In Defense of Margaret Mead: A Post-Colonial Feminist Perspective

In 1928, at the age of twenty-seven, anthropologist Margaret Mead published her first important work, *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Mead’s approach to anthropology sought to defy the Victorian era social constructions of race and gender, but in many cases her work also reflected imperialistic intentions by categorizing native peoples as savage. Modern readers of her work must recognize that despite the noted shortcomings, Mead was revolutionary in her thinking and inspired future generations of feminist anthropologists. She used her research and observations of other cultures to refute biological arguments for a gender hierarchy, and in doing so she successfully critiqued the patriarchal male-dominated system of her home country, the United States. Where she failed, in many respects, is with her attempt to promote cultural relativism and the binary opposition of primitive and civilized societies. Other critics claim that she wrote from a white privileged perspective and showed clear signs of racism and ethnocentrism.

It is essential to read Mead’s work with a critical mindset and understand the ways in which “difference” was defined and acknowledged during the era in which she lived and worked. Feminist post-colonial theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty have provided useful tools with which to re-read a text such as *Coming of Age in Samoa* and look for examples of what she describes as the “production of the ‘Third World woman,’” while noticing the ways in which
Mead shifted between challenging notions of gender relations and reinstating a hierarchy of the global north over the global south. I have chosen to defend the work of Margaret Mead using a feminist post-colonial lens as well as acknowledging that some contemporary approaches to indigenous research methodology may have better equipped her for translating the lives of native peoples without imposing western ideology upon them.

**Coming of Age in Samoa**

The purpose of this ethnographic study in Samoa was to understand how experiences of childhood and adolescence differed between cultures. Mead wanted to assess whether or not the angst and difficulties of being a young person had purely biological origins or could possibly be rooted in each individual society. While living among the village people and learning about life on the islands, the young anthropologist discovered what she thought was a delightful secret about sexuality and sexual experiences among the youth. She noticed that starting at puberty, girls and boys began experimenting with each other sexually, well before marriage, and that the parents and village elders knew of this behavior and did not disapprove. She also gathered that while it was possible for marriage and children to result from these trysts, for the most part, the girls carried on a series of practice relationships prior to settling down with one partner. She notes that “the first spontaneous experiment of adolescent children and the amorous excursions of the older men among the young girls of the village are variants on the edge of recognized types of relationships; so also is the first experiences of a young boy with an older woman” (49). Mead found this relaxed attitude that the Samoans seemed to possess about sex and sexual exploration refreshing and felt inspired to propose that women and men in the western world enjoy a similar kind of freedom and openness towards sex outside of marriage.
Reflecting on the emotional maturity and positive experiences of young Samoan girls, Margaret Mead advocated for sexual education to start at a very young age. She suggests that parents prepare their children for decision-making and “come clear-eyed to the choices which lie before them” (137). In *Coming of Age in Samoa* Mead writes that she believes that the American youth’s frustration, rebellion, rash actions, and inability to think critically or logically are all effects of Western society’s hampering and sheltering young people, particularly girls. Through her succinct writing she demonstrates that she was well aware of the sexual double standard that existed in her own society, one that gave more freedom to men than women. At the conclusion of *Coming of Age in Samoa*, she uses the information she has gathered on Samoan culture to launch a campaign against American culture. She states:

> Realizing that our own ways are not humanly inevitable nor God-ordained, but are the fruit of a long and turbulent history, we may well examine in turn all of our institutions, thrown into strong relief against the history of other civilisations, and weighing them in the balance, be not afraid to find them wanting. (130)

Her work, as demonstrated by this bold conclusion, was a means of interrogating gender roles, even going so far as to question the very nature of the institution of marriage. Mead was a “sex-positive feminist” before such a term even existed, meaning that she advocated for sexual freedom with more relationship and pleasure options for women outside of traditional long term coupling. What has been posited by critics of Mead’s work is that she was writing about such freedoms being possible for a strictly white middle-class female audience and thereby ignoring that this may not be feasible for women of color living in the Western world, a group already highly stigmatized as overtly sexual and morally bankrupt, taking into consideration that the group she was studying was also nonwhite and labeled as primitive.
Western Feminism and a Legacy of Racism

There is a complex history that surrounds feminism and racism. An example of a criticism against early twentieth century feminist ideology is that it was reserved for white women by white women with no attempt to address issues of race except for the occasions when humanitarian or missionary work brought them together. Mead’s research has not been spared from the accusation of having entrenched racism and ethnocentrism as foundational to her methodology. In her article entitled “Coming of Age, but not in Samoa,” Louise Newman explains how the legacy of Margaret Mead’s work has been both positive and negative: “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” (235). Here Newman is echoing the sentiments of women of color and indigenous women who in recent decades exposed the fact that they have been systematically ignored, isolated, and misrepresented by predominantly white academics and researchers.

