

## Children of Empire: Rereading Katherine Mansfield's 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' (1912)

*Roslyn Jolly, University of New South Wales, Australia*

### *Abstract*

Katherine Mansfield's story of a white (Pakeha) child kidnapped by Maori women and taken to their community is formally distinguished by its creation of a 'naïve' perspective on colonialism through the use of a young child as the narrative focalizer. The story illuminates and problematizes the historical question of the place of children in empire. With reference to works by Stevenson and Ballantyne, this essay discusses the relation between Mansfield's short story and the nineteenth-century tradition of imperial adventure fiction featuring child protagonists. It additionally compares the childhood perspective on colonialism offered by Mansfield with the 'authorized' perspectives presented in imperial literature specifically produced for child readers by publishing outlets such as the Religious Tract Society. Mansfield's story, it will be seen, unsettles a hegemonic tradition of using children to filter an 'innocent' perspective on the colonial other. The question of the other is the major theoretical issue explored in this story, which explores the dynamic of 'othering' in an imperial context as a two-way, mutually determining process. Pearl is as exotic to her Maori hosts as they are to her. By leaving unresolved the question of the kidnappers' motives, the story presents empire as an indeterminate space of mutual fear and desire between colonizers and colonized.

A white (Pakeha) child is taken from her home by two Maori women, for purposes unknown. A little girl enjoys a day out as the guest of a local indigenous community. Katherine Mansfield's New Zealand story, 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped,'<sup>1</sup> creates meaning in the space between these two ways of viewing the events it recounts. Formally distinguished by its use of a young child as the narrative focalizer, the story offers an artfully naïve perspective on an inter-racial encounter, and in the process unsettles some of the basic ideological underpinnings of colonialism.

Both the narrative mode of the story and the thematics of its plot function to illuminate and problematize the question of the place of children in empire. Mansfield's use of a very young child as the narrative focalizer gives her narration a directness of impression and apparent

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://modjourn.org/render.php?id=1159896242992466&view=mjp\\_object](http://modjourn.org/render.php?id=1159896242992466&view=mjp_object).

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ideological innocence, which allow her to express an attitude of romantic primitivism towards Maori culture. The romanticization of the Maori characters, as they are seen from the child's point of view, may be criticized as a politically simplistic response on Mansfield's part to the problem of imperialism. However, the status of 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' as an imperial short story is complicated by its engagement with two historical contexts, the tradition of colonial adventure fiction and the discourse of child rescue. These contexts were pertinent to both the imperial centre, where Mansfield wrote this story, and the colonial margin of which she wrote; indeed, they formed part of the ideological glue that held Britain's world-wide empire together in the early twentieth century. Mansfield's diminutive tale of a little girl's adventure playfully subverts ideas about freedom, crime, guardianship and education that were expressed in adventure fiction and child-rescue discourse, and which informed contemporary conservative thinking about childhood and empire. Hegemonic conceptions of the role of the white child as a supporter and stabilizer of imperial power structures are further unsettled by Mansfield's exploration of the emotions the settler child and her indigenous hosts provoke in each other. Taking into account the feelings of the reader as well as those of the characters, my analysis concludes that the child-centred narrative of 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' presents empire as an indeterminate space of mutual fear and desire between colonizers and colonized.

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Perhaps because of its stylistic simplicity and New Zealand subject matter, 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' long attracted little critical attention. In the first book-length study of Mansfield's fiction, published in 1952, Sylvia Berkman was crisply dismissive, placing 'Pearl Button' among those of Mansfield's stories that 'require only a glance' rather than those that are 'fruitful for examination', and offering the qualified praise that '[w]hat charm it has springs from the investment in fresh and exact detail'. Berkman did, nevertheless, set the agenda for the mainstream of critical response over the next several decades, with a succinct summation of the story's significance as it appeared to her in the mid-twentieth century: "'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped", written in 1910, depicts in symbolic semi-fable the repressive confinement of city

life' (Berkman 1952: 39). A generation later, Kate Fullbrook reframed the story's key concern as 'a child's freedom revoked by adults' (41), identifying this as a subject with extensive antecedents in Romantic literature. Where Berkman implicitly placed Mansfield's story within the tradition of pastoral literature, which exposes and critiques 'the repressive confinement of city life', Fullbrook mapped a romantic primitivism onto the work's pastoral themes, which, she argued, may be understood as expressing a series of binary oppositions: liberty versus enslavement, nature versus civilization, spontaneity versus conformity, and so forth (43).

