

Negotiating Local Subjectivities on the Edge  
of the Global

Vossiuspers UvA is an imprint of Amsterdam University Press.  
This edition is established under the auspices of the University of Amsterdam.

Cover design: Nauta & Haagen, Oss  
Lay-out: JAPES, Amsterdam  
Cover illustration: Jeroen Oerlemans, Amsterdam

ISBN 978 90 5629 488 5

© Niko Besnier/Vossiuspers UvA, Amsterdam, 2007

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the author of this book.

# Negotiating Local Subjectivities on the Edge of the Global

*Inaugural Lecture*

delivered on the appointment to  
the chair of Cultural Anthropology  
at the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences  
at the University of Amsterdam  
on 4 Friday May 2007

by

Niko Besnier

 VOSSIUSPERS UVA



*Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus,  
Mevrouw de Decaan,  
Colleagues, friends, family members,*

In an era in which life is undergoing an unrelenting ‘social acceleration’ that some applaud while others deplore, one has increasingly little time for details, subtleties, and complexities. Journalists expect academics to produce simple sound bites on complex issues. Funding agencies require us to make our point so that it be comprehensible to heterogeneous readers. And our students wish us to provide a ‘correct’ answer that they can regurgitate on examinations and in papers. In this context, anthropologists’ common reaction to the effect that ‘things are not as simple as meets the eye’, and our suspicion of objective, standardized, depersonalized analytic categories, may appear like an Apollonian stance ill-adjusted to a Dionysian world. As incoming professor to a nationally and internationally acclaimed anthropology programme, I take up from former and current colleagues the daunting task of trying to convince university administrators, funding agencies, students, and perhaps a broader public that anthropology’s quirky insistences on complexity, detail, and the seemingly inconsequential, far from being out-of-step with the requirements of contemporary realities, is as crucial to our existence as it has ever been. In this presentation, I aim to give you glimpses of why this would be the case, and seek to demonstrate that apprehending larger world issues requires a focus on experience through the lens of intimacy, while keeping in the immediate background a concern for comparison, one of anthropology’s most enduring preoccupations.

Looming over my presentation will be a concern with questions of modernity and globalization, which in recent decades have engaged anthropologists, including many current and former affiliates of the University of Amsterdam. The realization that the world is experiencing new forms of global interconnections raises novel questions about human action and what drives it. Some argue that the destabilization of local truths have given rise to new ways of understanding the self,

## NIKO BESNIER

which draw on multiple images no longer grounded in specific locales. Such claims must be examined by observing 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 enduring. Along with many other anthropologists, I approach globalization stressing that 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, of nurturing imaginings of a better life, of apprehending modern technology continues to be embedded in emotions, the senses, the body, kinship and friendship, desires and longings (Appadurai, 1997, p. 116). 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 foregrounding the multi-layered complexities of language, interaction, and performance taken in their broadest sense.

Taking these insights one step further, I argue for a rethinking of some of the central issues that have preoccupied the social sciences in recent years, namely the relationship between hegemony and counter-hegemony, and the transformations that this relationship is undergoing because of global processes. The preoccupation with resistance in the 1990s in anthropology, sociology, and political science deflected our attention away from other forms of agentive action that engage with both hegemony and globalizing processes (cf. Abu-Lughod, 1990, Brown, 1996, Gal, 1995, Ortner, 1995). Extending our analytic focus to intimate interactions among equals as well as unequals, coupled with attention to large-scale processes, provides us with a richer understanding of political action than a focus on oversimplified binary contrasts between power and resistance, the local and the global, or the modern and the pre-modern.\*

### Cosmopolitanism

I illustrate these claims with vignettes from my ethnographic research in the Pacific Islands. The first two vignettes stem from fieldwork I have been conducting intermittently since 1977 in the Kingdom of Tonga, a nation-state peopled by about 100,000 inhabitants, to which one must add probably twice as many people who identify as Tongan and reside in the urban centers of the Pacific Basin, particularly New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. Although no transnational

## NEGOTIATING LOCAL SUBJECTIVITIES

corporation has established sweatshops in Tonga, television and Internet usage are embryonic, and the country has yet to succumb to the dictates of IMF-prescribed 'structural adjustment', Tongans are intensely aware of the rupturing potentials of modernity and globalization, as are diasporic people in general. For example, most families have close relatives overseas, on whose regular monetary remittances they depend for survival in the increasingly expensive local economy, yet remittances are fragile resources. For Tongans, the global and the modern continue to piggy-back on direct relations between people, and they are as fragile as social relations.

Tongan society and culture are hierarchical and centralized, and the hierarchical order extends to modernity and globalization. The high-ranking and wealthy elites not only own traditional resources, such as land, but also claim to 'own' modernity in concrete ways: for example, the Princess Royal has appropriated the air-space over Tonga up to the stratosphere, providing, for substantial fees, satellite parking spots to the People's Republic of China (Van Fossen, 1999); the late king, Tāufa'āhau Tupou IV, sold in the 1990s an unknown number of Tongan passports to wealthy stateless persons, including Imelda Marcos. More subtly, Tongans associate a cosmopolitan self-presentation with the traditional elites, since this self-presentation is the product of frequent sojourns overseas under privileged conditions. Language is a particularly salient marker of rank and class: elites code-switch as they please between English, the language of modernity and cosmopolitanism, and Tongan, thereby exuding a sophisticated ease with both modernity and tradition, the global and the local. Non-elites who attempt to emulate the linguistic aplomb that code-switching presumes are ridiculed by their own peers for not knowing their place in the tightly structured social order.

