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Anxious Beginnings: Mental Illness, Reproduction and Nation Building in 'Prelude' and *Prelude to Christopher*

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Abstract

This article explores relationships between Katherine Mansfield's 'Prelude' (1918) and Eleanor Dark's *Prelude to Christopher* (1934). Mansfield's presence in Australian literary culture of the interwar period, together with Dark's knowledge of her writing, indicates that Dark was influenced, perhaps directly, by 'Prelude' when she wrote *Prelude to Christopher*. Both texts use modernist literary techniques to explore relationships between mental and physical illness and reproduction in the context of emerging feminist politics. The colonial contexts of 'Prelude' and *Prelude to Christopher* impact the treatment of modernist themes by interrogating the socially-prescribed role of woman as childbearer in the nation-building politics of the new colonial nation and its cultural, economic and scientific ideologies. Investigating links between Mansfield and Australian modernist women writers points to the possibility of a regional response to modernism.

Key words: Katherine Mansfield, Eleanor Dark, Australia, modernism, feminism, colonialism, reproduction

Katherine Mansfield's 1918 story 'Prelude' and Eleanor Dark's 1934 novel *Prelude to Christopher* are regarded as signature texts of literary modernism in their respective New Zealand and Australian national

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literatures. This article explores aesthetic and thematic relationships between these texts in the context of Mansfield's impact on Australian literary modernism, particularly among women writers of the interwar period. By considering what Katherine Mansfield, as a New Zealand modernist, may have offered Eleanor Dark that was different to more exclusively metropolitan writers such as Virginia Woolf, this article takes up recent ideas concerning relationships between regionalism and modernism.

'Prelude', published by the Hogarth Press in 1918, is widely regarded as key to Mansfield's development as a modernist writer. Sydney Janet Kaplan argues that the development of *The Aloe* into 'Prelude' 'demonstrates Mansfield's intensified process of technical and conceptual experimentation, the true beginning of her *conscious* sense of a new shape for prose fiction'.¹ She describes Mansfield's innovations in the short story genre, demonstrated in 'Prelude', as 'the "plotless" story, the incorporation of the "stream-of-consciousness" into the content of fiction, and the emphasis on the psychological "moment"'.²

Prelude to Christopher was Eleanor Dark's second published novel and won the Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal in 1934. It is considered one of the earliest works of Australian literary modernism. As Nicole Moore argues, the novel is 'in some ways the most recognisably modernist of Australia's predominantly realist canon of women's writing from the period'.³ Helen O'Reilly states that *Prelude to Christopher* 'upset conventional canons of narrative in the 1930s' and that Dark's rendering of time and memory and her extensive use of visual imagery 'is the associative world of modernism where objects, often trivial or commonplace are used to evoke deeper meaning or messages, or to release floods of memory'.⁴ She notes the novel's distinctly modernist themes and techniques, arguing that it reflects 'a strain of European modernism creeping into Australian writing; its abstract patterning and fractured time series made it strikingly different from Australian novels of social realism'.⁵

The few scholars who have critically examined *Prelude to Christopher* have traced Dark's modernist themes and techniques to Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.⁶ However, significant parallels between 'Prelude' and *Prelude to Christopher*, together with Mansfield's place in Australian literary culture of the 1920s and 1930s, suggest that Mansfield's work also had an impact, and perhaps a direct influence, on Dark's writing. In *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction*, Sydney Janet Kaplan remarks that her argument for Mansfield's significance in modernist literary history 'would not have surprised critics during the

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1920s or 1930s, when Mansfield was widely imitated, discussed, and revered'.⁷ This was certainly the case in Australian literary culture of the interwar period, where Mansfield's fiction, personal writing and notoriety had a considerable presence. An article published in the *Australian Women's Mirror* in 1925, for example, provides a lengthy discussion of Mansfield as among the foremost women fiction writers.⁸ The following year a further article in the same periodical describes her as among the greatest masters of the short story genre and, in what may be considered an early instance of Australia's penchant for claiming New Zealand talent as its own, argues that 'all who were born under the Southern Cross should remember with both gratitude and pride the name of Katherine Mansfield'.⁹ In January 1930 E. J. Brady reflected on his editorship of *The Native Companion*, the Melbourne periodical in which Mansfield first published, and described her as 'a genius who died all too young!'¹⁰

Mansfield's presence in Australian literary culture was due chiefly to the work of Nettie Palmer, Australia's foremost literary critic of the era, and her enthusiasm for Mansfield's writing in all its forms. Palmer lived in London in 1910–11, and then in 1914–15, and her husband Vance worked with A. R. Orage on *The New Age*. Vance and probably also Nettie knew Mansfield through their association with Orage and the guild socialist movement.¹¹ Palmer's reviews of Mansfield's *Journal*, published some years later, demonstrate a thorough knowledge of her stories and an early and insightful appreciation for her determined artistry, her achievement and her impact on the short story genre. Palmer wrote in the *Brisbane Courier*, for example: 'No matter how terrible her struggles were against disease, they were less than those she had with the intractable word and the elusive phrase; and as time went on she was more and more the conqueror'.¹² She strongly praised Mansfield's drive for 'sincerity', describing her in *The Bulletin* as 'a brave and vivid woman, aiming above all else at personal and artistic sincerity'¹³ and writing in the *Brisbane Courier*: 'What Katherine Mansfield really desired was the attainment of sincerity in expression and in life. Her books of short stories, completed and fragmentary both, leave the reader with an impression of vividness without exaggeration, and of courage without bravado'.¹⁴ Palmer's discussion of her stories focuses particularly on 'Prelude', 'The Garden Party' and 'At The Bay', supporting her argument that Mansfield 'found her youth in expression and theme [...] by deciding to base her stories on her own childhood in Maoriland'.¹⁵ She also references Mansfield as a fellow literary critic, valuing her critical insights into modern literature.¹⁶