The story's pastoral-primitivist endorsement of liberty, nature and spontaneity over enslavement, civilization and conformity is in full accordance with the stated editorial values and mission of *Rhythm*, the avant-garde London journal in which it was first published in September 1912. *Rhythm* explicitly identified itself with the 'pure perception' of Bergsonian philosophy and the wildness and simplicity of Fauvist art (Murry 1911: 12). An essay published in the June 1912 issue by John Middleton Murry and Katherine Mansfield, then co-editing the magazine, offered a series of provocative statements about art and society under the title 'The Meaning of Rhythm'. Extolling the freedom of the artist from social norms and constraints, as well as from pre-conditioned modes of thought and perception, Mansfield and Murry proclaimed: 'we measure the reality of things by measuring their freedom' (Mansfield and Murry 1912: 18). 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped', published three months later in the September issue, measures the white society in which Pearl Button was raised as a place of non-freedom, which is life-denying and therefore, in an essential sense, unreal. In the story's first few sentences we learn that Pearl lives in a 'House of Boxes', divided from the world beyond by a 'little gate' (Mansfield 1945: 530): here, the epithet 'boxes' suggests the separation and confinement of the house's inhabitants within box-like compartments, while the reference to the gate both underscores the idea of imprisonment and further indicates exclusion. The sterility of the urban environment is conveyed by the reference to 'street dust' (530). Within this environment, the child is 'all alone' (530). Pearl's home is presented as a place of loneliness and deadening routine; as we learn a little further into the narrative, she has been left by herself while her mother is in the kitchen, 'ironing-because-its-Tuesday' (531).

In contrast, for the reader, and for Pearl, the Maori women who carry the little girl away to their village appear as embodiments of a positive life force. Imperturbably good-humoured, they are 'always smiling' (530), 'clapping their hands' (530, 532), laughing (531, 532, 533) and 'nodding' (531). They seem to be in touch with what John Middleton Murry, in the first issue of *Rhythm*, called 'the essential music of the world' (Murry 1911: 12). Murry, a metropolitan engaged in a philosophical and aesthetic quarrel with his own civilization, conceived of this 'music' in self-consciously primitivist terms as 'the rhythms that lie at the heart of things, rhythms strange to the eye, unaccustomed to the ear, primitive harmonies of the world that is and lives' (Murry 1911: 12). At this time Mansfield, too, saw the rejuvenation of both life and art in the modern era as 'the splendid adventure, the eternal quest for rhythm' (Murry and Mansfield 1912: 20). This articulation of the critical vision she shared with Murry and sought to realize through her editing work on the magazine also stands as a fair summary of the plot of 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped'. The Maori women take Pearl on a splendid adventure, and in the process she discovers some of that energy and harmony which the editors of *Rhythm* magazine associated with things 'strange', 'unaccustomed' and 'primitive' (Murry 1911: 12). During her visit to the Maori village, Pearl temporarily leaves behind the life- and individuality-denying condition of industrial and consumer culture. 'Haven't you got any Houses of Boxes?' she asks the Maori women. 'Don't you all live in a row? Don't the men go to offices? Aren't there any nasty things?' (533).

The use of strong, bright colours throughout 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' aligns the story with the Fauvist art practices extolled by *Rhythm*, while at the same time putting the child's perspective effectively to work in the service of Mansfield's romantic primitivism. Into Pearl's emotionally monochrome world, which has been indicated in the first story's first paragraph, the two Maori women introduce, literally, a spectrum of bright colours. We do not learn straightaway that they are 'dark women' (531), but we are immediately told that '[o]ne was dressed in red and the other was dressed in yellow and green. They had pink handkerchiefs over their heads...' (530). It is part of the child's naïve—that is, imperfectly socialized—perspective that she is more interested in the colour of the women's clothes than in the colour of their skin, and their association with simple, bright colours makes them instantly

attractive to her. This association continues throughout the story, as Pearl later drives with the women in ‘a green cart with a red pony and a black pony’ (532), sees their ‘[p]ink and red and blue washing hung over the fences’, meets their ‘yellow dogs’, and accepts a drink from a ‘green cup’ (533). With the Maori women Pearl also sees for the first time in her life the ‘blue water’ of the ocean (533). Discussing other Mansfield stories, Tracy Miao claims that Mansfield was influenced by Fauvist art theory when she used ‘the idea of childhood seeing’ as a narrative technique (Miao 2014: 144). Mansfield’s use of colour in ‘How Pearl Button was Kidnapped’ bears this out, as Pearl’s attraction to bright, simple colours gives verisimilitude to the narrative method (for it is likely that a very young child would notice and be drawn to bright colours), while at the same time creating a Fauvist palette for the story, which contributes to its endorsement of the primitive and the natural.

As with colour, Mansfield uses food in the story to align a realistic sense of what young children notice and appreciate with her project of making the Maoris and their world attractive to the reader as well as to Pearl. References to food enable Mansfield to present the Maori village as a kind of Garden of Eden, where Pearl finds ready and abundant nourishment. Eating is like a game: one man ‘pulled a great big peach out of his pocket and set it on the floor, and flicked it with his finger as though it were a marble. It rolled right over to her’ (532). There is no need to ask for permission to enjoy the peach—when Pearl asks, ‘Please can I eat it?’, the question simply elicits laughter, clapping of hands and the gift of another piece of fruit. Here, children are also allowed to get messy. Pearl is very frightened when juice from the peach runs ‘all down her front’, as she fears a reprimand or a punishment, but one of the women tells her ‘[t]hat doesn’t matter at all,’ simply ‘patting her cheek’ (532). The supply of food seems inexhaustible. As if by magic, for its preparation is unobserved by Pearl, more food appears later when she is hungry. ‘She ate meat and vegetables and fruit and the woman gave her milk out of a green cup’ (533). In this sentence, Mansfield’s use of the stylistic device called *polysyndeton*—the inclusion of multiple co-ordinating conjunctions where normal usage would employ commas—conveys the sense of an unending abundance. Linda Pillière has remarked, with reference to another child-focalized Mansfield story, ‘Sun and Moon’, that ‘[t]he preponderance of co-ordination as opposed to subordination [at a grammatical level] means that all the information

is presented as being equally important' (Pillière 2001: 151), and she argues that this linguistic practice is characteristic of 'a child's mind style' (Pillière 2001: 143). Mansfield's use of this stylistic feature in the narration of 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' functions as a marker of the child's point of view, separating her 'mind style' from that of the adult reader, while at the same time effectively communicating Pearl's wonder at the nutritive richness of the Maori way of life, in contrast to the time-poor and possibly love-starved upbringing offered by her mother.

