

*Samoa, on the Wilde Side:  
Male Transvestism, Oscar  
Wilde, and Liminality in  
Making Gender*

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This essay asks two questions contingently related in Samoa. The first question is, by what avenues do obscure cultural practices become culturally salient? Male transvestism is prevalent and conspicuous in late 20th-century Samoa, yet transvestism is not mentioned by early missionaries to Samoa—missionaries who thought it worthwhile to comment repeatedly on what they saw as unusual sexual practices. Furthermore, the same ensemble of behaviors one finds in contemporary Samoan transvestism is recognizable in historical records from many other Polynesian locales (Besiner 1994; Levy 1971:12–13, 1973:130, 131; Watts 1992; Williams 1986: 255–256). It is not plausible that modern transvestites in Samoa sprang full blown, like Venus rising from her oyster shell. Rather, I suspect that in old Samoa transvestism was merely an extremely marginal institution, but one that was a behavioral cognate of less marginal institutions elsewhere in Polynesia. How then did transvestism make a historical transit from the margins of the Samoan cultural universe toward the center? I enlist a thesis of Oscar Wilde's in seeking an answer: art provides models that are imitated in social

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life. Probably drawing upon an existent but marginal prototype, Samoan 20th-century popular performing art featured transvestites, providing an avenue for the transiting of this ensemble of behaviors from relatively obscurity to the cultural limelight and providing new options for individuals.

The second question this article explores is a venerable question in the anthropology of gender: why does male transvestism become salient in some societies and not others, even when similar historical circumstances seem to apply? In a 1992 article, and more deeply here, I argue that in Samoa the historical circumstance most conducive to the increasing salience of transvestism was a destabilization of gender identity provoked by missionization, the Samoan response to missionization, and modernization. Gender identities, however, have been destabilized by modernization in many cultures, and not all develop entertainment interests in transvestism or rising populations of transvestites. While considering prior answers to this question, I propose that a gender system based on contrasting social roles, as opposed to contrasting temperaments, is a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for the development of transvestism as a highlighted social institution. We will also see, however, that while Samoan male transvestism presupposes role-based gender contrasts, transvestite humor aims at deconstructing these contrasts and has been exploited by Samoan women for deconstructive purposes. Through this Samoan example, I show that deconstruction is an activity in which our ethnographic subjects are actively involved, and this involvement has a necessary place in making cross-cultural theory.

My sources are as follows. For reports on sex and gender in pre-Christian Samoa, I rely on early students of the culture—particularly missionaries, but also philosophical travelers, and military and civilian government functionaries in the employ of European powers. For more recent accounts, I rely on ethnographies, travelogues, interviews I conducted, and entertainments I attended or watched on Samoan local broadcasting while residing in Samoa between 1981 and 1989, and again during the summers of 1990 and 1991, as well as my experiences as the wife of a Samoan and as a member of a Samoan *ʻāiga* (extended family).<sup>1</sup> The cultural history recounted here is a piece of a much larger history than can be accommodated within a single article. More often than I would like, therefore, I must refer to evidence assembled in my other

published work on Samoa rather than presenting all supporting evidence herein.

#### OSCAR WILDE AND CULTURE CHANGE IN SAMOA

In “The Decay of Lying” Oscar Wilde argued that—rather than art imitating life, as in Plato’s analysis—life imitates art. What Plato meant was that objects in the world are but shadows, copies, or reflections of an ideal form, and art is merely a copy of objects in the world: art is a copy of a copy. What Wilde meant was that the variety of experiences and modes of living depicted in art are often affected by people generally: “a great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher” (1972[1889]:55). Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is a famous example. After Goethe wrote this tale about a romantic young man who commits suicide because he is disappointed in love, there was a significant rise in the suicide rate in Germany (Swales 1987:94–98). Today this mimetic relation between art and social life has been documented and is called the Goethe effect (Phillips 1986; Philips et al. 1992). I argue that male transvestism in Samoa developed by way of the Goethe effect, that is by way of the social fictions proffered by Samoan comic theater, *faleaitu*. I also attempt to contribute to an understanding of the Goethe effect. Artists do not invent cultural life in a vacuum; by their responses audiences support certain art and thereby contribute to this process of invention.

Samoan male transvestites, *fa’afafine*, are often referred to as *teine pepelo*, which literally means “a lying girl.” While *pepelo* may be used specifically to denote lying, as in the expression “Pepelo ‘oe” (“You lie!”), it can also mean false, as in faux pearls, and has connotations both of a deception and a copy. Hanging out with girls, *fa’afafine* may strut and swing their hips. The girls will laugh and say “Pei la ā se real,” using the English word *real*, meaning “Just like a real [one],” or “Pei la ā se teine mo’i,” “Just like a true girl.” What *fa’afafine* lie about (in Wilde’s terms), or copy (in Plato’s), is sex and gender. But in Samoa to copy gender is to make a copy of a copy.

Gender itself is, after all, a social fiction, by which I mean a piece of artistry, both individually and socially conceived, by which people portray a biological substrata. This is particularly true in Samoa.

In our society identity is located in the experience of subjectivity, that is in personal experiences such as thinking and feeling (Shweder and Bourne 1984). The self is believed to reside within the person where these personal reactions take place. Similarly, we locate gender identity within the person in temperamental differences, as Mead long ago noted (1963[1935]). Elsewhere I argue that in Samoa identity is located in the persona.<sup>2</sup> *Persona* is a Latin term that derives from theatrical roles or masks; it refers to the social roles one plays and to the social masks that go with these roles. Samoans also conceive of gender identity as role-based; therefore, personal sexual practices like homosexuality do not necessarily qualify gender identity. There is an old Samoan word for male-to-male intercourse, *tauātāne*, virtually never used today. This term, however, did not refer specifically to sexuality but to any act when it was conducted only between men, such as dancing with men only or fighting with men only (Pratt 1977[1862–1911]:297). Unlike our term *homosexual*, *tauātāne* never denoted a type of person. Transvestism is enacted as a social role. In a society where categories for identity and gender are based on social role, it is likely that categories of aberrant gender will be as well. In Samoa, only miming the dress and manner of the other sex constitutes a significant mark of social difference.<sup>3</sup> While inner selves are supposed to be sincere or authentic, personae are performative, and like any performance involve a degree of self-conscious artistry.

If a girl, as an object in the world, is but a reflection of an ideal girl (as Plato argues), then the persona of a girl—which is a social copy of sexual difference—is a reflection of a reflection, and an imitation of a female persona by a male transvestite is a veritable hall of mirrors.<sup>4</sup> In Plato's terms *fa'afafine* are, then, like art, only more so. Perhaps for this reason, Wilde's hypothesis bears particularly upon an understanding of the figure of the *fa'afafine* in Samoa and on "her" relation to Samoan culture history. In the history I trace, however, "lying girls" not only play the role of art but also play the role of those who affect the modes of living described in a popular art form. The representation of male transvestism in Samoan comic theater (*faleaitu*) as an attractive and entertaining *dramatis persona* opened the way for a rising incidence of transvestism in everyday life. In turn the popularity of *faleaitu* sprang from a missionary problematization of sex and gender.

As a result of the missionary encounter, Samoans rewrote sisters' and wives' gender roles. Missionization is often thought to compromise the status of women (Etienne and Leacock 1993; Gailey 1987). In contrast, I argue that although the Christian role of the Samoan sister was much more restrictive than her pre-Christian role, it was elevated in status, as was the status of the Samoan-Christian wife. In Samoa status is relative: one has status vis-à-vis other social actors, not in some abstract sense. The ascent of women's status implied a descent of male status. Perhaps even more important, however, this ascent implied a decrease in the role and status differential by which the category male was previously defined. I am not saying that precontact Samoan society was heavily patriarchal or that the Christian philosophy of gender relations was an out-and-out improvement on the pre-Christian past, but a conjugation of Samoan and Christian values, together with economic modernization, played fortuitously upon indigenous conceptions of sex and gender in ways that no doubt dismayed missionaries as much as it did Samoan men.

As an all-male comic theater, *faleaitu* provided an arena to digest and contest this revision of male roles. Although there is no evidence that male transvestites (*fa'afafine*) were culturally salient figures in pre-Christian Samoa, or that early *faleaitu* actors were transvestites themselves, the persona of the *fa'afafine* became the favorite device of *faleaitu*. I suggest that this device was adopted because the figure of the *fa'afafine*, as a feminized male, was a metonym for the problem of a relative feminization of male roles that missionization provoked. Because of the *fa'afafine's* new place in the limelight, "she" became a key figure in social thought and social humor, and this theatrical ascendancy helped to create a place for real male transvestites in everyday social life. Not only were individuals more likely to adopt a *fa'afafine* role because of the Goethe effect; Samoan society was more likely to see this role as acceptable.