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In addition to laudatory reviews of her writing in literary and other periodicals and public lectures and readings of her work,¹⁷ Mansfield has an interesting presence in the writing of Australian women writers of the interwar period. In a letter to a London correspondent in April 1933, it is clear that Miles Franklin had a strong knowledge of Mansfield's fictional and personal writing, and her relationship with John Middleton Murry:

K M's pear tree (or the inspiration for that story) is in a friend's garden in Chelsea. K M's life was a sad struggle. I wonder did she love M M or was the fascination that she knew he would give her letters immortality and she lived only for that bit of creative work. [words illegible] was a flickering flame that persisted heroically. She was a minute and sensitive observer.¹⁸

Mansfield also figures as a touchstone of literary excellence in an essay by M. Barnard Eldershaw,¹⁹ in Jean Devanny's lectures in the early 1930s,²⁰ and in her reflective account of working in the Wellington library in the 1920s:

Katherine Mansfield! the exquisite adored. Ah! Here was something different, something close to me, of my own! Perhaps at this same desk, in this same library, this ardent ethereal soul had sat, moved even then, in the green temperate light, to dreaming of the immortal stories which some day she would tell.²¹

Mansfield's life and work were also well known to Eleanor Dark. In a letter to Palmer regarding her completion and publication of *Prelude to Christopher*, Dark discusses Mansfield's letters in the context of illness and isolation:

I can quite understand how worried you must feel about your friend in Switzerland. To be ill quite alone in a strange country must be very dreadful. I've thought sometimes that necessary as I suppose the complete idleness is as a part of the cure, it must be only the very hardest mentalities that can come through it undamaged—I was thinking then of Katherine Mansfield whose letters sounded to me as if she were so ill mentally as well as physically.²²

Dark's reference to Mansfield's letters and her health, in a letter to Palmer about isolation, illness and *Prelude to Christopher*, suggests, at the very least, that Mansfield and her work were contemplated by Dark when she was writing her novel, which addresses these same themes.

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Mansfield's modernist literary techniques and themes, particularly as they are developed in 'Prelude', are reflected in *Prelude to Christopher*. A clear parallel between these texts is the title, the word 'prelude' in each connoting a series of episodes or events leading to the birth of a male child: in 'Prelude' this child is the son that Linda Burnell knows she already carries, and who has been born in the later story 'At The Bay'; in *Prelude to Christopher* the child is the baby Christopher who will be born to Dr Nigel Hendon and his nurse Kay following the suicide of Nigel's wife Linda.²³ In both texts the action takes place over the course of four days. Both writers use dream sequences, moments of semi-consciousness and interior monologue narrative techniques to move their characters back and forward in time, allowing a more comprehensive development of personal histories and thematic concerns. The episodic structure of the texts renders time as fluid and fragmented: 'Prelude' is a series of vignettes, narrated through the consciousness of different characters, the relationship between which is not immediately clear; *Prelude to Christopher*, while more rigidly structured into four individual parts representing the four separate days, similarly refutes linear story-telling in favour of a polyvalent free indirect discourse.²⁴

At the centre of 'Prelude' and *Prelude to Christopher* is a woman named Linda in whom physical and mental illness and anxiety over reproduction converge. In 'Prelude' Mansfield dwells on Linda Burnell's physical weakness and psychological instability, which are linked to her reproductive role and her inability to perform her maternal responsibilities. Linda's physical incapacity is evident during and after the Burnell family's move to the new house, and later in the story is closely linked to her reluctance to have another child, the son her husband Stanley desires: "You know I'm very delicate. You know as well as I do that my heart is affected, and the doctor has told you I may die any moment. I have had three great lumps of children already..."²⁵ Linda's illness also has a psychological dimension, which Mansfield again ties to reproductive anxiety through a dream sequence in which a small bird grows into a baby:

As she stroked it began to swell, it ruffled and pouched, it grew bigger and bigger and its round eyes seemed to smile knowingly at her. Now her arms were hardly wide enough to hold it and she dropped it into her apron. It had become a baby with a big naked head and a gaping birdmouth, opening and shutting. (24)

Linda's reflection on 'this coming alive of things' (27) and Mansfield's repetition of images of growth and swelling reinforce the

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troubled relationship between Linda's psychological condition and reproduction:

They listened, they seemed to swell out with some mysterious important content, and when they were full she felt that they smiled. But it was not for her, only, their sly secret smile; they were members of a secret society and they smiled among themselves. (27)

Linda's fears of 'they' are evident throughout the story, and Mansfield leaves open the question of whether 'they' represent an 'othering' of fears in a form of paranoia or are instead located within Linda herself. Several critics have noted the range of external pressures on Linda's mind and body, over which she has little control: her physical decline; her husband Stanley's desire for more children, and particularly a son; fear of pregnancy and childbirth; and her dread of the unborn children she knows she will bear.²⁶ All relate to Linda's socially-prescribed role as woman, wife and mother.

