# NARRATIVE, VOICE, AND GENRE IN MARGARET MEAD'S *COMING OF AGE IN SAMOA*[1]

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My contemporary reading of *Coming of Age in Samoa* explores Margaret Mead's experimental ethnography as a textual artifact whose social history may be interpreted within a framework situated in gender, time, and place. Mead's ethnography appeared to reinforce consumer-culture representations of female alterity and "free-love" in the South Seas, yet her text challenged these popular images with a radical counternarrative. Mead's case study approach to the problem of adolescence, as well as her fieldwork photographs, created a narrative and visual space that questioned the dominant anthropological discourse of her day. Mead's woman-centered book, combined with her publisher's astute marketing strategies, created a commercial bestseller that has acquired the status of "Ur-text" in anthropology. Eighty years after publication, *Coming of Age in Samoa* continues to generate both academic and public interest.

## Reading the Text

Published in August 1928, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation*, initiated Margaret Mead's career as an anthropologist, best-selling author, and public intellectual.[2] "At the time that I wrote it," Mead (1978b, 2) noted fifty years later, "I had no idea I was writing a book which would catch the imagination of the general public." Mead's anthropological research and publications, as well as her personal and professional relationships with

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Ruth Benedict, Reo Fortune, and Gregory Bateson, continue to generate both academic and public interest. In November 2001, the Library of Congress inaugurated the Mead Centennial Exhibition (Francis and Wolfskill 2001). Three biographies of Mead and Ruth Benedict were published between 1999 and 2005 (Banner 2003; Lapsley 1999; Young 2005). These works were supplemented with a collection of essays on the Mead–Benedict legacies (Janiewski and Banner 2004), a centennial special issue on Mead's contribution to Pacific ethnography (Tiffany 2005b), and selections from Mead's correspondence (Caffrey and Francis 2006). Additional analyses of Mead's work and life in the context of American culture and the public media have been recently published (Lutkehaus 2008; Molloy 2008). Mead's anthropological "Ur-text," a term I borrow from Janiewski and Banner (2004, 153), has also crossed academic boundaries and entered the "global cultural ecumene" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988, 5). A Google search of *Coming of Age in Samoa* (accessed August 2, 2009) resulted in 51,500 sites.[3] The fact that an anthropological text published eighty-one years ago (as this article goes to press) continues to generate such interest beyond the rarified domain of academe is a rare phenomenon indeed.

Despite the commercial success of Mead's first ethnography and her stature as a public intellectual, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (hereafter *COA*) served to brand Mead as academically suspect among anthropology's gatekeepers (Lutkehaus 2004; Molloy 2009; Yans 2004). A contemporary reading of Mead's book as a textual artifact must, therefore, consider the gender politics of women writing about culture from the margins of academe (Lamphere 2004; Rohatynskyji and Jaarsma 2000). Part of my task in this essay, then, is to consider *COA* as an experimental ethnography that created a discursive space privileging female lives and experiences.

Mead's work also has a social and intellectual context. Occasional references to Bronislaw Malinowski's ([1922] 1984) pioneering text, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (hereafter *Argonauts*), published six years before *COA*, allow us to contextualize Mead's awareness of her ethnographic role as "literary artificer" (Stocking 1983, 105). Mead (1969, xv; 1972, 159) commented many decades later that she had not read Malinowski's book prior to her fieldwork in Samoa (see also Sanjek 1990: 215–8). Yet, as we shall see, there are many narrative parallels between *COA* and *Argonauts*—ethnographies written during the sexual revolution of the "Roaring Twenties." Both authors studied psychology; both were concerned with social issues of the day, such as women's rights to contraception and divorce; and both wrote mythic texts that continue to inform the contemporary ethnographic enterprise.[4] Mead's text thus provides insight into the narrative structures of professional ethnographic writing emerging in the 1920s,

as well as an understanding of the historical contribution of *COA* to understanding current social issues of the day associated with the New Anthropology (Gilkeson 2009; Lyons and Lyons 2004: 155–215; Murray and Darnell 2000; Stocking 1992; Yans 2009).

## First Encounter

There is no "arrival story" in *COA*, unlike Malinowski's famous trope in *Argonauts* of being cast alone upon a remote beach in the Trobriand Islands—a trope that obscured the narrator's retreats to the local trader's compound for respite from his ethnographic endeavors (Malinowski [1922] 1984, 4; cf. Clifford 1986: 37–9, 42; Pratt 1986: 37–8; Stocking 1983, 108). Mead, however, offered no narrative artifice of a heroic castaway's "first encounter" with a pristine South Sea island. Rather, her commentaries—written over a span of fifty years—emphasized personal experiences and detailed observations of peoples and places in her correspondence, her Samoa Field Bulletins (group letters circulated to family and friends), and published works.

Mead's encounter stories begin with her self-representation as the financially impoverished neophyte who sailed off alone to Polynesia. After a two-week stopover in Hawai'i, Mead reached her final destination five days later. She noted a "cloudy daybreak" as the *S. S. Sonoma* entered the spectacular harbor of Tutuila Island. The harbor, set in a submerged volcanic crater, was filled with naval ships: the American fleet had arrived just hours earlier (Samoa Field Bulletin, no. 4, p. 1, August 31, 1925 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box N1]). Mead's early correspondence from Samoa contrasted the scenic beauty of the harbor area with the colonial presence. Writing on the same day of her arrival in American Samoa, Mead's Field Bulletin described her initial impressions of the port town of Pago Pago:

> The Navy have really done nobly in preserving the native tone; . . . only the arial [radio] stations and one smokestack really damage the scene. 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. Aeroplanes scream over head; the band of some ship is constantly playing ragtime. (Samoa Field Bulletin, no. 4, p. 1, August 31, 1925 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box N1], spelling in original; reprinted with editorial modifications in Mead 1977, 23)

Mead's description holds no promise of a pristine island world. Her arrival set off a swirl of gossip in the port town. In a letter to Ruth Benedict, written a few days after debarking in Samoa, Mead linked the local gossip to her ambivalent marital status and conspicuously absent husband, Luther Cressman:

> And this sweet little group of gossips are just seething with speculation as to why I "left my husband." Of course, they are sure I have. And I know I oughtn't to mind but it's so depressing to be greeted with suspicious unfriendly glances. (Mead to Ruth Benedict, letter dated September 11, 1925, quoted in Caffrey and Francis 2006, 54)

Mead (1931, 98) wryly noted a few years later that the "very polite and very disapproving" naval officers were the source of "many rumors about what I had come to Samoa for, and all of them said that I could not live with the Samoans."[5] Decades later, Mead revealed that the chain of disapproval over her presence in the Islands reached to the highest levels of colonial authority. She had received a "frosty reception" from the Governor of American Samoa, "an elderly and disgruntled man who had failed to attain the rank of admiral" (Mead 1969, xviii; 1972, 147).

Colonial personnel, presented as Mead's "'stock of straw men'" (quoted in Stocking 1983, 108), served to highlight the ethnographer's social distance from the local authorities and her disdain for their "ridiculous" and "frightening" tales about Samoans (Mead 1931, 98; 1972: 147–8). Malinowski's introduction to *Argonauts* contains passages critical of expatriate attitudes and behavior toward Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski [1922] 1984: 4–6; see also Lyons and Lyons 2004: 174–8; Stocking 1983: 108–9). Mead's text, by contrast, is silent on these issues, aside from formally acknowledging the cooperation of the Naval Commander, Owen Mink, and other medical personnel in assisting her fieldwork enterprise.[6] However, as her later publications indicate, Mead did not attempt to obfuscate her dependence on government personnel for help and favors, which included letters of introduction and commissary privileges (Mead 1969, xviii; 1972, 142, 147; 1977: 19–20, 31). In addition, medical authorities arranged for Butterfly, an English-speaking Samoan nurse, to provide free language instruction to Mead during her six-week stay in the port town, and they arranged for Mead's housing at the naval dispensary on Ta'ū Island in the Manu'a Archipelago (Mead [1928a] 1961: i–ii; 1931, 96; 1972: 147–51; 1977: 19–20, 24–5, 28–9). The same holds for Mead's fieldwork photographs, which show, for example, items of trade store cloth, tin wash tubs, and telephone poles on the Island of Tutuila (Tiffany 2005a).