Along with bright colours and plentiful food, small furry animals tend to appeal to young children. The story contains no information about whether Pearl interacted with the 'yellow dogs' in the Maori village, but the narrative does include similes that associate the Maoris with domestic animals. Riding in the cart to the village, Pearl finds that '[t]he woman was warm as a cat, and she moved up and down when she breathed, just like purring' (532). At the Maori village Pearl sees babies 'rolling about in the gardens like puppies' (533). Purring cats and playing puppies pose no threat to a small child, but instead offer joy and childish pleasure: this is the benign face of the animal realm, from the human point of view. The association of the Maoris with these animals at the level of simile within the Pearl-focalized narration is in keeping with the child's point of view, while also enabling Mansfield to continue her alignment of indigenosity with the natural world, an association begun with the 'big flax basket of ferns' that each of the women carries on first coming into Pearl's sight (530).

The women take Pearl on a journey from an urban to a rural environment—'[t]hen the country came' (532)—and they introduce her to the ocean, a 'great big piece of blue water ... creeping over the land' (533). Mansfield's adherence to the child's perspective estranges both experiences: as Pearl sees it, the country comes to her, rather than the other way around, and the ocean cannot be named, only described (another example of Murry's 'pure perception' [Murry 1911: 12]). By presenting from Pearl's point of view what is unfamiliar to her, Mansfield defamiliarizes these objects of Pearl's perception for the reader as well. This turning of the ordinary into something extraordinary reinforces the pastoral-primitive value system of the story, in which the natural world appears not merely preferable to the manmade world, but truly wondrous and almost magical.

Pearl's experience of nature when she is with the Maoris is intensified by the fact that with them she goes about barefoot, which enables her to have direct sensory contact with grass, sand and seawater. The removal of her shoes is part of a larger process of undressing that progressively frees the child from the constraints of European clothing. One of the first things Pearl notices about the Maori women is that '[t]hey had no shoes and stockings on' (530). Over the course of the story the women also remove clothing from Pearl, so that she more closely resembles them and their 'little naked babies' (533). One of the women 'took off her hair ribbon and shook her curls loose' (531). Later, '[t]hey took off her shoes and stockings, her pinafore and dress. She walked about in her petticoat and then she walked outside with the grass pushing between her toes' (533-34). As a European child, Pearl had been used to rules about clothing and the need to keep it clean. So, when she joined the Maori people sitting on the dusty floor of their 'log room' (531), '[s]he carefully pulled up her pinafore and dress and sat on her petticoat as she had been taught to sit in dusty places' (532). But by the end of the story she experiences her liberation from clothing and the rules concerning it as a release from constriction and restraint. Playing barefoot on the beach, she digs in the sand, which is like 'mud pies' (534); she also enjoys paddling in the warm water, an entirely novel experience for her.

Pearl's movement towards a state of undress has distinct pastoral and primitivist—as well as colonial—associations. The biblical association of nakedness with prelapsarian innocence and shamelessness in Genesis 2-3, like the nakedness of the classical Greek heroes in the mythical Isles of the Blest, contributed to the tradition of European pastoral literature and art that identified absence of clothing with absence of sin, artifice and dissimulation. Some eighteenth-century European travellers to the Pacific, influenced by the ideas of the French *philosophes*, used this pastoral perspective to frame their view of the peoples of the Pacific. During the nineteenth century, though, an opposing missionary viewpoint condemned native nakedness as evidence of being uncivilized and unsaved. Any relaxation of European standards of dress could be regarded as indicating a loss of racial identity, with the 'state of undress [becoming] a sign of the erasure of boundaries between ... the civilized and the uncivilized' (Colley 2004: 55). As Ann Colley argues, for Europeans in the Pacific, clothing, and in particular shoes, functioned as

a 'symbolic boundary between the vulnerable flesh and the alien land'; removal of that boundary could be seen as 'going native' or succumbing to 'cultural contagion' (55). On the other hand, in the Pacific paintings of Paul Gauguin, a precursor of the Fauve art movement favoured by *Rhythm* magazine, nakedness or partial undress signified a release from the deadening artificiality of modern European society and a return to primitive freedoms and energies – the same artistic program announced in *Rhythm* and followed by Mansfield in 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped'.

