"For you have given me speech!"—Gifted Ethnographers, Illiterate Primitives, and Media Epistemologies in the Poetry and Plurimedial Writing of Margaret Mead

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Introduction

In her children's book *People and Places* (1959), U.S. American cultural anthropologist and public intellectual Margaret Mead opens with an evolutionary account of human history[1]. The first chapter in this account, "Man's Discovery of Man," ends with the invention of writing, which marks the transition to what is designated as a significantly higher stage in human development, to be portrayed in the next chapter, "Man as a Being." Writing, for Mead, presents

> a next great step in human history. And as soon as people could write, they did not have to depend on the memory of living people or the stories that old people told, but could keep the knowledge of a past beyond the memory of anyone alive. As they could keep records, they could begin to know what was happening to them and to ask questions: Was the kingdom getting larger or smaller? Did the river rise at the exact same time every year? And because all the special knowledge—how to govern, how to pray, how to make offerings to the gods, how to plant crops, or how to temper metal—no longer had to be carried in their heads, it could even be lost and learned again as long as people could read what had been written down. Civilization as we think of it seems to have started approximately five thousand years ago. (Mead 1959, 34–35)

According to Mead's account, the "next great step in human history" that was taken with the invention of writing turned man from "Discovery" into "Being" and enabled significant growth and specialization of knowledge with direct and determining effects on the way people think. For as soon as people could write and as long as people could read, Mead argues, their heads could be unburdened from past and "special" knowledge and, by consequence, rendered spacious enough to consider for the first time more abstract, long-term questions. Indeed, Mead claims, writing induces the passage to "Civilization as we think of it." With an article or qualifier conspicu-

ously absent, the potential plurality and relativity of cultures as promoted by Mead's teachers Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict—non-capitalized, plural—collapses into a unified, teleological concept, *Civilization*—capitalized, singular. The latter constitutes a unique state in human development that Mead's Euro-American readers, allied with the author as "we," are assumed to be familiar with.

This passage thus resonates eerily with the writing of 19th-century cultural evolutionists, the very "armchair anthropology" that Boasian fieldworkers such as Mead notably sought to refute (Stocking 1968, 1974, 1989, 1990, 2002). Cultural evolutionist theories in the late nineteenth century prominently involved assertions about the invention of writing and particular sign systems as key milestones in the development of humankind. Isaac Taylor's monumental *The Alphabet: An Account of the Origin and Development of Letters* (1883) posits a unilinear evolutionary sequence from pictorial and pictographic writing systems over logographic and syllabic writing to, finally, an alphabetic writing system. As Bruce G. Trigger explains, "The logic underlying this scheme was the observation that phrases, morphemes [...], syllables [...], and phonemes [...] represent increasingly basic and esoteric levels of analysis but at the same time offer ever more efficient means by which to record speech" (Trigger 2004, 41). The more abstract and arbitrary the relation between signifier and signified, the logic went, the more efficient and thus conducive to progress the

respective writing system. Consequently, Taylor considered Chinese and Japanese scripts indicative of a general backwardness of East Asian societies and claimed that their industrialization was contingent on the adoption of an alphabetic writing system (Taylor 1883, 25-38). Almost needless to say, the rapid economic development that Japan and China in particular have recently gone through while maintaining largely logographic writing systems provides definite proof of the unsubstantiated nature of such pseudoscientific arguments.

In the U.S.-American nineteenth-century context, Lewis Henry Morgan gained great influence through his leadership role in the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the adoption of his evolutionist scheme by John Wesley Powell, the founding director of the Bureau of American Ethnology, thus eventually becoming synonymous on both sides of the Atlantic with the cultural evolutionism that British Victorian thinkers such as Taylor, Edward B. Tylor, and John Lubbock had initially put forward. Morgan's *Ancient Society: Or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* (1877) lays out a seven-stage typology that defines Civilization against (Lower, Middle, and Upper) Savagery and (Lower, Middle, and Upper) Barbarism as the most advanced stage in human history, which sets in with "the Invention of a Phonetic Alphabet, with the use of writing" (Morgan 1877, 12). Mead's evolutionist account at the beginning of *People*

and Places shares with this rendering of human history not only the idea that Civilization started with the invention of script but also the equation of this invention with alphabetic writing. Taylor, Morgan, and Mead all acknowledge the existence of a plurality of notation systems, yet do so only by drawing up further developmental trajectories that dismiss other than alphabetic writing systems as antecedent to the present European state of media-technological innovation. By extension, following the media-determinist logic that judges civilizational progress by the "efficiency" of people's media use, they dismiss their users as inferior to Europeans in their mental and social capacities. "Picture Writing, or idiographic symbols," for instance, rank second in a five-part series of inventions that leads up to "a Phonetic Alphabet, or written sounds" in Morgan (1877, 589), while they are cited in Mead as a media-technological achievement that renders the Aztecs superior to the Incas, who "had no writing at all" and relied in their communication between "distant parts of the empire" entirely on *quipus*, that is, highly inefficient, "complicated knotted chords" (Mead 1959, 35).

Historians of writing have traced the discursive and associative entanglements between notions of literacy and culture much further back than 19th-century cultural evolutionism, exposing them as integral to a process of epistemic colonization that set in about the time of the European Renaissance. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Wal-

ter D. Mignolo's co-edited volume *Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes* (Boone and Mignolo 1994) has been particularly influential in defining the colonization of writing as a constitutive part of the colonization of knowledge that establishes the Eurocentric understanding of media technologies as necessary to exclude the colonized from dominant processes of knowledge formation. As Joanne Rappaport, one of the volume's contributors avers, "the power of European institutions was constituted and maintained through the spread of [a Eurocentric notion of] literacy" in particular between the late sixteenth and the early nineteenth centuries (Rappaport 1994, 271). A great number of scholars have followed in the footsteps of this early work on the colonization of writing, answering Boone and Mignolo's powerful call for studies that explore the contested history of the world's literacies[2]. In his own research on Renaissance theories of writing, Mignolo uses the Spanish missionaries' historiographical writing on Amerindians as an example of the colonization of Native discourses, which he defines as a "situation [...] in which the act of writing the history of a community means both suppressing and mistrusting the voices of a subjected community" (Mignolo 1992, 311). The Spanish chroniclers mistrust the Amerindian means of recording the past, such as picto-ideographic writing, oral narratives, and quipus, instead taking it upon themselves to present the information provided by their subjects in the medium that they consider most suited for historiography, that is, alphabetic writing.