Mead's subsequent versions of her arrival story emphasize her modest economic circumstances: "I landed in Pago Pago with four dollars and fifty cents in my pocket and a devout hope that a check would have arrived on the same boat," she wrote, three years after publication of *COA* (Mead 1931, 95).[7] Mead's living expenses during her fieldwork were paid from a National Research Council fellowship, doled out in monthly checks of $150, and dependent on the vagaries of shipping schedules (Mead 1972, 148; 1977, 19). Edward Sherwood Mead paid his daughter's round trip travel expenses to the South Seas, and Mead ([1928a] 1961, i) duly acknowledged his financial assistance in *COA*.

Mead's arrival story, expanded a half-century later in her 1977 introductory comments to the Samoa section in *Letters from the Field*, cited her inexperience: "But I myself had never been abroad or on a ship, had never spoken a foreign language or stayed in a hotel by myself. In fact, I had never spent a day in my life alone" (Mead 1977, 19). Accommodations in the port town were, at best, marginal. Mead ate solitary, "dreadful meals" served by the "sad-eyed" cook in a "ramshackle hotel" run by a "young half-caste," "amid a generally uncooperative atmosphere" (Mead 1931, 96; 1969, xviii; 1972: 147–8; 1977, 25). The hotel's claim to fame was its setting for *Rain*, Somerset Maugham's short story of missionary zeal and lust. Mead (1969, xviii; 1972, 147) saw a theatrical adaptation of Maugham's story in New York before her departure for the South Pacific.

### *"I Don't Dare Cry—and I Cry All the Time"*

By contrast to these scattered comments of ethnographic encounter, many of which were written decades after the fact, Mead's writing in *COA* presumes a self-assured author in control of the research project. The reader finds no hint in the text itself of the fieldworker's loneliness, self-criticism, and anxiety, the "*sine qua non* of ethnographic knowledge" (Stocking 1983, 106). One must, therefore, look to sources other than Mead's ethnography for such information: these include her rigorously edited autobiography, *Blackberry Winter*, and her Samoa Field Bulletins—the contents of which "were fairly evenly balanced between pain and pleasure" (Mead 1972, 151). In addition, there is Mead's published and unpublished correspondence, notable at times for its "heavy stress on points of difficulty" (Mead 1972, 151; 1977: 10–2). While in Samoa, Mead wrote almost daily letters to Ruth Benedict, her mentor, collaborator, and intimate partner, noting in *Blackberry Winter* that "[I]n my letters to friends I laid such heavy stress on points of difficulty that Ruth concluded I was having a hard and

disappointing time" (Mead 1972, 151). The two anthropologists' extensive correspondence, much of which the Library of Congress made available to scholars in 2001, provided an expressive outlet for Mead's homesickness and self-doubts while she was in the field (cf. Mead 1972, 142, 151; 1977, 12; Banner 2003, 240; Caffrey and Francis 2006: 54–7).[8] Benedict, writing from her own research site in Cochiti, New Mexico, described antidotes to the personal travails of fieldwork for Mead, newly arrived in Samoa:

> Develop all the expedients you can against weeping—companionship is only one of them. I've had excellent ones: they range from brushing your teeth and gargling your throat with every onset, to playing you're your own daughter for a year. (Benedict to Mead, letter dated September 5, 1925, quoted in Mead 1959, 301)

Mead's subsequent letter to Benedict, written from Ta'ū village in Manu'a, highlighted the emotional turmoil of the ethnographer's personal life and her fieldwork enterprise:

> I'm just unmitigatedly miserable and my head aches so I can't really think. It's the hottest day we've had this year. The room is full of flies, alive and dead. I have to beat off hordes of visiting Samoans. I don't dare cry—and I cry all the time.
>
> . . . I feel so helplessly beaten that I could almost decide to come home and give it all up. . . . I didn't half hope to be successful anyhow. And now—you can't get peoples' [Islanders'] inmost secrets out of them if you're on the verge of bursting into tears any moment. (Mead to Ruth Benedict, letter dated December 7–9, 1925, quoted in Caffrey and Francis 2006: 55–6)

A year before her death, Mead briefly revisited the topic of personal angst in the field, declaring in her 1977 Introduction to *Letters from the Field* that, "It would have made no more sense to broadcast one's miseries than to have cast messages onto the waters of the wide Pacific, hoping for some uplifting return three or four months later" (Mead 1977, 12). Emotional difficulties aside, her 1949 preface to the Mentor edition of *COA* provides one of the few published instances in which Mead, writing in the third person, described her fieldwork in Samoa as "plunge[ing] all alone into the language and customs of an alien people," while the ethnographer's "eagerness was very thoroughly tempered with apprehension" (Mead 1949, ix):

> For my first two months in Samoa, as I learned to speak the language, eat the food, and use and interpret the postures and the gestures of the people, I found myself often saying under my breath, 'I can't do it. I can't do it.' One day I noticed that I was no longer saying this in English but in Samoan, and then I knew that I could. (Mead 1949: ix–x)

Despite such tribulations, the anthropologist prevailed in her ethnographic endeavor. Publication of *COA* demonstrated that a woman who embarks on a quest "dares to reinvent herself" (Heller 1990, 1). The "White Princess of the South Seas" had indeed "collect[ed] out of the darkness stories never heard before" (Brand ca. 1926, 98; Heller 1990, 1; Tiffany unpubl. data).[9]

## Fieldwork

Mead set out for the South Seas in 1925 with a research project that had no precedent. Franz Boas, Mead's professor and mentor at Columbia, emphasized the innovative nature of Mead's fieldwork, both in his Foreword to *COA* (Boas 1928: iii–v) and in his earlier correspondence to Mead while she worked in Samoa:

> I am fully aware that the subject that you have selected is a very difficult one and is, I believe, the first serious attempt to enter into the mental attitude of a group in a primitive society. . . . I believe that your success would mark a beginning of a new era of methodological investigation of native tribes. (Franz Boas to Mead, letter dated November 7, 1925 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box B2]; online Côté 2004)

Mead reiterated Boas's comments about her pioneering fieldwork in subsequent prefaces to *COA* (Mead 1931: 94–97; 1973: vii–viii; 1977: 19–20) and throughout her career (cf. Murray and Darnell 2000: 563–5; Stocking 1983: 240–2). Writing for *Redbook Magazine* just months before her death, Mead returned to the theme of her Samoan research:

> [N]o one before me had tried to gain a scientific understanding of the life of young girls in another culture. I had to invent my methods as I went along and find out for myself whether my discoveries were genuine ones. Looking back, I think that took a certain steadfastness. (Mead 1978a, 40)

The introductory chapter in *COA* illustrates this "steadfastness." Emphasizing "this new experiment on the primitive adolescent girl," Mead cites both the lack of anthropological knowledge about the girl child and the importance of a woman-centered approach:

> Because I was a woman and could hope for greater intimacy in working with girls rather than with boys, and because owing to a paucity of women ethnologists our knowledge of primitive girls is far slighter than our knowledge of boys, I chose to concentrate upon the adolescent girl in Samoa. (Mead [1928a] 1961, 9)

Mead's ethnography, as well as her psychological training, would shape her subsequent research, as well as influence the work of her contemporaries who "attempted to deal with new insights emanating from Freud" (Gerald Sullivan, email communication to Sharon Tiffany, April 21, 2006; cf. Darnell 1977; Francis 2005; Gilkeson 2009; Molloy 2004; Sullivan 2004, 2009).

Most of the Introduction (chapter 1) of *COA* serves to familiarize the general reader with the anthropological perspective and its methods, and contrasts these with the dominant scientific paradigm of the "controlled experiment" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 5). Mead then addressed the study of adolescence as both a biological and cultural issue, casting her research problem as rhetorical questions: "Are the disturbances which vex our adolescents due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilisation? Under different conditions does adolescence present a different picture?" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 11).[10]

Describing *COA* fifty years later as "the least dated" of her books, Mead (1978b: 2–3) attributed the ethnography's "unexpectedly long life" to its subject matter. Noting that "the troubles that beset our adolescents in the 1920's are still with us," Mead (1978b: 2–3) alluded indirectly to the problematic issue of female sexuality. This topic would later become a focal point of academic and public debate with publication of Derek Freeman's (1983, 1999) contentious counternarratives about Mead's fieldwork in Samoa (Côté 2005; Shankman, 2009a, 2009b; Tiffany 2001, 2004). Indeed, Mead's proposed research had elicited criticism even prior to her arrival in Samoa. Herbert E. Gregory, then Director of the Bishop Museum, met with Mead during her stopover in Hawai'i and denigrated her project as the study of "'low things' like childhood and adolescence," (quoted in Mead 1969, xvi). Mead never forgot Gregory's comment, citing it forty-four years later in her 1969 introduction to the second edition of *Social Organization of Manu'a*.

