

COMING OF AGE IN AMERICA

Margaret Mead's reconstruction of adolescence for the 1920s

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Master of Arts

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by

Sarah Elizabeth Stevens

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# APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

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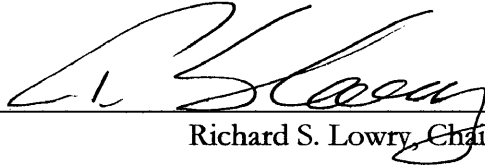
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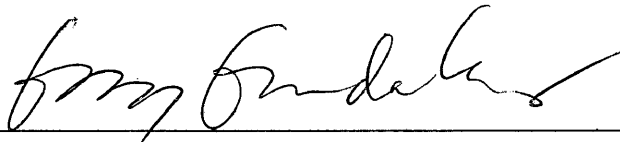
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## ABSTRACT

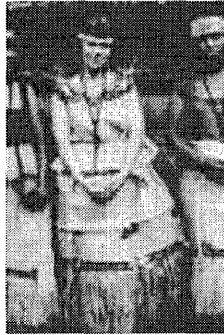
The term “adolescence” to describe a specific period of human maturation was first used by G. Stanley Hall in his work *Adolescence*, written in 1904. The concept of adolescence was very specific, applying only to boys, and relying on evolutionary theories. By the end of the 1920s however, the term was understood and used far more widely in the middle-class American public. This thesis explores the significant influence that Margaret Mead had on this wider public understanding by presenting a close-reading of her 1925 work, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, which directly addresses similar issues to those addressed by Hall at the turn of the century. In order to appreciate the significance of Mead’s work on adolescence, the thesis considers Mead’s ideas alongside an understanding of the work by Hall that preceded it and prepared its audience.

The thesis argues that Mead’s work has been previously undervalued for its impact into restructuring the concept of adolescence, and examines the anthropological research that Mead used in this restructuring for a specific 1920s white-middle-class American audience. In order to gain a fuller comprehension of the effect of Mead’s work, the thesis details the 1920s context into which it was published, and focusses on three key areas that Mead highlighted as she compared the Samoan society with her contemporary America: women, freedom and sexuality.

“Coming of Age in America” finally seeks to examine issues raised by Mead’s use of a foreign culture to change views and mindsets held in her own culture, by addressing various questions of ethnological positioning and writing.

## COMING OF AGE IN AMERICA

## INTRODUCTION



This picture shows Margaret Mead in Samoa. She is dressed as a Samoan and stands with a Samoan friend. They smile at the camera, looking free and natural, simply dressed. Mead's Samoan friend wears flowers around her neck. They appear to be at one with nature, enticing the viewer to an exotic paradise. Mead has her arm around her companion in a relaxed manner. While we can imagine such a photograph in a vacation commercial, in fact this image featured in Margaret Mead's work *Coming of Age in Samoa*.<sup>1</sup> It embodies the very essence of Mead's anthropological argument presented in this work, which stated that Americans could 'put on' something Samoan in order to experience freedom and happiness. She argued that if Americans could clothe themselves with Samoan values they too would smile like the girls in the photograph, free from the burdens of modern life.

The shaping influence of *Coming of Age in Samoa* should not be underestimated. The work in which Mead promoted Samoan life as a vital key to Western understandings of the adolescent self has been translated into sixteen languages and was an instant bestseller upon

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books Inc., 1928)

publication in 1928.<sup>2</sup> It brought attention to both the field of anthropology as a relevant discipline to the American public, and to Mead herself as a prominent figure within it. The work was a result of nine months study in Samoa, and earned Mead popularity and renown. During the time in 1925, Mead studied fifty girls in three small neighboring villages, spending time with the girls and their families in an attempt to understand the Samoan culture, particularly as seen through the eyes of young growing women. Covering topics such as the education of the Samoan child, the Samoan household, gender relations, physical sexual relationships, and the attitude towards personality, amongst other areas, *Coming of Age in Samoa* has remained a perennial favorite among the public. It has even found a niche in the academic world which initially rejected Mead as populist and simple, becoming part of the college syllabus, as the following quotation from Mary Pipher's introduction to the HarperCollins Perennial Classics edition of the work shows:

My mother was a girl on a ranch in Colorado when *Coming of Age in Samoa* was published. She read it in college in the 1930s. I read it in college in the 1960s. Now, with this new edition, my daughter may read it and maybe even my granddaughter.<sup>3</sup>

Although acknowledging that the work has widespread public popularity, this thesis seeks to argue that the deeper effects of Mead's arguments have hitherto been underestimated. By examining Mead's construct of adolescence in conjunction with G. Stanley Hall's arguments laid out in *Adolescence*, I seek to demonstrate that Mead used anthropological research to completely restructure the concept as white-middle-class Americans knew it, developing Hall's theories in accordance with her own understandings of cultural and psychological development. The concept of adolescence held by the American educated middle-classes changed significantly as a result of one woman's study of a small

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<sup>2</sup> See E. Michael Jones, *Degenerate Moderns: Modernity as Rationalized Sexual Misbehavior* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Pipher Ph.D, Introduction to the Perennial Classics Edition of *Coming of Age in Samoa* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), pp. xv-xix, p. xv.

group of teenage girls on a South Pacific island.

In order to appreciate the significance of Mead's work on adolescence, this thesis seeks to consider Mead's construct by examining and gaining an understanding of the work by Hall that preceded it and prepared its audience. By placing Mead's work in the context of the 1920s and evaluating her focus upon Samoan adolescent girls in the light of the contemporary understanding of the 'primitive' and of female sexuality, I seek to show that through *Coming of Age in Samoa* Mead ushered white middle-class Americans into a new phase of 'cross-cultural dressing,' in a similar fashion to that which she had experienced firsthand, as the photograph above suggests.

CHAPTER I  
THE SAMOAN ANTITHESIS: MODERN AMERICAN CIVILIZATION  
AND THE NEED FOR THE PRIMITIVE

It is difficult to imagine the effect of the first reading of Mead's Samoan idyll upon the average American reader in 1928. Mead verbalized her own window onto another world by recreating "A Day in Samoa" as a second introductory chapter in her book. The reader is permitted a glance at a world where "the life of the day begins at dawn, or if the moon has shown until daylight, the shouts of the young men may be heard before dawn from the hillside," where "restless little children roll out of their sheets and wander drowsily down to the beach to freshen their faces in the sea," where "men come home from the bush, grimy and heavy laden, shouting as they come, greeted in a sonorous rising cadence by those who have remained at home."<sup>4</sup> Mead's description here is sensory, appealing particularly to the ears as well as the eyes as she features the noises heard in the village. The use of the musical terminology is especially effective, transforming the noise of everyday voice-speech into symphonic singing. Mead utilizes adverbs and adjectives to maximum effect throughout this second chapter, which gives the description of the village and the inhabitants a narrative quality. She grants birds and animals personality, making the island both more magical and more friendly: "Cocks crow, negligently." The variety of experience featured in the few

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<sup>4</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, pp. 14, 17.

pages of “A Day in Samoa” is almost overwhelming. Everyone is delegated a task by Mead, giving the impression of incessant busyness and therefore exuberant life and vitality. Even the menial task such as the “twisting [of] palm husk on their bare thighs” is made to seem pleasurable, since the old men concerned are also “muttering old tales under their breath” as they work.<sup>5</sup> Such activity is a far cry from factory labor and the steady monotony of American industry that represented for so many urban Americans the essence of modern work-life. In Samoa, Mead creates an idyllic world far away from the American metropolis; American readers bought into this vision by buying the book.

For America at this time was a very different place than this exotic paradise. It was completely caught in the throes of the -ization age: commercialization, industrialization, urbanization, corporatization, and mechanization pervaded all strata of society. In 1928, the year of the publication of Mead’s work, the United States’ economy was entering its fifth year of steady growth; an economist writing for *The Nation* noted “Unquestionably this post-war period has been marked by America’s economic coming of age.”<sup>6</sup> This writer perceives both value and maturity in terms of financial success. The sense of individual identity and the concept of the self-made man that had been so vital in the nineteenth century and reflected in the opportunities to own businesses and have a role in a small town community in which ‘character’ could be acted out, had been pushed to extinction by the capitalist boom of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Working for a large corporation, divorced from seeing the fruit of labor as part of a factory chain, and living in a large urban center, the individual man struggled for autonomy and a sense of independence.

The modern situation led to feelings of weightlessness and questioning of the self, and therefore the ‘primitive’, or a sense of intrinsic basic otherness, contrasting with the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 12, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Cited *ibid.*, p. 167.

monotony of urban life, became increasingly appealing. As Joel Pfister notes, primitivism seemed to “empower the reader’s belief in individual agency and self-making” and to “restore faith in the idea that standardizing corporate order cannot strangle the significance of the ‘individual’ self.”<sup>7</sup> The ideas of the ‘primitive’ which formed the focus of the fields of anthropology and psychology, and which pervaded other realms of public thinking, offered a viable escape from the trappings of modernity. Mead is explicit in promoting an examination and understanding of Samoan ways of life as a remedy to the problems faced by modern Americans. Her subtitle directs her study to “Western Civilization,” and in her concluding chapters, which draw explicit contrasts between America and Samoa, Mead repeatedly uses the word “solution.”<sup>8</sup> According to Mead, Samoa was key to both a development of American ways of life and a progression to the future of civilization.

