Introduction

This study seeks to explain the shape of Margaret Mead’s early popular ethnographies and the professional and popular responses to them as cultural phenomena. It asks the question: what was it in American culture between the wars that was articulated in Mead’s early work in such a way as to secure it and her enduring place in the public imaginary? If Mead spoke to America, then just as surely America spoke to and through Mead. Thus, my focus is not on Mead’s anthropology of the various indigenous groups she studied. Rather, I consider her de facto anthropology of America, a significant part of each of her early ethnographies, and the raison d’être for them all. “Who or what was this America?” is the question that informs this book. Running through Mead’s work is a sustained commentary on the self and its relation to the larger society. It is one of the arguments of this study that the self as represented is not just any individual but is in some sense both an American self and the self of America.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, as many writers have noted, there was a new self-consciousness of what it meant to be American. What that nation/self might be or what it might become was the subject of much debate. Intellectuals and artists converged on New York City and began to explore the nature and meaning of culture in the United States, calling for the development of indigenous arts and literatures. By the 1920s, nativism, a new conservatism, modernism, new forms of religious fundamentalism, and a discourse of intellectual and artistic alienation all in some sense contested a definition of what America was and what it could or should be. The economic crisis of the 1930s intensified these debates, precipitating a reconsideration of many fundamentals, especially the economic system and its relation to democracy, freedom, prosperity, and what was by then a broader definition of culture. These contestations were explicitly about “America,” and what shape, place, and direction individuals might assume in the country Gertrude Stein was to call “the mother of twentieth-century civilization.”

Within these contestations, issues of gender and sexuality loomed large. The New Woman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with her
economic independence, her moral fervor to change the world, and her implicit sexual “inversion,” was superseded in the 1920s by women such as Mead and Amelia Earhart. These new New Women were trumpeted as able to perform in male domains while remaining, publicly at least, intrinsically feminine in their deportment. However, even these earnest, achieving New Women were in some sense anachronistic by the time they appeared, being, if not quite displaced, then certainly supplemented by a new female figure, the flapper. Trenchantly heterosexual, hedonistic, amoral, and dismissive of rather than opposed to traditional moral regimes, the flapper posed a different kind of challenge to the social order than had the New Woman. While the latter often stepped aside from domesticity to pursue the higher ends of the modern self—autonomy and worthy pursuits—the flapper flaunted the moral order, pursuing instead sex and fun, albeit with the ultimate aim of marriage.

And it was not only definitions of the feminine that were undergoing change, although it is these that tend to be emphasized in the academic literature. Cultural commentary after 1910 and in the 1920s was characterized in particular by a critique of “business America” with its obsessive pursuit of money and material ends, standardization of consumer goods, forms of work and leisure, and machine-driven economy. Male intellectuals and artists, while repudiating the de-individualizing trends of industrial capitalism, struggled to find new definitions of masculinity in a country that, they felt, defined art as a woman’s pastime and scholarship as effete. Nina Miller has argued that “the most visible experience of the situation we are calling modern was one of male crisis, and the most quintessentially modern response was a clearly marked style of masculinity, . . . more as a sense of anxious bewilderment than glib mastery.” Feminine incursions into traditional male arenas of work and the more marginal and risky forms of leisure, such as jazz clubs and speakeasies, exacerbated masculine anxieties.

New ideas about sex and its relations to freedom were central to this destabilizing of gender roles and definitions. The centrality of sex to selfhood was consolidated theoretically in the first decades of the twentieth century and almost simultaneously disseminated and absorbed into popular culture. The burgeoning science of sex, promulgated most famously in the writings of Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud, legitimated discussion of these issues and provided analytic frameworks that spilled out of the medical literature and into intellectual, middle-brow, and popular culture. The New Woman and the flapper were contentious figures, not just because they challenged traditional notions of female behavior but because they were also seen to be casting off unhealthy repressions that led to maladjustments, complexes, and neuroses. America, already characterized by its
various mind-cure religions, cults, and therapies, took up psychoanalysis with a vengeance.\(^5\)

