



## Coming of Age, but not in Samoa: Reflections on Margaret Mead's Legacy for Western Liberal Feminism

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In the case of anti-colonial critique, it is the *similarity* of past and present that defamiliarizes the here and now and subverts the sense of historical progress.

--Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture*

One of the most famous and popular works ever published by an American anthropologist, *Coming of Age in Samoa* first appeared in 1928 when its author Margaret Mead (1901-1978) was twenty-seven years old. <sup>1</sup> By the mid 1930s, Mead had gained a national reputation as an expert on "primitive cultures" and was recognized by the public, if not by her colleagues, as one of the leading anthropologists of her day. Prolific, outspoken, charismatic, unconventional, provocative, controversial, and brilliant, Mead achieved widespread public renown that was remarkable for a woman who constructed herself as a scientist and intellectual. She recognized instantly that her audience extended far beyond the elite worlds of the university and museum, and she cultivated her public by publishing hundreds of articles in such venues as *American Anthropologist*, *Natural History*, *Redbook*, *Vogue*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Seventeen*, and the *New York Times Magazine*, to name just a few. Mead also gave numerous interviews on domestic issues and international politics. From the time that *Coming of Age in Samoa* appeared in 1928, until her death fifty years later, journalists sought **[End Page 233]** Mead for her opinions on marriage, homemaking, child-rearing, feminism, civil rights, and race relations. <sup>2</sup>

Among the general public old enough to remember her, Mead is probably best known for the role she played in the 1930s in prompting westerners to question their sense of cultural superiority, using so-called primitive societies to critique patriarchal gender relations in the United States. Mead was not alone in this endeavor, as she wrote at a time when other artists, professionals, and elites drew from such cultures to reinvigorate western arts--literature, music, dance, visual arts, photography, and film. <sup>3</sup> Historians of anthropology remember Mead as one of Franz

Boas' many students who helped bring about a paradigm shift from evolution to cultural relativism by challenging biological explanations of cultural differences and refuting the explicit racism in eugenics and mainstream anthropology.

This article, however, situates Mead in a different intellectual context. In addition to seeing her as someone who helped foster cultural relativism within anthropology of the 1930s, we can also place Mead within a history of feminism and, more specifically, within a tradition of white feminist thought on racial questions. Recent scholarship has exposed the racism within much white feminist practice and history. Scholars such as Hazel Carby, bell hooks, Paula Giddings, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, among others, have analyzed the ways feminist theory has universalized white women's experiences, perpetuating racist hierarchies of racial difference. This critique has precipitated new work (as exemplified by Vron Ware and Ruth Frankenberg) that explores the racism still embedded within a purportedly antiracist white liberal feminist politics. Informed by this recent scholarship, this study of Mead explores the vestiges of nineteenth-century racism that form part of Margaret Mead's legacy to western liberal feminist thought today.

Repositioning Mead in this way requires that we view Mead as an integral part of a Victorian tradition that combined notions of white or "civilized" women's sexual restraint and black or "primitive" men's bestiality to reinforce the dominant cultural taboo against miscegenation. Whereas historians of anthropology usually understand Mead as challenging the racism implicit in such constructions, such dualisms nonetheless informed her work. In other words, this article reconsiders the nature of Mead's antiracism, highlighting the continuities between Victorian and modern anthropology. Such an approach to Mead's work **[End Page 234]** risks eliciting severe criticism from scholars who can only see Mead as a cultural relativist and racial egalitarian, as an opponent of western ethnocentrism and racial bigotry.<sup>4</sup> To grasp the central point—that Mead's work was implicated in and shaped by Victorian race politics—we must be willing to embrace the idea that oppositional movements retain residues of that which they oppose. To put it most simply, Mead's substitution of cultural theories for biological explanations of difference did not purge contemporary feminist theory of its western ethnocentric and white racist biases.

The argument is structurally divided into three sections. Part one assesses Mead's relation to the history of anthropology by analyzing how two of Mead's early monographs, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) and *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935), broke with an earlier tradition called evolutionary or Victorian anthropology.<sup>5</sup> From at least the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, evolutionary anthropology supported Anglo-Americans' definitions of themselves as a superior race because of their supposedly unique, race-specific, biological forms of sexual difference. Mead's work helped overthrow this central tenet of evolutionary racism.

Yet, while Mead challenged Anglo-Americans' belief in their inherent biological superiority to primitive peoples, she did not challenge their belief in the cultural superiority of western civilization. Mead invoked primitive societies to critique U.S. gender relations, but at the same time she dismissed those primitive societies for

lacking freedom and circumscribing individual choice. For Mead, primitive societies provided Americans with conceptual alternatives to reflect on, but she never advocated that the United States remake itself in the image of the primitive.

Nineteenth-century constructions linking race, sexual difference, and sexuality were central to Mead's work, enabling her to transform, without transcending, the racist formulations of evolutionary anthropology. Thus, section two of this essay analyzes some continuities between Mead and her Victorian predecessors in order to argue that Mead's break with evolutionary anthropology was not as great as it first appeared. Mead's corpus, I maintain, is equally well understood as a logical culmination of three nineteenth-century traditions: that of the woman missionary, the woman explorer, and the woman ethnographer. These traditions helped solidify a role for the Anglo-American woman as a legitimate practitioner of anthropological science, a role that **[End Page 235]** emanated from her previous role as Christian civilizer and governor of the primitive. Relating Mead to these traditions enables us to comprehend how she became so popular at a time when many still questioned the suitability and capability of women as scientists. Often, scholarship traces the way in which feminists brought their understanding of feminism to the practice of social science. This paper shows how several feminist practitioners of social science used science to legitimate their feminism.

Part three, the conclusion to this essay, suggests that the ethnocentrism and racism that existed in Mead's anticolonial politics still form part of a popular western liberal feminist tradition today. This popular tradition assesses the United States' purported cultural superiority to other nations in terms of its supposedly superior gender relations (western women are free and have the most choices). Most significantly, contemporary western feminism continues to insist, as Mead did, on its intellectual break from the earlier, explicitly racist traditions of the nineteenth century and so resists understanding itself as still deeply implicated within an ongoing history of western imperialism.

## **Margaret Mead's Departure from Evolutionary Anthropology: Invoking the Primitive to Reassess Civilized Gender Relations**

In the context of academic anthropology of the early twentieth century, both *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) and *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) were remarkable books, contributing to the dissolution of evolutionary anthropology. In these works, Mead represented the primitive as having something valuable to teach the civilized about reforming its present institutions, rather than just as an embarrassing reminder of a shared and discredited past. As Mead mentions in her autobiography, *Blackberry Winter* (1973), "We had, of course, had lectures on evolution. . . . But we went to the field not to look for earlier forms of [our past] human life, but for forms that were different from those known to us. . . . We did not make the mistake of thinking, as Freud [did] . . . that the primitive peoples . . . were equivalent to our ancestors." <sup>6</sup>

In this statement, Mead registers her rejection of Victorian evolutionary anthropology, in particular her disagreement with the presumption that all societies followed the same path of development. Positing a unilinear, universal path of

development, most evolutionists located **[End Page 236]** primitive societies at an earlier stage of development than civilized societies and often measured a society's relative position in the hierarchy of primitive-to-civilized nations by woman's "status" or "condition." One justification for western colonialism was formulated in terms of protecting primitive women from various forms of social, economic, and sexual mistreatment. <sup>7</sup>

Within evolutionary paradigms, another indicator of a society's evolutionary ranking was the existence of pronounced physical-moral-sexual differences: tall, strong, dispassionate men and small, delicate, emotional women. In the words of one contemporary, William I. Thomas, a social scientist at the University of Chicago in the 1890s, "the less civilized the race the less is the physical difference of the sexes." <sup>8</sup> Evolutionary accounts held that the "progress of a race" depended on the adoption of specific sex roles that were in turn supposed to bring about specific manifestations of sexual differences. Or as historian Gail Bederman encapsulates the ideology: "Savage (that is nonwhite) men and women were [taken as] almost identical, but civilized races had evolved the pronounced sexual differences celebrated in the middle class's doctrine of 'separate spheres.'" <sup>9</sup>

Mead challenged these evolutionary beliefs, which characterized primitive races as either lacking in sexual differentiation or exhibiting uncontrollable, rampant sexuality. She argued in *Sex and Temperament* that primitive societies differed substantially from one another in how they understood sexual differences and sexual drives and in the ways they structured gender relations. As Mead concluded, sexual differences varied so substantially from one society to another that they must be understood as culturally, not biologically, determined. Or as she put it, "the personalities of the two sexes are socially produced." <sup>10</sup>

Together with other anthropologists, including her teachers and mentors Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, Mead helped consolidate a new paradigm in anthropology, which scholars often call cultural relativism. Anthropologists working in this new paradigm understood cultures as developing along different, incommensurable lines, and they no longer held up western practices as the only morally legitimate forms of cultural arrangements. Nonetheless, Mead was not a moral relativist, nor was she attempting to write value-free ethnographies. Her understanding of cultural relativism did not prevent her from making moral distinctions among various cultural practices. Thus, I prefer the term cultural comparativism, for it enables us to retain the idea that for **[End Page 237]** Mead the point of studying other cultures was not to accept all social arrangements as equally valid, but to determine which arrangements represented better ways of living. Such a perspective meant that Mead and others who worked within this paradigm resisted normative judgments of the sort that automatically called for primitives to adopt civilized gender roles, but they did not suspend all judgments. Mead wanted to expand Americans' repertoire of conceivable alternatives so that they might envision new ways of reforming their social institutions. <sup>11</sup>

Positing a distinction between "social constructs" (Mead's term for culturally specific beliefs about sexual differences) and "biological facts" (universal aspects of

sex difference manifest in all known cultures), Mead assisted modern anthropology in creating new distinctions between culture and biology. <sup>12</sup> Evolutionary anthropology had preferred the term "civilization" to culture and understood the former as comprising social practices passed from one generation to another, partly through learning and partly through heredity. As the term culture eventually replaced the term civilization, culture became fully distinguishable from biology. In both anthropological and popular discourses, the older term *civilization* was eventually separated from the idea of heredity. Social scientists understood culture as passing from one generation to the next only by social processes, not by heredity. <sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, Mead used culture to account for the differences among peoples and biology to account for the similarities. The fact that all women could lactate and bear children was an attribute of biology (or sex); the fact that only some women in some societies were passive or gentle was an attribute of culture (or civilization). Mead's particular contribution to this paradigm shift was to show how varied were different societies' views of sexual differences (regardless of race) and thus to shift sexual differences from the category of biology to the category of culture. According to Mead, western nations were not the only ones to consider (civilized) men and women fundamentally different from one another; other cultures considered their men and women fundamentally different as well. Indeed, constructions and manifestations of sexual differences varied so much from culture to culture that it was no longer possible to account for these by appealing to biological notions of innate maleness or femaleness. In other words, racial superiority (of Anglo-American whiteness) and sexual difference (of genteel Anglo-American womanhood), which had been fundamentally **[End Page 238]** linked concepts in Victorian evolutionary schema, were, in Mead's work, separated and emptied of their usual content.