In promoting what was commonly seen as a ‘primitive’ culture as a vital key to solving the problems posed to the individual by modernity, anthropologists such as Mead could be understood as utilizing central tropes. Torgovnick details the power of these “sets of images and ideas that have slipped from their original metaphoric status to control perceptions of primitives:”

Primitives are like children, the tropes say. Primitives are our untamed selves, our id forces - libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free. Primitives exist at the ‘lowest cultural levels’; we occupy the ‘highest.’<sup>9</sup>

Mead’s understanding of primitivity was complex, combining a variety of these tropes. For although she did not adhere to basic stereotypes or overplay only one aspect of primitivity, she did utilize key features of otherness to Western culture, primarily the tropes of the

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<sup>7</sup> Joel Pfister, “Glamorizing the Psychological: The Politics of the Performances of Modern Psychological Identities” in Joel Pfister and Nancy Schog (eds), *Inventing the Psychological: Toward a Cultural History of Emotional Life in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 167-213, p. 199.

<sup>8</sup> See Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, pp. 211, 233.

<sup>9</sup> Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 8.

exotic, the simple, and the free. These can be seen to work on different levels, creating various understandings. Exotic primitivity offered an exciting external paradise away from standardized labor for corporations, from daily routine, and from the city. The vivid pictorial descriptions of the appearance of the youths in the text are good examples of Mead's use of this. One instance is the intricate description of the girls' dress at the dance:

While the children are dancing, the older boys and girls are refurbishing their costumes with flowers, shell necklaces, anklets and bracelets of leaves. One of two will probably slip off home and return dressed in elaborate bark skirts. A bottle of cocoanut oil is produced from the family chest and rubbed on the bodies of the older dancers.<sup>10</sup>

The essential exotic is captured through the references to unusual clothing, proximity to nature through dress, and the sexual connotations of the oil. Mead's photographic plates included in the early editions of the work, such as the example featured above, were also key in capitalizing upon this essential exotic, showing the girls dressed in the ways described in this extract. That which might constitute an imaginary or fantasy idyll is thus proved to be 'real' through photographic evidence. The romanticism of the beaches and palm trees and simple lifestyle can thus be viewed in concrete existence, and as we have seen, Mead herself is included in the photographs dressed in the Samoan fashion, partaking of the experience, free from the trappings of civilization. This picture provides a visual demonstration of Mead donning the external exotic primitivity; it is as simple as adorning oneself with garlands. Yet it is not only this external exotic primitivity that Mead draws upon. Her concept of the Samoan otherness depends upon the interplay of this external exotic with an internal simplicity.

This simple primitivity offered a notion of people as yet untouched by capitalism and technology, a people as 'we' (white Westerners) used to be with characteristics of life that

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<sup>10</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 79.

'we' have lost. The 'primitive' thus provided a chance to revisit Western prehistory and an opportunity to understand "human nature in the buff."<sup>11</sup> The simplicity of Samoa is highlighted by Mead in her introduction to the book, where she uses the word "simple" four times in one paragraph and describes Samoa as "never [having] attained the complexity of our own" culture.<sup>12</sup> This sense of simplicity was particularly important to constructions of concepts of the primitive other, because it answered specific needs that had already been highlighted by the fields of psychoanalysis and psychology. These fields already engaged the challenges of modernity, signalled by addressing the American nervousness and neurasthenia, by advocating therapies which would induce patients to rediscover an inner, deeper, more primal self, and thus reappropriate a sense of individuality and purpose. Non-Western people, such as those found on Pacific islands, epitomized this unalienated, natural humanity that psychologists and their patients sought. The simple 'primitive' seemed to offer Westerners Paradise Regained.

This assertion of an essential 'primitive' core to the self was by no means a rejection of a higher level of civilization, nor an expression of a desire for a permanent return to a simpler pre-modern existence. As commonly propagated by leading thinkers in the fields of psychology and psychiatry, neurasthenia was seen to be a disease of *overcivilization*; it was the consequence of higher intellect and advanced technology that stretched man's most complex and developed faculties to their limits. The theories discussed at the beginning of the century stated that civilized selfhood was increasingly complex. The shift towards an understanding of self as one of personality rather than of character brought with it a theory of layers of personality, built up around an essential core. These layers increased and

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<sup>11</sup> Di Leonardo, *Exotics at Home*, p. 147.

<sup>12</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, pp. 8, 7.

became more complex as man became more civilized. Thus, although they noted similarities between civilized and primitive man, psychoanalytic theories of this essential primitivity ultimately reasserted civilization's superiority. Academia and the medical profession maintained that neurasthenia was not suffered by non-Westerners because they were not complex enough to experience it. Thus therapeutic primitivism accommodated both a chauvinism toward American style modernity as the apex of civilization, and a concept of healthy personality and individuality grounded in contact with a 'primitive' core of being. It was into an arena already flooded with this thinking that Mead entered.

CHAPTER II

AMERICAN YOUTH: THE INVENTION AND  
RE-INVENTION OF ADOLESCENCE

Such beliefs surrounding therapeutic primitivism were widely held, particularly within institutional academia. One scholar who advocated these views was G. Stanley Hall, who believed strongly that overcivilization was damaging the new generation of men. His sense that overcivilization was leading to a loss of masculinity led in part to his 'invention' of adolescence and the publication of *Adolescence* in 1904. In this work, as well as in earlier research, Hall characterized childhood, and more particularly the years between the ages of ten and sixteen, as a time during which boys should be encouraged to remain savage. He stated that a more primitive existence during youth would prevent the nervous conditions, such as neurasthenia, and the feminized manhood that resulted from overcivilization. Gail Bederman summarizes his ideas as follows:

By encouraging small boys to embrace their primitive passions instead of repressing them, educators could 'inoculate' boys with the primitive strength they would need to avoid developing neurasthenia. As adults they could be safely civilized, refined, and cultured - but only if they had fully lived and outgrown a temporary case of savagery as small boys.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gail Bederman, "Teaching our sons to do what we have been teaching the savages to avoid": G. Stanley Hall, racial recapitulation, and the neurasthenic paradox" in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 77-120, p. 97.

Although Hall began by studying the welfare of young boys, as his studies continued he turned his attention to older youths, and extended the length of the period recently set aside for childhood by including a concept of adolescence. Hall's definition of this concept was first presented in his essay "Moral and Religious Training of Children" in the *Princeton Review* in January 1882.<sup>14</sup> His work *Adolescence*, published in 1904, was definitive in introducing the concept of a prolonged and scientifically recognized period of youth to the American reading public: "Only with the publication of *Adolescence*, Hall's masterpiece of research and creative interpretation, did Americans begin to speak of that new category of being, the Adolescent."<sup>15</sup> Hall is almost universally credited with the 'invention' of adolescence, as we understand it today.

Hall anchored his concept of adolescence in the popular theories of evolution, and the primitive, just as Mead would in 1928. He suggested that "the experiential history of *homo sapiens* had become part of the genetic structure of each individual,"<sup>16</sup> and thus just as mankind had progressed from savage to civilized, so the individual man should follow the evolutionary process as he matured to adulthood. Hall used evolutionary patterns to show that in order to avoid overcivilization and its associated problems, boys should replicate their ancestors' progress and thus undergo a period of savagery during which they would be free to experiment and enjoy life without moral responsibilities and modern concerns. Following Rousseau, who had also stressed theories of recapitulation,<sup>17</sup> Hall outlined four stages of childhood through which the individual developed. Each stage reflected a stage of the

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<sup>14</sup> See John Demos and Virginia Demos, "Adolescence in Historical Perspective" in *Journal of Marriage and the Family* Vol. 31 No. 4 (November 1969), pp. 632-638, p. 635.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex: the Shaping of Adolescence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Rolf E. Muus, *Theories of Adolescence* 6<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 1996), p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 14.

evolutionary process through simplicity to civilized. The first stage lasted from birth until the age of three. This was classed as the “free play” stage, during which children occupied their own simple world. The second stage lasted until around the age of six or seven, when children suffered a “crisis” of identity. This crisis precipitated the third stage, which was known as the “early savages” period and lasted until around the age of twelve to fourteen. It was during this third stage especially that children should be granted freedom to be ‘primitive,’ in his words, to “build huts, wear feathers and tomahawks as badges, carry knives and toy pistols, make raids and sell the loot.”<sup>18</sup> This extract shows that Hall adapted his idea of primitivity in part from the otherness understood to be demonstrated by Native American tribes, and that he equated their perceived lifestyle with childlike behavior from the early savages stage. He was frequently explicit in his references to the Darwinian theories of evolution, drawing overt comparisons between the behavior of American boys and what was known of the behavioral patterns of both apes and tribes of early man. For example, “he suggested that modern children’s tendency to pick scabs stemmed from their primitive ancestors’ propensity to pick lice.”<sup>19</sup> After this third stage, children could be seen to have progressed to stage four - adolescence. This meant that they had developed to be “similar to people of medieval times - imaginative, emotional, and idealistic but still not fully modern.”<sup>20</sup> Hall believed that it was of continuing importance that adolescents should not be treated as if they were fully developed adults, and that they were granted sufficient freedom to progress to complete ‘civilization’ without interference or pressure:

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<sup>18</sup> G. Stanley Hall, “Adolescence and the Growth of Social Ideals” in Richard L. Rapson (ed), *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America* (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Co., 1971), pp. 35-41, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> Bederman, “Teaching our sons to do what we have been teaching the savages to avoid”, p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> David I. MacLeod, *The Age of the Child: Children, 1890-1920* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), p. 24.