In *Prelude to Christopher*, anxiety over reproduction is similarly played out in the physical and mental health of the central character, Linda Hendon. The novel opens with a car accident in which Linda's husband Nigel is critically injured, then charts Linda's mental decline over the four days of his hospitalisation until her eventual suicide. Mental illness in the form of 'homicidal tendencies' runs in Linda's family history. Raised by her uncle after her father's certification, Linda is brought up to constantly doubt her own sanity:

she had lived out her stormy, haunted childhood with her uncle's gently-spoken promise of ultimate lunacy peering at her from every shadow, lying in wait for her at every corner; the family tree which he had so painstakingly compiled and so beautifully set out on a great sheet of yellowish parchment, with the names of the 'afflicted' in red ink, appearing like plague-spots here and there...²⁷

Dark writes that her uncle 'had ruined her nerves and her sleep, filled her childhood with terror and mistrust, pushed her frantically-resisting brain a little further along its darker road' (32). The result is that Linda is "always watching herself, always afraid of any impulse that comes to her – mistrustful of her very thoughts before they're formed" (45). Nigel's role as Linda's anchor to mental stability and safety is revealed in a moment of self-doubt shortly after his accident:

She stared at her reflection and her reflection stared back at her, a white mask of hatred and fear. She flung round desperately and faced the empty room. Nigel! Why wasn't Nigel here? Always, always when this fear came choking her, he had been there to act as... As anything she needed. (29)

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Nigel's solution is long periods of rest, linking Linda's mental instability with physical weakness:

Sleep for her after storms like that. Long sleeps of exhaustion, her black hair damp round the temples, her cheeks wet and stained with tears, his hand clutched tightly, as though even into sleep she dared not go without him. (46)

In Nigel's absence Linda's self-doubt becomes acute, leading to her conviction of her madness and her suicide. It is unclear, however, whether her mental decline results from her genetic inheritance or has instead been triggered by her self-doubt. As Nicole Moore argues, *Prelude to Christopher*:

opens the question of whether her eventual mental instability, leading to suicide, has a genetic cause, or has been provoked and reinforced by the very identity given to her by science. She is mad either because of a gene, or because of the fear of this gene.²⁸

Linda's mental instability is tied to reproduction through the theme of eugenics that *Prelude to Christopher* explores. Nigel, a doctor, and Linda, a biologist, are a childless couple in their forties. Dark uses dream sequences and moments of semi-consciousness to move the narrative back in time to the colony of Hy-Brazil that Nigel founded on eugenic principles soon after their marriage. Despite Nigel's eugenicist beliefs, Linda revealed her genetic history only after their marriage:

Nigel began to tremble. He was seeing further; his colony where no one might come who had not been passed by himself and Pen as mentally and physically sound. His children, who were to have grown up with the other children of the colony, learning simple, logical rules of health and conduct, hearing of the world they had left behind as if it were history, a legend of bad days long past . . . (43)

Bound by his love and faith in her essential sanity, Nigel agrees to take Linda to the island colony on the condition that they remain childless. Despite her physical and mental strength on the island, Linda is unable to change his resolution: "I will not carry on a-tainted stock. You're the last; it dies out with you" (91). Nigel later reflects on the wisdom of this choice, suggesting that enforcing Linda's childlessness may itself have driven her mental instability:

when Linda's body, beleaguered by her tormented mind, cried out for a saving maternity; when it asserted its primeval right to bear a child, to feel ruthless lips and fingers like fallen raindrops on its breasts; when

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it promised to yield her, on those completely absorbing emotions, forgetfulness and peace – he had denied it, and turned it back upon itself in helpless pain and frustration. (91)

Linda's interior monologue, which dwells increasingly on suicidal thoughts, confirms the role that childlessness has played in her mental illness:

To be born a woman with a woman's urge for creation – and to have nothing to give to life but sterility and death! You saw yourself before some fantastic judgment-seat, following women who had lived long and fruitfully and left behind them a train of lusty posterity; you saw yourself, a figure of fun with your angular barren body, a figure vaguely repellant with your starved and haunted eyes. (181)

In both texts, Linda's psychological instability and reproductive anxiety are exposed through the image of the house itself, and particularly domestic spaces and interior furnishings. In 'Prelude' the house is configured not as a feminine space but instead as a fiefdom purchased and controlled by the family patriarch, Stanley Burnell. For Linda, the space triggers her fear of things 'coming alive', revealed in the 'curtains and the patterns of stuffs and the fringes of quilts and cushions':

How often she had seen the tassel fringe of her quilt change into a funny procession of dancers with priests attending [...] How often the medicine bottles had turned into a row of little men with brown top-hats on; and the washstand jug had a way of sitting in the basin like a fat bird in a round nest. (27)

