

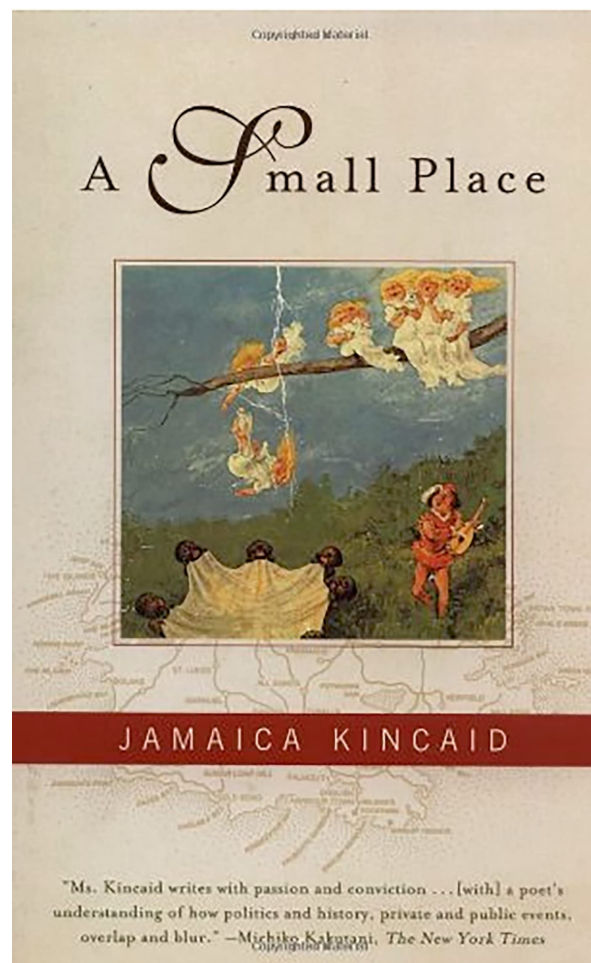
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note

Writing in Place with Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*

by Jesse Curran



JAMAICA KINCAID, *A SMALL PLACE*. FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX, 1988.

Twenty years ago, when I was an undergraduate at SUNY Geneseo, all students were required to take two classes: "Humanities I" and "Humanities II." The sequence presented the Western Humanities from Greek beginnings to the twentieth century. It was a "great books" approach at the core of a liberal arts agenda and was challenging, formative, and riddled with discourses of dominant and oppressive ideologies. While instructors had some freedom to select representative texts, the narrative was fairly canonical. In my senior year, I was a Teaching Assistant for a section of Humanities II with an English professor who vocally advocated for her Marxist-Feminist-Postcolonial critical practices. She openly critiqued the canon, even as she rigorously read the texts and taught us to see the ideologies embedded in political discourse, philosophical hierarchies, and literary form. To finish the sequence, my professor, who became a mentor and life-long friend, chose to teach Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, which, as she argued, offered a necessary critique of the Western tradition. *A Small Place* was the text that intellectually undid what we had just done. The heft of Kincaid's sentences confronts the colonial legacies that are all too ubiquitous in works of the Western tradition. As Kincaid powerfully questions, "Do you wonder why people like me are shy about being capitalists? Well, it's because we, for as long as we have known you, were capital" (37).

Twenty years later, I find myself teaching a wide range of literature courses in a small English department that values multicultural content. One of the courses I now teach is "Literature Across Cultures: Theory." The course is designed to introduce students to a sampling of critical perspectives, so they might begin to develop their interpretive muscles through exploring different literary theories. In addition to critiquing a range of literary texts, we experiment with asking the same theoretical questions of children's books and popular movies in order to generate interpretations and to demonstrate the possibilities of divergent views.

