CONTESTING THE EROTIC ZONE: MARGARET MEAD'S FIELDWORK PHOTOGRAPHS OF SAMOA

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Margaret Mead's photographs taken during her first ethnographic fieldwork in the South Pacific have received little scholarly attention. While some of Mead's images borrowed from earlier photographic conventions, her pictures also challenged prevailing representations of Polynesian women. Mead's photos experimented with alternative visual narratives about Samoan women's bodies and their everyday lives, in contrast to signature images of Pacific Islander women as commoditized sex objects, exoticized women of power, or as romanticized primitives. Mead's first effort at using a camera in the field provided a spectrum of representations useful for re-interpreting female embodiment and the gender politics of the photographic gaze.

Mead's Fieldwork Photographs of Samoa

WHEN MARGARET MEAD embarked upon her field trip to American Samoa in 1925, she took "a small Kodak, and a portable typewriter," among other possessions (Mead 1972:145). Decades later, in an introduction to the 1969 reprint edition of her monograph, *Social Organization of Manu'a*, Mead provided the most comprehensive account of her first attempt at ethnographic filmmaking that I have found to date in either her publications or archived papers. She wrote:

> The camera played a minimal role. I had no development equipment and films had to be developed within 24 hours, as there was then no method of keeping them dry. On the rare occasions when a ship was in, it was necessary to snatch a few pictures which serve as little more than illustrations—published in the original edition

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> of *Coming of Age in Samoa*, and in a few scattered comparative publications (Mead 1969:xix).

This passage suggests that Mead considered photography peripheral to her fieldwork enterprise in Samoa. Yet, Mead's camera work would prove to have a profound impact on her visual representations of female alterity in the South Seas.

By the turn of the twentieth-century, the Kodak "instamatic"—lightweight, inexpensive, and portable—was marketed in "Kodak girls" magazine advertisements as a woman's camera (Bernardin et al., 2003:11–12; Maxwell 1999:9–10). In addition to ease of handling, the portable camera "made possible the snapshot and the candid, informal images associated with the domestic and feminine, as well as with spontaneity, leisure, and tourism" (Bernardin et al., 2003:12). In sum, the new technology democratized the photographic process and enabled the amateur, like Mead, to experiment with a wide array of subjects in new contexts. While liberated by the hand-held camera for use in the field, Mead was nonetheless restricted by the transport of her day to taking what she referred to as serviceable "illustrations." Indeed, many of her pictures suggest haste, as though the inter-island boat that carried mail and supplies was about to depart Ta'ū for Pago Pago harbor on Tutuila Island. A significant number of Mead's images also suggest little experience with basic rules of photographic composition. For example, subjects' bodies are cut off at the knees or feet; group photos are too tightly cropped; images contain too much foreground or background; and interior scenes are washed out by strong background light. These problems appear to have corrected to some extent, perhaps as Mead became more familiar with the camera and her subjects, although she was unable to see the results of her photographic work while still in the field.

The Archived Photographs

Mead's Samoan fieldwork pictures, archived in her papers at the Library of Congress, number approximately two hundred (LOC: MMP, Box P25). This count excludes duplicates, as well as a small number of photos of Samoa that others sent to Mead in subsequent years; the latter include images of Mead's brief return trip to American Samoa in 1971. In addition to the photographs taken *by* Mead, the archives contain a few pictures taken *of* Mead, either alone or posed with one or more Samoan girls. Some of these images are well known, having been reproduced in Mead's publications and reprint editions (e.g., Mead 1972:149, 152; 1977:33, 46; [1928c] 2001: front cover), in biographies of Mead (e.g., Banner 2003: photo insert); in newspaper or magazine

articles about Mead (Tiffany 2005b), and in the Mead 2001 Centennial Exhibition at the Library of Congress (Francis and Wolfskill 2001).

When I first started working with these images in 1997, they had neither been officially counted nor systematically catalogued. This situation changed when Mead's Samoa photographs, including many duplicates, were sorted and placed in plastic covers in preparation for the Mead 2001 Centennial Exhibition at the Library of Congress. Most of these photographs have never been published, and with the exception of the *taupou* (ceremonial maiden), Fa'amotu, none of Mead's archived photographs of Samoan women and girls were publicly identified and named (see note 6, below).

It appears that Mead initially considered her pictures as a personal record of her fieldwork experience to be shared within her circle of family and friends. Almost all of the original copies were removed from family album pages in order to archive them. Pieces of black velum remain glued to the backs of these original prints, which are 2½ by 4½-inch sepia-toned, half-frame exposures printed on velox paper. Some photos are heat-damaged and contain water spots; most are discolored and faded to varying degrees.[1]

Challenging Dominant Representations

Formerly banished to library and museum basements, early anthropological photographs have emerged as subjects of renewed academic interest (e.g., Pinney 1992; Quanchi 1997; Young 1998). Visual representations of indigenous cultures and peoples—and in particular women's bodies—provide a rich source of social mediations that may be re-read and re-positioned within broader photographic frameworks (Desmond 1999; Edwards 2001, 2003).