In sum, where Victorian evolutionists believed that civilization was a racial trait, inherited by advanced white races, Mead assisted in redefining what was culturally transmitted through teaching and learning (civilization, culture, many sex-race differences) and what was genetically or biologically transmitted. Along with other social scientists of the 1910s and 1920s, Mead argued that sex and race were not significant variables of biological transmission. As Mead wrote, "one by one, aspects of behavior which we had been accustomed to consider invariable complements of our humanity were found to be merely a result of civilization, present in the inhabitant of one country, absent in another country, and *this without a change of race.*" <sup>14</sup>

These theoretical innovations had profound implications for the development of subsequent feminist analysis, for they permitted new critiques of western patriarchy. Previously, such evolutionary feminists as Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), Mary Roberts Coolidge (1860-1945), and Elsie Clews Parsons (1874-1941) had invoked the primitive to argue for the elimination of the primitive traces that remained in the United States' patriarchal civilization. For them, evolutionary or social progress meant increasing the distance (measured in terms of cultural differences) from existing primitive groups. <sup>15</sup> Mead's reevaluation of primitive cultural and social arrangements made possible a new strategy for Anglo-American



feminists. The primitive could now be invoked by these feminists as an alternative to be emulated, rather than a vestige to be eliminated.

## Studying the Primitive to Reform Western Civilization: A Discussion of *Coming of Age* and *Sex and Temperament*

Mead's intent in *Coming of Age* was to question the inevitability and intransigence of the emotional "stress and strain" that others believed were inherent in the biological stage of maturation known as adolescence. Mead explicitly situated her study in opposition to works like G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence* (1904), a book that ascribed the restlessness and rebellion of young people to inescapable maturation processes. <sup>16</sup> Mead wished to show that the behaviors and feelings that Hall and others identified as intrinsic to adolescence were dependent on social processes (culture) and not on physical development (biology-sex). As **[End Page 239]** Mead succinctly summed up her doubts about this biological-developmental explanation of young people's behavior, "Were these difficulties due to being adolescent or to being adolescent in America?" <sup>17</sup>

In particular, Mead attributed the pain of adolescence for young American women--thinking only of white, middle-class, heterosexual women--to changing social mores of the 1920s. These women, Mead argued, were no longer compelled to adhere to traditional forms of heterosexual marriage, but could now choose from among a broad range of marital arrangements: a "half a dozen standards of morality," to use Mead's phrase. Mead noted these alternatives as including premarital sex, open marriage (marriages that included extramarital sexual relations), trial marriage (marriages that ended voluntarily after a trial period without divorce proceedings), companionate marriage, marriage without children, and marriage combined with a career. <sup>18</sup>

Another problem for Mead was that the American girl had little experience or knowledge of sex. Once married, she was less likely than her Samoan counterpart to experience a satisfying sexual life, in part, Mead believed, because American society had such a limited notion of what constituted acceptable sexual behaviors. Samoan society, by contrast, had a wider range of practices, which prevented sexual problems of both an individual and social nature: guilt, frigidity, marital unhappiness, and prostitution. <sup>19</sup> Yet, Samoan society, although it enabled its girls to enjoy sex without shame or guilt, appeared to demand more "conformity" and allow less "individuality" among its women. This seeming "contradiction" troubled Mead greatly. The Samoan girl appeared more content, but she also seemed to Mead to have less freedom than her American counterpart. Samoa could serve as a model in one sense--in demonstrating to the United States that young women could enjoy sex--but not in another sense, since sexual enjoyment for Samoan women entailed restrictions on women's individuality and freedom. In Mead's view, then, the explanation for why adolescence was characteristically a pleasurable period of sexual expression for Samoan girls and a painful period of sexual repression for American girls could be boiled down "to the difference between a simple, homogenous primitive civilisation," where there was "but one recognised pattern of behavior," in which all Samoan girls had no choice but to engage, and "a motley,

diverse, heterogeneous modern civilisation," in which various types of sexual behavior for girls was possible. <sup>20</sup> In other words, Samoa served Mead, paradoxically, as a means of pointing out **[End Page 240]** what was wrong in U.S. gender relations, but at the same time, she devalued Samoan society for a more extreme gender oppression than that which existed in the United States.

Although Mead rejected certain assumptions from evolutionary anthropology, she retained its tendency to use gender to encode and assess cultural progress. This practice of measuring the status of a society by the degradation of its women had a long history in western imperial and anthropological thought and, in particular, in the way westerners understood Pacific societies, including Samoa. <sup>21</sup> Although Mead rejected the crude judgments of nineteenth-century anthropologists that debased primitive women, nonetheless implicit in her work was the belief that Samoa was a flawed society because it restricted the freedom of its women. In making this claim, Mead helped foster a liberal feminist critique of U.S. society, which attacked patriarchy for placing restrictions on women's expression of sexuality and conceptualized a free society as one that permitted women choice in how they lived their sexual lives.

It is crucial to emphasize that Mead never advocated that the United States model itself after Samoa. For one thing, she would have understood this as a practical impossibility. The United States could not make its culture simpler or less diverse, and Mead would have viewed an attempt to do so as authoritarian and repressive, involving an elimination of social options and resulting in less freedom for women. Mead also believed that young women in the United States had more freedom than did young women in Samoa, and she would not have been willing to trade freedom for happiness.

However, for Mead, individual freedom and personal happiness need not be at odds, particularly if one defined these ideals in terms of being free to choose what best suited one's innate temperament. The American girl's pain and suffering, Mead argued, resulted not from having too many choices, but from being unable to live out, without social stigma or economic repercussions, the option(s) that best suited her nature or temperament. Mead, a subtle observer of her own society, realized that some of the available alternatives were often not livable possibilities, and she realized too that class, race, ethnicity, and religion, among other factors, prescribed the choices of particular groups and individuals. <sup>22</sup> What the United States must do, Mead believed, was to make the sexual alternatives that were conceptually available real options for all women. **[End Page 241]**

In 1935, with the publication of *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, <sup>23</sup> Mead moved from a perspective that emphasized sexual conformity within a given primitive society (all men adhering to the same ideal of maleness; all women adhering to the same ideal of femaleness) to a perspective that emphasized the differences among primitive societies. Her analyses of the Arapesh, Mundugumor, and Tchambuli stressed that each had a different understanding of what constituted natural sexual differences. Both the Arapesh and Mundugumor, Mead argued, believed that men and women shared a similar temperament, but the Arapesh assumed both sexes were gentle and unassertive, while the Mundugumor

understood men and women to be violent, competitive, aggressively sexed, jealous, and quick to avenge insult. In contrast, the T'chambuli, like Americans, believed in innate or natural sexual differences between men and women, but had "a genuine reversal of the sex attitudes of our own culture. . . . [T]he woman [was] the dominant, impersonal, managing partner, [and] the man the less responsible and the emotionally dependent person." <sup>24</sup>

Mead drew an explicit lesson from her study of these three primitive societies, arguing that they showed that many so-called sexual traits of American men and women were arbitrary and not an inevitable emanation of biological difference. In other words, it was possible to change how men and women behaved and to eliminate many forms of apparent sexual difference:

[American] society can take the course that has become especially associated with the plans of most radical groups: admit that men and women are capable of being moulded to a single pattern as easily as to a diverse one. . . . Girls can be trained exactly as boys are trained, taught the same code, the same forms of expression, the same occupations. . . . If this is accepted, is it not reasonable to abandon the kind of artificial standardizations of sex-differences that have been so long characteristic of European society and admit that they are social fictions for which we have no longer any use? <sup>25</sup>

Mead tried to convince her society that there were other ways to structure gender relations than the ways that most middle-class white Americans felt were natural, inevitable, and good. She also challenged Americans' belief that men and women had sex-linked differences in temperament that were not possible to change. "We are forced to conclude," Mead wrote, "that human nature is almost unbelievably malleable, responding accurately and contrastingly to contrasting cultural conditions. . . . Standardized personality differences between the **[End Page 242]** sexes are of this order, cultural creations, to which each generation, male and female is trained to conform." <sup>26</sup>

This finding that primitives differed in their attitudes about sexual difference and sexuality represented a significant break from the evolutionary belief that all primitives were blatantly sexual beings, unable to exercise any restraint over sexual impulses, an idea still vestigially present in *Coming of Age*. <sup>27</sup> *Sex and Temperament* was thus a far more radical work (Mead commented later that it was her "most misunderstood book" <sup>28</sup> ) and unsettled readers in a way that *Coming of Age* had not. Some readers had difficulty grasping the distinctions that Mead was trying to make between sex and temperament. Mead used sex to mean sex-associated differences, some of which were innate (biologically transmitted through heredity), some of which were not. She used temperament to designate innate individual endowments, which were not sex linked, but which were nonetheless biologically transmitted through heredity.

Some readers mistakenly thought that Mead was denying the existence of any biological sex differences, when all she hoped to show was that most so-called sexual differences thought to be innate were not. Other readers found this point obvious, even trite. The sociologist Hortense Powdermaker pointed out that the



notion of cultural or social conditioning of human character was introduced over fifty years earlier. As Powdermaker wrote in a review of *Sex and Temperament*, the idea "that men and women follow roles culturally assigned to them is not . . . new . . . even to the intelligent layman." <sup>29</sup> Disappointed that Mead had focused her work on such an obvious point, Powdermaker called for additional work assessing the significance of those sex differences that were innate and universal. Mead eventually answered Powdermaker's call with *Male and Female* (1949), only to find that readers used this book to discredit her earlier one. In a new preface to the 1950 edition of *Sex and Temperament*, Mead responded to her critics: "In our present day and culture . . . there is a tendency to say: 'She can't have it both ways, if she shows that different cultures can mold men and women in ways which are opposite to our ideas of innate sex differences, then she can't also claim that there *are* sex differences.' Fortunately for mankind, we not only can have it both ways, but many more than both ways. . . ." <sup>30</sup>

Although *Sex and Temperament* represented a major break from *Coming of Age* by introducing variability into primitive sexuality, it [End Page 243] nonetheless operated on the same premise that had so fundamentally shaped the earlier book. For Mead, the point of intercultural comparisons (despite her stated belief in the incommensurability of different cultures) was to prove that alternatives to American gender relations were possible. She used knowledge of these alternatives to argue that Americans could and should reform their culture and themselves, establishing a fundamental principle that still operates within western feminist anthropology today.