Newman goes on to elaborate on the implicit racism that was present in anthropology in the early twentieth century, including that of other women doing fieldwork in various foreign countries. She notes that these women seemed to have a “prurient fascination with the primitive” which led to them struggling surreptitiously with their “own sexual and racial anxieties” under the guise of research (258). This kind of fetishizing research methodology was in direct relationship with what was happening in other academic arenas as the concept of “race” came under close scrutiny. The Victorian scientific community was just barely moving away from evolutionary models of humanity that claimed nonwhites were below whites on the chain of being. While I disagree with the premise that Margaret Mead was herself in any way racist, I also feel it is necessary to situate her in the time period in which she lived and worked. She boldly
declared that “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” (qtd. in Newman 239). This statement is evidence that Mead’s philosophy is a far cry from assigning all black bodies to a state of perpetual non-transcendence and objectification (See Mohanram *Black Body*). Her idea was to cite culture as the source of difference which completely rejected and dislodged the biological and evolutionary argument that there existed an inferior race of people(s).

One of the unfortunate but undeniable aspects of Mead’s research is that it is premised on a dichotomy of “Civilized women vs. Primitive women.” This terminology and ideology was part of an intentional hierarchy imposed on indigenous people by the highly invested imperialist powers that were still very much at work during the time of her writing *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Louise Newman continues her critique by stating: “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” (262). This differentiation between western and nonwestern women is a precursor to the construction of “third world women” as being a group outside of privileged conditions bestowed upon those living in modern societies. One aspect that Newman finds noteworthy is that Mead through her research introduced the idea that indigenous people such as the Samoans had “something valuable to teach the civilized about reforming present institutions” (236). The problem with this statement is that it is still couched in the ideology that gives primacy to Western culture as being superior except when it is not and then, only then, does the primitive
culture have any justification to impose its values as feasible options to adopt or discard as the dominant society sees fit.

**Mead and Mohanty**

In 1988, Chandra Talpade Mohanty composed a comprehensive commentary on feminist scholarship entitled, “Under Western Eyes.” A large part of Mohanty’s critique was the Western feminists’ portrayal of “third world woman.” She hinged her argument on six methodological and ideological errors that included: “women as victims of male violence,” “universal dependents,” “victims of the colonial process,” “victims of the Islamic code,” and “victims of the economic development process” (23). I would argue that Margaret Mead did not imply with her research that women form a singular category of analysis, nor does she suggest that indigenous women are powerless and under universal patriarchal control. On the contrary, Mead sought to understand the different ways young women were being socialized in other parts of the world as a way to critique gender constructs at home in the United States. As was stated earlier, it is likely that Mohanty would find Mead’s work to be freely engaging in “assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality” for the sake of her argument (19). To that end I can only suggest that her work be compared with one of her contemporaries. As an example, I will use Mrs. Alice Fletcher to demonstrate further my point.

Alice Fletcher was a leader in the Indian reform movement of 1870s in the United States and used her considerable influence as a women’s rights activist to help negotiate the Dawes Indian Act of 1887 as well as a push for the immediate “civilizing” of Indian people in order to avoid their extinction from the human race due to “evolutionary processes” (qtd. in Newman 249). She insisted that her main objective was to help save native women from abuse and
exploitation, but her solution was to dress them in Western attire and teach them middle-class domesticity. Fletcher’s approach was very different from Mead’s, as she refused to pronounce any judgment on the customs and practices of the Samoans. Similarly, she did not insist that they needed to be civilized by outside forces but instead presents their society as being one of the many possible within the large and diverse scope of human interactions. Using Mohanty’s analysis, there are still some pertinent questions that remain such as: Did Mead give an honest representation of the people of Samoa, or were her own bias and her positioning as a white western woman filtering it? Did she engage in academic dishonesty by indulging in fantasies about life in Samoa, using gossip as testimony in order to present a shocking finding, one that would inspire titillation as well as shore up her feminist ambitions? These are very difficult questions to answer and require more research than the scope of this paper, but nonetheless it is an arguable point and has inspired controversy in fields other than just anthropology.