[The adolescent] must have much freedom to be lazy, make his own minor morals, vent his disrespect for what he can see no use in, be among strangers to act himself out and form a personality of his own, be baptized with the revolutionary and skeptical spirit, and go to extremes at the age when excesses teach wisdom with amazing rapidity, if he is to become a true knight of the spirit and his own master.<sup>21</sup>

School and college were ideal spaces in which the adolescent could fully rehearse this evolutionary process of self-maturation. Hall effectively set aside these areas as adolescent spaces of ‘primitive’ freedom, and saw them as being so different from the adult world that he even suggested that “student life is perhaps the best of all fields, unworked though it is, for studying the natural history of adolescence.”<sup>22</sup> This statement reveals Hall’s attitude towards the subjects of his study: adolescents were ‘othered’ in the same way that ‘primitive’ tribes were. Similarly the tribes could be continually othered as less than adult; the ‘similarities’ thus had a double function. Both adolescents and non-Western cultures were of interest simply because they were more natural and less developed. Thus the common tropes of primitivity mentioned by Torgovnick also applied to this period of maturation. The freedom and simplicity of ‘savage’ life were vital to Hall’s construct, both in themselves and as the antitheses of the repression of Victorian morality.

Thus for Hall, adolescence was both a problem and a cure. As a necessary time of conflict, of *sturm und drang*, this period was an inevitable by-product of the psychological complexity of developing to modern adulthood. Yet since the necessity for an adolescent period was, in effect, caused by civilization, adolescence as a concept served as a way to imagine a “cure” for the problems of overcivilization, by institutionalizing the adoption of freedoms by civilized young men of the upper classes, destined for leadership roles in the future. In short, Hall’s adolescence, like the psychoanalytic therapies for neurasthenia, did

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<sup>21</sup> Hall, “Adolescence and the Growth of Social Ideals” in Rapson, p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

not condemn higher civilization, they merely presented a new understanding of what it meant to be civilized. Whereas civilized behavior had previously centered on the demonstration of self-restraint, it now focused upon cultivating a period of sanctioned release from any restraint, and thus offered an individual evolutionary process from youth to adulthood. Hall's theories neatly summarized the problems of modern selfhood and provided a possible solution. It is thus unsurprising that his concept was quickly and universally adopted in the public and academic discourses of the middle- and upper-classes.

Also to be considered here, given that Mead was working from an understanding of Hall's construct, yet would later discuss adolescence through an examination of Samoan girls, is the fact that Hall's work only addressed the generation of young men; it was very much gender-specific. He did not confront any ideas of womanhood or encourage a replication of evolutionary simplicity and conflict for growing girls. In Hall's work adolescence remained something of a men's club; entry into adolescent freedom being entirely dependent upon gender. Thus despite the fact that by 1904, when *Adolescence* was published, "a small but noticeable number of middle-class women were enrolling in institutions of high learning," not to mention the increasing number of working-class girls moving from work as domestic servants into the commercial marketplace, thus challenging the Victorian concept of ideal womanhood, Hall did not choose to explore adolescence as a universal condition.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, while viewing higher education as an integral part of the middle-class boys' development as a time of essential freedom, he suggested that higher education would produce women who were "functionally castrated."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> John D'Emilio & Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 190

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in D'Emilio & Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, p. 190

One of these women however, was to develop her own thinking to challenge and reconstruct Hall's theories. When Margaret Mead came to research her dissertation in 1925, twenty-one years after the initial publication of *Adolescence* and one year after Hall's death, his theories were still prominent within academia and public thought. Indeed, it could perhaps be argued that despite her gender and subsequent exclusion from Hall's own ideas, Mead's own upbringing had been affected by Hall's beliefs. Since both of Mead's parents, Edward and Emily Mead, were academics it is likely that both were familiar with Hall's work, published three years after Margaret's birth. As Mead remembers in her autobiographical *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years*:

In my family I was treated as a person, to them I was an individual. It might be necessary to keep me - as a child - from reading too much or sitting up too late. But it was never suggested that because I was a child I could not understand the world around me and respond to it.<sup>25</sup>

Mead's academic progressive parents seem to have allowed her some of the freedom to be herself, experience the world, and to develop in her own way, in a way that recalls Hall's model for growing boys. Beyond whatever experiential encounter Mead may have had with Hall's practice, his ideas certainly influenced her intellectual work. In her introduction to *Coming of Age in Samoa*, where she cites Hall as an influence upon popular thinking about adolescence, Mead characterizes adolescence according to Hall's construct, as "the period in which idealism flowered and rebellion against authority waxed strong, a period during which difficulties and conflicts were absolutely inevitable."<sup>26</sup> She also noted the effects of Hall's work in *Blackberry Winter*:

There was G. Stanley Hall, who had written a huge book on adolescence in which, equating stages of growth with stages of culture, he had discussed his belief that each

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<sup>25</sup> Margaret Mead, *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years* (New York: William Morrow and Co. Inc., 1972), p. 258.

<sup>26</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 4.

growing child recapitulated the history of the human race. [...] At that time puberty and adolescence were firmly equated in everyone's thinking.<sup>27</sup>

There are two significant statements in Mead's summation of Hall's arguments in this extract. Firstly, her use of the word "child" in the first sentence misrepresents Hall's belief to the extent that he only ever maintained that boys recapitulated the history of the human race. Mead here combines Hall's ideas with her own beliefs that girls too should experience the same period of growth and development. Although she does not specifically state this, the choice of the word "child" is specifically free of gender in a way that Hall's work did not imply. Her subtle and somewhat sly manipulation of his theories here are a vital part of her reconstruction of his concepts, which will be more fully explored as we examine her work. Secondly, the last statement regarding puberty and adolescence reveals the pervasive influence of the Hall's biological theories; adolescence as he conceived it was a biological stage of life and was seen to be linked to physical bodily changes. However, this is not to say that Hall's ideas were universally or uncritically accepted. He may have effectively shaped his society's understanding of adolescence, but Mead's mentor and professor, Franz Boas, questioned the biological determinism around which Hall had centered his concept.

Boas had taken his first teaching job under Hall's presidency at Clark University, but had left the university as a result of an academic dispute with Hall. Although appreciating the merits of Hall's work, Boas believed that adolescence was more culturally determined than Hall had suggested. It is generally thought that he discussed Hall's work with Mead, and that his desire to investigate Hall's theories in another culture influenced Mead's choice of subject matter in Samoa. Mead herself remembers:

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<sup>27</sup> Mead, *Blackberry Winter*, p. 139.

[Boas] wanted me to work on adolescence, on the adolescent girl, to test out, on the one hand, the extent to which the troubles of adolescence, called in German *Sturm und Drang* and *Weltschmerz*, depended upon the attitudes of a particular culture and, on the other hand, the extent to which they were inherent in the adolescent stage of bio-psychological development with all its discrepancies, uneven growth, and new impulses.<sup>28</sup>

As Boas set it, Mead's task was to evaluate Hall's theories in the field of another culture.

Although the challenge of biological determinism is emphasized in this passage, and was indeed at the forefront of Boas and Mead's discussions of the subject, Mead also seems to hint here at a challenge to Hall's gender-specificity. The necessity to suffix "adolescent" with "girl" alludes to the exclusion of young women from Hall's conception, and suggests that Mead's task as she saw it also included the challenge to remove gender limitations from the understanding of adolescence held by the educated public. Was adolescence as Hall conceived it a universal experience, or was it gender-specific, and endemic to overcivilization?

Thus by the time that Mead left for Samoa in 1925, she and Boas were responding not just to a scientific theory, but to a concept that was well established in American ideology. Where it was possible to allow the expression of freedom that Hall had promoted, American society of the early decades of the twentieth century had accepted the concept of adolescence as a lifestage, and was attempting to put Hall's suggestions into practice. It was becoming orthodox parenting in the white middle-classes to allow the younger generation increasing freedom to mature through individual evolutionary stages, although boys were more free than girls, who still came under much greater restrictions.. Adolescents were believed to be living the 'primitive' dream, divorced from responsibilities and the troubles of

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<sup>28</sup> Mead, *Blackberry Winter*, p. 127.

a modern lifestyle.

There were various shifts taking place at the beginning of the twentieth century that facilitated the introduction of an extended period of immaturity to America. Firstly, families were smaller, in all classes.<sup>29</sup> Middle-class families were particularly notable for their decrease in size:

One study of middle-class families found that for women born between 1846 and 1850, whose childbearing years ended in the 1890s, almost half of those with husbands in the professions or in business had two or less children. For a comparable group of wives born between 1866 and 1870 the small size of families was even more pronounced: in 1910, almost two-thirds had families of no more than two children.<sup>30</sup>

Although birth control methods were developing from the 1890s onwards, there was strong anti-birth control feeling and campaigning in the early part of the century, making to information on and access to birth control extremely difficult, yet “middle class couples were exhibiting extraordinary success in sharply curtailing the number of children they conceived.”<sup>31</sup> Fewer children in the family meant that more parental attention was given to each child. By the 1920s, children had almost become the primary focus of the family; more money was spent upon them, and more aspirations were held for their futures. Children were increasingly seen as subjects for the ever-popular psychology, and parenting became more complicated as psychological effects upon children became more widely known. As Pfister notes: “Modern moms were encouraged to go beyond sentimental advice to acquire

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<sup>29</sup> For example: “Among whites, annual birth per thousand of the population fell from approximately 55 in 1800 to 31 in 1890 and 25 in 1920. White fertility rates (the number of children born to an average woman during her entire span of childbearing years) declined at a similar pace, from 7 in 1800 to 3.9 in 1890 and 3.2 by 1920.” MacLeod, *The Age of the Child*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> D’Emilio & Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, p. 174.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

the vocabulary and ‘insights’ of the psychologist.”<sup>32</sup> Since childhood and parenting were envisaged as being more and more consequential for the future, the necessity for a longer period of youth and personal development was in accordance with other familial changes and theories already in practice.

World War I had also changed attitudes towards the behavior of the younger generations. In *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*, published only three years after Mead’s work, Frederick Lewis Allen suggested that the ‘eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die’ attitude fostered by the war was a primary influence which both precipitated and permitted youthful rebellion.

