

## Margaret Mead's Coming of Age in Ethnography Storying Scientific Adventure in the South Seas

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### Article abstract

A lightning rod for an array of criticism, *Coming of Age in Samoa* also attained monumental popularity with both scholarly and popular reading audiences, convincing many that it captured the sexual and social lives of Samoan adolescent girls and that North American girls might be instructed by this portrait. Taking a "recovery and reappraisal" approach, this article argues that the text is neither a collection of detailed, field note-anchored observations nor a cross cultural critique, but a love story to place. The text has much in common with postmodern conceptions of ethnography, which acknowledge "writing culture" as mediated by interpretive, representational and linguistic considerations. Like many postmodern ethnographers, Mead self-consciously constructs an authorial position rather than attempting to remain absent and objective. Part of the persona she constructs is that she is a scientist sharing data; yet she no sooner invokes standards of scientific rigor than she shifts course to promise us a good "tale". If contemporary readers can read the text through a postmodern lens, when she wrote, her approach was unprecedented. Her awareness of transgressing scientific method emerges in the "Introduction" to the book, where she self-reflects on her decisions about authorship as performance and text as storied, artful and intimate.

## MARGARET MEAD'S COMING OF AGE IN ETHNOGRAPHY

### Storying Scientific Adventure in the South Seas

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A recent book studying culture and field work opens by interrogating the visual rhetoric of a 1984 painting (Charles Tansley's *Secret of the Sphinx*) that depicts an Anglo male, dressed in a western-style business suit, kneeling before the sphinx, in the ready with microphone, head phones and tape recorder (Garber 1996: 1-2). The author questions whether the ethnographer-figure is depicted as one who seeks wisdom or one who is misinformed and "like some characters in T.S. Eliot's poetry ... [will] have had the experience and missed the meaning". Many critics of ethnographic method, and of Mead's early practice of this inquiry, have questioned her facts and raised doubts in particular about her reports of her experiences in *Coming of Age in Samoa*. She missed the meaning in so many ways, according to those who have detracted from her enterprise as well as those who have offered vague defenses: she has been accused of misrepresenting - even lying - about informants and cultural practice, of over-generalizing and exaggerating, of struggling with her own inexperience, of cultivating the romantic-erotic myth of the South Seas, of perpetrating the colonialist outsider's error of speaking for others, of misunderstanding patterns in her own culture (see for example, Freeman 1983, McDermott 2001: 851, Holmes 1987: 9, Martin 2006 162, Barnard 2006: 99, Marcus and Fisher 1999: 158-60).

A lightning rod for an array of criticism, the text also stands out for its monumental popularity, remaining to this day the best-selling anthropological study ever written. Upon its publication, *Coming of*

*Age* found both scholarly and popular reading audiences and successfully convinced both that it meant scientific business — that it captured the sexual and social lives of Samoan adolescent girls and that these elements might redirect the lives of North American girls. Even if it is no longer valued as a knowledge resource amongst anthropologists — one scholar has recently noted the “declining place for her work within the discipline [of anthropology] over the second half of her life” (McDermott 2001: 847) — it has continued to engage public imagination. When a conservative group recently circulated a list of the most dangerous books ever published, for example, Mead’s *Coming of Age* remained on the radar, receiving “honorable mention”, presumably for advocating sexual freedom (human events 2008).

In a renowned controversy, the scholarly accuracy of Mead’s study was attacked following her death in 1983 by Derek Freeman, who argued that she failed to collect accurate data and that as a result she had drawn faulty conclusions. The Samoans, he said, were not sexually free, but a rather rigid, patriarchal group. Her method was faulty — too short an encounter (some nine months), too far removed (as she lived outside the village and was attempting to learn the language as she studied the culture), and too dependent on too few sources. He further argued that her theoretical framework was askew — he derided as “the Boasian Paradigm” the view “that human behavior can be explained in purely cultural terms” (Rappaport 2001: 315). Going to Samoa with the expectation that culture determines behavior, Mead, he argued, was unwilling to consider how biological factors complicate human patterns. In short, he argued she practiced bad science. Picking up the critique, American scholar Martin Orans denounced Mead’s lack of rigor even more bluntly. He alleged that Mead was not fooled but that she deliberately presented misinformation to sensationalize her experience and publication.