While numerous scholars have explored the role of psychoanalysis and psychology in framing cultures of modernity and the meanings of modern selfhood in the twentieth century,\(^6\) the formation and impact of the other social sciences has received less attention. Studies of anthropology have tended to focus on that discipline’s formation in and complicity with earlier phases of Euro-American imperialism and colonialism. Yet anthropology and anthropologists, especially in the eastern United States, were centrally engaged in debates about the nature and meaning of modern life. Elsie Clews Parsons, Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Edward Sapir, each a mentor of Mead, participated in vigorous, not to say ferocious, debates in nonacademic venues about the meanings of domesticity, sexuality, race, and culture. Of these three, only Parsons has had her life and work definitively studied in terms of her location in and contribution to emergent modernity and modernism.\(^7\) Micaela di Leonardo’s *Exotics at Home* examines Mead’s and other anthropologies in the context of emerging American modernity. However, while di Leonardo devotes considerable space to Mead’s work and, like many others, points to her inconsistencies and to gaps in her scholarship, she falls on one side of the all too common dichotomy of Mead scholarship—hagiography versus excoriation. Her conclusion, that “Mead spent a half-century lecturing Americans and others on changing cultural patterns while sedulously avoiding dealing with the harsh realities of power, discrimination, oppression, exploitation,”\(^8\) leaves the reader wondering whether an anthropology of Mead might not try to understand Mead as being at least as much a product of her time as she was a (deficient) moral agent for American imperialism.

It is somewhat ironic that the only other major attempts to deal with the relationship between American modernism and anthropology come out of literary studies.\(^9\) Most notably, these include Marc Manganaro’s and Susan Hegeman’s explications of the links between modernist poets, novelists, and critics, and anthropology. Manganaro, reading Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, and Zora Neale Hurston alongside T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and the New Critics, traces “the development of the modern culture concept . . . as a complex whole,” which can and should be read synchronistically, “with myth as a newly professional way of reading.”\(^10\) Susan Hegeman traces thematic links between the modernist fiction and poetry of T. S. Eliot, Sherwood Anderson, Hart Crane, and others, the cultural nationalist critics, such as Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, and Waldo Frank, and the anthropological writings of Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Ruth Benedict, to argue that the idea of culture emerged in the first half of the twentieth century.
as an “estranged perception of collective identity,” in which spatiality replaced temporality as a way of “explaining the specific experiences of alienation and difference Americans felt” under conditions of modernity. Although their explanations of the thematic resonances between anthropology and modernist literature are insightful, their focus on the texts misses the very fundamental anthropological point that there were real relationships, both temporal and social, among some of these authors and therefore among their texts. This is especially true of those whom Hegeman considers. Many of their social relationships centered on Columbia University. Bourne, who did his degree at Columbia, for example, was a close friend of both Brooks and Elsie Parsons before his death in 1918, and listed Boas as one of his favorite teachers. Two decades later, the connections between the cultural critics and the anthropologists persisted: Mead’s close friend Lawrence Frank had been a friend of Bourne at Columbia and continued to be a friend of Parsons. Brooks’s protégé Constance Rourke was a student of Franz Boas. Brooks wrote his influential polemic America’s Coming of Age twenty years before Ruth Benedict wrote Patterns of Culture, and she almost certainly read either the book itself or commentaries on it, or participated in discussions about it, perhaps even with Edward Sapir, to whose work Hegeman compares it. The thematic resonances between the texts Hegeman considers are more than the result of an abstracted developing modernism. They come out of a close set of discussions, sometimes face-to-face, sometimes via print, among a relatively small group of people passionately committed to developing and shaping “American culture.”

Whereas Mead’s teachers and mentors forayed into public debates, none but Mead made the intersection between social science and “middlebrow” culture the principle focus of their professional lives. She was virtually unique in picking up the educative mission from the older generation of anthropologists. As the discipline grew and institutionalized in the 1920s and 1930s, fewer of its members continued to see it in terms of contributing to the debates on contemporary American life. Mead alone located her work primarily in that space where, she believed, academic study could inform and improve everyday life. From the beginning of her career she was committed to educating “professionals”—especially social workers and teachers. Her third academic publication, written when she was twenty-six and newly returned from Samoa, set out the agenda for her career, an agenda which, as far as I can tell, did not change much for the next fifty years: “By the study and analysis of the diverse solutions which other members of the human race have applied to the problems which confront us today, it is possible to make a more reasoned judgment of the needs of our own society. . . . Only by giving the students in normal schools and teachers’ colleges the very best equipment for thinking about
social problems can we hope to have teachers who will give their pupils a groundwork for constructive thought instead of a series of rules of thumb.”

Although she is commonly identified as an anthropologist, until the early 1930s she saw her work as comparative psychology and education. In 1927, for example, she wrote William Fielding Ogburn that anthropology was “just something to think with. I’d be as happy in psychology or any other social sciences, or anything that was good to think with.”

Throughout her career, her study of so-called primitive peoples was always couched in terms of what the modern West—especially the United States—could learn from their example. The subtitle of Coming of Age in Samoa says it all: A Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization. Although not unique among her anthropological peers in writing for the popular media, she gained a unique position as the arbiter of this particular academic discipline in the public sphere, a position she made for herself and secured in the years covered by this study.

