Compelling Culture:
The Rhetoric of Assimilation among Samoan Migrants in the United States

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Abstract: Studies of assimilation tend to focus on whether or not members of a migrant group are adjusting to their new surroundings. This article inverts this focus, asking not how migrant groups adjust, but rather how migrant groups use the language of assimilation to explain generation gaps and other exigencies of migration. This inversion sheds light on the ways a migrant group's epistemological assumptions underlie their understandings of cultural identity, and shape how they might respond to dilemmas caused by migration. Building upon ethnographic fieldwork among Samoan migrants in the United States, the article explores how and why community workers use the rhetoric of assimilation to teach Samoan parents how to raise children in the U.S. context.

Keywords: Assimilation, Samoan migrants, parent-child relations, community workers, child rearing, choice

I began exploring the question motivating this article while I was talking to Samoan community workers in San Francisco. I had been doing research among Samoan community workers in New Zealand the year before, so all my first impressions in San Francisco tended to center on how people engaged in the project of being Samoan in San Francisco differently than the ways in which people engaged in a similar project in Wellington or Auckland. When Samoan community workers in San Francisco started describing to me how Samoan parents needed to be taught to adapt their parenting techniques to the exigencies of living in the United States, my first thought was – how odd, no one in New Zealand would claim that. In New Zealand, people would tell me that the children needed to be taught Samoan culture, not that the parents needed to be taught another cultural approach. Yet, in both contexts, youth was a problem, although one that required different solutions. In both countries, my older interlocutors expressed a series of shared concerns about Samoan youth – the youth are leaving traditional Samoan churches, don't respect their culture or their parents, don't speak Samoan and are failing in schools. The youth themselves express the mirror image of these concerns, anxious that they are not accepted as Samoan in their parents' communities or in Samoa, but are facing prejudice for being Samoan in all other contexts. Generation gaps in both countries were being read as cultural gaps, albeit with different inflections. My interlocutors were all using problems they associated with raising children away from Samoa as a way to discuss the consequences of migrating into multiculturalism.

The fact that in New Zealand, the most commonly voiced solution to the youth problem was educating the youth about Samoan culture did not seem that surprising to me. The NZ solution seemed consistent with what I was learning about the assumptions my interlocutors were making about how one engages

with Samoan cultural knowledge as a Samoan. When I started historical research, I noticed that this argument was also voiced by migrants when they first moved to the United States from Samoa. Even the novice Samoan community workers in the United States would begin their grant applications to various government agencies arguing that Samoan youth need to be taught Samoan culture. Here is a sample quote for a city grant application for funds for a Samoan youth center:

Much of the virtues and qualities of the Samoan culture remains a mystery due to the youth's limited exposure to their culture with unlike setting they now live in. The revival of these values and traditions in a controlled and adaptable setting will bring about the reverence and respectful nature of their culture. These qualities of life need to be taught and instilled into the youths of today (especially away from their homeland) as a means of self identification rather than the criminal and destructive alternatives.

This grant application, and similar ones espousing Samoan culture, were not funded¹. As community workers, and Samoan migrants in general, became more experienced with the US context, they stopped arguing for the importance of teaching Samoan youth their culture. In this article, I focus on how, in the United States, people in Samoan migrant communities began to argue that solving the problems of migrant youth primarily entailed educating the parents.

I am taking insights emerging from grounded comparative ethnographic research among people living in diaspora, and explore more fully how assumptions about possessing cultural knowledge, and Samoan cultural knowledge in particular, affect the ways in which my interlocutors in the United States understood themselves both to be migrants and to be Samoan in multicultural contexts. The dilemmas my interlocutors faced are ones that many migrants face (Hall 2002; Lowe 1996; Ong 2003; Radhakrishnan 1994; Raj 2003). Here I am investigating how cultural assumptions shape Samoan

communities' responses to these common dilemmas. I analyse how an assimilationist rhetoric might provide Samoan migrants with solutions for problems which emerge from the way Samoan migrant communities in the United States frame their relationship to cultural knowledge. This article is divided into four parts: 1) a brief account of the historical and social context of Samoan migration; 2) the epistemological assumptions that people hold who are engaged in the project of being Samoan; 3) the explanations these migrants employ to understand their U.S.-raised youth's behavior; and 4) the types of solutions people, and in particular, Samoan community workers, advocate for what they perceive to be a generation gap caused by migration.

Background

Samoan migrants are able to arrive in the United States through complicated bureaucratic trajectories, partially because the Samoan islands have been subject to multiple forms of colonialism during the 20th century. For many years, New Zealand and the United States split control over these eastern Pacific islands. New Zealand colonized (independent) Samoa² from 1914 until 1962, when it became the first independent nation in the south Pacific. The United States, in contrast, retains territorial control over American Samoa, which the country has had since 1900. The colonial relationship provided Samoans with privileged status for immigration into the United States. Most of my interlocutors thus were originally from American Samoa.³ Samoans have been taking advantage of these ties to the United States since the early 1950's, migrating to urban centers such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Seattle and Honolulu in increasing numbers. Samoan migrants have grown numerically from communities of an estimated 300-600 in the United States to approximately 133,281 in the United States (US Census 2000).

The waves of Samoan migration to the United States followed a similar pattern to the three waves Cluny Macpherson (1997) outlines for New Zealand. The first wave of Samoan migrants (those who arrived prior to WWII) consisted of Samoan scholarship students to theological schools and universities. According to Sereisa Milford, Samoans first came to the United States as members of the Mormon Church in order to help build the Mormon Temple in Hawai'i in the early 1920's (Milford 1985, p. 54). After WWII, the Samoans who arrived in a second wave had served in the colonial bureaucracies in (independent) and American Samoa, had joined the U.S. military during the war, or were *afakasi* (Samoans of mixed parentage). Most of the migrants to the United States had been involved with the U. S. military base in American Samoa during WWII. The majority of these migrants had lived in Pago Pago before moving to the United States. The third wave, according to Macpherson, occurred in the early 1960s when people began to take advantage of the post-war demand for manual labor. Craig Janes writes that in American Samoa, 'By the early 1960s it was clear that migration was becoming institutionalized as a rite of passage for young Samoans' (Janes 1990, p. 26).

The third wave was the largest wave of migrants from Samoa—both to New Zealand and to the United States. When these migrants first arrived in Los Angeles or San Francisco, the cities were experiencing a post-war boom. As a result, there were plenty of manual labor jobs available, and Samoans quickly fit into a particular socioeconomic niche—the men working in factories or at the docks, and women often working as nurses (see Pitt and Macpherson 1974; Ablon 1971). Many Samoans held two or three jobs in an effort to earn enough money to send back to their parents in Samoa and American Samoa. The first three waves of Samoan migrants were comprised largely of young adults, who were recently married or about to be married, and start new households.

Households often consisted of several close relatives and their children, and still do to this day.

While the waves of migration might have helped shape how Samoan communities originally formed in the United States, these waves have little relevance in people's daily lives now. To persist in thinking about Samoan migration in terms of waves would be misleading. People travel back and forth between Samoa and other countries continuously. They will move back to Samoa for a certain number of years and then return to New Zealand or the United States. My interlocutor's lives were not as stable as an account based on waves of migration might imply. Samoan communities in diaspora reflect this greater variability, containing people with a wide range of commitments and experiences both in Samoa and in being Samoan. In much the same way that the notion of migrant generation can create erroneous classifications, waves of migration does not accurately represent the amount of variation within contemporary Samoan communities.