In this article I explore some of the dynamics of this process of epistemic colonization through media colonization as it unfolds in Margaret Mead's literary and plurimedial writing from the early to mid-20th century. My critique of Mead's continued reliance on cultural evolutionist, Eurocentric media concepts in an effort to produce knowledge about non-European subjects further underlines the necessity of challenging these very technologies as an essential step toward intellectual decolonization and postcolonial knowledge formation. In response to this necessity, Boone's introduction to Writing without Words redefines writing in radically broad terms as "*the communication of relatively specific ideas in a conventional manner by means of permanent, visible marks*" (Boone 1994, 15; emphasis original). However, especially in literature-trained scholarship, the medium of alphabetic writing together with its discursive history often remains a blind spot, that is, writing is usually taken for granted in our analyses, despite widespread agreement with Marie-Laure Ryan's dictum that media are not "hollow pipelines" (Ryan 2005, 289). By contrast, I concur with Sven Werkmeister that "the medium of literature itself […] needs to be examined in terms of the hazardous legacy it derives from its role in the history of colonialism" (Werkmeister 2016, 253).

More concretely, I first argue that Mead's writing about and *with* words is continuous with the Eurocentric cultural evolutionist understanding of phonetic writing as

a marker of ultimate human advancement. In doing so, I diverge to some extent from the dominant framing of the history of anthropology as a series of paradigms, with cultural evolutionism being replaced by cultural relativism in the first decades of the 20th century. As Tracy Teslow (2014) has recently shown, this narrative considerably downplays the continued imbrication of early proponents of cultural relativism, such as Boas, Benedict, and Mead, in 19th-century evolutionist thought[3]. I claim that it is in Mead's use of different media that these continuities are particularly manifest, through my investigation of the ramifications of her association of alphabetic writing with superior development, particularly in her treatment of media other than alphabetic writing. If the capacity to write is grafted onto the default, Civilized human, does this entail an understanding of the use of other media as failure and lack of human refinement? Do media other than alphabetic writing in this way end up being isomorphically aligned with a developmental state other than—and inferior to—Civilization?

In order to probe these questions, I first focus on Mead's monomedial, poetic writing and then, in the second half of this article, branch out to consider the plurimedial work that grew out of her fieldwork in Bali. Mead stayed in Bali for two years from March 1936 to March 1938, and for another six weeks from February to March 1939. During this time she collected around 25,000 still photographs and 22,000 feet of film footage, together

with her fellow anthropologist and then husband Gregory Bateson, in the mountain village of Bajoeng Gedé. The copious materials were later screened to make selections for two photographic studies, Balinese Character (Bateson and Mead 1942) and Growth and Culture (Mead and Macgregor 1951), as well as the film series Character Formation in Different Cultures (Mead and Bateson 1951, 1952a, 1952b, 1954a, 1954b, 1978; Mead, Bateson, and Belo 1952). Within this large corpus of texts, which combines written words with photography and motion picture film, I am guided by Mead's verbal and visual portrayal of Karba, a Balinese boy to whom large portions of *Balinese Character* (Bateson and Mead 1942) and *Growth and Culture* (Mead and Macgregor 1951) are devoted, as well as the film *Karba's First Years: A Study of Balinese Childhood* (Mead and Bateson 1952b). Karba also makes a final appearance toward the end of *People and Places* (Mead 1959). Apart from the evolutionary account with which I opened this article, and which appears at the beginning of the monograph, *People and Places* (Mead 1959) presents different representational media on a second dimension, by interlacing its body text with ample illustrations. When Mead was asked to write a book on anthropology for children, she reasoned that "because children's books are expected to be lavishly illustrated," she "could make the book suit a double purpose, as a text for children as well as a history of the evolution of techniques for the presentation and recording of other cultures—from the fanciful reconstructions

of and [sic] artist illustrator, through the careful drawings of museum artifacts, early paintings, still photography and finally color photography" (Mead 1976, 8)[4].

The Poetry of Margaret Mead and the Gift of Writing

Like her close associates and fellow Boasians Ruth Benedict and Edward Sapir, with whom she exchanged drafts and criticism[5]. Mead authored a substantial body of poems, six of which were published[6] and 222 of which have remained unpublished. This corpus has been largely ignored, with the exception of the intentionalist readings of Mead's biographers that reduce the poems to an outlet of personal expression and a conduit for private thoughts (Banner 2003; Bateson 1984; Howard 1984; Lapsley 1999). This simplistic treatment partly stems from Mead's own dismissal, in her later career, of her literary endeavors as subordinate and subservient to her anthropological work (Mead 1976, 2-4; Mead 1975, 115-122). Contrary to how this body of work is predominantly received, then, I close-read Mead's poetry in a discussion of the poet-anthropologist's media practices.

The poem "Your Gift" (1927a) was compiled by Mead together with nine other poems in a small volume titled *Song of Five Springs*[7].

Your Gift

For you have given me speech!
No more I'll sit, an anxious child
Awed by articulate elders,
Dumb in envy of the melodies
That fall from human lips, while mine
Can only give straight, formal kisses,
And the slight, unfreighted syllables
Of infancy.

No more I'll fear that love
Will strangle in his two swift hands
A speechless heart.

Nor must I train my feet to rest,
Crossed impotently in crowded valleys,
And never venture up those slopes of light,
Gleaming with pain to those
Who have no way of utterance.