To locate Mead’s work in its intellectual and cultural milieu and to ask what issues in American life it addressed and, perhaps more importantly, with what concerns it resonated, is simply to address Mead’s writings as cultural artifacts—to anthropologize them. This is not a new kind of work. Libraries are full of texts that do this with writers of fiction, poetry, plays, and film. And, indeed, in the reading about the period between the wars, which has informed this study, I have often found studies of poetry and fiction more useful and have certainly found them more plentiful than studies of other kinds of writings contextualized in this way. It has been one of the recurrent disappointments in my reading that each time I found a text that purported to address “writers” or “woman writers” of the twenties and thirties, the term “writer” almost inevitably meant either novelist or poet. It seldom meant journalist or social scientist, of whom the twentieth century produced a number who are notable, influential, and, not incidentally, good writers. This abiding distinction between “literature” and “science,” fiction and fact, is not, of course, innocent. As James Clifford reminds us, “[s]ince the seventeenth century . . . Western science has excluded certain expressive modes from its legitimate repertoire: rhetoric (in the name of ‘plain,’ transparent signification), fiction (in the name of fact), and subjectivity (in the name of objectivity). The qualities eliminated from science were localized in the category of ‘literature.’”

One of the curious features of the “new interdisciplinarity” engendered by the fluorescence of cultural studies is how seldom the objects of knowledge, the “data,” or the modes of analysis cross disciplinary lines. A quick search of the literature on “the nation,” for example, reveals that this object of knowledge has been more or less captured by literary and film studies. Novels, poems, plays, and films are
examined to reveal the ways in which nation is inscribed in the fictive or creative
texts of a particular time and place. The social sciences remain as cultural studies’
necessary but repressed Other: necessary because cultural studies depends utterly
on the detailed empirical work of historians and social scientists for “context,”
and repressed because that dependence is seldom acknowledged theoretically and
because the privileged position of “literature” as the carrier of culture remains vir-
tually unchallenged. There are very few studies that consider nonfiction authors as
“writers” whose texts merit the same careful attention to image, theme, metaphor,
strategy, and context. In the social sciences, anthropology and anthropologists
have constituted a notable exception to this rule. James Clifford, George Marcus,
and Clifford Geertz, in their important and controversial books, began examining
the writerly accomplishment of ethnographic authority. A couple of throwaway
lines on Mead in Works and Lives, in conjunction with Derek Freeman’s attacks
on her work, have spawned a series of articles on her writerly craft and rhetorical
strategies. Mead, who had early aspirations towards poetry and fiction, regarded
herself as a serious writer and crafted her books and articles with a keen ear for
rhythm and eye for image. Her conflation of the modes of science, literature, and
journalism was a reason for both her popular success and the ambivalence and
hostility with which many of her professional colleagues regarded her work. The
quality of her prose aroused suspicion, if not wrath, in the hearts of her fellow
anthropologists, who are reported to have commented on her status as a “novel-
ist” or “artist” rather than scientist. It is therefore fitting that Mead’s work should
be contextualized in terms of her writerly strategies: because she regarded herself
as a writer; because the intersection between “science” and “the public” was the
locus of her work; and because she challenged the modernist boundaries between
science, literature, and journalism while simultaneously depending on these same
boundaries to maintain her public authority.

The entanglements of author, reader, and the culture or cultures within
which they operate and to which they speak are not straightforward. The death
of the author, to paraphrase Mark Twain, has been greatly exaggerated. Mead’s
works cannot be read without attention to authorial intent. She was, above all, a
self-styled and self-conscious public intellectual who wrote for “ordinary people”
and for change. In addition to being a molder of popular ideas, she was an avid
consumer of intellectual public culture. She was a passionate reader of poetry
and a distinctly anthropological reader of novels, which, as we shall see, often
stood in for ethnography of the contemporary West in her work. But above all she
relished the many little magazines that flourished in New York in this period, and
her letters from the field repeatedly beg her family and friends to send them to
her. Unlike many of her peers, who were actively distancing themselves from the nonacademic presses in order to reinforce the boundaries between journalism and science, Mead not only wrote extensively for a variety of magazines but also mined them for the themes of her work. Although most noted for her engagement with issues of adolescence and sexual identity, she wove many of the other debates of the 1920s and 1930s—about materialism, the role of the intellectual, the standardization of American society, the need for strong leadership in crisis—through her writings in remarkable coincidence with the shifting concerns of the times.