Changes in population distribution were also pivotal in assisting the institutionalization of adolescence throughout early twentieth-century society. Population statistics concerning distribution according to age groupings show that while in 1870 there were two persons between the ages of twenty-four and sixty-four for every one person between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, by 1930 there were three persons of the older age-group for every one of the younger.<sup>33</sup> With the economic boom, Gross National Product per capita had greatly increased while these changes were taking place: in 1900 dollars, GNP per capita stood at \$203 in 1890, \$246 in 1900, and \$320 in 1920.<sup>34</sup> Practically, this meant that there was less need for adolescents to take adult social and economic responsibilities; they were not needed in the workplace as they used to be. This shift in proportion and the continuing economic growth permitted white upper- and middle-class adolescents to be ‘irresponsible’ for longer.

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<sup>32</sup> Pfister, “Glamorizing the Psychological”, p. 182.

<sup>33</sup> See Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 58.

<sup>34</sup> See MacLeod, *The Age of the Child*, p. 6.

Such economic factors allowed the institutionalization of adolescence through the setting apart of schools and colleges as adolescent spaces, as Hall had envisioned. It was between 1890 and 1920 that public high schools began to fulfil the role they now occupy in adolescence. According to the US Commissioner of Education, enrolment approximately doubled every decade, during this period - reaching over two million students in high school by 1920.<sup>35</sup> Schools were vital in solidifying the period of adolescence as one ideologically set apart from modern adulthood. Although they primarily encouraged continued education, another mark of increased civilization, they also enabled youths maximum exposure to peer groups and provided numerous opportunities for adult/youth confrontation with teachers, thus allowing further coherence of the peers and the youth culture. Mead herself recognized the importance of the extension of formal education in developing, institutionalizing and sustaining the concept of adolescence. Answering in a 1973 interview, she stated that increased schooling was important because “the years of childhood stretched out until people came to include the years of adolescence as part of childhood, in the sense that adolescents were not expected to be self-sustaining and responsible.”<sup>36</sup>

Business corporations and the media were active in establishing the new phase of development, and were instrumental in supporting the emergence of youth culture:

The media in the 1920s not only recorded the [youth] ‘revolution’ but also helped create it. Advertisers interested in targeting consumers through sexual themes, motion pictures concentrating on passionate romance, and, above all, the newspapers and magazines publishing hundreds of articles about the ‘revolt of youth’ led most Americans to believe they were living through a major transformation.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> Rhoda Metraux (ed), *Margaret Mead: Some Personal Views* (London: Angus & Robertson Publishers, 1979), p. 57.

<sup>37</sup> Moran, *Teaching Sex*, p. 78.

This transformation that could be seen to have resulted from the institutionalization of Hall's adolescence was not always welcomed. Adolescence had primarily been accepted not only as an explanation of problems but also as offering ways to combat problems. Yet it seemed to also offer new difficulties of its own; the cure itself had created a new problem. As the youth culture of the adolescents grew and became more powerful, the 'primitive' behavior which Hall had encouraged as adolescent behavior was increasingly seen to threaten the stability of American morality. Whilst people were eager to avoid an epidemic of neurasthenia amongst the younger generations, they were also keen to avoid mass rebellion, and an invasion of Fitzgerald's flappers. Adolescents and their rebellions increasingly became the focus of media attention, and the young were often used as scapegoats upon which to place the blame for the less-favored societal changes:

Contemporaries often used youth to condemn or to praise the network of change they came to represent. The problem of youth was connected to changes in family nurture, education, sex roles, leisure habits, as well as social values and behavioral norms.<sup>38</sup>

Thus while Mead referred to adolescence in *Coming of Age in Samoa* as an "unsettled, disturbed status of youth," by 1925 adolescence was also seen as an unsettling and disturbing factor upon society as a whole.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Hall's work came under a new wave of important criticism in 1925. E. L. Thorndike, Charles H. Judd, and Irving King all published works accusing Hall of gross overstatement.<sup>40</sup> It is significant that Mead returns to Hall's work at this time, since the concept was once again at the forefront of academic and public discussions, and was frequently under attack. Her restatement of adolescence confronted

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<sup>38</sup> Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful*, p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> See Demos and Demos, "Adolescence in Historical Perspective", p. 636.

the criticisms of others and her own misgivings regarding Hall's work to wrestle adolescence from the biological and male domains in which Hall had originally placed the concept.

Mead stated in her introduction to *Coming of Age in Samoa* that her aims were to discover whether Hall was right in asserting that adolescence was a biologically determined period of maturation, or whether it was rather a culturally determined concept, typical to America and other Western civilizations: "Were these difficulties due to being adolescent or to be being adolescent in America?"<sup>41</sup> In order to answer this question she drew explicit contrasts between Samoa and America, and making her the first American anthropologist to use fields both home and away together in the same work. There are important aspects to these contrasts that show how Mead intended to modify the discourse of adolescence in order to both sanction and effect certain changes in the late 1920s. The other issue that Mead addresses, although it is not proposed as a key topic in such a clear manner, is that of the gendering of adolescence. Mead's subjects are exclusively female. While she states that this is due to an ease of approach and investigation given her own gender, her proposition of girls as the sole focus of research is significant, since girls were previously excluded from any such discussion of adolescence. Mead's work does not discredit Hall's completely. Instead she uses concrete examples from Samoa in direct contrast with examples of American life to build upon Hall's foundations and re-modernize Hall's concept.

If we return to two of Torgovnick's primary tropes of primitivity - simplicity and freedom - we can begin to see exactly how Mead develops upon Hall's work to propose her own understandings. Simplicity and freedom had been the predominant aspects of the primitivity presented by Hall as the adolescent ideal; they were similarly the predominant

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<sup>41</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 7.

aspects of the primitivity presented by Mead in *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Mead draws upon them to outline the most important contrast between American and Samoan adolescence.

The primary contrast is that Samoan adolescence is free of the *sturm und drang* believed to characterize the American concept of the same period of life. Mead considered that her study proved that: “adolescence is not necessarily a specially difficult period in a girl’s life” as she outlines her conclusions towards the end of her work. After all, in Samoa, “this is the best period of her life” for “it is better to live as a girl with no responsibility, and a rich variety of emotional experience.”<sup>42</sup> One of the first conclusions we can make from these statements is that Mead unequivocally considers that girls are included in the concept of adolescence, and that therefore the period of freedom advocated by Hall for growing boys should not be denied to them. Freedom, the living of life without responsibility and stress, is seen here to be the ultimate source of a happy life. Thus in Samoa, everything is smiles and laughter; the adolescents, here the growing girls, seem to remain untroubled children, the terms even bracketed together for further emphasis:

When these *adolescent children* gather together there is a good-natured banter, a minimum of embarrassment, a great deal of random teasing which usually takes the form of accusing some little girl of a consuming passion for a decrepit old man of eighty. [my emphasis]<sup>43</sup>

Ultimately, Mead characterizes Samoan adolescence as being in direct contrast to that experienced by middle-class American youths, centering her argument around the tropes of simplicity and freedom:

Adolescence represented no period of crisis and stress, but was instead an orderly developing of a set of slowly maturing interests and activities. The girls’ minds were

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 197, 38.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

perplexed by no conflicts, troubled by no philosophical queries, beset by no remote ambitions.<sup>44</sup>

The Samoan girls experience adolescence as the period of gradual maturation that Hall had envisaged for America. Their happiness and stability arises from the fact that they are not required to assume adulthood before they are ready to, that they do not “grow up to find a world of choices dazzling their unaccustomed eyes”<sup>45</sup> as do their counterparts in America. Mead discovers in the Samoans the actual ‘primitive’ correlative to Hall’s ideal adolescent. Yet, just as Hall stressed the ultimate superiority of American civilization through the very necessity of a prolonged period of childhood in order to reach the higher psychological complexity that American adulthood demanded, so Mead subtly reiterates the benefits resulting from the “world of choices” while at the same time promoting the need for a greater freedom for the primitive phase of life that Hall had outlined.

Thus in Samoa Mead found an ideal center for developing and enlarging Hall’s arguments and concepts. Her familiarity with *Adolescence* meant that she was not introducing an argument that was completely new, merely reformulating the statements, drawing it away from the biological and into the cultural arena. Whereas Hall may have encouraged boys to wear feathers and brandish tomahawks to express their savagery, Mead dressed herself and encouraged others to dress fully in the Samoan style, as we have seen. In her arguments this complete embrace of the Samoan way of life was demonstrated by an open-mindedness to primitivity in areas of life that Hall would not have included in his permitted savage behaviour. Perhaps the most important area of contrast that Mead confronted, particularly given that her subjects of focus were adolescent girls, was that of sexuality. She used the key area of sex as a romanticized example of the primitive freedom that was lacking from the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

freedom granted to American adolescents in the 1920s.

## CHAPTER III

### SAMOAN SEXUALITY: COMING OF AGE WITH FREEDOM

Sex was the primary focus of contrast not between the adolescents in America and Samoa, but between the adult and youth cultures in America. The similarity of American adolescents to Samoan adolescents in their attitudes towards sex in particular was what was troubling to traditionalists in American society. This direct linking of youth and primitivity was even suggested in an *Atlantic* editorial in 1922: “The old and the young [are] as far apart in point of view, code, and standard, as if they belonged to different races.”<sup>46</sup> The dating and social events partaken by college youths were seen to be ‘primitive’ in a negative sense, unsuitable for ‘civilized’ youths. By the mid-1920s it was clear that petting, and premarital sex were no longer only practiced by ‘juvenile delinquents’ of the lower classes; ‘nice’ girls from white middle-class families were also involved. Increasingly, “the young were enunciating an ideal of sex as a private matter to be determined by personal needs rather than moral prescriptions.”<sup>47</sup> In America relaxed attitudes towards sexual experimentation were seen by some to be out of control, and a direct influence upon further moral degradation, that could lead to a collapse of ordered society.

