

Edited by  
Todd Martin

# Katherine Mansfield

and the Bloomsbury Group

B L O O M S B U R Y

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## Space of Debate, Debating Space: A Look at Irreverent Bloomsbury through the Lens of Mansfield's Stories

Ruchi Mundeja

*There were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk, some white grapes [...] and a big cluster of purple ones. These last she had bought to tone in with the new dining room carpet [...] When she had finished with them [...] she stood away from the table to get the effect—and it really was most curious. For the dark table seemed to melt into the dusky light and the glass dish and blue bowl to float in the air. This of course in her present mood was so incredibly beautiful.<sup>1</sup>*

*Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes [...] putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape [...] every time she did it, she felt more and more serene [...] She looked at Rose [...] How odd that one's child should do that!<sup>2</sup>*

Two moments couched in the domestic economy of the bourgeois home—moments where art seeks to reinvigorate the domestic, an art that is a hybrid *mélange*, a polyphonous riot, much like the buoyant experimentalism of the Bloomsbury interior. I have chosen to begin with these two vignettes as an indication of how the unorthodoxy of the “Blooms Berries” found its creative acme in lifestyle modernism and in Katherine Mansfield's reading/rendering of the same. As recent work by scholars such as Christopher Reed on Bloomsbury interiors has established, the aesthetic of the “Blooms Berries” pitched itself at the crossroads of the “domestic” and the “anti-domestic.”<sup>3</sup> This chapter, through a sustained reading of the minutiae in some of Mansfield's stories, focuses on how, read against the backdrop of Empire, the overhauling of the traditional

domestic partook liberally of the Empire's polyvocality. Monographs such as those by Reed and Mica Nava frame my reading of Bloomsbury's eclectic tastes. For instance, Mica Nava's work on consumer patterns in the Western metropolises becoming increasingly inflected by the impact of empire carries references to how the pale pastels of women's attire as well as domestic interiors were edged out by the more "barbaric" hues of jade, scarlet, and orange.<sup>4</sup> Nava's observation, intriguingly, finds a direct echo in a letter Vanessa Bell wrote to her sister in which she speaks of how the white walls of their dwelling were regally transformed by "Indian shawls of brilliant colors" that, draped strategically all over, "look rather fine and barbaric."<sup>5</sup> My subsequent discussion hinges around how Mansfield, with a minute eye, worked the (imperial) consumerism that undergirded Bloomsbury's cultivation of anti-insularity into her stories. The stories that I propose to look at become test cases for how Mansfield consumes the Bloomsburian spatial ethos, and how her own spatial positionality, as a woman *and* as a "colonial," is the interpretative filter.

To look a little more closely at the two passages: While the pear tree dominates critical discussion on "Bliss," the whiff of fruit enters the story through another side door—the blue dish overladen with fruit arranged to perfection by Bertha as soon as she reenters the house. As the feeling of bliss overwhelms Bertha, this radiant centerpiece of the dining table becomes one of its creative signifiers. In Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* the bowl of fruit, colorful and innovative, arranged with gay abandon by the Ramsay daughter, Rose, is admired by Mrs. Ramsay for the *experimentalism* of the arrangement. Woolf treads delicately between recognizing the autonomous creative genius of the girl and also registering how this aligns itself with Mrs. Ramsay's creative domesticity, that which lifts the Ramsay household above the level of "clucking domesticities."<sup>6</sup> Hence Mrs. Ramsay's "serenity"—she sees her daughter's artistry as a bequest; its "oddness," coalescing into a marvel of aestheticism, is seen as a continuation of her own legacy—that gift she possesses of merging and unifying is juxtaposed throughout the scene against the sterile, univocal, linearity of the masculine world. What both vignettes offer are polychromatic canvasses. Read from within the frame of gender, the two scenarios are a creative riposte to the idea of (masculine) regimentation. And if one were to employ the prism of empire, they can be read as suggestive of how the landscape of the imperial metropolis, impacted by the hybridized flux of empire, was rendered, in the words of Urmila Seshagiri, "marvelously supple."<sup>7</sup> The two passages speak of an embrace of fluidity and malleability, key concepts in Bloomsbury's iconoclastic understanding of both empire and gender. This leads forward to my later discussion of how, for the

women in the stories I have chosen, the unhomely becomes a way to escape/critique the homely. In both cases, by a virtuoso display of a hybrid mix-up of elements, a staid domestic arrangement is turned into a statement by the women characters. But while in Woolf it is of a piece with her theoretical standpoint vis-à-vis gender, in Mansfield, Bertha's "bliss" is in the ultimate analysis, a more tentative groping for self-expression. Authors like Mansfield, with their own off-center positioning, bring in a sense of the more conflicted, even compromised (given the fact that Mansfield keeps Bertha's class privileges firmly in view), nature of rebellion.

These two passages, then, are a suggestive entry point into the different positionalities of the two writers, one at the vanguard of Bloomsbury experimentalism, and the other occupying a more fraught inside-outside space. Woolf's cerebral engagement with otherness throughout her fiction can be read against Mansfield's more direct experience of finding herself "othered" (as her journals and letters reflect) in the subculture of coteries. This would also help readdress the debate on the "contours of privilege" in women's writing and to recognize that though gender is certainly a focal point in the works of women writers of the early decades of the twentieth century, it is equally important to read them along the multiple axes of class, nationality, background, and race.<sup>8</sup>

The Bloomsbury experiment was seminally related to an overhauling of domestic space. Bloomsbury's nerve center of the privatized conversational arena can be read as the locus of a transgressive challenge to, vis-à-vis its cerebral and sexual heterodoxy, the "moralizing solemnity" of the domestic.<sup>9</sup> Both Woolf and Mansfield register its liberatory potential for women in particular. But while "Bliss" does show Bertha as partaking of the bohemianism of her set in arranging the dish, it is contextualized as aligned to her current state of rapture. These moments of women's self-expression in Mansfield are not knitted into an ideological whole as they are in Woolf. Mansfield does not effect the transition from the experiential to the ideological in quite the way that Woolf does. Mansfield leaves us with unresolved issues, curtailed epiphanies, all of which bespeak qualified, truncated, half-articulated moments of revolt, such as Bertha's, as I argue later. Mrs. Ramsay's reading of her daughter's creative flourish is contiguous with Woolf's conceptual economy where heroines like Clarissa Dalloway, whose terrain is the domestic arena, interrupt its patriarchal solemnity by their gift for assemblages. Mansfield's women often enact covert acts of nonacceptance unfolding shadowily in the interstices of conformism and protest, not quite as definitive as Woolf's more programmatic and exhortative feminism.