Even as this book explores Mead’s handling of those concerns, it also tracks a change in her theorization, which paralleled a significant shift in the meaning of “America” and “American” during the interwar years. Ostensibly focused on the “native,” each of her early studies provides a template for Mead’s version, and vision, of America, and this changed significantly over the ten years covered here. This change is tied to Mead’s developing theory of the relationship between personality and culture. Over this period Mead’s theoretical position moved from an overriding insistence on cultural determinism to an emphasis on how “basic” temperaments fare in different cultures. Although a number of scholars have noted that “Boasians, Mead included, did not deny biology as much as they wanted to know ‘the exact conditions that biology imposed,’” the change in emphasis from culture to biology between Coming of Age and Sex and Temperament is striking. Furthermore, the movement begins to emerge well before the trip to New Guinea, during Mead’s fieldwork among the Omaha in the summer of 1930. This change in the charting of the relationship between “culture” and “selfhood” parallels a wider set of complex shifts and contradictions in the meanings of “self,” “culture,” “identity,” and ultimately “nationhood” that were occurring in the United States at the time.

The philosopher Charles Taylor has identified two conflicting themes that underpin the modern subject—a “disengaged, particular self, whose identity is constituted in memory.” One theme, which I have called eventuation, sees “the shape of a life simply the result of . . . happenings as they accumulate.” The second, which I call actualization, sees “this shape as something already latent, which emerges through what comes to pass.” As Taylor explains, both understandings of the shape and meaning of an individual life are inescapable: “We are made what we are by events; and as self-narrators, we live these through a meaning which the events come to manifest or illustrate.” This tension between eventuation and actualization ramifies through many of the discursive forms of modernity, underpinning the emergence of both the novel and the autobiography. However, it also pervades the social sciences, not least through the many nature-versus-nurture
debates that have been central to the disciplines of anthropology, education, sociology, and psychology. *Coming of Age in Samoa*, of course, was a pivotal text in this debate, seen as coming down wholly on the side of nurture, culture, or event rather than essence, nature, or biology.

This discursive framing of the self, conflicted between event and essence, ramifies far beyond the discussions of the person, or personal subjectivity. Modern notions of selfhood or subjectivity arose in conjunction with broader historical and symbolic changes. The idea of the nation itself was constituted in the same sets of changes in the meanings and chartings of time and space, which Taylor, following Benedict Anderson, identifies as central to modern selfhood. These include preoccupations with origins, with unity and the repression of difference, with boundaries and interiority. This imbrication of nation and self has spawned an array of scholarly works that have explored the ways in which the nation is narrated, revealing not only the overlapping forms between novel and nation but also the ways in which the story of the nation is told and retold at least as much, and perhaps much more effectively, in literature as it is in history books. One of the considerable pleasures of contemporary cultural scholarship has been the charting of the ways in which expressions of selfhood—subjectivity, ethnicity, sexual identity, for example—not only emerged through a similar set of narrative forms—novel, history, psychoanalysis—but also share their structures.

It is not surprising, then, that thematic struggle between essence and event in modern selfhood shapes also the meanings of nationhood. Between the wars in the United States, this struggle coalesced in the seemingly opposed ideas of “race” and “culture.” In the social sciences, these ideas have been seen as more diametrically opposed than their intertwined histories would suggest. Robert Young has demonstrated that all three modern meanings of culture—a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and artistic development; the way of life of particular peoples; and the realm of intellectual and artistic activity—arise together out of the conflictual economy of capitalism. Furthermore, he argues that each is implicated in the meaning of the other and that all three are implicated in the simultaneous development of notions of race. When Boas introduced the modern anthropological concept of culture in *The Mind of Primitive Man* in 1911 to signal a neutral equivalence of the ways of life of all peoples, the word was already hopelessly entangled with notions of racial hierarchy. The qualifier—primitive—already undercut Boas’s antiracist agenda. This entanglement between culture as way of life, on the one hand, and race, on the other, mirrored the more obvious class hierarchy intrinsic to the meaning of culture as the “higher arts.” The two meanings of culture grew out of the first and earlier meaning, “a general process of intellec-
tual, spiritual and aesthetic development” and, when held together rather than opposed to each other, they collapse again into it, each being an implicit hierarchy that privileges higher or greater development along some line of progression.