In this article, I discuss selected examples of Mead's fieldwork photographs of Samoa as cultural objects that deserve scholarly attention. As many theorists have noted, the open-ended, incomplete nature of photographs allows for alternative histories and meanings that "interrupt dominant narratives" (Edwards 2001:4). My purpose here is to suggest how Mead's photographs taken during her initial ethnographic research challenged dominant visual paradigms of female alterity in the South Pacific. While some of Mead's fieldwork images borrowed from earlier photographic conventions, her pictures also contested prevailing representations of Polynesian women. Mead's photos presented alternative visual texts about Samoan women's bodies and their everyday lives, in contrast to widely-disseminated representations of Polynesian women as commoditized sex objects, exoticized women of power, or as romanticized primitives.

Paradise and the Consumer Culture of Image-Making

The following discussion, exploratory and suggestive, focuses on my contemporary reading of Mead's photographs of Samoan girls and women framed by the dominant visual conventions of her day. "Remembering [Robert Louis] Stevenson's rhapsodies," Mead (1972:147) sailed into Pago Pago harbor, American Samoa on 31 August 1925. There she confronted a South Sea island world that was neither culturally nor visually neutral territory. On the day of her arrival, Mead (1977:23) described her initial impressions of Pago Pago harbor:

> The presence of the fleet today skews the whole picture badly. There are numerous battleships in the harbor and on all sides of the island, mostly not in the harbor because they make the water oily and spoil the governor's bathing. Airplanes scream overhead; the band of some ship is constantly playing ragtime.

Mead checked into the port town's shabby hotel "kept by half castes" (Samoans of inter-ethnic backgrounds), where she would soon become the solitary guest (Mead 1972:147; 1977:25; LOC: MMP, Box I2, Mead to Franz Boas, letter dated 17 September 1925). The hotel's claim to fame was its setting for *Rain*, the short story by W. Somerset Maugham (Mead 1972:147–148; 1977:23).[2] On the day of her arrival, Mead (1977:23, emphasis in original) had the opportunity to observe the tourist art marketplace, consisting of "*kava* bowls, tapa [bark cloth], grass [pandanus] skirts, models of outrigger canoes, bead necklaces and baskets," laid out in the *malae* (village commons) for sale by Samoans to sailors from the fleet and tourists from the cruise ship. Mead (1977:24) also remarked on the mission- and Western-inspired clothing she saw at the festivities:

> . . . the other natives [not participating in the ceremonial dance] were in the nondescript dress which they all wear, the women barefoot and in light shapeless dresses (some wore overblouses fitted in under the breasts in a most ungainly fashion), the men in white cotton shirts and lavalavas—cloth caught at the waist with a belt and falling a little below the knee—of various hideous striped American stuffs. And almost all carried black cotton umbrellas to make the scene finally ludicrous.

In sum, Mead's non-romanticized observations of a territorial port town overrun with naval personnel and tourists, as well as crowds of Samoan ven-

dors and merry-makers, collided with popular constructions of a pristine South Sea island unspoiled by colonial and capitalist influences.

South Seas Sirens

From a contemporary perspective, we may read Mead's commentaries, her ethnography, and her images of Samoa within the context of the South Pacific as a constructed "site of desire" (Jolly and Manderson 1997). The island world of beaches, palm trees, and nubile maidens constitutes an erotic borderland where cultures, images, and multiple meanings about women's bodies interact. The exotic appeal of Polynesian women, and their comparison (implicit or overt) with the physical attributes and gender roles of Western, white women, is essential for contextualizing visual images of the Pacific as an erotic playground and women's bodies as marketable commodities. These dominant conventions, in turn, serve to frame our understanding of Mead's camera work in Samoa.[3]

Studio portraits of Islander subjects posed with contrived backdrops and props were widely disseminated in the United States and Europe in a variety of media, including postcards, photographs, and stereo views. These highly mediated images of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries variously depicted Polynesian women as colonial "Belles," "Venuses," and "Wood Nymphs," or as exoticized women of power (Beets 2000; Maxwell 1999; Nordström 1992; Webb 1995; cf. Quanchi, n.d.). Studio creations of South Seas Sirens reclining in front of painted backdrops depicting "tropical" vegetation—suggesting rusticity and a "natural" landscape—produced a formulaic "marker of place" for consumers (Nordström 1995:25). Images of these "odalisques" were explicit in their eroticized messages of voyeurism and appropriation. "The end result," according to Beets (2000:17), was "a calculated redundancy of the native woman into a commercial object, created under the veil of aesthetic or ethnographic representation."