Chapter 3 of *COA*, "The Education of the Samoan Child," illustrates Mead's interest in topics of little interest to mainstream anthropology of the day. The chapter begins with a literary hook: "Birthdays are of little account in Samoa" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 20). This assertion is immediately qualified in the next sentence by noting that birthdays of high status babies are different: "But for the birth itself of the baby of high rank, a great feast will be held, and much property given away" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 20). The chapter continues with a detailed discussion of breastfeeding and infant food, childcare, child nurses, and children's work—rare subject matter for ethnographies of the 1920s, but consistent with Mead's experimental writing about domestic life. Consider, for instance, the author's careful details about infant feeding, suggesting a cultural parallel with the bygone era of a rustic life way:

> [T]he food is either masticated by the mother and then put into the baby's mouth on her finger, or if it is liquid, a piece of bark cloth is dipped into it and the child allowed to suck it, as shepherds feed orphaned lambs. (Mead [1928a] 1961: 21–22)

Such closely observed descriptions in *COA* illustrate Mead's determination to create a narrative space for childhood and adolescence in ethnography, despite academic disparagement of "low brow" or "female" topics of sentiment and domesticity (Hirschfeld 2002; Lutkehaus 2004). Just two years after publication of *COA*, Mead had completed fieldwork with her second husband, Reo Fortune, in the Admiralty Islands (1928–1929) and among the Omaha of Native North America during the summer of 1930 (Molloy 2009; Thomas 2009). Meanwhile, *COA* remained a best-seller. *Growing Up in New Guinea: A Comparative Study of Primitive Education*, Mead's second ethnography based on her research in Manus, was published in 1930. Like *COA*, *Growing Up in New Guinea* received considerable media attention and mixed academic reviews (see also Molloy 2009; Tiffany unpubl. data).

Three years later, Mead published an impassioned argument for the study of domestic relations in the *American Anthropologist*, using ethnographic details based on her own fieldwork experiences. Mead pressed her case for greater ethnographic attention to the "unformalized aspects of culture" that center on the everyday lives of people (Mead 1933, 1). "In the traditional monograph," she declared, "it is still regarded as adequate to dismiss 'family relations' with a paragraph and 'child training' with a page" (Mead 1933, 1). Little anthropological research on these topics would occur until decades later with the publication of two

important multidisciplinary studies, *Mothers of Six Cultures* (Minturn and Lambert 1964) and *Children of Six Cultures* (Whiting and Whiting 1975; see also Gilkeson 2009).

## A Room of Her Own

Mead took two photographs of her room, the back porch of the naval dispensary occupied by the Chief Pharmacist's Mate, Edward Holt, and his family on Ta'ū Island (Mead 1972, 150; 1977: 36–37; Figure 1).[11] This domestic space—Mead's version of Malinowski in "the ethnographer's tent"—was crucial to her fieldwork enterprise (cf. Malinowski [1922] 1984: 6–8). Mead described her room nearly half a century later in *Blackberry Winter*:

> A lattice separated my bed from the dispensary porch and I looked out across a small yard into the village. There was a Samoan-type house in front of the dispensary where I was to work with my adolescents. A Samoan pastor in the next village presented me with a girl who was to be my constant companion . . . . (Mead 1972, 150)

Mead also mentioned her room in the Acknowledgments section of *COA*, emphasizing the value of her living area as "an absolutely essential neutral base from which I could study all the individuals in the village and yet remain aloof of native feuds and lines of demarcation" (Mead [1928a] 1961: i–ii; see also Mead 1972: 150–1; cf. Stocking 1983, 97).

Mead's photograph of her screened room on the veranda reveals a bed with mosquito netting, a curtained window (with the lower half covered with a pandanus skirt), a bark cloth-lined ceiling, and most importantly, a table, the sacred space for writing (Figure 1). There are pictures on the wall, including one of Franz Boas: "Between dances they [the visiting children] look at my pictures—I am going to have to put Dr. Boas much higher on the wall, his picture fascinates them" (Samoa Field Bulletin, no. 9, December 11, 1925, p.2 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box N1]; reprinted in Mead 1977, 40; see also Mead 1972, 153).[12]

Mead's ethnography does not indicate where or when she wrote. Other sources, however, reveal that she wrote prodigiously while in the field. She kept meticulous field notes and typed extensive Field Bulletins (archived at the Library of Congress) to share with a "varied, known and loved group of people" (Mead 1977, 9). Mead also managed an enormous personal and professional correspondence while in Samoa, receiving as many as seventy

FIGURE 1. **"Margaret Mead's Room at the Naval Dispensary." Untitled photograph by Margaret Mead, 1925–26, 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.)**

to eighty letters every six weeks by boat (Mead 1977, 9, 15). In her introduction to *Letters from the Field*, Mead (1977, 9) reminisced: "I would sit and stare at [the mail], spread out on my bed, bracing myself for whatever news they brought, whatever questions they raised."

Mead's engagement with her writing was, no doubt, evident to the Islanders who visited her, especially the children, who "gather[ed] to peek through the holes" of the bamboo screen dividing her room from the porch, and "chatter[ed] endlessly in Samoan about Makelita's various belongings" (Mead 1977, 37). We know, for instance, that Mead wrote in her room, despite repeated interruptions by visitors, and that she also wrote on the dispensary porch. At other times, Mead typed her bulletins "standing up at the sideboard" when she "was shooed out of the Dispensary" (Samoa Field Bulletin, no. 9, p. 2, December 11, 1925 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box N1]). The ethnographer's living space, then, was rarely as quiet as Mead's photograph in Figure 1 suggests.

Writing to her brother, Richard, Mead described the continual parade of Islanders in her room:

> It's always a gamble whether the next guest will be a grey beard or a child, a lunch bearer or a prize fighter, or a mother with a howling infant in her arms— they come for paper; for cigarettes, for rubber bands, for string, for candy . . . because they are my dear friends, to bring me bouquets; at all hours, and in all costumes. (Margaret Mead to Richard Mead, letter dated December 14, 1925 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box R7])

Mead's correspondence mentions her crowded domestic space—"half of the back porch of the dispensary quarters"—a situation that occasionally drove her to secrecy for writing time: "I have no trouble in gathering the girls about me: in fact I'm hiding in the Dispensary in order to write this letter in peace. My porch room is crowded from dawn to midnight with all and sundry maidens" (Mead to Franz Boas, letter dated November 14, 1925 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box I2]; reprinted in Mead 1977, 37; online Côté 2004). Evening was also the time for dancing in the ethnographer's living space:

> At night I push back the curtain which divides my room off at the other end, put away the chairs, push back the tables and there is plenty of room for a small *sivasiva*—dance. The young people bring their guitars and ukeleles and dance for me. A few new ones come every night and it gives me an excellent opportunity

> gradually to learn their names. (Samoa Field Bulletin, no. 8, p. 2, November 14, 1925 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box N1]; reprinted in Mead 1977, 37)

What we learn, then, from Mead's correspondence and Field Bulletins is the significance of the ethnographer's domestic circumstances to her fieldwork and writing. Much of the ethnographic information published in *COA*, including the material on children and dance in chapter 8, was observed and recorded in Mead's room—an agreeable place for young people to congregate. Yet, Mead's occupation of this space was also fraught with personal difficulties. Domestic tensions between Mead and Edward Holt escalated over time. The Chief Pharmacist's Mate eventually "declared his house off-limits" to the Samoan children and adolescents who crowded on the dispensary porch as Mead's research timetable was concluding (Banner 2003, 242). Mead's correspondence to Benedict expressed "relief" at departing the Ta'ū dispensary ahead of schedule (Banner 2003, 242).

