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**Besnier/Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics**

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# 1 Gossip, Hegemony, Agency

TO THE CASUAL OBSERVER, gossip appears to be a quintessentially anthropological focus of inquiry. Not only is gossiping central to what ethnographers actually do during fieldwork, but it also encapsulates what anthropologists have come to think of as the essence of the discipline: an interest in the mundane, the overlooked, and the trivial, out of which the anthropologist distills not-so-mundane insights into how humans organize life in groups. Yet while gossip makes a cameo appearance in many ethnographic works, few anthropologists have engaged with an analysis of how it operates and articulates with other social forms. Of course, like all topics that anthropologists analyze, gossip can be seriously understood only if it is embedded in a larger context of social relations and symbolic dynamics, as it is only a vehicle through which agents get things done or undone. This book explores this embedding. In the process, it juxtaposes a number of themes that at first glance may appear unrelated. Its overarching theme is the emergence of political practice in the everyday and, in particular, the complexities of politics in small-scale societies where hierarchy and egalitarianism coexist in sometimes uneasy fashion and where the boundary between public and private is at best wafer thin. The analysis focuses in particular on power and agency, categories that are relevant not solely to public performances of political might, but also to everyday activities and unglamorous settings, where they sometimes fall into the hands of people whose hold on publicly sanctioned authority is tenuous at best. The book thus develops an analysis of the workings of power “from below,” but departs from approaches to politics from below as resistance that preoccupied the social sciences in the 1990s: in the material that this work analyzes, who oppresses and who resists are very difficult categories to determine, either over time or at any given moment.

The analysis is also about emotions and morality, aspects of people’s lives that anthropologists commonly subsume under the heading of “culture.” Culture, however, has occupied an uneasy place in recent anthropological writings, from which it emerges as a heterogeneous entity, subject to contradiction and contestation, leading some to ask whether we should continue to talk about it at all. While

arguments about the heterogeneity of culture are easiest to make in the context of large-scale socially diverse postindustrial societies, small-scale societies also present complexities, even where members anxiously emphasize consensus and homogeneity, as is the case here. Emotion and morality, like other aspects of culture, are always unfinished projects that require constant reiteration, and it is this reiteration and its relationship to politics upon which my analysis focuses.

Emotions made a sudden appearance in the anthropological limelight in the early 1970s, and figured centrally in disciplinary debates for a couple of decades. This centrality has since somewhat waned, perhaps because of the association of emotions with the intimacy of private lives, from which anthropological attention has turned away as it shifted from local particularities to global flows, borders, history, and “multisited” ethnography. I will argue in these pages, however, that we should not dismiss the extent to which intimate events and experiences are intertwined with large-scale processes. I aim to explore the political nature of emotion (and the emotional nature of politics), and embed this “politics” in such large-scale processes as transnational labor markets, the turmoils of history, anxieties about self-representation to others, the potentialities of new (and not so new) communication technologies, and ecological changes seemingly related to global warming.<sup>1</sup>

Looming over the analysis is a concern with questions of how people construct and maintain a sense of localness in the course of history, particularly when outside forces, recent manifestations of which we have come to label “globalization,” embed them in structures over which they may have little control. Some argue that the destabilization of local truths has given rise to new ways of understanding the self, ways that draw on multiple images no longer grounded in specific locales. I will maintain that such claims must be examined through an exploration of the everyday negotiations in which people engage over the meaning of the local and the global, the modern and the traditional, and the ephemeral and the enduring. I approach these questions stressing that large-scale global processes mean little if extracted from the quotidian experience of those who make them happen or endure them. For example, the experience of migrating, nurturing imaginings of a better life, or apprehending modern technology continues to be embedded in emotions, the senses, the body, kinship and friendship, desires and longings. It is on these intimate experiences that our search for an understanding of larger issues must focus, and I will illustrate how this approach can be fruitfully achieved by underscoring the multilayered complexities of language, interaction, and performance, taken in their broadest sense.

I bring together these various concerns by focusing on gossip, a form of interaction that in most societies variously provokes scorn, derision, and contempt, but also enormous interest. Precisely because it is the object of such contradictory sentiments, gossip embodies the complexities of social life. Confined to the intimacy of domestic contexts, gossip can nevertheless have a long reach, affect

important events, and determine biographies. Through gossip, people make sense of what surrounds them, interpreting events, people, and the dynamics of history. On Nukulaelae Atoll in the Central Pacific, the ethnographic setting on which I base my analysis, the choice of gossip as a prime locus of social action was not a difficult one to make: Nukulaelae Islanders love gossip, a fact that their neighbors have enshrined in a stereotype of them, the validity of which they agree with (with some embarrassment). Nukulaelae Islanders devalue gossip as useless and dangerous because they view it as disrupting ideals of emotional equilibrium and stability, yet they all gossip with barely disguised enthusiasm. Thus, to understand what makes this society tick, one is almost compelled to focus on gossip while remaining cognizant that this focus may touch a raw nerve in Nukulaelae people's consciousness.

My discussion rests on two analytic traditions: the microscopic analysis of interactional data, traditionally grounded in linguistic anthropology, and the macroscopic analysis of large-scale social processes, an approach associated with the sociocultural subfield of anthropology. The kind of language-sensitive anthropology to which this book seeks to contribute is one that locates linguistic exchanges in a broad context of power relations, commodity circulations, and historical processes. Inspired by Bourdieu's (1977, 1991) programmatic call for a social science of practice, it is an approach that recognizes the language itself is a commodity, exchangeable for other commodities, but also deriving value and meaning from a preexisting market defined by local, translocal, and historical dynamics (Gal 1989; Hanks 2005; Irvine 1989). This engagement differs from works in linguistic anthropology that take language as the basis on which agents construct the social world. For example, a widely read ethnography of political meetings in a Samoa village assumes "a view of social structure as extremely dynamic or, more precisely, as a joint achievement produced by a number of individuals and institutions, tied by specific collective activities" (Duranti 1994, 7). The ethnography continues to provide an exemplary analysis of the way in which Samoan titled men utilize particular grammatical structures to assert, mitigate, and manipulate agency in meetings. However, while we are later told that political interaction also continuously reasserts differentiation, we learn virtually nothing about the material positions from which these men talk. In particular, we hear nothing of the fact that, by the late 1970s, there were already more Samoans living in industrial countries than in the islands themselves, that postcolonial Samoan village economies were crucially dependent on the diaspora, and that migrations had opened up furious debates about a host of issues, including land ownership, the conferring of chiefly titles, the behavior of return migrants, voting rights, and citizenship. Surely, these dynamics are determinative of linguistic strategies of agency in village meetings and probably are the focus of anxious debate in the meetings, rendering the analyst's engagement with the relationship between utterances and larger dynamics essential.<sup>2</sup>

In turn, sociocultural anthropological efforts to embed local processes in a his-

torical and extralocal context are often based on interactional fieldwork material, but these materials rarely figure in the resulting analysis, or if they do it is in translated or paraphrased form, bearing the heavy weight of the analyst's interpretation. This book seeks to engage seriously "the (micro) study of face-to-face discourse strategies, and studies of macrohistorical processes; on the one hand the relatively well-understood role of, say, conversational inferences or participant structures in interpersonal power relations, and, on the other, the exercise of institutional power in which language is also a constitutive element" (Gal 1989, 349–350). Admittedly, "real-life" interactional materials are sometimes very difficult to obtain and analyze, and the specificity and quality of the data that I am able to present in this book vary in the different chapters. Using such materials also poses particular ethical and methodological problems. Yet, grounding myself in advances in linguistic anthropology since the 1970s, I will demonstrate the importance of analyzing what people say, rather than what they say they say or what I think they say (and of course, with Malinowski and every anthropologist since then, I will take as a problem the relationship between what people say they do and what they actually do). At the same time, I will demonstrate that an analysis of interactional data cannot be limited to a simple "reading" of the texts, but must invoke a more sophisticated theory of meaning and meaning-making.<sup>3</sup>

Nukulaelae Atoll, where I conducted the fieldwork on which this book is based, is a community of approximately 350 people, whose home is a graceful elliptical formation of islets surrounding a 3×8-kilometer deep-blue lagoon. The atoll is fringed by an outer garland of submerged reef intermittently broken by seawater channels rich in sea life but too shallow to allow crafts larger than canoes and dinghies to pass. As is the case of atolls worldwide, the 1.82 square kilometers of land barely rise above sea level, the soil is generally poor, and agricultural resources are limited and prone to environmental unpredictability. Along with eight other atolls and coral islands, Nukulaelae is part of Tuvalu, known in colonial times as the Ellice Islands and independent since 1978, and today one of the world's smallest microstates, peopled by 11,636 inhabitants (July 2005 government estimate). Nukulaelae's closest neighbor is Funafuti Atoll, the capital of the country, 121 kilometers away. To Western eyes, the atoll is a picture-postcard example of a South Sea Island, drenched by the almost-equatorial sun and covered, on clear nights, by a star-studded sky so bright that one can almost read by its light. However, Nukulaelae people are not prone to romanticizing the environment in which they live. This is an environment they know intimately, but which also embodies in very concrete terms the worries of everyday life: the search for fish on increasingly depleted fishing grounds, the growth of swamp taro now threatened by noticeable changes in the behavior of the sea and consequent seawater seepages, and the ever-growing need for cash, which remittances from overseas can never meet fully. Worrying about resources is hardly a new experience for them, as the atoll's

history, or at least what we know of it, is replete with catastrophes and periods of hardship.

