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**Paul Shankman. *The Trashing of Margaret Mead: Anatomy of an Anthropological Controversy*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009.**

Within academic circles, controversies abound. Reported data may produce multiple interpretations, academics may have their own biases, and history or culture may favor some findings over others. In short, scholarly consensus may be impossible to achieve. Current controversy surrounding the validity of the ethnographic study conducted by anthropologist Margaret Mead is but one example of such academic controversy. In the course of 250 pages, Paul Shankman articulately examines the complete “anatomy” of the controversy centered upon the works of anthropologist Margaret Mead and her critic, Derek Freeman, and their respective fieldwork in American and Western Samoa.

Controversy over the legitimacy of Mead’s work ranges from personal distaste/distain for her anthropological conclusions to claims that Mead was intentionally duped or “hoaxed” by her informants during the fieldwork that later comprised her famous anthropological text, *Coming of Age in Samoa*. This controversy intensified due to the direct involvement of the media in what might otherwise have remained a debate conducted in purely academic circles. This debate was further compounded by the fact that Mead was implicated posthumously. As an anthropologist, Shankman expertly examines the lives and works of Mead and Freeman, considers the variables in the debate surrounding the Samoan behaviors that may have been misinterpreted in Mead’s and Freeman’s work, and admits his stance and involvement in the Mead-Freeman controversy.

To begin, Shankman discusses Margaret Mead’s popularity and her anthropological works, and then juxtaposes her decades-long celebrity with her more recent and posthumous foray into the media spotlight. Freeman piqued the curiosity of the mainstream media with his book, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*.

*The New York Times* published a book review of Freeman’s work on January 31, 1983 (Shankman 2009:5-6), beginning a quarter-century debate over the merits and flaws in the works of both Mead and Freeman. As Shankman notes, “Over the next eighteen years, Mead’s alleged ‘mistake’ about the nature of Samoan adolescence would become the ‘hoaxing’ of a naive, inexperienced young Mead by Samoan women” (9). This dispute continued until Freeman’s death in 2001, reaching a level that caused Shankman to state, “When I mention Mead in lectures or casual conversations with people inside and outside of academia, they often ask, ‘Wasn’t there some guy who showed that Mead was wrong?’ or ‘Hasn’t her work been largely discredited?’” (11). The publication of a single book and the publicity garnered by Freeman and his work (with which most of his anthropological colleagues disagreed) resulted in the deep questioning of not only Mead, one of the most well-known American anthropologists but also the credibility of her ethnographic work, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, one of the most famous of all anthropological publications.

Shankman begins by explaining the significance of the media’s involvement in the Mead and Freeman controversy. Shankman mentions that by presenting his argument through popular media, Freeman gained a wider and more rapidly growing audience than he otherwise might have, since public media moves at a quicker clip than academic publishing. Anthropologists, for the most part, did not have the opportunity to read through or respond to Freeman’s book before he embarked on his publicity tour, and likewise, the media moved on to other issues before Freeman’s fellow anthropologists had the opportunity to come to Mead’s defense (25). Consequently, by the end of the 20th century, Mead was on “worst” lists for the century, and

Freeman's critique of her work was largely seen as "truth," as it had the benefit of appearing in popular media (27).

Following the review of his book in the *New York Times*, Freeman appeared on an episode of the Donahue show on March 18, 1983, during which Freeman discussed his views on the nature-nurture debate and during which fellow anthropologist of Western Samoan culture, Bradd Shore, critiqued Freeman's book, criticizing it for relying on personal attacks of Mead and for its failure to provide practical feedback regarding how to build, improve, or make a stronger type of anthropological work (35). Shankman provides particular insight into Freeman's personality by describing Freeman's reactions to Shore's critique during the Donahue episode. Apparently, Freeman had made threats to Shore during a commercial break and later tried to get Shore's Ph.D. revoked and a publication of Shore's discredited (38); a common practice of Freeman when he felt crossed by another academic professional was to write scathing letters about that individual's credentials or work or otherwise try to draw criticism to his critics' work.

Shankman further describes Freeman's attack of Mead's work by discussing a video documentary completed in 1988 (38) in which Freeman presents evidence in support of his claims that Mead was wrong in her anthropological conclusions. In the video, Freeman questions the legitimacy of the responses of Mead's interviewees and suggests that they had lied to Mead during her questioning of them as a joke (39). As Shankman comments: "This [hoaxing] hypothesis was also featured in David Williamson's play *Heretic*, which was performed for audiences in Australia and New Zealand in the mid-1990s. It included Mead and Freeman as major characters, imagining them as they might have been and how the controversy might have turned out had Mead lived to debate Freeman" (41).