The permeation of Freudian thinking regarding sexuality throughout the American

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<sup>46</sup> *Atlantic*, vol. 130, (1922) cited Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful*, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful*, p. 278.

lay public had, to a certain extent, resulted in a shifting of thinking towards greater liberation. As D'Emilio and Freedman state: "Americans absorbed a version of Freudianism that presented the sexual impulse as an insistent force demanding expression."<sup>48</sup> Sexuality was part of the inner self that had been repressed and now needed to be released, within certain boundaries, in order to maintain a healthy state of mind as an individual. One of these boundaries was adulthood; sexual freedom was not intellectually incorporated into the primitive period of adolescence. Yet Mead's presentation of Samoan adolescence actively attempted to sanction sexual experimentation during this time, particularly by making such behavior intellectually acceptable to the middle-class parents of American adolescents by involving it in the redemptive anthropological concept of the 'primitive'. Mead effectively connected the primal sexual inner being of Freudian thinking to the need for freedom from social restraint of Hall's *Adolescence* in order to make adolescent sexual experimentation both necessary and safe. In Samoa such experimentation was seen to be natural; the repression of natural impulses could only lead to psychological disorders. Mead's presentation of Samoan adolescents' sexual practices actively sanctioned sexual experimentation during Hall's set-aside period of youth. Her presentation of the Samoan girls was vital to this liberation from social mores.

As with their attitudes to other issues, Samoan attitudes to sex were seen to be far more relaxed than American attitudes. Mead stated that Samoans view sex as "harmless."<sup>49</sup> This is primarily because she believed that it was viewed in far more simplistic terms in Samoa than in America. The 'simpler' emotional capability of the Samoans suggested by Mead meant that sex was divorced from complex romantic involvement and dependent

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<sup>48</sup> D'Emilio & Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, p. 223.

<sup>49</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 104.

emotional relationships:

From the Samoans' complete knowledge of sex, its possibilities and rewards, they are able to count it at its true value. [...] the Samoan girl who shrugs her shoulder over the excellent technique of some young Lothario is nearer to the recognition of sex as an impersonal force without any intrinsic validity, than is the sheltered American girl who falls in love with the first man who kisses her.<sup>50</sup>

In Mead's formulation, sex is viewed as a natural physical function, thus there is "no sense of shame" attached to it, and "the concept of celibacy is absolutely meaningless." Thus sex is socially acceptable and publicly recognized and discussed when it occurs outside of marriage as well as within it. Mead writes that "besides marriage there are types of sex relations which receive formal recognition from the community." Although there are restrictions upon sexual experience, the restrictions are wide enough to include experimentation "between unmarried young people."<sup>51</sup> Although marriage was favored as the ideal relationship in which to enjoy sexual intimacy, sex was still accepted as part of adolescent relationships, either through clandestine encounters or ceremonious courtship.

Sexual appetite comes naturally with other biological changes of puberty and thus during the period of adolescence studied by Mead, "free and easy [sexual] experimentation" is seen as part of the maturing process, and is "complacently ignore[d]" by parents.<sup>52</sup> In this community-based culture, elopement, the rejection of family and community for a spousal relationship, is considered as far more of an aberration than pre-marital sex, since "there is a definite feeling that the whole community procedure has been outraged by a pair of young upstarts."<sup>53</sup>

Thus Samoan adolescents were not encouraged to regard sex as a taboo, or therefore

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 96, 69, 63.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 102, 69, 70.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 73

as a means of rebellion, since “the adult attitude towards all the details of sex is characterized by this view that they are unseemly, not that they are wrong.” Samoan children grow up free from sexual and other inhibitions: “in matters of sex the ten year olds are equally sophisticated.”<sup>54</sup> Free from viewing sexuality as necessitating the restraint of otherwise natural impulses, the Samoan adolescents are encouraged to explore their sexuality in order to prepare themselves for adult relationships. Sexual experimentation is thus part of growing up, and is undertaken by the childlike and innocent.

Mead highlights a sense of childish experimentation throughout her work, but particularly emphasizes it in her discussion of sexual practice. She removes the danger and threat of primitive sexuality by emphasising the youthfulness of the sexual Samoan adolescents, and also by continuing this sense of youthfulness in her presentation of Samoan adults; their sexual acts are therefore ‘natural’ rather than deviant. Thus youthful sexual experimentation, itself the expression of a childlike curiosity, is what differentiates Samoans from Americans, and what makes their behavior so attractive. This could, however, be applied directly to the situation in America: “The present problem of the sex experimentation of young people would be greatly simplified if it were conceived of as experimentation instead of as rebellion.”<sup>55</sup> As part of her argument that American adolescents should be allowed to “experiment” in order to make a healthy transition into American adulthood, Mead consistently showed that Samoan sexuality was harmless by drawing parallels between childhood and primitivity, just as Hall had when he had originally conceived of adolescence as recapitulation. Mead refers to sex more than once as ‘play’: “Play includes dancing, singing, games, weaving necklaces of flowers, flirting, repartee, all

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 136, 134.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

forms of sex activity.” Here sex as a leisure activity is on a par with innocent necklace weaving. She also states that “homosexual practices [...] are simply *play*.”<sup>56</sup> Masturbation is seen as an innocent pastime for young boys, who “masturbate in groups,” while groups of women frequently “romp,” “playfully snatching at the sex organs.” Seeing others, including elders, involved in sexual activity is also considered as a game rather than as an embarrassing or scarring encounter for children: “scouring the village palm groves in search of lovers is one of the recognized forms of amusement for the ten-year-olds.”<sup>57</sup> It is interesting to note that this discourse of “playing” at mature relationships through sexual experimentation was also employed in the popular manuals and pamphlets of the sex educator Max Exner. In *The Question of Petting*, a widely reprinted 1926 pamphlet, Exner unequivocally stated that: “Petting is play at love.”<sup>58</sup> Mead used Samoans as a case to show that in petting, or playing at love, adolescents are following Hall’s theories, living through a stage of primitivity as they progress through the evolutionary patterns towards complex civilized adulthood.

Yet just as children grow out of infantile games, so Samoan adolescents mature beyond the need for sexual experimentation, as Mead is explicit in stating: “the first preoccupation with sex experimentation has worn itself out and she settles down to increase her value as a wife.”<sup>59</sup> Mead thus shows that granting adolescents freedom to experiment sexually does not automatically result in promiscuous adults with no respect for the institution of marriage and an irrepressible sexual appetite. Moreover, she argues, despite the opportunity for sexual freedom, Samoan youths imposed their own taboos and

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 158, 149.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>58</sup> Cited Moran, *Teaching Sex*, p. 91.

<sup>59</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 128

institutionalized limits among themselves and that consequently there is a “lack of precocious sex experimentation.”<sup>60</sup> This indicated that some freedom did not lead to a full rejection of all standards that had hitherto formed the accepted moral code. Equally, 1920s American youths replaced standards rather than completely dispensing with them, as Paula Fass’ study of American youth during this period, suggests: “in ritualizing a process of personal and cultural experimentation, the youth of the twenties had also placed bounds on individual expression and behavior quite as real and determinate as those which ruled in the heyday of Victorian morals.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the attitudes towards virginity held by youths interviewed in the 1920s and Mead’s Samoan subjects would seem to be the same. If, in America, although “virginity in a bride was no longer an absolute prerequisite for most men, it was still considered desirable,”<sup>62</sup> in Mead’s Samoa “virginity definitely adds to a girl’s attractiveness.”<sup>63</sup>

The 1920s were an important time in the history of American sexuality, because more liberal attitudes towards sexual experimentation were brought into the public forum in the middle-classes. Whereas previously sexual experimentation was believed to be a pursuit of the lower-classes, blacks, or the upper- and middle-class men who visited red-light districts for their own amusement, the 1920s saw a more widespread tendency to allow greater freedom throughout the expanding middle-class.

In general, American society was moving by the 1920s towards a view of erotic expression that can be defined as sexual liberalism - an overlapping set of beliefs that detached sexual activity from the instrumental goal of procreation, affirmed

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>61</sup> Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful*, p. 272.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>63</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 98.

heterosexual pleasure as a value in itself, defined sexual satisfaction as a critical component of personal happiness and successful marriage, and weakened the connections between sexual expression and marriage by providing youth with room for some experimentation as preparation for adult status.<sup>64</sup>

This is the American society to which Mead was presenting her alternative adolescence through the group of Samoan girls who had always lived by such standards of freedom. In doing so she was continuing to challenge the boundaries that were being established and re-established. Her focus upon girls rather than boys was, of course, integral to this challenge.

The Samoan girls upon whom Mead focused are not judged by sex, or their premarital sexual experience, but through their attitudes to life and work: “A girl’s chances of marriage are badly damaged if it gets about the village that she is lazy and inept in domestic tasks.” Mead reiterates this fact with the detailed example of Fala, Tolu, and Namu, three girls who “made common rendezvous with their lovers and [whose] liaisons were frequent and gay.” She shows that “all three of these girls worked hard, doing the full quota of work for an adult” and that therefore “they were valuable economic assets to their families; they would be valuable to the husbands whom their families were not over anxious to find for them.”<sup>65</sup> Thus sexuality does not prevent Samoans from growing into responsible adults who work hard and embody positive values of their culture. Whereas Hall had conveniently excluded sexuality from his construct of adolescence, Mead uses the period of sexual experimentation of the adolescent Samoans to include sexuality in her construct, which is also in accordance with the primitive sexuality featured in the Freudian psychological ideas of the deeper self.