## Science and the "Personal Equation"

Mead's text focused on a research topic that required her to spend considerable time with her young subjects (Mead 1972: 138–9, 144). Mead later referred to her age (twenty-three), diminutive stature (five feet, two-and-a-half inches), and bobbed hairstyle (which, she noted, Samoan teens also wore) as assets in her fieldwork with Samoan youth (Mead 1931, 95; 1969, 228; 1977, 19). Three years after publication of *COA*, Mead described her fieldwork experience in Samoa as a process of self-transformation and self-representation:

> I wasn't very sure how I would succeed in this strange kind of adventure, this adventure of shedding all one's own ways of eating, sleeping, talking, laughing, just as if they were an old skin instead of the most important part of one, and putting on the attitudes of a Samoan girl, as easily as if they were only a party dress. (Mead 1931: 95–6)

None of these reflections, however, appeared in *COA*. Mead's authorial voice ([1928a] 1961, 11) reiterates the research problem throughout her introductory chapter, asserting that ethnographic details were "selected always with a view to illuminating the problem of adolescence. Matters of political organisation which neither interest nor influence the young girl are not included" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 11). Five appendices, described as

"impersonal, cast in the mode of the technical book," present the author's scientific bona fides to her general readers and academic colleagues (Mead 1973, xi). Appendix 2 ("Methodology of This Study") emphasizes that the ethnographer's "generalisations are based upon a careful and detailed observation of a small group of subjects," supplemented with "case histories" (Mead [1928a] 1961: 260–1).

Mead's text also discusses the "personal equation" in drawing conclusions based on ethnographic data collected from a sample of sixty-eight girls between nine and twenty years of age (Mead [1928a] 1961: 260–1). Her conclusions are "the judgments of one individual upon a mass of data, many of the most significant aspects of which can, by their very nature, be known only to herself" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 261). Malinowski ([1922] 1984, 3) also addressed this issue, depicting the ethnographer as "his own chronicler and the historian at the same time." Mead's measured statement concerning the tension inherent in her fieldwork endeavor and the representation of that endeavor to Western readers differs in tone from Malinowski's famous, if rather muscular assertion: "In Ethnography, the distance is often enormous between the brute material of information . . . and the final authoritative presentation of the results" (Malinowski [1922] 1984: 3–4; see also Stocking 1983: 104–5). Like Malinowski's introduction to *Argonauts*, Mead's appendices further remind the reader that *COA* is a multilayered text, a story of Samoan adolescence *and* of anthropological research, in which the author acknowledges her interpretations as part of the ethnographic process (see also Sanjek 1990: 215–26; Sullivan 2005 and unpubl. data).

*Narrative Strategies*

Mead's book illustrates the challenges of writing a problem-oriented, woman-centered narrative that could be both literary and scientific. Ethnographies produced within mainstream anthropological discourse imposed an authoritative voice, framed in the language of objectivity and neutrality, in recording scientific data about the lives of other peoples (Behar and Gordon 1995). Mead understood the authenticating power of scientific language. She wrote in her 1949 preface to *COA*, for example, of "the special quality of that first attempt to see the life of a very different people, both as they saw it and as they could never see it" (Mead 1949, ix). Mead used the authorial voice in *COA* to persuade readers of her own ethnographic authority to observe, record, and write about her group of Samoan girls in a way that they themselves could not do: to weave "the ethnographer's magic" by transforming the experiences of Samoan girls into the reader's experience, thereby creating in this instance a text both scientific and literary (Stocking 1983, 106; Malinowski [1922] 1984, 6).

The first chapter of *COA* establishes Mead's ethnographic credentials to tell her story of the life course of Samoan girls, just as Malinowski used his first chapter in *Argonauts* to prepare the reader for the narrative of the *kula* journey that was to follow (Stocking 1983: 106–7). Mead explains how she contextualized the lives of Samoan girls whom she studied on Taʻū Island. She "gathered many detailed facts" about her subjects, noting that "these routine facts," presented in the book's appendices, "are only the barest skeleton" that must be clothed, as it were, with closely observed details of the girls' "family situations and sex relations, standards of friendship, of loyalty, of personal responsibility" (Mead [1928a] 1961: 10–1). Mead emphasizes that everything about these girls' lives differed from the experiences of Western readers, including the basics of food and shelter:

> All of her habits of life were different. She sat cross-legged on the ground, and to sit upon a chair made her stiff and miserable. She ate with her fingers from a woven plate; she slept upon the floor. Her house was a mere circle of pillars, roofed by a cone of thatch, carpeted with water-worn coral fragments. . . . Her food was taro, breadfruit and bananas, fish and wild pigeon and half-roasted pork, and land crabs. (Mead [1928a] 1961: 9–10)

This passage, among many in *COA*, provides domestic detail that creates an intimacy between the reader and the girls whose lives Mead shared as she "receiv[ed] their whispered confidences and learn[ed] at the same time the answer to the scientists' questions" (Mead 1931, 118).

Most of *Coming of Age in Samoa*, like Malinowski's *Argonauts*, is written in the active voice and present tense and, on occasion, shifts from the impersonal to the personal voice (e.g., Mead [1928a] 1961: 72–3, 115, 119, 178; cf. Geertz 1988: 8–11). In writing about child nurses, for instance, Mead switches from an authoritative, third-person narrative to the subjective first person:

> By the time Samoan girls and boys have reached sixteen or seventeen years of age these perpetual admonitions to the younger ones have become an inseparable part of their conversation, a monotonous, irritated undercurrent to all their comments. I have known them to intersperse their remarks every two or three minutes with, 'Keep still,' 'Sit still,' 'Keep your mouths shut,' 'Stop that noise,' uttered quite mechanically although all of the little ones present may have been behaving as quietly as a row of intimidated mice. (Mead [1928a] 1961: 23–4)

This passage serves important textual purposes. The author validates her fieldwork, grounded in extensive observations of adolescent–child relations. By situating herself in the narrative, Mead convinces her readers that she was strategically placed to hear and observe such interactions. Mead buttresses her commentary with pithy examples of adolescent remarks, creating a vivid social landscape for understanding the exotic yet all-too-human dynamics of child-tending in Samoa.

*Coming of Age in Samoa* is replete with narrative devices to keep the reader turning the pages. For instance, Mead frequently uses literary "hooks" at the beginning of chapters: "Until a child is six or seven at least she associates very little with her contemporaries" (chapter 5); "The first attitude which a little girl learns towards boys is one of avoidance and antagonism" (chapter 6) (Mead [1928a] 1961, 59, 86). Chapter 10 ("The Experience and Individuality of the Average Girl") and chapter 11 ("The Girl in Conflict") are noteworthy for their literary devices at the beginning. One hundred and thirty pages into the text, Mead enters the narrative in chapter 10 as the authoritative storyteller who reiterates the book's theme:

> [W]e come to the tale of the group of girls with whom I spent many months, the group of girls between ten and twenty years of age who lived in the three little villages on the lee side of the island of Taʻū. In their lives as a group, in their responses as individuals, lies the answer to the question: What is coming of age like in Samoa? (Mead [1928a] 1961, 131)

Chapter 11 begins with a rhetorical question about an apparently idyllic adolescent passage to adulthood: "Were there no conflicts, no temperaments which deviated so markedly from the normal that clash was inevitable?" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 158). Mead ([1928a] 1961, 158) responds that she "reserved for this chapter the tales of the few girls who deviated in temperament or conduct," adding that "in many cases these deviations were only charged with possibilities of conflict, and actually had no painful results." Chapter 11 focuses on case studies of eight "deviant" girls, divided into two categories: The first group consists of four girls who "demanded a different or improved environment, [and] who rejected the traditional choices" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 169). Each of the four "delinquent" girls in the second group "is maladjusted to the demands of her civilisation, and who comes definitely into conflict with her group, not because she adheres to a different standard, but because she violates the group standards which are also her own" (Mead [1928a] 1961: 171–2; see also Sullivan 2005). After

discussing these individuals, Mead's ([1928a] 1961, 183) conclusion parallels the chapter's beginning: "And here ends the tale of serious conflict or serious deviation from group standards."