All travelled and untravelled ways
Are for me now.
For all encountered beauty I may press
Upon your lips of loveliness. (Mead 1927a, n.pg)

With great enthusiasm and force, the first line announces the poem's eponymous gift to be "speech," the ability to speak articulately. The empowering nature of this gift, suggested by this forceful introductory exclamation, is accounted for in the remaining poem, as the perso-

na draws up images of former identities that have now turned into deficient alterities: "No more" is the persona "an anxious child / Awed by articulate elders" (Mead 1927a, n.pg) and "Dumb in envy of the melodies / That fall from human lips" (Mead 1927a, n.pg). Now that s/he has gained the power of speech, s/he has evolved from a child stupefied by eloquent elders into a full human being, who emits out from "human lips" "melodies" rather than "straight, formal kisses" and "slight, unfreighted syllables" (Mead 1927a, n.pg). "No more," either, can love do violence to her "speechless heart" (Mead 1927a, n.pg), now that s/he has the ability to express her/himself; "[n]or must [s/he] train [her/his] feet to rest" (Mead 1927a, n.pg). For the gift of speech, the poem's last two stanzas argue, also comes with the power to move: No more is the persona confined to "crowded valleys" (Mead 1927a, n.pg); no more is s/he one of those who have to look up "with pain" to "those slopes of light" that s/he is now able to "venture up" (Mead 1927a, n.pg). The curious link between the ability to move and to articulate oneself is resolved in the final stanza: Only if the "encountered beauty" (Mead 1927a, n.pg) may be expressed and "press[ed] / Upon [the addressee's] lips of loveliness" (Mead 1927a, n.pg), the reasoning goes, is the persona granted access to "[a]ll travelled and untravelled ways" (Mead 1927a, n.pg). It is important to note that travel has both literal and figurative meanings here, with movement being semanticized in such a way as to render it a metaphor

for knowledge gain. Thus, the persona's journey up the "slopes of light" (Mead 1927a, n.pg) that "[g]leam[] with pain" (Mead 1927a, n.pg) to those who are left behind in "crowded valleys" (Mead 1927a, n.pg) also signifies an increase in knowledge. Crucially, then, this rise in both knowledge and altitude appears as conditional on speech in Mead's poem. It is this gift that enables the persona to move up and above "those / Who have no way of utterance" (Mead 1927a, n.pg) and who rest with their feet "[c]rossed impotently" (Mead 1927a, n.pg), to a supreme stage in human development characterized by epistemic prowess.

Given this portrayal of an educational process set in motion by the poem's eponymous gift, one could even go as far as to argue that the persona belongs to a group of people that turn-of-the-century scholars such as Mead considered primitive or savage. The image of a people resting motionless in dark valleys until a benevolent, knowledgeable visitor introduces them to a superior way of communicating clearly hearkens back to the rhetoric of Enlightenment thinkers that saw it as the duty and necessary burden of the Civilized to educate savage peoples by bringing light into darkness, that is, European knowledge to presumably ignorant dark-skinned people. In this frame of thought, the uncivilized savage is conceived in ways strikingly similar to the portrayal of the persona in Mead's poem prior to receiving the addressee's gift: as an impressionable child in "awe"

and "envy" of those who are more advanced in human development measured by a Eurocentric standard. The childlike savage is depicted as "[d]umb," lacking in both intellect and the ability to speak articulately, but also as "unfreighted" and unburdened by the complexities of civilized life, which are represented by "the melodies / That fall from human lips" (Mead 1927a, n.pg) and contrast with the "straight" and "slight" utterances "[o]f infancy." As soon as the persona receives the addressee's gift, she/he embarks on a metaphorical path toward an enlightened, civilized state of being, leading up "slopes of light" (Mead 1927a, n.pg) which "[g]leam with pain to those / Who have no way of utterance" (Mead 1927a, n.pg). The progress that the persona achieves, in the logic of the poem, thanks to the gift of her/his civilized benefactor remains painfully out of reach for the other dwellers in the "crowded valleys" from which the persona started her/his journey. Since these savages as opposed to the persona have not been subjected to a benevolent civilizing mission undertaken from a Eurocentric perspective, they remain "impotent[]," helpless, and unable to progress beyond their primitive state of existence.

While this shows the poem's entrenchment in the cultural evolutionist notion of a superior state in human development and knowledge that is initiated by an innovation in verbal practices considered indispensable to European ways of communication, what at this point

of my analysis still sets "Your Gift" apart from such accounts of human development as Morgan's in *Ancient Society* (1877), but also Mead's at the beginning of *People and Places* (Mead 1959), is the latter's presentation of alphabetic writing as the necessary innovation and threshold to this superior state, not speech. However, a comprehensive analysis of "Your Gift" and its assessment of different media practices also requires taking the poem's own mediality into account. Critically, in "Your Gift" the persona's celebration of the gift of speech comes in written speech. It is not "press[ed]" on the addressee's "lips of loveliness" (Mead 1927a, n.pg) in an oral act of communication, as the persona proposes in the last stanza, but the exchange between persona and addressee—the report on the "beauty" "encountered" upon receiving "[y]our [g]ift"—takes place in alphabetic writing. Note again the first, exclamatory line, "For you have given me spech!" (Mead 1927a, n.pg), which is a conjunctional phrase seemingly in response to something that the addressee has expressed beforehand. Yet the exact reference remains unknown. Oral speech as well as other than alphabetic systems of notation are excluded from the literary text, and those who use them—such as the addressee, tellingly characterized by her/his "lips of loveliness" (Mead 1927a, n.pg)—are positioned among "those / Who have no way of utterance" (Mead 1927a, n.pg) in the media regime of the poem. The treatment of differences in media use is isomorphic, that is, media and systems of notation are defined negatively by their

lack and failure of being the default, alphabetic writing. Knowledge production is limited to phonetic writers, those who have ascended to a state of enlightenment.

