



Margaret Mead and the Culture of Forgetting in Anthropology: A Response to Paul Roscoe

Only connect.

—E. M. Forster

NEARLY A QUARTER CENTURY AGO, the late Eric Wolf published a ringing editorial in the *New York Times* titled “They Divide and Subdivide, and Call It Anthropology” (1980). Wolf’s concern was the proliferation of mutually uncommunicative subfields in our discipline to the detriment of any overarching set of understandings of the human condition. He laid out his larger history-of-thought vision in *Europe and the People without History* (1982), in which he argued for our discipline’s release from the “bounds of its own definitions” in an historical political-economic vision uniting the social sciences and humanities sundered since the adaptive disciplinary radiation over the first half of the 20th century (1982:18).

Since Wolf made that call, centrifugal forces in anthropology have only increased. But the process has been complexified by linked historical political-economic, scholarly, and popular-cultural shifts in the United States and around the globe. This is not the place to lay out in detail the sequelae of the decline of the Soviet sphere and the triumph of both global capitalism and the new U.S. empire, nor the still-weak but certainly countervailing international anticapitalist, antiwar, labor, women’s, antiracist, gay, environmental, and human rights movements. Nor is it the appropriate venue in which to discuss the major effect of the scholarship associated with all the above-mentioned political movements, nor of the interdisciplinary “turn to language,” nor of the insidious renaissance of sociobiology, whose biological reductionisms have taken over American popular culture. (Only this morning, as I write in the spring of 2003, in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the *Chicago Tribune* published an extraordinarily stupid story, complete with academic quotations, about how scholars now think that war is “hard-wired,” genetically determined in humans [Keller 2003].)

These contemporary cultural, political, economic, and intellectual shifts—and those of any time and place—form the context within which scholars frame questions, do

research, and write and speak. And this is what is curious about Paul Roscoe’s piece: its anachronism, its radical lack of a sense of the historical shifts in anthropology and in the world, since Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune wrote about the Mountain Arapesh in the 1930s. Thus, while I appreciate Roscoe’s long familiarity with Papua New Guinea (PNG) populations and his archival work, this lack of “history and history of theory” connection means that both his framing of the question at hand and his empirical claims leave much to be desired. Let me elaborate.

First, I certainly agree with Roscoe on the importance of revisiting Margaret Mead’s oeuvre. Mead is still, as I wrote in *Exotics at Home*, “the most well-known anthropologist across this century in the United States, and probably the world. . . . Quite simply, she represents the genus *Anthropologicus* to the public, and even anthropologists who despise her work must deal with her presence in popular culture” (1998:17; see also the *Barnard College Scholar and the Feminist Online Journal* 2003). But Mead was also more or less present in the American public sphere over the course of her half-century career, and for a variety of reasons as her own work and politics altered. And this variation is relevant to Roscoe’s claims. He stresses the continued heavy citation of Mead’s *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) in order to undergird his critique of her claims about Arapesh peaceableness. But this particular Mead volume was centrally concerned with *gender relations*, not war. The book was so understood at the time of publication (see my discussion of contemporaneous reviews in *Exotics at Home*) and is so understood into the present.

Roscoe thus unsuccessfully tries to harvest Mead’s considerations of war and violence among the Arapesh from her larger sex and temperament frame. War, of course, whether in the present global political economy or among the Arapesh in the 1930s, is fundamentally gendered. And this is not only the case from the perspective of the 21st century, but from Mead’s 1930s perspective as well. She was centrally concerned with *all*—not only *intergroup*—forms of human violence, and she framed her analyses of violence and nonviolence in terms of sex role behavior,

with particular attention to the male warrior role, a focus only more horribly relevant today.¹ Here it seems that Roscoe's unfamiliarity with feminist work in anthropology, which since the 1970s has become simply mainstream in all domains of the discipline, leads him into serious misreading.

Moving from this fundamental misconception to Roscoe's specific empirical contribution, his justified criticisms of Mead turn out to be, unfortunately, very old news. British anthropologist Richard C. Thurnwald, in 1936, noted both Mead's own documentation, contra her analytic claims, of significant levels of violence among the Arapesh and her problematic labeling of counterexamples to her generalizations as "aberrant" (1936:666). Peter Worsley, in 1957, wrote that "as has often been pointed out, the 'peaceful' Arapesh looked a lot different in the paper on Arapesh warfare that *Fortune* published, and in which he *rejected* her account" (1957:125). And Mead's imprisonment in gestalt psychology-influenced culture and personality at this stage in her career is also far from a novel point. Contra Roscoe's assertion of his inability "to locate any such comment in published work," Worsley explicitly noted the "feeling of suspicion amongst anthropologists that the facts have been tailored or selected to fit a preconceived case" (1957:125, emphasis in original). Moreover, more than a half century ago, both Worsley and Wolf wrote, very compellingly and far more broadly than Roscoe, about *Culture and Personality's* intellectual flaws. As I summarize in *Exotics at Home*:

The "culture and personality" paradigm inherently ignored politics and economy and thus tended to reduce questions about shifting economic and political inequality to questions of individual or group psyche. Class, race, and other social divisions were homogenized, and "cultural snapshots" effaced historical contingency. Eric Wolf has noted that the "culture-and-personality schools . . . made a moral paradigm of each individual culture. They spoke of patterns, themes, world view, ethos, and values, but not of power . . . the anthropologists' culture of the thirties and forties was 'political economy' turned inside out, all ideology and morality, and neither power nor economy" (Wolf 1974:257). Anthropologists working within this mandate tended to make wildly unjustified claims about the connection of personality to social process—as did and still do other scholars and the public at large, in response to the simultaneous commercialization and psychologization of American culture. British anthropologist Peter Worsley complained that "in this sort of anthropology 'culture' tends to be reified. Cultures somehow 'select' or 'choose' social elements that they then combine in some unspecified manner. The spirit of the culture is therefore carefully investigated at the expense of more mundane pressures, of, say, an economic or political order" (Worsley 1957:128). [1998:189]

While *Culture and Personality*, then, has long been cast into the dustbin of anthropological history, we should remember the early-20th century political-intellectual context within which it grew. As I noted in *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge*,

American cultural anthropology focused largely on the Americas and the Pacific until after World War II, and its primary early twentieth-century concern was the documentation of vanishing Native American cultures and languages. American extermination or forced relocation of Native American groups prevented the extensive use of the structuralist-functionalist frame. American anthropologists tended, instead, to practice "salvage ethnography"—the collection of any and all information with a heavy emphasis on vanishing languages. This American emphasis on culture (mental baggage)—rather than society (observable, patterned behavior)—was fueled also by contemporary American psychology's high status and conservative, especially racist presuppositions and applications. Liberal American anthropologists were, then, doubly inclined toward the psychological arena—thus the "culture and personality" theoretical leanings of the two best-known women anthropologists of the early twentieth century. [di Leonardo 1991:4–5]

As to Roscoe's claim to improve on Freeman in citing Ruth Benedict rather than Franz Boas as Mead's unfortunate influence: There is a great deal more to be noted about Benedict beyond the flaws of the *Culture and Personality* school, and its roots not only in Gestalt psychology but in Boas' revulsion against racist U.S. psychology. Benedict is a fascinating figure with an entire and growing literature devoted to her—not to mention the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists' annual Ruth Benedict award. But suffice it to say here that we should only wish that Mead had been more, not less, influenced by Benedict over the 1930s and 1940s. As I have written,

Although Benedict was a chief architect of the "culture and personality" paradigm, she often transcended its intellectual limits, and her sense of her responsibilities as a citizen drew from a broader compass . . . to escape the paradigm into a progressive political argument. . . . Benedict is a far more thoroughgoing democrat [than Mead] with a strong grasp of the ironies of American racism . . . [During World War II] Benedict published *Race: Science and Politics* . . . an accessible work with distinctly Popular Front sympathies. . . . Late in the text, Benedict follows her antiracist mandate in the direction of economic democracy, commenting both on Europe and the United States: "[Those in power] are faced with two alternatives: they must keep down the rank and file by the use of naked force, or they must see to it that the major goods of life are available to a much greater proportion of the population than in earlier European history. We are far from having made economic sufficiency general in America, and essential liberties—opportunity to work, freedom of opinion on moot points, and equality of civil liberties—are far from won. They are, however, not unattainable if we will bend our efforts to achieve them." [di Leonardo 1998:190, 186, 195–96]

It is extraordinarily sad that Benedict's words ring as true in 2003 as they did in 1940: They serve as further evidence of our need to transcend our disciplinary, and very American, culture of forgetting and false memory; to reconnect to and recontextualize our own histories; to embrace openly, as scholars and as citizens, the critical analysis of the histories and present-day realities of power and powerlessness. Roscoe's unsubstantiated statements, then,

are symptomatic of much larger issues in American anthropology and American society.

Roscoe's particular use of Freeman's attack on Mead also reflects our culture of forgetting and false memory. While I am aware of the *American Anthropologist* editors' request that Roscoe not replay the Mead-Freeman debate in his article, his unproblematized references to Freeman's claims against Mead with reference to her *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) are shocking to anyone familiar with that disciplinary and public-cultural shark-fest of the first Reagan Administration era. In *Exotics*, I document not only Freeman's foolishly ahistorical and grotesquely misogynist claims but also the monumental anthropological counter-attack, involving literally dozens of excellent scholars' work. Roscoe seems not to be aware of Samoanist Lowell Holmes's documentation (1983) of Freeman's extensive misrepresentation of historical and ethnographic scholarship on Samoa through highly selective quotation, not least of Holmes's own work. Or of Samoanist Bonnie Nardi's powerful comment—considering the centrality of violence against women to Freeman's claims about Samoan culture—that “if Freeman had controlled for the factor of age, which any graduate student would be required to do even in a term paper, he would have found little difference between the rates of rape in Samoa and the United States” (as quoted in 1998:428). Or of historian of science Henrika Kuklick's crisp dissection of Freeman's use of Popperian “logic,” of Bradd Shore's, Eleanor Leacock's, Roy Rappaport's, Robert Levy's, Marilyn Strathern's, Annette Weiner's, David Schneider's, and George Stocking's contributions. And especially of the fact that, as I document, “actual scientists' reviews of *Margaret Mead and Samoa* [Freeman 1983] were uniformly unenthusiastic” (di Leonardo 1998:300–301, 428). Despite the 1980s mass media acceptance of Freeman's attack on Mead, then—he disappeared from the public sphere over the 1990s while Mead, of course, retains her iconic status—there is simply no judicious anthropological ground for citing him in any way favorably. Mead's work is most certainly flawed, and flawed differently over her half-century career, but not, I am afraid, in any of the ways adduced by Freeman.