Most likely, Mead had seen such mass-marketed images prior to her trip to the South Pacific. Collecting stereographs and albums filled with commercial images of exotic places and peoples was a popular form of domestic entertainment for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tourists and armchair travelers (Nordström 1991a, 1991b; Webb 1998). According to Nordström's (1995:11–13) conservative estimate, some fifteen thousand photographs *of* Samoa and its peoples (not counting duplicates) were produced in Samoa and widely distributed for popular consumption between 1870 and 1925 (see also Nordström [1991/1992] and Webb [1995:189–190; 1998]).

The size and persistence of the image industry in Samoa seems remarkable for such a small colonial outpost that was not even listed in the 1920

edition of *Pacific Ports Manual*.[4] Yet the port towns of Apia and Pago Pago in the western and eastern regions (respectively) of the archipelago were international travel stopovers for east-west Pacific voyages. By the 1920s, Hawai'i and beyond were growing South Pacific tourist attractions. Samoa was the subject of many articles in American and Australian illustrated media, such as *Asia*, *Travel*, and *Walkabout* (Sydney), among others (Quanchi, n.d.; Tiffany 2005b). Meanwhile, the image of the Hawaiian "*hula* girl" had become a well-established marker of exotic eroticism, representing "a paradisiacal past, unspoiled by modernity yet willing to be its entertaining hostess" (Desmond 1999:88). Indeed, a generic version of the *hula*-girl image influenced the first edition's dust jacket of Mead's (1928a) *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Tiffany 2001, 2004). By the time of Mead's fieldwork in Polynesia, mass-produced images marketing the Pacific as paradise and islander women as exotica had combined with tourism and other rapidly-expanding "industries of culture."[5]

Mead's Images of Samoan Women and Girls

Most of Mead's archived photographs depict girls and women, many of whom were presumably informants.[6] Mead's images lack the artifice of studio creations and concern for the exquisite face and form. Rather, her photographs show women and girls of differing ages, body sizes, and shapes. Some are slim and small-boned; others have solid bodies—broad shoulders and hips suitable for childbearing. In addition, Mead's Polynesian subjects typically wear everyday clothes. Their Western-style skirts and dresses, *lāvalavas* (erroneously referred to as "sarongs" by foreigners), and over-blouses are often soiled, torn, or patched cotton trade cloth—thin from frequent washings. Further, Mead's images of female embodiment offered, as we shall see, an alternate narrative to dominant visual representations of seductive Belles awaiting the male gaze.

South Seas Wood Nymphs

The conventional image of the South Sea Nymph is perhaps best exemplified by *National Geographic* aesthetics of a seductive Islander woman surrounded by lush foliage and palm trees—generic markers of paradise—suggesting the illusion of an exotic woman inhabiting an unspoiled, timeless world. Figure 1 shows Mead with an unnamed companion, probably one of her adolescent informants. Both wear solid-color *lāvalavas* (a wrapped, two-meter width of trade store fabric worn above the breasts or at the waist). Both are adorned with necklaces of banana-leaf strips. Mead wears a bracelet twist of

FIGURE 1. **"Margaret Mead with Samoan Companion." Untitled, anonymous photograph, 1925–26, probably Ta'ū Island.** (Photograph reproduced from the Margaret Mead Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York.)

banana-leaf, while her companion's wrist is adorned with a flower tie. The unidentified photographer has used an exotically-angled tree to situate both

subjects as versions of the Wood Nymph motif posed within a frame of lush vegetation.

This image (Figure 1) may be interpreted in several ways. For instance, it may be read as a *National Geographic Magazine* image of colonial relations of gender and race, in which the white woman with the fashionably bobbed hair style of the 1920s, asserts the privilege of bodily contact—in this instance, of having her arm about the shoulders of an indigenous woman. It is unlikely that Mead (who measured five feet, two-and-half inches [Mead 1977:19]), towered over many of her adolescent or adult informants. Yet, the pose of Mead's Samoan companion suggests that she is shorter, thereby bestowing upon the ethnographer greater "social weight" (quoted in Lutz and Collins 1993:204, note 11). One may also read this picture as an example of the adventurous traveler/anthropologist's "I was there" image, which serves "a validating function by proving that the author was *there*, that the account is a first-hand one, brought from the field rather than from library or photographic archives" (Lutz and Collins 1993:203–204, emphasis in original).