However, as social theorists tell us, from Antonio Gramsci to James Scott (and many others in between), no hegemonic structure is ever so watertight as to preclude resistance. The most dramatic form that Tonga has experienced in recent memory took place in November 2006, when disaffected young Tongan men ransacked and burned down the center of the capital. Complex and ill-understood reasons motivated their actions, including the lack of employment opportunities, the slowness of political reforms, and the ruthlessness of immigration and deportation policies in countries to which Tongans seek to migrate. At this moment, Tonga's economic and political future remains uncertain.

My analytic focus bears on much less dramatic forms of social action, contexts that are not designed as counter-hegemonic but as mundane situations of people

## NIKO BESNIER

trying to eke out a living and claim a modicum of dignity. An example is the very popular secondhand marketplace in the capital of Tonga (Besnier, 2004a), where people sell objects that their diasporic relatives send them from overseas in lieu of monetary remittances, thus enabling them to bypass the exorbitant fees that the transnational poverty industry charges for money transfers (cf. Gibson, McKenzie, and Rohorua, 2006). The objects on display are predominantly clothes, reflecting Tongans' keen interest in the respectability that a careful appearance commands, even when one is poor. Women are over-represented among the market's sellers and shoppers, as well as 'local others' (e.g., small-scale entrepreneurs, Mormons, Charismatic Christians, returned migrants, poorer Chinese immigrants). The marketplace is a context in which agents transform consumption into pleasure and intertwine these pleasures with global modern desires, in a way that few other contexts provide the opportunity to do in the islands.

A primary medium through which these juxtapositions are made is talk. I turn here to the brief analysis of an impromptu conversation between a seller and a shopper, which took place in the noisy context of the market, while young men blared the latest pop hit in the background for everyone's enjoyment. In this conversation, the two women, who are neither high ranking nor wealthy, evaluate the appropriateness of wearing a blouse, in a society in which a woman is best positioned to command respect if she is fashionably attired from neck to ankle. The kind of 'fashion talk' of which this conversation is representative is not only gendered, but also specific to the marketplace; it is certainly not the kind of talk that takes place between customers and salespeople in shops. The conversation takes place in both Tongan and English: \*\*

[Audio: Tu'imatamoana, disk 1, 1:47:55-48:47]

Seller:               *Sai ia kia koe, Sōnia.*  
                          'Looks good on you, Sōnia.'

Customer:           Yeah- if it fits =

Seller:               ((ignoring customer's contingency)) = Ni::ce. (1o.o) What size is it?  
                          (2.o)

Customer:           Eight.  
                          (3.o)



## NEGOTIATING LOCAL SUBJECTIVITIES

- Seller: Ohh. (4.0) Too small.  
(2.0)  
'E hao ia 'ia Mālia. (2.0) 'Ia me'a.  
'It'll fit Mālia. I mean, what's-her-name.'  
(2.0)  
It's might fit you, cuz it looks big!
- Customer: 'Io?  
'Yes?'
- Seller: Yeah! (2.0) The waist, look!
- Customer: I know-
- Seller: I think it's one of those one that it has to show the bellybutton.
- Customer: No way!
- Seller: Aaaha-ha-haa!
- Customer: .Haa-ha-hah!
- Seller: That's the in-thing in New Zealand now. Even my kids say, 'Mummy, see, it has to show the b-!' Huh! I say, 'No:::, no:::!' Ahahahuh-hh! Cuz that's the look now!

The customer did not buy the blouse.

What can we learn from this fleeting interactional moment? The fluent English-Tongan code-switching is locally remarkable for its oblivion to the potential shame that it could bring upon the conversationalists, particularly in light of the heavily Polynesianized syntax that one of them uses ('it's might fit you', 'one of those *one* that *it* has to show'). (Other Tongan informants of mine would characterize the seller's English as 'hurry mouth, no grammar'.) The seller makes up for these syntactic glitches with an exaggeration of the pronunciation of the second vowel of the word 'New Zealand' (phonetically, [nju: zə:lnd]) as [ə:] instead of [i:], an example of what sociolinguists call 'hypercorrection' (Labov, 1966), which aligns her with the most down-home dialects of New Zealand English and allows her to show off her familiarity with non-immigrant New Zealand ways of talking. The content of her talk ('Even my kids say, "Mummy, see, it has to show the b-!" Huh! I say, "No:::, no:::!"') provides additional texture to her performance, in which she portrays herself as a modern mother who benignly allows her kids to challenge her authority. She is also in-the-know when it comes to cosmopolitan

## NIKO BESNIER

fashions ('That's the in-thing in New Zealand now', 'Cuz that's the look now!'), even though their local propriety may be problematic, as evidenced by the quick retreat she makes, attributing enthusiasm for the style to her kids, when she realizes that her interlocutor is no longer colluding with her. Indeed, consumption, Douglas and Isherwood (1979, p. 126) remind us, is as much about competing with other people as it is about the fear that they will exclude you.