When I was first tasked with teaching this course, I knew right away that I wanted to teach *A Small Place*, as it had been so highly formative in shaping my own sense of how identity-based literary theories had done—and continued to do—such valuable work in critiquing dominant power structures. *A Small Place* exposes many of the key ideas of postcolonial theory; it is also highly relevant to ecocritical and Marxist thought (two theories we address in the course). In the text, Kincaid reflects upon her experiences growing up in Antigua and the ways in which British colonial rule impacted education, government, economy, and daily life. Kincaid begins the book, "If you go to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see" -- and takes the reader on an insider's tour of Antigua, including stops at the airport, hotel, hospital, local library, and beyond (3). As her narrative moves through the place, she reveals details of her own childhood, with a particular focus on social issues like governmental corruption and economic inequity, making visible what is sometimes invisible for the tourist. I am particularly fascinated by what Kincaid does with genre, adapting the exploitative gaze of the travel narrative to force the reader into an

uncomfortable space of feeling complicit in the extension of colonial and postcolonial history into a neocolonial present. The book had a profound effect on my perspective as a young person eager to travel and explore the world. When Kincaid calls the tourist "ugly" -- and the second person voice posits that ugly tourist as the reader -- contemporary complicity is exposed and it can be powerfully instructive.

Quite a number of students at my institution have ethnic roots in the Caribbean, so they bring an empathetic perspective to class discussions about the text, as they have experiences travelling to places like Antigua not necessarily as a tourist. For others, the Caribbean offers a relatively accessible "tropical paradise" vacation experience that is alluring. To facilitate discussion on the dynamics of Kincaid's framing of exploitative tourism, I show the class a six-minute "Antigua Vacation Travel Guide" video produced by Expedia. The students are able to easily identify the ways in which the place is being "sold" and how brief mentions of historical landmarks (connected to slavery, sugar plantations, colonial forts, etc.) are pleasantly framed in favor of the exultation of sandy beaches and "island time." We then begin to identify how Kincaid's text is extremely different, pointing out textual examples that are by no means featured on the travel video. For example, Kincaid writes: "the contents of your lavatory might, just might, graze gently against your ankle as you made carefree in the water, for you see, in Antigua, there is no proper sewage-disposal system. But the Caribbean Sea is very big and the Atlantic Ocean is even bigger; it would amaze even you to know the number of black slaves this ocean has swallowed" (14). We spend time unpacking examples like this, where Kincaid moves swiftly from problems in infrastructure to the history of slavery, suggesting ways in which the geographical sweep of the Atlantic swallows the historical memory her book works to reveal.

The student population at my institution is largely commuter, low-income, and first-generation; students usually balance school with full time employment and care-taking labor. I've noticed that my students are often exhausted and overwhelmed at the end of the semester with multiple capstone research essays. As a small way of responding to this larger end-of-term exhaustion, if the course requires a research essay, I schedule the paper mid-semester. I then present an alternative final assessment by designing an assignment that integrates a creative component. For example, students have reversed ekphrasis and have painted their interpretations of a poem. One student recently designed a costume from thrift store rummaging for *Othello's* Desdemona. Another student crocheted a crown of the flowers Ophelia tosses in *Hamlet*. The students then write a reflection supporting their creative choices, analyzing examples from the text specifically relevant to their creative choices. Students often express how much they enjoy this assignment at the end, noting how it allows them freedom to respond in ways that jive with their passions.

For "Literature Across Cultures: Theory," I have been experimenting with a new creative assignment connected to *A Small Place*, which is also tied to my current writing

project, a series of place-based essays and poems. In this writing project, I work to take a hard and critical look at the economic and racial inequities of my place -- and to examine my own privilege and complicity in ongoing segregation and environmental degradation. I challenge the students with writing their own postcolonial travelog, channeling Kincaid's tone and rhetorical strategies. I ask them to take on the second person and narrate the different and sometimes contradictory ways of seeing their hometowns or neighborhoods. We all start echoing Kincaid's language: *if you come to X* (Levittown, Farmingdale, Ozone Park), *this is what you will see*.