That this difference can to some extent be linked to the dynamics of center/periphery, high/low, European/"colonial," privilege/delinquency, and emplacement/marginality strands in modernist studies is perhaps best glossed by one of Mansfield's own statements: "How I envy Virginia; no wonder she can write. There is always in her writing a calm freedom of expression as though she were at peace—her roof over her, her own possessions round her."<sup>10</sup> While Mansfield's statement is open to contestation, it does importantly raise the question of authorial and locational positionality. Mansfield identifies Woolf as emplaced, in implicit juxtaposition to her own displaced, itinerant existence. Not only did Mansfield cross continents and countries but, as Gillian Boddy points out, John Middleton Murry's estimate was that they lived in no fewer than thirteen houses in two years.<sup>11</sup> Thus, though Bloomsbury is the common frame for these writers, the parallels are not seamless, and Mansfield's hyphenated status makes her more a skeptical consumer of the Bloomsbury milieu than its acolyte. As the "little colonial," Mansfield stood at a distance from this self-perpetuating mythos of modernist heresy, of which Bloomsbury was such a vociferous component. Though there is much in Mansfield's writing that is steeped in modernist aesthetics, there is also a component that looks askance at what Molly Hite terms their "canon forming polemics."<sup>12</sup> It is these resistant nerve centers that this chapter explores.

The spaces of modernism are rife with "rooms" that inseminate the literary firmament with a surcharged vitality. Domestic space was so much the crucible of oppositionality and avant-gardism, whether one thinks of Garsington Manor, Ford Madox Ford's and Violet Hunt's "South Lodge" Villa in Kensington, or of course Bloomsbury itself. Inside accounts of Bloomsbury, in consonance with the high-adrenalin narrative of modernist iconoclasm, configure it as a platform for nonconformist stances. How does this measure against formulations on bourgeois domestic space? Commenting on the prohibitive repressiveness written into the "normative" domestic economy of the bourgeois home in *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre observes how the "bourgeois space implies a filtering of the erotic, a repression of *libidines*."<sup>13</sup> He argues that in the increasing spatial subdivisions of the bourgeois home, bodily functions are thrust out of sight. Victoria Rosner, commenting on how the Victorian bourgeois home worked along the principle of a sanctimonious compartmentalization, says, "A 'good' house, a proper house, is one in which rooms maintain social and spatial discretion."<sup>14</sup> It is in the radicalization and sexualization of that same bourgeois interior that Bloomsbury's adversarialism is located. That "climactic" moment when Strachey uttered the word "semen" in the drawing room has been

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enshrined in the accounts of the Stephen sisters as in most subsequent modernist histories as the moment when the domestic was penetrated by the sexual. As Peter Brooker points out, this set the agenda for "the remorseless sniping at sham and hypocrisy," and for Vanessa Bell, it indicated what "complete freedom of expression and mind" meant.<sup>15</sup>

How then was this compelling narrative of heterodoxy read and consumed by a writer participating in these formations and yet often in a precariously poised relationship with them? Though arguably Mansfield is seen as casting her lot with the "Blooms Berries," her piquant location modulates her reception of Bloomsbury's gestures of self-construction. One might frame the argument in terms of the distinction Lefebvre draws (though in a different context) between space of consumption, that is, how Bloomsbury's radicalism of design and performance drew on imperial goods and idioms, and consumption of space,<sup>16</sup> which would pertain to how Mansfield watchfully perceived and read this hotbed of irreverence.

Inveighing against Victorian prudery, sexual talk pervaded the Bloomsbury interior, but that its registers of heterodoxy were compromised by class, race, and nationality is also clear. For instance, there was Strachey holding forth on how "one's amours are very like the British Empire—all over the shop, in every sort of unexpected ridiculous corner. One plants one's penis on so many peculiar spots!"<sup>17</sup> Whether this be read as an ironic glance at the expansionary zeal of the empire or in terms of Strachey's own sexual nonconformity, the imagery of phallic *jouissance* he evokes reads rather unfortunately for a postcolonial reader, since it bespeaks a sensibility insouciantly at home in the imperial imaginary. The Bloomsburians quite self-consciously staged their scandalous tableaux as a peeling away of the layers of accreted conventionalisms to reveal the provocative substratum beneath, contiguous with the project of modernism. Women, such as the Stephen sisters, were decidedly active participants in these exhumatory experiments of Bloomsbury. Thus, this would on one level have been attractive to a free-spirited woman such as Mansfield. My reading registers that, but equally pressingly pays heed to traces of the ironically resistant in her stories dealing with the "Blooms Berries." Mansfield's positioning as a woman writer from the colonial periphery shapes her qualified depiction of the irreverence of the "Blooms Berries" even as she grasps its emancipatory potentialities for women. Interestingly, in the stories that this chapter examines, it is the women who are most conspicuously associated with the cosmopolitanized imperial landscape. This would imply that, as a reader, one needs to tread carefully, to be attuned to how the satirizing

of imperial consumerism in Mansfield's stories is held in careful balance against the opportunities for expansiveness the overhauling of the domestic offered to women chafing against the confinement of the "homely."