This picture, as well as others taken of Mead during her Samoan research, no doubt served the function of authenticating the ethnographer's presence in the field. However, Figure 1 elides efforts to contextualize it solely in terms of colonial relations, or as providing what Nordström (1995:35) refers to as "gratuitous proof" of Mead's ethnographic presence. Figure 1 is itself an ethnographic artifact that legitimizes Mead's status as a participant-observer. It also suggests Mead's social engagement with her adolescent informant, who doubtless enjoyed the novelty of the anthropologist's company and attention. Mead wrote to her advisor and mentor, Franz Boas, that "My porch room is crowded from dawn to midnight with all and sundry maidens" (LOC: MMP, Box I2, Mead to Franz Boas, letter dated 15 November 1925; available online [Côté 2004]). In a subsequent letter, which justified her decision to live on Ta'ū Island with the Holt family in the Naval dispensary, rather than in a Samoan household, Mead further noted:

> Natives of all ages and sexes and ranks drift on and off my porch in a casual fashion. . . . I have to lock the door to keep the adolescents out, and yawn prodigiously to get rid of them at midnight. This fact more than compensates for the slight loss in linguistic practice (LOC: MMP, Box I2, Mead to Franz Boas, letter dated 29 November 1925; available online [Côté 2004]).

In short, Mead's accessibility, and the enthusiasm of Samoan girls for extended visits with her, fostered a rapport evident in the ethnographer's photographs and her text (Tiffany 2005b).

FIGURE 2. **"A Spirit of the Wood." Caption and photograph by Margaret Mead, 1925–26, probably Ta'ū Island.** (Photograph reproduced from the Margaret Mead Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York.)

The viewer senses a social engagement between the two young women in Figure 1 that transcends their posing for a photograph. Indeed, the viewer can well imagine the flurry of preparations necessary for getting dressed and selecting a suitable space for posing. Mead's correspondence, photographs, and published works offer insights into how her Samoan fieldworking experience and research are framed as gendered narratives of family connections and negotiations of public and domestic spaces. Figure 1 is a photo suitable for a family album, "a predominantly feminine cultural form, as a visual medium for family genealogy and storytelling" (Chambers 2003:97). The image of these two modestly-dressed girls evokes youthful confidence and a domestic intimacy, affirming familial ties and a sense of belonging. Figure 1 also suggests a distinctive aspect of Mead's photographic enterprise. Rather than privileging herself as the sole arbiter of the photographic process, Mead engaged in a shared exchange in which Samoans themselves helped shape the visual and expressive frame of the picture, a point that I return to below. By contrast, it would be difficult to imagine a photograph of Bronislaw Malinowski, dressed in indigenous cloth, with an arm casually resting on the shoulders of a Trobriander informant (see Young 1998).

Mead's picture (Figure 2) of a Samoan adolescent uses the same exotic tree (seen in Figure 1) as a prop. This image, published in the first and Blue Ribbon editions of *Coming of Age in Samoa* (William Morrow), bears the caption, "A spirit of the wood" (Mead 1928a: photo facing page 122). Note that the girl's body seems to merge with the tree's thick trunk and forked branches. Indeed, the vegetation nearly overwhelms the subject: her right arm disappears into the foliage, which also obscures much of her lower body, while her left hand clutches a flowering branch. This formulaic tropical landscape, perhaps suggested by the anonymous photographer of Mead and her companion in Figure 1 (above), suggests the signature framing of the Polynesian female body as "Wood Nymph."

However, the girl's body, pose, and clothing do not fit the popular culture paradigm of the South Sea Siren or Nymph, despite Mead's caption. The Samoan girl in Figure 2, probably one of Mead's informants, wears a modestly-draped, dark-colored *lāvalava*, which appears to be the same cloth Mead's Samoan companion wore in Figure 1 (above). The subject of Figure 2 may have also borrowed the banana-leaf necklace that Mead wore in the previous image (Figure 1). A striking aspect of Figure 2 is the girl's long hair that frames her shoulders like a cape—presenting a contrast to Figure 1, with Mead's 1920s bobbed style and her Samoan companion's off-the-shoulder-hair, probably pinned up in back. Figure 2 also presents a different kind of looking relationship. In contrast to conventionalized Wood Nymph images, Mead's picture suggests the possibility of an egalitarian exchange between

the photographer and the subject. The girl's grin and self-confident pose suggest a relaxed intimacy with the photographer. Mead's visual narrative opens a discursive space that does not easily fit the constructed artifact of South Sea alterity framed by the authoritative gaze of the camera's eye.

Negotiating Photographic Spaces

Sharp contrasts of shade and light within open-sided Samoan structures made photography a very difficult enterprise for Mead. Thus, many of her interior images are "washed out" by the intensely bright background. This technical problem encouraged Mead to consider alternative, exterior spaces for taking photos by using architectural backdrops of woven pandanus "blinds" (lowered between house posts), propped backgrounds of bark cloth (*tapa*), and vegetation (cf. Nordström 1995:34–35).

