

ethnography's male working-class protagonists than for the women in their lives. This, then, is primarily a book about class, what Raymond Williams called "structures of feeling," and the presence or absence of opportunities for political mobilization in deindustrialized Britain today. It is a powerful contribution to the anthropology of work and economy in Europe and beyond, at a time when there is renewed interest in class, capitalism, and globalization. Theoretical clarity and the compelling ethnographic portrait of Sheffield—the bleak terrain represented in the award-winning British film *The Full Monty* (1997)—make this an excellent text for graduate and senior undergraduate classes.

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**Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics.** *Niko Besnier*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. 243 pp.

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In this compelling and ambitious account, Niko Besnier presents us with numerous profound insights into the relationship between gossip and power. The term *gossip* refers to an often degraded, usually gendered, informal, and "private" speech genre that would appear to be a social universal if allowances are made for the many ways it can vary cross-culturally and historically. The model of power promoted here is one that carries on from more recent criticisms of resistance—criticisms that seek to highlight issues of contingency and to problematize agency and intentionality. Although gossip is a tool of no little import for the advancement of the agendas of those with relatively little power in other areas of life, it can, as Besnier aptly demonstrates, arise from no easily or even reasonably discernible motives, have unintended consequences, backfire, and, of course, be made to serve the needs of the powerful. Throughout the book, readers are reminded that gossip and

its ties to power raise complex questions that should ideally guide a far greater portion of anthropological inquiry than they do.

The main ethnographic setting is the relatively isolated Nukulaelae Atoll (Tuvalu, Central Pacific), currently home to some 350 people with economic and familial connections that extend well beyond the physical horizon. As in most (all?) parts of the world, gossiping here is at once a "bad" and "shameful" activity and one from which most people derive a great deal of pleasure. It can also be highly divisive and destructive of reputations and social relations, facts that certainly add to its appeal for many. On the atoll gossip takes place mainly in the spatial marginality of the relatively informal "private"—"female" cooking huts, well away from the areas associated with more formal "public"—"male" manners of speaking and structures of power. And, yet, the effects of gossip are felt well beyond the small physical span of its routine instantiations. Along with the more formal local speech genres, gossip, for instance, is deeply implicated in the playing out of two competing local political discourses: one emphasizing egalitarianism, the other, hierarchy.

It is indeed not sufficient, as Besnier shows, to a proper reading of Nukulaelae gossip to limit the inquiry to the here and now of the cooking huts, for the things of which gossip speaks are always embedded in other events and conversations framed elsewhere in other genres. An understanding of the geographical-spatial and historical arrangements of these events and conversations taking place farther afield and over stretches of time is essential to a proper contextualization of the political importance of Nukulaelae gossip. To meet this task, Besnier goes to great pains to provide detailed background on the community's history of interactions with itself and outsiders, and he imposes a species of tentative order that allows the reader to begin to gain useful purchase on the real scale of gossip's importance. His admirably eclectic and innovative theorizing also draws into the fold a host of other areas of interest, including local experiences of emotions, religion, and sorcery, and morality more generally.

Besnier's account likewise draws attention to the roles ethnographers play in the course of their work within and beyond the field. As most anthropologists will readily attest, the socially ambiguous positionings they must endure, even after they have gained a high level of trust among the people with whom they are working, often make it difficult for them to handle in great depth matters relating to gossip. There are, of course, ways around such issues, but none compares with Besnier's rather direct approach: he, as some few before him, spent a great deal of time making recordings of actual strands of gossip—recordings that allow him to characterize the subtleties of the speech

genre as it plays out locally and to make promising strides in determining the wider political effects of themes of gossip as they relate topically to those expressed in other speech and literary genres within and beyond the atoll. Through carefully analyzed examples, Besnier details ways in which the resulting intermingling reveals time and again the often-subversive power of gossip to alter individual biographies, rework social relations, and effect political change.

Besnier rightly notes that many ethnographers have downplayed the political significance of gossip and, indeed, of politics more generally in their publications, often with the aim of avoiding or at least minimizing any negative effects their works may have on the people they study. Such an approach creates its own problems, not only for the study of power but also for the study of gossip. As stated, gossip as a speech genre normally paints people in a most unflattering light, one that can lead to scandal and, in many parts of the world, lawsuits. So it is not surprising that the academic representation of gossip and its themes can raise serious ethical concerns for anthropologists. In Besnier's case, we have, for instance, a group of people who have historically been represented, by both outsiders and by themselves, as living "peacefully and harmoniously" with each other. The nature of cooking-hut gossip, reframed here and interpreted within the literary genre of ethnography, cannot help but to undermine such a representation. It is not then surprising that ethical concerns form a recurrent theme throughout the book, and Besnier's examination of his own practice is, like so much else here, a welcome contribution.

Although on rare occasions elusive and fragmentary—perhaps in keeping with the stubbornly problematic nature of its subject and the ambitious scope of Besnier's project—*Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics* is a remarkable and erudite work. It will be welcomed by those who seek a model ethnography for the embedding of everyday utterances within their wider social and historical contexts, and its attention to ethical issues will be appreciated by those who are not inclined to shy away from debates surrounding the production of anthropological knowledge. Beyond those interested solely in the ethnography of the region, key audiences will no doubt also include linguistic and political anthropologists and those keen on issues of agency and intentionality. As Besnier consistently demonstrates, the often contradictory, or at least highly intractable and always more than a little inscrutable, motives of individuals, coupled with the intriguingly complex contingencies of the practical realities that underlie all human interactions, subvert any attempt to reduce the political importance of what we tend to call "gossip" to simplistic functionalist readings or ethnographic "just so" stories.

**Under Construction: Making Homeland Security at the Local Level.** Kerry B. Foshier. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 260 pp.

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How does a community prepare for a disaster whose shape and nature is unknown? This question forms the basis for Kerry Foshier's innovative and imaginative ethnography of the making of homeland security. Fortuitously, her project on understanding the nature of emergency preparedness coincided with the arrival of an unprecedented new level of threat in the form of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. She traces how a diverse group of firefighters, police, coast guard, emergency medical technicians, hazardous materials experts, FBI agents, postal workers, and an array of other government agencies concerned with security struggled to figure out how to handle these new possibilities of disaster. They had to cope with the uncertainty of the threat while making up a new entity called "homeland security" and a department to administer it. In her richly detailed book, she describes innumerable meetings and planning sessions in which a wide variety of agencies tried to figure out what they should do and how they could work together. Foshier's ethnography presents us with local actors at work, using pragmatic approaches to solve particular problems. Her focus is on practice: on the ways people figure out how to get things done and to solve problems in the context of an enormous new set of expectations about the threat of terrorism. The everydayness of the process, the tendency to figure things out as you go along, is the enduring insight of this fascinating book.

The fight against terrorism is usually conducted by senior experts in the defense and intelligence communities, but she shows that homeland security at the local level draws in other actors such as firefighters, police, and emergency room doctors with local knowledge and practices. Although expert discourse influenced the local world, it was ultimately the people in the local policy community who developed the new strategies to cope with the new threats. As they tried to remain flexible despite pressures for codification and institutionalization, they undermined the control of the defense planners (p. 19). Whatever the federal government imagined homeland security would be, it ended up being whatever the local town and city leaders of a variety of responder and emergency groups figured out might be a good idea, given the deep uncertainties about what they were planning for. The study emphasizes the local nature of the process—the tendency to muddle through by falling back on mundane, day-to-day ways of handling problems.