Since independence, and particularly since the beginning of the millennium, Tuvalu has become the object of frequent newspaper-column-filling journalistic attention in industrial countries, much of which emphasizes the remoteness and vulnerability of the country. These themes are attached in particular to the threat of complete disappearance that the country is under because of rising sea levels associated with global warming, which had not yet been constructed, when I conducted fieldwork, as an “issue,” locally or globally. Vulnerability and remoteness do easily come to mind when one is on the atoll, and they have been recurrent themes in the history of Nukulaelae. At the same time, these themes are also constructs, and I will explore how and why these constructs arise, as Islanders negotiate and attempt to gain some control over the course of history and the course of their lives.

### **Politics, Agency, and Language**

In her encyclopedic history of anthropology and politics, Joan Vincent (1990, 5–11) identifies in World War II a pivotal moment in the periodization of the anthropological analysis of political dynamics. It is at that moment, she argues, that the “anthropology of politics,” hitherto a minor preoccupation in the context of other anthropological interests, transformed itself into “political anthropology,” the product of concerted efforts to focus anthropological attention on political processes. Heralding this intellectual era were the “great monographs,” such as Evans-Pritchard’s (1940) *The Nuer*, Leach’s (1954) *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, and Barth’s (1959) *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans*, works that not only became foundational for the sub-subfield of political anthropology but also came to represent key moments in the development of structural functionalism, structuralism, and transactionalism respectively. My aim is not to analyze these well-known texts, but to focus instead on two directions taken by latter-day critiques of these works, mirroring the course of political anthropology itself in subsequent decades.

The first direction that critiques have taken is to fault these early analyses for being oblivious to larger political contexts of state formation, colonialism, and economic conflicts among world powers. Leach, for example, had analyzed political alternation between egalitarianism and hierarchy (as well as state structures) among Highland Burmese groups as evidence of the fact that the seed of instability was embedded within the very structure of these political systems. Nugent (1982) reanalyzes *Political Systems of Highland Burma* by demonstrating that what Leach had interpreted as pendulum-like oscillations between two political systems was in fact one single gradual change (Leach’s [1983] virulent response notwithstanding). Precolonial chiefly systems were based on chiefly ownership of slaves, the

controlled cultivation of opium and mining of precious stone, and the control of trade routes. Revolts in the lowlands in the nineteenth century led to the breakdown of the Burmese kingdom and the successful expansion of British colonial rule, which emancipated slaves and regulated trade, thus weakening chiefs and opening the door to revolt and the political rise of nonchiefs through the cultivation of opium. Embedded as it was in anthropology's then-ongoing return to Marx and concomitant engagement with history and globality (S. Mintz 1985; Wallerstein 1974–1988; Wolf 1982), Nugent's reanalysis locates society-internal political transformations at the convergence of forces larger than society itself, such as imperialism, colonialism, and world economic history.<sup>4</sup>

Other critics of early political anthropology have taken what appears to be at first glance a move in the opposite direction: politicizing the domestic. The insight that politics operates in “nonpolitical” domains, and operates there even more effectively, is of course not new. It underlies, for example, Gramsci's analysis of hegemony as located in civil society (trade unions, schools, churches), which is primarily nonpolitical, rather than in political society (Gramsci 1991–2007). The insight is also embedded in Althusser's (1971) distinction between repressive state apparatus (e.g., the military, the police, the law) and ideological state apparatus, namely institutions whose explicit purpose is to educate, inform, or entertain, but that also have the dissimulated function of indoctrinating people to think and act in a way that serves the purposes of the dominant system. But it is probably feminist anthropologists who, following in the footsteps of second-wave feminism (“the personal is political,” remember?), questioned most effectively the confinement of the politico-jural to the public sphere, where men dominate, and the definition of what takes place in the domestic sphere, where women are confined, as irrelevant to politics (Rosaldo 1974, 1980b; Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995). It is in this context that we can read McKinnon's (2000) deconstruction of another classic, Evans-Pritchard's (1940) *The Nuer*. By separating the political from the domestic, and concentrating exclusively on the former, Evans-Pritchard confidently characterized the Nuer as an egalitarian society organized in patrilineal lineages. Yet he also presented ample evidence of “matter that did not fit,” particularly bilateral kinship, affinal relations, and status differences among children, all of which operate in the domestic sphere and are suffused with gender, but which he termed “transient.” McKinnon's reanalysis, illustrating that “taking gender seriously not only adds to the analysis at hand but produces a different analysis” (Freeman 2001, 1008), makes the “matter that did not fit” fit, resulting in a picture of Nuer society as based on bilateral rather than patrilineal principles, alliance in addition to descent, and inequality despite a dominant egalitarian ideology (cf. also Hutchinson 1996).

The important lesson from both these critical trends is that an anthropology of politics must question the confinement of politics to what people themselves,

as well as anthropological observers, overtly define as the political arena by taking account both of forces that transcend the boundaries of society and of dynamics that operate in the everyday, the domestic, and the mundane. While not alluding specifically to these critiques of earlier political anthropology, a congruent trend across the social sciences emerged in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, as anthropologists and other social scientists attended to the possibility that, because of their traditional preoccupation with structure and continuity, they had not been open enough to forms of action not defined as political but nevertheless politically consequential. Perhaps the most inspiring figure in this movement is James Scott. Based on ethnographic research among Malaysian peasantry and on a reading of historical and ethnographic works focused on a variety of contexts and times (e.g., Hochschild 1983; Thompson 1966; Willis 1977), Scott's successive monographs (1979, 1985, 1990, 1998) progressively refined a model that would recognize and showcase "everyday forms of resistance" among the subaltern. Even though they easily escape ethnographic scrutiny because of their seeming insignificance and disorganization, "weapons of the weak" have a cumulative effect on structures of power that is anything but insignificant. The foregrounding of resistance contrasts with the position, articulated in certain readings of Gramsci and in other versions of Marxism (e.g., Sennett and Cobb 1972), that hegemony has an all-pervasive effect, through which the powerless come to believe in the inevitability and just nature of unjust systems. Instead, Scott calls for an analytic recognition that, after all, the dominated are cleverer than those in power seem to think, and that life among the subaltern has a rich quality that agents of power fail to recognize, let alone control or defuse. This celebration of the revenge of the weak did not fail to generate enthusiasm in many social scientific circles, particularly an anthropology that had gradually come to define itself as the champion of the downtrodden in the course of its history.<sup>5</sup>

At first glance, the subaltern's quotidian resistance appears designed for purposes other than political action. Petty theft and minor acts of sabotage and obstruction, for example, seem driven by the desire to survive or take revenge, while the outcomes of disobedience, sarcasm, and foot shuffling are too insignificant to have an effect on structures of power. "Everyday forms of resistance," indeed, "make no headlines" (Scott 1986, 8). Yet the cumulative effect of individualized and often anonymous acts makes the exertion of power difficult, as long as they are consistent over time, coordinated (however loosely), and offstage. They also bear witness to the fact that, far from acquiescing to their own subordination and believing the system to be just (thus becoming active participants in their own oppression), the subaltern are perfectly capable of imagining alternative worlds while at the same time accepting more or less begrudgingly the terms of their oppression (what Scott [1990, 72] calls the "thin" theory of hegemony).