Figure 3 is one of Mead's best-composed images, and it appears to be one of the few framed with the idea of conveying ethnographic information. Reproduced in *Letters from the Field* (Mead 1977:39), this picture is captioned: "Woman scraping mulberry bark to make tapa [bark cloth]." The woman's arms form an aesthetic triangle with the plank board, which she uses to scrape and soften strips of paper mulberry piled in a large, hollowed-out

FIGURE 3. **"Woman Scraping Mulberry Bark to Make *Tapa* [Bark Cloth]." Caption and photograph by Margaret Mead, 1925–26, probably Ta'ū Island.** (Photograph reproduced from the Margaret Mead Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York.)

wood container at her side. The smaller object near her is a tin can, probably filled with water to help soften the bark strips during the tedious process of scraping. Described as the daughter of a chief, this mother wears workaday clothes, consisting of a sleeveless shift worn over a *lāvalava*.[7] We see her engaged in the labor-intensive task of producing cloth for household use or ceremonial redistribution. Mead's picture (Figure 3) further suggests that a woman's work life accommodates childcare. The photograph is remarkable for the child's intense gaze, which is focused on his mother's face, whereas, the woman's attention is directed to the task at hand. The child's expression is one of uncertainty and cranky displeasure; in other words, the child appears to be *musu*, an "attitude," according to Mead ([1928b] 1961:122), "which expresses unwillingness and intractability."[8] Mead's image thus disrupts the conventional visual story of happy children in paradise.

Islanders eager for photographs of themselves and family members most likely suggested suitable outdoor backgrounds to Mead—as they frequently did to me in American and Western Samoa during my own periods of fieldwork. During Mead's time, Samoans would have welcomed an opportunity for taking family portraits that also displayed valued possessions, such as bark cloth and pandanus mats. In other words, ethnographers such as Mead (and myself) had incomplete control over the process of picture-taking in Samoa.

Occasionally, Mead subverted "behind-the-scenes" negotiations that occurred prior to picture-taking by showing others responsible for holding a prop in place. In Figure 4, the viewer is privy to Samoan stagecraft. Fingers hold the bark cloth at the lower left side of the backdrop, while the right side is framed with a partial view of a man's kneeling figure. He is dressed in a long-sleeved white shirt and white *lāvalava*; this is Sunday church-going clothing for men in general, and daily wear for pastors. The children, by contrast, are not dressed in their "Sunday best." Both stand rather awkwardly on a pandanus floor mat laid outside a traditional, thatch-roofed structure; inside, on the left, the viewer glimpses seated figures silhouetted against the light. The girl's expression is a mixture of squinting and scowling as she holds a can of flowers in her right hand and stares stolidly at the camera. Her skirt and top appear soiled and thread-bare; her legs display tell-tale marks of tropical sores. Looking uncertain, the boy glances off-camera, perhaps to a relative who is "directing" the scene. The boy wears a *lāvalava* that he holds at the waist, perhaps to keep the cloth from slipping. In contrast to the girl's lack of adornment, the boy's costume includes a flower necklace that is much too long and hangs loose at the ends. The boy also holds a small-scale "fly-whisk" (*fue*) of braided coconut fiber (a symbol of talking-chief [*tulāfale*] status). The object, slung over the boy's right shoulder in the chiefly manner, appears to be a miniaturized artifact produced for the tourist market.

FIGURE 4. **"Children in Front of Bark Cloth." Untitled photograph by Margaret Mead, 1925–26, probably Ta'ū Island.** (Photograph reproduced from the Margaret Mead Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York.)

The overall effect of this image, probably taken as a request for a family memento, suggests two points. First, like Figure 3 (above), Mead's photograph contradicts the dominant image of carefree, laughing children in the South Seas. Rather, the children in Figure 4 appear confused and annoyed by adult demands to maintain their awkward poses before the camera. Mead's picture captures this discomfort. Secondly, Mead's image shows the viewer how Islanders participate in the crafting of photographic events. In this instance, it is likely that Samoans, rather than Mead herself, initiated the bark cloth backdrop—perhaps to show off a valued item of family wealth—as well as the children's props. In other words, Mead's picture suggests the interactive processes of preparing for this photographic encounter: retrieving for display a fine example of ceremonial cloth, dressing the children, and coaching them in the use of props. Mead's image permits the viewer to go behind the scenes, as it were, to witness the production of this domestic tableau.

Adolescents in Grass Skirts

In the series of images that follow (Figures 5–8), the viewer sees five Samoan girls, probably Mead's informants, "dressed up" in various garments

of bark cloth and pandanus—cloth typically worn by women of rank during a ceremonial event. The girls' preparations for picture-taking included tying pandanus skirts over their trade cloth garments, adjusting Western-style or bark-cloth tops, donning necklaces of shells, beads, or leaves, and tucking a decorative flower by an ear or in the hair. Most of these goods were shared among them. Seizing the novelty and photographic opportunity that Mead offered, these girls were, no doubt, delighted to adorn themselves and to wear cloth associated with Samoan "high culture" of social rank and public ceremonies.