The one divide that did seem for the most part to be stable was the trajectories of migration from (independent) Samoa and American Samoa to New Zealand and the United States. People from (independent) Samoa tended to move to New Zealand. I only met one person in New Zealand out of the hundreds I encountered who was from American Samoa.⁴ Some migrants from (independent) Samoa moved to the United States, first stopping in American Samoa, but for the most part, the people I met were originally from American Samoa.

This article's analysis is based on ethnographic research in non-profit organizations staffed by people originally from American Samoa. I spent 1998 in San Francisco, conducting research among three Samoan community-based organizations who were primarily funded by various branches of the city

government (the Department of Human Resources; the Mayor's Office of Children, Youth and Their Families; the Juvenile Probation Department, and so on). Their clients were from both (independent) and American Samoa, although my survey of 400 case files indicates that, in cases where this information was available, 32% were born in the United States, and 43% were born in American Samoa.

Analyses of U. S. integration have largely focused on its relative success, asking 'how are migrants adjusting?' By doing so, scholars have focused on strategies people develop to move between two cultures. (Alba and Nee 2003; Hall 2004; Portes and Zhou 1993) In this article, I am inverting this perspective, asking how migrants invoke the rhetoric of assimilation in response to conceptual possibilities created by migration. Rather than adopting the assumptions underlying the concept of assimilation, I am exploring what work this concept does when my interlocutors in the field invoke it. My interlocutors in the United States uniformly described life after migration as one filled with choices they never had in Samoa. After migration, they explained that they were confronted with the possibility that behaving like a Samoan can be a self-conscious choice. As I will discuss, this is antithetical to a Samoan perspective on how cultural identity is formed. In a sense, my interlocutors were explaining to me that migration opened the door to a new perspective on what a person's relationship to social order could be (see Parnell 2000 and Demian in press for discussions of comparable transformations). The people I spoke with saw this new and self-conscious relationship to social order in general, and Samoan social order in particular, as a solution to problems Samoan communities were having with the U.S. raised youth.

The result is that Samoan community workers in the United States invoke a particular type of assimilation as a solution for various problems. In the

United States, community workers told me that Samoan parents needed to realize that their children had more choices now; that the traditional Samoan parenting techniques do not work in this new context. They encourage parents to change their ways, while simultaneously trying to teach the youth to be more tolerant of their parents' traditional leanings. The Samoan community workers' unexpected lessons of how cultural identity and choice can be intertwined are being taught at the same time as local and national governments are advocating that citizens adopt neoliberal and market-based concepts of agency. Yet the Samoan community workers are espousing a position more complex and culturally resonant than simply a neoliberal perspective.⁵ In this paper, I explain why Samoan community workers in the United States will evoke a culturally specific assimilationist rhetoric as one avenue for exploring new relationships to social order and resolving a supposedly new tension between viewing Samoan cultural identity as a choice and as a given.

I want to offer two caveats. First, only a simplified narrative of the migration process enables generation gaps to become dilemmas that compel migrants to conceptualize assimilation as a possibility, and a possibility that threatens cultural identity. In practice, generations—particularly generations of migrants—are not rigidly segregated without a considerable labor of division constructing the boundaries between first generation, second generation, and third generation migrants. In any Samoan migrant community, there will be many people of the same age, each with a different life trajectory in relationship to Samoa. Some were born in New Zealand or the United States and never set foot in Samoa. Some will choose to move to Samoa as adults, and then will return to New Zealand or the United States only for retirement. Others misbehaved as teenagers and were sent back to Samoa for a number of years to learn discipline. Some have gone back to Samoa every year for a month or so to

live in a parent's village. Still others have just arrived in New Zealand or the United States, and will return to Samoa in a couple of years. In short, migrants are constantly circulating between New Zealand, the United States, and Samoa—generational divides are not accurate ways to classify people. Yet my interlocutors found these divisions very effective for labeling people and their behavior. This article also addresses how Samoan cultural identity is structured so as to make these labels compelling enough to recursively shape how social relationships unfold.

My second caveat is that in this article, Samoa⁶ emerges as a nostalgic utopic space in my interlocutors' imagination—the site of authentic and properly enacted cultural knowledge.⁷ The Samoa that people describe does not exist, it serves more as a place marker which people can invoke to comment on certain forms of cultural authority. While this will be familiar to many scholars of diaspora, in this article, I discuss the particular form it takes when migrants negotiate what counts as Samoan cultural knowledge. The Samoa discussed here is the imagined counterpoint to life in the United States—a site where people never have to create Samoanness out of hybridity, since Samoanness *there* is the natural and pure state.⁸

Who is Samoan?

For migrants, determining whether or not someone is Samoan can be a complicated venture. At stake is the kind of relationship to cultural knowledge—to language, genealogical expertise, political skill, ritual performance, among others—one needs to exhibit to be generally accepted as Samoan within Samoan communities. While people strongly believe that being Samoan involves linguistic competency and a certain performative predictability, they also think that these skills are inherited. One can not have these skills without having at

least one parent be Samoan—and to be fully Samoan both parents must be Samoan as well. Assuming that cultural skills are inherited makes ascertaining who is Samoan quite a complicated affair. There is a wide range of people whose particular configuration of skills and genealogy calls into question their status as Samoan, especially in migration.

In one of the Samoan churches I attended, a man in his mid-twenties who also regularly helped with the sound system in church, had been raised in Apia, spoke colloquial Samoan fluently, but wasn't himself Samoan by blood. People in the church persistently thought of him as being part-Samoan, despite being told occasionally that he wasn't by the man and others. One woman I spoke with, having been told he wasn't part-Samoan, forgot that conversation two weeks later, and explained to me that he was an *afakasi* (of mixed parentage). He was an anomaly that was incongruous enough to require people to forget repeatedly that he knew how to act like a Samoan only because he was raised as one. Samoan migrant concerns about who counts as Samoan are shaped by their epistemological assumptions about being Samoan.

My interlocutors tend to see people's ability to perform social roles properly as rooted in inherited knowledge. Being born Samoan implies that one knows how to act as a Samoan. Supposedly in Samoa, this assumption seems perfectly warranted, especially since learning to be Samoan is often accomplished tacitly within Samoan villages (see Ochs 1988; Drodzow-St. Christian 1997). However, this is much more difficult to accomplish after migration. In addition, the arenas in which people demonstrate their Samoan cultural expertise has shifted somewhat upon migration elsewhere. In short, Samoan assumptions about how one knows correct Samoan behavior is undermined upon migration, ensuring that Samoan anxieties about assimilation

revolve around family members raised outside of Samoa knowing how to behave properly.

What I, as an anthropologist, noticed that Samoan youth born in the United States tended not to know⁹ is different than what Samoan parents would complain about to me and others. I kept noticing that none of my U.S. raised interlocutors distinguished between the two kinds of Samoan chiefs, *ali'i* (high chiefs) and *tulafale* (talking chiefs). Not many knew about the *feagaiga*, the covenant originally between brothers and sisters that covers many respectful behaviors. I once tried to explain the *feagaiga* with little success at a picnic. One U.S. raised woman kept insisting to me that of course brothers and sisters shared clothes back in Samoa, while her mother watched bemused and finally disagreed. What my older interlocutors were concerned that U.S. raised youth did not know was a slightly different range of cultural knowledge. They were concerned that the youth did not understand the importance of *fa'alavelave* (ritual exchanges), and might stop participating in these costly exchanges when they got older. In addition, the parents were very concerned that the youth did not know how to behave respectfully to their elders, and thus potentially bringing shame upon the family. They were also concerned that the youth did not know the nuances of having a particular Samoan social role, and this might behave improperly (and disrespectfully).