The stories I have chosen for analysis, "Bliss," "A Cup of Tea," and "Marriage à la Mode," engage with the modernist provenance of Bloomsbury in an interesting way since they mime its movement from outside to inside, a microspace jousting with the macrodynamics of empire, war, gender, and so on. Writers like Mansfield who wrote on the peripheries of the developing canon of modernism provide an insight into what I term the inverted narcissism of modernist writing: that is, how each movement outward, its gestures of "centrifugal patronage" (to borrow a phrase from Timothy Bewes), was ultimately directed inward, geared toward either the angst of self-examination or the quest for self-revitalization.<sup>18</sup> In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said speaks of how, from the point of view of the West, other cultures have been either pathologized or embraced as therapeutic.<sup>19</sup> In keeping with modernism's anti-institutional spirit, while the bourgeoisie was wary of the unhomely, the modernists cast it as the necessary therapy for an increasingly mechanized civilization and also played on its primitive uninhibitedness as the much needed shock to the puritanical bourgeoisie, such as in "Bliss" when Mrs. Norman Knight revels in how her unconventional dress scandalized all the people on the train. Thus, the way in which the domestic space can be approached in these stories looks back at an essential feature of Bloomsbury—its aesthetic embrace of the other, as the cross-traffic of imperialism told on the consumer spectacle. The trope of *flânerie* brings into modernist literature an apprehension of increasing metropolitan polyphony. Bloomsbury sought to rework the domestic interior to reflect this cosmopolitanized flavor, but with scant concern for the geographical or material coordinates of these gleanings. In a wily parallel enactment, Mansfield brings the variegated panorama of the shopping arcades into the bourgeois home in these narratives.

In "Bliss," the story opens to reveal Bertha's present rhapsodic mood of bliss, where the bohemianism of her set is adopted in an individualized manner by her. That Bertha's experimental flings are bolstered by the consumerist paradise easily accessible to someone of her class is a fact not glossed over by the writer. For instance, the reference to the fruit as displayed in a blue dish with a strange sheen, given her husband's later reference to how the very sourcing of the objects in their home evokes a dynamic colonial circuitry, brings into the story the specter of imperial consumerism. In fact, in a characteristically blustering manner, Harry preens in front of Pearl Fulton as he shakes a silver box full

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of cigarettes at her: "Egyptian? Turkish? Virginian? They're all mixed up."<sup>20</sup> The terminology (the allusion to "mix-up") is directly evocative of a culturally miscegenated imperial landscape. The subsequent characterization of Harry as a man whose swagger is based on his possessions brings to mind Carole Sweeney's observation that "An aesthetic appreciation of non-Western culture as artefactual domestic commodity does not produce an equivalent political tolerance."<sup>21</sup> That the exploitative antecedents of these imperial collectibles that increasingly graced upper-middle-class bourgeois homes would scarcely concern someone as self-absorbed as Harry is self-evident. This would also be in line with this comment from Lefebvre: "Produced or worked objects pass from the space of labor to the enveloping social space only once the traces of labor have been effaced from them."<sup>22</sup>

It is in how Mansfield portrays this toying with otherness vis-à-vis Bertha that her own inside-outside stance manifests itself. In the plush interiors of Bertha's bourgeois salon, this foregrounding of otherness furthers Bertha's nascent stirrings to transgress the boundaries of the heterosexist marital bind. Bertha's consumerist forays are treated more tolerantly by Mansfield; the annoying, fawning eclecticism of the Norman Knights, on the other hand, is panned with a delightfully ironic flourish. Mansfield reserves her wickedest satire for the poseur-guests at Bertha's party. Koppen speaks of the sartorial derring-do of the Bloomsburians as a crucial facet in their self-invention.<sup>23</sup> As the Norman Knights enter, the narrator lingers over the attire sported by Mrs. Norman Knight, a bright orange coat with a procession of monkeys embroidered on its hem. The coat comes off to reveal a dress of vivid yellow, made out of scraped banana skins. If one recalls Vanessa Bell's account of Duncan Grant's inspired visualization of her studio at Gordon Square as a giant tropical forest,<sup>24</sup> or if we turn for a minute to Eric Hobsbawm's reminder of how tropical fruits like bananas flooded the imperial city,<sup>25</sup> one sees how the riotous excess built into her look visually elucidates Janet Lyon's reference to an imperializing cosmopolitanism.<sup>26</sup> The lady follows up the visual challenge with this remark: "Why! Why! Why is the middle class so stodgy—so utterly without a sense of humor! [...] For my darling monkeys so upset the train that it rose to a man and simply ate me with its eyes. Didn't laugh—wasn't amused—that I should have loved. No, just stared—and bored me through and through."<sup>27</sup> Writing against the backdrop of empire, Mansfield would want us to take note of the imperial-racial registers of both the design elements and the phobic hostility with which it is received. Recent work on colonialism has revealed that with imperial progeny and the empire's material spillover dotting the imperial corridors, the

colonial gaze was transplanted into the metropolis. While the passengers on the train enact its hysterics, Mrs. Norman Knight parades her willingness to plunge into the diaphanous folds of the imperial fabric. Modernism's fascination with cultural difference is legendary, but what these moments make us ask is: Did that necessarily entail a dialogue between cultures?

What Mansfield brings into the story with the entry of the arty clique is "the unremitting newness of modernity," which is portrayed in all its cannibalistic zeal, borrowing from other, (ironically) older cultures and art forms.<sup>28</sup> In her almost filmic description, Mansfield draws on her own experiences of being witness to Bloomsbury hijinks. Alison Light reminds us, for instance, that "The Stephen siblings were not Bohemians glorying in [...] eating scratch meals" and that their bohemianism existed in uneasy conjunction with a thorough "dependence" on servants.<sup>29</sup> With her own brushes with poverty and deprivation, Mansfield in her of/not of position could catch these ironies better.