In short, Mead never relinquished the belief that intercultural comparisons could be put to the use of social reform. Nor did she doubt or challenge Americans' belief in the cultural superiority of western civilization. Instead, she proposed a new set of criteria on which to base that judgment. Mead believed that the United States was superior to the primitive societies she studied, not because of the existence of sexual differences, but because only it had the potential—due to a presumably greater complexity and sophistication—to maintain a larger range of gendered behaviors from among which individuals could choose. <sup>31</sup> Challenging the United States to eliminate its rigid and artificial sex typing, Mead ended *Coming of Age* with the following injunction: "Samoa knows but one way of life and teaches it to her children. Will we, who have the knowledge of many ways, leave our children free to choose among them?" <sup>32</sup>

Mead's work became (and remains) popular because it touched on the collective unconscious of our society, which has long been accustomed to ruminating on what it takes to be the unrestrained and unrestrainable sexuality of the primitive, which it then used (and still uses) to form an identity of itself as a superior race and civilized nation. Mead brilliantly redeployed these constructions of primitive sexuality to prompt Americans to reconceptualize their understanding of sexual differences and gender relations; in so doing, she used science to intervene into feminist theory, which had, to this point, accepted the dominant view that the white woman's superiority to nonwhite peoples was due to her moral purity and sexual restraint, and was the basis of America's supposedly more advanced gender relations.

Yet, Mead's credibility as a "scientific" authority on primitive societies would not

have been possible had not a renegotiation of the social relations between white women and the primitive taken place during the late nineteenth century. For the profession of the woman anthropologist even to exist, single white women first had to demonstrate **[End Page 244]** that they could live safely among primitives without the protection of husbands or other white authorities and that they had something of value to contribute to western knowledge about the primitive. The next section examines how three developments occurred simultaneously in the 1880s and 1890s to make these demonstrations possible. Through missionary work, exploration, and ethnography, Anglo-American women transformed themselves from perceived victims of the sexual and physical aggression of savages into the civilizers and protectors of peoples presumed to be facing physical and cultural annihilation.

## **Cultural Resonances Between Mead's Work and the Late Nineteenth-Century Traditions of the Woman Missionary, Woman Explorer, and Woman Ethnographer**

Mead tapped into a longstanding cultural fascination with primitive sexuality. In the nineteenth century, Anglo-Americans perceived primitives as dangerous and wild, not in control of their sexual feelings and always lusting after white women. Through their work as missionaries, explorers, and ethnographers, white women confronted and altered these cultural beliefs, while negotiating the tensions that arose from their culture's taboo against miscegenation. The press accepted Mead as an expert on the primitive because she skillfully maneuvered within a discourse that had come to recognize Anglo-American women as the ideal protectors (rather than the sexual victims) of the primitive. This section analyzes how such a role for the Anglo-American woman was consolidated in the late nineteenth century. First, I examine how Mrs. Armstrong, the wife of a missionary in Hawaii in the early 1880s, imagined her relations to a "savage" she called Papatutai. Then I compare Armstrong's accounts with the progressive race politics of Alice Fletcher, a special agent for the Department of the Interior who later became an anthropologist. Finally, I briefly examine the cultural meanings assigned to May French-Sheldon, who led her own safari in East Africa in 1892 and then publicized her experiences during the next thirty years. Whereas Armstrong's sketches of 1881 stressed her personal vulnerability in the face of irrepressible savage sexuality, Fletcher saw herself as a maternal protector, who could help save American Indians from being overcome by "evolutionary processes." French-Sheldon also emphasized her personal empowerment and **[End Page 245]** authority over the primitive, helping to create a western feminist fantasy which held that white women could live with more freedom and personal satisfaction among the primitive than by staying at home among the civilized. By the time that Mead embarked for Samoa in 1925, the belief that white women could serve both as protectors and liberators of savages received full play in the U.S. print media.

The history of Anglo-American women's participation in anthropology cannot be understood apart from this earlier history of their involvement in missionary work, American Indian reform, and the exploration of Africa. During the 1880s and 1890s, large numbers of women, most of them white and middle-class, assumed

responsibility for bringing Christianity, civilization, and citizenship to peoples whom they considered their evolutionary inferiors, regardless of their residence within or outside the boundaries of the United States. <sup>33</sup> At the same time, evolutionary theorists like anthropologist Otis Mason and sociologist Lester Ward began to reassess "woman's role" in preserving and passing on civilization and race traits. As Ward wrote in 1888 in an article entitled "Our Better Halves," "Woman *is* the race, and the race can be raised up only as she is raised up. . . . True science teaches that the elevation of woman is the only sure road to the evolution of man." <sup>34</sup>

Thus, Anglo-American women became central to the civilizing process, in part because of their purported special attributes as moral guardians and teachers, in part because they held themselves up as a model of gender relations to be imposed on primitives for emulation, and in part because scientists imbued them with new biological functions in the transmission of civilization and race traits. <sup>35</sup> Anglo-American women assumed responsibility for transmitting civilization not just to their own children, but also to primitives, whom they presumed to resemble civilized children in their supposed simplicity and naivete. This was a "progressive" view in the 1880s because of its assumption that primitives *could* be civilized.

Anglo-American women found missionary work especially appealing because it gave them unprecedented authority to speak publicly and to assume an explicitly political role: they could act as representatives for the primitive without violating their notions of "woman's sphere" or abrogating their conventional duties as wives and mothers. But missionary work also terrified Anglo-American women who were frightened of primitives' dark skin color and nakedness, which they interpreted [End Page 246] as signs of unrestrained and wanton sexuality. This fear, experienced as sexual vulnerability, was exacerbated in the post-Reconstruction era by the highly publicized lynchings of black men, which whites often justified on the grounds that the black male victims had attacked or molested white women. In this climate of racial tension, Anglo-American women often saw themselves as potential rape victims, even when no sexual interest was shown them, and projected this sexual dynamic onto territories beyond the United States. Missionary reports sent back to the United States told stories of white women fending off unwanted sexual advances of nonwhite men (Indian captivity narratives contained similar types of stories). Because of the cultural taboo against miscegenation and the imperative to remain sexually chaste, white women denied any feelings of sexual attraction they might have felt toward these men through the projection of an exaggerated and aggressive sexuality onto the primitive.

A vivid illustration of how such repression and denial operated may be ascertained from Mrs. Armstrong's "Sketches of Mission Life," written in 1881 during her stay in Hawaii and sent back to the United States for publication in *The Southern Workman*, the school newspaper of Hampton Institute. Mrs. Armstrong was the wife of Samuel Armstrong, who founded the Hampton Institute, a vocational training school in Virginia established to civilize blacks and American Indians during the postbellum era. In several of these sketches, Mrs. Armstrong's sexual fascination with the primitive centers on Papatutai, a man she describes as "most savage in his appearance, some six feet tall, erect, and with a fine athletic form." <sup>36</sup>

Emphasizing his imposing height, his "erectness," Mrs. Armstrong's selection of details reveals how great an interest she takes in Papatutai's physical person, an interest she could never register so directly were she describing a white man. This kind of description is possible only because Mrs. Armstrong and her audience consider Papatutai to be a savage, not a man.

Despite the fact that Mrs. Armstrong expresses a strong dislike and feelings of repulsion toward Papatutai, she nonetheless decides to sketch his portrait so that she can send a picture of him home "for friends to see what sort of neighbors [she] had." (Unfortunately, the picture was not published, only described in the school newspaper.) For this purpose, she has "Papatutai stand, spear in his hand" as if he "were about to thrust it into a victim"--and at her request or insistence, for we **[End Page 247]** do not know whether she formulated it as a question or command, Papatutai dons a war costume. "His appearance as he thus stood . . . was revolting beyond expression." [37](#)

Savagery is quite literally Mrs. Armstrong's creation. She positions Papatutai in what she thinks of as a suitable and typical pose, with little clothing, a fierce expression, and a weapon about to be launched. Clearly, the spear that Mrs. Armstrong invokes is the warrior's long shaft, but she suggests another spear, one more phallic, in her description. Mrs. Armstrong anxiously anticipates their being left alone together, an event that finally takes place without incident. Yet Mrs. Armstrong represents this experience in terms of having narrowly escaped a fate worse than death, crediting her own ingenuity with staving off an imminent sexual attack. Although the anticipated rape never occurs, indeed is not even fully stated as a possibility, it nonetheless serves as the backdrop to this account, adding drama and tension to what otherwise would be an uninteresting and uneventful narrative. Mrs. Armstrong's sexual attraction to Papatutai surfaces through a subtext that strains against the bounds of Victorian sexual propriety. By imagining that it is Papatutai who desires her, and not the other way around, Mrs. Armstrong secures her identity as a sexually chaste Christian woman, obscuring the source of what for her society was an illicit interracial sexual attraction. Not having white male protectors (her husband is presented as entirely oblivious to her profound sense of sexual danger), Mrs. Armstrong believes that her proper ladylike comportment, her Christian faith, and her civilized womanhood provide a shield through which Papatutai cannot penetrate.

Mrs. Armstrong automatically forecloses the possibility of having an intimate relationship with Papatutai, but it repeatedly resurfaces as a dangerous threat. By reading between the lines of Mrs. Armstrong's narrative, we may surmise that Papatutai has no personal interest in Mrs. Armstrong but is merely fulfilling a promise to her husband to look after her when he is away on one of his frequent trips. Mr. Armstrong, himself, is represented as entirely at ease in making this request of Papatutai (bonding with him as a patriarch in their shared role of protecting the weaker sex), and Mrs. Armstrong seems to resent her husband for entrusting her to Papatutai. Thus the repressed attraction that Mrs. Armstrong feels for Papatutai, but cannot express given the bounds of Victorian propriety, is born of a mixture of loneliness, frustration, and dissatisfaction with her husband and domestic life. **[End Page 248]**

In her account, Mrs. Armstrong depicts herself as powerless and a potential victim, two feelings she clearly was not accustomed to having in relation to her Hampton students back home, and the act of writing creates a sense of control and autonomy. For other white women, like the Indian reformer and ethnologist, Alice Fletcher, contact with primitive cultures provided opportunities to experience themselves as powerful political and intellectual leaders, helping them to forget and overcome their frustrations with the patriarchal aspects of white culture.