In keeping with this romantic primitivism, the story shows that for Pearl there is 'nothing to hurt' (534) at the Maori village or on the beach it adjoins. Indeed, the only thing Pearl has to fear, it turns out, is the force of civilization coming to reclaim her:

Suddenly the girl gave a frightful scream. The woman raised herself and Pearl slipped down on the sand and looked towards the land. Little men in blue coats—little blue men came running, running towards her with shouts and whistlings—a crowd of little blue men to carry her back to the House of Boxes. (534)

Police or soldiers have been dispatched to recover the 'kidnapped' child, but their rescue mission seems more like the recapture of a fugitive than the release of a captive. As their irruption into her idyll shatters the feelings of peace and joy Pearl has experienced with the Maori, her fear casts the men, and possibly the society they represent, as threatening. At the same time, her childish perspective estranges and diminishes these figures of authority so that they seem faintly ridiculous, like toy soldiers or mischievous folkloric agents. The ending of the tale foreshadows Bertha's exclamation in Mansfield's later story, 'Bliss': 'How idiotic civilisation is!' (Mansfield 1945: 92).

Mansfield's use of a child focalizer in 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' is a tool that allows her to enunciate a seemingly straightforward program of romantic primitivism. The story expresses Mansfield's alienation from the Pakeha culture in which she was raised, and presents the Maori way of life as an antidote to the sterility, mechanism and commodification of modern European civilization. But what is the wider value of this as a response to British imperialism in New Zealand? Does the story do more than simply communicate Mansfield's personal disdain for colonial society? Anna Snaith has recently characterized 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' as an 'anti-



colonial celebration of Maori over settler society' (Snaith 2014: 127), thereby adding a post-colonial layer to, while retaining the essential insights of, the primitivist reading put forward a generation ago by Kate Fullbrook and the pastoral interpretation offered two generations ago by Sylvia Berkman. But Snaith also sounds a note of criticism about the political meaning of Mansfield's romantic primitivism: 'The fairy-tale narrative participates, then, in romanticized depictions of Maori culture: a primitive, childlike community disregarding of European-derived social laws and conventions' (2014: 124). According to this reading, Mansfield's use of a child's perspective in her narrative has achieved little more politically than an infantilization of the objects of Pearl's regard, the Maoris themselves, as 'a primitive, childlike community' (Snaith 2014: 124).



Snaith's reading exemplifies the current awareness in critical responses to 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' of the need to include race as well as place in any analysis of the story's social critique, and then to examine the power relations underlying its constructions of racial identity. I suggest that interpretation of 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' as an imperial short story can be further enriched by consideration of the literary and historical contexts that shaped contemporary understandings of the place of children in the British Empire. These are contexts that the story both engages with and reacts against, adding historical specificity and tonal nuances to its exploration of the relation between childhood and empire.

The first context to be considered is a literary one: the genre of Victorian and Edwardian colonial adventure stories written for (usually male) children. The genre was created in the 1840s and 1850s with tales by Marryat, Kingston and Ballantyne, and developed in the work of a host of popular writers from the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of whom G. A. Henty and H. Rider Haggard are now the best remembered. These 'books for boys' embodied a clear ideological formation, which connected chivalrous masculinity and muscular Christianity with a romance of empire (Jolly 2006: 89). They performed the cultural work of inspiring successive generations of youth to join in what was presented as an attractive and exciting imperial enterprise

(Edmond 1997: 144). They also served to justify and promote the work of Christian missions overseas, and, increasingly, to reinforce racial differences and hierarchies.

The presence of Christian evangelism at the levels of both story and narrative discourse is a notable feature of colonial adventure fiction. *The Coral Island* (1858), which is widely regarded as 'the ideal type of the nineteenth-century boys' adventure story' (Edmond 1997: 145), is relentlessly pro-missionary in its depiction of a post-contact but largely pre-colonial Pacific (Jolly 2006: 84). It exemplifies 'the convergence of the adventure and conversion narratives' (Edmond 1997: 147) that would become a hallmark of the genre. Alliance with a sincere and effective English missionary confers moral and cultural authority upon Ballantyne's boy-adventurers. Conversely, missions were able to draw upon the pleasures of the adventure story-form to explain and advertise their work to young readers both in Britain and in the colonies. Similarly, Morrison argues that from the 1880s to the 1930s in New Zealand 'secular pedagogy increasingly co-opted religious imagery and language to bolster notions of national and imperial citizenship. In turn, religious pedagogy co-opted imperial rhetoric to draw children into what might be called a form of Christian imperialism' (Morrison 2010: 320; see also Beets 2003: 184-85). Religious Tract Society publications such as the early Edwardian *Adventures in the South Pacific* by One Who Was Born There borrowed excitement from the adventure genre with chapter titles such as 'The Pioneer', 'A Narrow Escape' and 'In Chase of the Murderers', while overtly propagandizing for Christianity and against native religion (n.d.: 72, 216-28).