If culture and race have always been mutually implicating, the ways in which they are entangled are complex and changing. Indeed, Young argues that their very entanglement, complexity, and contradictions ensure their durability. Even those scientific theories most directly aimed at severing the links end up reinforcing them. Walter Benn Michaels contends that such a reinforcing process was occurring in the United States in the 1920s. In his study of American nativism in the 1920s, *Our America*, he explicates the shifting meanings of race and culture, essence and event, heredity and history, in the meanings of “America” and
“American.” He argues that “American” changed in meaning over the course of the 1920s, away from something that was achieved (through immigration, naturalization, assimilation, hard work, etc.) towards something much more akin to race or biology or family—something into which one was born or that one inherited. This argument itself is not revolutionary. However, Michaels argues something more profound: changes in the notion of culture, and the emergence of associated ideas of cultural identity and cultural relativism were central to this change. These latter ideas depend on a prior notion of “race,” however broadly construed. He argues that by the end of the 1920s, “culture” had become disarticulated from “beliefs and practices,” a change he describes as “deriving one’s beliefs and practices from one’s cultural identity” instead of “equating one’s beliefs and practices with one’s cultural identity.” The former means that culture is no longer what one does, thinks, or believes but has become something separate from the self and indeed from the social group. Culture became something that could be destroyed, lost, stolen, just as it could be found or reclaimed. Culture is thus objectified: “We are not Jews because we do Jewish things, we do Jewish things because we are Jews.” Given this formulation, culture and cultural identity also can ultimately be claimed only through some form of inheritance, which ultimately must be construed as “biological” or “racial.”

While one could take issue with Michaels’s history of the notion of culture (Young might argue that what Michaels identifies as a development or trajectory is simply a chicken-and-egg problem), the implications of the changes he charts have yet to be explored in terms of anthropology itself. American anthropology was, of course, central to the formulation of “culture” and “cultural relativism” during the 1920s and 1930s. The equivalent value of all cultures, and thus of all humans, is an idea that received its most articulate theoretical expression through the work of Franz Boas and the anthropologists he trained at Columbia University. It developed precisely in opposition to racist assumptions of the biological inferiority of some peoples that had been one of the outcomes of imperialist applications of Darwin’s theory of evolution. The centrality of anthropology to this process is curiously muted in Michaels’s book. He ignores Mead’s work, relegates Boas to a long footnote, and cites only Edward Sapir’s essay “Culture: Genuine or Spurious” from among the vast array of anthropological texts that contributed to the theorization of culture during the decade. However, Mead’s writings were much more directly formative than were Sapir’s in the wider scheme of things. Indeed, they were arguably the most central empirical texts that shaped popular ideas on culture and cultural relativism, and, not incidentally, shaped how these issues related to the personal lives of Americans during these two decades and
In this, they were supplemented, but not surpassed, by the best-selling *Patterns of Culture*, by her friend Ruth Benedict. If Manganaro and Hegeman are concerned with the “modern culture concept,” with a focus on texts that circulated within rarified or professional fields, then this book is more closely aligned with Michaels’s in its emphasis on something less well defined than a concept: how the modernist ideas about culture were transformed into vernacular understandings of culture through the vehicle of Mead’s work. It is striking, therefore, to find in Mead’s work the very shift in emphasis from eventuation (culture) to actualization (temperament, thwarted or actualized, but not modified, by culture) that Michaels identifies in his study of nativist literature and polemics of the 1920s.

Issues of sex and gender were central to the development of racial ideas and

Ruth Benedict, photograph courtesy of Vassar University Library
theories. From Anderson’s argument that ideas of race developed from class and aristocratic notions of blood, Young and Michaels, and also Ann Laura Stoler, and many others, have demonstrated the pervasive and multiple links between these two ideational formations. Anxieties about hybridity, degeneration, and race suicide mingled with fantasies of the harem and the South Sea Isle to produce inextricable inter-implications of a sexualized racism and a racialized sexuality. But what of culture? If race and culture are mutually dependent, then what are the implications of gender, sex, and sexuality in the formation of modern notions of culture? Certainly, some aspects are obvious. Women had (and one might argue continue to have) an ambivalent relation to culture as refinement or the higher arts. They were excluded from being makers of high culture and considered unable to reach the highest plains of artistic, intellectual, and spiritual refinement. However, women served as gatekeepers to these realms, to the point where, in the United States, at least, high culture itself became viewed as feminized. Modernist movements were impelled, at least in part, by men’s attempts to claim or reclaim creative space and intellectual endeavor as legitimately masculine, not to say manly. George Santayana’s association of the “gentel tradition” with Puritanism provided a fruitful and ongoing target for young moderns. Seeing themselves caught between the feminized repression of New England gentility, the anti-intellectual pragmatism of an outdated pioneer mentality, and the de-skilling and de-individualizing (and thus emasculation) of the machine age, modernist men from Herbert Croly and Van Wyck Brooks to Waldo Frank and H. L. Mencken sought to create a new meaning for (high) culture as the redemptive realm of modernity, and as fit work for men. It is not surprising then that the tables were turned and, as Andreas Huyssen has demonstrated, mass culture was consistently represented as feminized in cultural, political, and aesthetic discourse of the early decades of the twentieth century.