At this point in the book, Shankman pauses his documentation of the Mead-Freeman controversy to insert thorough biographies of both Derek Freeman and Margaret Mead, as it is important and pertinent to the debate to understand what formulated each anthropologist's worldview. Shankman starts with Freeman, who, after attending Victoria University College in Wellington, New Zealand, went to teach in Western Samoa and into the New Zealand navy during World War II. Freeman continued his education at the London School of Economics and Political Science and, later, the University of Cambridge. Soon after that, he went onto a career at the Australian National University. Shankman also chronicles Freeman's apparent mental breakdown (53-55), which altered his academic research and pushed him toward his eventual conflict with Mead and her work.

During Mead and Freeman's only meeting, Freeman claims to have shown data that indicated the ways that she had been mistaken in her conclusions regarding adolescent behavior in Samoa (59). Mead appeared to believe that Freeman intended to discredit her work. Shankman writes: "Anticipating Freeman's published critique of *Coming of Age*, she chose to comment on his critiques of her work in the second edition of her *Social Organization of Manu'a*, which was published in 1969. Although Mead did not know exactly what Freeman would say about *Coming of Age* in print, she concluded her monograph with a section discussing the ways in which "different anthropologists (men and women, for example) might produce different accounts of the same culture" (63). Despite this, Freeman continued to contend that Mead's primary failure as an anthropologist was that her preconceived notions about what she would see and what it would mean for the results of her work (65). Freeman also took issue with the conclusions to which Mead came regarding Samoan sexuality. Several years later, Freeman would take his argumentative stance against Mead to professional publication. First, he published a note in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, in which he claimed that there were signs that Mead's mastery

of the Samoan language was limited; his evidence was her misspellings of Samoan words in her work (65-66).

With the stage set, Shankman switches focus to the biographical sketch of Margaret Mead. Born in Pennsylvania, she attended DePauw University for a year and then transferred to Barnard. Like Freeman, she did not start her studies in anthropology, but instead, Mead majored in English and psychology. Toward the end of her undergraduate coursework, she took a class with Franz Boas.

Around the same time, she became friends with Ruth Benedict. She pursued a M.A. in psychology from Columbia, married a man she had been engaged to since the age of 16, and “entered the Ph.D. program in anthropology at Columbia in 1923 as one of only four graduate students in the department [at one of two U.S. institutions with Ph.D. programs in anthropology at that time]” (85). Her dissertation examined Polynesian cultural material, but did not include fieldwork (86). Boas played a role in her ultimate selection of American Samoa for her first fieldwork project (86).

Just as he had done for Freeman, Shankman meticulously covers Mead’s travels, her career moves, and as much as he can about her work in Samoa. He pays particular attention to balancing Mead’s story with the cultural standards and conventions of the time. Shankman first does this while describing Mead’s views of women and sexuality while she was in college. Later, he continues by presenting the standards typical of cultural anthropology and ethnography when Mead was conducting her fieldwork, forming an interesting juxtaposition between Shankman’s assessment of Mead as a competent anthropologist who was, nonetheless, a product of her environment and Freeman’s critique of Mead as a biased foreigner with Samoan language proficiency issues.

Upon her return from Samoa, Mead met Reo Fortune, who would later become her second husband, and prepared to start writing her first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (101). To reemphasize the importance of this book, consider the following quote by Shankman: “by the time of her [Mead’s] death, it had gone through six editions, been translated into sixteen languages, and sold over a million copies. The book is still in print today, eight decades after it was written” (101). Mead’s book came out of her initial National Council Report, “The Adolescent Girl in Samoa” (102). As Shankman reminds the reader, one must realize that “Mead’s primary goal in *Coming of Age* was to reach a large segment of educated Americans on a subject of concern to them” (108). She later wrote a more ethnographic piece in *Social Organization of Manu ‘a*, but it did not gain the same amount of publicity and many anthropologists overlooked it when criticizing Mead’s work with *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Shankman mentions that Bronislaw Malinowski and Marvin Harris were two anthropologists who chose to critique her work. Shankman concludes his sections on Margaret Mead by showing how *Coming of Age in Samoa* did fit the framework of society at the time of publication, in terms of society viewed sex, birth control, and even literature. Shankman contends that *Coming of Age in Samoa* gave people a glance into another world, which encouraged them to question their views and see life differently.

From there, Shankman focuses the second half of his book on the core anthropological data, the varied interpretations of the Samoan behaviors, and controversy surrounding the interviews Mead conducted, including those mentioned in Freeman’s personal appearances and in the documentary video. Shankman looks at the controversies from the perspective of the Samoans. The notion of informed consent had not been considered at the time Mead conducted her fieldwork, and it appears that the Samoans did not consider the fact that the responses they

provided to Mead might be used in publication (136-137). This section of Shankman's work is particularly interesting, as he includes what Samoans have since researched about their own cultural practices. Shankman also weighs the role that public and private knowledge played in shaping the very different perspectives of both Mead and Freeman. Shankman discusses Samoan views of the work of Derek Freeman and their thoughts regarding anthropological interviews.