What is notable about this set of images (Figures 5–8) is their lack of sentimentality. The exotic romanticism of a Polynesian girl wearing a "grass" (pandanus) skirt is absent in Mead's pictures. These "dressed-up" adolescents contest generic "*hula* girl" images by showing, for example, the charming naiveté of a trade cloth *lāvalava* showing beyond the hem of a borrowed pandanus skirt (see Figures 5–7). Neither the authoritative gaze of the "studio creation," nor the representational ideals of Hellenic feminine beauty—associated with the photography of Francis Flaherty (1925a, 1925b)—exerted a major influence on Mead's fieldwork images of Samoan girls and women (cf. Jolly 1997a:130; Nordström 1995:31–36).

In Figure 5, we see a young woman posing in an exquisite bark cloth top. She holds a large hibiscus blossom in her hand. Her everyday, trade cloth *lāvalava* shows beneath the bottom of an elaborate, shell-decorated pandanus skirt, which appears ragged at the bottom, suggesting historical value as a family heirloom. She smiles wryly as she looks off camera, perhaps at one of her companions who assisted with preparations for this photograph. We see a poised and confident young woman in Figure 5, sharing an intimacy with a relative or friend on the sidelines.

This younger girl (Figure 6), shown with a hibiscus tucked in her stylish, bobbed hair, is dressed in the same ceremonial garments worn by the subject in Figure 5 (above). Like the other adolescents in this photographic sequence, her pose and relaxed expression convey self-confidence.

This girl's solemn look (Figure 7) is heightened by a squint, perhaps because of the sun. Her Western style blouse and simple pandanus skirt contrast with the intricately woven fan (probably a prized family possession) that she holds out flat in her right hand for the viewer to admire. The girl's pandanus skirt is too short, revealing a great deal of her dark trade-cloth *lāvalava* or skirt beneath.

The last image in this set (Figure 8) shows two girls seated on a pandanus floor mat against a foliage background. Both girls look solemnly at the camera. Their hands (which, unfortunately, Mead cropped) rest lightly on their pandanus skirts, used by the subjects of Figures 5–7 (above). The girls' side-

FIGURE 5. **"Young Woman Wearing Bark Cloth and Pandanus." Untitled photograph by Margaret Mead, 1925–26, probably Ta'ū Island.** (Photograph reproduced from the Margaret Mead Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York.)

by-side pose invites the viewer to examine their dignified expressions and the variability of Polynesian facial features. The younger girl on the left wears the same dark cotton blouse, in a more risqué, off-the shoulder style, as well as the same pandanus skirt of the girl with the fan in Figure 7. The older girl in Figure 8 wears the same bark cloth top and elaborate skirt of the subjects shown in Figures 5 and 6. Note too that Figure 8 includes a by-stander on the right; she wears a loose-fitting garment, resembling a full-length body sack.

Mead's (1973:ix–x) careful attention to protecting her subjects' identities means that we know virtually nothing about these specific girls, nor how

FIGURE 6. **"Adolescent Girl in Ceremonial Cloth." Untitled photograph by Margaret Mead, 1925–26, probably Ta'ū Island.** (Photograph reproduced from the Margaret Mead Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York.)

they might be related to one another. The ethnographer's motive for taking this photo sequence may have been twofold: to satisfy Islanders' demands for photo mementos; and to have a visual record of her informants. Furthermore, the candid intimacy of these pictures reflects Mead's dense social interactions with her adolescent informants described in *Coming of Age in Samoa*. She wrote:

> I concentrated upon the girls of the community. I spent the greater part of my time with them. . . . Speaking their language, eating

FIGURE 7. **"Adolescent Girl with Pandanus Skirt and Fan." Untitled photograph by Margaret Mead, 1925–26, probably Ta'ū Island.** (Photograph reproduced from the Margaret Mead Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York.)

> their food, sitting barefoot and cross-legged upon the pebbly floor, I did my best to minimise the differences between us and to learn to know and understand all the girls of three little villages on the coast of the little island of Tau, in the Manu'a Archipelago (Mead [1928b] 1961:10).

This photographic set (Figures 5–8) is of interest in another context as well. Mead's pictures situate the five subjects within a domestic space. Each image is spatially intimate and contained, as though the girls, in prepara-

FIGURE 8. **"Two Seated Girls in Ceremonial Cloth." Untitled photograph by Margaret Mead, 1925–26, probably Ta'ū Island.** (Photograph reproduced from the Margaret Mead Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York.)

tion for this unique photo opportunity, have domesticated a public space outdoors. Wearing cloth designed for use in public, ceremonial spaces involves domestic social interactions and the sharing of valued goods with others.

Further, these pictures invite the viewer to re-examine essentialist visual scripts of Polynesian women and girls and to consider their individual and collective social presence. According to Berger (1972:46):

> . . . a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste—indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence.