As the examples of Freud and Exner reveal, there was already a discourse of

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<sup>64</sup> D’Emilio & Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, p. 241.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 105, 106.

sexuality into which Mead entered with *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Michel Foucault has since shown how important this discourse is to matters of culture and identity. Foucault's thinking is of utmost importance to understanding the significance of Mead's use of this discourse of sexuality to reinterpret and restructure Hall's concept of adolescence. As has been seen, the thinking of Mead's contemporaries maintained that the psychological sexual self was a vital part of the primal inner self that psychology and psychoanalysis aimed to recover. Foucault suggested that sex is integral to identity because "we demand that [sex] tell us our truth, or rather the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness."<sup>66</sup> Bourgeois society of the late nineteenth century was preoccupied with the creation of a discourse that would "formulate the uniform truth of sex," by presenting sexuality as something that was universal, deeply personal, and inherent within each individual.<sup>67</sup> Like primitivity, sexuality was buried in our inner selves and integral to who we are. The discourse of sexuality was thus a discourse of the truth of identity:

The most important elements of an erotic art linked to our knowledge about sexuality are not to be sought in the ideal, promised to us by medicine, of a healthy sexuality, [...] but in this multiplication and intensification of pleasures connected to the production of truth about sex. The learned volumes, written and read; [...] in short, the formidable "pleasure of analysis" (in the widest sense of the latter term) which the West has cleverly been fostering for several centuries: all this constitutes something like the errant fragments of an erotic art that is secretly transmitted by confession and the science of sex.<sup>68</sup>

Foucault was fascinated in this enormous shaping and pervasive power of the discourse of sexuality, and was intrigued by what it is that makes sex so important to us and

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<sup>66</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction* (1976, transl. Robert Hurley, 1978, repr. New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 69.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

makes us talk about it all the time. He traced Western history through Roman and early Christian roots in order to examine where and why this power originated. Rather than considering the rights and wrongs of morality surrounding sexual practice *per se*, he examined what he termed the *dispositif* (or apparatus) of the network of discourses, institutions, scientific statements and laws determining our understanding of sex as a controlling power. Foucault identified two major discourses which he recognised as the *ars erotica* and the *scientia sexualis*. The first was seen to be that maintained in Eastern cultures, where the truth demanded from sex was extracted from the pleasure of the practice itself. Pleasure is the focus of sex and the highest goal attained from it. In Western cultures however, Foucault identified the *scientia sexualis* in which we talk about sex as part of a quest for higher knowledge, of the key to individual physical and mental health and social well-being; the primary focus is analysis, not pleasure. Whereas *ars erotica* cultures may talk about sex to intensify pleasure, which is the end in itself, *scientia sexualis* cultures use any pleasure in the practice as a means to the end of attaining knowledge of the deepest self.

The promise of knowing the deepest self through analysis of sexuality, primarily through forms of the confessional, is so appealing the little attention is paid to the subsequent enmeshing in relations of power through the discourse. Foucault noted that from the eighteenth century sex became administrative in Western cultures through such means as population control and monitoring statistics; sex became a matter of interest and knowledge for the state as well as the individual. Nineteenth-century scientific developments also allowed the entry of the medical profession and the twentieth century saw the entry of psychological and pseudo-sciences into the discourses, all of which required and necessitated more confession and analysis, even in perceived times of sexual repression. Foucault maintained that confession, in order to know oneself, was the central component

in the expanding technologies for discipline and the control of bodies, populations, and society. Since even in periods of supposed repression, the discussion and analysis of any sexual urge or practice was still very much practiced and encouraged, increased interest by more fields of expertise and learning allowed greater external influence and control as a result of greater discussion.

Mead's comparisons of the sexual practices and attitudes to the discussions of sexual practices very much bear out Foucault's two dimensions. The Samoan view of sexual experimentation as a learning process to reach a sort of sexual maturity would suggest that Samoa could be identified as having tendencies to an *ars erotica* culture, whereas the complex moral mores and academic and religious discussions surrounding American adolescent experimentation would certainly support his theories of the controlling *dispositif* of sexuality in the *scientia sexualis* cultures of the West.

Just as Foucault illustrated that sexuality was constructed through discourse to "tell our truth," so primitivity, because of its simplicity, also attained this truth-telling status. As the representatives of a basic and essential humanity, untainted by the negative trappings of civilization, 'primitive' people were seen to hold the key to a simple paradise. In *Coming of Age in Samoa* Mead effectively unites these two truth-tellers in her discussion of adolescence. The simplicity of Samoan primitivity means that sex does not come under theories of morality or absolutes of right and wrong, and thus attitudes are freer and healthier according to the Freudian construct of aligning mental health with a healthy sex life. For young Americans to fully benefit from the period of adolescence as a phase of freedom, 'primitive' childlike sexuality must be included, and viewed as both primitive and childlike, rather than as deviant. By experimenting sexually as part of their evolutionary maturation, Mead argues, American adolescents can enter adulthood free from psychologically tormenting repression,

and be fully civilized adults with healthy relationships.

However, in justifying her statements, Mead did not rely only upon simple and free tropes of primitivity. Since her primary focus in Samoa was the adolescent girl, the exotic was also essential, since girls themselves were stereotypically the visual embodiment of exotic and sensual external primitivity. Mead had carefully developed her arguments to make it possible for it to be socially acceptable for her theories on adolescent sexual freedom to be applied to adolescent American girls. This may not have been possible but for a few fundamental shifts in thinking about both women and the exotic at this time that meant that Mead's thinking could be considered as a serious academic and moral proposition.

## CHAPTER IV

### EXOTIC GIRLS

For the exotic was a fundamental trope of primitivity at this time. It was key when discussing sexuality, primarily because exotic sexuality provided such a stark contrast to the previous orthodox Victorian morality. Non-Western women were the quintessential representatives of this exotic primitivity. There was something dangerous and exciting, and therefore sexy, about their absolute otherness through gender, race, simplicity and relationship to unspoilt nature. Therapeutic psychology and psychoanalysis had begun to allow some upper- and middle-class American women access to primitivity, and thus to this exotic sexuality of primitive womanhood. The Victorian ideal of the 'angel in the house,' the figure who maintained the domestic sphere, making it a comforting haven for the self-made man while simultaneously raising the next generation of self-made men, had been transformed greatly by the changing attitudes of the twentieth century, particularly those regarding sexuality.

Yet the role of women in preserving a sense of stability in the nineteenth century led to highly charged reactions to these changes. Women had gained the vote in 1920, and between 1910 and 1920 the number of women entering college doubled. The new 'sexualized' femininity encouraged women to exploit their sexual identity, particularly through the use of cosmetics, and this sexual identity presumably gave women a certain power over men, who were often seen as unable to resist the exotic sexual undertones the new fashions carried.

Perhaps what was most threatening to men about the sexualization of femininity was that it allowed women to be as primitive as men. The primitive self was no longer restricted to the men who had profited from the joint constructions of civilized manliness and primitive masculinity in order to alleviate the traumas of modernity. Pfister suggests that women were actively targeted by those who sought to glamorize psychoanalysis, and often posited as neurotic and therefore in need of therapy. But along with this came the assertion that women too had an inner, primitive self; this assertion challenged all preconceptions of the sentimental, angelic woman who had maintained stability for both men and families.

Yet as they became more and more like Hemingway's Lady Brett from *The Sun Also Rises*, single women were placed under the media spotlight:

Whether their behavior was deplored as representing the end of American civilization or celebrated as a new beginning, not only sexuality but freedom from social and sexual constraints and autonomy of sexual choice were central characteristics in the portraits of 1920s 'bachelor girls' painted by their contemporaries. Traditional morality was overthrown and single young girls were seen as the principal agents of its demise.<sup>69</sup>

The sexuality of young women was both condemned and welcomed; as Moran suggests, it was generally "agreed that the most unsettling (and titillating) trend unleashed by the First World War was the desire for sexual freedom among young women - or, rather, among young middle-class women."<sup>70</sup> Although exotic feminine primitive sexuality had long been attractive to middle-class males, they did not want to see their daughters and sisters embodying such sexuality. While the sexual experimentation of adolescent boys had been overlooked, or justified as part of their 'primitive masculinity,' there was great reticence regarding the application of similar attitudes to girls.

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<sup>69</sup> Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, p. 91.

<sup>70</sup> Moran, *Teaching Sex*, p. 81.

As we have seen, girls had been excluded from Hall's *Adolescence* in 1904. Hall had always justified his focus on boys by arguing that: "girls take far more kindly than boys to societies organized by adults for their benefit" and that "boys are nearer to primitive man" than girls.<sup>71</sup> As a result of Hall's exclusion, girls were generally thought not to go through adolescence; it was felt that his theories were not applicable to their situation, since the two sexes were ultimately being prepared for different future roles. Thus despite Joseph F. Kett's claim that since teenage girls were written about in both fictional and psychological literature in the period from 1840 until 1900, "in a sense, girls were the first adolescents,"<sup>72</sup> girls had never been encouraged to explore the same 'primitive' freedoms as boys during their childhood or adolescence.

Yet as we have seen, Mead's study of adolescence in Samoa focuses nearly exclusively upon girls. While it would have been easier for her as a woman to have access to the females in society, and while Boas encouraged and was interested in this specialization of interest because male anthropologists were usually prevented by the girls' kin to study adolescent girls, ultimately Mead's concentration upon the Samoan adolescent girls had a more socially pervasive effect than offering a new anthropological subject of study. Mead's work applied an established discourse to the previously undiscussed realm of female sexuality and youth, attempting to create a more complex identity for adolescent girls.