#### THE MISSIONARY PROBLEMATIZATION OF GENDER IN SAMOA

In precontact Samoa all girls were to advance the status of their family by marrying to advantage. High-status girls did so by remaining virginal until their elders arranged a marriage with the scion of another high status family (Freeman 1983:230–231; Schoeffel 1978:75; Tuiteleapaga 1980:231; Turner 1986[1861]:93). Lower-

status girls might advance the status of their family by bearing a child to a high-status boy, even if the union that produced the child were of a highly temporary nature. Writing in the 19th century, Pritchard says high-status boys have “as many wives as they please . . . who, while young and not invested with tribal honours and power, make their selection from among the daughters of the commoners,—girls of lower rank than themselves” (1866:133). Chief Tuiteleaga adds, “lessor chiefs or untitled persons, wishing to have connections with, or bring in royal blood to their families, would not mind their daughters having affairs de couer with the high and paramount chiefs” (1980:72).

All girls served as village hostesses in the *auauma*, an organization of the sisters and daughters of the village. The *auauma* put on entertainments for village guests, including night dances called *pōula*, meaning “joking night.” These joking evenings followed all occasions of state in old Samoa.<sup>5</sup> A high-status girl as a *taupou* would lead the first dignified phase of this dance. The *taupou* was a ceremonial village virgin. Less-cloistered girls took the leading role in the last comedic phase of the *pōula* through their hilarious, sexual dancing, which not only served as entertainment but also provided an opportunity to display themselves and to lure high-status husbands (Kraemer n.d.[1902]:389–398).

The British 19th-century consul, Churchward, describes girls arrayed for such a dance as

redolent and glistening with perfumed oil. . . . Most lovely garlands of flowers and leaves, bright with all the colors of the rainbow . . . crowned their flowing locks . . . together with long and short “ulas” (necklaces) of vivid scarlet berries . . . were the only clothing they wore above the waist. [1887:229].

Below, the 19th-century medic Kraemer says, they “wear their leaf girdle or shag girdle so scant and high that a part of their tattooed upper thigh is visible” (n.d.[1902]:395). Their dancing, Churchward continues, characterized by “undesirable antics,” was so excited, absurd, and wild that they soon appeared “like a lot of demons let loose from below” (1887:230). Not surprisingly, missionaries condemned the *pōula* and girls’ roles within it (Moyle 1988:205–206, 210).

Elsewhere I have argued that, as a social institution, the *pōula* was not merely disbanded; its various phases were broken into parts that were less objectionable to the Samoan-Christian conscience

(Mageo 1996). One part of the pōula consisted of theatrical mimicry (Kraemer n.d.[1902]:389–391). This mimicry often involved poking fun at authority figures. Missionaries to Samoa were largely Wesleyan and London Missionary Society (LMS) ministers. The London Missionary Society consisted in a variety of populist Protestant movements (Wesleyanism being the original example), which had an ambivalent relation to authority and ministers probably had some sympathy with comedy at the expense of political authority (Eliade 1987; Gilson 1970:65–94; Perry 1974:11). This piece of the pōula, therefore, survived the collision between public entertainment forms and missionary ethics, was combined with other existent theatrical traditions, and gave rise to a new form of theater—faleaitu.<sup>6</sup>

#### FALEAITU

The transition from “joking nights” that featured ribald dancing girls to joking theater seems to have begun simply by eliminating the dancing. By this I mean that, aside from the lack of dancing, early Samoan comedy may have been little more than nominally different from pōula. At early faleaitu, as in pōula, lewd gestures, scantily clad actors, and obscenity were the rule (Sinavaiana 1992b: 196–197). Probably to persuade missionaries that there was a significant difference between joking nights and joking theater, Samoans suppressed the old name of these occasions (pōula). “Joking nights” had taken place in what was called, for the purpose of the evening’s entertainment, a faleaitu, a “house of spirits” (Hereniko 1993; Shore 1977:318). Samoans used the place name of pōula, faleaitu, as a new name for these jesting evenings. Gradually, however, the female comedians that had been so important to the lasciviously funny character of pōula began to disappear and were replaced by males, whose lack of modesty was less distressing to Samoan-Christian sensibilities. Chief Tuiteleapaga, who was Mead’s assistant in the 1920s, reports both boys and girls participating in faleaitu (1980:50). Sloan, who visited Samoa in the 1930s, describes mythological skits acted in by both men and women (1940). I married a Samoan, and by the time my husband was a boy in the 1960s men and women had entirely separate theatrical genres: women acted only in serious mythological and biblical drama called *konseti*, never in faleaitu.<sup>7</sup>

If faleaitu carried on many pōula traditions, it also addressed a new problem, the missionary problematization of Samoan sex and gender roles. We saw that in pre-Christian Samoa high-status girls remained virginal prior to a formal marriage and were always demure and dignified. Missionaries believed these standards should apply to all girls and often had young women reside with them so as to give them a Christian education and keep them virginal (Mead 1961[1928]:156–157). In Samoan eyes this would have meant all girls were like high-status girls, “sacred, to be respected and treated as morally superior creatures” (Schoeffel 1979a:176).

The reasons why such a suggestion might have appealed to Samoans are several. In pre-Christian Samoa daughters were associated with status ascent (through their offspring) and, therefore, with family image. A particularly pretty daughter might offer her family a more exalted future.<sup>8</sup> Missionaries, however, insisted that only church weddings were valid, undermining the capacity of high-status boys to “marry” informally with a long series of lower-status girls, or at least undermining the status of the offspring of such unions (Gilson 1970; Hutton 1874). If Christianity blocked the progress of lower-status family fortune in certain respects, the idea that all daughters should be virginal would have implied, in Samoan terms, that all could make the facsimile of a high-status marriage, an idea flattering to the status of lower-ranking families. Christian ideas about girls’ virginity would also have been appealing because, by the 20th century, many of the controls by which families insured their daughters “married” in a manner that advanced family status began to decay as Samoa sustained greater and greater influxes of foreign men (Franco 1989:386; Keesing 1934; Stanner 1953:327–328).

The Christian idea that all girls were sacred and to be respected represented a radical elevation of the common girl’s role. This Christian revision of girls’ roles rebounded upon boys’ roles as well. As girls’ status became more elevated, boys’ declined by contrast. Changes in the habitation of buildings in Samoan villages illustrates this change. If buildings can be said to have status, then in Samoa they have status on a basis of their proximity to the *malae*, the open space that marks the center of the village. Correspondingly, the assignment of people to buildings closer to or farther from the *malae* reflects upon their relative status (Shore 1982:49).



In old Samoa “the young men mostly slept by themselves in the *faletele* or ‘great house,’ which was a favorite gathering place for all bachelors” (Stair 1897:109–110). *Faletele* are large houses in which public ceremonies are regularly staged. The bachelors’ *faletele* would have been the great house of the ‘*aumāga*, the village’s organization of untitled young men. Villages also had an *aualuma*, an organization of sisters and daughters. The *aualuma* and the ‘*aumāga* each had a great house in which their members slept. Presumably the ‘*aumāga*’s great house was situated on the *malae*, as *faletele* always are.

By the time Shore and Schoeffel were in Samoa, however, sisters slept in their extended family’s *faletele*, while brother had migrated to *faleo’o*, small houses situated back toward the bush (Schoeffel 1979a:135; Shore 1977:424, 1982:233–234). Shore says the physical positioning of boys suited “their symbolic and functional status in the family” (1982:234). In light of the metaphor of location, then, boys’ status suffered dramatic descent. In Samoa status is also reflected in the division of labor. Those with more status work less. In the Samoan-Christian family the boy “goes to sleep out the back, the place of lowest status. . . . He serves food to his sisters and eats after them. While he works long hours cooking, gardening and fishing, his sisters remain around the house resting a lot between . . . chores” (Schoeffel 1979a:176). In Christian Samoa, Schoeffel tells us, sisters tend to be “dominant, intractable and uncontrollable” and are “attributed higher rank” (1979a:177). We will see, however, that not only were boys’ roles put in jeopardy by missionization but men’s roles also.

This transformation of feminine and masculine gender roles posed difficulties for both sexes. If the girl’s status rose, this status came to be qualified by her potential acceptability as a Christian wife, that is by her virginity. Rather than indulging in comic self-display, she was to remain always demure and dignified. During the middle decades of the 20th century this emphasis on virginity and circumspection generated a new form of spirit possession that featured girls in a leading role, as *pōula* once had (Mageo 1994, 1996). During the same period the missionary problematization of sex and gender was also represented in *faleaitu*. The new form of spirit possession focused primarily on problems involving feminine sex and gender; *faleaitu* focused primarily on problems involving masculine sex and gender. In the following examination of *faleaitu*

I rely heavily on material from Sinavaiana's excellent dissertation, which provides a representative assortment of faleaitu plots.

#### FALEAITU AND MALE GENDER IN CHRISTIAN-COLONIAL SAMOA

Faleaitu plots commonly involve husband/wife relations.<sup>9</sup> In husband/wife skits, the wife is often represented as affected by a combination of Christian and colonial values. In one skit in which a wife dresses to go to church, for example, she appears as a comic bricolage of Samoan and Euro-American elements. Instructing her son to assemble her makeup, she says

Now go to the safe and get me my *mascara*; it's inside. Then go on behind our pigsty and get me my *lipstick*. After that, then go to the chest and get us the *Camay*. . . . [Sinavaiana 1992a:111; italics in the original to denote English words used]<sup>10</sup>

The wife's incorporation of Christian-colonial values in faleaitu changes the balance of husband/wife roles in a manner that often seems to deprive the husband of his authority. In the skit "Jealousy II," for example, the wife and the husband argue and the wife scores against him by speaking in English—a language associated with education and status in colonial Samoa—while the husband insists that all would be fine (and presumably he would win the argument) if they would just speak Samoan (Sinavaiana 1992a:104–106). Sinavaiana points out that here speaking Samoan is a metaphor for acting in accord with older Samoan values.