Mansfield's conflictual and divided relationship with Bloomsbury is figured in "Bliss" in terms of the split between Bertha and the rest of the arty set. Bertha's toying with Bloomsburian notions is seen as gendered and personalized, as opposed to the facetious and parodic Bohemianism of the others. Mansfield's edgy positioning vis-à-vis the Bloomsburian insiders rendered her recalcitrant to its expansive gestures—the earthbound nature of her vision resisted their etherealized flights and stubbornly brought the unsublime corporeal into the frame. Again, in "Bliss" this is presented more from the inside in Bertha's revolt against civilization's wanting to keep the body shut in a case like a "rare, rare fiddle," her desire to open out her body to taste the "brimming cup of bliss."<sup>30</sup> But the irony turns sharper in that wonderful vignette where Eddie Warren quotes what he considers an incredibly beautiful line—"Why must it always be tomato soup?"—as the story moves toward the analogically predictable denouement of adultery. Mansfield achieves a double effect here—even as the Bohemian wannabe's poetic credentials are held up to scorn, the discovery of infidelity is itself shorn of a glamorized portrayal, so "dreadfully eternal" like tomato soup.<sup>31</sup> Mansfield treads carefully between portraying Bertha's heartbreak but also an acute awareness of the deceptions that pull at the marital structure. My argument is in line with Aimee Gasston's strong emphasis not on the transcendent quality of her work, but its material obduracy, which Gasston sees as an "anti-aristocratic formulation of modernism."<sup>32</sup> Could Woolf's aversion to the story be traced back to Mansfield's stubborn refusal to sublimate quotidian domestic infelicities at the end, leaving us only with that intensely visceral image of the nakedly

carnal, "hideous Pearl?"<sup>33</sup>

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carnal, "hideous grin" that Bertha sees on Harry's face as he bends toward Pearl?<sup>33</sup>

While the domestic space in "Bliss" foregrounds the conspicuously exoticist through attire and objects, the next story I look at, "A Cup of Tea," centers its title on an item that is more complexly poised vis-à-vis the quotidian and the exotic. As I go on to discuss, this story plays with the implications of the homely/unhomely through the symbolization of tea. Urmila Seshagiri argues that the recurrent symbols of tea and china in modernist fiction render impossible any belief in "the unified, undifferentiated white English subject," and that even as these commodities were through the centuries transformed into "signifiers of Englishness," one needs to bear in mind that they were originally appropriated from the East.<sup>34</sup> Eric Hobsbawm points out how by the end of the nineteenth century Britons increasingly filled their teapots from India and Ceylon.<sup>35</sup> This engagement with the exotic is thus contained in the title of "A Cup of Tea" and how it is pressed into service to enliven the domestic space. Erika Rappaport does an extensive analysis of "Empire Tea." She shows how a colonial product like tea became the site for an accreting imperial conversation, reaching a crescendo in the 1930s. She describes the 1931 massive Drink Empire Tea campaign that "intended to teach British tea buyers and drinkers to prefer teas from India, Ceylon and British East Africa to those from the Netherlands East Indies."<sup>36</sup> She also points out how women in particular were recruited into the Empire Buying ideology. There was the Primrose League that looked at shopping as knitting together "Home, Nation and Empire," and the League of Empire Housewives that adopted as their motto the making of "Every Kitchen an Empire Kitchen."<sup>37</sup> She argues emphatically that no commodity was as inextricably associated with empire as was tea. Thus, the Buy Empire campaign, though impelled by commercial considerations, also harnessed the talismanic appeal of the Empire. There is also a reference in Rappaport's article to how there was a difference between the informed, discerning upper-middle-class buyer of imperial goods and the lower-rung citizens who "were generally receptive to the idea of empire shopping [but] on the whole ignorant about tea production and imperial geography."<sup>38</sup>

"A Cup of Tea" centers around a cup of the brew shared between two women divided by the gulf of class. Rosemary Fell belongs to the plush set, and the girl she befriends and brings home is portrayed as a wastrel. The story opens with a peek into Rosemary's life, and the consumerist paradise that defines her is the focus of the description. The cosmopolitan strivings of Rosemary are contained in references to how, while most people would shop in Bond Street, Rosemary's

refined pursuits take her to Paris, where in her "rather exotic way" she finds herself in her element.<sup>39</sup> Friedberg notes how "By the middle of the nineteenth century, as if in a historical relay of looks, the shop window succeeded the mirror as a site of identity construction."<sup>40</sup> The shop windows that beckon and the stores Rosemary visits go into her self-presentation as "extremely modern."<sup>41</sup> In bringing the "quaint" into her home, whether it be in the form of bohemian artists or antiques, she partakes of the experimental proclivities of the modernist salons. That Mansfield relates Rosemary's sourcings to women's resistance to marital anonymity is clear from the desultory emptiness that overcomes her as she walks away without purchasing an unusual box, with the battered young woman appearing miraculously as a substitute for it. What is interesting is that just at that juncture, Rosemary thinks of having an "extra-special tea" to assuage her sense of unfulfillment.<sup>42</sup> Tea here becomes a measure of her knowledgeable consumerism since this could be read as evidence of her awareness of special blends and brands and another manifestation of the co-optive embrace of the "other" to give a density to her own life.