Using the female life course as her narrative structure, Mead's text proceeds from birth, early childhood, adolescence, marriage and motherhood, to old age. The author clarifies her approach in the introduction, noting that she has no intention of including in *COA* the ethnographic "[m]inutiae" suitable for a more specialized text. Rather, she asserts:

> . . . I have tried to present to the reader the Samoan girl in her social setting, to describe the course of her life from birth until death, the problems she will have to solve, the values which will guide her in her solutions, the pains and pleasures of her human lot cast on a South Sea island. (Mead [1928a] 1961: 11–2)

Mead's text is most persuasive when the author engages the reader with a wealth of ethnographic observations centered on the domestic intimacies of young lives. By concentrating on children and adolescents (chapters 3–11), the life course narrative in *COA* falls short, giving married and mature women perfunctory attention in a single chapter of ten pages. Yet Mead's strategies enabled her to do what every good ethnographer must do: to make the exotic familiar by humanizing her subjects. Empathy with her youthful subjects is evident, for instance, in the fieldwork photograph that appeared next to the title page of the first edition of *COA* (Figure 2). Captioned "With Hibiscus in Her Hair," this girl's exuberant expression and her face, framed by hibiscus flowers worn over the ears, delights the viewer. Mead's photograph of this young woman, probably an informant, constitutes an important counternarrative to popular media constructions of the eroticized Polynesian body. This Samoan girl lacks the dreamy self-absorption of a Flaherty photograph; neither is she a commoditized exemplar of sensual eroticism (Tiffany 2004, 2005a). Rather, we see an Islander with a striking sense of personal charm and grace; she stands relaxed before Mead's camera, arms held across her chest in a graceful dance posture.[13]

*Case Studies*

Mead's discussion of child nurses enables the reader to enter the experiential world of five-, six-, and seven-year-old girls, "who trundle about upon their hips babies that are too heavy to be lifted into their arms" (Mead 1928b, 633). The reader empathizes with the child nurse's efforts at "coaxing, bribing, [and] diverting" a younger charge: "The little nurses are more

FIGURE 2. **"With Hibiscus in Her Hair." Title and photograph by Margaret Mead, 1925–26, probably Taʻū Island; printed in the first edition of *Coming of Age in Samoa*. (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.)**

interested in peace than in forming the characters of their small charges and when a child begins to howl, it is simply dragged out of earshot of its elders" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 24).

Mead's description of Anovale (a pseudonym)—a low-status girl of about twelve to thirteen years of age and "on the verge of puberty"—could well apply to the child nurse in Mead's photograph (Figure 3):

> The girl is decidedly overworked [with five younger siblings to care for] and is always carrying a baby. They are quite poor and she never has any even passably respectable clothes. . . . Anovale is tall, angular, loud voiced and awkward, domineering towards all her younger relatives, obstinate, sulky, quick to take offense. She regards her playmates as so many obstacles to be beaten over the head. She has no interest in boys whatsoever, except as extra antagonists. (Mead to Franz Boas, letter dated January 5, 1926 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box I2]; online Côté 2004)

Mead's discussion in *COA* conveys how Samoan children, especially girls, are "disciplined and socialised through responsibility for a still younger one" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 24). Mead accomplishes this narrative task by describing the kinds of mischief and inconvenience a child can impose upon an older sibling by putting up a fuss. Child nurses will:

> succumb to some little tyrant's threat of making a scene, and five-year-olds bully their way into expeditions on which they will have to be carried, into weaving parties where they will tangle the strands, and cook houses where they will tear up the cooking leaves or get thoroughly smudged with the soot and have to be washed—all because an older boy or girl has become so accustomed to yielding any point to stop an outcry. (Mead [1928a] 1961, 24)

Mead's experimental narrative in this context evokes a vivid sense of immediacy combined with domestic detail, a technique that also serves to confirm her authorial legitimacy to readers. Only a keen observer who had "truly 'been there'" (quoted in Geertz 1988: 4–5) could describe the minutiae of daily life that the ethnographer experienced firsthand.

Mead's *being there* is evident, for example, in her contextualization of Mala (a pseudonym), who had just reached puberty:

FIGURE 3. **"Child Nurse." 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.)**

> She was a scrawny, ill-favoured little girl, always untidily dressed. Her parents were dead and she lived with her uncle, a sour, disgruntled man of small position. His wife came from another village and disliked her present home. The marriage was childless. The only other member of the house group was another niece who had divorced her husband. She also was childless. None showed Mala any affection, and they worked her unmercifully. (Mead [1928a] 1961, 178)

Mead's case study approach illustrates how issues of status, power, and gender affect a low-status, orphaned girl like Mala. A woman of rank accused Mala of petty theft. Thereafter, "[w]hen her [Mala's] name was mentioned, the information that she was a thief and a liar was tacked on as casually as was the remark that another was cross-eyed or deaf. Other children avoided her" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 179).

Mala also had a reputation for preferring boys and their play and for wearing her *lavalava* (wraparound skirt) like a boy. Villagers roundly condemned her: "'She really was a very bad girl. She stole; she lied; and she played with boys,'" who in turn, "teased her, bullied her, [and] used her as general errand boy and fag [i.e., a junior child who does minor chores for an older child]" (quoted in Mead [1928a] 1961, 179). Noting that "[s]ome of the more precocious boys of her own age" were beginning to show sexual interest in Mala, Mead goes on to speculate that Mala would likely spiral into sexual promiscuity and "sink lower and lower in the village esteem and especially in the opinion of her own sex from whom she so passionately desires recognition and affection" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 180). Framed in the context of a girl's "emotional needs" and impoverished domestic circumstances, Mead's ([1928a] 1961, 180) three-page discussion of this young "delinquent" enables the reader to understand why Mala—on account of her appearance, behavior, and transgression of gender boundaries—was considered a "bad girl" in the eyes of others, and likely to reconfirm her "badness" through increasingly risky behavior.

The innovative structure of Mala's case study approach prefigures postcolonial feminist theory, which critically examines the boundaries of knowledge and power in the process of writing ethnography. Mead's representation of Mala is an experimental shift toward engagement with the marginalized voice in which the author uses, for example, quoted remarks of what others said about this girl. Mead's description of Mala's body reinforces the underlying message of deprivation that this girl suffered in her daily life. Her "scrawny" body suggests an impoverished diet; her disheveled appearance implies familial indifference. Her truculent behavior suggests "unusual emotional needs and unusual home conditions" that left Mala "marooned

in a household of unsympathetic adults" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 180). Mead wrote passionately about Mala as one individual girl victimized by domestic circumstances and emotional neglect. Mala is by no means an essentialized stand-in for all "deviant" girls in Samoa (Sullivan unpubl. data).

Mead struggled with the problem of how to present her data while still in the field, noting, "I have to be able to marshal an array of facts from which another would be able to draw independent conclusions" (Mead to Franz Boas, letter dated January 5, 1926 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box I2]; online Côté 2004). Mead's correspondence to Boas expressed her concerns about the subjective element of her ethnographic material and the questionable value of shaping it in "a semi-statistical fashion:"

> I can probably write two or three times as much about each one of them [her informants] before I leave. But to fill such case histories with all the minutiae which make them significant to me when they are passing before my eyes is next to impossible. And the smaller the details become, the more dangerous they become if they are to be taken just as so many separate facts which can be added up to prove a point. . . . But how to use it? If I simply write conclusions and use my cases as illustrative material will it be acceptable? (Mead to Franz Boas, letter dated January 5, 1926 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box I2]; online Côté 2004)

Boas endorsed Mead's case study approach, responding that "a statistical treatment of such an intricate behavior as the one you are studying, will not have very much meaning" (Franz Boas to Mead, letter dated February 15, 1926 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box I2]; online Côté 2004). Mead's challenge was to present objective and subjective voices in a narrative that—as she phrased it many decades later—would also have "literary persuasiveness," citing the widespread appeal of Malinowski's ethnographic writing at the time (Mead 1976, 3). Like *Argonauts*, *COA* occupies a distinct discursive space, representing a pioneering topic in the ethnographic endeavor—in this instance, the girl child in the social context of her domestic life and bodily experiences.