In chapter nine, entitled “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited,” of Mohanty’s book *Feminism Without Borders*, she describes a particular strategy used by Women’s Studies programs at American universities that she labels the “Feminist-as-Explorer Model.” This kind of limited pedagogy can result in “a notion of difference and separateness” at which point “the story told is usually a cultural relativist one, meaning the differences between cultures are discreet and relative with no real connection or common basis for evaluation” (240). I argue that Mead celebrated cultural differences and used them as a teaching tool for her work. She insisted that the construction of socialized gender roles could lead to greater or less freedom for young women and that it was a choice to be made by the society and not a biological imperative. She brought her research back to the young people in America hoping that it would instigate much-needed changes and shift the perspectives of the feminist movement away from a purely white
western context to one of global concern. While I agree that the Samoan people became objects of fascination for the Western reader or academic via Mead’s investigation I do not believe that she intended to place them in a fish bowl for the sake of furthering her career. It is my conjecture that she had the best intentions and her attitudes toward global issues would have marked her as a transnational feminist as she insisted on learning from other cultures and using that knowledge as a way of promoting diversity and tolerance among her peers in the West. However, her work has in many cases been viewed by certain readership as ethnocentric, as most ethnography of that era was, but I hesitate to label Mead as intentionally homogeneous in her portrayal of women in other cultures.

**Mead as Cultural Relativist**

Margaret Mead was a product of her time period and therefore greatly influenced by the prevailing attitudes of her contemporaries. The axiom “cultural relativism,” which became a staple of twentieth century anthropology, originated with her research mentor Franz Boas. Cultural relativism is a guiding principle that insists that each person’s beliefs and activities are influenced by and formulated within his or her own culture. In understanding human behavior as something learned and not innate, space was created for criticizing a multitude of practices that were once considered inevitable and beyond critique. The job of a field ethnographer such as Margaret Mead is to represent or produce for a western readership the foreign cultures being observed while maintaining a non-biased approach, and when necessary translating the differences between cultures. As a cultural relativist she must refrain from interfering with the native population and accept that culture as is. The opposite effect of this principle is what happens when a western outsider observes practices in a culture not her own and feels compelled to pass judgment on those actions or interfere in some way.
During the era in which Mead wrote, there seemed to be a fascination with native woman’s sexuality. The implication was that they had a lot more sexual freedom than their prudish white counterparts. In their book entitled, *Reading National Geographic*, authors Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins attempt to decipher the reasons behind the abundance of nude photographs of nonwhite women that seemed to gloss the pages more and more frequently: “The magazine and its readers are caught between the desire to play out the cultural fantasy of the oversexed native woman and the social controls of sexual morality, of science, and of cultural relativism” (174). The idea that young Samoan girls were engaging in sexual trysts at the start of puberty was just the sort of material that fueled the imaginations of early twentieth century readers and reinforced the exoticism that was necessary to indulge in “othering” so-called primitive people. Mead was a cultural relativist only when she delayed moral judgment on the affairs of the people she studied. Her understanding of cultural difference meant that there was no single right way to approach matters of love, sexuality, and bodily integrity. This point is touched on by another academic, albeit for a completely different topic, that of the practice of veiling in Islamic cultures.

In her article entitled “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” author Lila Abu-Lughod notes: “The reason respect for difference should not be confused with cultural relativism is that it does not preclude asking how we, living in this privileged and powerful part of the world, might examine our own responsibilities for situations in which others in distant places have found themselves” (789). The context of her argument is in 2002, when Laura Bush, the wife of then President George W. Bush, made emotional and imploratory speeches insisting that the military measures being considered at the time were necessary in part to protect the women in Afghanistan from repression (i.e. the veil or burqa) and abuse that they faced at the hands of
the Taliban (784). At that time the United States was positioning itself as being a leader in women’s rights. However, it can be convincingly argued that instead of gender equality, the US lags behind many other countries in that it lacks government mandated paid maternity leave and childcare assistance as well as refuses to sign the Equal Rights Amendment that the majority of the world ratified many years ago. The opposite of this offensive strategy is feminists choosing to engage in a “not my business” attitude, which is what Abu-Lughod bases her charge of cultural relativism upon (786). In contrast, Margaret Mead did not hide the fact that she came from a society that was claiming modernity and superiority over others. Instead, she was adamant about dislodging that claim by showing the ways in which other groups of people were prospering and happy with their own educational and familial systems. At the same time, she did not hesitate to show her displeasure at any instances of violence against women in the cultures she studied, including Samoa (*Coming of Age in Samoa* 52, 72, 101).