A crucial element of behaving like a Samoan—indeed, of behaving in accordance with any cultural identity—involves behaving with a certain amount of predictability. In the case of being Samoan, predictability and one's role is closely intertwined. As other ethnographers of Samoan cultural knowledge have noted (Shore 1982, Mageo 1998, Drodzow-St. Christian 1997), people have a finely nuanced set of Samoan role expectations for public contexts. People in Samoan contexts will interpret, and anticipate, each other's behavior based upon

one's structural place within a context, which is determined by characteristics such as the hierarchical position of one's family within the village, one's gender, age, religion, and marital status. As long as the person behaves in a predictable and appropriate Samoan manner, those observing will not attempt to find other explanations for social behavior. The person will be generally understood to be acting in a particular manner because fundamentally a person *is* the role.

Jeanette Mageo discusses this in her analysis of *aga*, the Samoan term for someone's character. 'In egocentric America character is thought to be interior—sometimes clearly reflected by a person's behavior and sometimes obscured by it: one must know the person's motive to read the character behind the act. But if you simply ask Samoans, "What is *aga*?" they usually say "behavior" because for them character is performative: *aga* consist of performances believes to be constitutive of the person or thing in question' (Mageo 1998, pp. 37-8). In essence, ethnographers' interlocutors can predict each other's behavior because they have a highly sophisticated mental map of what everyone's Samoan role should be, given their particular genealogy, village, and religion among other factors.

I have offered this brief sketch of how cultural knowledge and knowledge transmission are intertwined in Samoa as a foundation for explaining how migration affects Samoan families. In the following section, I will describe some of the conundrums youth raised outside of Samoa experience when they try to be accepted as Samoan by Samoan migrant communities. I focus in particular on the implications of failing to act properly, and the techniques Samoan migrants use to control and discuss these failures.

Migrating Knowledges

Samoaan epistemological assumptions about someone's relationship to cultural knowledge can lead to highly charged situations in migration, especially when children often do not know how to behave properly. As discussed elsewhere (Gershon 2000), Samoans also will often ignore the labor that goes into a public performance of a role in the very moment of enacting the role. In the moment of performance, Samoans do not distinguish between people and their roles. Elinor Ochs has traced this pattern in her work on language socialization in (independent) Samoa. She claims that in speech situations, Samoaan children are responsible for speaking intelligibly. ' . . . Samoaan caregivers expect small children to assume most of the burden of making an unintelligible utterance intelligible, and . . . this practice is tied to expectations concerning social rank, i.e. that a sociocentric demeanor is expected of lower-to higher-ranking persons.' (Ochs 1988, p. 28) From an early stage, the onus of proper behavior resides with the children. When the children do not speak properly, they are publicly teased. Ochs writes: 'Samoaan care givers rely on teasing and shaming to get a clearer utterance from a child. Children who speak unclearly are referred to in their presence as having *guku Saiga* (or *gutu Saina*) 'Chinese mouth' or may be said to talk like a horse or may be called by the name of an adult who doesn't speak or act normally' (Ochs 1988, p. 134). Ochs here points to the ways in which the labor of language learning is overlooked and linguistic competency is presumed when Samoaan care givers engage with children.

I noticed instances of role fetishism happening in many different contexts. One illuminating incident occurred at the Office of Samoaan Affairs, which housed a community school designed for Samoaan youths who almost failed out of the U. S. public school system. A top administrator from the city schools was planning to visit, and the coordinator of the Samoaan school, Alofa, was discussing with me her plans to welcome this administrator properly. She

wanted the students to present a Samoan dance routine to entertain and impress the administrator with the students' cultural abilities. I pointed out that the administrator would be coming in less than a week, and the students wouldn't have time to rehearse. She reassured me that the students didn't need time to rehearse—they were Samoan and would quickly learn any dance. This did not in fact turn out to be the case, and Alofa decided to have a handful of the students testify to the supervisor how important the school was to them. Three boys spoke, one after the other, in front of a long narrow table, describing how much they appreciated the school. Alofa had substituted oratory for dance at the last minute, oratory also is a crucial skill in demonstrating one's Samoan cultural knowledge. In general, Alofa's expectations of skills in cultural performance were commonly voiced, and, in my ethnographic work, tended to have more rhetorical than practical validity.

The Samoan assumption that people are aware of all the social implications of occupying their particular social role can create problems in migration, since youth often can not observe a wide range of Samoan role models. Not to act according to one's social role, from this Samoan perspective, is invariably intentional. Other participating Samoans' interpretative task becomes unraveling the meaning of the omission. Because Samoans are proceeding according to a finely tuned map of role expectations, they have guidelines for understanding when a silence is an intentional omission, for grasping which of the subtle implicit absences are to be read as strategic. This leaves little space for assuming carelessness or accidental ignorance. Yet U.S. raised Samoans often perceive their own mistakes as the result of an innocent ignorance. They are perplexed when others interpret their errors as intentional. The problem for U.S. raised Samoans is that they are born to be Samoan but do not always know how to behave appropriately in Samoan contexts. My

interlocutors believed that this dilemma—of being subject to expectations they lacked the knowledge to fulfill—did not exist in Samoa and was a direct result of the changes in child rearing brought about by migration.

This new dilemma underpins the most common criticisms people raised outside of Samoa face. When I was idly chatting with people while doing fieldwork, I tried to pay close attention to the terms they used to judge others' actions. After all, in the process of criticizing, people reveal the types of behavior that not only irritate, but are widely understood to irritate. I found it revealing that the two terms my interlocutors most frequently used, both to judge others and to report on others' disapproval of them—was *fia-poto* (to try or want to be smart) or *fia-palagi* (to try or want to be white.) Since I had recently left an academic setting, I personally thought to be *fia-poto* would be an unquestioned positive. Given that my interlocutors in the field described Samoan cultural knowledge as though it was canonical, why was displaying this knowledge disapproved of?

I began to unravel some of the assumptions underlying this charge while talking to a Samoan friend about Fili, a man who seemed to make many social blunders as the head of a community organization. Fili told me that he tried to be very straightforward, and my other interlocutors in the organization seemed bothered because of this straightforwardness. They seemed aggrieved that he was not being manipulative. So, when talking to my friend, I would explain Fili's transparently ineffective strategies as products of his lack of political savvy. This did not sit well with my friend, who thought he was *fia-poto*. At this interjection, I changed tactics a little bit, and said that I didn't understand others' explanations of his actions. Either they characterized him as too arrogant (an assumption implicit in the *fia-poto* denunciation) or too inept and unaware. It seemed strange to me, I continued, that these were the two options.

From my perspective, arrogance and idiocy are not antithetical. My friend shook his head empathetically, and told me that they weren't contradictory for Samoans either. In fact, one implied the other. My friend explained the problem with the man in question was that he was too arrogant to recognize his own ineptitude. He was refusing to be properly strategic with other Samoans, and was, in the process, insulting them.