Criticizing her work from another angle, postmodern theorists have questioned her comparative approach, and her misunderstanding of the culture of North American youth. Marcus and Fisher, for example, have pointed out that although she studied Samoan adolescents with attention to detail, her ideas about North American teens were generalizations rooted in commonsense, not the product of any special observation or reflection. Her methodological error was in trying to use one group to explain another. Even when Lowell Holmes offered a vindication of her work (1987) — pointing out that she maintained scientific standards to the extent “[that] her findings were correct, that

her approach was objective, and that her methodological skills were exceptionally good for one of her age and experience”(173) — he nonetheless referred to the youthful errors of Mead’s ways, explaining that she “often over-generalized and was given to exaggeration ... with only three years exposure to anthropology to prepare her for her scientific adventure in the South Seas”. Continuing the apologia, he also noted that Ruth Benedict was influential and may have encouraged loose talk because hers was a “configurational approach to culture” that privileged broad patterns and overlooked atypicalities (172).

I think Lowell may be right in both cases — that Mead was given to exaggerate and that Benedict helped give her courage and encouragement to do so (especially in a series of letters they exchanged during Mead’s Samoan fieldwork). The result, however, is not faulty science reporting but an artful interpretation that represents Samoa aglow with light and life. Mead’s Samoa is not an exotic far-away place but one she has taken to heart, apprehended, as Paul Willis has it in his argument for reporting life as art, “not coldly, cognitively, and rationally, but affectively, poignantly and aesthetically” (5). The text *Coming of Age* has much in common with postmodern conceptions of ethnography as “writing culture”, a term acknowledging that to write about others is mediated by interpretive, representational and textual considerations. The researcher is implicated and needs to be aware of his or her position, for writing about the other is connected to writing about the self.

Read in the context of recent theorizing about ethnographic method, Mead’s book gains contemporaneity. Like many postmodern ethnographers, she self-consciously constructs an authorial position rather than attempting as an objective disembodied narrator to let the research speak for itself. Part of the persona she constructs is that she is a scientist sharing data; yet she no sooner invokes standards of scientific rigor for her project than she shifts course to promise us a good “tale” (13). These perspectives are not subtly blended, but bump into each other in the style of postmodern pastiche, so that *Coming of Age in Samoa* is a heterogeneous mix of genres.

If Mead’s accomplishments can be understood through a postmodern lens, it is certainly true that when she wrote, she had no precedent for her approach. When she chose to “story” her experiences, she was aware of transgressing scientific method still being pioneered in her discipline and day. In her “Introduction” to the book, where she self-reflects on method and purpose, we can find some of her decisions about authorship

as performance and text as interpretive and creative representation of what she saw, heard, sensed and felt. What I wish to offer in this article is an understanding of Mead's work from a feminist perspective, taking a "recovery and reappraisal" approach (Rakow 2006: 205) to argue that what results is not primarily a collection of detailed observations nor a cross cultural critique, but a love story to place.

### **Theorizing Contemporary Ethnography: Storied, Artful, and Intimate**

Accepting ethnography as storied and artful is a theoretical commonplace now. Over the past few decades, critical anthropology has debated the definition of culture - no longer assumed to be transparent and fixed - and the rhetoric of its representation. What is seen and said is subjective and always subject to revision, given the changeability of culture itself and the extreme sensitivity of the act of seeing culture. Using a metaphor that compares observing culture to watching a passing parade, Clifford Geertz makes clear how one's position influences what one sees and how what one sees is always changing, as Clandinin and Connelly summarize: "Geertz reminded us that it was impossible to look at one even or one time without seeing the event or time nested within the wholeness of his metaphorical parade. ... We know what we know because of how we are positioned. If we shift our position in the parade, our knowing shifts ... as the parade changes our relative positions change" (2000: 16-17). Ralph Cintron captures the subjective and interpretive turn of ethnographic text-making in commenting that an event "does not come wearing its meaning or structure for all to see", but often gains significance "through the process of struggling to capture its meaning in a text", so that "ethnographers do not necessarily interpret the same phenomena in the same way" (1993: 408).