Although fundamentally, as Michael S. Kimmel argues, the "cross cultural research" of Mead and others "suggests that gender and sexuality are far more fluid, far more variable, than biological models would have predicted," Mead's work seems more concerned with

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<sup>71</sup> Hall, "Adolescence and the Growth of Social Ideals", p. 38.

<sup>72</sup> Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1977), p. 137.

validating the shifting constructs of gender than in presenting a new Samoan alternative to femininity.<sup>73</sup> In Samoa, girls were seen to be subject to the same sexual instincts as boys, and lived accordingly, enjoying the freedom to experiment: for the older girls of sixteen and seventeen “relationships and similar sex interests are now the deciding factors in friendships.”<sup>74</sup> During adolescence in Samoa, girls’ behavior as well as boys’ is treated according to “the attitude that minor sex activities, suggestive dancing, stimulating salacious conversation, salacious songs, and definitely motivated tussling are all acceptable and attractive diversions.” Mead states that in Samoa girls are even granted a longer period of adolescent sexual experimentation: “[Samoans believe] that women need more initiating, more time for the maturing of sex feeling.” There was indeed a specific period of sexual freedom, but this did not prevent the Samoan girls from entering successful marriages and raising families once they had matured: “To live as a girl with many lovers as long as possible and then to marry in one’s own village, near one’s own relatives, and to have many children, these were uniform and satisfying ambitions.”<sup>75</sup> These ambitions, as Mead described them, were not so alien to young women of America; a study carried out in Ivy League colleges in the late 1920s showed that ninety-four percent of female students would sacrifice education and a career for marriage.<sup>76</sup> The ‘primitive’ created and displayed by Mead showed that within the Samoan construct of femininity, the move from freedom and experimentation with many lovers to maintaining a home and family was entirely possible, or as Pfister states:

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<sup>73</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *The Gendered Society Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 37.

<sup>74</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 67.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149, 157.

<sup>76</sup> See Fass, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, p. 82.

“Angels with instincts can still be angels.”<sup>77</sup> There therefore seems to be an underlying suggestion that sexualized ‘primitive’ femininity did not prohibit sentimental ‘civilized’ femininity, and that it was possible for modern girls to develop through adolescence to embody both. Mead’s explication of the lives of the Samoan girls in their journey through adolescence and sexual experimentation to adult- and motherhood to the colleges and families of middle-America’s upcoming sweethearts was radical. It is impossible to consider Mead’s work in this way without taking into account the effects of her bold studies and statements.

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<sup>77</sup> Pfister, “Glamorizing the Psychological”, p. 192.

CHAPTER V  
SAMOAN SOLUTION: THE IMPLICATIONS OF  
MEAD'S CROSS-CULTURAL DRESSING

Mead's intention to prove that adolescence was culturally rather than biologically determined has led to accusations of untrustworthy methodology and data. Derek Freeman famously attacked Mead's work, raising important issues concerning how Mead shaped her discoveries for the audience she intended to reach.<sup>78</sup> Freeman included Mead's work on sexual freedom in Samoa as part of his criticism. He suggested that in the 1920s, while Mead was researching, adultery was featured in the Samoan legal code as "an offense for which those guilty 'shall be fined not more than one hundred dollars, or imprisoned not more than twelve months, or both.'"<sup>79</sup> He thus suggested that Mead's desire to justify greater sexual freedom in Western culture had tempered her perception of Samoan attitudes. Whether or not Freeman's accusations are completely justified, and whether or not Mead tailored certain data, it is clear that Mead was using Samoa within the discourses discussed above according to a specific agenda. The consequences of this use and the consequences of this agenda are important to consider if we are to evaluate the significance and effect of her work.

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<sup>78</sup> See Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

<sup>79</sup> Derek Freeman, cited Jones, *Degenerate Moderns*, p. 27.

As has been seen, Mead presents the Samoan primitivity as a “solution” to the problems of adolescence, centering her argument around issues of repression, particularly sexual repression. Her encouragement that adolescents should be allowed to partake in “sex experimentation” is also applicable to her own life; the Samoan liberation with regards to sex can be seen as a justification for her own choices during this time. Mead had herself become secretly engaged to Luther Cresswell at the age of sixteen, and was married to him before leaving for Samoa. Upon her return journey in 1925 however, she spent much time with another anthropologist, Reo Fortune, with whom she began an affair. She and Cresswell were soon divorced, and Fortune became Mead’s second husband. Placed into this personal context, the following statements concerning the Samoan lifestyle seem strangely appropriate: “Romantic love as it occurs in our civilization, inextricably bound up with ideas of monogamy, exclusiveness, jealousy, and undeviating fidelity does not occur in Samoa.”<sup>80</sup> Without suggesting that Mead was using her work as a purely personal justification, it does seem that she believed that American attitudes regarding relationships and sex were changing, that they should change, and that Samoa could be used to support these changes by providing a contrast to American tradition.

While not supporting Freeman’s claims, Torgovnick’s work seems to suggest that the accuracy of a representation of a culture, particularly when in contrast with another culture, must be attended to with care. The problem with presenting a culture for comparison is that it can lead to a false sense of unity within both cultures: “The ‘we’ is necessary to expose a shared illusion: the illusion of a representative primitive ‘them’ as opposed to a monolithic,

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<sup>80</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 105.

unified, powerful ‘us.’”<sup>81</sup> In order to express difference, there is thus a creation of distance, which can frequently result in the use of typicalities, tropes, and antitheses. While the cultural differences certainly exist, anthropologists are always faced with the difficulty of representing them in such a way that they can be both appreciated as foreign and yet understood by a foreign audience. Anthropologists are also often distanced from the culture of which they are writing by virtue of being foreign themselves. Mead remembers being treated like a “visiting young princess” during her time in Samoa.<sup>82</sup> Her letters written in Samoa are particularly telling as to her distance from her objects of study, as the following examples demonstrate:

Last Thursday I went on my first *malaga* - journey - to my first feast, given by the girls’ boarding school of the London Missionary Society. We were taken in cars, obligingly provided by the Naval Station.<sup>83</sup>

I can eat native food; but I can’t live on it for six months; it is too starchy [...] I can be in and out of the native homes from early in the morning until later at night and still have a bed to sleep on and wholesome food. The food will be much better than the hotel food because the Navy people have canteen privileges.<sup>84</sup>

Such problems of status, positioning, and access to another culture are always attendant for the ethnographer.

Yet despite these problems, it is significant that Mead uses Samoan primitivity in direct contrast with American civilization, since she suggests that the primitive can teach the civilized a way of life. Avoiding using the terms ‘primitive’ and ‘civilized’ in her work, Mead begins to attack the premises of racial hierarchy that she would continue to attack

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<sup>81</sup> Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> Mead, *Blackberry Winter*, p. 153.

<sup>83</sup> Margaret Mead, *Letters From the Field 1925-1975* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), September 27 1925, p. 26.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, October 13, 1925, p. 28.

throughout her career by working according to principles of cultural relativism: difference rather than superiority. During the 1920s, theories of social evolution and biological determinism were widely accepted by scholars. Henry Fairfield Osborn, president of the American Museum of Natural History (for which Mead worked) from 1908 until 1922, celebrated human progress with a display documenting the rise of civilization, the pinnacle of which was European and Euro-American civilization. He “went beyond pious hopes and constructed a Hall of the Age of Man to make the moral lessons of racial hierarchy and progress explicit, lest they be missed in gazing at elephants.”<sup>85</sup> Such supremacist attitudes were not uncommon in academia, and biological determinism was often used to justify inherently racist attitudes to other cultures. Boas and his students were firmly anti-determinist, favoring theories of cultural relativism. Mead is explicit in her rejection of biological determinism as she remembers leaving for Samoa in *Blackberry Winter*:

We went to the field not to look for earlier forms of human life, but for those that were different from those known to us [...] we did not make the mistake of thinking, as Freud, for example, was misled into thinking, that the primitive peoples living on remote atolls, in desert places, in the depths of the jungles, or in the Arctic north, were equivalent to our ancestors.<sup>86</sup>

Such a cultural relativist stance against social evolution tried to counteract other prominent academic thinking, and to propagate an understanding of cultural difference that did not advocate white, or Anglo-American, supremacy, particularly considering the rise of fascism in Europe and the problems that had arisen earlier in the century with the entrance of phenomenally high numbers of immigrants into America. Mead’s suggestion that not only

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<sup>85</sup> Donna Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936” in Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (eds) *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 49-87, p. 85.

<sup>86</sup> Mead, *Blackberry Winter*, p. 41.

were the Samoans not inferior to Americans, but that their culture could be used to help American culture was therefore radical and a made a major political statement.

Yet ultimately she suggested that the Americans could examine Samoan culture and choose which parts of it to adopt as their own in order to solve certain American problems, even later stating that the primitive can be used as alternative therapy:

I have never been psychoanalyzed. The close study of primitive peoples is another way of arriving at insight.<sup>87</sup>

The trope of simplicity pervades Mead's solution, but in reality is this 'pick-n-mix' cultural assimilation such an easy remedy for the problems of modernity? Mead is explicit in stating that the prime value of her study of Samoa is to answer questions and provide solutions for Americans.<sup>88</sup> This suggests that the primitive has no intrinsic value; it is only valuable when it can be used to benefit another culture, in this case America. Di Leonardo refers to this anthropological attitude to the primitive as "the correct rape of the other for treasure/knowledge."<sup>89</sup> Freeman has stated that Mead ignored all traces of colonialism that were in fact prominent in Samoan life in order to maintain the simplicity she required to tailor her primitive to her audience and her purposes. Di Leonardo however explores the very link between the colonizer and the anthropologist. This is a link which Deborah Gordon lays out in full: "anthropology's very existence as a profession was complexly linked to colonialism, yet the pose of ethnographers was as if they were the first Westerners to encounter the colonies."<sup>90</sup> This link has long troubled the discipline of anthropology and haunted anthropologists who seek to break it.