Imperial adventure fiction set in New Zealand used local references, including the so-called Maori Wars over land ownership and political sovereignty in the 1840s and 1860s, to support the genre's agenda of promoting Christianity and European civilization through British conquest and settlement. W. H. G Kingston's *Holmwood; or, the New Zealand Settler* (1868) and *Waihoura; or, the New Zealand Girl* (1872) depicted interactions between British emigrants and Maori through a narrative arc of conversion from savagery to civilization, copiously decked out with evangelical explication and persuasion. G. A. Henty's, *Maori and Settler: A Story of the New Zealand War* (1891) is a more militaristic story in which native resistance to colonization is subdued by arms rather than by moral example, but the narrative trajectory arrives at

a similar endpoint: the successful establishment of peaceful and prosperous English colonial settlements from which Maori may benefit to the extent that they accept their Anglo-Christian destiny (Beets 2003: 185-90, Clark 2009: 109-57). These and a host of other New Zealand-set adventure stories by less well-known authors propagated the image of the white settler child as ‘possessor, dispenser, and rejuvenator of the blessings of British imperial civilization’ (Beets 273), while representing an inferior Maori culture with either paternalistic concern or outright distaste.

Kidnapping was a popular theme and plot device in Pacific and New Zealand-set adventure fiction. The young English protagonists of Kingston’s *Waihoua*, Harry and Lucy Pemberton, are kidnapped by one group of Maori before being aided in their escape and return to settler society by another group of settler-friendly Maori. Their captors carry axes and exhibit ‘sinister features and fierce looks’ (Kingston 1872: 106), ‘which too clearly indicated their cruel designs’ (Kingston 1872: 111). Kingston’s earlier book *Holmwood; or, the New Zealand Settler* also contains a kidnapping plot, as do Emilia Marryat’s *Amongst the Maoris* (1875), G. A. Forde’s *Across Two Seas* (1894) and William Satchell’s *The Greenhouse Door* (1914). In each case, the captured European child or youth needs to be saved from concubinage or murder at the hands of remorseless natives. In *Adventures in the South Pacific*, the islanders’ propensity for kidnapping is rendered even more horrific by its association with cannibalism, and presented as even more depraved when its victims are family members and neighbours. ‘This child and the others have been seized for the purpose of converting them into food,’ explains the island ‘king’ to the narrator’s missionary father. ‘They have been eaten; but I think it most likely it is their own relatives who have done this thing!’ (n.d.: 74). Further instances of kidnapping and cannibalism practised by South Sea Islanders, not against Europeans but against their own friends and relations, reinforce the book’s negative depiction of unredeemed natives. As Shirley Lindenbaum argues, allegations of cannibalism serve as discursive weapons against ‘those we wish to defame, conquer, and civilize’ (Lindenbaum 2004: 491) and the figure of the cannibal functions rhetorically ‘to establish difference and construct racial boundaries’ (Lindenbaum 2004: 493). The ideological underpinnings of the cannibal trope align with the colonizing agenda that imperial adventure fiction supported.

'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' overturns almost every element of the ideological formation that underlies the Victorian and Edwardian genre of juvenile colonial adventure fiction. To begin with, the arc of conversion is reversed. Instead of the Maori being converted to European ways of civilization, commerce and Christianity, the European child is adopted into indigenous culture, which she enthusiastically embraces. Whereas Ballantyne and Marryat endowed white child characters with the capacity to educate, enlighten and evangelize indigenous adults, Mansfield restores the tutelary function of adulthood to the Maori women. 'We got beautiful things to show you,' (Mansfield 1945: 531) they tell the Pakeha child, and they teach her important lessons about the world, such as that the sea 'stays in its place' (533). In the women's company, Pearl finds occupation and purpose missing from her 'civilized' life. Instead of spending her time alone, swinging aimlessly on a gate while her mother is in the kitchen 'ironing-because-its-Tuesday' (531), she joins in the activities of the villagers, helping to dig in the sand for shellfish, which are collected for food. Far from being 'demoralized' (*Adventures*, n.d.: 52) by immersion in Maori culture, she is introduced to valuable new experiences of nature, occupation and community.

The story teases its readers by playing with the idea of 'treacherous natives' (Henty 1891: 254), which was a marked feature of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century adventure narratives set in the Pacific and New Zealand. '[O]ne doesn't seem able to trust the natives in the slightest' (Henty 1891: 241), says Wilfred, the boy-hero of Henty's *Maori and Settler*. The narrator of *Adventures in the South Pacific* recalls being warned by an old missionary not to believe the positive depictions of islanders created by early European explorers of the region.

'Those sailors only saw the outside. All that amiability, and gentleness, and softness of manners there spoken of was real enough, as far as outside show went; but had they dwelt amongst them for years, as I did, they would have discovered that those seemingly innocent, happy islanders were stained with crimes as black, and in most other respects were as wicked as any of the rest of our unhappy fallen race.' (Henty 1891: 217)

Mansfield's contemporaries, primed by her story's title to anticipate an instance of 'native treachery' similar to those so often represented in colonial adventure fiction, would most likely have expected something bad to happen to Pearl Button in the course of the narrative. Indeed, to

read the story for the first time is an exercise in deferred anxiety. Repeatedly—when the women entice Pearl away from her home, when ‘[a] man came into the room with a long whip in his hand ... [and] shouted something’ (532), when the Maori remove the little girl’s clothes – the reader faces the possibility that this is the moment when the story’s mood will darken, when a crime will be committed. But that never happens. Overturning one of the darkest European fantasy-fears about the Pacific, there is no cannibal plot. The Maoris do not eat Pearl, but feed her. (Mansfield’s use of the characteristic co-ordinating syntax of her child-focalizer even creates a momentary ambiguity in the narrative – ‘She ate meat and vegetables and fruit and the woman ...’ (533)—cheekily suggesting the possibility of the white child eating the adult Maori, instead of the other way around.) In a moment of comic anti-climax, the man with the whip turns out only to proposing a cart ride to the coast; he shouts with enthusiasm, not hostility. Clothes are removed simply to make movement easier.

