

# Counter-discourse in jamaica kincaid's a small place



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In the Western world, the Caribbean has long been viewed as an Edenic paradise. As a result, it has attracted legions of tourists from all over the world seeking an escape from the crushing banality of their day-to-day existence. While popular culture would have one think otherwise, many Caribbean natives resent the masses of innumerable tourists that frequent the region annually. Caribbean writers, in particular, have expressed contempt and indignation towards the tourist industry and the economic and environmental exploitation it entails. Adele S. Newson-Hurst and Munashe Furusa attest that, for Antiguan author Jamaica Kincaid, “tourism involves more than the accepted notion of the act of traveling for recreational or leisure purposes [...] Significantly, [her] definition creatively connects tourism with a new economic order sustained by injustice” (Newson-Hurst 142). Newson-Hurst and Furusa claims that Kincaid “connect[s] tourism with the imperial order and its design to commodify, relegating the other to a sub-human category for [colonial] consumption” (142). They argue that Kincaid’s work “contest[s] and subvert[s] assumptions about the [Caribbean] that are based on the ‘imperial text’ which posits people of the [Caribbean] as the ‘other’ whose main role is to quench the recreational and economic interests of the North” (141). My goal is to expand this claim by examining the ways in which Kincaid, in her short work *A Small Place*, employs postcolonial counter-discursive strategies to resist and combat exploitative imperialist attitudes towards the Caribbean and the West Indies.

Resistance through counter-discourse is a fundamental aspect of the formation and study of postcolonial texts. Helen Tiffin, in her work “Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse,” contends that “the project of

post-colonial literatures [is] to investigate the European textual capture and containment of colonial and post-colonial space and to intervene in that originary and continuing containment” (Tiffin 101). This, of course, is accomplished through counter-discourse, which Tiffin argues “ does not seek to subvert the dominant with a view to taking its place, but [...] to evolve textual strategies which [...] expose and erode [the biases] of the dominant discourse” (99). In other words, the purpose of counter-discourse, at least in this particular context, is not to overthrow and replace the hegemonic discourse perpetuated by imperialist ideology but rather to reveal and subsequently exploit the cracks in its foundation. Counter-discursive strategies, according to Tiffin, “ involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling [sic] of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified ‘ local’” (101). For the purposes my analysis, I will be paying especial attention to the final item in Tiffin’s list: the dismantling of long-held assumptions and biases established and considered fact by dominant ideology. Kincaid—the “ imperially subjectified local” in this scenario—subverts the Orientalist conception of the Caribbean as a tropical paradise replete with, in the words of Leah Rosenberg, “‘ island music,’ pristine beaches, [an] attentive black waiting staff, and the [...] freedom to dance and make love with partners not permitted in the north” (Rosenberg 361). Kincaid accomplishes this through the use of two strategies: first, by showing her readers the reality of Antiguan life; and second, by placing those same readers in the position of the “ imperially subjectified local” locked outside the hegemonic discourse with his/her voice appropriated by the colonial master narrative.

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There has been some debate regarding when and why the Caribbean and the West Indies came to be viewed as a paradise on earth. Rosenberg lists several factors, among them “ Britain’s loss of empire and the United States’ ascent to imperial superpower on the one hand, and on the other the U. S. struggle for Civil Rights, and West Indian nationalism; and by the interaction of these forces with culture: the calypso craze, the rise of an internationally recognized West Indian literary tradition, Britain’s need for a new literary aesthetic and vision of itself in the wake of Empire, and Hollywood’s fascination with race, romance, and Cinemascope” (362). Rosenberg further contends that islands such as Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Grenada, and Barbados appealed to North American and European sensibilities by offering “ a countryside- and beach-based tourism with the gentility associated with Britishness” (361). While Rosenberg dates the rise of the popular image of the Caribbean as a paradise at roughly 1950, Richard Grove, in “ Green Imperialism,” argues that the influx of tourists can be attributed to the search for Eden that flourished in the Middle Ages and continued well into the twentieth century. During this time, Grove asserts that “ the task of locating Eden and re-evaluating nature had already begun to be served by the appropriation of the newly discovered and colonized tropical islands as paradises” (Grove 499). It is this image of the Caribbean (and Antigua, in particular) as an Edenic utopia that Kincaid works to undermine in *A Small Place*.

