[Y]ou want to go back and be like a savage. . . . You want a life of pure sensation and “passion.”

(D. H. Lawrence, Women in Love)

D. H. Lawrence was among the period’s most passionate advocates of a nostalgic return to the primitive to revitalize modern civilization. In his roman-à-clef Women in Love, Lawrence envisioned Katherine Mansfield as a kindred spirit in this quest to reconnect with primal origins by using her as a model for the character Gudrun Brangwen, a sculptor whose strange little carvings are “full of primitive passion” and who, at one point, performs an impromptu vegetation dance (32, 157). Though other facets of Lawrence’s Mansfield portrait are hardly flattering, the linking of Gudrun/Mansfield to primitive rites and emotions bespeaks a perceived affinity with this fellow artist from the fringe. Mansfield’s early writings affirm that she initially embraced nostalgic primitivism, but by the time she met Lawrence in 1913, having been confronted with metropolitan prejudices casting her in the role of colonial-primitive, she was already rejecting this view. Scholars have examined Mansfield’s relationship with Lawrence, but neglected to factor in these writers’ different positions within a metropolitan literary culture obsessed with cultures and artifacts deemed primitive. Focusing on Mansfield’s Rhythm years (1912–1913), this chapter will argue that “the little savage from New Zealand” (as she was dubbed when she arrived in England) ultimately rejected the Lawrencian brand of primitivism, still under construction during this period.¹

Epitomizing Mansfield’s brief flirtation with primitivism is her short story “How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped,” probably composed in 1910, and published in Rhythm two years later. Narrated from the perspective
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of a young girl, the story expresses an ineluctable longing to return not just to childhood, but to a prior, innocent state associated with the Maori people in the Romantic primitivist view. In this way, the themes of “Pearl Button” resonate with a major motif in Lawrence's work—one that can be glimpsed in his story “The Soiled Rose” (published in *Rhythm*'s successor, *The Blue Review*, in 1913) and that receives full articulation in the essay “Indians and an Englishman” (published in John Middleton Murry's journal, *The Adelphi*, in 1923). All these texts share a yearning to return to an idealized past characteristic of a mode of longing that anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has called “imperialist nostalgia,” wherein traditional cultures' demise registers “not moral indignation, but an elegiac mode of perception” (107). Imperialist nostalgia assumes a posture of “innocent yearning” to efface metropolitan observers' complicity with processes hastening the destruction of indigenous cultures. Rosaldo explains that imperialist nostalgia relies upon a paradox: “someone deliberately alters a life form and then regrets that things have not remained as they were. . . . ‘We’ valorize innovation and then yearn for more stable worlds, whether these reside in our own past, in other cultures, or in the conflation of the two” (108). Of his own fieldwork in the Philippines, Rosaldo writes, “the very processes that aided my presence among the Ilongots were bringing devastating changes on them” (119).

As a response to processes of globalization propelled by new technologies of travel and communication, imperialist nostalgia can be seen as a specifically *modern* form of longing for an era when cultural differences seemed more distinct. Like Ian Baucom's concept of “postimperial melancholy,” this impulse to fetishize an idealized past entails one of the “willed amnesias of empire” (Baucom 172). In Baucom's study, the English country house emerges as a potent symbol for past imperial glory—one that strategically effaces the traffic in slaves, commodities, and capital that enabled such structures to be built. Mourning the decay of the country house as a national symbol amounts to lamenting the crumbling of a mere façade of English grandeur, one that masked a history of exploitation. Postimperial melancholy, then, is a nostalgia for the age of empire itself. Imperial nostalgia differs significantly in its source of melancholia: rather than mourning *for* empire, one mourns the destruction of supposedly pristine native cultures. One becomes an innocent bystander aghast at empire's effects, willfully forgetting one's entanglement in imperial histories.

Imperialist nostalgia also bears some resemblance to the nostalgic response of metropolitan English writers to eighteenth-century land