In order to encourage a shift in critical perspective concerning Long Island and the boroughs of New York City (where almost all of my students are from), for about two class sessions, I open discussions and informal workshops about local history. Very few students have much prior awareness of local history, and especially not local Indigenous history. Given time restraints, our dive isn't too deep, but is just enough to fathom and become aware of the depths we *could* explore. I am careful to outline questions that bear direct connections to Kincaid's work. For example, early in *A Small Place*, Kincaid notes whom the airport in Antigua is named after, so I ask my students to try to learn more about their local place names. Where did the word "Massapequa" come from? Who is the "Smith" in Smithtown? In addition, I provide them with some articles that discuss Long Island's racial and economic segregation. In our previous course unit, we explored ecocritical approaches, so I also introduce some of the basics of local environmental justice concerns (superfund sites, industrial plumes, differences in water quality and pollution based on socio-economic demographics, etc.). There isn't enough time to do a deep dive into research here, and perhaps more importantly, the introduction reveals the depths of our collective ignorance, and how this very "overlooking" becomes part of what practicing literary theory seeks to reveal. What do we overlook and why? What voices are missing? When we think about "our island," what are the narratives we have long been taught and who scripted those stories?

In order to encourage class discussion, I share with the students a sample essay that I wrote in response to the assignment, which reflects upon my own experiences growing up on Long Island. My essay largely negotiates how I grew up feeling ashamed of my family's working-class identity, as I lived on the fringes of a wealthy "gold coast" community. It also reflects how my friends and I were raised to participate in racist ways of thinking -- as we were told about "good" and "bad" sides of town, code words our elders used for racially segregated neighborhoods. I hope my own admission of uncomfortable emotions like shame and guilt, as well as using writing as a path toward atoning for my ignorance, helps open discussion of what can sometimes be uncomfortable to recognize and voice. I recall one student responding to my essay saying that she too "always felt poor," even as she realized her family was comfortably middle class.

Students often find that once they begin drafting, they have much material to interrogate and reflect upon.

As a response to the structural segregation on Long Island, many students write about the invisible lines in their towns that separate people by class and race. Consider the example of a first-generation Salvadorian student who lives in Springs, a small hamlet near East Hampton. She offered a scathing and emotionally powerful critique of the economic oppression of the tourist economy that both sustains and often demeans her family, who largely work in service industries providing for summering celebrities and Manhattanites. Another student wrote about white flight through noticing the crumbling infrastructure and outdated textbooks in his neighborhood school in Queens. Another student wrote about never knowing that his hometown of Levittown had excluded non-white people from buying homes in post-war America. Students will write about their existential discomfort in walking down blocks with MAGA flags and tell stories of the silent suffering among their peers from opioids.

In many ways, this assignment asks students to write about something they know intimately, but perhaps have not yet had the critical frame or rhetorical position through which to write. Kincaid's book, in providing both the frame and the rhetorical gestures, offers a compelling point of entry. Emulating Kincaid's second person seems to liberate students to be as cynical and critical as they please. They also find a space for ambivalence, as they explore their desire to maintain nostalgic affection along with the other socio-economic realities that are part of their lived experience, particularly in connection to their identities as workers, immigrants, and members of other historically oppressed groups.

The most common comment that I receive from students through the drafting and discussion surrounding this assignment echoes "I never really thought about...." As one student writes, "I had driven down Thomas Powell Boulevard countless times but never ever thought to stop and question who he was." Turns out he was responsible for "purchasing" land from Indigenous tribes all across Long Island. Connected to their creative narrative, students also write a reflection identifying what ideas from literary theory helped them analyze their place. In our final class session, the students all read a paragraph from their travelogs--and we collectively listen and learn from one another. I sense we all learn a bit more about our "island" and all find a bit more courage to share our stories. Ultimately, *A Small Place* stands as an invaluable text in encouraging students to think theoretically. It also provides an opening for them to narrate their own stories, recognizing the layers of complexity and contradiction involved with being a resident of a place and a subject in history.

Work Cited

Kincaid, Jamaica. *A Small Place*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988.

Jesse Curran is a poet, essayist, scholar, and teacher. Trained as an environmental humanist, she is passionate about interdisciplinary approaches to the ethical restoration of place. Her creative work has appeared in dozens of literary journals, including *Blueline*, *After the Art*, *Green Humanities*, *About Place*, and *Ruminate*. Her academic work, which explores connections between eco-poetic theory and contemplative practices, has been published in *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, *The Trumpeter*, *The Arrow*, and in other edited volumes. She teaches full-time in the English department at SUNY Old Westbury.



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