

THE CORRESPONDENCE ASSOCIATED WITH MARGARET MEAD'S SAMOA RESEARCH: WHAT DOES IT REALLY TELL US?

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Derek Freeman based much of his critique of Margaret Mead's Samoa research on the letters she exchanged with Franz Boas and others. However, as I have indicated elsewhere (Côté 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c), Freeman seriously misrepresented the content and intention of these letters. The present article extends the examination of archival material by reviewing letters from the late 1920s associated with the publication of *Coming of Age in Samoa*, which reveal that Mead originally wrote it as a commercial book, and that she was heavily influenced by her publisher to further sensationalize her account of life in Samoa. Additional archived letters from the 1960s reveal that Mead found herself bedeviled by Freeman after she declined to sponsor him in American psychoanalytic circles. This little-known correspondence provides an alternate explanation to Freeman's hoaxing theory, and for Freeman's persistence in attempting to discredit Mead's Samoa research.

Introduction: The Complexities of the Controversy

LITTLE INTRODUCTION IS NEEDED to Derek Freeman's decades-long campaign to convince the world that Margaret Mead was "wrong" about Samoa in her classic *Coming of Age in Samoa* (hereafter, *COA*), and that she was hoaxed into believing it was a "free love" society. Although he found some supporters for his claims (e.g., Henrie 2000), an extensive examination of the evidence has convinced me (and others) that various aspects of Freeman's case against Mead's Samoa research are problematic in many ways. For example, she does not appear to have been wrong about the prevalence of adolescent turmoil (Côté 1992, 1994), and it is improbable that she was hoaxed with any demonstrable consequences (Côté 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c). At

the same time, I have argued that in *COA* Mead capitalized on Western stereotypes about “free and easy life” in Polynesia to increase the popular appeal of the book (Côté 1992, 1994; cf. Tiffany 2001). Still, there is much in *COA* that is supported by independent evidence (e.g., Shankman 1996, 1998, 2000).

Others have examined Freeman’s arguments in relation to Mead’s book, and drawn similar conclusions, although a full consensus has not been forthcoming. For example, Orans (1996, 2000) also found the hoaxing claim to be improbable, but has more serious reservations than I concerning Mead’s overall portrayal of Samoan society (he argues that her book is a polemic portraying Samoan society as being too halcyon, playing down its agonistic aspects), and he questions her honesty in reporting some of the details of research (e.g., she wrote that none of her informants spoke English, yet he believes that some did). In addition, Tcherkézoff (2001) doubts the hoaxing theory, but questions Mead’s accuracy in depicting Samoan sexual mores, arguing that she was consumed with myths about Polynesian sexuality.

Yet other observers—especially those peripheral to the controversy who have not examined the primary evidence for themselves—have seen the controversy as a matter of differences of interpretation of evidence (e.g., Hellman 1998), or as a result of ideologically motivated fabrications on one “side” or the other (e.g., Henrie [2000] who sees Freeman as a champion of truth pitted against ideological “Meadophiles”).

One way to approach this impasse is to examine *all* of the surviving archival material. While Freeman (1999) claims to have done so, my examination of his use of this material has uncovered systematic omissions on his part. Indeed, although much of the evidence upon which Freeman bases his theory is drawn from the archived letters exchanged between Mead and Franz Boas, and from Mead’s reports about her research to the National Research Council (NRC; her funding source for the Samoa study), he provided only nine of the twenty-six relevant letters exchanged between Mead and Boas (in the Appendix of Freeman [1999]). Accordingly, until recently, those interested in verifying the accuracy of Freeman’s use of these documents had to acquire these letters from the Library of Congress at their own time and expense (so obviously few people have done so). Thus, as promised (Côté 1999), in order to give all interested parties ready access to the evidence, I made available in the Appendix of a special issue of the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* several crucial letters missing from Freeman’s book (Côté 2000b), and *all* letters in full on a Web site, along with excerpts from Mead’s reports to the NRC (Côté 2004).

Freeman's Claims in Brief

Key to Freeman's theory are the charges that Mead was sidetracked by overly ambitious ethnographic research, causing her to put off investigating her research problem regarding the prevalence of adolescent storm and stress; as a result, she was supposedly desperate to find something to both confirm her preconceptions and please Franz Boas, and was therefore vulnerable to being hoaxed because of her state of mind. Freeman claims that *COA* is actually based on this hoaxing, whereby she was suddenly convinced that she had been living in a free-love society.