My interlocutors will tend to hold two tenets which makes being *fia-poto*, into a habitual criticism. The first of these tenets is that cultural knowledge exists as a canon, a totality which a person could theoretically know. In fact, the premise is that to be fully Samoan entails knowing this body of cultural knowledge. As a result, when you speak, you are publicly positioning yourself as having a command of this total body of information, and each speech is a microcosm of the total knowledge base. There is a general realization that speaking is always strategic, that political exigencies compel the speech makers to chart the most politically relevant course in the genealogical total they are depicting.¹⁰ So every speech is a reflection of this tension between the potential articulation of total knowledge, and the pragmatics of everyday restrictions. A good orator is one who charts this tension successfully. To speak when you are not in the right hierarchical position to do so is to represent yourself as having access to this knowledge base, yet, in the very act of speaking inappropriately, undercutting this assertion. In general, to be Samoan is to inherently know appropriate behavior in any context defined as Samoan. To fail to behave properly is to undercut the assertion implicit in the act of speaking, that of being Samoan. This leads me to the second tenet underpinning why to be *fia-poto* is a criticism. As I mentioned before, for Samoans, failure is typically seen as intentional. To attempt to do something publicly, and not succeed, or to appear to be a particular role, but not to enact it—this makes no sense. This is true for

many roles—the point is never how well-intentioned someone might be. Either they succeed or they don't.

Accusing someone of being *fia-poto* is the product of juxtaposing these two assumptions. Because people individually recognize that they are far from grasping Samoan cultural knowledge as a whole, they try not to embarrass themselves or their family by making this failure apparent. To be *fia-poto* is not to recognize this basic paradoxical tension shaping Samoan displays of knowledge—that people are *not* only speaking in order to show what they know. Rather, they are speaking strategically in part to conceal their failures. Speaking from this perspective is an odd mix—one is aware that one is enacting a role in which one is expected to know all the appropriate behavior and genealogies, yet internally one realizes that one does not grasp all that people assume one does. By just revealing bits of information, one can ensure that others might attribute to oneself this totalized knowledge. At the same time, one conceals your failure to know everything. To be *fia-poto* is not to be smart, but to try to be smart. My interlocutors are criticizing the effort, of trying to transform what they hold to be an essence, a substance one either has or one doesn't, and making this essence into a state of becoming. Those raised outside of Samoa are constantly being criticized for revealing the effort they put into trying to become something which they should just *be*.

A similar complaint underlies the accusation that someone is *fia-palagi* (trying to be a white person). In these instances, *fia-palagi* criticizes a double failure. First, the term accuses people of denying their family, their origins, and their true identity. In a sense, the term with its critical overtones attacks any perceived attempt at assimilation. But the inevitable failure of this attempted assimilation lurks as a second form of failure within the accusation. A Samoan can never fully be a *palagi*, just as a *palagi* can never be a Samoan. So when a

Samoan is being *fia-palagi*, they are failing both to be properly Samoan, and also failing to be *palagi*.¹¹ In all the cases where I heard people using the term *fia-palagi*, there was an implicit criticism of someone's apparently assimilationist tendencies.

At the same time, the term, *fia-palagi*, contains, from a Samoan perspective, a central paradox that occurs only after migration. The phrase offers the possibility of cultural choice, that someone can choose not to be a Samoan. This offers a new way of imagining cultural identity – no longer is one's behavior largely unfolding the possibilities offered by inheritance. The term criticizes people who are denying a cultural identity based on birth, but also acknowledges that wanting to choose one's own cultural identity can be a powerful motivating force.

Choosing Culture

On March 3rd, 1998, a U.S.-raised Samoan with access to the Internet posted the following message on the Polynesian Café (www.polycafe.com):

For so long it has puzzled me a great deal, finding the right balance between cultural and non-cultural matters.

Specifically speaking of my parents, they are very *Fa'a Samoa* [following Samoan culture]. I have discovered in my life that the difficulty of balancing matters between my parents and my own life will remain to be a struggle. . . .After much discussion with a friend who is going through the same experiences I am, we've resorted to admitting and accepting the fact that this is the way it will always be.

This message encapsulates a central conflict that migrants experience in multicultural nation-states such as the United States - how to balance assumptions that one is born with an identity with the belief that one can choose against one's identity by assimilating. At the same time that this writer was expressing familiar migrant anxieties about how cultural identity is constituted,

there was also a uniquely Samoan flavor to the message. As I have discussed, being Samoan is fraught with culturally specific dilemmas, many revolving around how people envision the ways to embody Samoan cultural knowledge. The tension between parental demands and children's choices that this migrant mentions is a product of a new conflict created by migration. As a consequence, migrants express anxieties about assimilation that have specifically Samoan nuances, encapsulating dilemmas peculiar to how migration affects Samoan patterns of knowledge transmission.

Samoan migrant parents face a new type of role failure created by migration—children who are born Samoan but do not know how to speak or behave in ways that a Samoan perspective demands. There are a number of ways in which U.S. raised youth seem to be disrespectful in public Samoan contexts. For example, the youth don't say "tulou" as they walk between two people chatting, they do not crouch a bit when talking to a church minister or older relative to make sure they are not higher than the person in authority. These types of failure are particularly puzzling for people engaged in the project of being Samoan, who tend to see social behavior as an inherited knowledge which people strategically reveal in the appropriate context. This raises the question that haunts the Samoan migrant communities—why don't children raised outside of Samoa know better? Not surprisingly, the explanations my interlocutors offer differ depending on whether people are Samoan-raised or U.S.-raised. Many U.S. raised youth have told me 'if only my parents would teach me, I would know what to do.' The youth wanted explicit instructions, similar to what they are told to expect in U.S. school contexts. As Ochs (1988) and Jones (1991) have pointed out, teaching rarely occurs in Samoan contexts through explicit instruction. Instead, observation is far more common. Meanwhile, Samoan-raised migrants will tend to talk about parental inattention

(when describing other Samoan families), or, in their own cases, they will blame their children's friends. From both perspectives, what could be seen as a gap between being Samoan-raised and US-raised—a migration gap—is being interpreted as a generational gap between parent and child.

I was told some commonly used explanations for a generational divide both in the United States and New Zealand. In each country, my interlocutors would lament the loss of grandparents' input in raising children (see Tanielu 2000, p. 54). In addition, people also would point to parents' ambivalence about contributing money to *fa'alavelaves* (ritual exchanges)¹² and other elements of being Samoan in practice. They would want their children to have new opportunities and be successful in this new country. At the same time, parents would be angry when their children erred in Samoan contexts, and would scold them publicly. My interlocutors in both countries described these double binds as reasons for the divide.

There were some explanations that I primarily collected in the United States. Samoan-raised parents will explain children's disobedience and disrespectful behavior in three ways. First, they will discuss other families' failure to control the children in terms of a lack of supervision. The parents will tell me that in Samoa, there was always someone around to watch children. Even if the parents went to work in the plantations, there would be an aunt or uncle who could supervise them. In the United States, this constant supervision is absent. Parents have to work two jobs to survive, or else they work during the day and play bingo at night. In this sense, my interlocutors are blaming children's poor behavior (which ranged from using disrespectful language to stealing and belonging to a gang) on the lack of an extended family. But they are also blaming children's failure on the ways in which parents are failing to fulfill their Samoan roles.

The second explanation Samoans will offer is that the children have friends who will lead them astray. This was not only said when gang membership was the issue, although, not surprisingly, this explanation invariably came up when discussing gangs. To a large extent, this is connected to the complaint about the lack of supervision. After all, sufficient parental attention would also entail learning and regulating the children's friends. This particular explanation is a bit ironic, since part of Samoan knowledge transmission patterns, as Ochs details,¹³ is that children learn much of their information from their age mates. In essence, the parents are complaining that the paths through which children become good and knowledgeable Samoans have, after migration, become precisely the avenues through which these children learn to be disobedient.