Writing Balinese Culture: Mead's Plurimedial Monographs

In Mead's ethnographic work on Balinese culture, similarly, alphabetic writing is pitted against other media and ways of writing as well as people that are "less" literate in Mead's Eurocentric view. As the author makes sure to inform her readers in the very first pages of *Balinese Character* (Bateson and Mead 1942), her first monograph on Bali, "Writing there was, but only a half-dozen semi-literate individuals who were barely able to keep records of attendance, fines, etc." (Bateson and Mead 1942, xiii)[8]. 'Fully' literate and well able to keep records, by contrast, Mead and Bateson take it on themselves to write up the Balinese, thus both suppressing and mistrusting their subjects' records and engaging in the disenfranchising gesture that Mignolo found constutive of Spanish missionaries' colonization of Amerindian literacies (Mignolo 1992, 311). Mead and Bateson follow their ethnographic precursors, who continued this colonial practice in order to appropriate the right to study colonized subjects and lend authority to the knowledge that they generated in this way.[9] However, *Balinese Character* applies a methodology that combines alphabetic writing with photography, at the same time also breaking with

accepted conventions of ethnographic textualization. Mead and Bateson explain that the conventional method of writing up a group of people is flawed on several grounds:

> This method had many serious limitations: it transgressed the canons of precise and operational scientific exposition proper to science; it was far too dependent upon idiosyncratic factors of style and literary skill; it was difficult to duplicate; and it was difficult to evaluate. Most serious of all, we know this about the relationship between culture and verbal concepts—that the words which one culture has invested with meaning are by the very accuracy of their cultural fit, singularly inappropriate as vehicles for precise comment upon another culture. (Bateson and Mead 1942, xi)

Being sensitive *avant la lettre* to some of the predicaments that prompted the 1980s *Writing Culture* debate[10] in anthropology, that is, ethnography's failure to meet its own self-set standards of scientificity, the ineluctable literariness of ethnographic writing, and most damning, the fact that verbal representation is always already culturally inflected and hence "inappropriate as vehicle for precise comment upon another culture," Mead and Bateson construe photography as a representational medium that is diametrically opposed to alphabetic writing. Given their frustration with conventional ethnographic writing, the significantly younger media technology comes

to serve as a foil onto which they project their desire for a medium that is not characterized by an "accuracy" of "cultural fit" and not "inappropriate" therefore for cross-cultural representation. Hence, their naïve contention that "[e]ach single photograph may be regarded as almost purely objective" (Bateson and Mead 1942, 53). As Mead first explained in the rationale for her funding application with the Social Science Research Council, the camera is taken "as an automatic correction on the variability of the human observer," whose "cultural understanding" is subject to change during the fieldwork stay (Mead 1936, 3; also Mead 1956, 85; 1963, 172)[11].

Notwithstanding Mead and Bateson's acute awareness of writing's cultural partiality and their consequent invocation of photography as an impartial medium, the one hundred plates that make up the body of *Balinese Character* (Bateson and Mead 1942) contain a large portion of alphabetic writing. Besides an introductory statement, they feature lengthy captions for each photograph (Fig. 1 and 2):

> We have assumed that the objectivity of the photographs themselves justifies some freedom in the writing of the captions. We have not hesitated, therefore, to select for emphasis those features of the photograph which seemed most revealing, and to describe those features in words and syntax which might convey a sense of the emphases of Balinese culture as we understand it. (Bateson and Mead 1942, 53)

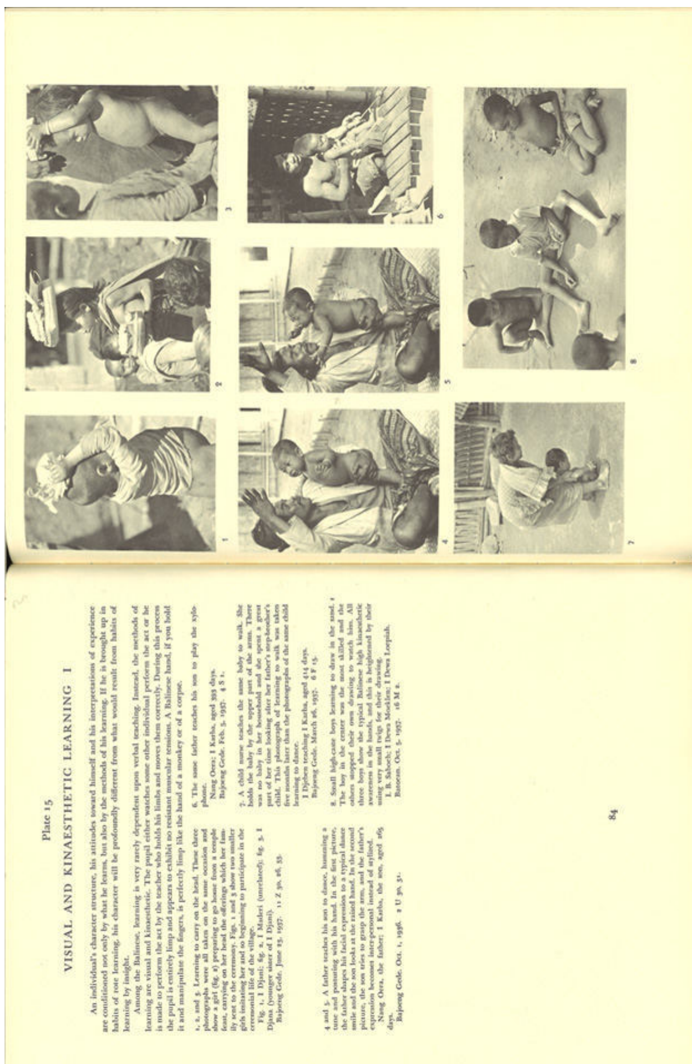

Plate 15

VISUAL AND KINAESTHETIC LEARNING I

An individual's character structure, his attitudes toward himself and his interpretations of experience are conditioned not only by what he learns, but also by the methods of his learning. If he is brought up in habits of rote learning, his character will be profoundly different from what would result from habits of learning by insight.

Among the Balinese, learning is very rarely dependent upon verbal teaching. Instead, the methods of learning are visual and kinaesthetic. The pupil either watches some other individual perform the act or he is made to perform the act by the teacher who holds his limbs and moves them correctly. During this process the pupil is entirely limp and appears to exhibit no resistant muscular tensions. A Balinese hand, if you hold it and manipulate the fingers, is perfectly limp like the hand of a monkey or of a corpse.

1, 2, and 3. Learning to carry on the head. These three photographs were all taken on the same occasion and show a girl (fig. 2) preparing to go home from a temple feast, carrying on her head the offerings which her family sent to the ceremony. Figs. 1 and 3 show two smaller girls imitating her and so beginning to participate in the ceremonial life of the village.
Fig. 1, I Djani; fig. 2, I Maderi (unrelated); fig. 3, I Djana (younger sister of I Djani).
Bajoeng Gede. June 25, 1937. 11 Z 30, 26, 33.

