



Meghan Buckley

[Creative] Nonfiction Novella:
Teaching Postcolonial Life Writing and
the Hybrid Genre of Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*

Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* has long posed a challenge of classification: At eighty-one pages long, its narrative work does not qualify as a "novel"; yet, its lack of character development and overall plot render "novella" an equally dissatisfying term. The angry tone of the piece has caused some readers to define it as a "polemic," while others have pointed to its simple structure of "title plus text" as indicative of a creative nonfiction essay. In book reviews, Caryl Phillips and Leslie Garris have referred to it as a "nonfiction essay" and an "enraged essay," respectively. Academics writing about the work also vary in their terminology: Suzanne Gauch refers to it as an "essay," Leslie Larkin calls it an "anti-guidebook" in reference to the tourism motif that Kincaid meticulously dismantles in its pages, and Rhonda Frederick simply refers to it as a "text." Others, such as Jane King in her oft-cited essay "*A Small Place* Writes Back" (2002), refrain from referring to *A Small Place* as anything but "*A Small Place*" (i.e. not as a book, a narrative, a novella, etc.), clearly dissatisfied with its inability to seamlessly align with any of the vocabulary listed above. None of the available terminology used to describe *A Small Place* seem to capture its inherent, and difficult to pinpoint, multifaceted movement between fiction and nonfiction; a "book" certainly, but also parts non-fiction essay, creative nonfiction, polemic, narrative, and novella.

Arguably, then, *A Small Place* operates as a hybrid text: in parts all the above descriptors, but one that perhaps best aligns with that of a creative nonfiction novella. An explanation of my meaning is necessary, as in recent years short nonfiction texts have begun to adopt the term "novella" while remaining creative nonfiction (a nod to the nonfiction novel, with Capote and Mailer as prime examples, is also necessary here). For my purposes, using the term "creative nonfiction novella" represents Kincaid's hybrid

use of both fiction and nonfiction in this text. The in-between-ness of this genre conversation speaks to the in-between-ness of Kincaid's text as a whole: the writer herself lodged between her Antiguan roots and her United States residency, the writings contained therein negotiating the "real Antigua" known to the native and the "ideal Antigua" viewed by the tourist. In combining these two seemingly disparate factors of the fictional and nonfictional into one text through a careful yoking of specificity and allegory, Kincaid widens the scope of what constitutes acceptable form within postcolonial writing, itself both a literary genre and theoretical framework heavily informed by historical record. As a creative nonfiction novella, *A Small Place* successfully straddles the line between primary and secondary/critical text, its ability to be studied as both offering unique pedagogical implications in higher education courses on topics which range in focus from genre studies, to postcolonial literature, to travel narratives, and to geopolitical and environmental writing.

An Analysis of Past Pedagogical Approaches

To fully engage with the notion of *A Small Place* being taught as a hybrid text requires first examining how it has traditionally *been* taught: both in terms of the texts that it is taught alongside, as well as the overarching goals and themes of the courses it is taught within. Using publicly available syllabi from a number of American universities shows how the text has been diversely incorporated in both undergraduate and graduate courses. Undergraduate courses on the counter-narratives of globalization have singled out *A Small Place* for Kincaid's "blunt provocations," including it as primary reading alongside creative nonfiction works from Gloria Anzaldúa and Edwidge Danticat. Conversely, graduate syllabi in postcolonial literature have grouped *A Small Place* alongside either all fictional texts set in Africa, India, and the Caribbean, as well as a mixture of both fiction and critical theory set in multiple formerly colonized territories worldwide, and, more recently, within the context of postcolonial environmentalisms. Outside of postcolonial studies, it has appeared in courses dedicated to world literature, transnational feminisms,

tourism rhetoric, and even “American Storytellers.” The varied manner that *A Small Place* has been built in to these courses, with their extremely disparate foci and intended learning outcomes, speaks directly to its hybrid genre: stylistically and temporally unbound, *A Small Place* works as either a primary or a critical text for any course which seeks to examine the transnational and globalized legacies of decolonization from a rhetorical, a gendered, or an interethnic imaginative standing.