The empowerment of wives evident in faleaitu was fostered by Christianity. In precontact Samoa one's status ultimately derived from family titles. Within the family women had status predominantly as sisters.<sup>11</sup> Females participated in local affairs mostly through the aualuma, an organization of the village's resident sisters and daughters only, excluding in-marrying wives (Schoeffel 1978, 1979a, 1979b). In post-Renaissance Western Christian countries women had been induced to control their sexuality in order to be preferred marriage partners, in part because they had status predominantly as wives (Kelly 1984:19–50). The exclusion of wives from the aualuma conflicted with this Christian emphasis on women as wives and on the concomitant importance of premarital virginity as a condition of the Christian bride. Not surprisingly by 1850 the aualuma had begun a slow decline because of its disfavor with Christian churches, whose converts were on the rise (Schoeffel 1979a:446–447, 1979b:3, 1983).

The decline of the *auaaluma* was paralleled in Western Samoa by the rise of a new women's organization, the *komiti* (committee). Beginning in the early 1920s, this organization grew out of church auxiliary groups, supported by Christian ministers (Schoeffel 1979a:447).<sup>12</sup> Unlike the *auaaluma*, the *komiti* consisted of all adult women of the village, implicitly incorporating and elevating the status of the wife.<sup>13</sup> Although it was originally intended to improve village health and sanitation, the *komiti* was important in the Western Samoan independence movement, called the *Mau*, and its role in this movement between 1926-29 consolidated many village organizations (Keesing 1934:394; Schoeffel 1979a:451). In 1930s Western Samoa the *komiti* became the conduit of health administration, as well as adopting other projects relating to churches, district hospitals, and schools (Davidson 1967:283; Schoeffel 1979a:459, 1983). By 1940 every village in Western Samoa had a *komiti* (Schoeffel 1979a:456).<sup>14</sup> Through the *komiti* wives took a larger role in the village affairs and governance.

The Christian status of the wife was often augmented by new earning power; colonial occupations from housekeeper to school teacher supplied adult women (who were more often than not wives) with financial resources and independence. One of Sinavaiana's *faleaitu* wives, for example, works night shifts; her economically dependent and self-pitying husband stays home to look after the children and is suspicious of her fidelity (Sinavaiana 1992:116–117). The husband, depressed, goes with a friend to the movies only to hear a 1950s American rock song about a man who discovers his unfaithful "darling" has gone to the movies with his best friend, entitled "Sad Movies Always Make Me Cry," sung in English. Here again English is used to mark Christian-colonial gender reversals. Sinavaiana notes that this wife's "superior occupational mobility and personal autonomy" reverses normative roles (1992a:116–117). While traditionally men worked away from home and village, in the plantation or out at sea, woman's work was largely within the compass of house and village. Husbands were expected to have affairs; wives were not (Tuiteleapaga 1980:63).

Caricaturing authority is typical of *faleaitu* (Kneubuhl 1987:171; Shore 1977:318–331; Sinavaiana 1992a) and Sinavaiana correctly points out that colonial authority has been a particular target of this comic effrontery. In the Samoan family, however, the husband is something like a chief and putatively holds authority; in *faleaitu*

it is his unruly wife who makes a mockery of his authority. Here it is not Samoans who contest colonial authority; rather, a colonial empowerment of wives threatens the husband's traditional authority. By undercutting the secular authority of her husband and his position within the family, the Christian-colonial wife deprives him of his precontact gender role and implicitly feminizes him.

The feminization of the husband's role in faleaitu plots is reiterated in the form of faleaitu. As mentioned earlier, faleaitu is an all-male comedy. The assumption of femininity by a theatrical "wife" who is actually a man, however, not only feminizes the "wife" but the husband as well. In Samoa male/female is defined as a complex set of binary categories (Shore 1981); binary sets make meaning by contrasts. Having a "wife"—that is, having a wife who is in fact a male—decreases the male/female differential by which the category male is defined. Faleaitu features a male/female dichotomy that collapses in upon itself. By virtue of the fact that both the male and "female" players are really male, neither is truly male: neither is one side of a male/female polarity. In fact the "female" player in faleaitu is explicitly represented as a liminal male, that is, as a "women" whose associated signs tag "her" as masculine. In another of Sinavaiana's faleaitu skits, for example

The comic playing the wife's role wears a loose, flowered dress and somehow manages to project femininity despite his obviously male physique, mustache, and prominently tattooed biceps. He speaks in a high-pitched voice and occasionally engages in flirtatious exchanges with the audience by wagging a hip or waving coyly. [Sinavaiana 1992a:102]

When I characterize the faleaitu "wife" as liminal, I do not refer to a ritual state of transition from one status category to the next, as in Turner's (1977) and Van Gennep's (1909) sense of the term, but rather to a categorical betwixt and between, in this case being betwixt and between precontact Samoan gender categories of male and female. As an explicitly liminal male, the faleaitu "wife" is an apt metonym for the issue of feminized men. Probably for this reason in faleaitu liminal maleness is conveyed not only through flirtatious, mustached "wives," but also through a generalized use of the device of transvestism.

Often, the only performer in costume is the lead comedian, who affects some form of female costume, either Samoan or European. For example, he may wear the ceremonial headdress and leaf skirt of the Samoan princess [taupou] or the brightly flowered dress imported from the West and favored by many Samoan

women. [Sinavaiana 1992b:196; see also Shore 1977:318–333, 1978:178; bracket mine]

If in Christian-colonial Samoa men no longer fell at one end of a male/female polarity, this was of course true for Christian-colonial women as well, but inasmuch as a more ambiguous wifely role meant more status, freedom, and authority, it had compensations that a less clearly defined male role lacked.<sup>15</sup>

#### FALEAITU AND FA'AFAFINE

In recent decades Samoan comedy skits have acquired modern competition. Contemporary entertainments include rock bands, trans-Polynesian reviews, “traditional” dance, beauty contests and talent shows, as well as the parties that are now an essential feature of wedding, graduations, and other ceremonies.<sup>16</sup> In entertainments, the figure of the fa’afafine provides continuity: as a dramatis persona, the fa’afafine was the reigning spirit of faleaitu comedy and fa’afafine comics tend to be made impresarios in the new entertainments (Mageo 1992:443–444).

Nonetheless, the fa’afafine who have today taken center stage are, in a practical and a symbolic sense, distinct from their thespian predecessors. In faleaitu transvestism was largely a device: faleaitu actors had reputations for running off with local girls (Tuiteleleapaga 1980:50). The male transvestites who appear in contemporary entertainments are the real thing: sexually they prefer men to women and their female attire is not shed offstage. Second, the new fa’afafine comedians do not act like the wives characteristically portrayed in faleaitu plots. Rather, they act like Christian-colonial sisters, or like the virginal village princess (taupou), whose costume the faleaitu actor had often borrowed. I shall offer reasons for these shifts from fictive to real transvestites and from representing wives to representing sisters as we go along.

#### LIMINAL “FEMALENESS”

In Samoa the transvestite’s performative style imitates that of the taupou. In pre-Christian Samoa the taupou was a village virgin whose role was to make kava on all ceremonial occasions and to take a lead in the dignified parts of public entertainments. This role served to advertise her attractiveness as a potential marriage partner to high chiefly titles. Titled chiefs married serially. A village

sought such marriages because its status depended upon the relative elevation of its chiefly titles and the descendants of unions between taupou and high chiefs had a strong claim to the chief's title upon his death. While all high-status girls in pre-Christian Samoa were supposed to remain virginal in order to enter into marriages of state, taupou represented the penultimate example of such a chiefly girl.

In more egalitarian Christian Samoa, where all girls are supposed to affect the taupou's virginity, all girls are, at least potentially, taupou. This potentiality is born out today in all-girl or mixed-sex entertainment companies. Such a company will pick the prettiest and most graceful girl among them to dance the taupou's dance, the *taualuga*.<sup>17</sup> Being a taupou, like being a beauty queen, is now a title won by the girl who is the most *tausala*, a word connoting both loveliness and dignity. Samoa today abounds with beauty pageants and the official beauty pageant in American Samoa is called "Miss Tausala." At formal beauty contests too, each of the participants will dance a taualuga as a criteria of selection.

Inasmuch as all Christian-colonial sisters are potentially taupou, today the taupou has become a symbol of the ideal Christian-colonial sister and it is this virginal ideal that the fa'afafine aims at imitating. Thus one of my fa'afafine informants was the taupou at Marist Brother's, a boys' Catholic high school in American Samoa. Indeed, at the annual American Samoa Flag Day celebration, Marist's taupou is usually a fa'afafine. What this means is that a fa'afafine is selected to dress up like a traditional taupou and to dance the taualuga in the school's entertainment presentations. Generally when male entertainment groups perform, their associated fa'afafine dance the taualuga whenever the chance presents itself. Fa'afafine, like true girls, are apt to stage beauty contests, and these events enjoy a greater popularity than the real thing.