The third explanation is that the government has begun to intervene in Samoan families in destructive ways, preventing parents from disciplining their children properly. Because discipline is an important component of how Samoan children are expected to learn, this government intervention is perceived as very destructive for families. My first indication that child discipline was a highly charged topic for Samoan migrants was the way in which Samoans in California would respond to my thirty second sound bite about my dissertation topic. When I introduced myself, I explain that I was studying how government policies impact upon Samoan families. This frequently elicited stories about government interventions which Samoans felt profoundly disrupted the lines of authority in a family, accounts which invariably revolved around parent's rights to discipline. My project description prompted a number of stories about parents who could no longer discipline their children properly because of the threat of government intervention. One woman told me that her six year old daughter has started telling her: 'You can't hit me.

I know how to dial 9-1-1.’ These stories would often involve episodes of heroic resistance in which Samoan parents would refuse to allow government officials to curtail their right to teach their children to behave properly. They would make public stands -- like spanking their children with a belt in front of the school -- to demonstrate their rejection of governmental authority. In these narrations of resistance, Samoan parents were also rejecting the divide between Family and Government which Donzelot (1979) argues is a central aspect of the modern state, which I discuss later.

These were stories that took disciplining children as a productive site for articulating what is Samoan about a family. Discipline is a new arena for forging identity, both the Samoan migrants I interviewed and ethnographers of Samoan childhood attest to this. I am not suggesting that discipline becomes a vehicle for teaching children how to be members of a group only after migration, far from that. Rather, Samoans start discussing discipline as a way to teach children proper *Samoan* behavior, while prior to migration, children were only being taught proper behavior. Douglass Drozdow-St. Christian, in his dissertation on embodiment in Samoa, describes the lessons discipline is supposed to teach in Western Samoa.

A punished person is almost immediately reintegrated into his or her family and community following a beating or other punishment. The act of punishment, *fa'a sala*, is the path from a mistake, the ending of an error, and the direction an offender takes back toward communal participation. The physical act of punishment does not avenge the offense, it reminds the offender of the way out of the mistake and back into complete and responsible sociality. (Drozdow-St. Christian 1997, p. 190)

According to St. Christian, Samoans see discipline as teaching proper sociality, how people should best exhibit their respect and commitment to their families and their villages. However, these communities and families are not defined in

terms of cultural difference, as they have been in the Samoan diaspora. Upon migration to the United States, disciplining children becomes laden with anxieties about remaining Samoan in the face of U. S. government attempts to define how families should behave.

Assimilation and Samoan Community Workers

I have been discussing the epistemological assumptions and explanations Samoan migrants evoke as they discuss some specifically Samoan problems of negotiating different cultures. I have been arguing in general terms that Samoan migrants have begun uneasily to think of cultural identity as an identity that can be chosen. This idea of choice is at odds with other assumptions Samoans have about identity as inherited. In this section, I examine a site where this tension is explicitly addressed, turning to how Samoan community workers try to help parents transform their child rearing in response to the pressures of living in the United States. Samoan community workers begin to offer a Samoan version of assimilation as a solution to the dilemma migrant parents now face—of thinking of culture simultaneously as a given and as chosen.

In 1998, the year I conducted this study, the U.S. government was in the early stages of implementing Clinton's welfare reforms. This was the first year that people on the welfare rolls faced the two year limit. As a result, I attended many information sessions in which city government officials tried to explain their strategies for encouraging clients to cooperate with the new "Welfare to Work" policies. Yet, while both government agencies and Samoan families were expressing considerable anxieties about families' access to resources, the Samoan community organizations were focused largely on addressing the concerns of Samoan youth. Previously the organizations I observed had offered job training and computer training to Samoan communities. The organizations

had also been involved in distributing food and organizing older Samoan women to weave *ie toga* (fine mats which must be exchanged at any large ritual occasion such as a wedding). By the time I was doing fieldwork, these projects were on a backburner, and all the organizations' primary focus was on Samoan youth.¹⁴ These community organizations survived year to year largely because of city grants, most of which were only available to assist "at risk" youth. When I asked community workers why they focused on youth primarily, they never mentioned that granting opportunities affected their commitments. Instead, they mentioned how frustrating working with Samoan communities were in general, and said that helping Samoan youth was the only way they felt like they could have a positive effect. Most of the people who worked at these organizations identified as Samoan. The main exception to this were the teachers who taught in the schools for so-called "at risk" Samoan youth which were housed in the organizations. These community workers had no special training (aside from intermittent and short training workshops offered by different government agencies¹⁵), and often became involved in the organization through family connections.

The Samoan community workers become involved in cases involving parents in three possible ways: a Department of Human Services social worker calls the community organization and requests assistance in handling a case; the non-profit organization's involvement with the Juvenile Probation Department leads them gradually into this involvement; or, the most infrequent path, the parents request their assistance. The most common role the community worker is expected to play is that of one-way translator, teaching Samoan clients what the government expects of them. Samoan community workers are rarely called upon to serve as advocates for their clients, although I know of at least one Samoan worker who had a reputation for consistently and aggressively arguing

for his clients in court. As a result, Samoan community workers' role in intervening within the family can be potentially adversarial from the beginning. From the outset, they face a set of problems which derive from the fact that community workers and government officials are claiming a form of authority which violates the hierarchical boundaries Samoan families are accustomed to enforcing.

A Foucaultian analysis of Samoan community workers' interactions with their clients would suggest that these community workers are one among many methods for disciplining families and extending state power (see Moffat 1999). Migrant families in particular are seen as posing a challenge to the orderliness of state/family relations, since migrants have not yet internalized the necessary forms of self-regulation. Social workers are faced with the task of teaching how to be productive citizens that raise equally productive self-regulating citizens. Indeed, this is the conclusion Aihwa Ong reaches in *Buddha Is Hiding*, an ethnographic exploration of Cambodian refugees, another Asian Pacific American minor minority, in the Bay Area. Ong writes: "Here, I will show how in daily encounters, poor newcomers like Cambodian refugees were constituted as particular kinds of unworthy subjects who must be taught to become self-reliant, to be accountable for their situation. The processes intended to produce self-disciplining, provident subjects often rely on ethno-racial notions as the basis for discriminating among, assessing, and penalizing welfare clients" (Ong 2003: 124). Ong describes social workers as encouraging neoliberal state ideals of what makes a good citizen. In the process, social workers treat Cambodian parents as continuing to enact cultural traditions that threaten their children. At the same time, the social workers treat the children as rational and autonomous subjects, not cultural beings (Ong 2003: 168-194). For Ong, the social workers embody the state unproblematically.

This was not the case in my fieldwork, which also was with a minor minority group that was disadvantaged by being linked through the census to “model minority” Asian-Americans such as Chinese or Japanese (see Gershon 2001 for a discussion of the relationship between major and minor minorities). The Samoan community workers I interviewed and worked with were often very ambivalent about the ways in which government agencies were asking them to further government aims with Samoan families. They were even skeptical of the initial divide between Family and Government, which Donzelot suggests is crucial to the modern labor of division by which the state determines how families and governments will antagonistically collude to fashion disciplined and productive citizens (Donzelot 1979). By delineating Samoan community workers’ unease, I am taking issue with a Foucaultian interpretation of how state workers assist in maintaining this divide between Family and Government. I am suggesting instead that Samoan community workers are re-figuring both U.S. government and Samoan community expectations when they attempt to intervene in Samoan parent-child relationships. They do so through an assimilationist rhetoric that defines anew what is choice and what is compulsion from both a Samoan or U.S. government perspective. In short, Samoan community workers are attempting, albeit with mixed results, to transform their clients’ reflexive understandings of how one engages with social orders into one more compatible with, but not the same as, neoliberal state understandings.