## "'Under the Palm Trees'"

*Coming of Age in Samoa* describes the intimacies of daily life among adolescent girls in the South Seas—a culturally charged landscape associated in popular culture with the romance and exotica of indigenous women's

sexualized bodies. Aware of the cultural and visual burdens that accompanied her fieldwork in Polynesia, as well as her subsequent writing about the South Seas, Mead sought to address the social issues that shaped her thinking at the time (Mead 1949, x; 1961, vii; 1973: vi–vii; see also Tiffany 2001: 22–4). These published commentaries consist primarily of a series of prefaces, written over a period of fifty years, for successive reprints of *COA*. Mead acknowledged the "young and hopeful world in the 1920's" that shaped her thinking and writing, noting as well the dark side of the cultural and social order of the interwar years: "the rebellion and self-criticism, the hatreds and the cynical despair," and the "rising totalitarianisms" that would eventually result in yet another catastrophic war (Mead 1961, vii; cf. Mead 1949, x; 1973: viii–ix).

Mead (1961: vii–viii) also reflected on the public reception of her ethnography, commenting that: "Those who saw American society in the 1920's as a rapacious and consuming monster greeted this book as an escape—an escape in spirit that paralleled an escape in body to a South Sea island where love and ease were the order of the day." *Coming of Age in Samoa* provided "satisfaction" to those who contrasted "'the primitive,' which was natural and delightful, with 'the civilized,' which was unnatural and repressive" (Mead 1961, viii). A few months before her death in 1978, Mead returned to this theme in an unpublished preface for a forthcoming special edition of *COA*:

> The book was a small bomb-shell. My account of adolescent sexual freedom in Samoa was embraced as a panacea in a country that had just given up chaperonage and had left adolescents to themselves. A long forgotten popular commentator pronounced: "Modern man has just one choice, Samoa or Calvary." (Mead 1978b, 2)

Such "either-or" statements, suggesting sexual liberation or repression, were common rhetorical devices in media reviews and public commentaries on *COA* at the time. They would assume even greater popular currency in the gender and culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, and beyond (Tiffany 2001, 2004).

Perhaps the best known example of Mead's literary voice in *COA* is "A Day in Samoa." Chapter 2 conveyed, not only "the whole gentle rhythm of [village] life" (Mead 1965, 141), but also the South Sea romance of "lovers slip[ping] home from trysts beneath the palm trees or in the shadow of beached canoes, that the light [of dawn] may find each sleeper in his appointed place" (Mead [1928a] 1961, 14). "A Day in Samoa" turned out to be a marketing asset: As one reviewer enthused, "The author begins her

work with a description of Samoa that is more beautiful than any I have ever read of in this corner of the world" (Nat Ferber, *Review* of *COA*, unattributed newspaper clipping, September 1928 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box L3]). Mead had originally intended "A Day in Samoa" for inclusion in her more "technical" work, *Social Organization of Manu'a*, first published in 1930 and reprinted in 1969 with a new introduction. However, Mead decided that her essay was "too literary in character for the style of a Bishop Museum monograph!" (Mead 1969, xvii, punctuation in original; cf. Mead 1972, 165; 1976: 3–4).

The narrative purpose of "A Day in Samoa," according to Mead's (1965, 135) subsequent account, was to present "a fairly typical day in the life of the people" from the perspective of an ethnographer's day in the field. Chapter 2, then, is a constructed world, a literary device for "giving readers some sense of the tone and the pace of life as I [Mead] had experienced it" (Mead 1965, 135). The author invites the reader to share what the ethnographer herself experienced, and to preview what is to come later in the text.

*Coming of Age in Samoa* raised the hackles of many colleagues. Reo Fortune, Mead's soon-to-be-husband, read the manuscript before publication and criticized the redundancy of its conclusions (see Thomas 2009). Edward Sapir, nursing a personal vendetta against Mead, assailed *COA* in a 1929 issue of *The New Republic* as "'cheap and dull'" (quoted in Shankman 2009a, 206; see also Molloy 2004, 39). Mead's response figures in a letter written to Benedict in 1932, when Mead and Fortune were conducting fieldwork in Alitoa, New Guinea:

> F[rances] Phillips [Director of William Morrow and Co.] sent me a copy of the Blue Ribbon Samoa. Reo is really impressed with my having gotten into a popular edition, instead of disapproving which is a help. I have been rereading it at meals since he left [on a supply trip] and I find there is very little in it that I regret—the journalese of the first part of the introduction, I do. And all over again, I have decided that Edward's [Sapir] accusations of cheap and sensational are unfounded. What I don't understand is why the general public ever reads it at all. (Mead to Ruth Benedict, letter dated July 12–13, 1932, quoted in Caffrey and Francis 2006, 153; see also note 13, below)

Mead's letter is significant: Aside from some "regret" for informal language in part of the Introduction of *COA*, she remained pleased overall with the content of her book. She expressed anger at Sapir's virulent criticism of her and the ethnography, and wonderment at the book's commercial appeal.

Years later, *COA* continued to elicit disparaging reviews and commentaries. Peter Worsley (1957) questioned whether *COA*, as well as Mead's other ethnographies, were "science or science fiction." E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1962, 96) deprecated Mead's "chatty and feminine" narrative as an instance of a "Rustling-of-the-Wind-in-the-Palm-Trees" style of ethnographic writing (see also Lutkehaus 1995).[14] Indeed, fifty-five years after the publication of *COA*, anthropological reviews of Freeman's (1983) contentious analysis of Boas, Mead, and *COA* reiterated the "Fantasy Island" theme with titles such as "Love Under the Palm Trees" (Kuper 1983) and "The Shangri-La That Never Was" (Leach 1983). These provocative titles suggested that Mead's book could be dismissed as romantic fiction; in other words, *COA* was merely a "literary" work written *by* a woman *for* a female audience. Such critiques belittled both the author and her subject matter (see also Shankman 2009a, 2009b; Yans 2004).

Mead's innovative narrative presented an unacceptable straying from the boundaries of academic ethnography, in which "[t]he subjectivity of the author is separated from the objective referent of the text" (Clifford 1986, 13). Yet, in 1928 Malinowski praised Mead's ethnography precisely for its personal tone, stating that "the many more subjective touches which you [Mead] give to your work, the obiter dicta, and the glimpses into your Weltanschauung have always stimulated me and at times delighted" (Bronislaw Malinowski to Mead, letter dated September 22, 1928 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box L3]). Indeed, just one month earlier, Malinowski had written to Mead's publisher, praising *COA* as

> [A]n absolutely first-rate piece of descriptive anthropology. . . . The manner in which Miss Mead's field-work was conducted seems to be beyond cavil and criticism. Her style is fascinating as well as exact and the book provides excellent reading; convincing to the specialist, attractive to the layman. (Bronislaw Malinowski to William Morrow, letter dated August 22, 1928 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box S9])

William Morrow subsequently used Malinowski's comments as endorsements for marketing the book (Tiffany 2001, 23).[15] By contrast, Robert Redfield's (1929: 729–30) review of *COA* lamented the absence of a personal voice: "But Miss Mead is interested, one feels, in problems and cases, not in human nature. There is no warmth in her account. A little Malinowski, stirred in, would have helped, perhaps."

Mead's publisher considered chapter 7 ("Formal Sex Relations") to be "one of the most important" chapters in *COA* (William Morrow to Mead,

letter dated September 5, 1930 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box Q12]). Certainly the cover of the first edition highlighted the "love under the palm trees" theme that Mead herself wrote about in *COA* (Figure 4).[16] However, a careful reading of Mead's ethnography indicates