But all the while the fa'afafine mimes the tausala beauty queens of modern Samoa, "she" tends to act in a salacious manner, waging her hips or even exposing her underwear. In jocular reference fa'afafine may even be called a "talking *pipi*" (*pipi tautala*). *Pipi* (actually a small cockle) is a common euphemism for girls' genitals, the euphemism for women's genitals being "hairy crab" (*pa'a fugu*). By marking "herself" as like an ideal Christian-colonial girl—and then behaving scandalously—the transvestite makes a caricature and a joke about girls' Christian-colonial role.<sup>18</sup>

Like the faleaitu “wife,” the fa’afafine “taupou” is also represented as aspiring to colonial values, and once again these aspirations are comically portrayed. There is an official annual fa’afafine pageant in American Samoa, for example, that imitates the “Miss America Pageant.” In the 1992 pageant this imitation was explicit, with the “girls” representing various American states: Miss Florida was crowned queen; Miss Ohio was first runner up; Miss Wyoming was third runner up; Miss Georgia was fourth. Fa’afafine pageants—often called by the American term “Drag Queen” pageants—include a talent section. Most often, “girls” impersonate popular American female vocalists. If faleaitu jocularly repudiates colonial authority, contemporary fa’afafine jocularly ridicule the more seductive features of colonial gender culture.

#### FROM LIMINAL MALES TO LIMINAL “FEMALES”

Through its preoccupation with the Christian-colonial feminization of male roles, faleaitu had established the fa’afafine persona as a veritable entertainment institution in Samoa. Yet we saw that male actors who acted like females in faleaitu tended to play the role of wives. Today real transvestites play the role of sisters through their portrayal of that idealized sister figure, the taupou. Why did the fa’afafine persona change in the hands of real transvestites?

Schoeffel (1979a:204) and Shore (personal communication) report that Samoan fa’afafine in the 1970s were relatively demure and denied that they slept with men. Since the 1970s the fa’afafine persona has been sexualized and fa’afafine have migrated to urban areas. Thus O’Meara, who worked in a rural village in Western Samoa in the 1980s, reports that, although there were a few fa’afafine residing in his village, there were no adult fa’afafine residing there (1990:71). Presumably, when they were old enough, fa’afafine moved to urban Apia.

One obvious answer to the question of why fa’afafine mime girls rather than wives is that the new fa’afafine were unabashedly looking for men and were, therefore, more interested in portraying themselves as like marriageable girls than already married wives. There may also be another answer. In some measure audiences dictate the nature of performances by responding to some types of performances and not to others. Urban audiences in modern Samoa have reason to respond to a fa’afafine characterization of girls.

I mentioned earlier that there was a possession epidemic in the second half of the 20th century in Samoa and that possession was a venue in which girls could explore Christian-Samoan gender problematics (Mageo 1994, 1996). As the century wore on, however, possession became a less-viable institution, particularly in urban areas, and there *fa'afafine* took up the cultural work that possession used to do. In girls' possession episodes the Christian-colonial demand that girls control their sexuality and be always dignified and respectful were recurrent themes (Mageo 1991, 1994, 1996). While the jesting of *faleaitu* transvestites had become an established cultural vehicle for expressing male Christian-colonial gender issues, the jesting of real life transvestites became a cultural vehicle for expressing the feminine version of Christian-colonial gender issues (as symbolized by the *taupou*) that was formerly expressed in possession episodes.

Through the persona of the *fa'afafine*, thespian transvestites represented the Christian-Samoan problematization of sex and gender for boys and men in a form that did not vex but delighted, diffusing social and individual anxiety about role shifts. Probably for this reason, the *dramatis persona* of the *fa'afafine* took on felicitous associations over the course of the 20th century, and more public support for assuming a transvestite persona became available. Because real life transvestites represented the Christian-Samoan problematization of sex and gender for girls in a form that delighted, additional public support for *fa'afafine* became available. While not the reason why individual boys decided to become transvestites, the public support originally cultivated by *faleaitu*, and later developed by *fa'afafine's* role as impresarios and stand-up comics, may have facilitated this development.<sup>19</sup> As in Wilde's hypothesis, "Life holds the mirror up to Art, and . . . reproduces some strange type . . . [that] has been dreamed in fiction" (1972 [1889]:60).

#### MARGINS-TO-CENTER MOVES

If the modern *fa'afafine* was initially "dreamed" by *faleaitu* artists, we saw at the opening of this article that it is also probable that these artists drew upon figures that, while not salient, were present in Samoan social life. *Faleaitu* is a genre that seems to have been present at least through much of the 20th century and that involves comic forms that extend back to precontact times (Mageo 1996).



The Samoan material suggests that when a marginal behavior begins a process of cultural incorporation it often does so by way of popular entertainments. Transvestism has gone from being marginal to salient in Samoa, and during the transition it was dramatically represented in a popular entertainment form.

Popular entertainments provide a likely route toward cultural incorporation because, like play, they often involve “as if” deviance: they may feature behaviors that would be socially suspect, or even reprehensible, if these behaviors were serious rather than playful. One might see popular entertainment as a venue in which cultures explore marginal behaviors in a process of considering whether or not to incorporate them.<sup>20</sup> Faleaitu were, and modern entertainments are, a cultural border town in Samoa and provide a space in which participants can explore cultural imports and ways of behaving but with the distance that satire and irony provide. The tendency of faleaitu “wives” and fa’afafine “girls” to sport elements of Western women’s gender identity is an example.

The Samoan data further suggest that marginal behaviors begin to gain prominence in popular entertainment contexts when they come to represent conflicts about social morality that are broadly shared, such as conflicts about sex and gender induced by missionization and economic modernization in Samoa. The Goethe effect results not simply from a process of cultural invention by artists, as Wilde argues, but from the margins-to-center movement of certain cultural material, reflected in the responses of audiences. What the faleaitu audiences find so funny, according to an informant, is not the imitation of women per se, but the actor’s use of the male transvestite’s high pitched voice and effeminate gestures. This is also my perception: faleaitu audiences respond specifically to the fa’afafine persona. Audiences are entertained by certain culturally marginal behaviors because of the symbolic affiliation of these behaviors with key issues in culture change, as Samoans were and are entertained by transvestite antics.

#### MALE TRANSVESTISM CROSS-CULTURALLY

Having to a degree examined male transvestism in Samoa, let us take a moment to reflect upon the institution of transvestism cross-culturally. On the basis of a broad range of cross-cultural data, Munroe, Whiting, and Hally hypothesize that male transvestism is most often found in societies that downplay sex differences (1969).

They list Samoa as a society in which gender differences are relatively insignificant but that, contrary to their prediction, lacks transvestites, probably because early ethnological reports did not note their presence (1969:90). My own more recent report would seem to support their hypothesis: faleaitu provides evidence that Samoa had an incipient institution of transvestism.

Contra the Munroe-Whiting-Hally hypothesis, however, traditional Samoan men's and women's roles are highly contrastive (Mageo 1991; Schoeffel 1979; Shore 1981). Furthermore, those who have analyzed Samoa social structure agree that contrastive/symbolic gender principles are foundational elements of this structure (Mageo 1989b; Schoeffel 1978, 1979a; Shore 1977, 1981, 1982). *Pule* (secular power) and *mana* (spiritual power) are arguably the pivotal symbolic concepts in Samoan worldview; *pule* is masculine, *mana* is feminine.

Munroe-Whiting-Hally define an emphasis on gender differences as "using biological sex as a discriminant in defining behaviors" (1969:88). The problem is that one can use biological sex as a discriminant in defining temperamental behavioral differences or one can use biological sex as a discriminant in defining differences in role behavior. Some societies tend to emphasize one type of difference, some the other; one needs to know what sort of gender difference a society emphasizes in order to properly gauge the use of sex as a differentiating variable. A lack of distinction as to type of behavior that denotes sex differences in the Munroe-Whiting-Hally approach stems, I suspect, from a lack of recognition of types of identity in culture. Earlier we saw that in our society gender identity, like identity in general, is located within the person. We, therefore, tend to regard gender as temperamental. Even current studies of American gender focus upon temperamental sex differences, although these differences are often attributed to a sociocultural factors (Tannen 1990). In Samoa temperamental differences between the sexes are downplayed. This is because Samoan gender identity, like Samoan identity in general, is located in social role.<sup>21</sup> The problem with Munroe-Whiting-Hally hypothesis illustrates another point: statistical instruments can benefit from holistic understandings of culture that are sensitive to cohesive and pervading cultural issues like identity.