Samoan community workers are caught in a bind, since they are frequently hired by San Francisco’s Department of Human Services (D.H.S.) to teach their clients the legitimacy of government intervention in culturally appropriate ways. Yet this very act of intervention is antithetical to a proper Samoan relationship between rules and responsibility. Samoans do not tell each other how to discipline their children unless they are in the right hierarchical position within

the extended family. In fact, in the church I attended, parents or relatives only will discipline children.¹⁶ The community workers are intervening, based on an authority granted them through their relationship to government agencies, an authority which their clients might well feel is illegitimate. Migrants do not share some of the basic assumptions that government officials must believe in order to legitimate their intrusion. As a result, Samoan community workers are placed in a unique trap. They must, often against their better judgment, educate their Samoan clients into recognizing the legitimacy of government intervention. Then, they are expected to re-frame the situation for their clients. Once they establish the basis for compelling migrants to be a different kind of parent, then they must teach the clients to choose freely to discipline their children differently.

In other words, first the Samoan community worker must make their clients realize that they have a problem—that they are raising their children in such a way that D.H.S. can intercede and remove their children from their care. Then they must teach their clients to think of the problem as one built into the very structure of the family, which the parents can actively choose to transform, if they are determined to do so. Samoan community workers must first teach their clients the framework of compulsion, before they can encourage them to choose to be ‘healthy’.

Samoan community workers are regularly confronted with the problem of mistrust. The community workers and clients would tell me that Samoan community workers are perceived as being unable to keep secrets. Because they are Samoan, they will spread information about the clients’ cases throughout various Samoan communities. Their role as community worker would always be superseded by their connections to their family and their church, an anxiety which was figured as fear of gossip. The clients’ concern is focused upon

internal community dynamics, not the external government perceptions. In other words, the clients are not particularly fearful that the government would learn inappropriate information, or that Samoans could not be counted upon to advocate properly for their Samoan clients in the face of a confusing and complicated bureaucracy. Rather, the clients worry about how Samoan community workers might use the gleaned information to shame the client's family within Samoan circles. The community workers have to figure out strategies for reassuring the Samoan clients that they are trustworthy, and will not circulate information which will damage the family's reputation. In San Francisco, one community worker told me that she proffered this reassurance by telling Samoan families that she personally adhered to a strict division between work and family. For her, the role of a community worker ensured that she would not divulge any information about particular cases. She also laughed, as she described her efforts, and pointed out that she lacked both the time and the energy to violate people's confidences.

This reassurance was a first step in teaching Samoan clients about the distinction between government and family, as well as providing them insights into how Samoan community workers positioned themselves in this divide. Samoan case workers must convince their clients that their roles as community workers is distinct from their roles as Samoan community members, and that they had internalized this distinction. This is actually a position which is antithetical to how Samoans manage their own relationships to roles. From a Samoan perspective, one's role is the result of a particular context. As I have discussed, people tend not to be able to choose to be particular roles, often the context compels them to adopt a given role. There are many situations in which the exact role is not readily apparent, when a person is related to another through a variety of relationships, and hence can act according to one of several possible

relationships. In these cases there will be a certain amount of negotiating to determine which role a person will be for the duration of that context. There is a certain amount of fluidity in these roles, which can create tension. When Samoan community workers claim that their jobs ensure a relationship based on confidentiality, they are denying the contextual and fluid nature of Samoan roles. They are implicitly teaching their clients the first step to recognizing a specific division between government and family.

After Samoan social workers have established their trustworthiness by introducing a new concept of how roles structure people's behavior, they have to teach their clients that government agencies have the right to intercede in their family hierarchies. This seems particularly odd for Samoan families. They are accustomed to having the person who makes decisions, and who voices rules also be the person who is responsible for the outcomes. Government agencies are imposing both rules and responsibilities in one fell swoop upon families. They require people to take full responsibility for the success or failure of the family as a unit, while proffering the guidelines which will determine this success. When the families fail to conform to the imposed standards, then government officials step in to help. In Samoan families, the same expectations of respect and conformity apply to everyone. It would make no sense to have a division between familial actions and government expectations, with government officials demanding certain practices without the officials themselves also being forced to wrestle with the dilemmas of these restrictions. While government agencies distinguish between being a community worker and being a mother, the San Francisco community workers I interviewed reject this distinction. Often their case notes will reflect this tension, describing how 'as a mother' they find themselves insisting on parent-child relationships dominated by respect and obedience. The Samoan community workers' quandary is that

they must, in the process of helping their clients, teach them this new way of attributing agency and responsibility.

One of the first things that Samoan community workers do, after explaining that their role ensures confidentiality, is to remind their clients to exhibit the respect demanded in Samoan hierarchical relations. In other words, the community workers try to reassert a code of behavior that all Samoans are assumed to understand—the need to respect and serve those who are hierarchically superior to you. When speaking to the youth, the community workers will often invoke this ideology by attributing motivations such as love to parents' attempts to discipline. The youth are chastised for not respecting their parents, and showing this disrespect by not obeying them. Parents are reminded of their duties to their children, the need to care for their children in such a way that the children are expected to obey rules and behave appropriately. A Samoan case worker described one of her sessions between a young rebellious girl and her two too lenient parents in which she tried to establish clear hierarchical relationships.

The girl interrupted me several times while I was trying to explain her problems. Not only was she rude, but she was starting to get very loud. The parents on the other hand just sit there and say nothing. At this time, I told the girl to behave herself and it is very rude to cut someone in the middle of a statement to raise her objections without waiting her turn. She immediately said that she does that all the time to her parents and they don't care. Well, I am not your parents and I will not tolerate this kind of behavior. The girl pouted but kept quiet for a while and the father tried to say something except I held up my hand and continue with introducing the problem as hand as well as introducing what I am planning to do to try and help the girl with her problems as well as having them as part of this rehab session.

In short, Samoan community workers are invoking Samoan ideological attempts at creating compulsion within people. They are describing the interwoven principles of love, respect and obedience which are supposed to underpin parent-child relationships. These statements are ideological assertions of ideal Samoan

family interactions in the rawest form. Not to adhere to them, at least verbally, is to reject the ways in which parents and children affirm their relationships on a daily basis, and thus, ultimately, to reject the relationship altogether. By reminding the family members about the expectations which frame the Samoan-inflected relationship between parent and child, the Samoan community worker reminds the family of the rules which are supposed to determine their interactions. The community workers are setting the stage for demanding that Samoan families adhere to practices which they are supposed to always already enact as Samoans. The compulsion, in this instance, lies in the expectations underpinning what it means to love a relative as a Samoan.

When Samoan community workers are addressing their clients, they are wielding two types of compulsion. They are teaching the Samoan families that governments can and will intervene within families, that each member is expected to work towards creating a functional family, a functionality which the government defines. In addition, Samoan community workers are evoking Samoan communities' expectations of appropriate behavior. In essence, these two types of compulsion are contradictory, since the division between government and family presupposes an allocation of responsibility which Samoan families implicitly reject in their hierarchical structures and tactics of decision-making. It is partially to resolve the tension between these two kinds of compulsion lurking in the background that Samoan community workers then stage the next step in placing families on the road to functionality -- they help construct choice.