Following the dream sequence with the bird, Linda's contemplation of the wallpaper next to her bed similarly uses the language of natural imagery and growth to reinforce her psychological instability and its relationship to her reproductive role:

She turned over to the wall and idly, with one finger, she traced a poppy on the wall-paper with a leaf and a stem and a fat bursting bud. In the quiet, and under her tracing finger, the poppy seemed to come alive. She could feel the sticky, silky petals, the stem, hairy like a gooseberry skin, the rough leaf and the tight glazed bud. (27)

In a strikingly similar passage, Linda Hendon in *Prelude to Christopher* traces the linoleum of her kitchen floor as she contemplates her approaching death:

On the kitchen floor there was a linoleum with a strange and complicated pattern. Circles and triangles lay scattered with apparent aimlessness

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among jagged lines of green and sinuous lines of black. And yet there was an order, a definite scheme. Linda, lying on the floor with her head pillowed on one arm, was tracing the green lines idly with one finger [...] Her tracing finger moved faster over the maze of lines, a faint trembling began to shake her, she found her teeth hard together as they will shut under the strain of some freezing nervousness. (168–9)

In *Prelude to Christopher* the house is the site of Linda's mental decline. A social outcast in the small rural town of Moondoona, there is no place for Linda besides the house and her visits to Nigel's hospital ward. Yet, as with Linda Burnell, it does not have the domestic association of 'home'; she tells Nigel's colleague, Dr Marlow, "I don't like that house" (101).

The climax of both texts is Linda's moment of self-knowledge—of understanding relationships between gender and social performance, and her own inability to fulfil them—that is mediated through contemplation of a powerful image of the self. In 'Prelude' this image is the aloe that grows on the island in the Burnells' driveway, and in *Prelude to Christopher* it is the artist d'Aubert's painting of Linda: both images are simultaneously portrait and landscape, reinforcing the alignment of the natural world with femininity throughout both texts. Linda's first encounter with the aloe repeats the imagery of growth that characterised her dream sequence: 'Linda looked up at the fat swelling plant with its cruel leaves and fleshy stem. [...] The curving leaves seemed to be hiding something; the blind stem cut into the air as if no wind could ever shake it' (34). Observing it later at night, Linda sees the strength and detachment she herself desires:

Looking at it from below she could see the long sharp thorns that edged the aloe leaves, and at the sight of them her heart grew hard.... She particularly liked the long sharp thorns.... Nobody would dare to come near the ship or to follow after. (53)

Linda and the aloe share a need for protection and self-preservation: for the aloe, it is provided by thorns and leaves; for Linda by her emotional detachment from her family. Yet Linda realises that for all their self-defence measures, neither she nor the aloe are able to escape their reproductive role: the aloe has buds, and Linda is already aware of her new pregnancy (54).

In *Prelude to Christopher* Linda Hendon experiences a similar moment of clarity when revealing d'Aubert's painting to Dr Marlow. The painting, *Portrait of Linda*, is both a highly coloured, abstract

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landscape of Hy-Brazil and a portrait of Linda, who watches Dr Marlow's disturbed response:

His heart gave, again, that little thud of shock and revulsion; his eyes remained, only half-believing, on the right background of the picture where, in a tangle of shadow, Linda had suddenly appeared. There like a part of the shade itself she stood; the dim whiteness of her face and hands seemed only other gleams of half-vanished light. Something that might be a tree-trunk partially obscured her so that behind the rioting foreground of crude joy and colour she looked incredibly furtive and apart. Never in his life had anything given him so strong a conception of evil, not as an active malevolence but as an outcast uncleanness. (106)

The painting reveals Linda's isolation on the island and presents her as a force of disruption, of degeneration. After Dr Marlow flees, she sits down to contemplate the painting: 'Queer, she thought, that in this mood she could look at the thing all day long without the quiver of an emotion!' (118). This vision of herself triggers her decision to end her life: 'You painted the prison and the torture, d'Aubert, but you didn't know about the escape' (118).

Both Lindas contemplate escape, both from their socially-prescribed roles as women and from their lives completely. As she lies in bed while Stanley prepares for the working day, Linda Burnell fantasises about leaving the house and family behind:

Her clothes lay across a chair—her outdoor things, a purple cape and a round hat with a plume in it. Looking at them she wished that she was going away from this house, too. And she saw herself driving away from them all in a little buggy, driving away from everybody and not even waving. (25)

Stanley throwing a wet blanket—or towel—on her clothes does not prevent her dreaming of escape again in the evening:

She dreamed that she was caught up out of the cold water into the ship with lifted oars and the budding mast. Now the oars fell striking quickly, quickly. They rowed far away over the top of the garden trees, the paddocks and the dark bush beyond. Ah, she heard herself cry: 'Faster! Faster!' to those who were rowing. (53)

As she realises her inability to escape her social role or to effect change in her life, Linda resigns herself to performing her function as childbearer, regardless of the consequences to her physical and mental health: 'How absurd life was—it was laughable, simply laughable. And why this mania of hers to keep alive at all? For it really was a mania, she thought, mocking and laughing' (54). To Linda, 'mania' has become