Going one step further, however, the subaltern's resignation is generally "read"

in what Scott terms “public transcripts”: social action that takes place in the open, particularly when interacting with the oppressor. But if we turn our attention to “hidden transcripts,” forms of speech and behavior that occur when the subordinated congregate “offstage,” particularly when the powerful are out of earshot, hegemony becomes thinner and thinner: through expressions of stories, songs, rituals, or gossip, the subordinate reflect on their subordination, defy its agents, and forge solidarity. Even seemingly compliant action in public can contain the seed of resistance, through subterfuge, indirection, and concealment: the Malay peasant’s unctuous flattery of the stingy landlord’s piety, for instance, can place the latter in the uncomfortable position of having to demonstrate generosity, one of the fundamental tenets of Muslim piety. The task of the social scientist is therefore to uncover the hidden transcripts of the subordinate, understand their dialectical and porous relationship with public transcripts, and more generally give voice to the voiceless.

Scott unravels in novel ways the complex relationship between material oppression and the symbolic realm, and this success has given rise to a veritable industry of ethnographic and other works that claimed to discover resistance where it was least suspected. The model, however, has also been subjected to serious critical scrutiny. The first concerns the implicit romanticism inherent to a search for resistance in every small act in which the oppressed engages. Let us not forget that for every small act of resistance there is a not-so-small act of increased oppression (Abu-Lughod 1990; also Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Rebel 1989; Seymour 2006; Solway 1998; and many others). Abu-Lughod warns against the enthusiastic celebration of heroic resistance among the subaltern, evidence of the ultimately ineffectual nature of power and of the creativity and inventiveness of the human spirit. Heeding Foucault’s (1980) warning that power has the propensity to lurk in covert ways, she reminds us that power and resistance are always intertwined in complicated and often unexpected ways. What may appear to be heroically resistant action to our well-intentioned ethnographic eyes or ears may in fact expose agents to broader, more diffuse, and thus more effective forms of oppression.

Furthermore, how we determine that particular forms of social action constitute resistance or not deserves serious scrutiny. Michael Brown (1996, 1997) demonstrates both the complexity and the importance of this question with ethnographic material from New Age spiritualism in contemporary America, which features the channeling of the spirits of the dead. Channeling, like the New Age movement in general, attracts middle-class, middle-aged Americans, arguably some of the most empowered people in the world, and is dominated by women. The highly gendered nature of channeling could lead one to propose that it represents resistance to male hegemony: after all, those who practice it occupy, as a group, a subordinate position in society, and the practice itself is nonnormative, somewhat secretive,

and exclusive. However, everything that channelers say contradicts this interpretation: rather than performing a critique of gender hierarchy, Brown's women informants position themselves beyond gender, power, and resistance, working toward a deconstruction of gender binaries (an agenda largely made possible by material security). In fact, if hegemony is to be found anywhere in New Age spirituality, it is surely in middle-class mainstream New Agers' domination of the "indigenous" people from whom they borrow practices like Native American sweat-lodge rituals. Rather than being sites of resistance to structures of power of whatever kind, the burgeoning of the New Age industry is better understood as a response to the anxieties of the self associated with modernity. A form of action that has all the trappings of resistance (the right personnel, the right characteristics, the right relationship to the hegemonic order) ends up being about something entirely different. The moral of the story is that anthropologists should perhaps curb their enthusiastic search for resistance in every corner of the social map.

It is not only an obsession with power that plagues works on resistance, but also a blindness to forms of power that do not pitch, in a simplistic way, a dominant group against a subordinate group. Indeed, the subaltern is never single and unitary, since it is minimally transversed by dimensions of difference such as gender and age, structures of difference that are invariably transformed into structures of inequality, as feminist anthropologists taught us long ago. The subordinate thus always has its own internal politics beyond a reactivity to the domination it experiences as a group, and through this politics the very concept of subordination is negotiated, redefined, and contested (Ortner 1995, 175). In addition, in many societies, who is in positions of power and who is not may in fact be difficult to determine, as everyone can experience subordination or domination at different moments of their lives, given the inherently elusive and shifting nature of power (Gal 1995, 416). Such laminations can occur from moment to moment, and the exact configuration of power can even be indeterminate at any given social moment. It is precisely this indeterminacy that makes power potentially so effective, but can equally make it susceptible to resistant action.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, resistance never occurs in a "pure" form, that is, as action that is unquestionably designed to undermine domination and that is not motivated by any other design. In turn, the distinction between persuasion and coercion, the "obverse" of resistance, assumes a rational self-formed political subject whose goal in life is to free itself from structures of domination, a subject that is unlikely to exist outside of post-Enlightenment political theory (Mahmood 2005, 5–17; T. Mitchell 1990). Actions, be they authored by an oppressor, an oppressed, or anyone in between, are always the result of complex, multilayered, and ambivalent motivations, about which actors themselves are often unclear (e.g., Howe 1998; MacLeod 1992; Merry 1995; Reed-Danahay 1993):

“Real” actors, be they individual or collective, circulate among several “logics,” choose among diverse norms, manage multiple constraints, are located at the convergence of several rationalities, and live in a mental and pragmatic universe transversed by ambiguities and ambivalences, located under the gaze of others, seeking their recognition or confronted with their hostility, and subjected to their multiple influences. (Olivier de Sardan 2001, 244–245; my translation)

Language and interaction figure centrally in works on resistance that Scott inspired. Indeed, much of the 1990 monograph is concerned with different kinds of linguistic activities that are foundational to resistant action. Hidden transcripts are forms of linguistic action that the powerless produce away from the punishing gaze of the powerful, and alternatively rely on formal features that presumably hide the “true meaning” of what is said, such as indirection, evasiveness, and anonymity, and thus shield the powerless from surveillance and retaliation. Gal (1995) articulates two important criticisms of these arguments. First, the assumption that public transcripts are somehow less “real” than hidden transcripts is problematic. All social acts are staged, if we take Goffman (1959) seriously, and interactions that take place in intimate contexts have as much dramaturgical quality as public interactions (Gal 1995, 411–414). Furthermore, hidden transcripts are not evidence of “truer” emotions and selves, since emotions and selves are always the product of culture, as decades’ worth of work in psychological anthropology has demonstrated (Lutz and White 1986; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990). Of course, people can define certain manifestations of the self and certain emotions as more genuine than others, but such situations are always embedded in particular intentional dynamics that are matters of both culture and politics.

Gal’s second criticism concerns the semiotic dynamics of linguistic disguise, interactional indirection, and opacity in talk, categories that are often the focus of ethnographies of resistance. In fact, in the work of Scott and of those who took up his lead (e.g., Levi 1999), hidden transcripts are almost invariably constituted of talk, even though the analysts assume that we can deduct unproblematically from the form of linguistic action its political meaning. However, “any linguistic form—such as euphemism, metaphor, indirection, trickster tale, or anonymous speaking—gains different meanings and has different social and political effects within specific institutional and ideological contexts” (Gal 1995, 419). For example, indirection, inarticulateness, and interactional reluctance are, in some celebrated cases, tools of the powerful rather than forms of resistance (e.g., Keenan [Ochs] 1974; Irvine 1990). Recognizing the contingency of the relationship between form and meaning has motivated linguistic anthropologists since the 1990s to turn their attention to the workings of linguistic ideology, that is, the ideological shaping of the link between social dynamics and forms of talk (Bau-

man and Briggs 2003; Kroskrity 2000; Makihara and Schieffelin 2007; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). These developments have demonstrated that, although ideas about and in language mediate the relationship between linguistic form and the sociopolitical context, this mediation takes on complex semiotic forms. Drawing on the classic semiotics of C. S. Peirce (1932), works in this vein have demonstrated that semiotic forms, including utterances, do not operate independent of a world of ideas, but do the work of meaning variously across different contexts (e.g., by invoking, through resemblance, or by means of social convention, or by suggesting and juxtaposing). It is in this more complex (and messier) model of meaning than conventional overcoherent Saussurean semiotics that we should embed our approach to performance, embodiment, and, in particular, language, and seek to understand the culturally and politically meaningful messages that people convey. These messages are not just embedded in the literal form of what they say or do, but in the way in which what they say or do evokes, insinuates, and alludes to dynamics that may be quite distant from the immediate context.

I locate my analysis of talk and political action on Nukulaelae at the juncture of Scott's theorization of hegemony and resistance and the critique of this theorization by cultural and linguistic anthropologists. I retain an important insight from resistance theory: politics "happens" where one may be led to least expect it—in the nooks and crannies of everyday life, outside of institutionalized contexts that one ordinarily associates with politics. This insight is not completely new, although works on resistance and contemporary critiques of earlier works have furthered it in two novel directions. One is that the politics penetrates much further into the "private" realm than the institutions of civil society and the locus of the ideological state apparatus, a point that Gramsci- or Althusser-inspired works, for example, have generally not explored (with some exceptions, e.g., Allison 1991). The second insight is that "politics," obviously, is much more than hegemony and coercion, a point that calls for renewed attention to the limits of hegemony and the potential effectiveness of alternative forms of action.