Alice Fletcher (1838-1923) <sup>38</sup> helped formulate and later took credit for the passage of the Dawes Indian Act of 1887, which represented a fundamental departure from the U.S. government's standard policy of segregating American Indians on reservations and denying them U.S. citizenship. The Dawes legislation formally introduced the severalty or allotment policy, which made the granting of individual plots of land, as well as citizenship rights, conditional on Indians' conformity to white, middle-class gender relations. Under this legislation, those Indians who gave up traditional tribal customs to establish monogamous patriarchal families were accorded legal status as U.S. citizens and granted individual title to reservation land. After the passage of the Dawes Act, Fletcher served as a special agent for the Department of the Interior, administering this legislation among the Winnebago Indians of Nebraska (1887-1889) and the Nez Perces in Idaho (1889-1893). <sup>39</sup>

Fletcher became a leader in this Indian reform movement after more than a decade in the New York and Boston woman's movements, first joining Sorosis during the late 1860s and then the Association for the Advancement of Women, when it was founded in 1873. <sup>40</sup> The seeming paradox between Fletcher's desire to free middle-class white women from patriarchal family structures and her commitment to introduce patriarchal family structures into American Indian societies can be explained by her belief in evolution. Fletcher thought patriarchal family structures would help propel Indian societies along the evolutionary hierarchy toward civilization. She felt a sense of urgency about this task, fearing that if Indians were not civilized quickly, they would die out as "evolutionary processes" overtook them (that is, as whites killed them). To prevent such an outcome, Fletcher argued that Indian cultures must be compelled to adopt the supposedly more advanced forms of gender relations of civilization. In practice, this meant monogamous sexual relations; individual (male) ownership of land; male support of **[End Page 249]** women and children through farming; adoption of western-style homes; Indian women's assumption of white, middle-class, domestic roles; learning English; conversion to Christianity; western education of children; and adoption of western styles of dress and appearance. Fletcher assumed the role of the economic and sexual protector of the American Indian woman, whom she argued was being abused and exploited by Indian men and ignored by white male politicians and reformers.

Fletcher's ethnographies of the 1890s and early 1900s documented the existence of the cultural forms that she had earlier helped to curtail, adopting a tone that was now much less critical of traditional Indian cultures. In part, Fletcher could safely shift her views because of a growing sense of security among white elites that American Indians could no longer offer violent resistance to the U.S.



government. Thus, although this work may have been motivated in part by a sense of guilt and a desire to atone for her previous governmental activities, it also represented a new way to command authority at a time when the role of the assimilationist was becoming less viable. Moreover, these ethnological writings coincided with Fletcher's increasingly intimate relationship with Francis La Flesche, a member of the Omaha tribe, with whom she eventually lived and considered her "adopted son." Perhaps through this relationship, Fletcher eventually came to see another side to her assimilationist policies, attributing to them the disintegration of traditional Indian familial structures and a lowering of the status of some American Indian women within their own societies. Although saddened by these consequences, she never doubted the necessity of her assimilationist "solutions" to the "problems" that the Indian represented for her. Until her death, Fletcher remained rooted in a world view which held that patriarchy was a crucial and an inevitable step in the evolutionary advancement of all societies.

May French (1847-1936) was grounded in a similar world view, but she lived longer than Fletcher and found a way to make the primitive serve her feminist purposes. Born in Beaver, Pennsylvania, to a wealthy and prominent family, French's mother, Elizabeth J. French, was a respected physician and her father derived his fortune from sugar, cotton, and tobacco plantations. In the 1860s, private tutors educated May and her sister, Belle French-Patterson, and the family went on an extended trip to Europe to round out their daughters' education. By the **[End Page 250]** mid 1880s, May lived in London with her new husband, Eli Lemon Sheldon, who had a prosperous banking and publishing business. <sup>41</sup>

In January 1891, at age 43, French-Sheldon, for reasons that remain unclear, began to plan an expedition to East Africa, writing to the famous explorer Henry Morton Stanley for advice. <sup>42</sup> Despite Stanley's letters of introduction to British officials in the region, French-Sheldon met with a great deal of resistance from British colonial authorities. <sup>43</sup> Still, with the financial support of her husband, she eventually set forth by herself on an historic expedition to eastern Africa that lasted three months, from March to May 1891, and that she publicized during the next thirty years. <sup>44</sup> Although over one hundred African men accompanied French-Sheldon on her safari and served as her porters, guards, and interpreters, most press accounts of her voyage repeatedly stressed that she traveled "alone," meaning that she traveled without white male escorts. This extraordinary departure from convention initially subjected her to public ridicule and suspicion. How was her society to conceive of such an audacious act? Was she naively ignoring the sexual risks of such a venture, or worse yet, might she secretly be desiring illicit contact with primitives? <sup>45</sup>

Perhaps to counter this stigma, French-Sheldon's various accounts of her trip repeatedly called attention to her skill at disciplining African men who, according to French-Sheldon, were unaccustomed to and resented taking orders from a white woman. <sup>46</sup> French-Sheldon constructed herself as the leader and protector of her porters, although on several occasions, she conceded that the porters had saved her life. She also stressed the many and ingenious stratagems she devised to elude the sexual advances of the sultans who "courted" her. Her most popular lectures

from the 1920s, "Thrilling Experiences in Savage Africa," "Camp Life With Natives in the Jungle," and "Thrilling Adventures of a Lone White Woman in Savage Africa" emphasized these same themes.

Upon French-Sheldon's death in 1936, an obituary from a London newspaper marked the significance of her 1891 safari in the following way:

For months she lived alone except for head-hunters and cannibals. She had at least 60 proposals of marriage from native sultans, kings and chiefs. "Not that they loved me for myself," she used to say. "They simply thought that the acquisition of Bébé Bwana [a respectful title] would add to their prestige. **[End Page 251]** It requires some tact and nerve to refuse a native potentate when he has you at his mercy." She added, nevertheless, that in all her experience of savage races she had never known a savage insult her. "It is only when one gets back to civilisation that one is reminded of one's sex." <sup>47</sup>

This account contains many of the classic themes that surfaced in popular discussions of white women among the primitive during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: emphasis on the physical danger that the primitive represented (head-hunters and cannibals); the hint of miscegenation (sixty proposals of marriage); the dismissal of any possible sexual desire on the part of white women, along with a subtextual rendering of the primitive as rapist (It requires tact and nerve to refuse a native potentate when he has you at his mercy). Indeed, she depicted the sultans as incapable of western love (Not that they loved me for myself). Yet, the final line of the obituary contained an unexpected paradox: "It is only when one gets back to civilisation that one is reminded of one's sex." Despite everything, encounters with the primitive symbolized a realm of freedom and power, personal independence, and control over others that was not available to French-Sheldon at home in England or in the United States. <sup>48</sup> Assuming the role of the protector of primitives, she traveled widely and independently at her own discretion. Her trips to Africa quite literally enabled her to escape the suffocating protection of white men. <sup>49</sup>

Obituaries published in American newspapers went even further in representing French-Sheldon as an emancipated woman who also worked for the emancipation of African natives. The *New York Times* reported that "Mrs. French-Sheldon was not only a pioneer among women explorers in Africa but one of the few of either sex who in her generation returned with kind words for the natives. In a day when they were described as treacherous and bloodthirsty she insisted their white exploiters were more guilty. . . . For many years she argued the cause of the blacks, and [the] decrease in the cruelty with which natives were handled was in some part attributed to her championship." <sup>50</sup> What was not noted in this obituary and has yet to be restored to the historical record was French-Sheldon's long and vigorous defense of Belgium's rule of the French Congo and her justifications of the brutal system of indentured servitude that King Leopold and his successors enforced among African laborers. Nor did the writer mention French-Sheldon's advocacy of legislation for the restriction of immigration to the United States during 1915 or her unsuccessful lobbying attempts on behalf of **[End Page 252]** the Americo-Liberia Company, which tried to obtain permission from the Liberian government to export American

blacks to Liberia. [51](#)

The print media in the United States thus erased from view French-Sheldon's role as an apologist for King Leopold and overlooked her active complicity in U.S. and British imperialism, transforming her into a symbol of feminist independence whose great accomplishment was not so much her scholarly contributions to natural science (these may have been noted in passing but were not emphasized in American press accounts), but rather her bravery and ingenuity in averting the sexual advances of hundreds of African men. Accounts of French-Sheldon's travels in Africa deployed the primitive for the cultural reconstruction of white women's roles and status, and while these accounts furthered the projection of unacknowledged sexual desire onto the primitive, they downplayed the illicitness of the attraction in the 1920s, as the sexual advances were most often represented in the form of marriage proposals rather than rape.

Where Armstrong's narratives of the 1880s stressed the vulnerability of white women in the face of irrepressible savage sexuality, French-Sheldon's narratives of the early twentieth century emphasized her empowerment via her relations to the primitive. Had French-Sheldon exhibited such disregard for social proprieties at home, the press would have stigmatized her as an immoral and outrageous woman. Because she did these things in Africa, she was heralded as independent and courageous, a model for feminists and other unconventional women of the 1920s. [52](#)

Margaret Mead clearly understood herself as representing a break from all three of these nineteenth-century traditions. By the time of Mead's writings in the 1920s and 1930s, the virtual abolition of what had once been deemed primitive in American Indian cultures made possible a nostalgia for primitivism that was not possible when Indian submission was still in question. Although her upbringing was steeped in Protestant evangelicalism, Mead was not a missionary and did not want to convert others to Christianity. Nor did Mead conceive of her own scientific expeditions to primitive societies as a way to demonstrate white women's independence and courage to a skeptical world, although the mainstream and feminist press reported on Mead's achievements under headlines (recalling French-Sheldon's) like "'Going Native' for Science" and with leads that began: "Here's the only white woman to live alone among cannibals." [53](#) **[End Page 253]**

Furthermore, Mead went to extreme lengths to differentiate her own scientific practices from those of evolutionary anthropologists, including Alice Fletcher. Speaking of the relationship between the modern fieldworker and her subject, Mead proclaimed that the "pure" anthropologist "does not want to improve them, convert them, govern them, trade with them, recruit them or heal them." [54](#) Opposed to what she called "culture-wrecking," Mead characterized this earlier anthropology as poor science, distorted by assimilationist goals. She understood the role that evolutionary anthropology had played in accelerating the deculturation of American Indian societies. Mead differentiated her scientific methodology from those of her predecessors, constructing herself as an objective scientist, whose practice, in distinction to Fletcher's, was politically detached, morally neutral, theoretically valid, and empirically sound.

Despite her disavowals, however, Mead depended on nineteenth-century traditions to construct her own authoritative relationship to primitive societies (as their protector) and to maintain her authority as a scientific expert in the eyes of her western audience. Anthropology attracted Mead initially and continued to compel her allegiance because it empowered her to act as a cultural mediator (or barrier when necessary) between the civilized and primitive. Like Fletcher in the 1890s, Mead believed that anthropologists were under severe time pressure to provide knowledge about primitive cultures before western societies entirely subsumed or destroyed them. Although in Mead's view, Fletcher had assisted in the annihilation of American Indian cultures and Mead saw her role as somehow preserving what was left of primitive cultures (or if not the cultures themselves, then westerners' knowledge of them), the two positions were not that different. For the same tensions that existed in Fletcher's anthropology riddled Mead's. Fletcher justified her intervention into Indian societies by the necessity of "protecting" Indian women; Mead wanted to protect primitive cultures from "contamination" by the west. Despite her avowals that the pure scientist must remain uninvolved, as a citizen sensitive to the injustices of western imperialism, Mead often found a neutral stance impossible.

