcoming, and

gracious. They invited me to the Tribal Council inauguration ceremony, brought in one of the Tribal historians to tell me the history of the Northern Cheyenne, and acted as key informants, arranging visits with several respondents. One of the informal interviews lasted two hours and forty five minutes and included one or both men at different points. In that single conversation alone I was told alternately that eighteen, nineteen, twenty one, and twenty two homes had burned in the fire. They said, alternately, that one, two, and three of the houses had been insured. I learned the Tribe had been granted nineteen, twenty, twenty one trailers. They had sold several trailers after distributing seven, no eleven, to fire victims.

When the number of houses lost to the fire did not match the number of trailers distributed to victims combined with the number of blighted homes being used as interim housing, even taking into account the range I was given for each category, I was finally told that not all of the burned homes had been occupied at the time of the fire. Called “summer homes,” they too were blighted structures that families living in cramped quarters used during the warm months. They did not have utilities but were periodically in circulation. I understood why this distinction had not appeared in any of the media stories or governmental documents I had read; it is hard to get reimbursements for abandoned homes, and abandonment on the reservation was a transitory state. Though I asked many times I was never given a master list of fire victims, trailer distribution, or interim housing assignments. Even other fire victims and first responders in this very small community could not tell me exactly who had lost a home to the fire or where fire survivors were currently living. After learning that several displaced families were temporarily housed in Ashland Flats, a plateau just outside of Ashland, I drove there to



see for myself. New modular homes that had been empty due to trouble with the water in the area had several new families staying in them, but none that I met had been in the fire.

There are many possible ways to interpret this array and disarray of information, not the least of which is that I might not be a very skilled or culturally competent interviewer. While both are quite possibly true, and my inability to obtain positivist answers was frustrating at the time, when I returned home I remembered what years of fieldwork have repeatedly taught me: a good ethnographic muddle can be more instructive than the tidiest spreadsheet. What was really going on? What were the Housing Authority employees communicating and not communicating? Why couldn't anyone rattle off the less than twenty families whose homes had burned, or even the eleven who had actually been living in the homes at the time of the fire? I realized that the categories I was using—lost house, fire victim, household inhabitants, displaced—were far too static for the world of the reservation. It seemed that my determination to create a map of fire survivors' temporary housing accommodations, while a worthy and useful aim, was perhaps distracting me from observing other dimensions of the experience of life and disaster on the reservation. I had been viewing the fire as a discrete event but could not make sense of it without a better understanding of pre- and post-fire life for the Northern Cheyenne. Despite the fact that I had previously authored an article called "Beyond Disaster Exceptionalism," I had not applied the insights *methodologically*. I began to pay less attention to the information I had wanted but was not getting and more to the question of why I was not getting it.

White academic exploitation of Native communities is well documented, as is Native resistance to scholarly objectification (Smith 2012; Hermes 1999). It occurred to me that the response and non-response to my questions were a form of cultural

corrective. To interpret the obfuscating and contradictory information I received as political resistance, as a demonstration of the *fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups*, allowed me to bring into relief the context of colonization and cultural difference that overdetermined the encounters. I include these remarks here not as a conclusion to my inquiry into the Northern Cheyenne experience of the Ash Creek disaster but rather as the beginning of a reorientation to Native disaster scholarship. If my approach had called forth the fugitive conduct of a colonized people, what would an anti-colonial approach be? Future research into Native communities and disaster will benefit from the development of an anti-colonial methodology of disaster scholarship.

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