No simple act of transcription, writing ethnography can be linked to making art. Laurel Richardson (1997) has developed what could be termed a poetics of ethnography, especially in recommending that the voices of informants be rendered in verse so that readers are confronted with the interpretive rather than literal outcome of ethnographic transcription; she forges an explicit link between writing research and making art. Paul Willis theorizes that ethnographers need not even attempt to capture the empirical chimera of direct knowledge of the real but, receptive to the scene and people, aware that "[e]thnographic

imaginings of life as art deal with both abstract and sensuous forms of knowing and with connecting both" (2000: 13).

The more familiar the ethnographer becomes with the culture, the more likely the slippage between ethnographic fieldnotes and what is eventually written up as the ethnographic text, for the ethnographer responds with embodied knowledge so that what he knows and writes is the sum of intellectual, emotional and sensual experience. Of course to compose a holistic response drawn from all these levels both expresses and forms the writer's identity. As Susan Rubin Suleiman puts it, when writing about "people who have shared at least some bit of your time/space ... you are also necessarily writing about yourself, your material world, your preoccupations, your history" (1996: 257-58).

### **Revising Boasian Ethnography. Patterns and Cases "known only to herself"**

When Mead wrote *Coming of Age in Samoa*, it was not commonplace to link the ethnographic gaze with subjectivity and creativity - not a perspective her colleagues would endorse. In 1925, still in her early twenties, Margaret Mead traveled to an island in American Samoa, where she observed "some 50 adolescent girls, from 3 villages on a western part of Ta'u island for about 6 months" (1928: 259-60). Conducting fieldwork for her PhD. dissertation, she was under the direction of Franz Boas at Columbia University, who had set her the problem of studying the lives of girls in Samoa, to examine "the psychological attitude of the individual under the pressure of the general pattern of culture", to discover whether or not adolescent girls possessed the same "strong rebellious spirit" found in American adolescents (Boas 1925). Published in 1928, Mead's book responded to Boas' question by presenting a picture of Samoan girls growing up in a culture with more relaxed attitudes to sexuality and with fewer opportunities and rewards for displays of individuality or special ability. As a result, she claimed, the passage from girl to womanhood was more pacific than in western societies, where young women encountered so many restrictions defining sexual propriety and depended entirely on immediate family.

In addition to focusing on the central question posed by Boas, Mead also solicited and claimed to follow his methodological recommendations. In a letter responding to her questions about the need to gather numeric data, he told her to concentrate instead on citing cases to build "the general picture". He acknowledged the role

of subjectivity in making selections - of choosing "a selected number of cases" - yet urged her to seek a standard of accuracy by being responsive to variety rather than trying to streamline cases to impose uniformity. An experienced practitioner, he also told her to find her own way in relation to the field (Mead: 1926).

In Appendix II, "Methodology of this Study", Mead responds to several of these recommendations, yet in each case she revises his approach in a way that reveals she may have taken his suggestion, she finds her own way closest to heart. She reassures us that her "generalisations are based upon a careful and detailed observation", yet rather than draw from a variety of respondents as Boas advised, she refers to concentrating on "a small group of subjects" (1928: 260). She also tells us that she will support generalizations with examples, so that "results will be illuminated and illustrated by case histories" (261). Yet she furnishes examples that do not always support her generalizations. Here, for example, following the generalization that there is no pattern of sexual jealousy in the group because it is so rare, she cites as support for her point four different manifestations of sexual jealousy: "During nine months in the islands only four cases came to my attention, a girl who informed on a faithless lover accusing him of incest, a girl who bit off part of a rival's ear, a woman whose husband had deserted her and who fought and severely injured her successor and a girl who falsely accused a rival of stealing" (160). While the four instances do indeed play out differently, a reader inclined to weigh the evidence might question her main claim that sexual jealousy is a rare occurrence given that she witnessed four relatively serious cases of it, within a small group in a short time frame.