The other implication, that the ubiquitous presence of these products made them almost English in their wide usage, is also present in the story. This comes in through the girl who, in line with the argument of Rappaport, is the passive, uninformed consumer for whom tea is only a familiar English custom. She refuses brandy and only pines for the warmth that a cup of tea can give her. Rosemary ensures that she has her fill of it: "Every time her cup was empty she filled it with tea, cream and sugar. People always said that sugar was so nourishing."<sup>43</sup> In the introduction to *Empire of Tea*, the authors identify tea and sugar as foremost among the nonnative material commodities that had a radically transformative effect on patterns of British consumption.<sup>44</sup> One wonders whether Mansfield was deliberately playing upon the knowledge of empire since the story quite startlingly "orients" itself to such a reading. Joanna de Groot speaks of how complexly interwoven the "circuits of capital, exchange and consumption" were in imperial times.<sup>45</sup> This would account perhaps for a blurring of the origins of tea. Arguing also that tea chains such as the ABC were "aimed at those of modest means," de Groot cites Forrest's point that on the metropolitan map the "natural habitat of the teashops was ... the less exclusive shopping streets"; this landscape would account for the girl's metropolitan at-homeness with tea, her unawareness of its imperial origins.<sup>46</sup>

The nourishing effects of tea and sugar conjoined conflate in the young woman's case into a homely narrative. But the postcolonial reader cannot but make the connection with the colonial horrors that silently reside in colonial

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products like sugar in particular. To that extent, a readjustment of perspective can reveal how close the émigré writers from the colonial peripheries sometimes come to the later insights of postcolonial theorists. Stuart Hall's self-scrutiny of immigrants to England like himself reads thus:

People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries: symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea [...] There are thousands of others beside me that are, you know, the cup of tea itself. Because they don't grow it in Lancashire, you know. Not a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom. This is the symbolization of English identity—I mean, what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they can't get through the day without a cup of tea?<sup>47</sup>

The tea and the sugar that are viewed in the story as rejuvenating and nourishing are as exotic as the other objects that Rosemary craves, though their ubiquity in English life, as Hall suggests, belies this. Interestingly, when Rosemary visits the little treasure-house of antiques and collectibles, one of the objects she sees on display is a teakettle. Mansfield's story evokes through the symbol of tea the intermeshing, indeed blurring, trajectories of the homely and the unhomely.

Having partaken of the cornucopia of empire, the girl displays the languor of the satiated imperial consumer and transforms into a "new being."<sup>48</sup> It is now time for another kind of consumerism to come into play—Rosemary's aestheticization of the young woman as the "model" of alterity: "Rosemary lit a fresh cigarette; it was time to begin."<sup>49</sup> The girl becomes another collectible in Rosemary's appropriative and eclectic consumerism. The ritual of tea that is the site of assembly thus marks various levels of consumerist incursions into distant, alien, "unhomely" realms. Through her interaction with the young woman, Rosemary ventures into the unfamiliar realm of the underclass. Rosemary's acute self-consciousness is evidence of how Mansfield is ironizing the anti-insular gestures that animated high modernism. This is Rosemary's social experiment, her induction into the domestic sphere of the alien. When her husband plays on her wifely possessiveness to get rid of the intruder, Rosemary cultivates an exoticism to rival that of the stranger. Mansfield explores both the possibilities and limits of domestic experiments. Her fine-grained irony allows for an understanding of Rosemary's consumer forays as both appropriative and self-defining. The self-absorption of Rosemary's sourcings is recorded with unerring honesty by Mansfield, yet employing the filter of gender, she writes from the inside of Rosemary's connoisseurship as



the *raison d'être* of her marital existence. In line with the self-performativity of modernist culture, Mansfield's married protagonists bring the performative into the home to combat, even disrupt, the staid normativity of their bourgeois existence.

Mica Nava has written extensively on how the department store culture of the first few decades of the twentieth century drew upon the pervasive iconography of the oriental. Nava points out that the stores staged their own tableaux to parallel the imperial exhibitions: "Spectacular oriental extravaganzas which included live tableaux of Turkish harems, Cairo markets, or Hindu temples with live performers, dance, music, and of course oriental products" were frequently organized.<sup>50</sup> She discusses how Selfridges created a business empire out of this symphonic interplay between consumerism and the exotic.<sup>51</sup> In *Bohemia in London*, Peter Brooker's engaging study of the "lifestyle modernism," that is, the fashions, fads, lifestyles of the artistic set in the modernist period, he cites John Drummond to point out that following the premiere of *Scheherazade*, blue, orange, turquoise, and velvet found favor with the dressmakers of Paris.<sup>52</sup> That Bloomsbury was a part of this sartorial and cultural frenzy to embrace the new is corroborated by Brooker's account. Relying on Vanessa Bell's reminiscences, he mentions how at the Post-Impressionist ball, the Bloomsbury denizens draped themselves in cloth worn by natives in Africa sourced from Burnett's and completed the impression by browning their legs and arms and by sporting flowers and beads.<sup>53</sup>

Employing a similar frame of consumerism, "Marriage à la Mode" traces the fluctuating marital fortunes of Isabel and William through consumer patterns, with Isabel's turn to novelty contrasted against William's loyalty to the familiar. Mansfield cleverly uses a consumerist idiom to map out the faltering trajectory of their married life. This is a particularly difficult tale to bracket since while Mansfield's examination of marital existence inclines toward an understanding of women's entrapment, the critique of the Bohemian necessarily entails recognizing Isabel's complicity in its trendy shallowness. However, the two strands are also interwoven where Isabel's taking to its theatrics is a reaction against William's refusal to grant her individuality—like when he wishes to control who she consorts with, his greatest regret being her introduction to Moira Morrison. Whether his instincts about her "crowd" are correct or not is another matter, but what is incontrovertibly present in their relationship is his complete inability to see the element of stasis that plagues Isabel. For instance, when Isabel points out how they needed to move out of their too tiny, "poky little" house, he sees her point at one level, yet cannot let go of the nostalgia as