On the basis of the Samoan data, I offer a new hypothesis: male transvestism has a *potential* for cultural salience when a culture

emphasizes role and semiotic distinctions, over and above temperamental distinctions, and when gender identity is based upon social role. By this I do not mean that temperamental distinctions between the sexes will be altogether absent in societies where male transvestism is salient. Temperamental differences may well be attributed to men and women and, to the degree they are, feminine temperament will be affected by male transvestites.<sup>22</sup> Despite the presence of other markers of gender identity, however, role distinctions will be seen as the *fundamental* marker of sex difference. Neither do I mean that transvestism will be absent in societies that emphasize inner experience in regards to self and gender, only that transvestism will not be culturally salient and widely accepted.<sup>23</sup>

It makes sense that transvestism would prosper in a society where gender is conceived of in terms of social role because what is external and social is easy to imitate. In contrast, temperamental gender differences tend to be looked at as intrinsic: they are essentialized. Gender is a symbolic concept, so in a sense all social constructions of gender are based on semiotic distinctions. When I refer to societies that emphasize semiotic gender distinctions, what I mean is that in some societies pivotal concepts in social symbolism are conceived of as gendered, as in the case of *pule* and *mana*. Emphasis on this type of semiotic gender distinction may to a degree entail a de-emphasis on essentialized gender differences because symbols are promiscuous in their applications and will not be confined to persons of any particular anatomy. A society that emphasizes the symbolic aspects of gender runs the risk that men will sometimes be symbolized as feminine and women as masculine. In Samoa, for example, the high chief, *ali'i*, has *mana* and is symbolically feminine; the talking chief, *tulāfale*, has *pule* and is symbolically masculine (Shore 1977, 1978, 1982). Further, the idea that gender is symbolic and that either gender may, in some capacity, represent the opposite sex potentially conflicts with the idea that there are deep-seated temperamental differences between the sexes. If gender-as-symbolic undermines an emphasis on temperamental gender differences, it supports transvestism: transvestites capitalize on the migratory properties of symbols.

I do not intend to prove my hypothesis here through an extensive investigation of cross-cultural data, but recent studies in the area of male transvestism are suggestive. In analyzing the *hijras*, Nanda remarks that, in its present form, the Munroe-Whiting-Hally hy-

pothesis does not explain male transvestism in India (1990: 140–141). Inasmuch as male transvestism is salient in India, according to my hypothesis individual identity should emphasize social role. Shweder and Bourne argue that identity in India is based upon social role, rather than upon the inner aspects of experience (1984:190). Again, according to my hypothesis, sex roles should be highly contrastive. Nanda stresses that Indian sex roles are highly dichotomous and specialized (1990:140–42, 1994). Temperamental gender differences should also be downplayed. Nanda tells us that “Hinduism affords the individual temperament the widest latitude” (1990:143). Likewise, Trawick states that “in South India, androgynous personalities are many, both in myth and life” (1992: 235). Yet Indians also believe that “male and female are opposed cosmic forces, as different from each other as black and white, as powerfully charged as earth and sky in a lightening storm” (Trawick 1992:235), and view all persons as containing male and female principles within themselves (Nanda 1994:374–376): in short, symbolic sex differences are emphasized, just as I predict.

In her work on male transvestites (*xanith*) in Oman, Wikan tells us that Omani society is “based on a fundamental dichotomisation of the sexes” (1977:309). While grounded in social role, the persona is also the manners one affects as part of a social role (Mageo 1989a:184); identity in Oman is based on projecting “an honourable and graceful presence” and upon embodying “beautiful manners” (Wikan 1977:313), that is, on the persona rather than on inner aspects of experience. The Omani case, therefore, again suggests that transvestism is correlated with highly contrastive gender roles and a form of identity emphasizing the persona.<sup>24</sup> Whitehead’s theory of the Native North American male berdache also assumes a dichotomization of the sexes based on social roles (Whitehead 1981:80–115).<sup>25</sup>

#### TRANSVESTISM AND GENDER BINARISM

If male transvestism has a potential for salience in societies that have a role schema for self and gender, and that emphasize symbolic male and female principles, one wonders what conditions favor the conversion of this potential for transvestism to a social actuality. This article shows that during the period in which transvestism became salient in Samoa, gender role differentials decreased. This does not mean that these differentials became

insignificant, as in the Munroe-Whiting-Hally hypothesis, but it does mean that gender differentials were less securely grounded than they once had been. From the native's viewpoint, lowering sex role differentials may appear to threaten sex differentials generally. This correlation is no surprise: culturally salient transvestitism is by definition linked to insecure gender binarism because it reflects a prevalence of more general social tendencies toward gender crossing. Nevertheless, exploring the structural and historical reasons for unstable gender binarism will allow me to catalogue and sometimes critique prior anthropological theories of transvestitism.

Munroe and Munroe (1977) attribute male transvestitism to structural features of the male role. They hypothesize that male transvestitism appears "more frequently in those societies in which males make a greater contribution to the subsistence economy than do females."<sup>26</sup> The implication of the Munroe-Munroe hypothesis is that male transvestitism exists in societies where men have reason to desire an escape from the male role, and the prevalence and force of this desire makes for an unstable gender binarism, which sometimes results in transvestitism. In Samoa, however, men do not labor more than women, nor do they have less status. The male council of chiefs (*fono*) is the village's center of status and authority. Once a man has a title he becomes a member of the *fono* and has a good deal of discretion as to how much physical labor he contributes to subsistence. Yet male transvestitism is salient in Samoa and is becoming more so.

In Samoa dignity is associated with stasis and with directing the actions of others. We saw that Samoan girls' dignity increased with missionization; girls also came to contribute less physical labor (Schoeffel 1979a). Conversely, boys' status declined and it is likely that boys inherited a larger share of subsistence labor. Decreasing agricultural productivity due to erosion and soil depletion may have further increased the time and energy that boys had to invest in subsistence (O'Meara 1990). Unlike females, young males earn their right to status and titles in adult life through service, and yet serving others in Samoa indicates that one lacks status. One can imagine that an increase in labor together with a decrease in status made adolescent boys' roles less attractive. It is often in early adolescents that boys convert to transvestitism.<sup>27</sup>

The structure of Samoan family life also contributes to an unstable gender binarism. Adult males in Samoa are frequently away

from the household, while male infants and children may be cared for by older boys. In Samoan childhood, therefore, developing youngsters are likely to form an impression that females contribute less to subsistence and that their tasks are higher status because the males they know well (older boys) contribute more to subsistence and have tasks of lower status. These data suggest a revision of the Munroe-Munroe hypothesis: in societies where identity emphasizes social role, institutionalized male transvestism is probable when adolescent males and males who are directly associated with male infants and children are assigned tasks that are more demanding than those of females, particularly if these tasks are of low social status.

Other studies too correlate transvestism with features of family structure that make for unstable gender binarism. In her work on Indian male transvestites (hijras), Nanda argues that an over-erotized relation between mother and son in the Hindu family tends to make male identity insecure and that men later replicate this relationship through worship of mother goddess figures (1994: 405–407). Hijras identify with a mother goddess, Bahuchara Mata (1994:383–384). By implication this identification is a version of a more general male tendency evident in goddess worship, a tendency that potentially jeopardizes gender differentials. Likewise, Levy, in his work on male transvestism in Tahiti, reasons that the structure of the Tahitian family inclines boys to identify with female figures; men are largely absent from child care and women appear to be the sources of authority in the household (1971, 1973). Although certain types of family, then, directly foster transvestism, thereby making gender differentials insecure, I nonetheless hold that transvestite tendencies are more commonly acted upon and socially accepted in societies that ground identity and gender in social role.

Sometimes structural features of the gender categories themselves make for an unstable gender binarism. In Oman, for example, Wikan says (1977) that sex differentials, while of pivotal cultural significance, are insecure because they rely upon men acting in a sexually assertive manner and women acting in a sexually circumscribed manner, symbolized by veiling. Some men, however, are without a female sex partner, either because they do not have wives or because they are migrant laborers and, therefore, have need of prostitutes. Prostitutes are not sexually circumscribed.

When women play the role of prostitutes they reduce the sex differential by which both men and women are defined in Oman. Xanith (male transvestites) are explicitly liminal males and are also prostitutes; people think of prostitutes as xanith. By this conceptual device "Womanhood is . . . left uncontaminated by such vices, even though individual women may be involved" (Wikan 1977:311). Thus gender binarism in Oman is based on a condition (female chastity) to which women cannot always be expected to hold and transvestism is employed conceptually to mitigate a categorical instability.

Levy anticipates the idea that transvestism mitigates unstable gender differentials. In Tahiti, Levy says, male transvestism provides males with a cautionary example of how not to behave (1971, 1973). To attribute transvestism to a social need for a prophylactic reiteration of gender roles would be functionalist, but the idea that transvestism occurs where gender binarism is unstable and is then exploited by cultural members to maintain gender binarism is not and, furthermore, seems to be confirmed in Samoa. Some tasks, such as sweeping the house or washing the household's clothes, are seen as women's work. Should a boy sweep or wash the clothes, he is apt to be called a fa'afafine. Here a popular use of the category fa'afafine helps to insure that Samoan boys will maintain gender-role dichotomies.