Following Berger, I suggest that Mead provides a visual insight into her informants' respective social presences, which were negotiated (for example, in terms of dress and surroundings) with each other, and with others who assisted with preparations but who were not themselves photographed. The ethnographer was also part of this interactive process, as each adolescent created her public self for purposes of a photographic family record.

FIGURE 9. **"Motherhood." Untitled photograph by Margaret Mead, 1925–26, probably Ta'ū Island.** (Photograph reproduced from the Margaret Mead Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York.)

Motherhood

Figure 9 is a domestic image of three solemn mothers who stand together on a pandanus floor mat placed outside a traditional style structure. The woman in the middle holds a newborn, its face and body turned toward the sun, perhaps to ensure a better view for the camera. The woman on the right wears workaday clothes, a soiled and tattered *lāvalava*; perhaps she lacked the opportunity for a quick change before the picture was taken. Her loose-fitting top—most likely a hasty slip-on for the appearance of modesty—appears ready to slide down her shoulders as the baby searches for her breast. The woman on the left apparently had time to place a shell band about her head and neck, and perhaps to pull a sleeveless shift over her *lāvalava*. Note too that the three infants are modestly covered—in contrast to the common household and village scene of bare-bottomed babies and small children.

As we have seen, Mead's correspondence and publications noted her dislike of mission-inspired clothing. Perhaps part of Mead's intent was to show the solemn dignity of these women, despite the "nondescript," "shape-

FIGURE 10. **"Laundry at Low Tide." Untitled photograph by Margaret Mead, 1925–26, probably Ta'ū Island.** (Photograph reproduced from the Margaret Mead Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York.)

less," and "ungainly" clothing that covered their substantial Polynesian bodies (Mead 1977:24; LOC: MMP, Box I2, Mead to Franz Boas, letter dated 17 September 1925; available online [Côté 2004]). Unlike twentieth- and twenty-first-century images of South Seas Sirens unburdened with demanding babies and stretch marks, Mead's photograph of these Samoan mothers (Figure 9) emphasizes the Gauguin-inspired qualities of their aesthetic bodies framed by various styles of trade-store cloth. The women stand together as a kind of artistic triptych for the veneration of motherhood. They lack the Euro-centric ideal of feminine beauty and dreamy self-absorption found, for example, in Francis Flaherty's (1925a, 1925b) photographs taken during Robert Flaherty's filming of *Moana of the South Seas* in Western Samoa in 1923-1924 (Tiffany 2001:27–29, 41 [note 8]).[9] Mead's photograph, by contrast, rejects such a constructed fantasy of paradise by offering the possibility of visualizing the "lived realities" (Suaalii 2000:106) of Samoan women's domestic responsibilities and the demands of childcare.

Finally, we see three young people seated on the beach at low tide with a large tin full of clothes (Figure 10). This domestic image suggests a hot sun and menial work, as well as an opportunity for relaxed sociability among young people, who are probably relatives. The photograph highlights the unconventional notion that a man living in paradise might actually engage in the mundane labor of doing his own laundry, despite the presence of two capable

women who could (or should) do it for him. Consumers of mass-marketed images of paradise would doubtless have ambivalent feelings about Mead's picture. This is not a conventional palm-tree-studded beach, rich in erotic possibilities; and South Seas Sirens don't do laundry, even their own. As Lutz and Collins (1993:138), note, "the picture contrasting modern and traditional is a fundamental building block of many *National Geographic* articles on the non-Western world," and is especially common in *Geographic* narratives about the Pacific. Yet, one could argue that Mead's photograph in Figure 10 neither celebrates nor deplores the theme of technological "progress" (see also Appendix 3 in Mead [1928b] 1961:266–277). The foreign intrusion of a tin wash tub and a cardboard container (of laundry soap?) lying on the sand precludes the fantasy of a South Sea culture unspoiled by Western goods and litter. Rather, Mead's image suggests that Samoans go about their daily lives, adopting whatever Western objects are deemed useful.

Concluding Reflections: On Contesting the Erotic Zone

Margaret Mead's fieldwork photographs were not intended for use as a research tool. They served as a personal visual record of her ethnographic experiences and, perhaps most importantly, of her Islander informants and friends in the field. Yet, Mead's use of a camera in Samoa is more than mere historical curiosity. Mead's images provided an important point of departure for reinterpreting the photographic conventions of her day. Mead's photographs challenged commercial images of eroticized female bodies and standardized "scenics" of beaches and palm trees that informed representations of the South Seas in Western popular culture. In addition, Mead contextualized the lives of Pacific Islander women by presenting a different kind of "trading gazes" (Bernardin et al., 2003:3–4), in which interactions between photographer and subject moved beyond dichotomous relations of an authoritative gaze and the subordinate object of that gaze.