This is the kind of negotiations in which people on the edge of the global engage over the boundary between the restraints of the local and the excesses of the global (cf. Leichty 2003, pp. 73-79). Through interactions like this one, people lay claims to particular positions with respect to one another, quickly backtracking when others disapprove, true to Goffman's (1959) fifty-year-old insight that every social act is a presentation of self. More subtly, negotiations between more-or-less equals indirectly challenge the received order, including, in this case, the over-determined discourse that defines cosmopolitanism as the property of elites. The game is tentative, multi-layered, and not without pitfalls, and certainly does not exhibit the violence and drama of burning down the town. Yet it represents the never-ending project through which people search for meaning and dignity with the meager material and symbolic resources available to them.

### Marginality

This project can be hard work, and is hardest for those who occupy the lowest positions in the pecking order, or for those whose claims to dignity mainstream society deems particularly improbable. At the same time, having little to lose also gives license to make even more outlandish claims on symbolic resources.

Such is the case, in Tonga, of members of the small but highly visible transgender minority, whose members are physiological males who sometimes cross-dress, sometimes occupy women's spheres, sometimes engage in sexual relations with non-transgender men, and always defy generalization. The experience of *leitī*, as they call themselves (from English 'lady'), is particularly fascinating because their identity work exposes not only the constitution of masculinity, femininity, and marginality, but also Tonga's relationship to the rest of the world (Besnier, 2002, 2004b). Multiply marginalized because of their non-normative gendering, general poverty, and low rank, *leitī* nevertheless throw caution to the wind with even

## NEGOTIATING LOCAL SUBJECTIVITIES

more abandon than secondhand market women, performing a cosmopolitanism and sophistication through which they claim immunity from the judgmental strictures of local morality, which are becoming increasingly strident through the transnational circulation of homophobic discourses emanating from the American Christian Right.

Once a year, *leitī* perform their cosmopolitanism in the wildly popular Miss Galaxy beauty pageant. A national event patronized by members of the royal family, the pageant is a show of transgender glamour as well as trans-local imagination, as contestants parade in prim tailored ladies' suits, stunning evening gowns, or 'national costumes' representing countries to which they have no personal association whatsoever. In contrast to the secondhand marketplace, where the focus is on the shifting boundary between restraint and excess, Miss Galaxy is all about demanding, through excess, a modicum of respect (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The contestants at the end of the pageant posing around the newly elected Miss Galaxy 1997, the incumbent, and the emcee.

Contestants, audience members, and organizers come to the pageant with equal enthusiasm, but divergent agendas. Prominent among these agendas is a struggle over who controls humor, and when. Many audience members are deeply skeptical about *leitīs'* claims of both gender crossing and cosmopolitanism, and lay in wait for any hint that these claims are without substance: nothing generates more uproarious laughter than a bra that slips off a flat chest or a wig that falls off, exposing the contestants for what they 'really' are according to the audience. Contestants approach with trepidation the 'interview event', a segment of the

## NIKO BESNIER

pageant in which they have to not only *look* glamorous but also *sound* glamorous, and in English of course. If the contestant retreats into Tongan, she demonstrates that she is not, after all, the cosmopolitan person her outfits and postures claim she is; if she answers in English, she is laughed off the stage at the slightest slip, even if her English is quite fluent. This is what happened to contestant Masha in the 1997 pageant, whose word-search early in her answer meant a quick end to the limelight for her (Figure 2):



Figure 2: Masha searches for the English word she needs to answer her interview question.

[Video: 1997:Sony:4 0:02:45-0:03:55]

Emcee: What would you say about being a hairstylist, or- being-a working- what- what does it mean, like, to be working at Joy's Hair Styles? ((sotto voce, summarizes the question in Tongan)) *Ko e hā e me'a 'oku ke fai 'i he hair salon?*

Masha: ((takes cordless mike)) Well thank you very much. ((audience laughs, then shouts with admiration and encouragement)) If you want your hair to be curled, ((beckons with her hand)) come over. ((audience explodes in laughter and whooping, Masha laughs and then becomes serious and requests silence with her hand)) Uh, I like it very much, and uh- I enjoy working there, with uhmm- ((pauses, word-searches, waves her hand, audience explodes in laughter, drowning the remainder of the answer)) blowers, ((unable to finish, mouths)) (thank you). ((hands mike back and returns to her position))

But not all contestants relinquish control so easily. Minutes after Masha's fiasco, the incomparable Lady Amyland stepped up to the podium, very seriously drunk of course. Knowing full well that she speaks very little English, a *leitī* in the audi-

ence heckles her, urging her to speak English (*Faka-Pālangi*) and calling her by her boy's name, 'Āmini. She responds by 'breaking frame' (Goffman, 1974, pp. 345-377), asserting in English that she is after all Tongan and that this entitles her to speak Tongan, even in this context. The effect on the audience, and on all Tongans who have watched this video segment, is explosive (Figure 3):



Figure 3: Lady Amyland savours the effect of her quick-minded repartee to a heckler.

[Video: 1997:Sony:4 0:05:42-0:06:26]

Emcee: Miss Joey's Unisex Hair Salon! What do you have to say to promote Joey's Unisex Hair Salon? ((lowers voice, translating into Tongan)) *Ko e hā e me'a 'oku ke fai ke promote ai 'a e-* ((rolls eyes, searches for Tongan word)) *fakalakalaka ai 'a Joey's Unisex Hair Salon.*

Heckler: *Faka-Pālangi, 'Āmini!*

Audience: ((laughter))

'Āmini: Sorry excuse me, I'm a Tongan ( ) ((rest of answer drowned by deafening laughter, vigorous applause, cat-calls))

Lady Amyland's overt project is to seize control of humor and force the audience to laugh *with* her rather than *at* her. More subtly, she deploys a different subjectivity from the one that dominates the pageant, asserting her right to be *both* glamorously cosmopolitan in her mutton-sleeve gown *and* grounded in the local context, which she cannot dispense with because it is all she has.