At the same time, I seek to shift the focus away from the unwieldy and theoretically problematic constraints inherent to the category "resistance," onto agency—"streams of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world" (Giddens 1979, 55). Two features are central to agency. First, at any moment in the stream of action, the agent "could have acted otherwise" (Giddens 1979, 56), either through an alternative intervention or through forbearance. Second, agency is not a universal capacity of precultural ahistorical individuals, but the product of particular cultural dynamics and historical antecedents. "The importance of subjects (whether individual actors or social entities)," Ortner reminds us, "lies not so much in who they are and how

they are put together as in the projects that they construct and enact” (1995, 187). Agency can be resistant, but it can also be many other things, as humans negotiate their daily affairs with one another through social action.

Gossip is a classic form of agentic action. One of the most “hidden” of hidden transcripts, it is a quintessential tool for political action in private realms. A focus on gossip, as many have argued, enables us to understand politics “from below,” particularly from the perspective of those whose voice is rarely heard in public or from perspectives that are deemed “not to matter.” Such a focus diverges from approaches that seek to understand political action as primarily taking place in meetings, court proceedings, moots, parliamentary debates, bureaucratic encounters, and street demonstrations, and in the oratory and ritual that take place within them, about which we now have an extensive anthropological corpus. Anthropologists working in the Pacific region, for example, have long associated themselves with those in power, seduced, I suspect, by Islanders’ flattering reassurance that anthropologists are themselves honorary chiefs or big men (the modern-day equivalent, perhaps, of early navigators thinking they were Polynesian gods; cf. Sahlins [1985] vs. Obeyesekere [1997]). Since Malinowski, who frames his classic *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) as a study of Trobriand men competing for prestige, anthropologists have predominantly been preoccupied with chieftainship, leadership, power, authority, and prestige. This is the case even in societies that anthropologists have considered relatively “egalitarian,” such as big-men systems of Melanesia. In contrast to the multiple monographs on big or great men of the Papua New Guinea Highlands, for example, none exists on “rubbish men” (but see Wardlow [2006] on “wayward women”). Similarly, the lives of common people in Polynesia frequently often end up being couched in reference to chiefly persons, events, and categories. This book attempts to redress these biases.<sup>7</sup>

Gossip, of course, does not “do things” on its own; rather, like all other forms of discourse (Keane 2003, 140), gossip achieves whatever it achieves because it stands in relation to other forms of talk and social action. I seek an understanding of politics as the product of a relationship between various forms of action, from intimate contexts to events that involve the entire society. One insight I retain from works on resistance is that power and hegemony always constitute unfinished projects, structures that agents always potentially return to the drawing board through resistance or other forms of action. From critiques of resistance theory one can add the insight that resistance (and agency in general) is just as shifting, potentially contradictory, and incomplete. It is with these insights in mind that I now turn to gossip as linguistic activity, social action, and cultural form.

### **Theorizing Gossip**

As many have pointed out (e.g., Besnier 1996a; Brenneis 1989; Haviland 1977, 28–47), gossip is notoriously difficult to circumscribe in the abstract, and this

difficulty is a direct reflection of its inherent ambiguity: what a third party calls “gossip” is “information exchange” for those who engage in it. A general working definition identifies it as the negatively evaluative and morally laden verbal exchange concerning the conduct of absent third parties, involving a bounded group of persons in a private setting. As a social activity, gossip is often dismissed as lacking in importance and is equally often regarded as a reprehensible activity to be avoided or feared. Yet it is so pervasive that it is probably a universal phenomenon in one form or another.<sup>8</sup> It is closely related to scandal (Gluckman 1963), defined as gossip that becomes public knowledge, and rumor and hearsay (Rosnow and Fine 1976), defined as the unconstrained circulation of information about an event deemed important.

We find various versions of this definition in the now substantial literature on gossip in the social sciences and humanities.<sup>9</sup> Yet, not surprisingly, any version immediately raises a number of problems. First, what constitutes a private setting is a particularly thorny issue if we acknowledge that people frequently (perhaps always) gossip while being fully aware of the possibility that what they are saying will become public. What do we also make of “public” gossip such as celebrity tattle columns, tabloid journalism, and reality television, as sociologists of media remind us to ask (e.g., Gamson 1994), and of the increasing permeability of private boundaries that the Internet, for example, has made possible (Solove 2007)? What do we make of the recycling of public discourse, such as media talk, into private acts of collusion and complicity (e.g., Spitulnik 1996)? Even though the private and its contrasting category, the public, are highly elaborated categories in some societies, their definition is dynamic and never innocent of politics (Calhoun 1993; Gal and Woolard 2001; Habermas 1991; Warner 2005). Second, the seemingly innocuous issue of when a third party can be considered to be absent is in fact problematic. For example, interactors can make innuendos and veiled remarks about a person who is within hearing range for various purposes such as teasing, and these activities bear a close resemblance to gossip (Goodwin 1997). Similarly, conversationalists can make morally damaging statements about their own behavior, and whether this type of activity can be considered gossip is a pertinent question. Third, characterizing gossip as a form of criticism raises the question of whether any form of talk is ever devoid of moral evaluation, and this question leads us to ask from which forms of talk we should differentiate gossip. Furthermore, agents often skillfully disguise the evaluative character of gossip under the appearance of a straightforward narrative, in which case what constitutes gossip and what does not require careful analytic scrutiny.

These issues command that we focus our attention on the perspective of the actors themselves. Here again, however, analytic difficulties arise. Languages may lack a label for the range of activities roughly comparable to what English speakers term “gossip,” or people may fail to recognize gossip as a significant interactional

category. Such is the case of the Zinacantan of southern Mexico, who engage in verbal exchanges that anthropologist John Haviland clearly identified as gossip, even though Tzotzil, the language they speak, offers no specific descriptive term for such exchanges (Haviland 1977, 46). On Nukulaelae Atoll, people have strong ideas about gossip, and have a word for it: *fatufatu*, literally, “to make up [stories]” (reduplicated form of *fatu* “compose, begin to weave”). However, when pressed for a definition, a common answer is, “It’s what people from family X do all the time!”<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, both women and men will often define gossip as “what women do,” although women are also perfectly able to attribute the propensity to gossip onto men, pointing out that men’s seemingly endless palavers in Council of Elders meetings are just as useless and morally suspect as gossip. Seemingly innocent conversation is *sauttala* “chat”; it is what men do, men say, aware of the fact that labeling their chatting as *fatufatu* would implicitly question their masculinity, even though their *sauttala* in many respects resembles what they say women do when they *fatufatu*. The characterization of women’s communicative activities as reprehensible and unwholesome gossip and of men’s as morally neutral talk is a phenomenon that finds echoes in many other societies: in the classic example of rural France, men’s gossip “is *bavarder*: a friendly, sociable, light-hearted, good-natured, altruistic exchange of news, information and opinion. But if women are seen talking together, then something quite different is happening: very likely they are indulging in *mauvaise langue*—gossip, malice, ‘character assassination’” (Bailey 1971a, 1). It enables men to denigrate women’s social activities and justify gender hegemony, even when women’s and men’s talk may have similar structures and social organizations.<sup>11</sup>

In short, an airtight and cross-culturally valid definition of what constitutes gossip is probably not possible because the category itself is subject to context-dependent interpretations and possibly contestation by members of the same society. Indeed, an analysis of gossip must take into account the dynamic and shifting nature of the category, as well as its relationship to other forms of discursive and social action. To date, our theoretical and comparative understanding of gossip has been hampered by a dearth of detailed ethnographic investigations of gossip in specific societies. An artificial division of labor across disciplinary lines aggravates this ethnographic vacuum. On the one hand, anthropologists and sociologists have analyzed the sociopolitical “work” that people accomplish with gossip and rumor, while paying little attention to the form of talk. On the other hand, sociolinguistics has generated a sophisticated corpus of microanalyses of the structure of gossip talk, but these works adopt what most anthropologists would deem to be an impoverished theory of context.<sup>12</sup> This book seeks to establish a rapprochement between these analytic traditions and to demonstrate how an integrated approach can help us bridge microanalytic tools with macroanalytic concerns in a fruitful way.