Even the most first-rate academics, claiming to have positive aims, would not be immune to investigations into having possible ulterior motives or hidden bias. Radhika Mohanram takes aim at the discourse and theorizing that influence academics who engage with cultural difference. She notes that these researchers can be guilty of using their discursive power in an unethical way when working with indigenous peoples and trying to speak for and about them:

Conflating representation as proxy with representation as removed from reality by using the same verb, to represent…suggests that the person who speaks for the masses also speaks the truth and speaks within reality. Such a conflation of the two senses of the verb also results in a lack of examination of what is essentially a power relationship between the intellectual and the masses, for the intellectual is
also a product of dominant ideology and thus cannot be transparent or devoid of any markers of self-interest. (21)

These research tactics can be extremely problematic for inquiry into societies that have been colonized spatially and now are susceptible to being re-colonized intellectually. At the beginning of her book Mead defends her methodology by stating, “we choose primitive groups who have had thousands of years of historical development along completely different lines from our own, whose language does not possess our Indo-European categories, whose religious ideas are of a different nature, whose social organisation is not only simpler but very different from our own” (5). She felt justified in her attempt to locate difference in a remote place, relatively untouched by western influences. There is no doubting that both Mead and her contemporary anthropologists considered themselves to be authorities on what was civilized and what was not. A central part of this mentality was the absolute right of the researcher to speak for those who they felt could not speak for themselves. This act of ventriloquism was never questioned until much later when it became possible for indigenous people to read and write for themselves. A particular accusation that was launched against Margaret Mead by her male colleagues was that she was under so much pressure as a young woman in a male dominated field to perform and provide something of use for her research mentor that she was willing to engage in research methods that were less than scientific and report data that was less than reliable. Derek Freeman is one of several academics making such accusations against Mead. After doing his own field work in the area, Freeman wrote several books and articles trying to discredit her work and to prove that he discovered the “real” truth about life for young girls in Samoa.
Mead vs. Freeman

In 1983 anthropologist Derek Freeman scandalized the academic community by claiming that Margaret Mead was hoaxed by two local Samoan girls into believing that they were sexually promiscuous. He also insisted that she was merely a young and ambitious researcher, eager to please her mentor Franz Boas, giving rise to her vulnerability and led to her being deceived. He writes that her young informants “were, as a prank, engaging in the Samoan custom of taufa’ase’e behavior (or ‘recreational lying’) and telling Mead the exact reverse of the truth” (611). During his own on-site research in Samoa he sought out and spoke to the girls that had worked with Mead at which point they retracted their statements about having sexual liaisons prior to marriage. Freeman focuses on the emphasis that was placed on virginity by the taupou system and was again reinforced by Christian missionaries. I propose that Freeman’s experience with the local young women of Samoa would be entirely different from Mead’s. He is a white male in a position of power that would encourage a particular kind of response, one that would be the exact opposite of a young female researcher who spent months developing a personal relationship with the young girls. My question is why would these girls lie to Mead and tell the truth to a foreign man?

In doing further research I came across several articles that reexamined the claims against Mead to prove that her observations were indeed correct but glossed over by moralistically impassioned researchers. Paul Shankman’s article, “Virginity and Veracity: Rereading Historical Sources in the Mead-Freeman Controversy,” argues that the documents used to discredit Mead are shoddy, misquoted, and in many cases misinterpreted: “Freeman’s emphasis on the ideal virginity obscures the variety of relationships that were taking place in colonial Samoa and cannot explain why they were taking place” (499). He goes on to note how anthropologists such
as Freeman have been linked to other religious sectarians in the hopes of proving that civility is linked to virtue and vice versa, but all were stymied by lack of supporting evidence in Samoa. It is interesting that Freeman was quick to defend Mead from an even more vitriolic critic named Martin Orans who claims that she deliberately lied about her evidence in order to get her work published. Freeman is much more inclined to attribute her false conclusions to naiveté rather than malevolence (614). As a contemporary feminist reader, I am more swayed by the idea that Mead’s subject matter, unbridled female sexuality, is reason enough for conservative men working in anthropology to rush to try to discredit her. There is a certain veiled misogyny present in these articles, as both Freeman and Orans seem to be chiding her like an errant child rather than engaging with her work academically, as they would with a colleague considered of equal status.

**Indigenous Methodology**

It has been proposed by various indigenous scholars that all white western anthropologists engage in a power relationship with the indigenous peoples they are charged with representing. Adding to the case against the misuse of western academia in representing native people is the continued debate that has been fostered by men such as Derek Freeman. In an intriguing article about the Mead vs. Freeman debate a professor of anthropology at the University of California, Robert Levy, inserts a quotation by a native Samoan that is incredibly poignant: “To the putative objects of the investigation, the Samoans, it all looks peculiar. They seemed to have been saved from one myth only to be subjected to another. Lelei Lelaulu is quoted in the *Pacific Islands Monthly*: ‘Are we Samoans now to be known as a race of sex-starved rapists? I much prefer my previous reputation as a free loving orgiast’” (87). This sentiment is understandable, and the concealed anger is justifiable. Reading this I tried to
imagine what it would be like to discover my mother’s or my grandmother’s sex life via an anthropological investigation. It would certainly feel like a violation of privacy along with being mortified at having one’s family business or dirty laundry aired out in front of the world for the sake of research on the lives of “primitive people.” Mead addresses this issue in her “Preface 1973 Edition” of the book noting:

The young Samoans in universities throughout the United States often find this account embarrassing as all of us find the clothes our mothers wore when we were young. And I, instead of being a dutiful granddaughter writing letters home so that my grandmother might experience some of the Samoan joy in life, am now a grandmother delighting in a dancing grandchild. (ix)

This gentle admonition to the Samoan granddaughters is mildly condescending and done with what seems to be a wave of this white elderly woman’s hand; as if the feelings of these young men and women were just a passing phase or a nuisance for the sage academic to address on the occasion of her book being republished for the fourth time in as many decades. With the rise of indigenous scholarship, there have been more instances of people in countries such as Samoa and Papua, New Guinea, the location of another one of Mead’s books, talking back to ethnographers and demanding that they have the chance to tell their own stories without the interference of or need for a white interpreter.

In Chapter one of her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith discusses the issues surrounding the endless research and investigations of western academics into the lives of native peoples. She makes the argument that, historically, the majority of the work done in the name of diversity and knowledge building has been tied up with imperialism. The result has been
misrepresentation and misguided attempts at located difference at the expense of truth and bridge-building between cultures. She states: “Indigenous peoples have been, in many ways, oppressed by theory. Any consideration of the ways our origins have been examined, our histories recounted, our arts analysed, our cultures dissected, measured, torn apart and distorted back to us will suggest that theories have not looked sympathetically or ethically at us” (38). Despite the fact that Margaret Mead had good intentions and positive relationships with the people that she researched and wrote about, there is evidence that she also had her own agenda and was herself blinded to the ways in which she used her position to dominate over those people she could only see as “primitive.” In response to being consistently spoken about by outsiders, many indigenous scholars working in academia, as well as activists in the political arena, have initiated an “agenda for indigenous research” that surely would have made a difference in Mead’s approach had she known about it (Smith 115).

A large part of this collective form of resistance to ongoing academic imperialism has been the insistence on more advanced ethical research guidelines. Smith outlines a particular concern about the methods used historically and what is expected to change with these new propositions, stating: “Indigenous groups argue that legal definitions of ethics are framed in ways which contain the Western sense of the individual and of individualized property—for example, the right of an individual to give his or her own knowledge, or the right to give informed consent” (118). What about the personal stories and information that the young girls of Samoa shared with a young Margaret, a woman whom they no doubt saw as a friend and companion? Did she have their expressed consent when they confided in her about their sexual liaisons? I believe that the knowledge and training she had received in the US during the 1920s was far too inadequate to prepare Mead for ethical research in Samoa. By instilling into her cultural
relativism her mentor Franz Boas may have helped to situate her better and eliminate the majority of the ethnocentric antagonism that permeated the majority of anthropology, but did not eliminate all forms of bias. Despite this training, there was still a remnant of the “us versus them” mentality underlying her methods and findings that reflected a deep seated, though probably unconscious, sense of entitlement and superiority.

**Conclusion**

Margaret Mead’s work was a forerunner for many contemporary theories regarding gender role constructs and gender performativity. She was the first to suggest that differences between the sexes were not biologically determined but culturally conditioned. She hoped to use her discoveries as a springboard for American women to claim their sexual independence, to question their subservient position in the home, and to make changes to the existing parameters that governed relationships between the sexes. She rallied against notions of essentialism and denied that there was anything innately male or female. Her research was controversial for the time period in which she lived and worked, even so far as her deducing through observation in Samoa that homosexuality was completely natural and an acceptable form of coupling (*Coming of Age in Samoa* 82-83). Had she been privy to the current trend in indigenous methodology, perhaps she would have approached her work with the Samoans differently, or at least with more clarity. She might have been able to ascertain and rectify the possible harm she was causing by using the private sexual lives of those young women as material for western readers to indulge in a fantasy of superiority, to fetishize and objectify what was at that time considered a primitive human community. Nevertheless she was a forerunner to contemporary theories on gender as a socialized culturally motivated performance, and her work served to initiate a feminist approach
to the science of anthropology. Therefore, I believe that, despite her flaws, Margaret Mead deserves credit as a brave and innovative thinker.
Works Cited


Freeman, Derek. “Was Margaret Mead Misled or Did She Mislead on Samoa?” *Current Anthropology*. 41.4 (2000): 609-614. Print.