Market women and Miss Galaxy contestants engage in similar projects: as members of a rigidly stratified structure, but one whose engagement with a global

## NIKO BESNIER

context provides valuable resources, they re-fashion the self through large-scale imaginings, not as Nietzschean escapism, but as constructive projects. But these imaginings are hard work: other people must be convinced of their validity, some claims are more far-fetched than others, and the marginal position that some agents occupy places them at greater disadvantage than others. As a result, cosmopolitanism is achieved with varying degrees of success. These struggles are not resistant, because they pitch more-or-less equals against one another, nor are they 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1990) by any stretch of the imagination. Yet power suffuses these struggles, in that they embody an indirect commentary on elite appropriation of modernity, although both the hegemony and the counter-hegemony are diffuse, shifting, and ungrounded.

What we learn from this kind of analysis is to attend to the complex entanglements of locality and globality, the material and the imagined, microscopic action and large-scale processes. These entanglements are after all not exotic, and attention to their complexity helps us go beyond simplistic analyses of globalization as a 'clash of civilizations', or the imposition of the West onto the non-West. This attention also highlights the way in which language, interaction, and performance play important roles as political resources, but that our analysis must reach beyond a simple 'reading' of form, into a reading of indexical substance: the indexicality of accents, code-switches, tones of voice, interruptions, and laughter, none of which have literal meaning, but all of which are pregnant with allusions.

### Skepticism

Not everyone shares the enthusiasm that *leitī* and Nuku'alofa second-hand market women display for the potentialities of cosmopolitan performances in ameliorating their fate. People around the globe actively distance themselves from what they experience as the oppressive, unjust, and alienating nature of Western-dominated modernity through cargo cults, affirmations of historical continuity through claims of tradition, or the politics of indigeneity (e.g., Conklin, 1997, Sylvain, 2005). In this project, they are joined by the West's own Modern Primitives and middle-class adherents of various New Age doctrines, although their contestations take on different configurations (e.g., Brown, 1997, Rosenblatt, 1997). But skepticism can take on subtle, seemingly apolitical forms, and to illustrate this point I turn to

## NEGOTIATING LOCAL SUBJECTIVITIES

my fieldwork on Nukulaelae Atoll, a beautiful and tiny atoll just below the Equator, peopled by 350 inhabitants, and part of one of the world's micro-states, Tuvalu, with a total population of 9,500 (2002 estimate). I spent a total of four years as a guest of Nukulaelae Islanders, posing a variety of ethnographic questions, of which I will only provide glimpses of one.

Despite their continued isolation from the rest of the world (the ship still only comes once a month at best), Nukulaelae Islanders' engagement with modernity has not been easy: in 1863, slavers hauled off 80% of the population to Peruvian guano fields, where all promptly died; in 1865, the islanders who had not been taken away leased, for 10 shillings, a fourth of their tiny atoll to a German colonial venture, for what they thought were twenty-five lunar months, but ended up being twenty-five years. London Missionary Society-sponsored teachers from Samoa arrived in the midst of all this, and turned Nukulaelae Islanders into a staunchly Christian society. And to this day Tuvaluans continue to experience the dramatic effects of modernity: the country has acquired international notoriety for being at risk of entirely disappearing under rising seas because of its extreme low-lying geography, which makes the Netherlands look mountainous.

More recently, Nukulaelae Islanders have engaged with modernity in far-away locations, particularly in the island-republic of Nauru, where many have spent considerable time as contract workers in the phosphate industry. Since the end of that industry, it is young men, employed as cheap and pliable workers on ships owned by transnational corporations, who are the vectors of the modern. Over a century's experience with modernity has had a strong impact on atoll life, particularly in the quarter century since independence, and the signs are tangible. Outboard dinghies replaced outrigger sailing canoes in the space of a few years in the 1980s. Thatched open-wall houses have now been replaced by cement structures topped with corrugated iron, which allow rainwater catchment and relieved the constant threat of drought, but remain under permanent construction because people run out of money. Paralleling images of enduring timelessness, tradition, and isolation that islanders associate with atoll life, modernity is very much part of life on Nukulaelae, however slow and frustrating the struggle for development may be.

It is in this context that Nukulaelae Islanders love to tell stories about their own and each other's discomfiture when they encounter the modern world during visits off-island, in the form of electric lights, gas stoves, running water, complicated

## NIKO BESNIER

buildings, flush toilets, and telephones. So delectable are these stories that one of the most popular radio programs on national radio is a weekly compendium of these stories, sent in from the various islands of the country and recounted from the capital's broadcasting studio by an elder, originally from Nukulaelae, who is widely regarded as the national trickster. Without discounting the comedic intent underlying these narratives, I also treat them as serious texts, through which 'we constantly construct and reconstruct a self to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears of the future' (Bruner, 2003, p. 210).

Particularly prone to be both tellers and protagonists of these narratives are elderly women. As in many other societies, Nukulaelae elderly women are liminal beings: doubly marginalized by their age and gender (cf. Hereniko, 1995, Mitchell, ed., 1992), they often engage in norm-breaking behaviour, such as singing and dancing in lewd ways (Figure 4). They are also least entitled to the self-indulgence that people associate with modernity, which they are expected to leave to their children and grandchildren.