Leaps like this have led to censure. In a recent evaluation of her scholarly contributions, Ray McDermott opines that Mead's false assurances weigh against her many accuracies, and that "[at] her worst" in *Coming of Age* she is "filled with a false, confident authority on many points of description" (2001: 851). In Appendix II, discussing her approach, Mead herself dismisses the disconnect between data and claim on that basis that her aim was to deliver insight into behavior rather than to catalogue instances, "to illuminate rather than demonstrate a thesis" (1928: 260). Defending a similar observational case-based approach, education theorist Glenda Bissex uses a parallel defense when she points out that readers who want empirical evidence can always ask when there is no tangible or objective data. "But what does this

prove?" She counters by asserting that the salient question is "How does this improve my understanding?" (1990). Mead implicitly claims that her work compels a similar reframing by observing that she intends to illuminate broad patterns rather than count individual cases — to offer her understanding of their understanding, and not simply to recreate scenes in dramatic and empirical detail. She also speaks plainly of the role of subjectivity in knowing, acknowledging that her cultural portrait trades in "judgments", many formed on the basis of details "known only to herself" (261). Thus she follows Boas' lead, using cases to support broader claims about the culture, but modernizes his method by linking subjectivity to knowing and characterizing the text as interpretive rather than transcriptive, illustrative rather than definitive.

There is another instance when she revises his advice. In a letter to Mead addressing some of the details of her world journey and work plan, Boas advised her to stay focused on studying the situation of Samoan adolescent girls, and not to attempt to observe the social life as a whole. While she stuck to girl culture in *Coming of Age*, she accepted a contract from the University of Honolulu to study the broader cultural patterns of Samoa, which resulted in a second book, *The Social Organization of Manu'a*, published just after *Coming of Age*. By contrast, this book not only analyzes the broader Samoan culture, but does so in descriptive, factual, and technical terms, often providing evidence in the form of numeric data.

### Writing Science and Art as Discrete and Hybrid Forms

While Mead's ability to complete the two projects demonstrates her prodigious ambition and productivity — providing evidence of the energy which drove her life's work "relentlessly", according to biographer Patricia Grinager (1999) — the difference she ascribed to the two works is fascinating from a rhetorical and methodological perspective. Writing to her mentor and friend Ruth Benedict, she remarked of the fact — based cultural study that there is a clear correlation between her written data /field notes and the text itself, so that others could make sense of and use her data. By contrast, she remarked on the sharp and irreparable disconnect between written data /field notes and the narrative we know as *Coming of Age*. Rather than worrying about a lack of factual documentation or resolving to gather and record facts more carefully, she decides to continue "being as cryptic and illegible and brief as I like" in collecting her data (Mead 1926).



By refusing to provide careful fieldwork notes to support or authenticate her report, she veers from the then-emerging path of ethnographic method, whose travelers, according to John van Maanen, “share the same broad notion that fieldwork is their defining method” (1988: 24). Bronislaw Malinowski, Mead’s contemporary pioneer in the field, for example, called for and practiced rigorous record keeping, for which he was acclaimed by Mead who was convinced that “Malinowski was perhaps the most thorough fieldworker God ever made” (in Wolcott 1995: 43). Yet about her own decision to keep her notes to herself — even to keep no notes — Mead expresses more glee than anxiety: not so much the scientist humbled by methodological shortfall as the bravado of a writer in love with a project bigger than planned, and willing to run risks.

We learn several things about Mead’s methodological orientation to telling ethnography from her description of the pair of projects:

1) Mead could write a straightforward fact-based ethnography, as demonstrated by the text, *The Social Organization of Manu’a*. In *Coming of Age in Samoa*, she deliberately took a different approach, which she refers to as more “literary” in an introduction to the 1969 edition of *The Social Organization of Manu’a*. Conversely, in the 1973 “Preface” to *Coming of Age*, she refers “the scholarly reader” to *The Social Organization of Manu’a*, which has been “revised in the light of contemporary ethnographic theory”, in contrast to *Coming of Age*, whose very different strength she describes as presenting “living persons as they were known to me and to their friends and relatives, human in their lives and loves” (xvii).