If transvestism is predicted on the basis of gender polarities that are fundamental to social role distinctions and to social symbolism, and can be used to reinforce gender polarities when they are under siege, it also has an aptitude for subverting gender categories. I know this statement may seem contradictory: all I am saying is that while transvestism is an avenue through which an unstable gender binarism is reiterated, it also has a symbolically disruptive potential that cannot be erased. Where it is salient, transvestitism is often a means by which artists and others deconstruct gender role polarities. This deconstruction comes about through the liminality of the transvestite.

#### TRANSVESTITE LIMINALITY

This article has found the Samoan male transvestite persona to be liminal in several respects. In faleaitu skits one finds a Samoan "wife" who is explicitly represented as liminal. On the level of plot this "wife" represents half of a husband/wife, male/female gender

polarity. Symbolically, however, through “her” associated signs (tattooed biceps, mustaches, and so forth), “she” is portrayed as the opposite element of the dyad—a male like the husband. In contemporary fa’afafine antics one finds a “virginal girl” who is explicitly represented as liminal. “She” assumes girlish airs, linking “her” with one half of a virginal/sexual, girl/women gender polarity. Symbolically, however, through “her” associated signs (referential names like talking pipi, salacious joking, and so forth), “she” is portrayed as the opposite element of the dyad—a women who is sexual. One could, of course, put this the other way around. In faleaitu one finds a male explicitly tagged as such (through tattooed biceps and so forth) who, through his part in the play, is associated with the opposite element of a gender dyad, a wife. Neither element is primary or secondary: the play of elements defies the attempt to place them in a fixed hierarchy.

By virtue of a pastiche of gender-opposed elements—a pastiche that is characteristic of Samoan male transvestism—both of these dyads (husband/wife, girl/women) collapse in upon themselves. In faleaitu skits this collapse takes place because the “wife” is a man (or because the man is a “wife”); in transvestite antics this collapse takes place because the “virginal” girl behaves like a “sexual woman” (or because a sexual woman behaves as if she was a dignified taupou); the elements that are putatively opposed turn out to be one—one person, one body. Both these collapses take place through the intercalation of the fa’afafine as a negative gender term.

Bateson analyzes how one expresses the negative gesturally (1972:177–193). One represents what one would negate but frames it as “not that” through the addition of contradicting signs. On regarding monkeys playing at a zoo, Bateson notes that their gestures resemble fighting but actually signify “not fighting”: although their nips resemble bites, there is no bite (1972:179). So the nip is an analog that contains a contradiction: it says “bite” and it also says “no bite.” What is represented by the persona of the fa’afafine is similar. A fa’afafine may appear as a wife (in the theatrical case), or as a girl (in the contemporary case), but with the addition of incongruent signs (tattooed biceps in the first case, wagging hips in the second) such that the composite signifies a negative gender term, “not really a wife,” or “not really a girl.” This negative gender term, however, turns out to signify not only “that



which is not,” but also a “should not”: the first case shows how wives should not be; the second case shows how girls should not be; both cases show how males should not be.<sup>28</sup>

This argument is sufficiently complicated to bear reiterating. In faleaitu the dramatis persona of the fa’afafine constitutes a negative gender term intercalated betwixt and between a traditional male and a Christian-colonial wife. By being masculine “wives,” theatrical fa’afafine constitute a social oxymoron and a negative image of Christian-Samoan wifeliness. On the other hand, real fa’afafine represent a negative gender term that is intercalated betwixt and between a polar construction of females in Samoan-Christian thought, as either virginal girls or sexual women. By being sexual girls, fa’afafine constitute another social oxymoron and a negative image of Christian-Samoan girlhood. Inasmuch as faleaitu “wives” and fa’afafine “girls” are anatomical males, however, both embody yet another social oxymoron and a negative image of maleness. Thus Plato is right: the fa’afafine is not only a copy but a shadow—a kind of negative space turned visible and ironic. But Wilde is also right: there is more to shadows than meets the eye.

#### THE TRUE AND THE FICTIVE

It is asked of anatomical girls in Samoa, “Is she a true [*mo’i*] girl?” meaning “Is she a virgin?”; as mentioned earlier, fa’afafine are called *teine pepelo*, meaning “lying girls,” but also “false girls.” Nonetheless most fa’afafine will claim that they are virgins (*teine mo’i*), although everyone knows this is comic mendacity. So the figure of the transvestite is a lie in several senses of the word, although like art in Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying,” fa’afafine even play upon, and in a sense negate, the opposition between true and false itself.

Plato argues art may be a lie; Wilde counterpoises, it is a lie that people may decide to live, as in the case of those who imitated Goethe’s unhappy protagonist, making art true. This play upon the opposition between truth and falsity is inextricably entangled in the social reality of the fa’afafine. The fa’afafine may be a false (lying) girl or even—to use another Samoan colloquialism—a “pretend pipi” (*pipi fai*), but “she” is a real transvestite, whereas faleaitu transvestites are largely false transvestites, that is, fictive, literary transvestites.<sup>29</sup> And all these “femmes” together demonstrate that Samoan gender polarities themselves are a gender fiction, or a lie that resembles theatrical fiction: that is, gender roles

in Samoa may be a social fiction or a set of *dramatis personae* that people make true by living, but gender opposed roles are continually collapsing in the persona of the *fa'afafine*, thereby reminding all that gender personae cannot be taken entirely seriously.

At *fa'afafine* beauty pageants the “girls,” the audience and the emcee will play upon the truth/fiction motif as a primary basis for jest. “Girls” may act as if they are going to offer biological proof of gender by beginning to pull down their blouse. A member of the audience may tell a “girl” to go get leaves for the earth oven, a boy’s task. *Fa'afafine* adopt a girl’s name, usually a fancy English or American name, but at a recent beauty pageant the emcee teased the participants by calling out their male name by way of introduction.

In everyday life as well men and women tease *fa'afafine* about gender, and transvestite responses are revelatory. If a girl teases a *fa'afafine*, calling “her,” for example “*Fia teine*,” “Want-to-be-a-girl,” a transvestite may strut “her” stuff and say “Well [I am] an actress” (*Leaga ole actress*), using the English word.<sup>30</sup> Here again English usage connotes a contemporary colonial (or postcolonial) reality and hints that the *fa'afafine* constructs “herself” at least in part in terms of this reality. In this response the *fa'afafine* uses something like the truth as a basis for jest, in lieu of “her” usual fictions, for “she” is posing like an “actress” (a female), and yet what “she” says carries more than a little truth: acting is the explicit mode of the *fa'afafine*.

If a man teases a *fa'afafine*, calling “her,” for example, “*Faipopolo*,” “Hanging-Balls,” or “*Gā'au tele*,” “Big-Tube,” the *fa'afafine* will respond (often in a deep voice), “You better watch out lest I stand on my male side [*itu*] and immediately punch you.”<sup>31</sup> This is the only context I know of in which *fa'afafine* admit that they are not true girls; it is the closest they come to telling the simple truth, but even here the “truth” turns out to be a cultural construction: Samoans typically conceive of themselves as having different *itū* or sides (Shore 1982:137). In this response the *fa'afafine* constructs “herself” as liminal, that is, as a gender pastiche of male and female sides. Uncharacteristically, then, in teasing practices with other males, contemporary *fa'afafine*s bridge larger polarities between the sexes, rather than bridging fragmented parts of feminine identity. Thus teasing practices reveal a latent potentiality in the contemporary *fa'afafine* to collapse all four of the elements by

which sex and gender are constructed in Samoa (girl/woman, male/female). We will soon see that women are apt to take advantage of this potentiality.

#### LIMINALITY AND THE DEVOLUTION OF SOCIAL CATEGORIES

Fa'afafine appear not only in faleaitu skits and as entertainment impresarios but also in the narrative humor of women. While thespian fa'afafine collapse a male-female dichotomy and modern fa'afafine collapse a girl-women dichotomy, the jokes told about them by women often collapse both in one stroke. The following joke, for example, is told and pantomimed by a woman before a group of men.

A pair of transvestites, bored with intercourse, play a vegetable game. Transvestite number one bends over; transvestite number two inserts various vegetables in the anus of the first. Then transvestite number two says "Guess what, guess what?" Transvestite number one guesses the name of the vegetable, and transvestite two remarks, "Oh you're so smart!" The teller goes through this routine with several vegetables. She then begins again, miming the insertion of a new vegetable, this time looking directly at the audience (of men), and says "What vegetable do rabbits really love to eat?" "Carrots," the male audience responds. "Oh you're so smart!" the teller says to the audience.

The final constellation in this joke involves a woman (acting the part of fa'afafine number two), who fictively enters the male audience (with her "carrot"), and a male audience that has been tricked into playing the part of fa'afafine number one. In Samoa, as long as a male takes the inserter role with a fa'afafine, his behavior is considered masculine. After all, his role performance is in consonance with his anatomy. For a man to be entered, however, is to act the part of the fa'afafine. The point of the carrot joke is to cast the listening males into the role of transvestite number one—who is entered—and thereby to feminize them. In finessing this operation the joke diverges interestingly from the manner in which fa'afafine represent themselves. Fa'afafine characteristically deny that they have intercourse with one another: they construct themselves as something akin to heterosexual, that is as women seeking intercourse with men, although I have heard stories to the effect that their sexuality is less delimited and structured than they might lead one to believe. In any case the presence of two sexually engaged

fa'afafine, like the vegetable guessing game itself, leads the audience to forget that the sexual behavior at issue within the confines of the game involves masculine and feminine roles. Thus an anomalous construction of fa'afafine sexuality is part of the trick by which the male audience is positioned in the feminine role.