Figure 4: Elderly Nukulaelae women at a 1990 island celebration, cracking obscene jokes, dancing lewdly, and laughing.

I turn to one of these narratives, recorded in 1985 in a cooking hut by the lagoon, in the intimacy and pleasurable informality of after-dinner conversation among elderly women (Figure 5). In this excerpt, one elderly lady, Sualai, recount her embarrassment when faced with her inability to figure out running-water taps while visiting the country's capital and staying at the modern home of a high-rank-



## NEGOTIATING LOCAL SUBJECTIVITIES

ing government official, a close relative of hers and of the audience members to whom she tells the story. She tells her self-deprecating narrative in quiet but highly dramatic tones, to her audience's delight:



Figure 5: Young Nukulaelae women in 1985 by a cooking hut, the site of much gossip and of occasional 'encounters with modernity' narratives.

[Audio: 1985 Vol 2, *Sunema* @ taps 00:00-02:23]

Sualai: *Aati laa ko te lua mo ko te tolu o oku aso, muna a Vaitaume, 'Naa hano o:: o koukou,'*

'It was about the second or third day [I was on Funafuti], Vaitaume said [to me], "Go ahead and take your bath!"'

*Hano au ki ki te fale foo i te fale teelaa, i te suaa potu, te:: kii teelaa i ei o kii.*

'I go to- to the outhouse- to that room, the other room, [the one with] a tap that you turn on.'

*Hanatu au, ulu au ki loto i te mataloa, kaa ssala ssala te koga e: e kii ei a t::e mea te paipa, me teehee laa te koga e kii ei te paipa,*

'I go, go inside the door, then I look and look and look for the place where- where you turn on- turn on the tap, where you turn on the tap.'

*A ko te mea h, e isi ttakafi e fakapuuhhlou heh heh! (hee iloo) laa ko fiti fakataallava peelaa te mea, koo hanatu au, koo puke: loo i luga loo i te fiti loo peenei, kae- kae teketeke laa au =*

'The thing is, there is a mat that's on top of the pipes, (I didn't know) that the metal was running sideways like this, I go and grab the metal like this, and I pull on it,'

= *aku muna! hhh 'E- e aa?, kae teehee laa nei te koga kii ei,' =*  
'I ask myself, "So, where do you turn this on?"'

## NIKO BESNIER

all: = ((quiet laughter))

Sualai: *Fakattau mai laa, koo kae hai i te mea maa iloahh nee Fagauta!*  
'I'm thinking, let me find out so that Fagauta does not get to know about it!'

*Kae kalaga atu au, 'Ee Donny!' 'Io!' ((falsetto)) 'VAU AKA!'*  
'So I call out to Donny, "Hey Donny!" "Yes!" "Can you please come over?"'

*Vau a Donny. Aku muna hh, ((creaky)) 'Teehee te paipa e:: hai ei a:: hhh vai kee aka hhhh kee kii aka kee koukou au?'*

'Donny comes over. I go, "Where is the tap where the water comes out of, so I can take my bath?"'

*((falsetto)) Muna a tou tagata! 'VALEA PULALIFUULU! peenei EILoo mea!'*  
'He goes, "[You] stupid bloody fool! It's like this!"'

*((falsetto)) Aku muna! 'He aa!' 'Kiloko ki te paipa teelaa e kii!'*  
'I go, "What?" "Look at that tap, you turn it on!"'

*((mid-falsetto)) Aku muna, 'Maalie ua laa hh, e kii peehee te (paipa) hhhh!' ((falsetto)) 'KII MAI KIAA KOE!'*

'I go, "Hold it, so how do you turn on the (tap) hhhh?" "Turn it right towards you!"'

*((whisper)) 'Ttaapaa ee!, kii!, ttaapaa ee!, ((falsetto)) kae he aa te mea KOO GGANA PEELAA?'*

"Hey! Hold it! Hey! What's that thing that's making noise?"

*((normal pitch)) Taku mea e kae muna aka au peelaa, ((mid-falsetto)) 'Kae he aa te mea koo ggana peelaa?'*

'Then I- then I say, "But what is it that's making noise like this?"'

Muna a::: =  
'(He) goes'

Tamala: = *Te paamu.* =  
'The pump.'

Sualai: = *muna a Donny mo ko te mea e hai ki te mesiini o te::: =*  
'Donny says it's the thing that makes the machine of the'

Mele: = *mmm* =  
'hmm'

## NEGOTIATING LOCAL SUBJECTIVITIES

Sualai: = o te vai. *Ttaapaa ee!, Sepoima!, Kaa kii a motou mea, tapu kkii eeloo au e hano o kii, mo ko Donny, mo ko Sekau, mo ko Siuila, teelaa i te hanatuuga teelaa a Siuila. Mo ko:: Peenina.*

'of the water. Hey! Sepoima! When we needed to get stuff, I would never ever get the water, I'd let Donny or Sekau or Siuila, because it was the time that Siuila was there, or Peenina.'

*A mea a motou puaka e hai, heki hano eeloo au o kii.*

'When we'd [feed] the pigs, I'd never get the water.'

*Fakamuli eeloo i au koo nofo atu peelaa, koo iloa ai nee au o kii te-*

'It's just much later on that I was there for a long time, that I'd know how to turn on the-'

((whisper, deliberate tempo)) *Aku muna, 'Ttaapaa ee!, Peenina!, kiloko! koe loo haa fakamatala kia::: kia Peifaga, i au laa nei heki kau iloaaga lele he mea hh peehhnei!*

'I go, "Hey!, Penina!, look, don't you go and tell this to Peifaga, it's just that I have no idea about any of this!"'