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not a desire for escape through death, but instead a willingness to continue living: “What am I guarding myself for so precious?” (54). For Linda Hendon, thoughts about escape result in her actual suicide. Her suicide is prompted not only by her belief that she is declining into madness, but also by her conviction that she has nothing to offer Nigel:

She rose quietly, and as she moved to one side the light fell dimly on his face. She bent and peered at it. She thought that her real passing out of his life was now when she saw him for the last time. She limped softly to the door, saying to herself that nothing of any worth at all went with her out of this room. (161)

Linda interprets her decision to take her own life as a victory:

to her it had always been there, comforting like the feel of a revolver in a dangerous moment, the smell of an anaesthetic in pain, the knowledge of the ace of trumps in her hand!

Enemy, this is my life – mine! And when I can’t protect it from you any longer, I destroy it. I, not you . . . (119)

Mansfield’s ‘Prelude’ and Dark’s *Prelude to Christopher* illustrate different modernist treatments of relationships between illness, anxiety and reproduction, reflecting the passage of time between the texts and Dark’s own interest in eugenics and family experience of mental illness.²⁹ Yet their interrogation of women’s socially-prescribed roles and their use of domestic spaces and powerful images of the self suggest the development of a female modernist aesthetic and politic. Moreover, as a writer who shared a colonial heritage from such a geographically and culturally near place as New Zealand, Mansfield offered Dark insights into modernist aesthetics and ideas that were different from her British and European counterparts and particularly pertinent to her Australian context.³⁰ The colonial contexts in which anxieties over illness, gender and reproduction are played out in these texts are significant because they respond to the colonial politics of ‘nation building’ in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In both texts there is a strong sense that New Zealand and Australia are new nations focused on growth and development, in which women’s social role as childbearer is prescribed not only by the domestic ideology exported by Britain throughout its empire, but also by closer economic and scientific imperatives. By foregrounding relationships between physical and mental illness and reproduction, both ‘Prelude’ and *Prelude to Christopher* register resistance to roles assigned to women in masculine imperial and national projects.

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The narrative of 'Prelude' clearly takes place in a context of aggressive capitalist socio-economic growth. The Burnell family moves to a larger house further away from town, suggesting an increase in income and prestige and a parallel between the growth of the house and the urban area. Stanley's conversation repeatedly turns on his purchase of the house, revealing pride in his commercial prowess and his view of the house as both commodity and status symbol: "'land about here is bound to become more and more valuable . . . in about ten years' time'" (23). Photographs of Stanley's office 'before and after building', together with 'the signed photos of his business friends' adorn the new house (30); his pride in the purchase arises from his perception of gaining a competitive edge over his business associates and friends. Mark Williams argues that Stanley's 'speculative streak is based on his confidence in the colony's future'³¹ and likens him to Mansfield's father, Harold Beauchamp, who was 'representative of a new class of people who were moving rapidly up the scale toward wealth and an affected gentility'.³² As Williams argues: 'In the Burnells' Wellington everything is expanding: houses, property values and, thanks to Stanley's healthy appetites, both Stanley and his wife Linda'.³³

In 'Prelude' the reproductive imperative that accompanies this socio-economic climate—in which men like Stanley thrive—is presented as threatening to women such as Linda. Mary Paul argues that 'one of the important rhetorics of settlement (from the 1840s on) was the exhortation to marry and create a family. Only out of this would national prosperity develop and good habits be inculcated in the citizens of the new nation'.³⁴ Women such as Linda Burnell were expected to bear children for the economic and social improvement of the nation. While Paul argues that 'Prelude' can be seen as an act 'of participation in the emerging discourse about sex in marriage and fertility' among women beginning to take control of their reproductive lives,³⁵ the violent, animal-like imagery Mansfield uses to characterise Stanley exposes the danger of ideologies of capitalist growth and national progress for women. The first time we meet Stanley he is eating a dish of fried chops and praising the meat before he 'pushed back his plate, took a tooth-pick out of his pocket and began picking his strong white teeth' (19). Throughout the story he also devours a bag of cherries—'delicious, so plump and cold, without a spot or a bruise on them' (35)—and carves the Sunday roast:

Burnell ran his eye along the edge of the carving knife. He prided himself very much on his carving, upon making a first-class job of it [. . .] he took a real pride in cutting delicate shaves of cold beef, little wads of

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mutton, just the right thickness, and in dividing a chicken or duck with nice precision. (50)

Stanley's appetite for food reflects his appetite for power, property and progeny. His voraciousness and latent violence is revealed through his likening by Linda to several animals, including a Newfoundland dog: 'If only he wouldn't jump at her so, and bark so loudly' (54). Mansfield dwells on his physical strength:

He was so delighted with his firm, obedient body that he hit himself on the chest and gave a loud "Ah" (25); later, on the drive home, he 'stretched out his right arm and slowly bent it, feeling the muscle. (36)

Stanley's physicality is specifically linked to his desire for a son and Linda's reproductive role. On his arrival home he observes his daughters eating dinner: 'That's where my boy ought to sit', thought Stanley. He tightened his arm around Linda's shoulder' (38). His sexual dominance of Linda is explicitly revealed:

He was too strong for her; she had always hated things that rush at her, from a child. There were times when he was frightening—really frightening. When she just had not screamed at the top of her voice: "You are killing me". (54)

As Williams argues, 'Stanley's expansion is associated with bourgeois vulgarity and crude masculine force, behind which lie both vanity and threat' (14) and 'his desire [...] visits constant anxiety on his shrinking wife' (15).³⁶

Linda Burnell's moment of self-realisation as she observes the aloe reveals her understanding of the inevitability of her role as procreator in an expanding colonial society: 'I shall go on having children and Stanley will go on making more money and the children and the gardens will grow bigger and bigger, with whole fleets of aloes in them for me to choose from' (54). Linda has a highly developed understanding of the sexual, social and economic politics of her situation. Despite her evident reluctance to fulfil her socially-prescribed role, she realises that she is both physically and practically incapable of refusing. Mansfield's exposition of the relationship between Linda's predicament and her psychological torment registers a voice of resistance to masculine ideologies of economic and social progress in the new colonial nation.

In *Prelude to Christopher*, Dark interrogates culturally dominant ideologies of nationhood and women's nation-building role as childbearer through the eugenic principles Nigel implements in his

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colony and his marriage. As Nicole Moore argues: 'All of Dark's earlier novels [...] in some way connect a scientific sexuality, or eugenics, with nation building'.³⁷ By presenting Linda's madness as in part the result of her enforced childlessness Dark resists scientific control of reproduction, particularly through eugenics. Dark pitches a masculine, rational science against a feminine, instinctive drive as Linda becomes pregnant to the painter d'Aubert:

So much, Uncle Hamlin, for your scientific training. So much, Nigel, for the austerities of your idealism. You were right, and all your rightness failed before a child's mystical superstition and a biological need [...]. She had gone farther back, to a picture of tiny arms waving in the air; of hands open, seeking, exploring, of bright eyes watching them, solemn with the concentration of the awakening brain. There she had found peace, her hope, the fantastic promise in whose fulfilment she most fantastically believed... (120)

After she miscarries, and through Nigel's absence during the war, Linda has a series of affairs but does not conceive again. Whereas in 'Prelude' Mansfield's exposition of Linda Burnell's unhappiness resists social pressure to bear children, in *Prelude to Christopher* Dark reveals the consequences of the scientific control of reproduction emerging in the 1920s and 1930s for women such as Linda Hendon.

Dark also links Linda's childlessness with her mental instability by characterising her in relation to culturally normative conceptions of the desirable woman. The sense of isolation and futility Linda experiences in the colony—captured in d'Aubert's painting—is a heightened expression of her alienation from the mainstream Australian society to which she returns. Linda's difference from dominant constructions of desirable femininity is exposed as she is rejected by several characters throughout the text for numerous reasons—including her childlessness, her appearance, her lack of domesticity, her educated intelligence and her direct and forthright manner—rather than her genetic family history. This is clearly illustrated through the young nurse Kay: "She's a beast, she's a beast, she isn't fit to be married to anyone, let alone Nigel. She can't love him, she can't know a bit what he's like." (24). Dr Marlow recognises the social cause of Linda's isolation, and illness:

'His mad wife!' One said it automatically—*thought* it automatically. And for what reason? Because she came of what they called 'tainted stock'? Half the people who called her mad so glibly didn't even know of that. Simply because, like her husband, she stood a little from the ruck. Because she had a queer, cold manner, and a certain outre kind of beauty.

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It was, too, incomprehensible to them that though her temper was bad, though she was childless and lame, though she had, notoriously, not one solitary domestic virtue, her husband, quite obviously, never wavered in his devotion, his faithfulness. (63)

Like the New Zealand of 'Prelude', the Australia of *Prelude to Christopher* is focused on nation-building, which demands not only the scientific management of reproduction but also the reproduction of the idealised domestic family.³⁸ As a woman who is married but childless, Linda's life is, by contemporary standards, void of meaning because she has not fulfilled her social role of childbearer in the reproductive politics of the new nation. Linda is effectively trapped between a scientific imperative that denies her children and an economic and social imperative that demands she reproduce. Dark exposes the tragic consequences for women caught between such competing agendas, asserting the importance of women's self-determination regarding pregnancy and motherhood: 'Was she nothing at all but a parasite, feeding now on Nigel, but just as likely, some day, if her host were to die, to fasten on to something less wholesome?' (30).

Mansfield and Dark also link resistance to women's role as child-bearer prescribed by national, economic and scientific ideologies to World War One. Both 'Prelude' and *Prelude to Christopher* were written in the shadow of World War One and reflect an acute consciousness of (and resistance to) the nationalist meanings invested in that event in Australia and New Zealand in the wartime and postwar period. 'Prelude' and *Prelude to Christopher* can be read as counter-stories to the mythologising of World War One as signifying colonial heroism in defence of empire and national pride on the international stage.