2) Rather than being proud of maintaining a lockstep connection between field notes and the fact-based ethnography of the culture - between what she “wrote down”, and then “wrote up”, to borrow Wendy Bishop’s terms for the two-stage process - she instead refers dismissively to accomplishing this clarity in *The Social Organization of Manu’a*. Mead tells Ruth Benedict that she was able to collect in a mere three weeks the extra material she needed for it (Mead 1926). She tells readers in the “Introduction” to *Coming of Age* that she has spared us extraneous details and relegated the “[m]inutiae of relationship systems or ancestor cults, genealogies and mythologies” to be “published in another place”(12).

And,

3) She recognizes there is some risk to her reputation involved in publishing *Coming of Age in Samoa*, because of the disconnect between written data and narrative. She knows her book will be scrutinized both as academic dissertation and as a document of public scholarship, and is alert to potential criticism on both fronts. Her academic advisor Franz Boas expects more than a colourful travelogue, and her perspective publisher, William Morrow, expressed his concern that she avoid damaging her reputation as an intellectual by taking a non-scientific approach (1928).

Thus, *Coming of Age in Samoa* does more than mobilize the ethnographic methods of the time to respond to the anthropological question about the culture of Samoan adolescence posed by Boas. Mead confronts the dilemma of authorship head-on, explaining her close connection with her subjects and describing how she chose to tell about their lives in a way that is largely undocumented, not anchored in scientific method. That she was self-conscious about her rhetorical position is evident in a letter to Benedict, when she seeks advice about how to style her ethnographic presentation, saying “write me your notion of just how my results could be most convincingly presented” (Mead 1926). Such a request may have been heartfelt and practical, but it was also rhetorically purposeful since by it she seeks to bring Benedict — a senior scholar and Boas’ peer — into collusion with her approach to authoring.

### **Introducing the Author as Scientist, Anthropologist, Storyteller. Shifting Pronouns and Positions**

Perhaps the “Introduction” to *Coming of Age* provides the best insight into Mead’s decisions about “just how [her] results could be most convincingly presented”. Far from being naïve or haphazard in her approach, she deliberately cultivates a persona that allows her flexibility as author and respectability as scholar. By changing self-referential pronouns in person and number, she positions herself as active or delinquent practitioner of science and anthropology to suit her purposes. To establish herself as a voice of authority, she begins by adopting the persona of scientist. Yet even as she links science to anthropology, and herself to both of these pursuits, she establishes gaps or distances, pointing out the difficulties of measuring and controlling the behavior of human subjects in naturalistic settings. Within these few pages, she aligns herself with science — looking at a scientific question — establishes the limits

of scientific method in dealing with social or human science research, and then decides to ignore details to offer instead a more coherent and interior picture of these lives.

She opens by aligning her project with science, and thus with attitudes of reason, caution, and knowledge-discovery. It is thus allied with science that she stakes her claim to clear up the misconception that adolescence is innately stormy, popularized by “the social philosopher, the preacher and the pedagogue” (3). In these early passages, she uses the *masculine* third-person pronoun to refer to the anthropologist in the role of scientist arguing the need to pay more attention to the influence of culture on behavior

*He* heard attitudes which seemed to him dependent upon social environment ... ascribed to a period of physical development. And on the basis of his knowledge of the determinism of culture, of the plasticity of human beings, he doubted (emphasis mine, 5).

Had she continued using the masculine pronoun consistently throughout the introduction, it might be considered a relatively innocuous or neutral choice, especially because the third-person masculine was a commonplace universal reference at that time. Moreover, because it is known that Franz Boas established the problem Mead was to study in Samoa, it is a matter of accuracy on her part to refer to the theorist as masculine. Yet her use of “he” stands out here because Mead goes on to shift to the plural “we” in her ensuing description of the struggles of scholarly practitioners to find an investigative method suitable for studying human problems. By this move, she joins the ranks of those pursuing exploratory inquiry practices: “What method then is open to *us* who wish to conduct a human experiment but who lack the power either to construct the experimental conditions or to find controlled examples of those conditions here and there throughout *our* own civilization?” (7). While the masculine figure of Boas is cast as the scientist responsible for identifying generative problems and questions, she places herself among the ranks of practicing researchers whose “materials are humanity” and who therefore struggle to “construct the experimental conditions or ... find controlled examples” (7). Thus, her work is mandated by science, even if its conduct falls outside the rigors of scientific method; by these moves, Mead has both positioned herself under the umbrella of scientific respectability, and arranged to reach out from its confinement.