The associated advents of a professional anthropology and a respectable psychology provide a crucial link in understanding the relationships between culture (as way of life) and sex. Descriptions of sexual practices had been, since the Enlightenment at least, a necessary, if not obsessive, part of the reports of non-Western peoples, signaling ambivalently their liberation from the constraints of civilization, or their degraded primitive status. By the time Boas articulated the idea of culture as the way of life of a particular people, the meaning of culture had been pre-loaded, so to speak, with sex. The New Psychology, psychoanalysis, provided the theoretical link between a primitivism already well entrenched in modernist (high) arts and cultures as distinct ways of life. Freud’s association of the primitive with the unconscious enabled associations between the child, the woman, and
the primitive to be formally articulated to the unconscious as well. Culture, in its anthropological meaning, already saturated with sex, became simultaneously a marker of a pre-civilized sexual freedom and a contemporary constraint on that freedom. Elsie Clews Parsons’s teachings and writings on the family, marriage, and sex were important in bringing anthropology into the public intellectual debates on these issues. But it was Mead, arguably, who is most responsible for widely consolidating the anthropological notion of culture with variability in sexual practices, in the United States at least.

Mead’s popular ethnographies of the 1920s and 1930s trace a trajectory of a progressive disillusionment with “culture,” articulated through discussion of sexual practices. In *Coming of Age in Samoa*, culture signifies the possibilities for change or for more-fulfilling ways of life. However, in *Growing Up in New Guinea*, Mead represents culture both as inhibiting change and freedom, and as perversely to the extent that it develops, fails to capitalize on, individual strengths. Mead’s disillusionment, not with individual cultures but with “culture” itself, deepened in the summer of 1930, which she spent researching the lives of Omaha women in Nebraska. Frustrated by the “social tragedy” she observed, Mead struggled, unsuccessfully, with the effects of America’s internal colonization. Hampered by a model of culture as a unified, functionally integrated “whole,” she was unable to come to terms with the social havoc she found in Nebraska in any way that made sense in terms of her imperative to find lessons for America. Her private correspondence began to consider the question of temperament as separate from the influences of culture. In the introduction to *The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe*, she defines a focus on “the relationship between original nature and social environment” as one of two principle contributions of ethnology to social science. A prolonged personal crisis in New Guinea between 1931 and 1933 consolidated this move. Temperament, not culture, emerges as the privileged element in her work from this period. In *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, culture is fully articulated as that which creates deviance by not allowing individual, innate temperament to develop according to its natural predilections and potentialities.

This book, then, examines these themes in Mead’s four early “popular” ethnographies, the related articles that drew on this ethnographic material, and the anthropological, critical, and popular responses to her work. It explicates how her writings reflected the intellectual debates and social milieux in the period 1925–1935. Mead was, by anyone’s measure, an incredibly productive writer. In the years 1925–1935, which are the focus of this book, she published seven monographs (writing three between mid-1929 and mid-1931 alone) and seventy-seven articles
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...and book reviews in the academic, elite, and popular presses. Although this book is structured around her four general ethnographies, they stand as a gloss for the many shorter articles that she wrote for the popular, middlebrow, and academic presses. Indeed, to understand both the meanings that Mead gave to her work, and the meanings that might have been inferred from them, these articles must be taken as central to Mead’s project and the response to it. The monographs include the three for which she is best known—Coming of Age in Samoa (1928), Growing Up in New Guinea (1931), and Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (1935). Each of these went through between twelve and seventeen editions by the time she died in 1978, and each was translated into between twelve and twenty other languages. She also wrote three much more orthodox anthropological treatises, at least one of these in order to prove to her anthropological colleagues that she could do “real” anthropology—that is, kinship, economics, and material culture. The seventh, The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe, her only non-Pacific monograph of that period, was written for quite a different reason: impelled by a grant to Mead’s employer, the American Museum of Natural History. It occupies a peculiar position in her oeuvre—unusual in its provenance, unsure of its audience. It is included in this study for two reasons: because it was during her fieldwork with the Omaha that she began to formulate her theory of the relationship among temperament, personality, and culture, and because of its failure to ignite the popular imagination. It is the “other” to her more widely known works and as such tells us much about their popularity.

In encapsulating dilemmas of American selfhood, Mead’s reputation among her professional peers as a “lady novelist” can perhaps be put to the test, not in terms of the facticity of her ethnography but in terms of her writerly strategies. If, as Taylor insists, the modern self is experienced and constituted as a “story,” then Mead was a consummate storyteller. A good story has two aspects—a compelling plot and engaging characters. The plot of Mead’s stories is the most compelling story of all—the self’s transition from childhood to adulthood, and the struggles that shape that transition. Each of her books addresses in some way those twin obsessions of modernity: how we have become what we are, and how we might become what we should be.