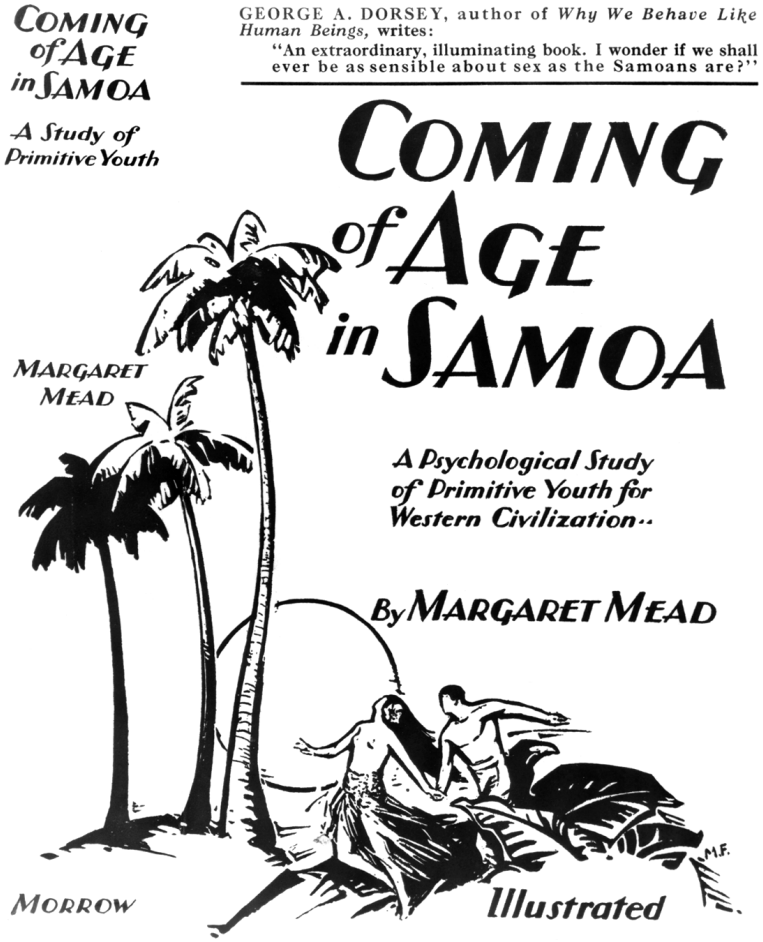


FIGURE 4. **Cover of the first edition of *Coming of Age in Samoa*, by Margaret Mead, published in 1928 by William Morrow and Company. (Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. Jacket cover reproduced from the Margaret Mead Archives, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Courtesy of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., New York.)**

that the book's cover (Figure 4), which suggests the girl's initiative in leading her lover toward the palm grove, is somewhat misleading. According to Mead, youthful excursions at night typically involved groups, rather than individual couples:

> These clandestine lovers make their rendezvous on the outskirts of the village. "Under the palm trees" is the conventionalized designation of this type of intrigue. Very often three or four couples will have a common rendezvous, when either the boys or the girls are relatives who are friends. (Mead [1928a] 1961, 92)

Another distinctive feature of the first-edition dust jacket is the prominent display of George Dorsey's printed endorsement, which contrasted Samoan and American sexual mores (see Figure 4). A best-selling author and distinguished anthropologist of Native America in his own right, Dorsey had introduced Mead and her manuscript to the fledgling publisher, William Morrow. Dorsey subsequently proposed a new title for the manuscript, encouraged Mead to ask Boas to write a foreword to *COA*, and also wrote a glowing review of the book (Mead 1965: 122–5; Tiffany unpubl. data).[17] Mead (1965, 125) had little to say about the first-edition cover of *COA*, noting decades later that: "It went to press, I read proof, and saw a small printer's dummy of the table of contents, chapter one, and the jacket. This done, I sailed for Hawaii, glad to be on my way to the field in the Admiralty Islands" (see also Tiffany 2004: 157–8).

Despite Malinowski's and Dorsey's endorsements, Mead recognized that the sexual content of *COA* could jeopardize a return field trip to Samoa that she had tentatively planned for 1928. She eventually decided not to go for personal and professional reasons, opining that a second trip to the Islands could delay publication of *COA* for at least a year, "for it [the book] would alienate too many people down there [Samoa] and complicate my field work" (Mead to William Ogburn, letter dated April 27, 1927; Mead to Franz Boas, letter dated April 27, 1927 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box Q11]; cf. Thomas 2009).

### *Toward A Political Economy of Sex in Samoa*

Mead did not discuss explicit details of what constituted "sex" in *COA*, lacking, in part, a respectable, public vocabulary specific to female experiences (Lyons and Lyons 2004: 148–51). Her ethnography does indicate, however, that sex experience included "*play,*" such as "suggestive dancing," "salacious conversation," "salacious songs," and "tussling" (Mead [1928a]

1961: 148–9, 151). Other kinds of social interactions, such as watching others engaged in "sex" or sex "play," as well as "good-natured banter" and "teasing" about others' alleged lovers, comprised part of Samoan girls' sex experiences (Mead [1928a] 1961: 86–9, 136–8). In other words, "sex" did not necessarily mean intercourse (cf. Grant 1995).

Mead's narrative of the political economy of sex presents a complex social cartography of desire and constraint: The ethnographer elucidates the restrictions and limits, ranging from fear of going out at night, to issues of age, status, and domestic environment. Female sexuality is fraught with social and emotional uncertainties: the politics of status that surround the *taupou* (ceremonial maiden) and her chastity; the boy who waits until dawn for the girl who never shows up; the willful girl who elopes, with its attendant domestic and sociopolitical consequences for her high-ranking relatives; the low-status adults who ignore a girl's sexual adventures for fear of losing a valuable household worker (Mead [1928a] 1961: 92, 94, 98–104, 151–2). While Mead's ethnography appears to reinforce consumer-culture representations of "free-love" in the South Seas, her narrative, in fact, challenged popular images with a radical counternarrative of Polynesian female sexuality and its nuanced expressions situated in a specific social environment.

## Writing Gender and Ethnography

*Coming of Age in Samoa* remains an important experimental work in which Mead creatively used literary and scientific language—writing styles considered incompatible by her academic critics. Further, the presence of a gendered voice in *COA*, with its attendant message of female agency in the problematic domain of sexuality, prefigured more recent developments of reflexive and postmodern issues of gender in contemporary ethnographic writing. Mead's innovative case study approach created a narrative space for privileging the female experience in ethnography. *Coming of Age in Samoa* also served to legitimize public discussion of gender issues concerning both Polynesian and Western women's bodies and behavior.

Like Malinowski, the "'Reluctant Sexologist'" (quoted in Lyons and Lyons 2004: 183–4), Mead lamented public fixation on the exotica of Pacific Islander sexuality, noting that the topic of Samoan adolescent sexual experiences comprised only a small portion (68 pages) of her 297-page ethnography (Mead to Professor W. A. Brownell, letter dated March 10, 1930 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box I2]). Mead expressed these concerns to Dr. W. A. Brownell, a Psychology Professor who had assigned portions of *COA* in an undergraduate class. Basing her comments

on Brownell's discussion of his students' response to *COA*, Mead noted the students' "complete conviction that this is a book about sex, mainly about sex education and sex freedom. I have met this attitude in other people and it has always amazed me" (Mead to Professor W. A. Brownell, George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, Tennessee, letter dated March 10, 1930 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box I2]).

Despite her critics, *COA* cannot be dismissed as a *National Geographic*–style of adventure narrative with titillating commentary on indigenous sexual practices. Mead was neither "duped" by her informants (Freeman 1999) nor gulled by "the potency of the Western myth of uninhibited Polynesian sexuality" (Tcherkézoff 2001, 72), to cite just two interpretive scripts that anthropologists have sought to impose on her work. Mead steadfastly resisted demands that she update or revise *COA*, writing that the girls whose lives she recorded remained "living persons as they were known to me and to their friends and relatives, human in their lives and loves" (Mead 1973, xi).

In 1933, the International Conclave of Woman Writers and the International Congress of Women, convening jointly in Chicago, announced the best books by American women writers of the past one hundred years. Chaired by the editor of *Poetry Week*, "a book council of twenty-four American writers and literary figures and the faculties of sixty universities and colleges" selected a hundred titles for the list (Gifford Ernest, *Century's 100 Best Books by U.S. Women; Two Chicagoans on List*, unattributed newspaper clipping, ca. 1933 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box L3]). *Coming of Age in Samoa* shared the social science category of the hundred best books with two works now considered First Wave feminist classics: Margaret Sanger's *Woman and the New Race* (1920, with a preface by Havelock Ellis); and *Woman Suffrage and Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement* by Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler (1923). Presumably, Mead was delighted to be part of such a distinguished group of authors. Seventy-two years later, *COA* achieved "Honorable Mention" in a list of the "Worst Books of the 19th and 20th Century," published online in May 2005 by *Human Events*, a conservative weekly. Mead, no doubt, would be both amused and pleased to have her ethnography included with such luminaries as Auguste Comte, Charles Darwin, and John Dewey, among others, on the weekly's list. *Coming of Age in Samoa* continues to generate debate in the postmodern culture wars of academe, politics, and popular media. This is no small accomplishment for a work published in 1928, reprinted in several editions and languages over a period spanning more than eight decades, and dedicated to the girls of Ta'ū Island in American Samoa.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented on February 3, 2005 at the symposium, *Gang of Four: Gregory Bateson, Ruth Benedict, Reo Fortune, and Margaret Mead in Multiple Contexts*, during the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO) annual meetings in Kauai'i, Hawai'i.