The last reference is to the national radio programme that broadcasts such misadventures, complete with a full identification of the protagonist.

Because space constraints preclude a full analysis of this narrative, I will limit myself to a few analytic remarks. Taken literally, this narrative and others like it could be viewed as evidence of Nukulaelae old ladies' defeatism in the face of modernity. This reading would suit a long genealogy of thinking that bears witness to the humiliation, frustration, and defeat experienced by pre-modern people, imprisoned in a 'developing' stage from which they will never emerge. Because a 'developing' world is needed by the 'developed' world to define itself, its inhabitants are suspended between their desire for modernity and the realization that it is unattainable. Marshall Sahlins articulates this line of thought particularly provocatively, declaring that societies on the periphery only develop a sense of modernity after they have learnt to 'hate what they already have ... despise what they are ... and want, then, to be someone else' (1992, p. 24, also 1988). This assertion has recently provoked scholars to ask a number of important questions about it (e.g., Robbins and Wardlow, eds. 2005): How does humiliation arise? How does it operate? What does it look like? In particular, what exactly happens to people in the interstice between modern desires and the realization that the modernity with which they are associated is out of reach?

## NIKO BESNIER

An analysis of Nukulaelae self-deprecating narratives that reaches beyond the literal provide a few glimpses of the way in which we may proceed with these questions. First, as in Nukulaelae gossip in general (Besnier, 1989, 1993), the moral and affective weight of the story is embedded in reported dialogues, which the speaker presents to the audience as a rendition of conversations that actually took place in the past, but does so with noticeable drama, as witnessed by the whispers, falsettos, and exclamations that punctuate the retelling. Second, the entire narrative is told in a heavy Nukulaelae dialect, rather than Standard Tuvalu, which accentuates the ‘country bumpkin’ effect that Sualai aims for. Third, her expressions of fear and dread (e.g., at the noise of the pump, at the possibility that the story will be broadcasted on national radio) are disproportionate to the events themselves, but they provide comedy that her audience appreciates and identifies with, as the frequent giggles attest. The insult *valea pulalifuulu* (‘stupid bloody fool’) indexes the expletive that islanders learned the hard way from British colonial officials, and recontextualizes in revealing ways the relationship between young privileged capital-city-dwelling Donny and his elderly great-aunt visiting from the Outer Islands.

Finally, in such narratives, elderly women sometimes articulate a cynical distancing from modern complexities, as is the case at the conclusion of the narrative session that includes the previous except (which is followed by another story about a baffled encounter with a gas stove). Here the conversationalists use food and cooking to contrast inclusion with exclusion, familiarity with estrangement, and comfort with anxiety, a trope familiar from many contexts in this society and many others (e.g., Fajans, 1983, Kahn, 1986):

[Audio: 1985 Vol 2, Sunema & taps, conclusion 03:40-03:58]

Sualai:                 ((whisper)) *Taapaa ee!* ((others laugh)) *Mata eeloo, taatou hee aogaa eeloo o olo ki [fale] ki mea kolaa, =*  
‘And- I swear, it’s useless for us to go to houses where there is this kind of things.’

Sepoima:   [ *mm!* ]                     = *mm!*  
  ‘hmm!’                                 ‘hmm!’

Sepoima:           *Taatou e tasi loo ttou mea koo apo taatou i ei, ko te ((falsetto)) meakkai faka-Tuuvalu eeloo, ttafuga te afi =*  
‘We are proficient at only one thing, and that’s Tuvaluan food, the kindling of the fire.’

## NEGOTIATING LOCAL SUBJECTIVITIES

- Sualai: = *Tafu te afi o-* =  
'Kindle the fire to-'
- Sepoima: = *Ko pulaka, ko fuagaamei, ((falsetto)) meakkai faka-taatou eeloo!*  
'Swamp taro, breadfruit fruit, food that belongs to us!'
- Ka ko mea peelaa, . . .*  
'But when it comes to things like that, . . .'

The 'we-ness' that suffuses this commentary (in the repeated use of the first-person inclusive pronoun *taatou* and its grammatical variants, for example) saves Nukulaelae old ladies facing a threatening modern world, enabling them to rally around simple familiar things, providing them a face-saving mechanism that is a far cry from the pretensions of their modern relatives' lifestyles, while keeping alive an ironic sensibility that mixes ambiguously moral commentary and self-deprecating humor.

Thus, contrary to the sequencing of humiliation and development that Sahlins asserts, and in contrast to Tongan market women and Miss Galaxy contestants, Nukulaelae old ladies demonstrate that encounters with modernity can provoke affects other than either self-loathing or enthusiasm. Rather, people in different situations develop layered emotions about the possibilities and impossibilities of modernity, and microscopic tools for the analysis of narrative performances can open our eyes to this complexity. These tools help us provide a much more nuanced account than journalists' and pundits' accounts of why large portions of the world 'hate Westerners'. I am thinking of the pronouncements of a Thomas Friedman or a Samuel Huntington, which are as influential as they are flippantly simplistic. Our anthropological tools enable us to go beyond glib statements, and search for a self-reflecting complexity that continues to make our discipline stand out among the social sciences, even though it does not necessarily make us good interviewees on television shows.