That this transition is focused on the child is something we have come to take for granted. But the modern investments in the child—as the quintessential form of the self, as the carrier of the history of the species, as the repository of innocence—have their own histories. Carolyn Steedman uses the notion of “personification” to detail how “the figure of the child” came, over the period 1780 to 1930, to stand for or carry the meanings of “the self.” Personification, “the giving of
human shape to abstract ideas and notions,” is stronger and more intrinsic than metaphor, more condensed and historical than archetype. I draw on Steedman’s idea of personification to argue that Mead’s most popular ethnographies were compelling at least in part because she built each one around a central character—a personification of the self’s journey from childhood to adulthood. In these cases, the self is not necessarily female, as is Steedman’s child figure, but in the three books that had popular success, the central figure is a child struggling towards adulthood. The Samoan girl, the Manus boy, and, more complexly, the deviant in *Sex and Temperament*, were each forged to highlight the dilemmas of selfhood Mead was addressing. Not quite archetypes, these figures personified a problem of “coming into being” not only in their own culture but more importantly in America. And it was not just American individuals who were struggling to “come into being” but also the nation itself. The Indian woman in *The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe* is a complex exception; ironically, she is much more adult and culpable, and this may be one factor in the book’s notable lack of popular success. However, she is a strongly delineated character type and as such gives a particular focus to the story of degeneration Mead penned in relation to the “Antlers.” Sex is the lynchpin in each of these narratives of the relationship between self and culture: it epitomizes the essential status of the protagonist. The free love of the Samoan girl, the repressed Puritanism of the Manus boy, the disordered delinquency of the Antler woman, and the heroic struggle of the deviant caught in an alien culture condense and signify the relation of the individual to his or her society.

If the strength of Mead’s books lies in her ability to take the foundational plot of the modern self and give it character, then the key to their reception is in the extent to which they held out hope. In all her work, but most particularly in *Sex and Temperament*, Mead drew on an aspect of the self that many theorists have identified but that has been eclipsed by other emphases in contemporary theory. This is the notion of modern selfhood as a constant state of development, an always coming into being. Each of her books tells the story of a particular coming into being. This emphasis not only on origins but on potentials is the aspect of Mead’s work that most clearly addressed American concerns. For what Mead held out to America was, ultimately, a promise—that life could be better, that fulfillment was possible, that humanity had already crafted the cultures that allowed humans to develop in a variety of ways, and that these ways could be incorporated into American life.

The next chapter of this book describes the intellectual debates that provided the basic framework for Margaret Mead’s writing during the period 1925–1935, and, indeed, set the character of her lifelong educative mission. Termed variously
“the New York renaissance,” or the “cultural nationalist movement,” or even, “the beginnings of American modernism,” these debates were prompted by the desire to create an indigenous arts and letters in the United States that would remedy what were perceived to be the ills that beset it: materialism, Puritanism, the Frontier Mentality,\textsuperscript{51} alienation, chaos, lack of integration, lack of higher purpose, and discontinuity between America’s industrial power and the state of its culture—a concept, of course, that had not yet been fully articulated into its present-day meanings. This debate was influenced by the advent of psychoanalysis after Freud’s visit to Clark University in 1911. From that point, the tensions between therapeutic liberation of the self and the impetus towards socially meaningful cultural creation marked the debates on the problem of American culture in distinctive ways. Mead was to draw on both these tendencies in American cultural criticism to formulate the lessons she drew in her books.

*Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), written and published at the height of the Roaring Twenties, is the focus of chapter 3. Mead took that most problematic figure of the twenties—the “flapper”—and asked whether she was a cultural or a natural phenomenon. *Coming of Age* was a spectacular success; both its publisher and its author were amazed by its reception. The reasons for this success are to be found in the way Mead encapsulated 1920s ambivalences about progress and loss, science and communal values, the possibilities for happiness and the superiorities of civilization in its story. The Samoan girl, and indeed Samoa itself, represents the sort of society of which cultural theorists such as Herbert Croly and Van Wyck Brooks had dreamed: one in which “[t]he individual becomes a nation in miniature, . . . [and t]he nation becomes an enlarged individual.”\textsuperscript{52} As such a representation, Mead’s Samoan girl, sexually free and without any value conflicts, epitomizes the loss ensuing from civilization. In Freudian terms she represents the pre-oedipal self that is whole, without repression, innocent and undamaged. She stands in marked contrast to the flapper, who epitomized not only loss of innocence but also loss of unity between the individual and the community.