Gossip is ethnographically difficult, for a number of reasons. One is that it typically takes place in small, intimate groups, which often exclude outsiders, including anthropologists. Particularly at the beginning of my fieldwork on Nukulaelae, I often experienced arriving at a house where people were engrossed in conversation to hear everyone shush each other because of my sudden presence. Even after I had managed to extricate myself from the isolating liminality of outsidership, Nukulaelae people who did not know me well would express amazement (and sometimes amusement) when I dropped an ironic allusion, in good old Nukulaelae fashion, to a particularly juicy piece of gossip when the occasion called for it. It is not just that outsiders are excluded from gossip, but also that exclusion from gossip is one the primary means through which groups define outsider status.

However, some have advanced the exact opposite of this argument, claiming that the information ethnographers gather in the field consists mainly of gossip, or even gossip about gossip. Postcolonial critic Trinh Minh-ha (1989, 67–68) parades this view as an indictment of the ethnographic enterprise as a whole, arguing that anthropologists cultivate with informants a deceitful sense of solidarity that elides the erasure of coevalness that has plagued the discipline since its inception (Fabian 1983). I agree with the essence of Trinh’s comparison, although I do not share her simplistic assumption that gossip is inherently idle, deceitful, and partial, and thus that the comparison is denigrating of anthropology. After all, anthropologists themselves have long been aware of the comparison (“scandalmonger par excellence,” Gluckman [1963, 315] calls the anthropologist), and there is nothing inherently peculiar to the anthropologist’s reliance on gossip as a source of insight, since all social knowledge consists of such “partial theories” through which actors make sense of the world (Van Vleet 2003).<sup>13</sup>

Another factor that has deterred anthropologists from studying gossip up close is that a careful investigation of gossip as a communicative and social practice necessitates a more than superficial command of language, norms, and presuppositions, as well as an intimate familiarity with the personal biographies of those who are gossiping and are being gossiped about. As I will show in chapter 4, Nukulaelae gossipers often do not even mention the name of the person about whom they are talking, to the extent that even autochthonous interlocutors sometimes have difficulties figuring out whom the gossip is about.<sup>14</sup> Understanding gossip thus presupposes a degree of intimacy with persons and events that anthropologists rarely attain. As Haviland (1977, 171–182) points out, it amounts to understanding a culture, with the caveat that “knowing culture” is always a partial, unfinished, and negotiated project (Van Vleet 2003).

Gossip as a legitimate object of anthropological inquiry first came into focus in a well-known paper by Max Gluckman (1963). True to his structural-functionalist intellectual roots but also inspired by his Marxist political leanings, Gluckman was concerned with both the inherently conflictual yet integrative function of gossip.

He argued that its principal role is to contribute to social cohesion and to distinguish the group from other groups: as “the hallmark of membership” (1963, 313), gossip provides a way of asserting the boundary between morally acceptable action and deviant behavior, and thus helps to solidify consensus and to control dissent without recourse to direct confrontation.<sup>15</sup>

Gluckman’s analysis gave rise to a long series of exchanges pitting Gluckman against scholars (including some of his own students) inspired by versions of methodological individualism that were then emerging in anthropology and sociology, particularly transactionalism (Bailey 1960; Barth 1966; Boissevain 1968) and the symbolic interactionism of Erving Goffman (1959, 1963, 1967). Rather than being a harmony-maintaining mechanism, these analysts maintained, gossip is a tool that people use to foster their own agendas and undermine the interests of others (Faris 1966; Gilmore 1978; Handelman 1973; Hannerz 1967; Hotchkiss 1967; Paine 1967; Szwed 1966): “It is the individual and not the community that gossips” (Paine 1967, 280–281). Gossipers engage in “information management” that treats information as a precious commodity to be accumulated and jealously guarded, in capitalistic fashion, or doled out selectively in patterns of negative reciprocity, to use a concept from another anthropological subfield (Sahlins 1972). Human action is by nature unpredictable, and thus gossip does not have a “function,” as it may create or exacerbate conflict as easily as it can contribute to group harmony.<sup>16</sup>

Sabini and Silver (1982, 93–94) capture the essence of the debate of the 1960s and 1970s about what gossip “does” by drawing a distinction between the end and the purpose of an activity: the end of a game of chess is checkmate, while the purpose may be to entertain, make money, impress, and so on. Viewed in this light, transactionalists focused on the purpose of gossip, while Gluckman focused on its ends, although the debate was also a debate about paradigms. Be that as it may, for many years this debate diverted analytic attention from what gossip “means” and what it looks like, themes whose importance later researchers would underline by turning to the aesthetic and micro-organizational aspects of gossip as verbal performance and communicative practice. Subsequent works (e.g., Abrahams 1970; Almirol 1981; Cox 1970) also argued that the positions Gluckman and his critics defended are not mutually exclusive: gossip can have both cohesion-building and self-serving purposes or consequences. Indeed, “taking the longer view, it seems almost obvious that many of the traditional devices which argue in terms of a public morality, (such as proverbs and myths), may also be applied to the prosecution of personal or factional ends” (Abrahams 1970, 290).

Furthermore, by focusing on the authors of gossip, scholars involved in the early controversy ignored an important aspect of the activity, namely the audience. In certain societies, such as Bhatgaon, a Fiji Indian village, author and audience are not even discrete categories, because gossiping is a joint effort involving many par-

ticipants, and the authorship of particular gossip stories is fundamentally blurred (Brenneis 1984a, 1984b, 1987a, 1987b, 1990). Even in societies in which speakers rarely interrupt each other in the course of storytelling, gossip depends crucially for its effectiveness on the cooperation and participation of the audience. Perhaps more than any other form of interaction, gossip is a multiparty production, and attention to the microstructure of gossip interactions enable us to transcend largely speculative debates over whether conflict is personal or collective.

While many societies dismiss it as inconsequential, gossip can have dramatic consequences for its victims, a point that neither transactionalists nor structural-functionalists paid much attention to, and that leads us to return to problems of power, resistance, and agency. A focus on consequences differs from a focus on function, in that consequence is not an intrinsic characteristic of gossip. It is precisely the contrast between its social evaluation as trivial talk and the seriousness of its potential repercussions that endows gossip with potency as a political tool. According to Merry (1984), gossip can have economic consequences, in that it can restrict its target's access to resources, particularly those obtained through cooperative efforts. Gossip may have political consequences, in that it can mobilize support for particular agents, level structures of inequality, and delimit factionalism. Social consequences of gossip may include ridicule, ostracism, or even death. Finally, gossip sometimes has no consequences: people who are already socially marginalized (e.g., the rich, the poor, the abject) may be largely immune to it, and may even turn it to their advantage. An understanding of the consequences of gossip helps explain how gossip is embedded in a broader social and political context.

Closely related is the question of whom gossip benefits or harms, a question that brings us back to the problem, which underlies the debate about resistance of the 1990s, of whether and under what conditions resistance results in "real" social change. Because gossip is particularly difficult to repress or contain, it is a privileged instrument of protest and resistance in the hands of those with restricted access to public political action. It thus can provide a political voice to persons or groups that are excluded from more onstage political processes. Gossip, however, can just as easily be an instrument of oppression. Those in power can deploy it to control others or to control material and symbolic resources and thereby ensure the continuity of preexisting inequalities. Brison's (1992) exemplary ethnography of gossip and power demonstrates how Kwanga leaders, in the East Sepik province of Papua New Guinea, encourage rumors about their ability to perform maleficent sorcery to enhance their own prestige and intimidate potential rivals and dissidents. In short, the sociopolitical makeup of the group determines who benefits and who suffers from gossip, but the reverse is also true: gossip creates particular sociopolitical configurations. What may appear to be a tautology actually captures the constitutive relationship between gossip and politics, to which

we should also add all other forms of talk and political action: agency, whether it manifests itself in talk or nonverbal action, creates structure just as structure gives rise to agency.

Anthropologists to date have mostly been concerned with the escalating consequences of gossip in fomenting conflict, oppressing the weak, or standing up to the strong, but gossip can also deflect conflict: people sometimes gossip in order to avoid aggressive confrontations. A celebrated example is Goodwin's (1990) analysis of African American children in a Philadelphia working-class neighborhood tattling on one another about each other's gossip, using narrative structures involving recursively embedded structures of reported speech (e.g., A says to B, "C said to me that you said to C something disparaging about me"). Because these narratives implicate several individuals, they obscure responsibility and thus avert more serious physical confrontation while allowing the protagonists to save face. Again, whether gossip aggravates conflictual situations or soothes strained relations hinges on the dynamics at play in the broader social setting.