Still, Mead took advantage of imperialist power relations when it served her purposes to do so. In 1932, she explained how Reo Fortune, her husband at the time, coerced unwilling men to help them carry their **[End Page 254]** belongings by "unearth[ing] their darkest secrets which they wished kept from the government, and then order[ing] them to come and carry." <sup>55</sup> Mead's biographer, Jane Howard, also relates how audiences in Manus and in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, shouted Mead down in 1953 (her first return since the 1930s) because she refused to acknowledge that she had made her "fortune . . . telling their stories around the world." <sup>56</sup> Howard tries to defend Mead, offering the observation that Mead would have been the first to encourage New Guineans to write down their own stories. Indeed, during the 1940s, Mead had urged western anthropologists "to *study with* members of other cultures," cautioning them that it was "imperative to phrase every statement about a culture so that those statements are acceptable to the members of the culture itself." <sup>57</sup> Whether Mead called for this kind of collaboration because she believed it would promote more accurate and scientific accounts, or whether she simply believed that westerners had a moral obligation not to offend their informants remains unclear. Whichever the case, Mead seemed not to understand that imperialist dynamics gave her power and authority over her informants, a power they eventually resented.

Like Armstrong and French-Sheldon before her, Mead played to western fears that a single white woman among primitives was always at some physical risk. This aspect of Mead's self-presentation can be most clearly discerned in her radio conversations with James Baldwin, transcribed and published in 1971 under the title *A Rap on Race*. In these exchanges, Mead recollected one incident from her field work in New Guinea, in which she felt she had to retrieve a book of matches that strange men from another village had stolen from her. Recalling that she was all "alone in a village where there wasn't a single white person within two days' walk," Mead recounted:

I had to get that box of matches back. If I didn't, I would have been as

good as dead. White people who let a thief go used to be killed; they had shown themselves as weak. So I stormed up to the end of the village. This was a fine exercise of sheer white supremacy, nothing else. . . . I walked up to the end of the village and they were all sitting around in a circle and I said, "Give me those matches back." And one man put his hand in his bag and said, "I didn't steal them; I just took them," and handed them back. Then we were all safe. Now if I had made one misstep I'd have been dead, and then the administration would have sent in a punitive expedition and they would have been dead. [58](#)

### [End Page 255]

What is most interesting in this account is the responsibility that Mead assumed for ensuring everyone's safety, that is, her ease with the Anglo-American female role of protector. While she clearly feared for her life, she claimed greater fear for these New Guinea men and argued that their fate lay in her hands—not her fate in theirs. This sense of having greater power, knowledge, and skill than the primitive at maneuvering within the primitive's own world, links Mead to both French-Sheldon and Fletcher and attributes to the white woman an agency and authority that simultaneously denies the primitive corresponding agency, knowledge, and power. It does not seem to occur to Mead in this account that the village men might have understood the risk of retribution by the colonial government, and it was that understanding rather than skillful maneuvering on her part that led to their compliance with her orders. Yet, Mead also felt burdened by what she understood to be her complicity in maintaining the racist boundaries required by the strictures of white supremacy, for, as she immediately added in her conversation to Baldwin, she imagined that this was what it must have been like for white women in the antebellum American South: "This is the burden, in a sense, that in this country the black man and the white woman carried in plantation days. If a white woman made a mistake, or didn't remember who she was every single second, everyone would suffer." [59](#)

Finally, one other tendency in Mead's work owes its cultural power to the embeddedness of nineteenth-century constructions and continues to be of great relevance to feminists in the late twentieth century. Mead vested responsibility in women as mothers to abolish racial discrimination and oppression. Although she did not believe in evolution's theory of the maternal transmission of racial traits, she set forth a cultural theory of mothering in the 1950s that held that better mothering could eliminate racial prejudice. Downplaying economic and social structures that perpetuated racial oppression and conflating all forms of racism with individual prejudice, Mead argued that prejudice developed and served primarily as an "educational device" which the "average mother [uses] to bring up her children." Believing that all forms of racial oppression could be overcome through an alteration in child-rearing practices, Mead recommended that mothers be taught not to make negative references to other groups as they raised their children. [60](#)

To illustrate the importance of unprejudiced child-rearing methods, **[End Page 256]** and in response to the query "Do the children of mixed marriages usually grow into more tolerant adults?" Mead cited an anecdote she claimed to be "render[ing] from memory of a story recorded on p. 168 in John Dollard's *Caste and Clan in a*



*Southern Town (1937).*"

There is quite a good anecdote that is told of a group of Negro children in the South who were picking on one sibling who was much lighter than the others. . . . [T]he mother comes out and says: "you chillun stop apickin' on dat pore white chile. He'd be jes' as black as you are if I hadn't got behind in mah insurance." [61](#)

Mead called this "a counter-racial joke," "a Negro-American joke which denies the fact that white people are the least interesting or attractive [to black people] except for economic reasons." [62](#) Mead employed the joke to allay fears among her white audience that black people constantly desire and seek sexual intercourse with white people. The context in which Mead repeated it suggested that it was a joke that black people told about themselves. She used it to allude to the information it supposedly contained concerning actual child-rearing practices among black people, practices that white people, Mead seemed to be saying, might consider as a model for raising their own children to be free of the racial prejudice that disparaged blackness.

However, when we compare Mead's analysis to the one that Dollard provided (since Mead gave the precise page number from Dollard, we can presume she knew of Dollard's interpretation), we find that Mead dramatically revised the significance of the joke by neglecting to mention that Dollard heard it from white women of the middle and upper classes. Dollard's interpretation, in fact, is quite different from Mead's. He found the joke interesting because it seemed to him "to convey an amusement [on the part of white women] at the freedom with which Negro women do sexual things," "to express a rather simple sort of envy of the superior freedom of Negro women, who . . . have access to men of both castes, as the white women do not." In short, for Dollard, the joke represented "the fleeting forms in which forbidden [sexual] interests can be socially expressed although they could not be seriously declared." [63](#)

This clearly, then, was not a joke that black people told about themselves, as Mead's reading implied, but a joke that elite southern white women told about black women in the 1930s. The joke does not contain information concerning actual child-rearing practices, as Mead's **[End Page 257]** citing of it suggested, but expresses white hostility toward black women (masking the repression of white women's interracial sexual desires). Mead read "choice" into black women's imputed behavior, seeing freedom from, not entrapment within, racist economic structures, as the lesson the joke contained. To put this point in even stronger terms, Mead's analysis of choice transformed what might have been interpreted as the disparagement and sexual victimization of the black woman into a justification for her just punishment due to her own lack of industry and thrift (she should not have gotten behind in her insurance).

Had Margaret Mead been born several generations earlier, in 1850 rather than 1901, she very likely could have been a missionary in the vein of Mrs. Armstrong or an ethnologist and advocate of American Indian reform, like Alice Fletcher, or with a little more money, an explorer of Africa, such as May French-Sheldon. As it was, Mead came of age at a time when academic anthropology was consolidating its

authority as a modern science of human nature and society. Mead's use of anthropology drew upon her culture's longtime prurient fascination with the primitive as a racial "other," upon whom white women could project or work through their own sexual and racial anxieties as they continued to reflect on what they should do about their own perceived sexual oppression.

Mead's insistence that the pure anthropologist was merely a neutral observer was disingenuous, or rather, it was a point of considerable instability on which she seesawed throughout her career. The objectivity she insisted on when she claimed to be merely observing and recording cultural practices of primitive societies (as a pure anthropologist) was something she easily dispensed with in her critiques of both western and non-western patriarchal relations (as an applied anthropologist). Mead's relation to primitives was equally complex. Part of Mead wanted to protect primitive societies from what she saw as the contaminating influences of western colonialism and modernization, and part of her wanted to spur primitive societies, as well the United States, into altering its gender practices.<sup>64</sup> To get primitives to change immoral practices without imposing western values on them was not necessarily, for Mead, a contradiction, as she believed that certain values were universal and that human beings were often in agreement on moral questions. "Practices that are repugnant to our ethical system, often [are] also to the natives who practice them. . . . It is very [End Page 258] interesting to see the way these practices which are most repugnant to humans disappear quickly when primitive people are given a chance at something else."<sup>65</sup>

As Jean Bethke Elshtain and others have argued, by the standards of her day Mead's science was not just competent, it was at the cutting edge of progressive anthropological practice. Although Mead conceived of her work as an antihegemonic challenge to Social Darwinism, eugenics, and evolutionary anthropology, this does not mean that Mead's work was devoid of racism. Mead offered a radical critique of evolutionary anthropology and its political corollary, assimilationism, but her dependency on liberal constructs of choice and freedom impeded her ability to critique domestic racism. Her work was implicated in the history of western imperialism in ways that she herself refused to acknowledge.

## Envisioning a Future for Feminist Ethnography

Feminist-inspired anthropological research and writing on gender relations, after two decades of practice, has come of age. . . . We now see both the adjective of location—we are Western feminists . . . and the noun's contingent, historically determined existence. . . . It is necessary to break out of the closed system of ethnographic liberalism, to recognize that no ethnography is ever entirely nonevaluative, that ethnography itself is a genre made possible by ongoing Western imperialism.

—Micaela di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge*

Despite her profound impact on American society, Mead does not figure prominently in most recent cultural histories and only occasionally appears among the pantheon of elite women whose works now constitute the canon of feminist writings for the modern women's movement in the United States.<sup>66</sup> Scholarship on

the history of anthropology and the history of feminism remain two distinct fields of inquiry. Little work exists that examines the history of the exchange between feminism and anthropology as systems of cultural critique. <sup>67</sup>

In part because Mead so emphatically defended anthropology as a positivistic science that produced "objective" accounts of other cultures, and in part because so many U.S. social scientists today remain committed to positivism as an ideal to strive for, even if, as they understand, it can never be obtained, much recent debate surrounding **[End Page 259]** Mead's work centers on the question of whether she produced accurate or true ethnographies. <sup>68</sup> The few feminists who have defended Mead from the charges of shoddy science have done so from the perspective that no scientific practice is ever fully objective and have argued that the ethnocentrism in Mead's work was unavoidable and insignificant in light of the dominant practices of her day. <sup>69</sup>

I would argue otherwise. Mead's legacy for western liberal feminism demonstrates that what counts as good ethnography is neither self-evident nor measurable in any objective sense, and most certainly does not derive from attempts to be fair, rational, or scientific. Science cannot resolve the problems posed by the fact that the anthropological author-reader is always already historically as well as culturally positioned in relation to the object of study. As Micaela di Leonardo has written, "ethnography itself is a genre made possible by ongoing Western imperialism." <sup>70</sup> But this statement, so subtly put, raises a significant question: How precisely should we characterize the relationship between ethnography and imperialism? To understand how previous forms of ethnography facilitated certain types of ethnocentric visions of the world does not explain how ethnography will function in the future. Yet, it does focus our attention where it needs to be: on the contemporary effects of ethnographies, assessed in relation to a range of political contexts. If ethnographies are inescapably evaluative, are they inescapably ethnocentric? The problem we must engage, then, is whether some kind of new ethnography can be created that might help undermine western imperialism.