Another pronoun shift follows, this time from “we” to “I”, as she describes the decisions she makes that govern her inquiry (9). From this personal perspective, she announces several decisions to deviate from the usual ways of science. She advises readers that the ethnography will not be burdened with the presentation and analysis of numbers, but that instead “routine facts are summarized in a table in the appendix” (11). She goes on to dismiss or diminish the link between such facts and our ability to understand complex human situations, pointing out that facts provide “only the barest skeleton, hardly the raw material for a study of ... all those impalpable storm centres of disturbances in the lives of adolescent girls.” Since recorded, routine facts provide no real insight into “the less measurable parts of their lives” (11), she chooses instead to describe “the lives of these girls” (11). If she told Benedict directly of the disconnect between collected data and the text of *Coming of Age*, she tells readers here that to describe a life requires a narrative account rather than a collection of facts and numbers. As she describes her decisions about how to conduct and write the study, she uses the personal pronoun twenty one times in seven paragraphs (9-12). This concentrated use of the personal pronoun demonstrates she is willing to take responsibility for — even eager to claim authorship of — her approach and her text.

Within these same paragraphs, she complicates her relation to science in another way, by invoking the then-popular theory of primitivism to provide a scientific foundation for her own decision to make generalizations and cross-cultural comparisons on this basis of studying a small group of non-western people. Anthropologists, she tells us, often identify a population to study on the basis of the theory of primitivism, which holds “that the analysis of a simpler civilization is more possible of attainment” (7-8)

In complicated civilizations like those of Europe and the East, years of study are necessary before the student can begin to understand the forces at work within them. ... A primitive people without a written language present a much less elaborate problem and a trained student can master the fundamental structure of a primitive society in a few months (8).

Mead claims that a non-literate culture is also easily depicted by “generalizing” because “one girl’s life was so like another’s, in an uncomplex, uniform culture like Samoa” (11). The theory of “primitivism” supports making cross-cultural comparisons as well as

generalizations. The wide differences between the traditions of Indo-European and “primitive” groups allow anthropologists to observe cross-cultural contrasts “vivid enough to startle and enlighten those accustomed to our own way of life and simple enough to be grasped firmly” (8).

Thus she connects her method to scientific theory of the time: she uses primitivism to anchor her commitment to making generalizations about the lives of Samoan girls and to support her decision to contrast the lives of Samoan and American girls. Yet immediately following her definition of primitivism as the belief that non-literate cultures are simple and relatively easy to know, she offers something of a reversal by explaining that, far from simple, the process of understanding a culture different from one’s own is complicated. When the differences between cultures are immense, to recognize them the ethnographer needs to expend huge, almost insurmountable effort to reach across languages and culture

She [the Samoan girl] spoke a language the very sounds of which were strange, a language in which verbs became nouns and verbs nouns in the almost sleight-of-hand fashion. *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 whole material environment was different* (emphasis mine, 9-10).

In the following sentence that caps off this paragraph, Mead sums up the differences as spanning every aspect of living, from personal habits to physical and social environment

And just as it was necessary to understand *this physical environment, this routine of life* which was so different from ours, so her *social environment* in its attitudes towards children, towards sex, towards personality, presented a strong contrast to the social environment of the American girl (emphasis mine, 10).