And then again, Roscoe also fails to account for the U.S. political context in which Freeman's book was received. The public-cultural Sturm und Drang of the Mead–Freeman affair was, as I detail,

about the extraordinary *fit* between [Freeman's] line of attack and newly dominant new rightist politics. Specifically, the neoconservative strategy of focusing away from economic issues and onto “culture” paralleled Freeman's claim that Mead, influenced by her nefarious advisor, Franz Boas, misread the Samoan situation in a “culturally determinist” direction. Thus, *Margaret Mead and Samoa* seemed a heaven-sent opportunity for the press to cavil at the “liberal feminist culture” and “lifestyle experiments” with which it newly identified Mead, conveniently forgetting its fervent paeans to her of only half a decade earlier and celebrating the eminence of its new masters by tying

her corpse to the wheels of their imperial chariots. As David Schneider noted, Freeman's book was “a work that celebrate[d] a particular political climate by denigrat[ing] another” (Schneider 1983:10). The scarcely hidden public transcript of the day asserted, “It's human nature, stupid,” and Freeman's text offered *the* exemplary excuse for sensationalized press accounts “proving” the inevitability of capitalist, male, white, Western, heterosexual dominance of the world. [di Leonardo 1998:298]

It would behoove any scholar today, then, who wished to cite Freeman's attack on Mead as a frame for his own, to take into account the Reagan-era Weltanschauung of its reception. Particularly given Roscoe's chillingly tossed-off reference to the “close genetic heritage” among some PNG populations, with its evocations of the racist sociobiology associated with the Freeman book, a serious immersion in the past two decades of American and global political-economic history is in order. Mead is certainly not alone in her imprisonment in unfortunate epistemic frames.

Finally, there is the issue of war and what anthropology has to offer to its study. Not only is the question of Mead's empiricism moot, as her generalizations concerning violent and nonviolent societies were refuted back in the 1930s. Roscoe's framing of the issue reveals, as well, a desire to construct a hived-off “anthropology of war” disconnected not only from the history of anthropology and its relevant subfields (political and economic anthropology, for example) but from all other scholarship. The interdisciplinary Marxist tradition—to cite a range of scholarship hardly “recent”—has always been, after all, deeply engaged with articulating the historical political-economic contexts of violent human conflict, from prehistory to the present. And, since at least the publication of Talal Asad's clarion call anthology, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973), we also have a detailed and extensive literature on overt Northern colonial violence against Southern subjects as well as both the structural violence of colonial policies and their indirect effects on prior structures of conflict and conflict resolution. The recent anthology that Roscoe cites approvingly, *War in the Tribal Zone* (Ferguson and Whitehead 1999), itself reflects this sophisticated scholarly climate, unlike Roscoe's unselfconscious references to colonial “pacification” in PNG.

I am writing in the spring of 2003, at the close of our preemptive war against Iraq, in which, as a historical first, two American women were taken as POWs. This is a period of uncertainty abroad—we have succeeded in alienating nearly the entire planet—and at home, we find ourselves on the cusp of serious political-economic crisis, given rising civil rights violations, a recessionary climate, rising unemployment, and the specter of further giveaways to the rich (not to mention those to corporate friends of the Administration in the “rebuilding” of Iraq) and cutbacks against the poor. I cannot know the exact political climate that will obtain when this piece is published two seasons hence. Gramsci's optimism of the will and pessimism of the intellect, I am afraid, will be more than ever called for. But I do know that any “anthropology of war,” or any sort

of anthropology worth its salt, will be interdisciplinary and historical political-economic, will centrally consider gender and race/ethnicity in its investigations, and will be self-reflexive about both its own intellectual histories and the contexts of its studies and of its publication. Mead fulfilled only one of these strictures in the 1930s, but Roscoe fulfills none of them today.

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NOTES

1. The real interest of *Sex and Temperament*, as I lay out in *Exotics at Home*, is that while the text articulated Mead's shift to the Freudian antiwomen's rights stance she maintained until the 1970s, it was not so read at the time of publication, nor has it been so read into the present. So powerful was the image of Mead as the intrepid female anthropologist trumpeting cross-cultural sexual malleability that even Second Wave feminists "forgot" Betty Friedan's extensive attack on Mead in her 1963 *Feminine Mystique*. See di Leonardo 1998:190–193, 164–165.

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