For Mead, the reality of a South Sea culture was the household—domestic space occupied by women and children, whom she fore-grounded in her ethnographic best-seller, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, published in 1928 and still in print. Mead used her camera to take photographs of Islanders who wanted mementos of themselves or of other family members to frame and hang in their homes. The Samoan girls and women in Mead's images are neither eroticized nor romanticized; they are daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and friends. Mead interacted with them, observed them, and wrote about them as individuals connected by multi-layered social ties of kinship, status, and community (Tiffany 2005a). Mead also wanted "illustrations" of her fieldwork site—to identify a place, individual people, and a domestic space

where she too belonged during her period of research. Her photographs were glued into albums—itself a domestic endeavor—for her own circle of family and friends to share the ethnographer's experiences of her "first South Sea island" (Mead 1972:147).

Mead's Samoan photographs often appear amateurish, in comparison with the multitude of well-composed pictures associated with Reo Fortune's and Mead's camera work in Manus and New Guinea, which are also archived in the Mead Papers at the Library of Congress and remained little explored by scholars. Furthermore, Mead's images of Samoa do not demonstrate the theoretical sophistication of Mead's later filmmaking work in Bali with Gregory Bateson (Bateson and Mead 1942; Sullivan 1999). Nonetheless, Mead's initial fieldwork photography is historically significant, as it revealed Samoan women and girls in social contexts that challenged orientalist representations of Polynesian women and their bodies. There are, of course, many ways to read a photograph, and the modest interpretations offered here are by no means definitive. Margaret Mead's images of Samoa have many other stories to tell.

NOTES

This article began as a paper presented 16 February 2001 at the symposium, *Reflections on Pacific Ethnography in the Margaret Mead Centennial, 2001*, during the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO) annual meetings in Miami, Florida. The article also incorporates portions of another paper, "Narratives of Samoa in the Margaret Mead Archives," presented 22 March 2002, at the Library of Congress symposium, *Archival Gold: Treasures from the Margaret Mead Collection*.

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1. Mead's photographs reproduced in this article were retouched, using the computer program, *Adobe Photoshop 7.0*, in order to reduce fading and discolorations and to lighten shadowed faces. The composition and subject matter of Mead's images have not been altered or edited in any way.

2. Mead (1972:147) noted in her highly-edited autobiography, *Blackberry Winter*, that she had seen a theater performance of *Rain* in New York prior to her departure for the South Pacific.

3. The literature on female alterity and social constructions of orientalist "sites of desire" is vast. Works that influenced my thinking about these issues in the context of Mead's Samoan fieldwork images include: Desmond (1999); Graham-Brown (1988); Lutz and Collins (1993); Maxwell (1999); Nordström (1995); Stephen (1993); Sturma (2002); and Willis and Williams (2002).

4. I am grateful to Gerald Sullivan for bringing this reference to my attention.

5. I have borrowed the term "industries of culture" from Buck (1993:173). Issues of popular culture and tourism in the South Pacific are discussed further in Tiffany (2001, 2005b).

6. Mead took several precautions to protect her informants' identities. She discussed this issue on numerous occasions in her publications and correspondence (e.g., Mead 1972:154; 1973:xii–xiv; MMP: LOC, Box I2, Mead to Derek Freeman, letter dated 6 November 1968). Part of Mead's letter to Freeman is available online (Francis and Wolfskill 2001). See also the articles by Côté and Francis (this volume) for further discussion of Mead's Samoan fieldwork and methods.

7. The same woman, dressed in ceremonial cloth, posed with her child for a second photograph reproduced in the first edition of *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Mead 1928a:photo facing page 52). Mead's fieldwork photographs, which were published in the first edition of *Coming of Age in Samoa* in 1928 and later in the Blue Ribbon Morrow edition of 1932, were not reproduced in subsequent reprints of the book, including the most recent centennial edition published by HarperCollins in 2001 (Mead [1928] 2001).

8. Milner's (1966:152) Samoan-English dictionary defines *musu* as being "utterly uncooperative, sullen and obdurate."

9. Mead's "picture-naming test," described in Appendices 2 and 5 of *Coming of Age in Samoa* ([1928b] 1961:262–265, 289–292), used three photographs from Frances Flaherty's portfolio published in the May 1925 issue of *Asia Magazine*. Mead received a mailed copy of this issue while in Samoa (cf. Mead 1969:xix; 1972:154; see also Ruby [2000:85, Mead to Jay Ruby, letter dated 20 September 1976]). Francis (this volume) provides further discussion of Mead's picture-naming test. For additional discussion of *Moana* and other early cinematic narratives of the Pacific, see Jolly (1997a, 1997b), Ruby (2000:67–93), Sturma (2002:127–132), and van Trigt (2000).

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