4 and 5. A father teaches his son to dance, humming a tune and posturing with his hand. In the first picture, the father shapes his facial expression to a typical dance smile and the son looks at the raised hand. In the second picture, the son tries to grasp the arm, and the father's expression becomes inter-personal instead of stylized.
Nang Oera, the father; I Karba, the son, aged 265 days.
Bajoeng Gede. Oct. 1, 1936. 2 U 30, 31.

6. The same father teaches his son to play the xylophone.
Nang Oera; I Karba, aged 393 days.
Bajoeng Gede. Feb. 5, 1937. 4 S 1.

7. A child nurse teaches the same baby to walk. She holds the baby by the upper part of the arms. There was no baby in her household and she spent a great part of her time looking after her father's step-brother's child. This photograph of learning to walk was taken five months later than the photographs of the same child learning to dance.
I Djeben teaching I Karba, aged 414 days.
Bajoeng Gede. March 26, 1937. 6 F 15.

8. Small high-caste boys learning to draw in the sand. The boy in the center was the most skilled and the others stopped their own drawing to watch him. All three boys show the typical Balinese high kinaesthetic awareness in the hands, and this is heightened by their using very small twigs for their drawing.
I. B. Saboeh; I Dewa Moeklen; I Dewa Loepiah.
Batoean. Oct. 5, 1937. 16 M 2.

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Fig. 1: Bateson and Mead 1942, 84-85.

The basic premise of Mead and Bateson's ethnographic study is that Balinese culture calls for interpretation, which they as anthropologists are equipped to provide. Yet with photography being annexed to alphabetic writing as a transparent medium exempt from cultural bias and processes of meaning construction, it is only in the captions' "words and syntax" that Mead and Bateson "might convey" what they consider "a sense of the emphases of Balinese culture" (Bateson and Mead 1942, 53). The alleged objectivity of photography, though, is profitably employed to heighten their scientific authority, guaranteeing data integrity to such an extent that they feel free to take greater liberties in their writing and, by implication, meaning-making of Balinese culture[12].

Growth and Culture (Mead and Macgregor 1951), Mead's second ethnography of Balinese culture, published with Frances Macgregor, relies much less on wordy captions in its signifying process. Nonetheless, it is still Mead's writing[13] that determines how the illiterate—or "semi-literate" (Bateson and Mead 1942, xiii)—Balinese are to be understood, while photography is used to substantiate this interpretation with presumably objective evidence. The first sixteen plates of the study introduce eight Balinese children individually, starting with Karba[14], who already featured prominently in *Balinese Character* (Bateson and Mead 1942; e. g. Fig. 1). In Mead's opening remarks, Karba is characterized as "the only surviving son" of his parents and "the gayest baby in the village of Bajoeng

Gedé" (Mead and Macgregor 1951, 64). She admits that "[t]here are more pictures of Karba than of any other child," and that "this is not entirely a result of circumstances" but of Karba's extraordinary "liveliness, intelligence, and responsiveness, which made him the most actively interested participant" and "the center of observation" even when he was not intended to be (Mead and Macgregor 1951, 64)[15]. Having thus portrayed Karba as a unique and positive character—strong, energetic, intelligent—Mead goes to great lengths to defend this reading against contrary photographic evidence. On the second plate dedicated to Karba and with regard to a photograph in which he sits sulking next to a group of more actively engaged children, Mead concedes that there is a "period of withdrawal through which Balinese children characteristically go" (Mead and Macgregor 1951, 66). However, "even in this period," she immediately counters, "his [Karba's] gaze is level and appraising; he is withdrawn into himself, but still presents a picture of a well-integrated child" (Mead and Macgregor 1951, 66). Mead's writing in this way evokes a picture in competition with the photograph, the "picture of a well-integrated child" with a "level and appraising" gaze; and since photography, in Mead's understanding and use of it, is devoid of cultural meaning and depends on the writer-anthropologist for interpretation, it is the latter's picture that prevails in how readers of *Growth and Culture* (Mead and Macgregor 1951) look at Karba.

It is also this image of Karba that "lives on" as the image of how "he really was in 1936," Mead notes in *People and Places*: "Karba, the little Balinese boy in a mountain village, who was photographed in 1936, lives on—on the covers of books, in films, and in the textbooks which one generation of students after another study—just as he really was in 1936" (Mead 1959, 207–208). The film *Karba's First Years: A Study of Balinese Childhood* (Mead and Bateson 1952b), for instance, also starts with a description of Karba as creative and "gay" in phonetic writing, in white letters scrolling upwards against a dark background, before the viewers are presented with camera-recorded evidence to support this characterization[16]. In *People and Places* (Mead 1959), as well, he reappears as the "actively interested" and "gay[] baby" (Mead and Macgregor 1951, 64) that Mead presented in her two monographs on Balinese culture. However, as Mead continues, there is a twist:

> [Karba lives on] just as he really was in 1936. And this is strange too, for in the years between, Karba has grown up and married; now he has children who will go to school in modern Indonesia and live a very different life from his own. But this grown-up Karba is not yet known to all the thousands of people who know the little Karba, for this picture, taken in 1953, is the first to be published of Karba as a man. (Mead 1959, 208)

A photo of a grown-up Karba appears, without further comment[17]. In this instant, Mead gives over the gift of speech to the photograph, granting it the power to complicate her former, written portrayal of Karba. The photo, then, which appears in the chapter "Where Are They Now?" and follows Mead's portrayal of five different cultures, "The Eskimo," "The Indians of the Plains," "The Ashanti of West Africa," "The Balinese," and "The Minoans of Crete," frustrates what Johannes Fabian (2014 [1983]) has influentially termed the "denial of coevalness," the "*persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse*" (31; emphasis in original). The photographic appearance of grown-up Karba thwarts the positioning of coexisting people in an earlier, more "primitive" or "savage" stage of human development, which has been a defining feature of anthropological discourse. Responding to the question "Where Are They Now?" the photo situates Karba firmly in the present of the 1950s, in which Mead writes *People and Places*. In the process, it acknowledges Karba's capacity for growth and development. Not only does he appear to have outgrown the characteristic gayness and active interest that Mead observed in her earlier photographic studies, with "Karba as a man" gazing languidly into the distance rather than engaging with the observer (Mead 1959, 208); more importantly, the photo breaks with the evolutionist myth that the most advanced, contemporary

stage of human development is conditional upon "the Invention of a Phonetic Alphabet, with the use of writing" (Morgan 1877, 12). Even without what Mead considers 'full' literacy, Karba has been able to evolve from infancy to maturity and an advanced state of knowledge. "No more," indeed, is he "an anxious child / Awed by articulate elders" and "Dumb in envy of the melodies / That fall from human lips" (Mead 1927a).