However, this hybridity of genre within the university setting encounters problems when the students whose worldview one aims to expand are the potential vilified “tourists” of Kincaid’s prose. As Rhonda Frederick writes with regard to teaching the text to a decidedly Euro-American audience, many students feel angry, defensive, or closed off when encountering the text for the first time, and this anger must be counteracted with pedagogical strategies such as “pre-reading” other colonial texts with less of a provocative tone than Kincaid’s in an attempt to help them locate the space of alliance postcolonial texts offer the reader in their expressions of subjectivity, instead of immediately identifying as the author’s enemy, reinforced in *A Small Place* by its pointed dictation to “you” (2). The difference between the “tourist” and the “native” should not be neatly compartmentalized into students’ already existing worldview, but instructors ought to help students interrogate how these definitions are inherently ambiguous and subjective. As Kincaid herself argues, “Every native is a potential tourist and every tourist is a native of somewhere”; focusing on the relationship between the writerly intent and the readerly interpretation of such a statement allows students to question their previous notions of being in the world while also considering the purpose behind *A Small Place*’s form and content (18). As Meredith Coffey reflects on teaching *A Small Place* to students in her undergraduate “Rhetoric of Tourism” course: “Last fall my students were genuinely offended by Kincaid’s argument...many became angry at the text’s accusations or ashamed.” Yet, she adds that her spring semester students felt annoyed “in a different way” when tasked with identifying Kincaid’s main thesis in *A Small Place* and boiling it down to one sentence, arguing that the text was too complex to do so. Meanwhile, Creighton Nicholas Brown writes in

“Education Archipelago: Alternative Knowledges and the Production of Docile Bodies in Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* and Marjane Satrapi’s *The Complete Persepolis*” that he situates teaching *A Small Place* in his undergraduate course a week before his students leave for spring break and potentially become the “tourist.”

In my own courses, I have tried to utilize the activity of opening a discussion on *A Small Place* by asking students to pick one word or phrase to describe the text. The typical phrases one would imagine are often chosen, such as “angry,” “opinionated,” and “blunt.” However, I have also often gotten quite a few responses in semesters past that have surprised me—both in terms of their meaning and applicability to the text, as well as their sophistication and originality. Some of these less-typical descriptors include reading the text as a “one-sided conversation,” a “general letter to the spatial amnesia of colonialism,” an “invitation to alternative perspective,” and even “Gilded Age,” in reference to the imperfect nostalgia Kincaid injects, which one of my students paralleled to Mark Twain’s contention about the Gilded Age of America, which was “glittering on the surface but corrupt underneath”—an exceptionally insightful comparison to the way Kincaid portrays Antigua’s colonial history of the past and tourism industry of the present. What each of these responses indicate, however, is the difficulty of pigeon-holing the text into a singular category—*A Small Place*, in its directness and brevity, invites its reader to consider the myriad generic categories it partially upholds, obscures, and overlaps with. Effectively, all of my students have resisted the task of simplifying Kincaid’s text into a word, phrase, or sentence; they might settle on one initially, but almost always feel the need to say more, to point to a line or section of the text in order to “show what they mean,” or contextualize their statement with a question or comment about the (post)colonial history that Kincaid seamlessly weaves into her text, and which many of my students were oblivious to before being required to read it.

I have now taught *A Small Place* in three different courses—“Introduction to World Literature,” “Introduction to Fiction,” and “Empire and Global English”—and each time I have avoided referring to

A Small Place as a primary text, even though I have listed it as one on all three syllabi, further complicating its classification. In those courses that are explicitly historical and cultural in theme, the reading and discussion of *A Small Place* often is centered on explicating the legacy of Antiguan colonization that Kincaid describes, as well as situating the text within a larger framework of the postcolonial concepts of the contact zone, ambivalence, and the gaze. However, in my “Intro to Fiction” course teaching Kincaid’s work is much more challenging—the largest question that my students grapple with is usually: “Is *A Small Place* a work of fiction?” Resoundingly, students argue that no, it is not, which offers the opportunity to consider the nonfiction aspect of the text. Because of these anomalies, though, the text serves as an exemplary model of the myriad forms that prose can take, and how readers need not always be positioned as a nonentity or witness, but can also function as a bystander and/or potential collaborator who is very much complicit in the injustices and exploitation Kincaid depicts.