The 'prelude' in Mansfield's text is to the birth of her brother Leslie, who was killed in France on 7 October 1915, shortly before she began revising *The Aloe* into 'Prelude'. As Gerri Kimber notes, 'Prelude' 'delineates the "prelude" to the birth of her now-dead brother, a homage to the natural world, steeped in plant and nature symbolism'.³⁹ Mansfield's comment on writing the story that she wished 'to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the Old World' – written not only after her brother's death, but also after the Gallipoli campaign of April 1915 that was so devastating to New Zealand and Australian troops – potentially has specific meanings in the context of New Zealand's contribution to the British Imperial Force in World War One.⁴⁰ Mansfield uses the language of colonial resistance: a sense that the 'Old World' needs to understand and appreciate its colonies, and New Zealand in particular, lies behind her comment.

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At a time when the sacrifices of New Zealand and Australia for the sake of Britain and Empire were being lauded, and World War One was entering the mythology of both nations as a milestone in terms of national identity and progress, 'Prelude' registers a voice of resistance, specifically from a woman's perspective. While Kaplan comments that in 'Prelude' her 'brother is the absent center, the son whose meaning to his parents is still incipient, in potential', by the time Mansfield wrote 'Prelude' that potential had been extinguished. The tragic end for the sons of women like Linda Burnell—evident by the time 'Prelude' was published—make her personal torment in the colonial politics of reproduction and 'nation-building' all the more acute.⁴¹

World War One is also revealed in *Prelude to Christopher* as a central cause for the failure of Nigel's eugenicist colony. War breaks out five years after the colony is founded, and Nigel is unable to convince the colonists that their project of raising a new, superior form of humanity is more important than defending king and country. The departure of the colonists to a war that does not involve the colony symbolises the mass enlistment of Australians to take part in a European war that did not threaten Australia. Nigel is tormented by what he sees as the destruction of human posterity on a mass scale:

All the world damning its posterity—with cheers! Who was doing this thing? Weeding out the youngest, the strongest, the bravest—for what? Honour and responsibility? Work and propagation? No—just death. 'Here, you're the best we have—go and be killed.' (150)

In *Prelude to Christopher*, World War One is figured as an Australian national tragedy rather than the heroic birth of the nation on the international stage.

Considering 'Prelude' in relation to *Prelude to Christopher* highlights Mansfield's impact on later modernist women writers and illustrates the value of examining modernism's non-metropolitan spaces and the important role of place in the development of modernist aesthetics and politics. Scott Herring argues in relation to American regionalism and modernism that non-metropolitan spaces 'have often been treated as geographic curiosities removed from larger global impulses'.⁴² Clearly, 'Prelude' and *Prelude to Christopher* are anything but 'removed from larger global impulses'; on the contrary, they present a culturally- and geographically-specific response to the global forces of empire and world war one. These texts illustrate what Herring describes as 'the importance of locality to modernism's world-imaginary' by addressing common modernist themes—feminist politics and World

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War One—in a manner that is specific to the colonial contexts of Australia and New Zealand. ‘Prelude’ and *Prelude to Christopher* are both determinedly modernist and determined to present a feminist resistance to colonial ideologies of reproduction and nation building.⁴³

Katherine Mansfield was a significant predecessor for Australian modernist women writers in terms of both her artistic achievement and her New Zealand colonial heritage. Mansfield’s presence in public culture of the interwar period suggests that her literary influence may extend well beyond parallels that can be drawn between ‘Prelude’ and *Prelude to Christopher*. The treatment of illness, anxiety and reproduction in these texts illustrates a specifically colonial response to relationships between emerging feminist politics and the politics of economics, science and reproduction in the new colonial nations of Australia and New Zealand. These texts suggest that further exploration of Mansfield’s influence on Australian modernist women writers may elucidate broader regional treatment of modernist themes and aesthetics.

Notes

1. Sydney Janet Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction*, p. 104.
2. Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 3.
3. Nicole Moore, ‘The Rational Natural: Conflicts of the Modern in Eleanor Dark’, *Hecate*, 27: 1, 2001, 19–31.
4. Helen O’Reilly, ‘Linda’s Linoleum: Visual Imaging in Eleanor Dark’s *Prelude to Christopher*’, *Southerly*, 68: 1, 2008, 95–103, p. 97.
5. O’Reilly, ‘Linda’s Linoleum’, p. 96.
6. Barbara Brooks with Judith Clarke, *Eleanor Dark: A Writer’s Life* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1998), p. 132; Helen O’Reilly, ‘Time and Memory in the Novels of Helen O’Reilly’, PhD thesis (University of New South Wales, 2009), p. 71.
7. Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 1.
8. Warren Graves, ‘Women as Novelists’, *The Australian Woman’s Mirror*, 22 September 1925, pp. 8–9.
9. Gerald Dillon, ‘Katherine Mansfield’, *The Australian Woman’s Mirror*, 28 December 1926, p. 18.
10. E. J. Brady, ‘Notes on Australian Writers’, *All About Books*, 20 January 1930, p. 26.
11. Geoffrey Serle, ‘Palmer, Edward Vivian (Vance) (1885–1959)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 11 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988), pp. 126–8.
12. Nettie Palmer, ‘Katherine Mansfield: A Study in “Success”’, *Brisbane Courier*, 28 June 1928, p. 20.
13. Nettie Palmer, ‘The Sincerity of Katherine Mansfield’, *The Bulletin*, 1 February 1928, p. 2.
14. Palmer, p. 20.
15. Palmer, p. 2. New Zealand was often referred to as ‘Maoriland’ in public culture of the period. The term was coined by *The Bulletin* to distinguish New Zealand