I use the ambiguous term author-reader purposefully to suggest a double meaning: first that anthropological researchers read their subjects before they write accounts, and second, to insist that all subsequent readers of ethnography are just as actively involved and implicated in the act of anthropological interpretation. Ethnographies are always contested political acts. This is true regardless of the cultural origin or affiliation of the author-reader. A native anthropologist (cultural insider) is no more advantageously positioned to produce objective, true, or authentic narratives than is a nonnative one (cultural outsider), although we might want to consider whether we should grant indigenous or insider accounts greater claims to authority on moral grounds as a sort of anthropological corollary to the political right to self-determination.

In short, ethnography, like history, is always already an interpretative **[End Page 260]** act that imposes on its subject and thus always requires further interpretations (impositions). These interpretations respond to and derive their meanings from the past and help direct the meanings of the future. The subsequent rereadings and

reinterpretations are as important as those of the original anthropologist--indeed more so, for it is through these rereadings, reinterpretations, and rewritings that the relationship between feminism and imperialism might be changed. So, as western feminists, the sooner we begin to understand how our feminism, as well as our ethnographies, derive from and are connected to the history of imperialism, the sooner we may be able to envision a nonimperialistic feminist ethnography. <sup>71</sup>

Both the debates over Mead's competency as a scientist as well as Mead's relative neglect by feminist historians deflect us from reflecting on how racism and ethnocentrism continue to inform an Anglo-American liberal feminist tradition, not just in the most esoteric realms of feminist theory, but also in popular expressions of feminist politics. <sup>72</sup> The question, was Mead's science objective, as well as the response offered by feminists, no science is ever objective, excuses us from having to examine the effects of Mead's comparative cultural criticism on western feminist thought today.

To identify these effects, consider an article that recently appeared in the *New York Times*. Written by Susan Chira and entitled "Nursing Becomes a Feminist Battlefield," this article describes the emotional difficulty that some middle-class American women experience as they decide whether or not to breast-feed their infants. <sup>73</sup> The author attributes the dilemma to the psychological and cultural pressures resulting from the medical community's campaign to promote breast-feeding. Aware that the medical profession did not always advocate breast-feeding, Chira cautions American women against capitulating to the newest dogmas of scientific authority. Chira fears that the medical community's injunction to breast-feed will result in further restriction of American women's economic opportunities, and she wants women to be able to resist, without guilt, the cultural pressure to nurse their infants. Thus, she demands of American society that mothers be given the greatest freedom of choice in making such a decision.

So far, there is nothing particularly striking in the linkage of women's freedom with individual choice, which has become an intellectual mainstay of liberal feminism. What is remarkable, however, is the way Chira attempts to defend choice as the basis of western **[End Page 261]** women's freedom. She does so by invoking an implicit assumption that freedom of choice differentiates the United States from the developing world. In a discussion that is, up until this point, clearly focused on a conflict between American mothers and American physicians, Chira introduces ethnographic evidence about breast-feeding practices of women in unspecified developing countries. Desiring to show that breast milk is not always the best milk, that breast-feeding does not necessarily or automatically promote the health of child and mother, Chira marshals her evidence from interviews with Penny Van Esterik, an anthropologist from York University in Ontario, and Nafis Sadik, the executive director of the United Nations Population Fund.

Both Esterik and Sadik go on record as advocates of breast-feeding, but they provide Chira with conflicting data about the significance of nursing practices in developing countries. Sadik offers examples of nursing mothers who suffer anemia and iron deficiencies, which for Chira, serve as evidence that breast-feeding does not necessarily promote these women's health. Esterik points out that bottle-feeding

among women in developing countries does not change their status as full-time child-rearers. For Chira, this serves as evidence that bottle-feeding does not liberate these women from restrictive gender roles.

At one level, then, the evidence is both contradictory and meaningless. Chira has no interest in determining whether breast-feeding or bottle-feeding is a better method of nursing infants for a specific group of women in a specific sociohistorical context. The cultural logic and power of such an argument--why it is that Esterick's and Sadik's contradictory testimony about women in developing countries is seen as relevant for assessing U.S. cultural practices--only becomes evident when we reflect on Margaret Mead's legacy. For it was Mead who consolidated the idea for western feminists that the primitive could be used to critique western patriarchy, even as primitive societies themselves were devalued for an even more extreme gender oppression. For Chira, the same logic is operable: such evidence can point us in the right direction (be wary of breast-feeding because women in developing countries who breast-feed suffer from nutritional deficiencies), even as such societies are devalued for their antifeminism (even when such women bottle-feed they remain oppressed by restrictive gender roles). For these comparisons to have any meaning at all, we must understand ourselves as somehow connected to these women of developing countries (do not breast-feed or you too may suffer health **[End Page 262]** problems) and yet consider our culture incommensurably superior in its gender relations (bottle-feeding would promote freedom for American women, even though it does not promote freedom for women in developing countries). Chira invokes the developing world to critique patriarchal gender relations in the United States, while at the same time, her critique discredits the developing country as a model because of its own purported extreme and intransigent gender oppression.

Chira's assumption that developing countries (generically and abstractly conceived) are relevant to Americans' assessment of their own patriarchal, misogynistic gender practices is logically possible only because western liberal feminism has succeeded, since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in forging analytical comparisons between civilized and primitive women.<sup>74</sup> This tradition is a deeply problematic one, not the least because western feminist theory has enabled the carving out of a cultural space that empowers the civilized woman as morally superior to those primitives with whom she compares herself. In so doing, western liberal feminism has perpetuated a cultural ethnocentrism that the western speaker rarely intends and often cannot acknowledge. It is not simply that cross-cultural forms of sisterhood are difficult to enact because of misunderstandings that stem from cultural differences. Rather, the history of western liberal feminism has produced theoretical claims that position western societies as superior to non-western ones in terms of women's freedom from oppression defined in terms of individuality and choice.

I do not share Micaela di Leonardo's optimistic assessment that in the last two decades feminist anthropology has come of age. Too often, positivist feminist ethnography continues to assert that empiricism will somehow solve these conundrums, positing unproblematically that "systematic approaches" are better than "armchair reasoning."<sup>75</sup> Or conversely, poststructuralist feminist ethnography too often assumes that exposing contradictions within imperialistic discourses will



somehow automatically take the gale out of imperialist winds. Both traditions believe that writing good feminist ethnography (now acknowledged to be inescapably evaluative rather than value free) is only a question of coming up with a better methodology or a more nuanced theory. Most practicing feminist anthropologists, I would suspect, would agree with di Leonardo that our recognition that "we are western feminists" somehow moves us beyond the ethnocentrism of Margaret Mead. **[End Page 263]**

Her ethnocentrism notwithstanding, Margaret Mead grappled with important questions that still need consideration: If cultures are fundamentally untranslatable or incommensurable, what then is the point of and how shall we conduct comparative analyses? How does the attempt to understand other cultures help us comprehend our own? Given that we are always already historically and culturally positioned in relation to our objects of study, how do we write ethnographies that do not merely impose our views and morals on another?

If Mead cannot be emulated as a capable scientist, neither can we reject her work on the grounds that our own practices and theoretical insights have nothing in common with hers (as she did with regard to evolutionists like Fletcher). We must not be too quick to deny our historical embeddedness within the liberal feminist and anthropological traditions that Mead so centrally represents and embodies. Mead helped give authority to and popularize a framework that invoked the primitive for the articulation of western feminist ideals—a framework that, if Susan Chira's article is any indication, we are still a long way from abandoning in our popular discourse.

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## Notes

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1. Margaret Mead, Preface to 1973 ed. in *Coming of Age: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation* (1928; New York, 1955, 1961, 1973), n.p. All future citations from *Coming of Age* are from the 1973 edition. This book was reissued with at least five new prefaces, one in 1939, 1949, 1953, 1961, and 1973.

2. In the 1930s in the midst of the Depression, Mead gave advice about homemaking and child-rearing. During World War II, she became an expert on "national character" and argued that the United States could defeat totalitarian regimes without jeopardizing its own democratic institutions. After the war, with the nation's attention focused on domesticity, Mead lectured on marriage and the family. At

the height of the Civil Rights and women's movements, Mead spoke and published on racial and gender issues. Mead discusses her publishing venues and decisions in the introduction to a bibliography of her corpus; see Joan Gordan, ed., *Margaret Mead: The Complete Bibliography, 1925-1975* (The Hague, 1976), 1-21.

3. As other historians have pointed out, Mead's work coincided with an ongoing social movement in the 1920s to overcome the Victorian prudery and repression endemic in middle-class, heterosexual, Anglo sexual relations. See Stephen O. Murray, "On Boasians and Margaret Mead: Reply to Freeman," *Current Anthropology* 32 (Aug.-Oct. 1991): 488.

4. Earlier drafts of this essay have elicited this type of criticism.

5. The best treatment of evolutionary anthropology is George W. Stocking, Jr.'s classic works, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, 1987) and *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Chicago, 1968, 1982).

6. Margaret Mead, *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years* (New York, 1975), 151-52.

7. For over one hundred years, westerners had presumed that primitive women were overworked, sexually abused, or otherwise badly treated by the men of their cultures. As historian Nicholas Thomas has argued, "the degradation of women was a measure for the degradation of a society and enabled it to be mapped against others in a region. Gender was thus central to the evolutionary ranking of societies. . . ." Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), 102.

8. William I. Thomas, "A Difference in the Metabolism of the Sexes," *American Journal of Sociology* 3 (July 1897): 41.

9. Gail Bederman, "'Civilization,' the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness, and Ida B. Wells's Antilynching Campaign (1892-94)," *Radical History Review* 52 (winter 1992): 9.

10. Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935; New York, 1963), 310. All future citations of this work are from the 1963 edition.

11. I want to thank Todd Gernes for suggesting the term cultural comparativism as a substitute for cultural relativism.

12. Mead was not quite a social constructionist in the way that scholars currently use the term, because Mead believed that innate personality differences powerfully shaped individual personalities.

13. The best account of how women social scientists challenged evolutionary paradigms in the early twentieth century is Rosalind Rosenberg's *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Root of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, 1982). Also see Louise Michele Newman, ed., *Men's Ideas/Women's Realities* (New York, 1985) and Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: Victorian Constructions of Womanhood* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

14. Mead, *Coming of Age*, 4 (emphasis added).

15. See Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (New York, 1903) and *The Man-Made World, or, Our Androcentric Culture* (New York, 1911); Mary Roberts Coolidge, *Why Women are So* (New York, 1912); and Elsie Clews Parsons, "Facing Race Suicide," *Masses* 6 (June 1915): 15 and *The Family* (New York, 1906).