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the pride of that house in London remains his most precious memory of the idyll he feels those years were.<sup>54</sup> It is space that is at the crux of the debate: For William it is a space that disallows room for Isabel's expansion. For him, the understanding that it could be cramped for her can be measured vis-à-vis spatial dimensions, yet he is reluctant to face up to its other resonances: "He hadn't the remotest notion [ ... ] that she was desperately lonely, pining for new people and new music."<sup>55</sup>

It is this impulse that guides what might be seen as Isabel's callous toying with the marital space in "Marriage à la Mode." Interestingly, the story opens with William's thoughts on his marriage and children, a clear indication of how he is far more invested in the domestic structure than Isabel. There are, of course, the satirical flashes, such as Isabel's newly acquired taste in foreign toys that will improve her children's "sense of form."<sup>56</sup> William's ruminations on how Isabel is in his mind allied to a world of childhood freshness betray his own refusal to grow up, his childish desire to freeze-frame his marriage as a never-ending idyll, which leads to his lack of awareness of Isabel's loneliness. More generally, too, William's seeing life through the lens of prearranged categories is clear from the pronouncements he makes at the spectacle he sees through the train window: a girl running alongside the train is cast as an instance of (feminine?) "hysteria," and a workman at the end of the platform is viewed as an example of "filthy" low life.<sup>57</sup> Conversely, Mansfield does not let Isabel's Bohemian gang off the hook. The story details how their artistic flamboyance feeds off William. Mansfield wickedly delineates a parallel between the gastronomic excesses and artistic dilettantism of Isabel's artistic finds such as when the nougat is described as "a perfect little ballet" by Bobby Kane.<sup>58</sup>

Woolf's essay, "Bloomsbury," reflects how she envisaged their move to the new location—it is the domestic that becomes the bearer of transgressive rupture with the past: "We were full of experiments and reforms. We were going to do without table napkins, we were to have [large supplies of] Bromo instead; we were going to paint; to write; to have coffee after dinner instead of tea at nine o'clock. Everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial."<sup>59</sup> So we come back again to how the laboratory for the Bloomsbury experiment was the home and that the throwing over of old consumer commodities and patterns were the sites of transgression.

"Marriage à la Mode" opens with William anguishing over how he has again bought fruits for his children. Thus, Mansfield engages with the lifestyle modernism of the Bloomsbury set, and hence her chosen site, too, is the domestic. William's buying sprees seem repetitive and nonadventurous when

juxtaposed against the avant-garde pretensions of Isabel's friends. William's reminiscences circle around how the domestic was earlier cozily shorn of these novelties: he recalls how initially homely domestic objects doubled up as the children's toys—many a mock battle fought with shovels, tongs, and so on. A little down the years, they were playing with familiar choices like toy animals, and he fondly remembers finding lopped-off limbs of the toy animals strewn around the house. Mansfield again gives the reader very little room for glib pronouncements in the way she juxtaposes William's conservative consumerism and the related implication of unimaginativeness to the annoyingly self-serving consumerist éclat of Isabel's friends. Isabel's experimental jauntiness is at times rendered from the outside, but Mansfield also creates space for an alternate interpretation. Mansfield holds the balance between William's nostalgic need for sameness—"And he was still that little boy"—and Isabel's yearning for change, though the "rebels" she chooses as her cronies are presented in the most unflattering manner.<sup>60</sup> Isabel might strike one as vapid and uninvolved, but that is the deliberate space Mansfield provides her women characters for preservation of autonomy, the possibility of uninhabitation, if one may coin that word. By not investing completely in the domestic structure, by enacting a withdrawal, her women retain a private voice of critique and commentary.

"Marriage à la Mode" makes for a telling as also perplexing study in Mansfield's conflicted take on the "Blooms Berries," how she both ironizes them yet at the same time holds on to their liberatory agenda, specifically vis-à-vis women. This story, too, like "A Cup of Tea" and "Bliss," plays off an increasingly cosmopolitanized landscape against William's attempt to hold on to a more knowable, identifiably English one. Early on in the story, William feels nonplussed by how his buying sprees for his children are now complicated by the influx of foreign goods on display: "In the old days, of course, he would have taken a taxi off to a decent toyshop and chosen them something in five minutes. But nowadays they had Russian toys, French toys, Serbian toys—toys from God knows where."<sup>61</sup> The vocabulary here points to the insular in his consciousness—his resistance to newness/change. Pitted against that are the anti-insular flourishes of Isabel's friends—their overeager embrace of the foreign, all in their pursuit to "make it new." As the unhomely enters the homely in this story, it is analyzed in terms of its self-serving fashionableness, yet at the same time it becomes an important leveraging point to expose the paranoias of the "old." With her experience of both colony and periphery, artists like Mansfield were especially primed to read

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into the hysteria of self-protection exhibited by the imperial metropolis, as also its obverse, the triumphal note of self-reinvigoration through an embrace of the alien that ruled in artistic circles. The ambivalence of the tale gathers into that one line at the end, as Isabel, after sharing an intensely private missive from her husband with her "set," withdraws in a moment of distress into her room: "Down she sat on the side of the bed. 'How vile, odious, abominable, vulgar,' muttered Isabel."<sup>62</sup> Who is the reference to? Is it to Isabel herself? Is it meant to be a castigation of her friends? Or could it be a reference to William's (as suggested by the word "vulgar") unfashionable sentimentalism? I believe that the fact that it could be any or all of these is where the complexity of Mansfield's response to Bloomsbury resides.