By tricking males into playing the part of a fa'afafine (who acts like girls)—that is, by feminizing them through the intercalation of the fa'afafine as a gender negative—the female teller of the joke accomplishes more than role reversal: she collapses the male-female polarity that would normally pertain between herself and her male audience. Samoans call the explicit telling of jokes *poka*, from the English term *poker*. The English word indicates that this activity is a competitive game in which there are winners and losers. In acknowledging that another has told a really good joke a participant may say “You win for today.” Here the woman who has told the joke wins and her male audience loses—fictively and temporarily—its masculinity.

In a second joke, this one told by fa'afafine themselves, two transvestites have hitched a ride with a truck driver. One transvestite asks if “she” can fart. The truck driver says okay and there follows a soft “pu.” The other transvestite makes the same request, gets the same answer, and there follows another “pu.” Then the truck driver asks to fart, after which follows a high pitched “e-e-e-e,” in response to which the transvestites squeal, “He’s a virgin, he’s a virgin.”<sup>32</sup>

Here fa'afafine show a solidarity with the Samoan women who tell the first joke in the project of feminizing men. In this joke the fa'afafine imply that the male truck driver is like them in that his anus, like theirs, is analogous to a vulva. Once again, through the intermediary of the fa'afafine's body, a gender polarity dissolves into a gender likeness. Virginity is a category normally applied to girls in Samoa, not to men, so by calling the truck driver a “virgin,” they also feminize him.

The first joke makes a man seem like a fa'afafine, that is, a *teine pepelo*, or “false girl.” The second joke makes a man seem like a real girl, that is a *teine mo'i*, or “virgin.” Both jokes concatenate the two sex and gender polarities previously examined—between males and females and between virginal girls and sexual women—and collapse them all at once. Thus the figure of the

fa'afafine as a sex and gender trickster seems to inevitably precipitate the comic devolution of Samoan gender categories.

Today even male comedy skits have begun to undertake the project of collapsing this full set of oppositions. In 1992, for example, the Samoan Students Association at the University of the South Pacific put on an entertainment entitled "Pōula Night," which was in fact a parody of beauty contests, and apparently fa'afafine beauty contests, as the actors copied characteristic styles of fa'afafine beauty contestants. Yet the males who portrayed the contestants had the attributes of faleaitu "wives": they juxtaposed signs associated with maleness and femaleness—generous breasts and tattooed biceps, for example.

Inasmuch as these actors make themselves like sexy transvestites (who caricature girls), while tagging themselves as males (which fa'afafine would not do), their comedy collapses the opposition between girls and women and that between males and females inherent in the Samoan-Christian construction of gender. Here nouveau fa'afafine comic artistry feeds back into faleaitu: faleaitu artists copy fa'afafine beauty contestants, beauty contestants who are themselves later-day copies of a faleaitu convention, a convention that copied those neither so sexual nor so salient fa'afafine who must have been present in earlier times, fa'afafine who in turn copied the gender persona of girls, girls whose persona is a copy of a biological substratum. Here faleaitu becomes a lie taken to an exponential power.

#### FA'AFAFINE LIMINALITY AND WOMEN

Women in Samoa consistently approve of fa'afafine and often encourage their sons to become fa'afafine when sons show that inclination (Mageo 1992:450).<sup>33</sup> My American friends, both male and female, have consistently expressed surprise at this fact; they explain that they see American male transvestites as caricaturing women and they experience caricature as hostile.<sup>34</sup> I asked Samoan women if they felt such hostility and they routinely denied it. Examining the foregoing data, a possible solution to this puzzle presents itself: Samoan women appreciate the presence of fa'afafine because fa'afafine have an important role in deconstructing gender dichotomies that disadvantage women.

In pre-Christian Samoa men had pule (secular authority); women had cursing power. What this meant was that, for the most

part, men held titles and had final word in decisions of import; however, should a man gainsay his female relatives, particularly his sister, supernatural sanctions were believed to ensue. This sounds like a gender balance, yet so common was the violation of sisters' wishes by their more secularly powerful brothers that whenever a brother became seriously ill sisters had to appear and ritually demonstrate that they held no grudges toward their brothers (Stair 1897:180; see also Kraemer n.d.[1902]:118, n.d.[n.d.]:37).

In other words, custom implied a high likelihood that the relation between the brother's and the sister's power would not be balanced but would be in need of supernatural redress. It is comforting to know that one's outraged feelings and one's sense of disempowerment will be compensated for by spirits, but it is not the same as holding the power oneself. I do not mean to say that women in old Samoa were in any extreme sense disempowered; gender balances were and are better in Samoa than in most places (Schoeffel 1979a, 1979b), but gender roles were not equal (Mageo 1994). Today it is still men who usually hold titles and political office, while people are increasingly skeptical about supernatural sanctions. As a group that has been at least to a degree disenfranchised, it is likely that Samoan women have resisted both precontact and Samoan-Christian gender configurations. Perhaps the character of Samoan humor itself suggests a history of effective resistance. In documenting a 19th-century comedy the missionary Turner, for example, describes a typical plot in which a marriage is arranged, but when it comes to the climax, the bride will not have the husband (1984[1884]:132).

The fa'afafine as a mediator of gender categories is "herself" a representation of sociohistorical change: "she" is not only a pastiche of gender polarities but also of the reworked remnants of an older cultural order. "She" plays the role of leader in public comedy that pōula girls once did, even drawing upon pōula conventions (Mageo 1992:455). In faleaitu "she" has been a medium in which artists and their audiences thought about missionization and colonialization, although "she" has also stepped off the canvas and become an artist "herself." Because "her" art concatenates cultural issues past and present, it is apposite that, through "her," gender categories in Samoa become, in Sahlins terms, "vulnerable to pragmatic revaluation" (1981:37). At least since missionization, Samoan women resist inferior gender positions in part by taking

advantage of this vulnerability in the person of the fa'afafine. Lévi-Strauss long ago taught us what he did not need to teach Samoan women: dyadic structures are transformed by a medial term, as Samoan sex and gender categories are collapsed and thus implicitly transformed by the dramatis persona of the fa'afafine.

Another reason why Samoan women appreciate transvestites may be that fa'afafine widen behavioral options for Samoan-Christian girls by playing forbidden roles for them. A girl may whisper her sexual feelings about a boy to a companionable fa'afafine who then turns these feelings into a joke and conveys them to the boy. Thus in jests fa'afafine represent a kind of veracity and at the same time a means by which girls could give the lie to their Christian-colonial roles. A joke is not true; it is in this sense a lie, something one does not really mean, but, more often than not, jokes tell a truth we normally do not have permission to tell (Freud 1905).

In her discussion of the image of the unruly women in early modern Europe, Davis argues that comic images of dissent were part of "efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society" and "could operate to widen behavior options" (1978: 154–155). The fa'afafine, as an archetypal unruly woman, is a social fiction—a lie about anatomy that gives the lie to sex and gender roles through a strategy of collapse. This strategy aims at undermining maleness as a discrete social category and thereby undermines male authority, shifting the distribution of power in Samoa, however playfully. Perhaps this is, again partially, why Samoan brothers and fathers do not encourage boys to become fa'afafine, but often take offense and try to beat the boy out of his decision. In Samoa the figure of the fa'afafine, as the unruly woman, is ever ready to contest traditional male authority in "her" faleaitu form, and "she" is ever ready to contest Samoan-Christian strictures on female sexuality in "her" flesh and blood form. In this sense fa'afafine joking, as a form of verbal play, a play of gender categories, holds a promise of freedom from sexual hierarchy and inequality (see Marcuse, summarized in Hearn 1976–77:150).

Liminality, as a social representation of a medial term between a social polarity, is an avenue through which the transformation of cultural categories can take place. Liminal terms do their medial work—that is, collapsing cultural categories—by their essential negativity. Cultural polarities are constituted on the presupposition they specify a difference that makes a difference. Liminal

persons are walking demonstrations that whatever the difference predicated by the polarity is, that it does not make any serious difference, just as fa'afafine intimate that sex and gender differences in Samoa are an occasion for a good joke.

In the person of the fa'afafine one discovers that liminality is not only a passage from one state to the next; it may also be a passage from one historical period to the next. Arden King has argued that Native American peoples who sustained vital institutions of public clowning did not begin revitalization movements because their ritual humorists provided conceptual passages between the cultural past and the cultural present (1979). In Samoa the liminal figure of the male transvestite continues to provide such a passage.

In sum, popular entertainment affords a medium to digest social anxieties, such as those produced by increasingly unstable gender categories, and is often populated by characters who wish away these instabilities, as do Samoan husbands in faleaitu. In seeking palatable symbols through which to contemplate culture change, art may invent forms that are then increasingly appreciated and even borrowed by culture members as ways of mediating the same changes in everyday life. In Samoa transvestites became increasingly appreciated after their frequent representation by faleaitu artists and some Samoan boys probably adopt transvestite ways to mediate the status difficulties posed by modern-Christian changes in the relation between gender and status, changes symbolized by the transvestite persona in faleaitu.