When the catastrophe finally occurs, it is heralded in the melodramatic language of the adventure tale: ‘Suddenly the girl gave a frightful scream’ (534). Once again, though, generic expectations are reversed. It is not the sight of dark bodies and tattooed faces that causes the little girl to scream, but rather the appearance of the ‘little blue men’ who represent European civil authority. At the climax of Henty’s *Maori and Settler*, young English pioneers who have been kidnapped or besieged by Maori are rescued by civilian militias. In Mansfield’s story, in contrast, the white men sent to reclaim Pearl from the Maoris do not save the day, but spoil it.

A story suggesting such a thing cut against the grain of assumptions, widespread at the time of Mansfield’s writing, that the children of the British Empire needed to be safeguarded against moral and racial degeneration. Historians Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel call the expression of these assumptions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ‘child rescue discourse’. I suggest that this discourse constitutes a second context against which Mansfield’s story may profitably be read. Swain and Hillel argue that ‘the child rescue movement understood itself as central to the social or civilising mission’ of the British both at home and abroad (Swain and Hillel 2010: 79). The movement encompassed institutions dedicated to housing and educating ‘waifs and strays’ within Britain (Ballantyne n.d.: 206), emigration schemes for the resettlement of

British children in the colonies, and colonial practices of relocating children deemed to be at risk in their home environments. As future citizens of empire, British children, settler children, and to some extent indigenous children (especially if partly white) were seen as resources to be managed and safeguarded as well as souls to be saved. Child rescuers believed that there was a moral imperative to remove neglected or abused white children from their neglectful or abusive parents, in order to place them in more appropriate familial or institutional settings. They similarly considered themselves justified in removing non-white children from familial and communal contexts they regarded as dangerous or degrading. They also took for granted that white children who had somehow found themselves under the care (or abuse) of non-whites must be restored to their proper place within colonial society. For, Swain and Hillel argue from their analysis of British, Australian and Canadian evidence, '[t]he protection to which the child was entitled was mediated, in practice if not in principle, by race. In the colonial child rescue literature, the threat of the alien 'other' sat alongside that posed by alcohol or vice' (Swain and Hillel 2010: 93). Although New Zealand is not included in Swain and Hillel's survey of the child rescue movement, the ending of Mansfield's story, with its mass influx of men in uniform sent out to recover one little girl, bears out their claim that '[t]he white child threatened with the loss of racial privilege attracted extraordinary rescue efforts' (Swain and Hillel 2010: 88)—efforts that Mansfield's story mocks as disproportionate and misguided.

Mansfield's mockery of white authority in 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' contrasts with the attitudes towards colonial child-rescue displayed in a near-contemporary New Zealand-set children's story. John Finnemore's 'The Story of Epuni and Amohia, the Little Maories' was part of a short story collection titled *The Empire's Children* (1906). The British writer Finnemore was a prolific author of children's fiction, much of which belonged to the genre of the imperial adventure tale. In *The Empire's Children*, he offered his child readers 'sketches of youthful life in some of the great countries which constitute our empire', including stories set in Canada, Africa and Australia. 'The Story of Epuni and Amohia' is a New Zealand tale of child rescue, which takes for granted the necessity for paternalistic European intervention in indigenous affairs. In this story, an English settler, Mr Seaton, meets two orphaned Maori children who have run away from their community, where they

have been the victims of physical abuse. The children are also seeking redress for their mistreatment by two itinerants on the fringes of European society, a white ‘sundowner’ and his ‘half-breed’ accomplice (Finnemore 1906: 131). Mr Seaton’s solution is to drive off these latter harassers—the Maori community is simply ignored—and give the children a home on his property, not with his own family, but with his indigenous labourers. As he tells his wife, ‘we’ll find them a corner somewhere, if it’s only to keep up their faith in us British’ (Finnemore 1906: 145). The story expresses the belief that the colonizers have a duty to look after the colonized, to the point of raising their children when they are incapable of doing so themselves (Beets 2003: 278-79). At the same time it assumes that different races should not live too closely together – the Maori children are offered a home under the protection of the British settler, but not in the same physical space occupied by his own family.

In a gesture that would have shocked some of its first readers, ‘How Pearl Button was Kidnapped’ reverses the hegemonic thinking expressed in Finnemore’s story. It does so in two ways. First, it presents close interracial contact as enjoyable and beneficial for both Maori and Pakeha. Secondly, it explores the possibility that Maori adults might feel it was their duty to intervene in the affairs of a European family, for the benefit of the child. Could a white child be conceived as better off in the care of ‘natives’ than under the protection of their own race? Swain and Hillel cite an example from nineteenth-century Australia of a piece of satirical journalism, which proposed that the local Aboriginal people would have made better parents than a drunken white mother who allowed her baby daughter to be burned to death. However, they interpret the rhetorical inversion of ‘savage’ and ‘civilized’ in this article not as a positive endorsement of indigenous culture, but rather as a strategy ‘to shame [the baby’s] parents and others like them who had sunk so low that such a comparison could be drawn’ (Swain and Hillel 2010: 98). ‘How Pearl Button was Kidnapped’, on the other hand, really does suggest that the little white girl is happier and healthier with her Maori ‘kidnappers’ than in her own home. This suggestion opposes the mainstream of early twentieth-century colonial thought, which posited white culture not as a problem in the raising of children, but rather as the solution to indigenous failures in that area.