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<sup>87</sup> Metraux, *Margaret Mead: Some Personal Views*, p. 215.

<sup>88</sup> See Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> Di Leonardo, *Exotics at Home*, p. 38.

<sup>90</sup> Deborah Gordon, "The Politics of Ethnographic Authority: Race and Writing in the Ethnography of Margaret Mead and Zora Neale Hurston" in Marc Manganaro (ed) *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 146-162, p. 153.

Mead, in 1928, exploited what Renato Rosaldo terms “imperialist nostalgia.”<sup>91</sup> This concept is intended to cover a longing for what used to be, the very civilized desire for the primitive that was propagated by American modernity. It is a nostalgia that arises from a privileged dissatisfaction however, and one that, although realizing that simplicity is not necessarily congruent with intrinsic inferiority, still maintains the underlying opinion that the primitive is only valuable when it can serve the ends of the civilized. Mead’s conscious effort to present a simple, safe primitivity led to the exclusion of the colonial reality. She was aided in her 1925 visit to Samoa by the U.S. Navy, and then publicly supported the Navy methods of rule in American Samoa.<sup>92</sup> Her ethnography, utilizing the anthropological tropes of the exotic and the simple to the extreme, is firmly apolitical with regards to the American presence in Samoa and seems to avoid any questions of whether or not the presentation of a simplified culture in order to meet American needs is, in fact, ethical.

These are questions that di Leonardo considers in detail:

The noble savage is a character in the drama of the Fall, and while ‘we’ strut on that stage as post-Adamic seekers, we can find our redemption through antimodernist engagement with the not-yet-fallen. There is no role, save that of the Devil, for the desperate, ‘inauthentic’ world’s poor caught as pawns in the internationalization of capital and labor.<sup>93</sup>

It is interesting to note that in her autobiography, as Mead remembers how she used to organize her younger brother and sisters, she describes herself as “a kind of stage manager at family festivals,” using exactly the stage metaphor that di Leonardo employs to refer to the

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<sup>91</sup> Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 68.

<sup>92</sup> See Angela Gilliam and Leonora Foerstel, “Margaret Mead’s Contradictory Legacy” in Leonora Foerstel and Angela Gilliam (eds), *Confronting the Margaret Mead Legacy: Scholarship, Empire, and the South Pacific* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 101-156, p. 119.

<sup>93</sup> Di Leonardo, *Exotics at Home*, p. 36.

practice of anthropology.<sup>94</sup> When we consider *Coming of Age in Samoa*, it is easy to see how Mead continues her role as “stage manager,” creating a Samoan stage upon which to organize her characters. In di Leonardo’s drama she can also be seen to assume a role on the stage, as the voice of the voiceless ‘noble savage.’ “A Day in Samoa,” for example, is all-encompassing; this view promotes Mead as having the ability to be somehow omniscient. Chapters III through XII are written very much in the style of the classic anthropological monograph, through the voice of a detached observer who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the community and the culture. The primitives never speak for themselves. The Samoans are assimilated into the authoritative voice of Mead the anthropologist just as she suggests their freedom and simplicity can be assimilated into American life. Like di Leonardo, Torgovnick is suspicious of such assimilations:

The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. It is our ventriloquist’s dummy - or so we like to think.<sup>95</sup>

Although Mead, Americans, Westerners, may like to believe in the essential simplicity of the primitive, and therefore its adaptability to the situations for which we would like to interpret it, this simplicity is in fact a trope we have created. By reiterating this trope we allow the attitude to pervade that primitives are still essentially commodities to be appropriated, rather than people. Although she cannot be accused of advocating biological determinism or white supremacy, there is still a sense of colonial hierarchy within Mead’s conclusions; she can still be seen to stage-manage, direct, and produce the lapsarian drama to which di Leonardo refers. Mead’s final statements are that: “Samoa knows but one way of life” while “we [...]

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<sup>94</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 65.

<sup>95</sup> Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 9.

have the knowledge of many ways.”<sup>96</sup> She also later made the following statement in a 1963 interview, when discussing happy society:

Happiness might be defined as getting those good things in life that one has been led to expect. Then a happy society would be one like Samoa, where children grow up wanting very simple things- enough food, water, sleep, sex and mild amusement - and usually obtain them. [...] It is only when people are unhappy about the discrepancy between their situation and their aspirations that they seek something that is different, better and more desirable.<sup>97</sup>

As Mead groups the two cultures into ‘them’ and ‘us,’ she suggests that the primitive is attractive because of its ahistoricity, yet ultimately the adoption of primitive culture traits will enable America to move forward. The Samoans provide an aid to the American future, while remaining firmly in the simplicity of the past. It is still a privilege of the ‘civilized’ to appropriate the ‘primitive.’

The civilization into which the primitive is appropriated also suffers at the hands of anthropological tropes of simplification. The America found in the concluding chapters of *Coming of Age in Samoa* is in many ways as simplified as Freeman believes the Samoa found in the earlier chapters to be. Mead’s America is essentially void of issues of race and class. Although she mentions the “Negro children” and “the children of immigrants,” the America to which she is writing is primarily an America where “Mary” has “gone to business school” and has a weakness for “chiffon stockings.”<sup>98</sup> This writing earned Mead the criticism of British anthropologists such as A. C. Haddon and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, who condemned her for being too much like “a lady novelist.”<sup>99</sup> Employing that which di Leonardo terms

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<sup>96</sup> Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 248.

<sup>97</sup> Metraux, *Margaret Mead: Some Personal Views*, pp. 211, 212.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 237, 238, 239.

<sup>99</sup> Cited Nancy C. Lutkehaus, “Margaret Mead and the ‘Rustling-of-the-wind-in-the-palm-trees School’ of Ethnographic Writing” in Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon (eds), *Women Writing Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 186-201, p. 188.

the “synecdochic fallacy,”<sup>100</sup> Mead addresses the native-born, white, middle and upper classes as ‘America.’ Thus the primitivity she presents is directed to a very specific audience - the middle-class book-buying audience - and is designed so that these middle classes will not be threatened. As has been seen, Mead’s construct was so successful because it was specifically designed for such a specific audience within specific discourses, so successful and far-reaching, in fact, that “South Seas” became synonymous with ‘primitivity.’<sup>101</sup> Mead is careful to structure her work to address the ‘America’ that she creates in her conclusions.

Mead’s work is ethnography without jargon, making it accessible to a wider audience than the work of her male colleagues. This non-academic writing style was used intentionally by Mead to make her work available to a wider audience. As she states in her 1973 Preface to *Coming of Age in Samoa*:

If our studies of the way of life of other people are to be meaningful to the peoples of the industrialized world, they must be written for them, and not wrapped in technical jargon for specialists [...] I did not write it as a popular book, but only with the hope that it would be intelligible to those who might make best use of its theme.<sup>102</sup>

Her book allowed the middle-class book-buying public to experience the primitive energy that had previously been seen as a possession of the threatening working classes, particularly those immigrants who had originated from other cultures themselves. The very act of reading maintains a sense of educated status and ensures distance from raw primitivity, and yet still allows a sense of experience. Reading Mead’s book is thus similar to a visit to view

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<sup>100</sup> di Leonardo, *Exotics at Home*, p. 176.

<sup>101</sup> The influence of Mead’s work is demonstrated in the following example, taken from Allen, *Only Yesterday*, p. 118: “Some of the apostles of the new freedom appeared to imagine that habits of thought could be changed overnight, and that if you only dragged the secrets of sex out into the daylight and let every one do just as he pleased at the moment, society would at once enter upon a state of barbaric innocence like that of the remotest South Sea Islanders.”

<sup>102</sup> Cited in Pipher, Introduction to Perennial Classics edition, p. xxiv.

the taxidermy displays in the African Hall in the American Museum of Natural History, in much the same way as Donna Haraway considers in “Teddy Bear Patriarchy.” As a middle-class, college-educated anthropologist Mead became the reader substitute out in the field, and her record of Samoa allowed the reader to be there without leaving his chair. Reading permitted an experience of the primitive by proxy, an experience of the primitive from an essentially civilized position. An experience of Mead’s primitive could only enrich the reader, increase sophistication, and aid an understanding of the primitive within. Once again, only a certain section of America would be privy to this experience, since such civilized complexity and knowledge of the primitive could only be enjoyed by those who had been educated to a certain degree and who could afford to buy the book. In employing the Samoan primitive as a solution to specifically middle-class problems, Mead therefore neglects to appreciate that there are those within the society to which she supposedly writes who are perceived as ‘primitive’ already.

Mead’s attitude towards American culture was thus just as ‘pick-n-mix’ as her attitude to Samoan culture. She does address specific concerns of the 1920s, particularly with regard to issues of sex, as Jones states: “To the polymorphously perverse, to the sexually liberated, to those who felt unduly burdened by the Judeo-Christian prohibition against adultery, to those who felt that raising their children was an intolerable restriction on their freedom, all of what Mead was saying must have seemed too good to be true.”<sup>103</sup> Yet she also chooses her audience and tailors her understandings of both America and Samoa accordingly. Mead promotes Samoan freedom to the middle classes of the late 1920s as being the pivotal key to a complete understanding of the limitations of Hall’s theories of adolescence, as well as

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<sup>103</sup> Jones, *Degenerate Moderns*, p. 25.

being the new way to understand and implement this important cultural construct. She uses her anthropological studies of the Samoan girls to sanction the changes in youth culture for the middle classes and her arguments were radical in their academic proposition for liberation, the effects of which are still in evidence in modern American society. However, we cannot view her “solutions” without considering the problems that they pose in themselves.

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## VITA

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