Categorical Complications

What the above teaching strategies demonstrate is a conscious decision to treat Kincaid’s prose not as fiction but as critical text. Yet, within the domain of postcolonial writings, *A Small Place* draws parallels to both artistic and theoretical works, complicating the way it is placed within the canon of Western literature. Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Genocide in Nigeria* (1992), for example, is extremely similar in length and form to Kincaid’s text—roughly 90 pages long and divided into short chapters, Saro-Wiwa’s explicit focus on the Ogoni response to oil drilling has been efficiently classified as a “novella” operating in the “testimonial tradition” due to its clear focus on environmentalism and neocolonialism. Moreover, V.S. Naipaul’s “In A Free State” (1971), the title piece from the short story collection of the same name, is also reminiscent of Kincaid’s writings: Naipaul, a postcolonial writer of Caribbean descent like Kincaid, sets up “In A Free State” to operate semi-allegorically in an unnamed newly independent African state that is similarly plagued by political disorder and deteriorating governmental infrastructure in the wake of decolonization.

Yet, “In A Free State” is consistently referred to as a “novella” or a “short story” within the collection despite falling into the same hybrid-genre work as *A Small Place*. Perhaps the question is simply one of classification that exists in the creative writing sphere but has not yet transferred to the critical mode. This is an issue that raises the need for ongoing conversations about genre between the various groups who study literature.

Despite the formal features that connect it to Saro-Wiwa and Naipaul’s works, *A Small Place* also shares stylistic features and overlaps in theme, content, and message with hallmark examples of postcolonial theory. Aime Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955) describes the role of the European colonizer in terms highly evocative of Kincaid in *A Small Place*: for Césaire, the colonizer is “barbaric” and “decivilized,” while for Kincaid he is “human rubbish from Europe” (Césaire 35, Kincaid 80). The inherent dehumanization of the native through the discourse of racism and the black/white binary for Césaire is the same dehumanization Kincaid speaks of in terms of the “native”/“tourist” binary. Furthermore, Césaire argues that “a capitalist society is incapable of establishing...rights for all men...[or] of establishing a system of individual ethics,” just as Kincaid remarks that people “like her” are shy about being capitalists because “we, for as long as we have known you, *were* capital” (Césaire 39, Kincaid 37). Notions of the colonial gaze and obstacles of recognition also connect *A Small Place* to Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). For Fanon, the experience of racial subjectivity for the black man is constructed and realized under the white gaze, just as Kincaid narrates the disconnect between the “tourist” who stares and the subjugation of the Antiguan who are the focus of and who suffer underneath this scrutiny. The closing lines of *A Small Place*, which some critics have problematically referred to as “reductive,” echoes the dilemma of a lack of mutual recognition in terms of the master/slave conflict. Moreover, Alfred Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957) discusses the colonizer as disbelieving in his “innocence...deep within himself pleading guilty” while Kincaid refers to the colonizer

as a “criminal” whose cardinal sin is robbing the Antiguan of their national culture and national language (Memmi 57, Kincaid 32).

Yet, despite these numerous parallels, the hybrid genre Kincaid adopts in *A Small Place* allows her readers to absorb the complex theoretical models she seamlessly injects into it through the wry wit of her lyrical prose. Although Césaire refers to the colonizer’s acts of forced control and exploitation as “indefensible,” Kincaid maintains that the English are just exceptionally “ill-mannered...not racist” (34); while Fanon’s text concerns itself with displacement through the complex lenses of psychology and psychoanalysis, Kincaid’s “gaze” is caught up in the comparison of the native, wearing things fashioned out of “vulgarily colored twine (to you),” with the tourist, the “incredibly unattractive, fat, pastrylike-fleshed man...a nice blob” (13, 16). Her tongue-in-cheek observations on the everyday mechanisms of colonialism that still very much exist in newly decolonized spaces like Antigua breathe new life into subject matter that is typically thought of as complex and somber; students want to keep reading about the discourse of postcolonial studies contained within *A Small Place* in a way that postcolonial theory does not always generate, and which pure fiction alone does not grapple with as overtly or successfully, failing to hold their readers accountable the way Kincaid does.