The indigenous New Zealand author Witi Ihimaera extends Mansfield's critique of the early twentieth-century discourse of child rescue in his short story 'The Affectionate Kidnappers' (1989), a 'modern response' (Ihimaera 1989: 58) to 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped'. The story was published as part of a collection titled *Dear Miss Mansfield*, in which Ihimaera retold and reimagined a series of Mansfield stories from an indigenous point of view. Subtitled *A Tribute to Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp*, Ihimaera's volume pays 'homage' to New Zealand's most famous author (Ihimaera 1989: 9) while at the same time '[i]nserting Mansfield into a contemporary postcolonial politics' (Williams 2007: 334). In his retelling of 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped', Ihimaera attributes explicit child-rescue motivations to the Maori women in their behaviour towards Pearl: 'it made us sad to see her all alone. A tamariki [child] all alone—no good. Especially near a hotel with all those boozers around' (Ihimaera 1989: 111). Ihimaera's version of Pearl Button's story shows the women taking pride in feeding up their apparently undernourished young guest. "It made us feel very happy ... to see that kid eat so much. Too skinny, the Pakeha children, but," she sighed, "that's the Pakeha way" (Ihimaera 1989: 112). Ihimaera's post-colonial rewriting of the story from the point of view of the Maori women thus expands Mansfield's critique of the insufficiencies of Pakeha civilization, especially in relation to the education and care of children.

While Mansfield's use of a child focalizer for her story enables her to express a romantic primitivism that (it may be argued) infantilizes Maori characters and culture, her engagement with the historical contexts of adventure fiction and child rescue discourse has a different result. She uses techniques of parody and reversal to challenge assumptions about imperial superiority and indigenous incapacity that characterized both the genre of adventure fiction and the discourse of child rescue. 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' engages subversively with early twentieth-century hegemonic thinking about the care and education of children in a colonial context, radically proposing that indigenous culture may provide a happier and more beneficial environment for a white child than imported European systems of child-rearing.

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Yet, while a reader may impute specific aims to the Maori characters in 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped', as Ihimaera does, it is important to remember that in Mansfield's text the motivation of the kidnappers is never stated, and remains obscure. We may infer that the women feel sorry for the lonely little girl; we may ascribe motives of philanthropy or curiosity or play to their actions, but ultimately we do not know what they were trying to achieve in removing Pearl from her home, or even whether they know themselves. In this section, I will probe more deeply into the question of character-motivation in the story, and will argue that Mansfield's depiction of the mutual attraction between Pearl and the Maori women uncovers a desire for the 'other' that is experienced on both sides of the colonial encounter, unsettling imperialism's Eurocentric ideology of racial hierarchies.

Many of Pearl's experiences with the Maori women at their village are reminiscent of female-to-female cross-cultural encounters recorded in earlier Pacific contact narratives. At Nanomea in the Ellice Islands, in June 1890, the American traveller Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson (wife of the author Robert Louis Stevenson) found herself both an object of curiosity and an exotic plaything for the local women. She describes how, after exchanging cloth and jewellery with these women, her contact with them became more intimate, as 'they were trying to take my clothes off; finding this stoutly resisted, they turned up my sleeves to the shoulders' (Stevenson 2004: 133). The women then called their menfolk to come and observe this strange creature, as they peeled back her clothes to expose her skin: '[m]y sleeves, in spite of my struggles, were dragged to my shoulders and, to my dismay, my petticoats were whipped up to my knees' (Stevenson 2004: 134). Stevenson's narrative creates a tension similar to that produced in Mansfield's tale, as the reader wonders whether some kind of violation is to follow; but in both instances that tension is quickly defused. The intentions of the women of Nanomea towards their European guest, like those of Mansfield's Maori towards theirs, turn out to be entirely harmless.

Fanny Stevenson's travel narrative bears out the idea expressed in Mansfield's short story, that white females may be infantilized and objectified by their indigenous Pacific hosts. Two of the Nanomea women, Fanny Stevenson writes, 'took possession of me' (Stevenson 2004: 133). Similarly, Pearl Button becomes the passive object of actions performed by the Maori: 'Pearl was carried again' (Mansfield 1945: 532)

and 'Pearl was lifted down and taken into a tiny house' (533). Fanny Stevenson believed she was infantilized and animalized by the native women, claiming that one of them 'was plainly saying to the others, 'She's just like a pickaninny; I would like to have her for a pet,' holding out her arms as she spoke and going through the motions of tossing and caressing a baby' (Stevenson 2004: 133-34). The women are interested in her '[p]ickaninny hands and feet', and the seasoned traveller plays along with her assigned role as a baby, starting to cry when her arms and legs are exposed to the menfolk. In Stevenson's account, the islanders treat her with great affection: 'One woman kissed my feet (the island kiss) and sniffed softly up and down my arms' (Stevenson 2004: 133), but the element of 'taking possession' remains: 'One woman was most anxious that I should stop on the island with her. I really think she had some hope that she might keep me as a sort of pet monkey' (Stevenson 2004: 134).