2. All references to *Coming of Age in Samoa* are from the Morrow Quill Paperback edition of 1973, copyrighted 1961, unless otherwise noted.

3. Web site results for "*Coming of Age in Samoa*" or "Margaret Mead 1928", for example, are diverse. They include advertisements from booksellers, hotels, and tours; gay newsletters and articles about *fa'afine* (Samoan cross-gender roles); academic essays on Mead's work and life; public responses to Mead's intellectual legacy; the Mead–Freeman controversy; and conservative blogs filled with the rhetoric of "debunking" and "hoaxing." The Wikipedia site offers a fairly extensive discussion but dated bibliography on the Mead–Freeman controversy (accessed August 2, 2009). See Stover (2005) for extended discussion of Mead and online sources.

4. The publishing histories of these two works are remarkably similar. Malinowski and Mead received assistance from other well-known anthropologists of the day (Alfred C. Haddon and George C. Dorsey, respectively) in getting *Argonauts* and *COA* published. Both ethnographies were subsequently retitled (originally, *Kula: A Tale of Native Enterprise and Adventure in Eastern New Guinea* and *The Adolescent Girl in Samoa*), and both were published by commercial presses (Routledge & Kegan Paul and William Morrow, respectively) (Lyons and Lyons 2004: 155–215; Stocking 1983, 94, 106, 110).

5. Mead's 1931 publication, written for a young female audience, was one of ten "personal stories" by heroic women "who have traveled far or experienced some unusual adventure." The anthology included an essay by the famous aviator, Amelia Earhart, on her cross-Atlantic flight ("Review of *Adventures of 10 Women*," *Every Evening*, Wilmington, Delaware, October 10, 1931 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box L3]). Mead's essay for this anthology, described as "her life in the South Sea Islands with natives," is an important published source regarding Mead's thoughts about her Samoan fieldwork experience ("Review of *All True!—A Compilation*," *Oregon Journal*, Portland, Oregon, October 25, 1931 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box L3]).

6. Mead cited the assistance of American Naval authorities and medical personnel in her acknowledgments for *COA*. Upon returning to the United States, Mead wrote a two-page letter of thanks to the Navy surgeon general, stating that "the Medical Department was the backbone of my work" in Samoa. Her letter concluded with praise for the naval presence, noting that "the Samoans are exceedingly fortunate in the naval administration," by comparison to civil governmental "exploitation which is devastating most of the other South Sea Islands" (Margaret Mead Papers: Library of Congress, box I2, Mead to Dr. E. R. Stitt, surgeon general of the United States Navy, letter dated September 17, 1927).

7. Mead's check did not, in fact, arrive on the same boat as she had anticipated. Penniless, she was forced to remain in the port town for six weeks until her fellowship check arrived on the next boat, enabling her to settle her hotel bill (Mead 1972, 148).

8. Biographical accounts provide few details on the extent of Benedict's intellectual and editorial collaboration with Mead during the preparation of *COA* (e.g., Caffrey 1989, 100; Lapsley 1999, 170). Mead herself is vague on this point, citing Benedict's (and others') "criticism and assistance" in the Acknowledgments of COA (Mead [1928a] 1961, ii). A brief discussion of Benedict's influence on Mead's thinking about Samoa may be found in Mead's 1969 introduction to the reprint edition of *Social Organization of Manu'a*, which was dedicated to Benedict in the first edition of 1930 (Mead 1969: xvi–xvii). Further examination of the Benedict–Mead correspondence during and after Mead's Samoan fieldwork may provide further insights into the early working relationship between these two anthropologists.

9. In January 1978, just months before Mead's death, *Redbook Magazine* published an article based on Mead's Samoan fieldwork correspondence, excerpted in *Letters from the Field* (Mead 1977). The *Redbook* article, titled "The Reluctant Princess," was published during a resurgence of the feminist movement in the 1970s, contrasting it to the 1920s, when "at that time, women were doing things nevertheless and that she [Mead] just got up and got going'" (Mead 1978a; quoted in Helene Pleasants, Senior Editor of *Redbook Magazine*, to Rhoda Metraux, letter dated June 23, 1977 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box I301]).

10. The theme of culture and biology was rephrased for a publicity blurb for *COA* printed in *Morrow News Notes*: "In her book, Miss Mead shows the developing girl, as a constant factor in American and Samoan civilizations, but the civilizations are different. Is it the difference in those civilizations, not in the girls, that brings about the problems of adolescence?" (*Morrow News Notes*, August 29, 1928 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box L3]).

11. All photographs, with the exception of Figure 4, were taken by Margaret Mead in American Samoa between 1925 and 1926. Only one of Mead's photographs (Figure 2) is titled. All other photo titles are those of the author (Sharon W. Tiffany). Mead's fieldwork photographs reproduced in this article were retouched using the computer program *Adobe Photoshop Version 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. Mead's second photograph of her room, which is not reproduced in this essay, reveals that she actually had two tables. The second, shown with a bark cloth cover and a row of books on top, faced the screened area of the veranda (Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box P25).

12. The pictures displayed on the wall of Mead's room in Ta'ū probably included some of Francis Flaherty's photographs of Western Samoa, published in the May 1925 issue of *Asia Magazine*, which was mailed to Mead in the field. Three of Francis Flaherty's published photographs, taken during the filming in 1923–1924 of Robert Flaherty's documentary, *Moana of the South Seas*, were eventually used for the picture interpretation test Mead administered to her Samoan informants (Mead [1928a] 1961: 290–1; 1969, xix; 1972, 154; see also Tiffany 2005a). The "picture-naming test" is described in Appendices 2 and 5 of *COA* (Mead [1928a] 1961: 262–5, 289–92). Mead's archived test is closed to public access, primarily to protect the identities and responses of her informants (Patricia A. Francis, email communication to Sharon Tiffany, June 24, 2004). To my knowledge, Mead's most extensive discussion about protecting her Samoan subjects' identities is contained in unpublished correspondence to Derek Freeman (Mead to Derek Freeman, letter dated November 6, 1968 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box I2]).

13. This fieldwork photograph, along with six other images of Samoan girls and women, appeared in the first edition of *COA* published in 1928 by William Morrow, as well as in Morrow's cheaper, mass-market Blue Ribbon Books reprint edition of 1930 (Frances Phillips, Director of William Morrow and Co., to Mead, letter dated October 27, 1931 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box I6]; see also Caffrey and Francis 2006, 399, n. 13). Mead selected a total of twelve fieldwork images for the first edition of *COA;* none of these photos were republished in subsequent reprints of her ethnography, including the 2001 Centennial reissue by Perennial, HarperCollins Publishers (Tiffany 2001, 2004). Reprint editions of *Argonauts*, by contrast, included Malinowski's numerous fieldwork photographs reproduced in the first edition (Malinowski [1922] 1984; see also Young [1998]).

14. While Evans-Pritchard (1962, 93) acknowledged Malinowski's *Argonauts* as "a classic of descriptive ethnography," he also criticized the book as "long-winded and written in a journalistic style."

15. Delighted with receipt, on the same day, of letters praising *COA* from Malinowski and sexologist Havelock Ellis, Morrow and his staff "almost staged a celebration when we read them" (William Morrow to Mead, letter dated January 11, 1929 [Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box I2]).

16. A copy of the first-edition cover of *COA* is archived in the Mead Papers at the Library of Congress (box L3).

17. Mead's original manuscript submitted to Morrow carried the academic title, *The Adolescent Girl in Samoa*—the same title as Mead's final report to the National Research Council's Board of Fellowships in the Biological Sciences, which had sponsored her fieldwork (Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box N1; online Côté 2004). Dorsey's positive review of *COA*, titled "Natural or Savage?" was published on September 2, 1928 in the *New York Herald Tribune* (Library of Congress, Margaret Mead Papers, box L3).

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