What works such as Goodwin (1990) demonstrate is that the articulation of gossip with the broader sociocultural context in which it takes place is most fruitfully investigated through an approach that takes as its object of inquiry both the microscopic aspects of gossip and the sociocultural context in which the gossip is embedded. Research conducted in this vein recognizes that the meaning of gossip (and, for that matter, of talk in general) cannot be derived by simply analyzing words and limiting our analytic focus to the referential aspects of language. The structural and organizational aspects of the interaction, such as turn taking, reported speech constructions, and ways of interweaving evaluative elements with the narrative representation of events all carry great import. Attention to these interactional features demands a shift to the Peircean semiotics to which I alluded earlier, which locates meaning not solely in symbols and reference, but in a complex play of symbols, indexes, and icons, and the multiple ways in which they refer, resemble, allude, contextualize, confirm, and create what they mean (C. Briggs 1992, 2007; Keane 1997; Silverstein 2003; and many others). The richness of gossip as communicative and social action can be understood only through an investigation of minute aspects of actual samples of naturally occurring gossip in the original language (rather than in translated or paraphrased form), even though these details may appear at first glance familiar and unworthy of analytic scrutiny.

One particular aspect of the relationship between gossip and other sociocultural dynamics that has received relatively little attention is the articulation of gossip with emotions, particularly shame and pleasure. Shame will emerge in a number of ways in the analysis that follows: to the shame of the target of gossip, whose embarrassing deeds the gossipers divulge and ridicule, we can add the gossiper's potential shame for engaging in a socially disruptive form of action. But pleasure plays an equally important role in gossip. There is the pleasure that

people experience in each other's company while denigrating absent parties, to which analysts of gossip as cohesive activity implicitly allude (Hornberger 1998; Strating 1998). There is also the pleasure of one-upmanship that skillful gossipers experience when they have a juicy story to tell to an attentive audience, particularly if they have few other occasions to have others listen to them (Bowman 1989; Gilsenan 1996). Gossipers also find pleasure in the aesthetic qualities of gossip and the creative enjoyment of deploying a skillful performance (Abrahams 1970; Brenneis 1984a, 1987a; Ghosh 1996; Guerin and Miyazaki 2003). Among rural Fiji Indians, for example, gossip has a sustained rhythmic structure and involves repetitions, strategically timed overlaps, and word play, features that all together provide a coordinated harmony to the interaction that is both aesthetically and socially pleasing to members of a society who value egalitarianism (Brenneis 1987a). Like other verbal arts that fall outside hegemonic aesthetic standards (e.g., Abrahams 1983; Labov 1972; Limón 1994), gossip can have a recognizable poetic structure, in the performance of which participants find pleasure. However, the reverse can also be true, as I will explore in chapter 5: gossipers can structure their stories as the antithesis of poetic language, turning them into a Rabelaisian performance that generates its own kind of enjoyment. But as we have come to realize in the last couple of decades (Butler 1990, 1997), "performance" and its companion "performativity" are also deeply political. Thus gossip emerges as the meeting ground for politics and aesthetics, and this dual nature enhances its efficacy as social and political action.

### **Ethical Entanglements**

Nukulaelae people strive very hard to maintain, to themselves and to the outside world, an official version of their society as suffused with harmony and peace, an image that in the course of history has proved useful in coping with turbulent events (cf. Nader 1990). By documenting dynamics that precisely undermine the terms of this communal self-image, I am "exposing" aspects of life on the atoll that its dwellers consider unsanctioned, hidden, and unsavory, thereby undermining a mythology that has long served a relatively powerless community as a defense against the power of outside forces. As Luhrmann (1996, ix) did in her ethnography of Parsis in India, I run the risk of producing a document that Nukulaelae people, or rather the small but growing number of Nukulaelae people who will be able to read this book, will not like. This raises a set of ethical entanglements that have no simple solution, but that merit discussion.

The entanglements I face are not unique to this particular ethnographic project. Social scientists have long confronted the problems associated with presenting communities in a fashion that, as a corporate body, they do not find attractive, desirable, or politically useful. Communities' scandalized reactions to the ways in which researchers have depicted them have periodically rocked the boat of sociol-

ogy (C. Allen 1997; Brettell 1993), a discipline that, in its ethnographic version, is perhaps more vulnerable to these occurrences than anthropology because the geographical, linguistic, and cultural distance between the describer and the described in sociology has traditionally been less dramatic. However, the anthropology of the Pacific has had its share of such controversies, particularly where anthropologists have scrutinized instances of the ill-named (and sloppily theorized) “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Indigenous scholars and activists who have found useful political ammunition in stressing connections to a mythologized past have confronted anthropologists who have contended that the historical constructs in question may be fictional (although not necessarily illegitimate). This situation has arisen most notably when indigenous groups utilize these historical constructs in question to affirm empowered identities and claim for the return of resources, as is the case of Hawaiians and New Zealand Māori.<sup>17</sup>

For the moment at least, Nukulaelae Islanders live in a considerably less fraught and contentious world than the Fourth World populations that have been the context of these choleric exchanges (to my relief as well as theirs, I suspect). The stakes are arguably more modest, the colonial encroachment has been much less dramatic, and the history is relatively less tragic than in the Hawaiian and Māori situations, although Nukulaelae certainly has had its share of suffering at the hands of Westerners. Nevertheless, serious ethical questions remain concerning the depth and motives of ethnographic probing, the presentation of ethnographic materials and their potential consequences, and the nature of the relationship between the ethnographer and the ethnographed. While I am not going to tackle every single one of these topics in the same amount of detail, I describe in what follows several stances that have been taken in the recent literature on comparable situations and attempt to apply them to the Nukulaelae context.

The most radical stance is the assertion that no ethnographic research by outsiders should be allowed, on Nukulaelae or anywhere else, because anthropology is yet another instance of the colonization of the lives of Third and Fourth World peoples, particularly the sort of voyeuristic prying that my research could, at worst, be said to amount to. Trinh Minh-ha (1989, 47–76), again, condemns the hegemony that anthropological scientism exerts on its subjects, a hegemony that is so deeply embedded in the history and practice of the discipline that it is even perpetrated in the works of reflexive anthropologists, despite their claims to “expose the workings of ethnographic authority and ideology” (1989, 157). In less nuanced language, Trask (1991, 1993, 161–178) lashes out at anthropologists for robbing graves, treating other human beings as objects, and exploiting the intimate details of their lives to pursue highly lucrative careers in academic institutions of the industrial world.<sup>18</sup> In rather grandiloquent fashion, Bustos-Águilar (1995, 164) denounces the “apparatus of ethnographic surveillance” central to the “imperial anthropology machine.”

There are several responses to the blanket identification of anthropological fieldwork with colonial exploitation. One is that this identification seriously lacks a sense of perspective. Harvey (1992) points out that there is a difference between the exploitativeness of cultural anthropologists and that of, say, multinational corporations intent on turning the forests of the world into logging quarries and its beaches into luxury resorts. Nukulaelae is too remote and lacking in resources to be a direct target of such exploitation, but it is vulnerable, along with the rest of Tuvalu, to less direct forms of neoimperialism. Among these figure most immediately the exploitation of Tuvaluan laborers by the Nauru Phosphate Company over past decades, as well as, since the early 1980s, their exploitation by German and Hong Kong shipping conglomerates who find in Tuvalu a source of non-union, eager seamen satisfied with deplorable wages. One also finds exploitation of a different kind in the gradual habituation of Tuvaluan children to imported junk food and trashy videos, particularly on Funafuti, and Tuvaluans' general vulnerability to the uncontrolled dumping of substandard consumer goods (Laban and Swain 1997; cf. also Gewertz and Errington 2007). Finally, yet importantly, rising sea levels, or at least the increase of violent storms and "king tides," seemingly tied to the greenhouse effect seriously threaten the very existence of exposed and low-lying island groups such as Tuvalu, to say nothing of radiation contamination from nuclear wastes dumped elsewhere in the Pacific.

To the extent that my prying into Nukulaelae lives can be labeled exploitative, this exploitation cannot compare, in intent, method, or consequences, with truly worrisome forms of economic and political colonialism that Nukulaelae and the rest of Tuvalu face. The intent of the ethnographic monograph, whatever it may be, is certainly not the enrichment of the author (*pace* Trask); it is even doubtful that it advances careers, in a climate of increasing distrust of intellectuals and in an academic market in which most scholars hang on precariously to part-time temporary employment in undesirable locations. An academic monograph may at best demonstrate to its limited readership that the image that a community finds useful to present of itself is a partial depiction (in both senses of the word "partial"). This threat is unlikely to leave the realm of ideas and representations, and is eminently resistible, in contrast to nuclear pollution, rising sea levels, and labor and consumer exploitation. As Ortner points out, "the notion that colonial and academic texts are able completely to distort or exclude the voices and perspectives of those being written about seems to me to endow these texts with far greater power than they have" (1995, 188).