Although my evaluation of these claims shows that Freeman's theory is severely flawed, several questions remain before the controversy can be put to rest. For example, if Freeman's work is so flawed, why has Mead's work been the object of so much controversy? And why was Freeman so unrelenting in trying to convince the world to dismiss it? I believe that light can be shed on these two questions with an examination of the correspondence concerning the publication of *COA* in the late 1920s and Freeman's eventual contacts with Mead in the 1960s. These letters yield insights into (1) Mead's motivations for playing up stereotypes about Polynesian society, leaving her work open to criticism, and (2) Freeman's motivations for undertaking an uncompromising critique of her work.

Letters Concerning the Publication of *Coming of Age in Samoa*

If Mead was not hoaxed, how do we explain the problems in her book that have been the object of controversy? Once we get past the fabrications that Freeman has constructed regarding both the sexual content of *COA* and Mead's approach to her research, we can consider the problems with Mead's simplification of Samoan culture and mores, as well as her exaggerations of certain forms of behavior. In my view, part of the answer is relatively straightforward and is supported by evidence archived with the Library of Congress.

In order to fulfill the conditions of her NRC fellowship, Mead was required to submit a report of the research she carried out in 1925–26. However, the letters show that she took her time in doing so. In her letter of 13 January 1927 to the Secretary of the NRC Board of Fellowships she wrote that she was "planning to make a commercial book of the report as it seems to be a topic of sufficient general interest," and asked if it would "be acceptable to the Board [to] submit the manuscript as prepared for book form, rather than in the form of a report" (LOC: MMP, Box N4). The Secretary, Edith Elliott, responded on January 14 that it would "not only be acceptable to the Board to see the manuscript prepared for book form," but

the Board would prefer it (LOC: MMP, Box N4). On April 24 of that year, she submitted the manuscript, and in the cover letter to Frank Lillie, the Chairman of the Board, she pointed out that she wrote it “in a form which is sufficiently untechnical to appeal to a commercial publisher. In this way [her] results may reach a much larger number of readers than if they were published in a scientific journal” (LOC: MMP, Box N4). On May 10, Mead was notified by Elliott that the manuscript was approved for publication by the Board.

With this NRC approval, Mead set out in 1927 to find a commercial publisher. She changed the title of the book to *Coming of Age in Samoa* because she thought the original title (“The Adolescent Girl in Samoa”) was “too clumsy for a commercial publisher” (LOC: MMP, Box N4: Mead to Elliott, letter dated 25 April 1927), but she left the remainder of the text as it was in her report to the NRC. Her first attempt to land a publisher with this draft failed, with Harper and Brothers rejecting it (Howard 1984:101). She next tried William Morrow, with a personal introduction made for her by George Dorsey (Howard 1984:101). Morrow was new to the publishing business, so he was obviously anxious to adopt books that would sell well. When Morrow read “The Adolescent Girl in Samoa” (submitted with the new title), he apparently saw its potential to appeal to the American public and encouraged Mead to write introductory and concluding sections that would “have a real show with the general public” (LOC: MMP, Box I2: Morrow to Mead, letter dated 10 February 1928).

In her letter of 25 January 1928, Mead wrote to Morrow about the way she proposed to frame the concluding chapters:

I have been thinking over the possibilities of the concluding chapters of my book very carefully. I finally decided that I would be willing to incorporate . . . a discussion of education which I had been working on from a different angle. This is a speculation about the education of the future and can be tied up very definitely with the problems of conflicts of adolescence. *It is definitely a speculation*, but one in line with what seems to be our present development. I am enclosing an abstract of this chapter as I would write it. I am couching it in as simple terms as possible and using concrete illustrations. I believe it would save both your time and mine if you were able to tell from this abstract whether such a chapter would satisfy you. In all events, I am most grateful to you for your criticism and encouragement for this conclusion now seems to me to be a great improvement upon my former short summary and the instigation to make the improvement I owe to you (LOC: MMP, Box I2: emphasis added).