In this chapter, I have tried to examine the fine line that Mansfield treads as both a participant in and a caustic reader/recorder of the conversational, performative, and ideational exuberance of the "Blooms Berries." Given her locational ambivalence, Mansfield reads astutely the coterie nature of the group, such as in her recording of how the "other" is rendered a consumable commodity in the search for novelty, as in Rosemary's "exoticizing" of poverty in "A Cup of Tea." At one point the Norman Knights are referred to as a very "sound" couple.<sup>63</sup> Is this Mansfield's antipodean backlash against how the compelling narrative of modernist heresy was made possible by entrenchment in a sound, secure, privileged structure? If immersion in the flourishes of its gestures of iconoclasm is modernism's hubris, then outré figures like Rhys and Mansfield expose these fissures by writing a sly counternarrative to it. One can appreciate how prescient these critiques were in terms of the long critical afterlife they have had, such as in Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina's mention of Sir Christopher Ondaatje's remarks on the telling silence of most Bloomsbury denizens on Leonard Woolf's anti-imperial *The Village in the Jungle*. Gerzina mentions this by way of problematizing Bloomsbury's aesthetic engagement with the other.<sup>64</sup> Mansfield's stated ambition to "write with acid" finds fullest expression in her skeptical consumption of the Bloomsburian narrative.<sup>65</sup> Again one wonders if Woolf's dislike of "Bliss" was founded on Mansfield's writing with venom, a mode of writing Woolf inveighed against in *A Room of One's Own*, a proviso significantly stemming from Woolf's discomfiture with Charlotte Brontë's recording of the inchoate, infantile rage of Bertha Mason, the colonial other. By letting the rancor and acid seep into her writing, Mansfield implicitly problematizes the exclusionisms of the Bloomsbury set.

## Notes

- 1 Katherine Mansfield, "Bliss," in *The Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield, The Collected Fiction 1916–1922*, vol. 2, ed. Gerri Kimber and Vincent O'Sullivan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 142–43.
- 2 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927; London: Penguin Books, 1992), 118.
- 3 Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture and Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 3. Reed's extended argument revolves around how the radicalized politico-aesthetic agenda of the Bloomsbury group found its materialization in "the modernist dwelling, which becomes a kind of anti-home."
- 4 See Mica Nava, *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalization of Difference* (Berg: Oxford University Press, 2007), 32.
- 5 Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 23.
- 6 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 27.
- 7 Urmila Seshagiri, *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), 7.
- 8 Rosemary Marangoly George, "Feminists Theorize Colonial/Postcolonial," in *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 220.
- 9 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1974), 315.
- 10 Katherine Mansfield to John Middleton Murry, November 30, 1919, quoted in Gillian Boddy, *Katherine Mansfield: The Woman and the Writer* (Victoria: Penguin Book, 1988), 71. Jean Rhys, another "savage" from the colonies, similarly commented on the cliquey, clubby feel of metropolitan art coteries: "Everything is clubs in London, isn't it? Clubs, clubs..." Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939; London: Penguin Books, 2000), 131.
- 11 Boddy, *Woman and the Writer*, 41.
- 12 Molly Hite, "The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins's *My Little Sister*," *Modernism/Modernity* 17, no. 3 (2010): 523. Hite uses this phrase while discussing how Woolf, in her nonfictional writings such as her "great modernist polemic" "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," left out in the cold her women precursors from the Edwardian period, thus relegating them to relative obscurity.
- 13 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 315.
- 14 Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 65.
- 15 Vanessa Bell, *Sketches in Pen and Ink: A Bloomsbury Notebook*, ed. Lia Giachero (London: Hogarth Press, 1997), 106, quoted in Peter Brooker, *Bohemia in London: The Social* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2007), 161.
- 16 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 315.
- 17 Lytton Strachey, *Portrait of a Woman: Lady Julia de Grey*, in *Gretchen Holbrook Kinzler, ed., Bloomsbury Group: A Companion to the Bloomsbury Group* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 100.
- 18 Timothy Bewes, *The Bloomsbury Group: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 100.
- 19 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 100.
- 20 Mansfield, "Bliss," 14.
- 21 Carole Sweeney, *From the Bloomsbury Group to the New Zealand Literary Canon, 1935* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 100.
- 22 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 315.
- 23 R. S. Koppen, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 100.
- 24 Morag Shiach, "Domesticity and the Bloomsbury Group," in *Bloomsbury Group: A Cultural History*, ed. Timothy Bewes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 100.
- 25 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (New York: Random House, 1989), 100.
- 26 Janet Lyon, "Cosmopolitanism and the Bloomsbury Group," in *Bloomsbury Group: A Cultural History*, ed. Timothy Bewes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 394. Lyon argues that cosmopolitanism, as a geographical inflection, was central to the Bloomsbury Group's identity.
- 27 Mansfield, "Bliss," 14.
- 28 Jane Garrity, "Modernism and the Bloomsbury Group," in *Literature Companion to the Bloomsbury Group*, ed. Jane Garrity (New York: Routledge, 2010), 100.
- 29 Alison Light, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 100.
- 30 Mansfield, "Bliss," 14.
- 31 Mansfield, "Bliss," 14.
- 32 Aimee Gaston, "Cosmopolitanism and the Bloomsbury Group," in *New Zealand Literature*, ed. Aimee Gaston (New Zealand: Victoria University Press, 2010), 100.
- 33 Mansfield, "Bliss," 14.
- 34 Urmila Seshagiri, "Race and the Modernist Imagination," in *To the Lighthouse*, ed. Urmila Seshagiri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 100.
- 35 Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire*, 100.
- 36 Erika Rappaport, "The Bloomsbury Group and Consumerism in London," in *Pleasure in Twentieth-Century London*, ed. Sandra Trudgen (New York: Routledge, 2010), 100.
- 37 Rappaport, "Drink and the Bloomsbury Group," in *Pleasure in Twentieth-Century London*, ed. Sandra Trudgen (New York: Routledge, 2010), 100.