Another response to the characterization of anthropology as neocolonial exploitation, voiced by Said (1991) among others, demands that close attention be paid to what critics of this exploitation propose to replace it with. Often, the most virulent critics of outsiders' entitlement to investigate the inner workings of Third and Fourth World societies are themselves in positions of intellectual and

material hegemony over the “truly” disenfranchised members of these societies. Replacing the hegemony of outsiders with society-internal hegemony, which is potentially more veiled and thus more insidious, is hardly an improvement. Yet another, perhaps more dramatic, response would highlight the parallels between censorship and barring outsiders from knowing what goes on “inside.” Preventing outside scrutiny is something that certain governments are very good at, because it allows them to kill, suppress, and sterilize in peace.

A final argument for barring outsiders’ access to knowledge would invoke the fact that knowledge is irremediably tied to power, as Foucault (1980) has demonstrated and many others have reiterated, and thus that industrial-world knowledge of social processes in a developing world society further reinforces the power differential between industrial and developing worlds. This power differential, and the colonial oppression and other forms of hegemony that go with it, can be undermined only through a deconstruction of the mutually reinforcing linkage between knowledge and power. However, controlling access to knowledge is different from deconstructing this linkage; it is even antithetical to it.

A variation on the anticolonialist critique of anthropology would maintain that anthropologists should focus only on issues devoid of political sensitivity and that ethnographic attention to charged issues is unwelcome (as in the case that van Meijl [2000] analyzes). The anthropology of yesteryear, which focused its efforts on studying kinship, counting fish catches, or collecting plant names, tacitly followed this unstated precept, for one reason or another. Commonly, this focus results from the self-censorship that all ethnographers must apply to their field notes. Just as often, anthropologists have lacked the linguistic fluency, the time, and the personal connections in the field to become privy to the details of their hosts’ lives. Some ethnographers have made explicit efforts to ensure that they not become affiliated with one faction or another in their host communities; while it may have personal or analytic advantages (which may well be illusory, as Barnes [1980, 115] suggests), this strategy has the unfortunate consequence of keeping the ethnographer well outside the workings of the community.

The confinement of anthropological inquiry to “neutral” pursuits may place anthropologists in a better position to deflect accusations of neocolonial exploitation, but it makes them subject to other criticisms. First, anthropology of this type erases lived experience from the picture, and with it agency, humanism, and the (inter)subjectivity that occupies a central place in the lives of members of all societies (as skillfully argued by authors such as Abu-Lughod 1991, 1993, and Jackson 1995, 1996, 1998). In addition, such research perpetuates understandings of non-Western societies as isolated, internally coherent, kinship-driven aggregates, whose members are concerned principally with cataloguing items in their environment and distributing the resources that their bountiful and benign environment provides them. The resulting picture is a familiar one in the history of anthropology,

but also one from which anthropologists have tried hard to get away for decades in their deconstructions of “the romance of community” (Joseph 2002; see also Creed 2006; Ortner 1997, 63–64). Alternatively, my description could have focused on political strife, but only insofar as it pits Nukulaelae against outside forces, such as nineteenth-century slavers, traders, and missionaries, twentieth-century colonial rule, the late-millennium encroachment of capitalism, or even perhaps the contemporary dealings between Nukulaelae and the Tuvalu nation-state. Here again, problems emerge, of both an analytic and ethical nature. In particular, as Ortner aptly argues, “the impulse to sanitize the internal politics of the dominated must be understood as fundamentally romantic” (1995, 179).<sup>19</sup>

The more vociferous critics of anthropology maintain more or less explicitly that social research should be restricted to “insiders,” namely individuals who belong to the same social group as the people being researched. My own employment peregrinations have taught me that these views do not have a uniform distribution the world: they are rarely expressed in Continental Europe, for example, while in postcolonial New Zealand they tend to dominate all discussion to the detriment of more significant dialogue, a fact that suggests that they may raise more questions than they answer. In the first place, there is ample evidence that “insiderness” has to date not turned out to be as privileging as it is cracked up to be, both in the First World and elsewhere. British anthropologists conducting fieldwork in Essex have as many barriers to overcome, albeit different ones, as English anthropologists conducting field research in Papua New Guinea (M. Strathern 1987). In Mithila (Bihar, northern India), Brahmin men are as predisposed to identify Tantric symbolism in rural Brahmin women’s folk artistic production as are foreigner scholars, even though Tantric symbolism has little relevance to the paintings and their intended meaning (C. Brown 1996). “Insiders” in this case are thus not particularly privileged in their understanding of what is produced locally, sometimes in their very own houses.

More fundamentally, who counts as an insider or outsider is hardly a straightforward question. Insisting on an opposition between “inside” and “outside” generally assumes a tacit conceptualization of community, society, or culture as homogeneous, immanent, and well bounded, characteristics against which empirical evidence militates (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a, 24; T. Turner 1979). Furthermore, as Abu-Lughod argues, the very act of observing social behavior places the observer in a liminal position: “the [indigenous] anthropologist is still defined as a being who must stand apart from the Other, even when he or she seeks explicitly to bridge the gap” (1991, 141). This liminality is most dramatically illustrated by what Abu-Lughod (1991) terms the condition of the “halfie,” the hybrid anthropologist with complex allegiances to multiple backgrounds and contexts (see also Narayan [1993] and, for a slightly different perspective, Cerroni-Long [1995]).<sup>20</sup>

These entanglements derive directly from the complexities of what consti-

tutes identity in any context, not just that of the anthropologist conducting field research, complexities that postmodernist and poststructuralist scholars such as Butler (1990) and Spivak (1988) have brilliantly exposed. At the most basic level of analysis, one may share a racial, ethnic, or national identity with the villagers or islanders among whom one is conducting fieldwork, but remain fundamentally alienated from them by an elite or foreign education, privileged social class affiliation, and the dual citizenship or visas that afford the choice of residing in either the developed or developing world (Abu-Lughod 1991, 138–143). Any aspect of my identity can override whatever binds me to my kindred-hosts and establish a power differential between them and me. This power differential, incidentally, does not necessarily place the anthropologist in the superordinate position, as illustrated by the case of anthropologists (indigenous or not) who are, like me, of the “wrong” sexuality and find themselves in sometimes precarious positions vis-à-vis their hosts (Kulick 1995; Lewin and Leap 1996). In Bakalaki’s apt words, “One becomes insider and outsider, representative of local or global discourses, in the context of social and especially power relations with others” (1997, 519).

To what extent am I deceiving my respondents by conducting research on something other than what they insist is, should be, and can only be the topic of my research? To what extent are my Nukulaelae informants really providing me their “informed consent,” which some insist should be given as much importance in ethnography as in other human sciences (e.g., Fluehr-Lobban 1994)? As Barnes (1980, 89–133) discusses, the motives of social scientific research are never entirely clear to informants, even in contexts where no linguistic and cultural barrier separates researcher and researched, because informants generally lack familiarity with the intellectual and social context in which the research is embedded, that is, how questions arise, how they are addressed, how results are disseminated, and to what end. This is certainly the case of Nukulaelae society, whose members remain unacquainted with the basic precepts of academic research for the most part. For the moment at least, as far as I know, no one associated with Nukulaelae Atoll has raised any objection to any aspect of my representation of the society. Similarly, I know of no case in which my statements about Nukulaelae society have been used against the interests or endeavors of the atoll community, and thus the arguments I entertain in this section remain solidly grounded in the hypothetical, the eventual, and the contingent.<sup>21</sup>

This situation may change somewhat in the near future, as Nukulaelae’s population becomes increasingly transnational and thus likely to be less impressed by academic credentials (as already evidenced by the pun that people have long made, converting the word *tiikulii* “[academic] degree” into *tae kulii* “dog shit”). Younger people are receiving university training in Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, and Hawai‘i in growing numbers, and their reactions to my work are beginning to trickle back to me, thus far couched in polite terms. Nevertheless, the same people

are unlikely to return to reside on the atoll (a situation that is itself potentially subject to critical scrutiny) and thus unlikely to have a direct impact on my own research practices and the responses of the atoll's residents to them. In the unlikely event that educated or otherwise privileged Nukulaelae Islanders would oppose my being privy to sensitive material, my documenting it in print, or even my conducting further research in the community, this opposition would undoubtedly be contested by other members of the community, even if it is as a matter of egalitarian principles.