In a later letter accompanying these chapters, Mead wrote to Morrow that she would not be able to conjecture any further:

Any improvement which I would be able to make in these last chapters *could not lie along the lines of further speculation, which I have pushed to what seems to me to be the limit of permissibility*, but would have to be in terms of more concrete illustrative material, or condensation or expansion of the points which I have discussed (LOC: MMP, Box I2: Mead to Morrow, letter dated 11 February 1928, emphasis added).

These speculative chapters were to Morrow's satisfaction and shortly thereafter he approved the new introductory chapters as well, including "A day in Samoa," which Mead later described as "too literary" (1969:xvii) for the academic book, *Social Organization of Manu'a* (a byproduct of her Samoa research), which was published by the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. Hence, two people eager to make money seized an opportunity and the book was rushed into print in July of that year without any further review, academic or otherwise.

It is important to note that Mead's book-length report to the NRC is virtually identical to *COA* except that the original introduction was dropped (and portions of it kept as Appendix II of *COA*), the conclusion became Appendix III of *COA*, pseudonyms were substituted for the real names of her informants, and minor copy editing polished the text (LOC: MMP, Box I2). My reading of Mead's report found a very detailed, descriptive account that was more academic than popular, and was unlikely to have been any more of a best-seller than other similar books published at that time, like Malinowski's (1927) *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*. Thus, in spite of Mead's initial attempt to write a commercial book, it was with Morrow's direction that Mead crafted two new introductory chapters and two concluding chapters that enhanced the readability of the book for the general public. Most importantly, however, when one compares *COA* with "The Adolescent Girl in Samoa," as I have done, much of the controversial material playing on stereotypes about Polynesia is in the opening and concluding chapters, which were written to satisfy Morrow's desire to create something that would make a "real show with the general public" (LOC: MMP, Box I2: Morrow to Mead, letter dated 10 February 1928). These chapters play up the more halcyon, as opposed to agonistic, aspects of life in Samoa in the 1920s (cf. Orans 1996).

On 11 January 1929, Morrow wrote Mead a two-page, single-spaced letter telling her about the "campaigns" and "stunts" he had used to promote her book and that he had "been giving special attention to the book and do-

ing all [he could] to promote its sales" (LOC: MMP, Box I2). He also noted in the letter that he had spent on "advertising and promotion ... a substantial sum for a book of its kind." The various provocative paperback covers that Morrow used to play up the notion of carefree sexuality are now a matter of public record (see Tiffany 2001).

With this correspondence we get a glimpse of the relationship between the eager young researcher/writer and the ambitious publisher trying to build a business, and can see how *COA* was launched with the goal of making it a best-seller. Had someone published it in its original form, without its sexy cover page and speculative chapters appealing to the public's stereotypes of Polynesia as a paradise, it is unlikely that it would have sold any better than most other dry academic books. In this light, Freeman's claim that a hoaxing was responsible for embellishments in *COA* is exposed as a fancy, against the reality of commercial publishing.

Records of Freeman's Early Contact with Mead

Two sets of letters give us insight into Freeman's attempt to first befriend Mead to use her as a sponsor in American psychoanalytic circles, and then his later escalating harassment of her after she declined to do so. The first set of letters is from the early 1960s and the second is from the late 1960s. From this chain of events we can speculate that Mead's unwillingness to oblige his request and sponsor him turned him against her and led to his increasing obsession with her and her work.¹

Freeman's Attempt to Befriend Mead

From the first set of letters, we find that Freeman wrote to the psychiatrist Morris Carstairs on 14 June 1962, asking Carstairs if he could introduce him into psychoanalytic circles in the U.S. or Europe (LOC: MMP, Box C5). In turn, Carstairs wrote Mead, forwarding a copy of Freeman's letter, asking her what to do about Freeman's request.

Carstairs had spent time with Freeman twelve years earlier at Cambridge and found him to be "an extremely congenial and not at all an over-assertive fellow student" (LOC: MMP, Box C5: Carstairs to Mead, letter dated 6 September 1962). In his letter of 14 June 1962 to Carstairs, Freeman described the new direction his work was taking after having recently experienced an "abreaction" in Sarawak that he says demonstrated to him "the fundamental significance of psychological forces in the social life of men," both personally and ideologically. This was associated with a mental breakdown for which he received psychiatric treatment (Heimann 1997; Williamson 1996).