Chapter 4 examines the second of Mead’s ethnographies, *Growing Up in New Guinea* (1931), a product of the cusp of the prosperous twenties and the Depression. Mead’s grasp of both her ethnographic material and the New York intellectual milieu is much surer than it was in *Coming of Age*. *Growing Up in New Guinea* is a mature and self-conscious work that traverses a wide range of issues, most of which come out of the agonized self-conceptions of 1920s intellectual and artistic life. The book hinges on a crisis in masculinity: not the self-deprecating masculinity of the Algonquin Round Table or the womanizing freedom of Greenwich Village\textsuperscript{53} but the paralyzed masculinity of the businessman, sexually repressed,
conformist, indebted, trapped. These themes of the 1920s are, however, articulated around the crisis of the early 1930s. In particular, the calls for strong, innovative leadership to guide the country back to prosperity were becoming increasingly desperate as businessmen and politicians were revealed as incompetent, helpless, ineffectual, and corrupt. The Manus boy, in his transition from lively, free, and intelligent boyhood to sexually repressed, miserable, indebted adulthood, provided a mirror for America at the beginning of the Depression. Mead wove these themes together to argue for a new masculinity that was strong, nurturing, and innovative, and unafraid to go against prevailing cultural mores.

*The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe* (1932), the most anomalous of Mead’s books, is the subject of chapter 5. It is her least well known work, being located in the American Midwest, far from her usual ethnographic locus in the Pacific. It received little public attention when it was first published and little academic attention subsequently. It provides a compelling contrast to the exoticized and eroticized “natives” of the other three ethnographies. Mead, whose Pacific ethnographies are marked by denial of Euro-American imperialism’s effects, was unable to refute colonization's impact on the “Antlers.” The book’s reception reflects both the difficulties America had in coming to terms with its internal empire and Mead’s dismissal of the study’s usefulness for anthropology because the culture was “broken.” By the early 1930s, Mead had embraced a functionalism drawing on both British anthropological influences and the Young American cultural critics’ yearning for an integrated, un-alienated society. She used William Ogburn’s influential notion of “cultural lag” to argue that the problem with Antler society was that it clung to traditional values even as its material base had changed drastically under the influence of European settlement. The Antler woman—diseased, sexually delinquent, yet clinging to and guarding traditional culture—was a frightening metaphor for the breakdown of American civil society in the early 1930s, when both socialist revolution and fascism were being touted in the intellectual and popular media. In many ways it is the best of Mead’s early works, but its message is bleak. It was praised by her anthropological colleagues but passed over quickly at the nadir of the Depression and in the decades that followed.

*Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, the focus of chapter 6, is a child of the New Deal, a reconstructive project not only for America but also for Mead herself. This book is closer in tone to *Coming of Age in Samoa* than it is to the hectoring faultfinding tone of *Growing Up in New Guinea* or the depressive, hopeless tone of *The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe*. Mead’s return to a call for openness to individual needs and aspirations, a liberality of culture, and flexibility in gender definitions was a tonic for America as it began to pull itself out
of the crisis. After a prolonged period of depression, illness, and emotional breakdown in New Guinea, Mead determined to have a child and build a family life, seeing that as the “private solace” of those who were in other ways unable to come to terms with their culture’s restrictive gender roles. The book describes the gender roles of three societies, which fortuitously provide the most salient contrasts for America. Its true focus, however, is on the “deviant” within each culture—the person whose innate temperament set him or her at odds with the cultural expectations of his or her society. It is a story of how culture perverts the potential of individuals, but much more importantly it is a tale of individual survival against cultural and social odds. It is a message of endurance in the face of adversity, and its call for ongoing cultural change to foster individual potential was, like that of her other books, a message of the times.

Finally, chapter 7 ties together these themes, arguing that Mead’s turn to a more essential version of the self in relation to culture was intimately connected to two “absences.” The first is her lack of any endogenous or nuanced theory of the genesis of human variation, such as a more rigorous understanding of psychoanalytic theory might have afforded. The second is her implicit belief in the existence of homogenous, integrated, smoothly functioning cultures not subject to internal processes of change. Thus, Mead lacked, at the level of both the individual and the socio-cultural, any theory of endogenous change. Therefore, variation in human “personality” or responses to life could generally be found only in that realm she understood to be outside history and outside culture—that is, biology. I go on to argue that it is fortunate that Mead did not publish or further pursue (except in private) her “squares” theory of human types. Rather, she re-emerged into the public sphere after Bali and the Second World War as a major force for a cosmopolitan, democratic ethic. This was to be her enduring legacy.