Lesley Larkin, in her essay “ Reading and Being Read: Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* as Literary Agent,” aptly describes Kincaid’s slim essay collection as an “ anti-guidebook” in the sense that it shows the reader what actually

occurs in her home island of Antigua as opposed to what advertising and neocolonial representations of the Caribbean would have one believe (Larkin 195). Indeed, Kincaid presents the reader with a portrait of Antigua that is decidedly different from the romanticized representation perpetuated by Western media. Kincaid's Antigua is a nine-by-twelve-mile hotbed of political corruption and environmental exploitation; she laments the perpetually dry climate of the island and how it has become to be viewed by tourists as a positive characteristic. Kincaid bemoans, "[T]he thought of what it might be like for someone who had to live day in, day out in a place that suffers constantly from drought, and so has to watch carefully every drop of fresh water used [...], must never cross your [the tourist's] mind" (4). Kincaid proceeds to actively undermine the popular tropes and images associated with the Caribbean: for example, while contemplating the image of tourists wading out into the ocean, Kincaid snidely remarks, " You must not wonder what exactly happened to the contents of your lavatory when you flushed it [...] Oh, it might all end up in the water you are thinking of taking a swim in; the contents of your lavatory might, just might, graze gently against your ankle as you wade carefree in the water, for you see, in Antigua, there is no proper sewage-disposal system" (13-14). Antigua is politically corrupt, as well. The island's government regularly sacrifices the cultural stability and well-being of its citizens in order to accommodate the hordes of tourists that frequent the island. Later in the book, Kincaid relates to the reader a string of suspicious deaths that bear the unmistakable stench of politically-motivated assassination. The average tourist, of course, hasn't entertained the slightest thought or concern regarding these political troubles. Kincaid's seething hatred of the exploitative nature of tourism culminates when she <https://assignbuster.com/counter-discourse-in-jamaica-kincaids-a-small-place/>

contemptuously declares that “[a] tourist is an ugly human being” (14)—a statement that, as Adele S. Newson-Hurst and Munashe Furusa point out, “is tantamount to sacrilege as the economy of the nation is dependent on tourism” (Newson-Hurst 148).

While Kincaid obviously does not hold tourists in high regard, Lesley Larkin contends that “Kincaid’s primary target is not tourism itself but tourist-reading and the subject it produces [emphasis in the original]” (Larkin 195). According to Rosemary V. Hathaway, tourist-reading is “a form of selective reading” that “threatens to ‘subsume’ cultural particularity within preconceived notions” (qtd. in Larkin 195). According to Larkin, Kincaid “shows how tourist-reading is a productive discourse, one that constructs not only the tourist site and its inhabitants but also the tourist himself” (196). Larkin also suggests that Kincaid’s work “anticipates the touristic impulse of [its] readers”—many of whom, she argues, are “privileged white people, from the readers of *The New Yorker*, for whom Kincaid originally intended her work (and who are likely to be experienced tourists) to American college students who, regardless of touristic impulse, are regularly invited to ‘visit’ other cultures by the diversity requirements of university curricula” (194). Larkin further argues that Kincaid’s distinct use of second-person address, “points the finger at its [...] readers, critiquing contemporary reading practices for their affinity with global tourism and imperialism” (194). Thus, the reader is placed in the position of the imperialized local—his/her voice has been silenced and even appropriated by Kincaid where necessary. To compound this representation, Kincaid makes sweeping general statements that fail to take into account the heterogeneity of her audience. For Kincaid,

her audience coalesces into a formless white blob—they have been effectively dehumanized in the same way that imperialist ideology has dehumanized those who have been directly marginalized by colonial discourse.

It becomes increasingly evident that Kincaid holds the reader directly responsible for the injustices Antiguan people have faced at the hands of European colonizers. “Have you ever wondered to yourself why it is that all people like me seem to have learned from you is how to imprison and murder each other [...]?” seethes Kincaid (Kincaid 34). She continues, “Have you ever wondered why it is that all we seem to have learned from you is how to corrupt our societies and how to be tyrants?” (34). According to Kincaid, the unwitting reader “will have to accept that this is mostly [their] fault” (34-35). She then proceeds to unleash a deluge of accusations against which the reader is powerless to defend themselves: “You murdered people,” she fumes (35); “You imprisoned people. You robbed people. You opened [. . .] banks and put our money in them. [. . .] There must have been some good people among you,” Kincaid admits, “but they stayed home. And that is the point. That is why they are good. They stayed home.” (35). Kincaid never gives the reader the opportunity to defend themselves against these accusations and give their side of the story. By robbing the reader of his/her voice, Kincaid forces him/her to experience this subhuman status for themselves. Works Cited Carrigan, Anthony. “Hotels Are Squatting on My Metaphors: Tourism, Sustainability, and Sacred Space in the Caribbean.” *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 13-14. 2-1 (2006): 59-82. MLA International Bibliography [ProQuest]. Web. 2 Nov. 2015.

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