In 1962, Freeman was in the early stages of planning a study leave and wanted to spend it with a noted psychoanalyst, such as Erik Fromm, Julian Huxley, or Erik Erikson. He thought the project he had in mind would take some ten years and would result in “a unified view of man, and so point the way to a genuine anthropology” (LOC: MMP, Box C5: Freeman to Carstairs, letter dated 14 June 1962).

Mead responded in a long (three-paged, single spaced) letter, warning Carstairs of Freeman. She noted Freeman’s “absolute failure to recognize that any anthropologists have ever thought along these lines before” (LOC: MMP, Box C5: Mead to Carstairs, letter dated 4 July 1962). Although Mead had not yet met Freeman, she had heard many negative reports from others, including a student of hers who had spent time with Freeman in Australia. It was her feeling that Freeman was “a brilliant man with definite dangers towards a messianic and over-systematized point of view.” She added that “the experience of everyone I have talked to, unfortunately without exception, in the last five years has been very negative.”

Mead also informed Carstairs that Freeman had previously sent her a series of long letters complaining about Tom Harrison (see Heimann [1997], for an account of his dealings with Harrison, leading to Freeman’s mental breakdown), as well as one in 1961 requesting Mead’s sponsorship of him in the psycho-analytic community. She told Carstairs that she had put Freeman off regarding his request with a vague response, in part because she was concerned that Freeman did not think he would need “a full [psycho-] analysis,” which flew in the face of thinking at the time. As such, Mead did not think he would fit in anywhere she could think of, and was concerned about “what he is likely to do as a person, in closely knit, highly self conscious settings.” However, she goes to great lengths to suggest alternative scenarios for Carstairs to present back to Freeman, and ends the letter exactly as follows, including the ellipsis: “No one questions his brilliance but”

In his reply letter of 6 September 1962, Carstairs stated that he appreciated Mead’s reservations about Freeman, and although he was surprised that Freeman had become difficult to get along with, concluded that the “grandiosity of his intentions . . . makes one fear that he may be passing through a period of emotional instability” (LOC: MMP, Box C5). Freeman did eventually take a study leave—without their help—at the London Institute of Psychoanalysis ending in July of 1964 (Appell and Madan 1988; Fox 2001).

Freeman’s Escalating Harassment of Mead

The second set of letters allows us to jump to 1968, when several were exchanged between Freeman and Mead (LOC: MMP, Box I2). On 10 May 1968,

Freeman asked her to clarify eight “apparent anomalies in the Appendices” of COA, and three other points of information, prompting Mead to ask her assistant to “make up a file called Derek Freeman’s queries about Samoa.” She asked her assistant to tell Freeman she was in Europe all summer and would respond in the fall. On October 3, he wrote again with two further queries.

It is obvious from the archives that Mead took great care in responding to Freeman, first making a note to herself on October 15, working through (and saving) three drafts of a letter on October 28, and sending him a fourth draft on 6 November 1968. The note to herself of October 15 read as follows:

I have read the two stories he discusses. My guess is, although I would have to verify this that I have further disguised this story and given two names, Mutu and Fuativa, to the same man, who was the government medical assistant. This would be consistent with my method of disguise. He has probably collected both incidents or something wildly resembling them and wants to say something about my inaccuracy. I will still write him saying the disguise meant that verification is impossible, and further detailed work on these materials is impossible. Talked to Lowell Holmes on the telephone, he was ready to write an angry letter but I suggested to keep it flat to reduce Derek’s paranoia (LOC: MMP, Box 12)

The anomalies in the Appendices were explained to Freeman in her letter of 6 November 1968, as follows:

Items which conceal identity—including sometimes the use of two names for the same person, slight changes in the composition of the household, duplication, repetition or deletion from a table—all alter the data just enough to make further analysis from the cases as published, impossible. . . . [W]hen I was writing about the personal lives of living, identified subjects, I made certain arbitrary and deliberately unsystematic alterations of details, which protected the subjects and those around them but did not affect the circumstances crucial to the analysis. . . . I believed it was necessary to collect information in conversation, without taking immediate notes. So actual questions used and verbatim answers do not occur in the records (LOC: MMP, Box 12).