Fifty-year-old Fanny Stevenson believed that the indigenous women of Nanomea – most of whom would have been her juniors – regarded her as something between a baby and a pet. It is easy to see that the very small, golden-haired girl in Mansfield's story could have presented the same attraction to the Maori women, who treat her as a doll to be undressed, cuddled and played with. In Mansfield's story, the little girl's name, which indicates an item of haberdashery, draws attention not only to her diminutive size, but also to this idea of dressing and undressing a precious plaything. Cherry Hankin has demonstrated, through her reading of their letters, that Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry used real and figurative dolls as mediating objects and channels of desire in their unconventional relationship. In 1915 Murry wrote to Mansfield: 'we were born again in each other, tiny children, pure and shining, with large sad eyes and shocked hair, each to be the other's doll', and Mansfield responded, 'We are still quite babies enough to play with dolls' (qtd. Hankin 1994: 31-32). The lovers played at being children, parents and dolls within a relationship they self-consciously framed as childlike and profoundly anti-social. The relationship of the Maori women with Pearl Button has similar qualities; she is the doll with which they play in a game of 'families' that holds at bay the regulating norms of white society.

But Mansfield also emphasizes the attraction Pearl feels towards the older Maori females, which rebalances their relationship by restoring

agency to the former. The narrative focalized through the child tells us that one of the women ‘was softer than a bed and she had a nice smell – a smell that made you bury your head and breathe and breathe it ...’ (Mansfield 1945: 531). Here, Pearl engages in the ‘sniffing’ (Stevenson 2004: 134) which was a feature of Pacific Island manners, and which Europeans often found comical or embarrassing. After one of the younger women ‘lifted all Pearl’s hair and kissed the back of her little white neck’ (531-32), ‘Pearl felt shy but happy at the same time’ (532). When one of the women showers affection on her, kissing the fingers and dimples of her hand, we are told: ‘Pearl had never been happy like this before’ (533). And towards the end of the story the child herself initiates sensory contact with ‘her’ woman: ‘She was so excited that she rushed over to her woman and flung her little thin arms round the woman’s neck, hugging her, kissing her ...’ (534).

Mansfield connects the emotions that cause Pearl to run to the Maori woman and throw her arms around her with the child’s blissful sensation of feeling ‘a little line of foam’ break over her feet on the beach—a sensation that causes her to exclaim ‘Lovely, lovely!’ (534). This connection may suggest a reading of the story through the lens of post-structuralist psychoanalysis, with a Kristevan ‘semiotic chora’ represented by Maori culture opposing a Lacanian ‘symbolic order’ embodied in Pakeha, colonialist culture. Such an opposition between, on the one hand, an inclusive, nourishing, maternal, natural and nativist realm and, on the other, a punitive ‘law of the father’ that embodies the differentiating and hierarchizing edicts of imperial civilization, offers an attractive way of interpreting the story and would be in line with its overall primitivism. However, it is important to notice that Pearl’s blissful connection with the Maori woman at the end of the story is specifically prompted not by the sensory joy of feeling the line of foam across her feet, but by the intellectual excitement of discovering that when she made a cup of her hands to catch some of the ocean, ‘it stopped being blue in her hands’ (534). This shows that her experience with the Maori has ultimately not been regressive, but educative. The protective maternal realm they provide does not retard the child’s development but enhances it. In their company Pearl becomes wiser, as well as happier.

‘It *is* a funny place’, Pearl says, as she watches dinner being set out on the floor of the ‘tiny house’ (533). A Pakeha Alice in a Maori Wonderland, Pearl functions for Mansfield as a device to provide the

reader with an innocent perspective on an indigenous culture that appears in every way superior to the European one she has temporarily left behind. Pearl's story embodies, as Lorenzo Mari (2013) has argued, a version of Freud's family romance, fulfilling the child's fantasy of discovering an alternative family that is preferable to her biological one. And while we see how exotic and attractive the Maori women's world is to Pearl, we are also able to see that the little white girl with her 'yellow curls' (531) is equally exotic and attractive to them. 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' explores a female-female desire, which is not sexual but familial, operating between races and across generations. The Maori women offer Pearl an experience of emotionally generous and imaginatively nourishing maternal care, to the rich sensuality of which the little girl responds strongly and positively.

The impact of this story derives from the way Mansfield exploits dissonances between the emotions of the reader and those of the characters. Steeped in traditions of colonial adventure fiction, aware of current concerns about child rescue, and primed by the story's title to anticipate a crime, an Edwardian reader is likely to have experienced anxiety about the fate of the little girl. While such fears remain unrealized—and that is the 'twist' of this artful little story—they are part of the experience of reading the text. At the same time, Mansfield makes the reader aware of the passionate mother-child love generated between Pearl and the Maori women. So, while the child-centred narrative of 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' depicts an individually affirming but culturally subversive encounter, at the same time it requires the reader to experience the conflicting forces of fear and desire that have always characterized the engagement between races within a colonial context.

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