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- writers from Australia. See Mark Williams, 'The Pa Man: Sir Harold Beauchamp', in *Katherine Mansfield's Men*, Charles Ferrall and Jane Stafford, eds (Wellington: Katherine Mansfield Birthplace Society Inc in association with Steele Roberts, 2005), p. 19.
16. See for example Nettie Palmer, 'A Reader's Notebook', *All About Books*, 19 May 1930, p. 119. Palmer also reviewed works about Mansfield in 'Katherine Mansfield Returns', *Book News*, July 1947, p. 21.
 17. In June 1934 the meeting of the Australian Literature Society was dedicated to the short story and featured a lecture on Mansfield. 'The Short Story', *All About Books*, 12 July 1934, p. 147. In April 1936 a meeting of the Australian Poetry Lovers' Association in Melbourne featured a discussion of Mansfield's work and readings of her poems. 'Australian Poetry Lovers' Association', *All About Books*, 12 May 1936, p. 78.
 18. Miles Franklin to Mrs F. E. Hobson, letter dated 30 April 1933, in Jill Roe, ed., *My Congenials. Miles Franklin & Friends in Letters*, 2 vols, (Pymble: State Library of New South Wales and Angus & Robertson, 1993), pp. 287–8.
 19. M. Barnard Eldershaw, 'Two Women Novelists: Henry Handel Richardson and Katharine Susannah Prichard', in Maryanne Dever, ed., *M. Barnard Eldershaw: Plaque with Laurel, Essays, Reviews & Correspondence* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1995), p. 195. The essay was first published in *Essays in Australian Fiction* in 1938.
 20. Jean Devanny, *Point of Departure: the autobiography of Jean Devanny*, Carole Ferrier, ed. (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1986), pp. 94–5.
 21. Devanny, *Point of Departure*, p. 82.
 22. Eleanor Dark to Nettie Palmer, 14 December 1933, 'Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer' (National Library of Australia, MS 1174).
 23. It is interesting that despite her knowledge of Mansfield's stories and *Prelude to Christopher*, Nettie Palmer did not note the similarities between the texts in her correspondence with Dark when she read and reviewed the novel in May and June 1934 ('Papers of Eleanor Dark', National Library of Australia, MS 4998 and 'Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer', National Library of Australia, MS 1174).
 24. Several critics have noted the role time plays in rendering the narrative in both texts. In relation to 'Prelude' see for example Mary Paul, *Her Side of the Story*, p. 44; regarding *Prelude to Christopher* see O'Reilly 'Time and Memory', pp. 73–4.
 25. Katherine Mansfield, 'Prelude', *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Penguin, 1981), p. 54. All further references are to this edition and placed parenthetically within the text.
 26. See for example Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 114; Paul, *Her Side of the Story*, pp. 57–9; Heather Murray, *Double Lives: Women in the Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, pp. 45–53; Kate Fullbrook, *Katherine Mansfield* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), pp. 77–84; Angela Smith, *Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A Public of Two* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
 27. Eleanor Dark, *Prelude to Christopher* (Rushcutters Bay: Halstead Press, 1999), p. 30.
 28. Moore, 'The Rational Natural', p. 27.
 29. Indeed, Dark had several motivations in writing *Prelude to Christopher*. Her mother died in an asylum when Dark was a teenager, giving her first-hand and very personal experience of mental instability and illness. Her aunt was also a pioneering eugenicist and sex reformer in Sydney. These personal experiences are evident in *Prelude to Christopher*. See O'Reilly, 'Time and Memory' Chapter 2.

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30. Mary Paul similarly argues that the shared colonial context between Mansfield and contemporary women writers in Australia and New Zealand needs to be explored, particularly in the context of Miles Franklin's 1901 novel *My Brilliant Career*, p. 61.
31. Williams, 'The Pa Man', p. 13.
32. Williams, 'The Pa Man', p. 14.
33. Williams, 'The Pa Man', p. 14.
34. Paul, *Her Side of the Story*, p. 59.
35. Paul, *Her Side of the Story*, p. 62.
36. For other discussions of relationships between masculinity, commerce and sex in 'Prelude' see Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 114; Paul, pp. 68–73.
37. Moore, 'The Rational Natural', p. 21.
38. Nicole Moore argues that *Prelude to Christopher* needs to be interpreted in 'the context of an anxiously modernising white Australia, aggressively managing the racial identity of its population while birth rates fell and economic crises fomented social protest', p. 21.
39. Gerri Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield: The View from France* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 104.
40. Margaret Scott, ed., *The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks*, 2 vols (Canterbury NZ: Lincoln University Press and Daphne Brasell Associates, 1997). Vol. 2, p. 32.
41. Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 111.
42. Scott Herring, 'Regional Modernism: A Reintroduction', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 55: 1, Spring 2009, 1–10, p. 3.
43. Herring, 'Regional Modernism', p. 3.