Freeman wrote back on 20 March 1969, stating that he was not satisfied with her explanation and insisted that he had identified “instances of obvious internal inconsistencies or errors in [her] coding of cases and tabulation of

them,” and he asked that these be corrected in subsequent printings of *COA*. He ended the letter by stating that he had recently “been making detailed analysis of the early writings of [Franz] Boas and [Alfred] Kroeber,” revealing to him “that these men were not really interested in dispassionate scientific enquiry, but rather in the dissemination and support of certain doctrines,” so he planned “to devote a series of papers and perhaps even a book” reexamining these doctrines (LOC: MMP, Box I2).

Mead’s note to herself of 7 April 1969, in her “Freeman file” indicated that she was not going to answer the letter then. “At present,” she wrote, “he seems to be diverting his hostility to Boas and Kroeber, and he may lay off me.” She noted that she did “not intend to correct the statements which he calls errors but which are byproducts of my having to do some tricky double defining of people—like our medical *fitafita*—who was too identifiable if I told all the stories about him the same way.” She ends the note: “I am going to write Roland Force and ask him to hurry the publication of *Manuan Social Organization*” (LOC: MMP, Box I2, emphasis added).

Freeman (1999:207) noted that Mead never responded to his letter, and it appears that there was no further correspondence between them until 1978, when Freeman sent her a draft of *Margaret Mead and Samoa* while she was dying of cancer, although he says he did not know she was ill.

The Archives Compared to Freeman’s Reconstruction of Events

Freeman’s (1983, 1999) published recollection of events differs significantly from what the archival records show. Freeman claims that he began his attempted refutation while in Samoa as a schoolteacher in the 1940s, during which he collected “extensive and detailed historical research” (Freeman 1983:116). In a letter to me (Derek Freeman, personal communication, 10 September 1994), he claimed that this included “a mass of empirical evidence” regarding the “sexual mores of the Samoans.” If so, the evidence shows that he did not share this concern with Mead until 1964, during his one and only meeting with her. Instead, he appears to have been friendly, and even ingratiating to Mead, before turning on her in 1964. According to an obituary (Fox 2001; see also Appell and Madan 1988:15), it was:

... on his return voyage to Australia in 1964 that Freeman reread, after many years, Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* and was perturbed by what he regarded as the book’s culturalist and relativist premises and its lack of any biological understanding of adolescent behavior. He resolved to return to Samoa and resume his own researches from his newfound behavioural and philosophical perspectives.

It is possible, then, that Freeman's scorn for Mead is rooted, not in the 1940s experiences in Samoa as he claims, but in her rebuffing him in the early 1960s and refusal to sponsor him in psychoanalytic circles. This is conjecture on my part, but it does explain why he waited twenty years to begin what he came to call his "worldly task" (Freeman 1999:204).

A play about Freeman's life speculates about the source of his obsession with Mead (Williamson 1996), suggesting that he saw Mead as a controlling mother figure toward whom he had sexual feelings. Freeman openly endorsed the play, saying that he could see himself "more clearly" in it (Barrowclough 1996:34). In an interview following the debut of the play in Australia, Freeman was unusually candid with a reporter (Barrowclough 1996). In this interview, Freeman recounts his one and only meeting with Mead, which took place in Canberra in 1964:

'I kept very detailed notes,' he says. 'I had arranged all my evidence on my desk, and she came in with this great staff, and she wore a cape, and said something like, "You're the one who thinks he knows better than the rest of us"'

'... I made notes on little sheets of paper immediately after the interview. They were mostly psychoanalytic, about how she stuck out her tongue when she talked ... She said she wanted to see [his 1948 thesis]. I said, "I'll, I'll, fish it out for you." I had never stuttered in my life. And she said, "You're trembling like jelly." I was a bit scared of her. I took these two volumes of my thesis and put them on my table and said, "You can take them overnight."'

'At the end of our interview, which lasted two hours and 40 minutes, I escorted her back to University House where she was staying. The next day, during a seminar, there was an argument between her and me. She wheeled around and said, "Why didn't you bring me your thesis?" I replied I had left it for her to take.'

Mead repeated her question.