16. By the early 1900s, Hall had achieved prominent status as one of the founding fathers and current leaders of American psychology, having taught first at the Johns Hopkins University and then at Clark University, a graduate institution in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he served both as a professor of psychology and as president from its inception in 1888 until 1920. Dorothy Ross, G. *Stanley Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet* (Chicago, 1972); Russett, *Sexual Science*, 57.

17. Mead, *Coming of Age*, 5.

[18](#). Ibid., 201.

[19](#). "This acceptance of a wider range as 'normal' provides a cultural atmosphere in which frigidity and psychic impotence do not occur and in which a satisfactory sex adjustment in marriage can always be established. The acceptance of such an attitude without in any way accepting promiscuity would go a long way towards solving many marital impasses and emptying our park benches and our houses of prostitution." Ibid., 223.

[20](#). Ibid., 206.

[21](#). According to historian Nicholas Thomas, gender relations was "a crucial dimension of difference that often encode[d] or valorize[d] other differences such as those based in 'race' or geographic location." Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture*, 100.

[22](#). Mead, *Coming of Age*, 236-37.

[23](#). This book drew many readers for over four decades. As late as the 1960s, introductory psychology and anthropology courses in U.S. colleges still routinely taught *Sex and Temperament*.

[24](#). Cited in Jane Howard, *Margaret Mead: A Life* (New York, 1984), 162.

[25](#). Mead, *Sex and Temperament*, 313. Numerous reviewers read this book avidly, accepted most of its conclusions, and strongly recommended that others read it too because "of its theoretic importance to the subject of the relations of the sexes." C. H. Wedgwood, review of *Sex and Temperament*, *Oceania* 6 (Sept. 1935): 113.

[26](#). Mead, *Sex and Temperament*, 280-81.

[27](#). For example, the *Nation* published Freda Kirchwey's review under the headline "Sex in the South Seas," *Nation* 127 (24 Oct. 1928): 427.

[28](#). Mead, Preface to 1950 edition, *Sex and Temperament*, n.p.

[29](#). Hortense Powdermaker, review of *Sex and Temperament* by Margaret Mead, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 181 (Sept. 1935): 221-22.

[30](#). Mead, Preface to 1950 edition, *Sex and Temperament*, n.p.

[31](#). Readers in the 1930s understood and embraced this point. As Jeannette Mirsky, a reviewer for the *Survey*, wrote, "the author concludes that by assigning definite and different traits to the sexes or by setting a single pattern for men and women, we get misfits, persons of either sex who cannot fit into their defined roles. Her plea is for a variety of roles open to both men and women so that everyone will have institutionalized backing to express his temperament and talents." Jeannette Mirsky, review of *Sex and Temperament* by Margaret Mead, *Survey* 71 (Oct. 1935): 315.

[32](#). Mead, *Coming of Age*, 248.

[33](#). In the early part of the nineteenth century, the job of civilizing primitives fell mostly to white Protestant men--most often, trained ministers (albeit frequently accompanied by their wives) who were sent to the field to convert the heathen. Only eleven single women served as foreign missionaries in the antebellum period. The Civil War, however, marked a watershed for white women's involvement in both the home and foreign missionary movements, with the number of single women serving as foreign missionaries rising into the thousands, and support for the movement attracting millions of other women. See Patricia R. Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Woman's Foreign Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation, 1870-1920* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1985), 36-40, 213-22; and Barbara Welter, "She Hath Done What She Could," *American Quarterly* 30 (winter 1978): 627 n. 12.

[34](#). Lester Ward, "Our Better Halves," *Forum* 6 (Nov. 1888): 275.

[35](#). The clearest presentation of these ideas can be found in Otis T. Mason, "Woman's Share in

Primitive Culture," *The American Antiquarian* 11 (Jan. 1889): 3-13; Mason, *Woman's Share in Primitive Culture* (New York, 1894, 1898); and Lester Ward, "Our Better Halves," *Forum* 6 (Nov. 1888): 266-75; Ward, *The Psychic Factors of Civilization* (1893; New York, 1970). Otis Mason immediately understood the implications of this new theory for redirecting the U.S. policy in regard to assimilating American Indians. As Mason argued in *Woman's Share in Primitive Culture* (1894), the United States had to civilize and assimilate Indian women first. Only then would it make sense to attend to Indian men. This was assumed to be true for biological reasons: a civilized Indian woman would pass on civilization traits to her offspring, regardless of the evolutionary status of the father. I analyze these theoretical developments in more detail in *Laying Claim to Difference: Ideologies of Race and Gender in the U.S. Woman's Movement, 1870-1920* (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1992).

36. M. R. Armstrong, "Sketches of Mission Life, No. IV," *The Southern Workman* 10 (Apr. 1881): 44.

37. Ibid.

38. The following biographical details are drawn from Joan Mark's superb biography, *A Stranger in Her Native Land: Alice Fletcher and the American Indians* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1988).

39. The General Allotment Act of 1887, or the Dawes Act as it was called, was the U.S. government's response to mounting criticism of its reservation system. The act had several main features intended to abolish separate Indian reservations and force the assimilation of Indians into Western society: first, it provided for the "allotment" of land to individual Indians who were deemed assimilable and civilizable, as a first step towards granting U.S. citizenship. Second, it specified different amounts of land to be granted to different categories of people. Heads of household could receive 160 acres, unmarried adults 80 acres, and children 40 acres, but government agents had discretion for overseeing allotments. Third, because the Indian reservations contained much more land than would be used up in allotments, the act specified that all "surplus" lands would be sold to the government and opened to white settlement. The Indian population in 1880 was three hundred thousand; and reservation land included more than one hundred fifty million acres, or more than five hundred acres per person. Hence, the Dawes Act provided for forced transference of a large portion of Indian territory from Indians to the U.S. government. The Dawes Act was implemented on a case-by-case basis, beginning with tribes that appeared to whites to be more eager for individual land ownership. See Frederick E. Hoxie and Joan T. Mark, introduction to *With the Nez Percés: Alice Fletcher in the Field, 1889-92* by E. Jane Gay (Lincoln, Nebr., 1981), xiv-xvi.

40. As secretary, Fletcher assisted the leaders of the Association for the Advancement of Women (AAW) Julia Ward Howe, Maria Mitchell, and Mary Livermore, in carrying out their executive duties and planning the annual conferences (Woman's Congresses), which were held every year in different parts of the country. According to Fletcher's biographer, Joan Mark, the eight years that Fletcher spent in the AAW, from 1873-1881, were critical for her subsequent career, because she learned how to run an organization, participate in public debate, and petition public officials. Her experiences in the AAW also reinforced her elitist convictions that society ought to be led by "natural leaders," people of the highest ability, education and energy who believed they knew what was best for the country. "What Alice Fletcher's New York clubwoman years did not do," Mark argues, "was prepare her to consider as her equals those at the bottom of the social ladder or to respect the right and opinions of the dispossessed." Mark, *Stranger in Her Native Land*, 28.

41. According to Jeanne Madeline Moore, May French married and divorced at a young age before her second marriage to Sheldon. See Moore, "Bebe Bwana," *American History Illustrated* 21 (Oct. 1986): 37. I have not yet found any other sources that corroborate a prior marriage.

42. Although Stanley warned her "not to go further than the Free Methodist Mission nine miles beyond Mombassa," he provided her with several letters of introduction to British officials in the region. This correspondence between French-Sheldon and Stanley is contained in the May French-Sheldon Papers in the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

43. "The fact was," French-Sheldon relates, "it was feared that the consequences of a woman's leading a caravan might throw the natives into a frenzy, [and] bring difficulties about which would involve the Imperial British East African Company in trouble and expense to come to my rescue." M.



French-Sheldon, *Sultan to Sultan: Adventures among the Masai and other Tribes of East Africa* (Boston, 1892), 66.

44. For reasons of space, I have restricted my analysis to a discussion of French-Sheldon's first expedition and its subsequent treatment in the U.S. media, but it should be noted that French-Sheldon made other trips to Africa, including several to the Belgium Congo and Liberia (1905, 1907). Her first account of the 1891 expedition appeared in a lengthy monograph, which was part travelogue, part scientific treatise, and part ethnography, and published in 1892 under two different titles *Sultan to Sultan* and *Adventures in East Africa*. A year after her return, she created several exhibitions of her trip for the Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893. These exhibitions were judged to be among the best of the fair and French-Sheldon was awarded a prize, given to her by Alice Fletcher, the renowned American anthropologist and leader of the Woman's National Indian Association. Over the next three decades, from the late 1890s through the 1920s, French-Sheldon arranged various lecture tours that were also reported on favorably by newspapers around the country.

45. In preparing for the trip, French-Sheldon claimed she needed a new setting for her next novel; accounts published afterward stressed her aspiration to make a "scientific" contribution to the knowledge of remote lands and peoples. The British public took French-Sheldon's claims to scientific expertise and authority seriously, and she was among the first group of women to be inducted into the prestigious and exclusive Royal Geographic Society.

46. *Sultan to Sultan* is full of stories that emphasize the author's disciplinary tactics as well as her ingenuity at protecting herself and her porters from physical dangers. "They never could seem to reconcile my sex with my post which, in their eyes, indubitably belonged to a man. . . . It is therefore with a sense of personal pride [that I can attest to the fact that I was] during my trying expedition, surrounded constantly by these black porters, the majority of them culled from the roughest specimens of natives, deficient in intellect, devoid of any certain knowledge as to the proper attitude that men should assume to a white woman, and many of them full of brutish instincts, that they universally treated me with deference and obedience. . . . All this I firmly hold was due to [a] certain regime I adopted, based upon the combined experience of many white explorers and an innate conviction that individual prestige, consisting in personal dignity and self-respect on the part of a leader, must be maintained wherever you may be, if you expect to inspire those whom you aim to guide and command with your personal importance." French-Sheldon, *Sultan to Sultan*, 380, 381.

47. Obituary, May French-Sheldon, *London Evening News*, 1 Feb. 1936, lunch edition; in May French-Sheldon Papers, Scrapbook, Container 7, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Or as another paper reported: "Close on half-a-century ago, just at the time when the world was being thrilled by the chronicles of Stanley's adventurous exploits in Darkest Africa news of the journey of Mrs. French Sheldon . . . unaccompanied by any white companion, came as an astonishing feat of intrepid courage and daring." Obituary, May French-Sheldon, *West London Observer*, 21 Feb. 1936, in May French-Sheldon Papers, Scrapbook, Container 7, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

48. In the 1910s, more than twenty years after French-Sheldon's original trip, newspaper journalists were still asking her about her decision to travel without white male escorts. French-Sheldon replied: "I wanted to show how easy it was for a woman to go into the country and travel about on friendly terms with the natives where a man would probably have to make his way by force. . . . I never took a white *man* along with me because . . . I didn't want to have any differences of opinion concerning the conduct of the caravan and I was afraid he would want to take care of me, shoulder all the responsibilities, &c., and it would turn into *his* expedition instead of mine." "With Gayest Parisian Clothes She Traveled Alone Through African Jungles," *Evening Sun*, 15 Feb. 1915, in May French-Sheldon Papers, Scrapbook, Container 7, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

49. French-Sheldon's husband died sometime during 1892 while she was writing an account of her safari. She never remarried. Her most significant emotional relationships later in her life were with women, in particular one who was a personal assistant and a companion for many years. This woman's existence can only be indirectly documented through existing primary sources. French-Sheldon seems to have destroyed all of her personal papers that touched on this crucial relationship.