Even more, in this instant, Mead goes as far as to reconstruct the Balinese, a "primitive" people in Mead's 1936 funding application (Mead 1936, 2), as "a modern people" (Mead 1959, 207). However, a caveat is due, in order to put what is ultimately an isolated incident into perspective. Just as their portrayal in *Balinese Character* (Bateson and Mead 1942) and *Growth and Culture* (Mead and Macgregor 1951), the repositioning of the Balinese as modern and coeval at the end of *People and Places* (Mead 1959) still very much relies on alphabetic writing, the very medium whose full mastery the Balinese are denied and whose absence, in fact, rendered them Mead's "primitive" subjects of anthropological investigation in the first place[18]. To be sure, the photo of "Karba as a man" is framed by written words (contextualized by a monograph that consists largely of alphabetic writing) which provide the clues necessary to read it as an affirmation of coevalness. Most notably, it submits a response to the chapter's titular question "Where Are They Now?" Thus underneath the rupture in media practices

that Mead's plurimedial work signals—and which Mead calls for in her theoretical writing, most famously in her essay "Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words" (Mead 2003 [1975])—lie the same epistemic and political dynamics that are at play in her monomedial work. As alphabetic writing is established *in* alphabetic writing as integral to the most advanced stage in human development and knowledge, Mead's subjects of representation are deprived of their capacity to intervene in the very discourses that construe them as illiterate and underdeveloped, and by extension, unable to add to the knowledge of humankind. This capacity remains limited to those who qualify as literate in the Eurocentric taxonomy of media and writing systems that has been in use since Renaissance travelers first colonized Indigenous knowledge, that is, phonetic writers such as Mead. The formation of postcolonial knowledges therefore has to unsettle the media concepts employed in the production of colonial knowledge and the constitution of the power of European institutions.

Conclusion

While my analysis has shown that both Mead's poetic, monomedial writing and her plurimedial work extend well into the 20th century the process of epistemic colonization that her cultural evolutionist precursors had pushed forward in the 19th century, I want to conclude by returning to the second, more exploratory research

question formulated at the beginning of this article: If alphabetic writing is grafted onto the default, Civilized human, what does this entail when it comes to how other media are understood and treated? Mead's plurimedial writing has provided a particularly valuable platform to probe this question, given the anthropologist's simultaneous imbrication in 19th-century cultural evolutionist conceptions of writing and pioneering experimentation with photography and cine film. The analysis of Mead's first plurimedial study of the Balinese, *Balinese Character* (Bateson and Mead 1942), showed that media alterity, i.e. the use of media other than alphabetic writing, is defined isomorphically as a lack and the failure of being the default—alphabetic writing. That is, photography is cast as that which alphabetic writing is not; it is construed negatively (and falsely) as an "almost purely objective" (Bateson and Mead 1942, 53) medium of representation, which is not subject to the cultural imprint that makes alphabetic writing transgress the "precise and operational scientific exposition proper to science" (Bateson and Mead 1942, xi). It thus depends on the writer-anthropologist for interpretation; because of its presumed immediacy and transparency, photography does not produce the knowledge that Mead's Euro-American audiences require to make sense of the subject of representation. In this way, ideas about cultural and media alterity dovetail to corroborate the authority of the writer-anthropologist and the epistemology compounded by her work. Photographs and primitives, despite being ontological-

ly different entities, align discursively as subservient to a meaning-generating, knowledge-producing phonetic writer. Sven Werkmeister's study *Cultures beyond Writing: On the Discourse of the Primitive in Ethnology, Cultural Theory and Literature around 1900* [Kulturen jenseits der Schrift: Zur Figur des Primitiven in Ethnologie, Kulturtheorie und Literatur um 1900] (Werkmeister 2010) arrives at related results, noting a marked parallelism between notions of cultural and media alterity around the turn of the 20th century—a "curious affinity of subject and method, observed and observer" [eine "eigentümliche Affinität von Gegenstand und Methode, Beobachtetem und Beobachter"] (Werkmeister 2010, 165)[19]. In his discourse analysis of a range of fields, from travel writing to linguistic anthropology and ethnomusicology to theories of perception, semiotics, and media to modernist literature, Werkmeister argues that proponents of these fields imagined the cultural primitive and media and sign systems other than alphabetic writing in intricately interrelated ways. What connects these fields at bottom, he contends, is an opposition between symbolic and analog systems of notation in which the former is associated with the idea of a rational European equipped with cognitive skills such as abstraction, and the latter with the image of a more sensually perceptive primitive. While Werkmeister (2010) compellingly demonstrates the pervasiveness of this dualism, his discussion in the process also reveals an isomorphic relationship between media other than alphabetic writing and people other than Eu-

ropeans. In fact, the title *Cultures beyond Writing* already suggests as much: Whereas one pole of the dichotomy is formed by alphabetic *writing*, the other comprises an indefinite number of *cultures*, which are cast as primitive due to their common lack of script.