Samoan community workers, faced with the unpleasant burden of evoking two contradictory forms of compulsion in the families that they serve, tend to frame the problem in terms of cultural differences. Rather than describing the tensions in terms of family dysfunction, they are prone to describe it as one of

the hazards of assimilation. In presenting their clients with reasons to change their behavior, they suggest that formerly effective Samoan parenting techniques no longer work in America. While in Samoa, children were obedient and respectful, in the United States, they are corrupted by other children and negative media influences. One community worker I interviewed described a recent counseling session with a Samoan mother whose children had been removed by DHS. She explained the parent training/counseling session in the following terms, having introduced the topic of what each family member should do:

The client presented only the Samoan culture version, which is a child should only be seen and not heard; a child should do as told and not to ask why; and since the parents knows better, they are the sole decision making in the family. The client is a typical Samoan mother, raised back home in Samoa under the above condition. Based on the way she was brought up, she is absolutely correct. I reminded her that the Samoan way is not of the American ways. There are laws governing the well-being of a child. Although we were brought up to do as told, the roles and structures in the United States are very different, and since we are residing in the United States we must understand and adhere to these rules and regulations if we are to keep our nuclear family together.

The Samoan community worker went on to explain that she will then teach clients (this one included) that there is any number of rules and leniencies that parents can apply to their offspring, and that Samoan parents will err on the side of strictness. If childrens' friends can go to the movies, stay out late, date, and other freedoms, the children begin to resent that their parents' restrictions.

Samoan community workers teach families that the dilemma they confront is one of too many choices. These choices are presented implicitly as criticisms of other cultures' parenting. Samoan disciplining patterns are not in themselves wrong, they are simply less effective when the children see the discipline as a choice rather than a necessity¹⁷ as Americans do. The same logic that allows

families to choose to be healthy also encourages children to think of parental restrictions as fundamentally arbitrary. The community workers teach that diversity has ensured that parents can no longer control their children through the techniques that they are accustomed to using, and they must develop new approaches.

Samoan community workers are walking a fine line. They can not criticize Samoan culture, for several reasons. First, their organizations are based on the assumption that Samoan culture offers valid and productive techniques for resolving family dilemmas. Secondly, it would involve expressing shame about their own identity, a stance it would be extraordinarily difficult for these community workers to take. Thirdly, one of their main techniques for compelling their Samoan clients to change their behavior relies upon guidelines expressed in Samoan cultural ideology. At the same time, some of these same explicit principles are creating problems between parents and children in transition.

Intriguingly, the community workers rarely talk about a cultural gap between the Samoan parents and their social or economic settings. Samoan parents often struggle to meet the financial demands of assisting an extended Samoan family as well as supporting a household on low income salary. The larger economic pressures are rarely discussed in these parenting sessions. Rather, the cultural gap emerges between Samoan parents and their children, who are understood to be adopting American practices and expectations. The children are often described as too disobedient—asking questions inappropriately, not obeying parents' direct order, choosing friends badly and insisting on dating. Rather than discussing Samoan parents in terms of the larger forces that impinge on their lives, community workers focus only on the presumed cultural gap between parent and child. For example, this became apparent when a case

worker was describing her counselling session with a grandmother who is raising her three grandchildren on her own:

The grandmother admitted that she is very good at that but find it very hard to reward Sila when doing well. [The grandmother said:] “It is not our nature to do likewise. Sila should know I always love her and I don't need to show it.” That is when I explained to the grandmother that those were the old ways. This is America, it is a different world and there are so many other people that influence Sila's life, and if she continues to ignore Sila in that way and not compliment her for doing well or telling her she loves her, how will Sila know?

Indeed, whenever the community workers talked about Samoan forms of discipline, they would describe how these forms are inappropriate in an American context, where the government will be motivated into intervening if Samoan children carry openly the repercussions for their misbehavior.

Thus, Samoan community workers describe the relationship between parents and children as generation gaps which are becoming re-figured as cultural gaps. The compulsions implicit in Samoa, ensuring that an extended family and village pressures children into behaving properly, no longer exists. As a result, Samoan parents have become the sole disciplinarians for their children. When before discipline was spread out as a responsibility for various relatives, now it is concentrated in fewer people. Techniques that others used to mitigate discipline (grandparents' intervening, children being sent to live with other relatives), can be far more complicated and difficult to implement in an urban environment. These are only some of the many changes that have affected Samoan disciplining practices after migration. But for Samoan social workers, it is the influx of influences, not the diffusion of them, which has created the dilemma. For Samoan social workers, too much choice has led to a treacherous cycle in which their clients must be confronted with other compulsions in order to change ‘traditional’ family patterns.

In advocating a tempered form of child discipline, Samoan community workers are attempting to teach Samoan parents to imagine anew the ways in which compulsion and choice are cultural, to rethink their relationship to a social order. From a Samoan perspective, being Samoan means obeying unquestioningly certain cultural compulsions, such as respecting parents and obeying hierarchical superiors immediately. Refusal is not read as an expression of freedom, but as an insult to one's Samoan family and culture. Thus, choice in the individualistic sense is not to be practiced publicly, from this perspective it is asocial. By explaining children's behavior as a product of American cultural influences, Samoan community workers are trying to convince Samoan parents that individual choice is not only cultural, but an integral part of the American experience. At the same time, they are encouraging families to understand compulsion as acultural from a Samoan perspective. After all, Samoan parents are being expected to follow rules established by an abstracted authority, government, one whose representatives accept neither the responsibility nor the shared compulsions which go hand-in-hand with rules in America Samoa. In short, in an attempt to teach Samoan families the American way of distinguishing government from family, Samoan community workers are advocating cultural choices and taking the culture out of compulsion.

When Samoans move to the United States, they encounter new possible relationships to social order. For perhaps the first time, they do not have to behave like a Samoan, their cultural identity becomes a choice and not a compulsion. This new possibility is antithetical to the assumptions Samoans employ to interpret each others' behavior, and generates common condemnations that some Samoans are *fia-palagi* (trying to be white) and disrespectful. While these are general tensions, the paradoxes become heightened around U.S.-raised Samoans' behavior, and, as a consequence, the

parent-child relationship. When people consciously attempt to resolve these paradoxes, as in the case of Samoan community workers, they will tend to use an assimilationist rhetoric and focus on the Samoan parents as the locus for potential effective change.

Conclusion

In this article, I have turned to a common experience for migrants in general—how raising children in nations other than where the parents were raised can focus attention on the consequences of migrating into multiculturalism. I have considered ways that Samoan community workers evoke terms implicating culture and assimilation to understand how youth become icons for debating how best to navigate new contexts. In the United States, Samoan community workers insisted that the parents need to be taught another approach, the American way. In educating parents about the need for a form of assimilation, however, Samoan community workers kept invoking Samoan ideological assumptions, such as the importance of respecting certain hierarchies. Ultimately, Samoan community workers were re-figuring how compulsion and choice are supposed to function in social contexts, mixing Samoan cultural assumptions with neoliberal government expectations. This fusion was not at the level of the content of what might count as compulsion or choice. Rather, Samoan community workers were recommending that their clients reflexively fashion a different relationship to cultural orders, one which enabled culture to be a choice.