By mounting up such a weight of difference, Mead actually undermines the theory of cultural mastery-in-a-month, at least as it might be exercised by an anthropologist following the common practice of her day. Not only is understanding hard won, it is only won by empathy and intimacy: “Speaking their language, eating their food, sitting barefoot and cross-legged upon the pebbly floor, I did my best to minimise the differences between us” (10). By endorsing the standard

notion that a “primitive culture” is hugely different while at the same time challenging the notion that a simpler way of life is easy to understand, Mead accounts for her unorthodox approach to her subjects — for getting up close and personal with a limited number of subjects in order to gain the necessary understanding and then for writing about the few as if they signify the rule in order to draw out cross-cultural differences. In much the same way as she cherry-picked the desirable parts of Boas’ methodological instructions, here she calls on the theory of primitivism to support making cultural and cross-cultural generalizations, but amends it to explain her decision to observe a small group intimately.

In a final pronoun shift, Mead reverts back to the “we” voice, but whereas the earlier “we” joined her to scholarly practitioners, now she uses “we” to connect to the public at large. Picking up the concerns of American readers and educators, she tells us in the last paragraph of her “Introduction” that she will make no attempt to report on education in general, but only on those elements that stand out as boldly contrastive to our own: “The strongest light will fall upon the ways in which Samoan education, in its broadest sense, differs from our own” (13). With this, she cuts herself loose from another of science’s rigors — the obligation to attempt to account for all of one’s findings, in a way that is both complete and objective. Instead, she seeks a mandate for “selective telling”, deciding to attend more fully to insights that might help us “to fashion differently the education we give our children” (13). While Mead began her “Introduction” by invoking the claims of scientific method and disciplinary Anthropology, she ends by making a commitment to meeting the needs and interests of a popular public audience; rather than coming full circle, she opens up new possibilities. Indeed, in this last paragraph, she refers for the first time to herself as author, telling “a *tale* of another way of life.” (emphasis mine, 13).

### **Intimacy and Ethnography. Love Story /Self-Story**

I began by asking us to see the figure of Mead in relation to the picture of the ethnographer as seeker, supplicant before the exotic sphinx, eyes averted, hoping for the disclosure of a secret or to record a moment’s truth. Yet, when we turn to an actual photograph of Mead in Samoa — remembering how Mead and Gregory Bateson held that film and photo are crucial to developing our understanding of others — we see a very different figure and attitude. In place of downcast eyes and

reverend and hopeful pose, we see her alongside a Samoan girl, so close that they are touching, almost mirror images of each other in dress, jewelry and stance, right down to the out-turned bare feet. The two are holding hands and gazing at each other. Both are smiling, more in intimate than comic fashion. In some photos, they are wearing wedding dresses, perhaps signifying their sense of being bound together. Certainly, Mead knows her subject well — they look at and touch each other. Without the ease of a language shared comfortably, it may be that they communicated best with each other on sensory and even sensual levels.

Although we cannot know for sure if Mead and the girl were lovers, we do know, according to the publication of recent biographies and personal letters, that same-sex relationships were part of Mead's life "from her college years on" (Rupp 2004: 366).

Certain passages in *Coming of Age* also suggest that Mead became sensually, even intimately connected to her Samoan subjects - that more than hearing accounts of their activities or observing cases, she became directly involved. She tells us, for example, that important experiences are closed to non-participants in a culture that does not support voyeurism. In this passage, she tells us that she would not have had access to many events if she had not become more participant than observer

From the night dances, now discontinued under missionary influence, which usually ended in a riot of open promiscuity, children and old people were excluded, as non-participants, whose presence as uninvolved spectators would have been *indecent*. This attitude towards non-participants characterized all emotionally charged events, a woman's weaving bee, which was of a formal ceremonial nature, a house-burning, a candle-nut burning — these were activities at which the presence of a spectator would have been *unseemly* (138, emphasis mine).

Since she describes a number of ceremonies and private events in the book, gathering her evidence while maintaining the warm regard of the Samoans — never being reviled as "unseemly" or "indecent" — we can assume some level of participant engagement.