What is further evident by the end of *Cultures beyond Writing* is that this "media primitivism" ["medialer Primitivismus"] (Werkmeister 2010, 11 et passim) also involves a fascination with and desire for non-symbolic systems of notation and mediation due to their presumed immediacy in representation. Werkmeister's monograph closes by reading the modernist literary experiments of writers such as Hugo Ball, Alfred Döblin, and Robert Musil as being prompted by precisely this media primitivist longing. I have shown that Mead's work, too, is informed by a need for other than alphabetic, written media of representation to provide the unmediated directness that a symbolic sign system, requiring decoding of the relation between signifier and signified, fails to offer. However, the default against which photography and film are in this way measured and defined remains phonetic writing, the 'gift' of written speech. As in the logic of Mead's poem, where this capacity empowers the persona to explore "[a]ll travelled and untravelled ways" (Mead 1927a), knowledge gain is conditional upon alphabetic writing. It is also this ancient European media-technological innovation that vests the knowledge that Mead generates during her fieldwork with academic

authority, via its long-standing equation with a supreme stage in human development distinguished by epistemic prowess. Given the outcome of my analysis, it may not surprise that Mead went on to publish more than 1,300 written texts in her lifetime[20]. "Monuments to writing are built by writers," as Stephen Greenblatt already noted in his critique of Todorov's *Conquest of America* (Greenblatt 1991, 12; Todorov 1984). Surely, then, what we witness in Mead's poetic and plurimedial writing is a particularly apt writer building a monument to her craft.

Notes:

1. This article grows out of the Swiss National Science Foundation project "Of Cultural, Poetic, and Medial Alterity." I want to thank Philipp Schweighauser, his co-directors Gabriele Rippl and Walter Leimgruber, and the SNSF for their generous support. This institutional frame allowed me to access the archival materials necessary for the present article, which are held in the Margaret Mead Papers at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. I am indebted to the friendly assistance of the LoC's Manuscript Division. Figure 1 is reprinted by permission of the Bateson Idea Group, kindly granted by its President Phillip Guddemi. I further thank Philipp Schweighauser and Sven Werkmeister for their thoughtful feedback on an earlier version of this article. My critical reading of Mead's treatment of media alterity through the lens of isomorphism (Irigaray 1985 [1977]) has been inspired by Patricia MacCormack, who makes profitable use of the concept

in the context of posthuman studies. I am also grateful to Silvy Chakkalakal for providing me with a digital copy of the film series Character Formation in Different Cultures (Mead and Bateson 1951, 1952a, 1952b, 1954a, 1954b, 1978; Mead, Bateson, and Belo 1952). Finally, I want to thank Kerstin Knopf and Janelle Rodriques for their thorough editing of my manuscript and their thoughtful suggestions.

2. Recently, Liu (2010; 2015), Rath (2014a; 2014b), Brander Rasmussen (2012), Cohen (2010), and Teuton (2010), for example, have added valuable contributions to this body of research. Michel de Certeau's *The Writing of History* (1988 [1975]) forms another important early investigation that starts with the Renaissance alliance of writing with Civilization, antedating by two decades Mignolo's 1990s work and contributing to the debate in continental philosophy that Lévi-Strauss's "Writing Lesson" stimulated (Lévi-Strauss 1961 [1955], 286–297; Derrida 1997 [1967], 101–140; Barthes 1977 [1968]). Finally, and almost needless to say in the postcolonial studies context of the present volume, Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism also involves an acute awareness of the complicity of notions of writing and semiotic conceptions with colonialist endeavors (Greenblatt 1990; 1991).

3. Teslow (2014) should also be approached with some caution, however. While profitably emphasizing the continuities between cultural evolutionism and Boasian anthropology to qualify the dominant narrative, Teslow's criticism of historian of anthropology George W. Stocking for popularizing this narrative, by applying Kuhn's concept of the paradigm to the history of anthropology (Teslow 2014, 3–12), does not sufficiently acknowledge the tentativeness and critical self-reflection with which Stocking puts forward his account. Espe-

cially in his book-length publications, Stocking makes sure to note that he "regard[s] Kuhn's schema not as a precise model [...] but rather as a very fruitful heuristic metaphor which may help us to understand particular movements" (Stocking 1968, 302), "not as a model of how that development 'actually' takes place, [...] but as an orientation toward certain aspects of certain episodes in the history of the [social sciences]" (Stocking 1987, xiv). Stocking's own unease with the disjunction that Kuhn's concept of the paradigm implies is further evident in his later move toward the term "tradition" (Stocking 1990; see also Stocking 1987, xiv).

4. Apart from the evolutionary account with which I opened this article, and which appears at the beginning of the monograph, *People and Places* (Mead 1959) presents different representational media on a second dimension, by interlacing its body text with ample illustrations. When Mead was asked to write a book on anthropology for children, she reasoned that "because children's books are expected to be lavishly illustrated," she "could make the book suit a double purpose, as a text for children as well as a history of the evolution of techniques for the presentation and recording of other cultures—from the fanciful reconstructions of and [sic] artist illustrator, through the careful drawings of museum artifacts, early paintings, still photography and finally color photography" (Mead 1976, 8).

5. For analyses of Benedict's poetry, see Schweighauser (2006) and Roffman (2010, 143–181); for Sapir's poetry, see Handler (1984; 2005a; 2005b; 2007), Reichel (2015), and Reichel and Schweighauser (2017). For a useful overview of the literary work of the latter, see also Carpenter (2014). What remains

of the correspondence in which the three anthropologists exchange and discuss each other's poetry is held in the Margaret Mead Papers (box T3, folder 6; box T4, folders 1-2; box S15, folder 2).

6. "The Penciling of Pain" in the *Barnard Barnacle* (1923a), "For a Proud Lady" (1925a) and "Rose Tree of Assisi" (1925b) in *The Measure*, "Misericordia" in *Poetry* (1930), "Absolute Benison" in *The New Republic* (1932), and "And Your Young Men Shall See Visions" in Eda Lou Walton's anthology *The City Day* (1929).

7. The hand-bound volume was probably compiled for Benedict (Library of Congress 2001). Apart from "Your Gift" (Mead 1927a), it comprises the poems "Drifted Silence" (Mead 1923b), "The Closed Door" (Mead 1924a), "A Craven's Technique" (Mead 1924b), "Traveler's Faith" (Mead 1925c), "Refutation" (Mead 1926), "The Need That Is Left" (Mead 1927b), "A Rueful Valentine" (Mead 1927c), "Green Sanctuary" (Mead 1927d), and "Cradle Song" (Mead 1927e) and is held in the Margaret Mead Papers (box S9, folder 5). The Mead Papers also contain two other typescripts of "Your Gift" (Mead 1927a; box Q15, folder 15), one of which features a handwritten note under the poem's title, "(For R.F.B.)," which further supports the idea that "Your Gift" was written for Ruth (Fulton) Benedict.