### Hopes

The kind of cultural anthropology that I seek to encourage at this University is one that pays as much attention to the intimacy of cultural production as to the embeddedness of humans in large-scale processes, following in the footsteps estab-

## NIKO BESNIER

lished by my predecessor Johannes Fabian and pursued by a number of my current colleagues. Particularly in this age of global flows, we are all involved in each other's lives, through our engagement with similar objects and images. Inequality and marginalization bear recurrent features, whether they occur on Pacific Islands or in poorer neighborhoods of Amsterdam, or between rich polluting countries and the poorer isolated communities that pay for the extravagance of their rich neighbors with their own survival. At the same time, what people do with these recurrent dynamics varies, because local forces always color global ones. As a result, an intimate understanding of human lives that can only be arrived at through careful fieldwork (sometimes in unlikely places) continues to be an essential component of what we must do. Without such an understanding, we obliterate the experience of those who live far from urban centers, outside of networks of wealth and consumption, and away from what funding agencies and publics define as conforming to a particular definition of contemporariness and relevance.

The goal of studying life in places like the Pacific Islands that seem improbable from a European perspective is not to demonstrate their exceptional nature nor highlight their exoticism, but to demonstrate the typicality and recurrence of social dynamics (Teaiwa, 2006). While the vignettes I have provided illustrate the divergent routes that people can take to manage the compromise between what they imagine and what their structural positions permits (Appadurai, 1991, p. 198), there are outer limits to these divergences, and it is precisely on the margin of globality and modernity that we can seek to understand them. The middle ground in which the traditional and the modern, the local and the global intertwine through intersubjective negotiation constitutes the focus of particularly fruitful comparison, which coax us away from the facile images of cultural incommensurability that inform mainstream journalism, demagogical politics, and the popular imagination.

In this endeavor, we need to distance ourselves from the powerful but ultimately simplistic model of meaning that De Saussure (1917) proposed a century ago, in which arbitrary semiotic forms acquire meaning through paradigms of alternation, and instead take on the more cumbersome but considerably more insightful model of C.S. Peirce (1931-58), which recognizes that semiotic forms do not operate independently of a world of ideas, and do the work of meaning differently in different contexts (e.g., by invoking, through resemblance, or by means of social convention, or by suggesting and juxtaposing). It is through a more complex

## NEGOTIATING LOCAL SUBJECTIVITIES

model of meaning 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, not just 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. This attention to the complex workings of meaning is opposed to the transcendence of language that some anthropologists have advocated in recent years, leading some to even suggest that knowledge of our informants' language gets in the way of empathy and understanding (e.g., Bloch, 1991, Wikan, 1992). In contrast to these calls to get away from language or interaction, I propose to encourage the kind of anthropology that my predecessor Johannes Fabian championed, an anthropology that pays specific attention to old ladies' hilarious stories told in the dark, drag queens' half-meant claims to cosmopolitan glamour, market women's negotiation of fashion, and everyone's struggle for both material betterment and a sense of self that enables one to cope with anxiety over resources, the setbacks of fate, and persistent inequality.

### Epilogue

Long ago, Mikhail Bakhtin insisted that all utterances had histories, and that these histories were always intersubjective productions. I will only have time to thank some of the contributors to the utterances to which I have subjected you. *Tout d'abord, mon père Guy Besnier, sans lequel vous n'auriez rien entendu cet après-midi, ainsi que ma sœur Patricia Malaqarriga, et José María, Oliver et Gema, qui m'ont fait l'honneur d'être ici.*

My teachers, among whom figure inspiring luminaries such as Elinor Ochs, the late Michelle Rosaldo, and the late Beatriz Lavandera, as well as the many people in Tuvalu and Tonga who welcomed me into their lives and hearts, and Mele Alefaio, my friend, adoptive sister, and research assistant for almost three decades.

At institutions where I have previously taught, I am fortunate to have been surrounded by inspiring colleagues, particularly at Yale University and UCLA.

In my first year-and-a-half in Amsterdam, I have valued the intellectual climate of a department whose high international standing I hope university administrators will note. I can only mention a few names (in alphabetical order): Gerd Baumann,

## NIKO BESNIER

Jan Willem Duyvendak, Yolanda van Ede, Peter Geschiere, Frances Gouda, Thomas Blom Hansen, Anita Hardon, Gert Hekma, Birgit Meyer, Annelies Moors, Mattijs van de Port, Peter van Rooden, Vincent de Rooij, Mario Rutten, Rosanne Rutten, Alex Strating, Thijl Sunier, Oscar Verkaaik, and Jojada Verrips. I appreciate the intellectual legacy that my predecessor Johannes Fabian left, and thank my students, past and present, for frequently reciprocating my not letting them get away with simplicities.

Lastly, I offer this lecture to Mahmoud abd-el-Wahed, for his unwavering support, fortitude, and disbelief that anyone would want to spend years on islands in the Pacific, as well as to his large and loving family, whose daily existence in Palestine redefines the meaning of resilience in the face of untold oppression.

Ik heb gezegd.