Shankman gives equal space to the data and interpretations of both Freeman and Mead. He includes some chronicling of anthropological literature, comparative studies, and analyses of modern Samoan society and culture. He explores Samoan views on sexual permissiveness and the notions of consensual versus coerced sex in Samoan culture. He also examines Samoan thoughts on virginity and homosexuality and considers the ways in which the private views of Samoan individuals might align with the public ceremonies and societal beliefs discussed in both Mead's and Freeman's work. Finally, Shankman wonders whether either anthropologist might have missed anything, misinterpreted subjects' responses, or entered into observation with preconceived notions functioning as blinders. Shankman addresses each of these issues by working his way through the academic research with a journalistic style. In the end, the reader has no choice but to appreciate how much more complexity existed in the Mead-Freeman controversy than the media depicted.

*The Trashing of Margaret Mead: Anatomy of an Anthropological Controversy* ends with an examination of the "broader issues" of the Mead-Freeman debate and the impact the controversy had on both the field of anthropology and Mead's legacy. Shankman reflects upon the ways the nature-nurture debate is embedded within the Mead-Freeman controversy. To round out his thorough work, Shankman states that he met both Mead and Freeman but was close with neither anthropologist. This final section of Shankman's text documents how and when Shankman became involved in the Mead-Freeman controversy and how he came to appreciate its complexity.

One of the strengths of this book is its universality. The work offers useful information for readers of various levels of prior knowledge. For readers with next to no knowledge of the controversy outside of knowing of Mead's anthropological work, Shankman assumes nothing and moves methodically through all the stages of the controversy. This is particularly useful since more than a quarter century has passed since Freeman's controversial book hit the media circuit, and the story is neither in the media nor actively discussed in some introductory cultural anthropology courses or readers.

For those who only knew the story only as far as it was presented by mainstream media (particularly those who lack background knowledge of anthropology), this book also offers something. Shankman juxtaposes the controversy as it was presented by the media and the actual anthropological research and primary documents relevant to the case, making for a highly informative book. Last, for those well-versed in anthropology and the Mead-Freeman controversy itself, Shankman assembles the complete picture, from biographic synopses to the ramifications of the controversy over a quarter century later, and asks anthropologists to reexamine the controversy and what teaching moments it has provided. In considering the needs of all potential readers of this text, Shankman skillfully merges anthropological and lay knowledge that this controversy needed all along for resolution and closure.

With this strength in mind, one must also consider a few minor criticisms. Firstly, as fairly as the author treats both Mead and Freeman, *The Trashing of Margaret Mead: Anatomy of an Anthropological Controversy* is a relatively recent publication that comes after Freeman's death. This means that once again, we are left with a critique of an individual who is unable to

respond. Still, Freeman's recent death does not appear to have been an incentive for Shankman to publish his work at this time. Shankman did serious research and did not go on a character attack. The fact that this book comes after Derek Freeman's death should not detract from its merits. If anything, Shankman's book attempts to resolve the decades-old controversy. To be a little more objective, perhaps the author could have included of a foreword or postscript from a Freeman supporter in order to have balanced the work a little more.

Skeptics could also question the level of bias in this textbook, as Shankman was in opposition to Freeman's work. Within the first pages of this book, Shankman writes: "I was one of Freeman's numerous critics in the controversy. In a letter written in 1997, Freeman declared that I had become one of his major adversaries" (13). Several times more, he writes of his stance. Shankman's honesty strengthens his credibility as an anthropologist. He is truthful about where he stands, and he successfully presents a largely objective researched book. In addition, Shankman exposes a side to the Mead-Freeman controversy that much of the mainstream media and general public did not hear in the 1980s and early 1990s, and this is likely to appeal to many anthropologists. Shankman has also spoken with the anthropologists he scrutinizes and even had access to Derek Freeman's archives. In no way does he try to silence Freeman.

Ultimately, one must appreciate both the complexity of the Mead-Freeman debate and the role of the media in changing the public perceptions of Mead and her work, *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Readers should likewise recognize the thorough and professional work of Paul Shankman, who dissects one of the most controversial debates in 20th century anthropology. There is no more an appropriate term to use in describing this book than "anatomy," as the data Shankman collected, the analysis of media coverage he conducted, and his nuanced interpretations of both Mead and Freeman as individuals and anthropologists truly constitute a body of work that is unparalleled in scope and magnitude.

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