- London: *The Social Scene of Early Modernism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 161.
- 16 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 352.
  - 17 Lytton Strachey, Manuscript, vol. 3, King's College, Cambridge University, quoted in Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, "Bloomsbury and Empire," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Bloomsbury Group*, ed. Victoria Rosner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 115.
  - 18 Timothy Bewes, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 78.
  - 19 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 303.
  - 20 Mansfield, "Bliss," 150.
  - 21 Carole Sweeney, *From Fetish to Subject: Race, Modernism and Primitivism 1919–1935* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 106.
  - 22 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 212.
  - 23 R. S. Koppen, *Virginia Woolf, Fashion and Literary Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 22–23.
  - 24 Morag Shiach, "Domestic Bloomsbury," in Rosner, *Cambridge Companion to the Bloomsbury Group*, 64.
  - 25 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (London: Abacus, 1987), 64.
  - 26 Janet Lyon, "Cosmopolitanism and Modernism," in *The Oxford Book of Global Modernisms*, ed. Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 394. Lyon cites Pheng Cheah's concept of an imperializing, assimilative cosmopolitanism, to argue that cosmopolitan "plundering" had a "strong geographical inflection" with the routes of empire opening up "intercultural" zones.
  - 27 Mansfield, "Bliss," 146.
  - 28 Jane Garrity, "Modernist Women's Writing: Beyond the Threshold of Obsolescence," *Literature Compass* 10, no. 1 (2013): 19. doi:10.1111/lic3.12043.
  - 29 Alison Light, *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants* (London: Penguin, 2007), 53; xvii.
  - 30 Mansfield, "Bliss," 142, 148.
  - 31 Mansfield, "Bliss," 152.
  - 32 Aimee Gasston, "Consuming Art: Katherine Mansfield's Literary Snack," *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 31, no. 2 (2013): 178.
  - 33 Mansfield, "Bliss," 151.
  - 34 Urmila Seshagiri, "Orienting Virginia Woolf: Race, Aesthetics and Politics in *To the Lighthouse*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 69.
  - 35 Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire*, 64.
  - 36 Erika Rappaport, "Drink Empire Tea: Gender, Conservative Politics and Imperial Consumerism in Inter-War Britain," in *Consuming Behaviours: Identity, Politics and Pleasure in Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. Erika Rappaport, Mark J. Crowley, and Sandra Trudgen Dawson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 140.
  - 37 Rappaport, "Drink Empire Tea," 143.

- 38 Rappaport, "Drink Empire Tea," 150.
- 39 Katherine Mansfield, "A Cup of Tea," in Kimber and O'Sullivan, *Collected Fiction*, 461.
- 40 Anne Friedberg, "Les Flâneurs du Mal(l): Cinema and the Postmodern Condition," *PMLA* 3, no. 106 (1991): 422, quoted in Elizabeth Outka, *Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism and the Commodified Authentic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 147.
- 41 Mansfield, "A Cup of Tea," 461.
- 42 Mansfield, "A Cup of Tea," 462.
- 43 Mansfield, "A Cup of Tea," 465.
- 44 Markman Ellis, Richard Coulton, and Matthew Mauger, *Empire of Tea: The Asian Leaf that Conquered the World* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2015), 9.
- 45 Joanna de Groot, "Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections: Reflections on Consumption and Empire," in *At Home with Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 173.
- 46 D. Forrest, *Tea for the British* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), 184, quoted in de Groot, "Metropolitan Desires," 184–85.
- 47 Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, ed. Les Back and John Salamos (London: Routledge, 2000), 147.
- 48 Mansfield, "A Cup of Tea," 465.
- 49 Mansfield, "A Cup of Tea," 465.
- 50 Mica Nava, "Modernity's Disavowal: Women, the City and the Department Store," in *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, ed. Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea (London: Routledge, 1996), 49.
- 51 Nava, *Visceral Cosmopolitanism*, 31.
- 52 John Drummond, "A Creative Crossroads. The Revival of Dance in Fergusson's Paris," in Scottish Arts Council (1985): 22, quoted in Peter Brooker, *Bohemia in London: The Social Scene of Early Modernism* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 82.
- 53 Brooker, *Bohemia in London*, 175.
- 54 Katherine Mansfield, "Marriage à la Mode," in Kimber and O'Sullivan, *Collected Fiction*, 332.
- 55 Mansfield, "Marriage à la Mode," 332.
- 56 Mansfield "Marriage à la Mode," 330.
- 57 Mansfield, "Marriage à la Mode," 331.
- 58 Mansfield, "Marriage à la Mode," 334.
- 59 Virginia Woolf, "Bloomsbury," in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, 2nd ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 185, quoted in Rosner, *Modernism and Architecture*, 130.

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- 60 Mansfield, "Marriage à la Mode," 331.
- 61 Mansfield, "Marriage à la Mode," 330.
- 62 Mansfield, "Marriage à la Mode," 337.
- 63 Mansfield, "Bliss," 144.
- 64 Sir Christopher Ondaatje, *Woolf in Ceylon: An Imperial Journey in the Shadow of Leonard Woolf, 1904-1911* (London: Harper Collins, 2005), 238-39, quoted in Gerzina, "Bloomsbury and Empire," 113. Expressing his reservations about their proclaimed radicalism, Ondaatje asserts that they "were not radical enough to take seriously a viewpoint utterly removed from their own ... even through the literary filter of one of their own" (Gerzina, "Bloomsbury and Empire," 113).
- 65 Katherine Mansfield to John Middleton Murry, May 19, 1913, in *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield, 1903-1917*, vol. 1, ed. Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 124.



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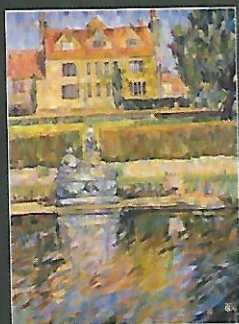
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