8. An early report published in *The New York Times Magazine* reveals a bias that contributed significantly to the production of such a "semi-" or illiterate subject of investigation. Because of limitations in time and resources, the readers learn, Mead and Bateson "decided not to work with the elaborate

high culture" of Bali but to settle down in Bajoeng Gedé, "a village of dour peasants, which lies in a closed hollow in the hills" (Mead 1939, 12). As opposed to Bali's "high culture," which features "two archaic religious languages with which the Balinese write their sacred texts on books made of sheaves of palm leaves" and an "intricate vocabulary for each of the dozens of styles of dances," in Bajoeng Gedé, "[t]he ceremonies were so simple that it was easy to master them" (Mead 1939, 12). Mead and Bateson's early decision to ignore the former and opt for the latter is downplayed in all later publications.

9. By the time Mead and Bateson did their fieldwork in Bali, the expression "to write up" a people had become ethnographic jargon (Handler 2005c, 143; Asad 1986, 159).

10. Clifford and Marcus (1986); but also Marcus and Fischer (1999 [1986]), Clifford (1988), Fabian (2014 [1983]), Hymes (1972), Rosaldo (1993 [1989]), and Manganaro (1990).

11. Mead would later use quotation marks, claiming that photography "present[ed] more 'objective' evidence" (Mead 1956, 104). However, the idea that the camera "provid[ed] reliable data" and "information independently of language" (Rouch and Hockings 2003 [1975], 533) still prevails in Mead and Bateson's (in)famous interview "For God's Sake, Margaret," where Mead vigorously rejects Bateson's view that the photographic record is never independent from the observer's subjective perception (Brand 1976, 39–40).

Mead's firm belief in the objectivity of photographic documentation is frequently noted—and criticized—among schol-

ars of visual anthropology, such as Sullivan (1999, 6–18, 20–21), Poole (2005, 168–169), and Blake and Harbord (2008, 217, 219, 221–222). Few scholars have so far followed Sol Worth's suggestion to read Mead more charitably as spearheading an "anthropology of visual communication" which breaks with the myth of photographic truth prevalent in nineteenth-century ethnographic photography (Worth 1981). For a good overview of the early history of visual anthropology, see Poole (2005) as well as Ruby (1996) and Wacowich (2010).

12. It has been argued that Mead's mobilization of photography and cine film as ethnographic tools also served to counter previous criticisms that had accused her of not providing sufficient objective evidence to support her cultural interpretations. Tara Blake and Janet Harbord thus describe Mead's use of the camera "on an unprecedented scale," to an "extreme extent," in martial terms: as "a type of re-arming" and "a re-assertion of her professional prowess" (Blake and Harbord 2008, 221–222; see also Sullivan 1999, 29–30).

13. Mead produced all the writing for *Growth and Culture* (Mead and Macgregor 1951), whereas Macgregor was responsible for arranging the photographs, taken by Bateson. In the collaboration out of which came *Balinese Character* (Bateson and Mead 1942), Mead wrote the introduction, which presents the study's theoretical and methodological framework, and Bateson took over the photographic analyses that accompany each plate.

14. *I Karba*, to be more precise. "Personal names in Bajoeng Gedé," Mead explains in a short "Note on Orthography and Pronunciation of Personal Names and Balinese Words,"

which precedes the book's body matter, "are prefixed with an I (pronounced *ee*) until an individual becomes a parent, and then the word *Nang* (father of) or *Men* (mother of) is prefaced to the name of the oldest child" (Mead and Macgregor 1951, 2).

15. In the second paragraph of Plate I, Mead continues to describe Karba using such categories as "outward rotation," "fluidity," and "flexibility" (Mead and Macgregor 1951, 64). Mead and Macgregor's interest in these observational categories is due to their application of a new methodology developed contemporaneously by child psychologist Arnold Gesell and pediatrician Frances Ilg at Yale (Lakoff 1996, 18).

16. There are two differences, though, to *Growth and Culture* (Mead and Macgregor 1951) in how Karba is portrayed in *Karba's First Years* (Mead and Bateson 1952b): First, the opening sequence of the film describes him further as characteristically "withdrawn," whereas the monograph dismisses Karba's withdrawnness as a mere phase through which all Balinese children go (Mead and Macgregor 1951, 66). Second, and even more important, in contrast to *Growth and Culture*, which emphasizes his uniqueness, in the filmic study of Balinese childhood, Karba stands synecdochically for Balinese culture as a whole: Karba is depicted as he "begins to develop a *Balinese* character, gay, artistic but withdrawn" (own emphasis), the opening crawl also notes.

17. This photograph was not taken by Bateson but by Ken Heyman, who would go on to collaborate with Mead on two photo-books, *Family* (Mead and Heyman 1965) and *World Enough: Rethinking the Future* (Mead and Heyman 1975). In

World Enough (Mead and Heyman 1975), Mead recapitulates how she met up with Heyman in Bali in 1956 (sic!) to re-photograph some of the people that Bateson had taken pictures of twenty years earlier and how she then decided to include some of the new photos in *People and Places* (Mead 1959), juxtaposing them with Bateson's pictures. "The children I had studied in the late 1930s were grown now," she explains the arrangement (Mead and Heyman 1975, xxi).

18. In her autobiography, Mead puts forward a definition of "the primitive" as her research subject that directly echoes Morgan's influential conception of "the savage" and "the barbarian" as those who lack script—despite Mead's manifest intention to distance herself from precisely the cultural evolutionism of her precursors: "Our training equipped us with a sense of respect for the people we would study. They were full human beings with a way of life that could be compared with our own and with the culture of any other people. No one spoke of the Kwakiutl or the Zuñi—or any other people—as savages or barbarians. They were, it was true, primitive; that is, their culture had developed without script and was maintained without the use of script. That was all the term 'primitive' meant to us" (Mead 1975, 151).

19. For an essay that translates some of the numerous findings and rich analyses that Werkmeister (2010) contains from German into English, see Werkmeister (2016).

20. Her *Complete Bibliograph*y 1925–1975 (Gordan 1976) lists 1,397 published writings. Mead remained an active writer until her death in 1978 and Adams (2016, 14, 276) claims that Mead published around 1,500 titles.

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