50. Obituary, May French-Sheldon, *New York Times*, 11 Feb. 1936, in May French-Sheldon Papers, Scrapbook, Container 7, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.



[51](#). Since the writing of this essay, T. J. Boisseau has published an article that situates French-Sheldon within the history of U.S. imperialism. See T. J. Boisseau, "'They Called Me *Bebe Bwana*': A Cultural Study of an Imperial Feminist," *Signs* 21 (autumn 1995): 116-46.

[52](#). In 1923, a newspaper in Covina, California identified French-Sheldon as "one of the outstanding figures among the great women of modern times." In 1924, the *San Francisco Chronicle* publicized an upcoming lecture of the seventy-eight year-old Sheldon with a notice written tongue in cheek, but which ended with a sincere endorsement: "Seriously, Mrs. Sheldon is one of the most remarkable of women, to whose accomplishments in lines not usually considered within woman's sphere it is a pleasure to pay this tribute." Clippings from a newspaper published in Covina Calif., 27 Sept. 1923 and from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 Feb. 1924, in May French-Sheldon Papers, Scrapbook, Container 7, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

[53](#). Frances Drewry McMullen, "'Going Native' for Science," *The Woman's Journal* 15 (July 1930): 8; and *American Magazine* 120 (Sept. 1935): 42. The *New York Times* reported on a dinner held to honor Dr. Mead in 1934 with the headline "Women Explorers Held Equal to Men." The lead to this article began, "Whether in the steaming jungles of Central Africa or atop the frozen summits of some of the world's highest peaks, the modern woman explorer 'can more than hold her own.' . . ." *New York Times* 14 Mar. 1934, 9.

[54](#). Margaret Mead, *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* (New York, 1949), 39.

[55](#). Letter from Alitua, 15 Jan. 1932, in Margaret Mead, *Letters from The Field, 1925-1975* (New York, 1977), 103.

[56](#). Howard, *Margaret Mead*, 398. Although Howard is not clear on this point, it appears that this quotation comes from an interview with Leonora Foerstel, who it seems was an eyewitness to the event.

[57](#). Margaret Mead, "The Comparative Study of Cultures and the Purposive Cultivation of Democratic Values, 1941-1949," in *Perspectives on a Troubled Decade: Science, Philosophy, and Religion, 1939-1949* (New York, 1950), 91.

[58](#). Margaret Mead and James Baldwin, *A Rap on Race* (New York, 1971), 28.

[59](#). *Ibid.*, 28.

[60](#). Mead was aware that many would find this an oversimplified and inadequate analysis, and to ward off criticism, she wrote: "You perhaps think that I am constantly bringing this back to simple family points and not facing the major issues, but the big differences that exist in any society, like . . . between the three races, are all originally worked out in the home." Mead, "Race Majority--Race Minority," in *The People in Your Life: Psychiatry and Personal Relations by Ten Leading Authorities*, ed. Margaret M. Hughes (1951; New York, 1971), 132.

[61](#). Mead, "Race Majority--Race Minority," 147.

[62](#). *Ibid.*

[63](#). John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937; New York, 1949), 168.

[64](#). An excellent and early example of this complex and ambivalent position can be found in Margaret Mead, "Americanization in Samoa," *The American Mercury* 16 (Mar. 1929): 264-70.

[65](#). Margaret Mead, "Human Differences and World Order," in *World Order: Its Intellectual and Cultural Foundation*, ed. Ernest Johnson (New York, 1945), 42-43.

[66](#). U.S. women's historians rarely include Mead's work among the pantheon of elite women whose ideas constitute the canon of feminist writings for the modern U.S. women's movement, even though Mead was writing columns on the women's movement for *Redbook Magazine* at the time. The dismissal of Mead from the early feminist tradition may have been encouraged by Betty Friedan's

interpretation of Mead (post-1949) as a biological essentialist. Friedan comments in *The Feminine Mystique* that Mead's writings, infused with Freudian ideas, "glorif[ie]d the mysterious miracle of femininity, which a woman realizes simply by being female." Nonetheless, Friedan recognized that Mead had a "profound effect on the women in [her] generation, the one before it, and the generation now growing up." Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963), 145, 135.

Activist-scholars who produced the first round of histories of the so-called second wave of feminism scarcely took notice of Mead's presence. For example, Aileen Krador, who edited one of the earliest second-wave collections of feminist writings, *Up From the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism* (Chicago, 1968), included entries for Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mary Bunting, and the National Organization for Women's statement of purpose, along with several lesser-known figures. Miriam Schneir ended her anthology *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (New York, 1972) with selections by Margaret Sanger, Clara Zetkin, and Virginia Wolf. Only sociologist Alice Rossi recognized that there was "much in the work of Margaret Mead that can contribute new qualities to the thinking of contemporary feminists" and saw fit to place Mead in the company of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir in her collection *The Feminist Papers: from Adams to de Beauvoir* (New York, 1973). Margaret Rossiter, in *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940* (Baltimore, Md., 1982), dealt peripherally with Mead, largely because her career, along with Ruth Benedict's, presented counterevidence to Rossiter's central and valid purpose, which was to demonstrate the marginalization of women in science from 1920 to 1940. Even Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere's pathbreaking collection *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford, Calif., 1974) which arrayed the most promising work in feminist anthropology up until that time, makes only slight mention of Mead, although Rosaldo points out that Mead was among the first to use cross-cultural analysis to argue that westerners' conceptions of "natural" sexual differences were not in fact natural, necessary, or universal.

My quick perusal of the most prominent journals, *Feminist Studies*, *Signs*, *Journal of Women's History*, *Gender and Society*, and *Gender and History*, turned up no articles on Mead. Prominent secondary-source collections, such as Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner, *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women* (New York, 1974); Nancy Cott and Elizabeth Pleck, *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women* (New York, 1979); and Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz, eds., *Unequal Sisters: A Multi-Cultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (New York, 1990), contain no articles on Mead. The major exception is Rosalind Rosenberg, who in *Beyond Separate Spheres* identifies Mead as part of a generation that, in distinguishing itself from the politics of its suffragist mothers, "rejected the public side of feminism, with its ideology of female uniqueness and its organizational focus on female interests" (209).

67. An excellent, burgeoning scholarship historicizes and critiques anthropology, including James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986); George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago, 1986); George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, 1987); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); Marc Manganaro, ed., *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text* (Princeton, N.J., 1990); Micaela di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991); Arnold Krupat, *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992); and Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture*.

A feminist historiography on the history of social science is just beginning to emerge. See Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres*; Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge, England, 1991). Practicing feminist anthropologists are currently engaged in specifying the theoretical contributions of their feminist predecessors; see Michaela di Leonardo, Introduction to *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge*, 1-50; and Louise Lamphere, "Feminist Anthropology: The Legacy of Elsie Clews Parsons," *American Ethnologist* 16 (Aug. 1989): 518-33.

68. In the early 1980s, anthropologist Derek Freeman's *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983) sparked a controversy over the scientific worth (accuracy) of Mead's ethnography. As a result, Mead has emerged again both among anthropologists and a larger nonacademic audience as a subject of intense public scrutiny and

debate. Freeman argued that Mead had not properly differentiated truth-telling and jesting among her adolescent informants and so had produced an ethnography that inaccurately represented Samoan sexual practices. In response, social scientists published a flurry of articles reassessing the empirical methods and scientific validity of Mead's early work. This debate has tended to fixate on whether Mead's depictions of Samoan society correspond to other anthropologists' knowledge about the reality or truth about Samoan society and cultural practices in the early 1920s. Jane Howard lists some of these articles in her bibliography in *Margaret Mead*, 505-6. A good review of this scholarly debate can be found in Ray A. Rappaport, "Desecrating the Holy Woman: Derek Freeman's Attack on Margaret Mead," *American Scholar* 55 (summer 1986): 313-47.

[69](#). For example, feminist theorist Jean Bethke Elshtain accepts Freeman's charge that Mead's own cultural preoccupations fundamentally shaped her study of Samoa. As Elshtain writes, "It should neither surprise nor shock us that [Mead's] perspective and politics helped gear her expectations and color her interpretations. . . . Science provides no corrective lens that adjusts automatically for the 'distortions' inherent in the fact that the researcher is, after all, from another culture." Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Coming of Age in America: Why the Attack on Margaret Mead?" *The Progressive* (Oct. 1983): 33-35. Despite Elshtain's caution that the issue of scientific accuracy takes us down an unproductive line of inquiry, some scholars continue to trod this path. See Eleanor Leacock, "Anthropologists in Search of a Culture: Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman, and All the Rest of Us," in *Confronting the Margaret Mead Legacy: Scholarship, Empire and the South Pacific*, eds. Leonora Foerstel and Angela Gilliam (Philadelphia, 1992), 3-30.

[70](#). Micaela di Leonardo, Introduction to *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, 1, 2, 27.

[71](#). Joan Scott makes this argument in relation to the category of "experience" for feminist historiography. See "Experience" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York, 1992), 22-40. Also see Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads and Intrusions* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), 40, 88, esp. 105-6. For an interesting discussion of the problem of the native-anthropologist see Indira Karamcheti's review of Nita Kumar's book *Friends, Brothers and Informants* in the *Women's Review of Books* 9 (Sept. 1992): 16-17.

[72](#). Although white scholars now often concede the point that feminists of the early twentieth century held racist views, they usually add a disclaimer. For example, "she was white and middle-class, she was a part of her era, she could not escape the dominant ideologies of that era." These kinds of acknowledgements (while preferable to denials) do not enlarge our understanding of how or why profoundly racist ideas infused twentieth-century feminist theories. The problem with the logic that attributes racism to the racial and class identity of the feminist author establishes a false causality that condemns future white theorists to the same fate.

[73](#). Susan Chira, "Nursing Becomes a Feminist Battlefield," *New York Times* 10 Oct. 1993, Op. Ed.

[74](#). I am singling out Chira because she represents a compact example of a tendency I find widespread in contemporary feminist discourse. For other examples, see Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston, 1978) and Marilyn French, *The War Against Women* (New York, 1992).

[75](#). See for example Nadine R. Peacock, "Rethinking the Sexual Division of Labor: Reproduction and Women's Work among the Efe," in di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge*, 339-60.