Freeman said, 'I was afraid you might ask me to stay the night.' 'I don't know why I said that,' he comments now. 'I was mortified after I said it. There was a great deal of tension [at the seminar] and Mead was known as a castrator: she went for men and put them down. She also had this sexual reputation ... I was not going to be bullied by her' (quoted in Barrowclough 1996:36).

Readers can take from this interview what they want. Although I am not a psychiatrist, it suggests to me that Freeman had a range of confused and repressed feelings towards Mead, which help explain his dogged "pursuit" of her,

zeroing in on her portrayal of sexual behavior in Samoa. It is possible that in his mind he saw her both as a “wanton” woman to be punished and as a mother figure to be forgiven. One way to resolve this cognitive dissonance would be to have her “forgiven,” and claiming to the world that she was hoaxed would accomplish this. The Williamson play has Mead’s character offering several such theories for Freeman’s behavior (Williamson 1996:95), which apparently raised no objections from Freeman, given his endorsement of the play.

Conclusion: Who Hoaxed Whom?

In the introduction, I noted that two of the remaining questions from the Mead-Freeman controversy involve the issues of (1) why Mead’s work in Samoa has been the object of so much controversy, and (2) why Freeman was so unrelenting in trying to convince the world to dismiss her work.

With respect to the first question, the correspondence associated with Mead’s research reveals that a good part of the answer lies in the fact that Mead’s book was neither reviewed as an academic text, nor intended to be one. Mead wrote her “report” for the NRC in such a way that she could submit it immediately to a commercial publisher. With the exception of the opening and closing chapters and minor copy-editing, it was printed as she submitted it to William Morrow. In this respect, some of the book’s faults can be traced to her desire to make it commercially appealing and to inducements by her publisher to make “a real show for the general public,” not to a hoaxing as Freeman would have it. In my view, the resolution to the hoaxing aspect of the controversy is that simple. Had Freeman undertaken a true scholarly critique of her book, he would have acknowledged this.

In reference to the second question, in conjunction with other evidence, the correspondence suggests that Freeman became personally obsessed with Mead and wove this obsession with a set of intellectual concerns, with the result that Mead’s Samoa research was used as a foil. He did not need to go to the lengths he did to point out the faults in her research (other correspondence in the archives shows that Mead immediately encountered academic criticism upon publication of *COA*). Instead, he undertook a public campaign that seemed designed to enhance his prestige in inverse proportion to Mead’s (cf. Hellman 1998), while at the same time satisfying his obsession with her. In this respect, his unrelenting campaign tells us more about him than about Mead’s book.

Margaret Mead did not get everything right in her first field study fresh from graduate school, but Derek Freeman got a lot wrong in his portrayal of that study, in spite of being an Emeritus Professor at the time. Mead was early in her career and eager to please her publisher; but Freeman was late

in his career and had no publish-or-perish pressures. Mead was not here to account for herself, but Freeman was hardly the person to speak for her; indeed, his claims about her work became more immoderate overtime, with his last offering (1999) constituting a caricature of her Samoa research.

Indeed, as Caton (2000) notes, now that the dust is settling after Freeman's death in 2001, Freeman's academic case has no progeny: no academic has stepped forward to continue his mission against Mead. Unfortunately, stimulated by Freeman's persistent claim that Mead was hoaxed, some people among the general public have continued to parrot him. For example, an Internet search with the key words "fateful hoaxing" finds all sorts of Freeman-inspired analyses of her work. It is my hope that by making the primary sources available to everyone on a Web site (Côté 2004), these analyses will be reconsidered and a more reasoned consensus will emerge. Regrettably, when something is said enough times, people will tend to take it as the truth. The claim that Mead was hoaxed is one of those "academic myths" that will likely persist until enough people say otherwise. We can only hope that Internet technology can be used to correct myths as well as perpetuate them.

NOTES

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I am grateful to Catherine Bateson for permission to reproduce her mother's archived correspondence, as well as to Mary Wolfskill of the Library of Congress Manuscript Division for her help and diligence in tracking down archival material.

1. Unfortunately, Freeman does not include this early correspondence in the archives he set up with the University of California in San Diego (Paul Shankman, personal correspondence, 29 June 2001).

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