If we like popular art because it reproduces our anxiety-provoking instabilities in entertaining forms, however, art also delights in and expands upon these instabilities, exploiting their transgressive potentials, as does jesting about transvestism by Samoan women, fa'afafine, and even Samoan men in modern comedy skits. Perhaps cross-culturally there is a fascination with the historical fluidity and dynamism of social structure, exemplified by Samoan audiences' reaction to performances that fasten on changing gender binarisms. Art capitalizes upon this fascination and, at least potentially, feeds this fluidity.

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## NOTES

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1. I resided in American Samoa; however, I married a Samoan who had Western Samoan relatives, and we would travel to Apia and more rural locations in Western Samoa to visit them. I also spent time in Western Samoa doing occasional fieldwork projects in conjunction with the Samoan-Pacific courses I taught for the community college in American Samoa and to visit the various friends I acquired in Western Samoa during my eight-year residence in American Samoa. Therefore, although there are differences between the two Samoas, I feel I can speak at least to an extent for both. Furthermore, the two Samoas are less divided than some may assume. Virtually all Samoans have family in both places and have family in both rural and urban locations within each place, and people travel frequently among their various relatives so that intercultural communication on most subjects is strong.

2. On identity in Samoa and the persona see also Mageo 1989a:185–186, 1989b:410–412, 1992:450, 1995. In anthropology today, the lexical distinction between a self-concept emphasizing role and one emphasizing inner experience is more commonly denoted by the terms *person* and *self*, respectively (Fogelson 1982; Harris 1989; Levy 1983; Rosaldo 1984; Shweder and Bourne 1984).

3. As Laqueur says of pre-industrial European society, in Samoa gender is regarded as a phenomenon and sex as an epiphenomenon (1990).

4. My reader may be wondering why I use the socially diminutive term *girl* instead of the more generic term *woman*. As the essay progresses the reader will see that I do so to conform to Samoan usage.

5. On the significance of the term *pōula* see also Moyle 1988:207. On *pōula* as following occasions of state see Churchward 1887:141; Stair 1897:235; Tuiteleapaga 1980:70, 102; and Turner 1984[1884]:90.

6. On the origins of *faleaitu* in the *pōula* see also Kneubuhl 1987 and Shore 1977:315. *Faleaitu* also has roots in Samoan comic traditions of what one might call "court jesters," specifically in the figures of the *soga* and *salelesi* (Mageo 1996).

7. In the 1980s Sinavaiana found one woman who had acted in *faleaitu* (1992:214).

8. On daughters as a route to status ascent in Polynesia see further Ortner 1981 and Sahlins 1981.

9. Sinavaiana describes one skit in which a letter-writing pair of young people break off a relationship and another in which an older man "proposes" to the father of a girl who does not want him and who does all she can to insult him. In general, however, boy/girl dyads are rare.

10. In cash-poor Western Samoa these Western objects are still considered luxury items and family members may hide small objects of value (Sinavaiana 1992a:111).

11. See further Sacks 1979:6 on the cultural distinction between women as "sisters" versus women as "wives."

12. Meleisea attributes its founding to Dr. Marbel Christie, who was part of the a medical team from New Zealand that arrived in Western Samoa in 1918 (1987a:129), while Felix Keesing and Schoeffel date the *komiti* to 1923–1924 and attribute it to Dr. Roberts, wife of Mr. Quincy Roberts who was US consul (Keesing 1934:376; Schoeffel 1979a:449–459).

13. However, in those villages that had played important political and ceremonial roles in pre-Christian and 19th-century Samoa female members of the villages' own descent groups dominated the *komiti* and allowed in-marriage women only utilitarian roles (Schoef-

fel 1978:76). Furthermore, there were some functions that the aualuma retained in all Samoa, and a village lacking an active aualuma would occasionally reconstitute it in order to fill these needs. For example, an aualuma must open the requiem (Leo) that is held the night prior to a burial.

Like the komiti, two other church affiliated organizations, the *'au a teine*, and the *'au a tama*, took over some of the entertainment functions of the aualuma, for example, singing at weddings and the performance of moderately sexy dancing, but these dances tended to be performed by either female children or pre-adolescents.

14. The aualuma did not disappear in American Samoa, although its activities were often truncated. The stereotype of the relationship between American Samoa and Western Samoa is that Western Samoa has preserved Samoan culture and American Samoa been corrupted by American influence. In fact each Samoa has its own history, which has altered the culture in different ways.

15. One must also remember, however, that in faleaitu boys took the leading role in public comedy that was once assigned to pōula girls (Colvocoresses 1852:87; Wilkes 1845:130, 134, 140; Williams 1984[1830–32]:232, 247–248). A penchant for theatrical transvestism is not surprising if, by taking the leading role in comedy, boys assumed a feminine mantle.

16. I put traditional in quotation marks because the dance forms that Samoans now consider traditional I regard as a “compromise culture” in Marcus’s sense of the term (Marcus 1989). See further Mageo 1996 for an analysis of Samoan dance.

17. Tualuga is actually a dance associated with high-status persons generally (Moyle 1988:233). Most commonly today, however, one sees it danced by a young woman who is acting as a taupou.

18. The liminality of the Samoan male transvestite’s role is also evident in the word *fa’afafine* itself, in *fa’afafine*’s locutionary practice, and in the stories that are told about *fa’afafine* affairs (Mageo 1992:452–453). Wikan also describes male transvestites in Oman, as liminal (betwixt and between categories of male and female gender), although she uses the term “intermediate” rather than liminal. Nanda (1994) sees hijras in India as liminal and Besnier (1994) characterizes Polynesian transvestites in general as liminal.

19. As to why Samoan boys may be inclined to transvestism, see Mageo (1992:450–452).

20. The potpourri of marginal behaviors that are featured in American adolescent musical and choreographic entertainments is an obvious example.

21. Ancient Hawaii provides a second example: tasks were sharply differentiated by gender, and symbolic differences between men and women were the foundation of the social order (Linnekin 1990:13–35; Valeri 1985), and the institution of male transvestism was salient (Watts 1992). Tahiti is an important example of transvestism in the Pacific. Levy says that sexual dimorphism is minimal in Tahiti, but what he actually refers to is temperamental, inner sexual dimorphism; in adult life most tasks and associated roles are gendered (Levy 1973:236–237).

22. On male transvestites affecting feminine temperament see, for example, Mageo (1992:453), Nanda (1994:381, 397).

23. Prior to the Munroe-Whiting-Hally study, Downie and Hally hypothesized that male transvestism was to be found where male and female roles were highly contrastive, because then changing from a man’s role to a women’s has social purchase (1961). Downie and Hally abandoned this hypothesis because it was not borne out in a sample of 20 societies.

24. Nanda also cites the Omani case as casting doubt upon the Munroe-Whiting-Hally hypothesis and questions the applicability of this hypothesis to the American berdache (1990:140–141).

25. Roscoe denies that North American Indian gender roles were dichotomous, but by dichotomous he refers to a belief that gender is “based on the ‘natural facts’ of sex . . . there are no possible variations that cannot be defined by reference to male or female. . . . In such a system there can be only one sexual orientation, namely, heterosexual” (1994:345). To say

that sex roles are dichotomous, or that transvestites play upon male and female gender dichotomies, is not to say that in societies where transvestism is salient biological sex takes precedence over gender as a social category. Furthermore, in societies where identity is located primarily in social role private sexual practice tends to be a relatively unstructured area of experience. See Mageo 1992:449–450. In my view role and semiotic dichotomies allow for intermediate categories of gender, at least potentially; temperamental or essentialized dichotomies discourage the development of such categories.

26. This hypothesis was an expanded version of Hoebel's idea that male transvestism was positively correlated with a rigorous male role such as bravery in warfare (1966).

27. Whitehead (1981) suggests that transvestism is salient in cultures where the female role has considerable status and potential access to wealth. In modern Samoa female roles have moved in this direction.

28. As noted in the text Levy argues that Tahitian male transvestites supply a negative model of male behavior in Tahiti (1971:16–20, 1973:472–473). In my work on Samoan male transvestitism I have argued that present-day fa'afafine supply a negative model of girls' behavior, as well as supplying a negative model for males (1992:454).

29. On the real and the fictive in the construction of hijras social identity see Nanda 1994:393.

30. A fa'afafine's feminine name is called a "stage name" (Poasa 1992), or an "actress name"; however, this name is not shed offstage.

31. The Samoan version would be "Va'ai 'oe ne'i o'u tū i lo'u itū tama o'u alatu loa sali ma 'oe."

32. American male students tell me this is probably originally an American gay-bashing joke; however, in the American version the riders are not transvestites and the tellers are straight. Both the adaptation and the selection of this joke by fa'afafine for import no doubt speak to its applicability to a Samoan agenda.

33. Women also tend to support a boy's adoption of transvestitism in India (Nanda 1994:402).

34. For a published version of this opinion see Hooks (1991).

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