In light of Mead's dismissal of voyeurism as a way of knowing in this culture, we need to reconsider the accuracy of biographer Lois Banner's claim that Mead learned about Samoan sexuality by furtive observation. She pictures Mead watching adolescent couples engaged in sex "under the palm trees that ringed the village", yet notes of this apparently

furtive behavior that Mead “wrote to Benedict that she had ‘taken chances’ to get her sex material” and to another correspondent “that she had been out the night before, ‘scrutinizing’ the lovers by moonlight” (2003: 237). It is possible that her watching involved a more active level of participation, for by her own estimate the price of looking is participating — to observe as non-participant would have been “indecent.” Helping draw us toward this conclusion is Banner’s own accompanying observation that the “Samoan girls accepted her as one of them”. The photograph of Mead and the Samoan girl discloses her entirely relaxed attitude toward and camaraderie with her subject, making clear that she chose intimacy over distance. Speculations about the exact nature of the relationship aside, however, the level of intimacy between the two women simply as it is captured and displayed in the photograph stands in sharp contrast to the more standard image of the ethnographer as supplicant seeker, bowed before a mysterious and exotic subject that looms large and remains unknown.

In developing a close rapport with her subjects, Mead seems to have anticipated another favorite practice of contemporary ethnography. Summarizing the intimate relation currently cultivated between researcher and field informants, Katherine Irwin suggests that several theoretical traditions have combined to recommend this approach, so that, “interpretive, feminist, and postmodern positions have seemed to argue that intimate methods, and especially our accounts of intimacy in the field, can be more accurate, less exploitative, and less colonizing than objective and distant methods” (2006: 159). While even advocates admonish against exploitative relations — warning that intimacy can be a problem rather than epistemologically productive if it results in “yet another exoticist discourse” (Kulick 1995: 23) — getting to know “the pleasures and dangers” of a field is widely recommended “edgework” (Irwin 2006: 153). In the “Preface” to 1973 edition, Mead disavows that hers is an exploitative treatment, fending off criticism from young Samoans who claimed not to recognize the culture depicted in her book and who bridled, too, at the characterization of their ancestors. Her defense is not only that the picture was true at the time, but also that far from attempting to undermine Samoans, her portrait is lovingly gilded by an ethics of caring. She describes herself in the current day as regarding place and people with the pride of a grandmother “delighting in a dancing grandchild”. This is one of several familial images she uses to insist on the resiliency of her portrait: it is authentic because it evokes place and people with love.



Her visible personal connection to the Samoan girls and her textual use of familial imagery raise an issue frequently canvassed in recent theory as to whether it is possible to write about others without implicating the self. One of the disputed claims Mead made about Samoan adolescents was that they were open to same sex as well as heterosexual intimacy. In writing about adolescent sexuality, Mead had a stake in understanding her own recent adolescent sexuality, punctuated with open and same-sex experiences in much the same way as she describes the lives of Samoan girls. While biographers point out that her views and practices found some support amongst her liberal and well-educated peers in the 1920s, her advocacy of free love disrupted several of her serious relationships and she was conflicted enough about her lesbian relationships to keep them from public view. Janet Mason speculates that throughout her scholarly career, it was Mead's own sexuality that sparked "her interest in cultures with permissive attitudes toward sexuality, including the acceptance of multiple partners and the practice of homosexuality" (2004).

Apart from being an advocate of sexual freedom, Mead was also known for her lifelong interest in examining family structures and promoting healthy families. In *Coming of Age*, she makes powerful recommendations both for relying on extended family in place of primary family and for sexual freedom in place of repression. These are the twin calming ingredients that sweeten Samoan adolescent life. Thus, two of her lifelong preoccupations — with familial and sexual relations — are intertwined thematically in her first book, establishing a link between telling about others and telling about self.

This is complicated work. She writes in the persona of scientist, yet gently revises several conventions regulating science writing practice, so that she is free to tell about sensual Samoa — which she goes on to depict in the ensuing chapters as a place of light, dark, and shadows, where the grade of light not only affects what people do but also changes what can be seen — a place by this imagery more favorable to artist or photographer than scientist. Mead revised the relationship of ethnographer to subject, staking a claim for intimacy. In relation to telling about others, she cultivated intimacy in place of objectivity and claimed that interpretation and creativity were not tools of fabrication but keys to knowing.

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