I address how Samoan community workers create an account of choice and culture that is compatible with neoliberal assumptions, but not the same. This opens a path for understanding one of the ways by which cultural difference affects people's encounters with government bureaucracies and other

institutions. To engage with their clients, Samoan community workers had to fashion a rhetoric of assimilation that acknowledged and legitimated two contradictory ways of carving up the world. Both neoliberal and Samoan and neither, Samoan community workers counseled a new reflexive relationship to social orders.

In practice, this focus on the generation gap as a cultural gap draws attention away from connections made possible by what Nina Eliasoph terms a “sociological imagination.” (Eliasoph 1998). The dilemmas between parents and children could be understood as the consequences of larger sociological forces. Yet economic inequalities, bureaucratic racism or other large-scale factors are all overlooked by the community workers’ social analysis as they focus on how to re-frame the ways in which culture, and in particular Samoan culture, engenders choice and compulsion. In these moments, an anthropological imagination--a focus on cultural differences and their consequences--undercuts a sociological imagination—a focus on the connections between the personal and the political.

I have been focusing on how assimilationist explanations can allow people to re-configure their relationship to social order, particularly a Samoan social order, by offering a self-referential perspective that enables Samoan community workers to portray identity as a choice. In many ways, what I have been describing is not the experience of migration from a Samoan perspective, but one of the ways by which people construct themselves as migrants. In the process, differences between (independent) and American Samoa become less salient. By envisioning Samoa as this unified haven, this counterpoint to the United States’ unpredictable multiculturalism, Samoan community workers are able to approach a generation gap as a cultural gap. They are not only experimenting with different relationships to social orders, they are positing

their clients and themselves as Samoan first and foremost, and as American more grudgingly. Part of the work of constructing choice is also constructing what it means to be a migrant.

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Notes

¹ See Gershon 2001 for a more detailed analysis of Samoan migrants' experiences with government funding.

² In 1997, Western Samoa officially changed its name to Samoa. For the sake of clarity, in this paper I will refer to (independent) Samoa.

³ Migrants from (independent) Samoa frequently moved to American Samoa and aligning themselves with their American Samoan relatives before traveling to the United States.

⁴ This was a recent high school graduate who decided she wanted to go to university in New Zealand instead of the United States, and was able to do so because her aunt lived in Wellington.

⁵ See Ong (2003) for ethnographic examples in which social workers' practices emerge seamlessly out of neoliberal ideology.

⁶ My language in this article will reflect this particular nostalgia. Rather than distinguishing between (independent) and American Samoa in my general discussion, I am referring to Samoa as a unified territory in much the same way that my interlocutors in the field would.

⁷ Douglas Drozdow St. Christian (1997, p. 33) argues that in Samoa people describe the *fa'asamoa* as a similar utopic possibility. "While *Fa'a Samoa* is spoken of as a totalizing

code, it is a code which is sought after or pursued, rather than adhered to or obeyed. It is, as one informant put it to me, " a Samoan's dream of what Samoa should be", a process of desire, rather than a fixed standard of regulation."

⁸ Both American and (independent) Samoa are far more multicultural than Samoan migrants will describe.

⁹ An exception to this is university students who took courses on Pacific ethnography.

¹⁰ Alessandro Duranti (1994: 100-101) discusses how Samoan orators present this idealized totality at the beginning of a formal speech.

¹¹ While people raised outside of Samoa were often accused of being *fia-palagi* and *fia-poto*, they too had moments when they criticized other Samoans for being inappropriately Samoan, for being Fobs (Fresh Off the Boat) or freshies. I was especially captivated by the term Fob as a criticism, because when I first heard it being used, it was often evoked in conversations in a way which from my perspective seemed contradictory. My interlocutors raised outside of Samoa would be explaining to me how much they valued being Samoan, and how important this was for them as an identity – a conversation that appears to be an occupational hazard for field workers studying Samoanness. They might then start describing situations in which they felt as though they possessed less than adequate cultural knowledge to understand how to behave properly or speak properly in a given Samoan context. As the conversation gradually shifted to talking about people, these same people would use the term Fob pejoratively, although, if talking about a family member, with a certain amount of affection. I would be puzzled—people were telling me how they wished they understood their Samoan

culture better, and then would be criticizing as inept and ineffectual precisely the people who had the knowledge they supposedly desired. When I asked one friend about this, pointing out to her that this seemed a bit contradictory, she agreed. She said that this had always bothered her, because people who used the term Fob were criticizing their own parents and older relatives implicitly, since all their relatives had to learn how to manage when they first migrated. In addition, they were criticizing people who had no way of knowing better, who had just arrived from Samoa and didn't know any better. I should also record that my friend then proceeded to tell me that sometimes her friends would tell her how fobby she was, largely because of the way she dressed (such as wearing hot pink pig-shaped bedroom slippers when she went shopping). Acting like a Fob, or being fobby, is not an accusation reserved only for recent migrants (or even Samoan-born). It can refer to any behavior in a *palagi* context in which the person acted according to Samoan assumptions or principles, and thus acted inappropriately or appeared out of place. Intriguingly, both those raised outside of Samoa and Samoan-raised share a common assumption when they criticize someone for being a Fob or *fia-palagi* – each group is criticizing someone's failure to conform to contextual expectations of appropriate behavior, failures which emerge out of not knowing the correct way to behave.

¹² See Gershon 2000 for a more detailed account of ritual exchanges and migrant ambivalences towards participating in these exchanges.

¹³ Ochs describes how child-care responsibilities are often distributed among a wide range of care givers, but heavily placed upon older siblings. Adults will monitor

children's play, but from a distance. Ochs writes: "When the infant is several months old, he or she is left for periods of time with one or more siblings. These older siblings may bring their charges with them to other activities in the village, for example to watch a game or to visit with friends. At four or five in the afternoon, the village is dotted with groups of children holding their younger sibs on their laps or straddled on their hips." (Ochs 1988, p. 80) A great deal of children's interaction, and hence knowledge transmission, takes place between agetates and siblings.

¹⁴ The Office of Samoan Affairs, where I spent the majority of my time, received outside assistance and funding from three sources—Asian/Pacific Island Hotline, the Juvenile Probation department through its IHBS (intensive home-based supervision) program, and the San Francisco school system. The Samoan Community Development Center was not as youth-oriented, partially because it received an CDBG grant to help Samoan migrants find housing. This organization also was funded by an MOCYF grant, (Mayor's Office of Children, Youth and Their Families grant—begun under Mayor Agnos) which also encouraged a focus on youth. Soul'd Out, a third Samoan organization in San Francisco, was a church-based organization whose primary activity was providing youth with extra-curricular activities such as sports and Polynesian dance performances. While they were not able to receive city funds during 1998 (partially, but not solely, because Soul'd Out were a religious organization), this organization had regular luaus, fund-raising events in which they offered the paying audience a Samoan dinner and a student performance consisting of dances inspired by various Pacific Islands.

¹⁵ For a more detailed account of these training sessions or the role of these Samoan community workers as cultural brokers, see Gershon (in press).

¹⁶ This was not the case in the churches I attended in New Zealand. There, any older person was entitled to discipline those who were younger.

¹⁷ While using culture to advocate for new forms of discipline was often a successful explanation for the parents, this was not as effective an explanation for the children. As one case worker told me after a grueling session:

The boy fails to understand why his father did this to all of them regardless of his upbringing and the culture. If he was going to be that mean, why have them in the first place. He said that his parents are using the culture as an excuse to their own meanness and stupidity. The boy insisted that he is not buying into this culture concept of discipline.

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