These issues raise the question of who is entitled, on Nukulaelae or in any other society, to provide informed consent to the anthropologist. Indeed, Nukulaelae Islanders who are victimized by sorcery accusations, disparaging gossip, and other overt or covert forms of hegemonic action see in my fieldwork an opportunity to make their voices heard and the injustices that are perpetrated upon them documented. These people would urge me to write about what had happened to them, so that those who are the perpetrators of these injustices, many of which are never redressed, be exposed. These particular individuals subvert the prevalent image of outsiders being incapable of inside understanding. In many cases, they have come to know me well, which made them realize that an outsider may develop insights into the inner workings of Nukulaelae society after all. On the one hand, one can maintain that ethnographers are bound by the community's overarching desires to be presented under a certain light. On the other hand, this stance raises questions about who represents the "community" and the extent to which these desires are consensual. Standard professional codes of ethics are of little help on this issue because they conflate unproblematically the interests of individuals with those of the society to which they belong, in such statements as "anthropological researchers have primary ethical obligations to the people, species, and materials they study and to the people with whom they work" (American Anthropological Association 1998). In other words, codes of ethics continue to tacitly assume a definition of "community" as harmonious and cohesive, while anthropologists and sociologists moved away from such definitions decades ago.

Of course, people's attitudes and allegiances, like their identities, can be complex and change over time and across contexts. Could the same people who urged me to write about forces that have victimized them change their minds when they see the final product? Will they suddenly align themselves with the rest of Nukulaelae despite the pain it inflicted upon them, in contradistinction to a nosy anthropologist who had the nerve to paint a less-than-glamorous picture of their community? Here again, identities, affiliations, and sociopolitical stances are by nature shifting and negotiable, and at least at the local level, the anthropologist is as vulnerable to these shifts as his or her informants can claim some power through them. One possible escape route consists in simply deleting the identity of the field site by giving it a pseudonym and adopting a *nom de plume*, as van der

Geest (2003) did in Ghana in the 1970s, only to find out years later how displeased his informants had been about not having been identified. In this book, when writing about people in potentially compromising situations, I use pseudonyms and do not cross-reference details about them across chapters. While achieving complete anonymity in ethnographic writing about a very small group is impossible, the use of pseudonyms and other means of blurring recognition does provide a useful distance between anthropological descriptions and real-life actors and events.<sup>22</sup> However, I use real names when the context is positive and flattering, knowing that this is what people wish. One last factor on one's side is time: while I have published some of the materials I reanalyze here in scholarly journals, by definition relatively inaccessible, I waited to publish this book. Many people have died. For those that live on, the outrageous actions and scandalous events of two decades ago are now the object of mirth.

My field research benefited directly from the Nukulaelae enthusiasm for gossip, and many of its results focus on it in more or less direct fashion. In the first respect, my research may not differ greatly from most anthropological work. As if Trinh Minh-ha had written my fieldwork agenda, I obtained information over the years about social life on the atoll principally through gossip. But gossip has also figured prominently in my social and affective relations on Nukulaelae, in that my actions, intentions, and identity were common objects of speculation in the kitchen huts of the atoll. Gossip is Nukulaelae people's means of ethnographing the ethnographer, of turning the agent of description and analysis into an object of description and analysis.

Viewed from a local perspective, my retelling of the less-than-savory aspects of life on Nukulaelae could be seen as falling right in line with common social practices in the community: I, too, paint an unflattering picture ("disparaging" attributes the wrong connotation to my intentions) of close friends to my readership, that is, to complete strangers. However, the medium that I employ in my gossip is clearly different: no longer confined to the (albeit largely illusory) privacy of a cooking hut, my gossip is printed, and thus acquires an implicit claim to authority and truthfulness. However, the printed word only makes a *claim* to truth, and one that people can reject or resist, as Nukulaelae Islanders often do. As astutely literate people, they approach a written text with the expectation that it is authoritative, but they are also intensely aware of the fact that written texts are not end products, that their production and consumption are embedded in social contexts that determine the "truthfulness" of the text as much as its literal meaning (Besnier 1995, 165–166; cf. Lambek 1990). People can respond to texts, can evaluate, accept, or reject them. There are other differences between oral gossip in huts and ethnography-as-gossip. First, the latter makes serious attempts to maximize anonymity, while the former does everything to maximize recognition. Second, the gossip's intent is very different from that of the ethnographer, whatever that may

be. Third, and in a similar fashion, audience intentions differ in each case. Indeed, it is unlikely that many members of the anthropological community, to whom the work is principally addressed, will be interested in the specifics of the scandals on a tiny Pacific island. Readers with closer connections to the field site may have such interests, but it is difficult to imagine how they could use the specific knowledge they may acquire through the work for damaging purposes. In short, the parallel between gossip and ethnography breaks down under closer scrutiny.

Some may dismiss the conscience-probing exercise I have performed in this section as superfluous hand-wringing or as foolhardy self-exposure better suited to the confessional (or the wine-lubricated anthropologists' party) than to a "serious" published forum. Others may find that I have stopped short of deconstructing the sordid inner workings of the politics of an academic discipline. I conclude this modest effort by contending that anthropologists do not engage in such exercises often enough. For example, in an otherwise perceptive essay that I have already cited repeatedly, Sherry Ortner criticizes anthropologists' reluctance to study internal forms of hegemony in dominated groups as romantic (1995, 179). Yet she fails to give any consideration to the ethical implications that such research may have. All too often, anthropologists frame questions of representation only in terms of their intellectual content, while ethical considerations, or discussions of the political implications of anthropological field research, are relegated to newsletters and similar marginalia. The result is that ethical issues appear marginal to anthropological thinking, lending some validity to the strong reactions of the type voiced by the likes of Trinh Minh-ha and Trask.

However, what these reactions overlook is that the ethics of field research cannot be addressed by asking straightforward questions and expecting straightforward answers. Anthropological inquiry is embedded in social relations, just like relations with one's familiars, one's boss, and one's employees. And like all other social relations, relations in the field are potentially suffused with bonds of friendship and goodwill, as well as potentially fraught with difficulties (Luhmann 1996, 233–236). Ethnographers are working with complex allegiances and obligations, and from complex identity formations. Field research is subject to local regimes of justice, cohesion, and social relations, as well as to more global regimes, and the interaction between these different regimes can be murky. Ethnographic works do not represent societies to their audiences, as M. Strathern (2005, 7) astutely remarks; rather, they establish a connection between societies and audiences, in some fashion or the other. What follows is my attempt at crafting this connection.

### **What Follows**

The chapter that follows provides a description of life on Nukulaelae Atoll, focusing in particular on the intimacy of contexts in which gossip takes place. The

chapter continues with a discussion of Islanders' self-representations to themselves and the outside world in the course of history and in modern times, self-representations that foreground problematically an ideology of harmony and consensus. In chapter 3, I further develop a discussion of this ideology, demonstrating that Nukulaelae people's anxious elaboration of it can be understood in terms of the coexistence of seemingly incommensurable discourses, one that calls for a hierarchical and authoritarian order, another for egalitarianism. This ideological landscape backgrounds the analysis of the microscopic structure of gossip interaction, to which I turn in chapter 4, in that this structure indexes the complexities of political ideology extant on the atoll. Chapter 5 puts the general discussion of the previous chapters "to the test" in an analysis of one particular event, a gossip session about a marginalized member of the society. I demonstrate how microscopic aspects of this gossip session relate to dynamics of marginalization and reputation, not only of the target of the gossip, but also of the gossipier and his or her audience. In turn, these dynamics are embedded in large-scale processes such as the politics of religious affiliation, encroaching capitalism, and novel discourses of human rights. Chapter 6 focuses on another set of events, the marginalization of two women through sorcery allegations, backgrounded again by changing economic and social conditions, in which I played a pivotal role as ethnographer. Here my focus shifts to the targets of gossip and seeks to make sense of their divergent responses to the gossip, responses that I contrast with those of another victim of gossip in chapter 7, also the target of sorcery allegations, who loses job and status as a result. I demonstrate that the latter's attempt to seek redress in a meeting with the entire island fails miserably because what can be whispered in gossip cannot be raised in public. The last two chapters demonstrate how different genres of interaction articulate with one another and highlight the extent to which gossip should be studied both in terms of what it is and in terms of what it is not. The concluding chapter brings together strands of my argument. Throughout the book, I seek theoretical inspiration from a variety of sources, which I introduce as needed: Peircean semiotics, which "complicates" the relationship between semiotic forms and what they represent; Bakhtinian understandings of the circulation across time, space, and contexts; the study of ideology in and through language; Foucault-inspired theories of power, coupled with poststructuralist insights into the work of performativity; and the feminist critique of received assumptions about the location of significant action in society and culture.