

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

A. Elisabeth Reichel

## Abstract

This article centers on the role of the medium of alphabetic writing in the poetry and scholarship of Margaret Mead (1901–1978), one of the most prolific writers of 20th-century U.S.-American anthropology. I 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. Mead’s demarcation of her subjects’ alterity by their lack of and failure to use the medium of script extends the process of epistemic colonization well into the 20th century, a process that denies the people that anthropologists study the ability to become involved with the very discourses that cast them in this position of objects of study. I first focus on Mead’s largely unexplored poetic writing and then consider the plurimedial work that grew out of her fieldwork in Bali.

**Key words:** Margaret Mead; cultural anthropology; ethnography; plurimediality; literacy/writing; poetry