## Notes

- \* I thank Peter Geschiere and Michael Goldsmith for their careful reading of an earlier version of this lecture.
- \*\* The textual fragments cited here are transcribed as faithfully as possible from audio recordings using conventions developed by conversation analysts (Atkinson and Heritage 1984). The conventions relevant to the fragments presented in this lecture are:

,	continuing intonation, not necessarily at the end of clauses
.	falling intonation, not necessarily at the end of sentences
?	rising intonation, not necessarily in questions
!	animated tempo
(0.5)	timed pause in seconds and tens of seconds
=	latching turns, with no pause or interruption
hhh	exhalation
.hhh	inhalation
word-	cut-off or self-interruption
wo::rd	lengthened vowel
WORD	very loud voice
(word)	not intelligible, conjectured transcript
	in translations, wording not in original text added for comprehension
((comment))	transcriber's comment

I have changed personal names to pseudonyms in texts other than those recorded at the Miss Galaxy pageant, which is a public event.



## References

- Abu-Lughod, L. 'The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women', in: *American Ethnologist*, 17, pp. 41-55. 1990
- Appadurai, A. 'Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology', in: R.G. Fox (ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, pp. 191-210. Santa Fe, NM, 1991
- Appadurai, A., *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, 1997
- Atkinson, J.M. and J. Heritage, 'Transcript Notation', in: J.M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds.), *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*, pp. ix-xvi. Cambridge and Paris, 1984
- Besnier, N., 'Information Withholding as a Manipulative and Collusive Strategy in Nukulaelae Gossip', in: *Language in Society*, 18, pp. 315-341. 1989
- Besnier, N., 'Reported Speech and Affect on Nukulaelae Atoll', in: J.H. Hill and J. Irvine (eds.), *Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse*, pp. 161-181. Cambridge, 1993
- Besnier, N., 'Transgenderism, Locality, and the Miss Galaxy Beauty Pageant in Tonga', in: *American Ethnologist*, 29, pp. 534-566. 2002
- Besnier, N., 'Consumption and Cosmopolitanism: Practicing Modernity at the Second-Hand Marketplace in Nuku'alofa, Tonga', in: *Anthropological Quarterly*, 77, pp. 7-45. 2004a
- Besnier, N., 'The Social Production of Abjection: Desire and Silencing Among Transgender Tongans', in: *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 12, pp. 301-323. 2004b
- Bloch, M., 'Language, Anthropology and Cognitive Science', in: *Man* (n.s.), 26, pp. 183-198. 1991
- Brown, M.F., 'On Resisting Resistance', in: *American Anthropologist*, 98, pp. 729-734. 1996
- Brown, M.F., *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age*. Cambridge, MA, 1997
- Bruner, J., *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*. New York, 2002
- Conklin, B.A., 'Body Paint, Feathers, and VCRs: Aesthetics and Authenticity in Amazonian Activism', in: *American Ethnologist*, 24, pp. 711-37. 1997
- Douglas, M. and B. Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*. New York, 1979
- Fajans, J., 'Shame, Social Action, and the Person among the Baining', in: *Ethos*, 11, pp. 166-180. 1983
- Gal, S., 'Language and the "Arts of Resistance"', in: *Cultural Anthropology*, 10, pp. 407-424. 1995
- Gibson, J., D.J. McKenzie and H. Rohorua, 'How Cost-Elastic are Remittances? Estimates from Tongan Migrants in New Zealand', in: *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 21, 1, 112-128. 2006
- Goffman, E., *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York, 1959

- Goffman, E., *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York, 1974
- Hereniko, V., *Woven Gods: Female Clowns and Power in Rotuma*. Honolulu, 1995
- Kahn, M., *Always Hungry, Never Greedy: Food and the Expression of Gender in a Melanesian Society*. Cambridge, 1986
- Labov, W., 'Hypercorrection by the Lower Middle Class as a Factor in Linguistic Change', in: William Bright (ed.), *Sociolinguistics: Proceedings of the UCLA Sociolinguistics Conference, 1964*, pp. 84-113. The Hague, 1966
- Mitchell, W. (ed.), *Clowning as Critical Practice: Performance Humor in the South Pacific*. Pittsburgh, 1993
- Ortner, S.B., 'Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal', in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37, pp. 173-193. 1995
- Peirce, C.S., *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A.W. Burks (eds.), vols. 1-8. Cambridge, MA, 1931-1958
- Robbins, J. and H. Wardlow (eds.), *The Making of Global and Local Modernities in Melanesia*. Aldershot, 2005
- Rosenblatt, D., 'The Antisocial Skin: Structure, Resistance, and "Modern Primitive" Adornment in the United States', in: *Cultural Anthropology*, 12, pp. 287-334. 1997
- Sahlins, M., 'Cosmologies of Capitalism: The Trans-Pacific Sector of "The World System"', in: *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 74, pp. 1-51. 1988
- Sahlins, M., 'The Economics of Develop-man in the Pacific', in: *Res*, 21, 13-25. 1992
- Saussure, F. de., *Cours de linguistique générale*. Lausanne and Paris, 1916
- Scott, J., *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT, 1990
- Sylvain, R., 'Disorderly Development: Globalization and the Idea of "Culture" in the Kala-hari', in: *American Ethnologist*, 32, 354-370. 2005
- Teaiwa, T., 'On Analogies: Rethinking the Pacific in a Global Context', in: *The Contemporary Pacific*, 18, 71-87. 2006
- Van Fossen, A., 'Globalization, Stateless Capitalism, and the International Political Economy of Tonga's Satellite Venture', in: *Pacific Studies*, 22, 3, pp. 1-26. 1999
- Wikan, U., 'Beyond the Words: The Power of Resonance', in: *American Ethnologist*, 19, pp. 460-482. 1992