What makes Kincaid’s text so useful, then, is the way these categorical complications demonstrate essential concepts about the form and function of postcolonial writing. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, *A Small Place* exemplifies how postcolonial texts need not always be long and dramatic tomes but can come in a variety of lengths and forms. In other words: big books are not necessarily inherently “better,” “deeper,” or more “scholarly,” but can work equally well as historically instructive narratives. In her article on the value of smaller nonfiction texts, “In Praise of Small Volumes: Big Book, Big Evil,” Julija Sukys reflects that, as a writer, deciding on the appropriate style and length of a text is not only one of the biggest challenges of writing, but is also something that the content of the text often dictates for

itself: “Writing is selection... [you need to] take away what doesn’t belong... Just as long books must justify every leaf and every additional signature, short ones need to earn their brevity.” She continues:

The form of my manuscript emerged when I finally accepted that it was no memoir. My book, I came to understand, was an essay: a tiny book-length essay that simultaneously looked forward and backward and that put a series of questions about guilt, inheritance, and the overvaluing of origins at its center. And because it was an essay, neither the “real I” nor the “writing I” could remain the protagonist of the book. Nor could my grandparents, for that matter. For an essay “is something that tracks the evolution of the human mind,” writes John D’Agata. It charts the mental journey of a human being through the world. So, in the end, my book’s protagonist, if I can put it this way, was a thought process and a journey of understanding.

The parallels to *A Small Place* are obvious in this context and Sukys’ argument is clearly applicable to Kincaid. The brevity of the text—as well as its hybrid genre—offers a specific reading experience for students, who often report reading *A Small Place* from start to finish in one sitting, enabling more focused and thorough reading that in turn allows for more provocative and detailed analysis of the text in both class discussions and take-home essay assignments. Secondly, Kincaid’s text exemplifies what Creighton Nicholas Brown identifies as a specific form of postcolonial life-writing: a type of writing that “typically places less emphasis on the individual and more on how underrepresented communities navigate different types and scales of power, discourse, and discipline: local, national, and international.” Postcolonial life writing begins from the source knowledge of the writer herself—in this case, Kincaid—and attempts to show the reader how 1) this knowledge differs from the reader’s worldview and 2) how this alternative knowledge and information should be taken just as seriously as the dominant ideologies with which the reader is already familiar.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this second consideration about the alternative education that postcolonial life-writing often provides leads to the third useful characteristic of the hybrid genre of *A Small Place*—its explicit focus and discussion of education itself. According to Brown, postcolonial life-writing such as Kincaid’s is useful in highlighting the discipline and docility in educational practices that produce [colonial] bodies that are economically and politically useful. In *A Small Place*, Kincaid reflects on the function of education in decolonized Antigua through the examples of the defunct public library, “REPAIRS PENDING” since an earthquake in 1974, as well as the existence of the Hotel Training School, which Brown argues is a modern-day corollary to Antigua’s history with slavery (42). With these examples, Kincaid portrays the education system in Antigua as not meant to encourage its students’ personal advancement or increased agency, but as instead ensuring the continuation of instructional practices that are biased and fundamentally deficient. As she reflects: “You loved knowledge and wherever you went you made sure to build a school, a library (yes, in both of these places you distorted or erased my history and glorified your own)” (36). While Brown has written about the way education deposited on students in these formerly colonized spaces like Antigua reflect the dominant ideologies of imperial discourse, I would challenge instructors who teach *A Small Place* to a predominantly Euro-American student audience to engage in conversations in which we transfer ideas of conditioning and docility from the colonial subject to the contemporary student. To what extent, for example, are the students we teach—many of whom are unaware of the largely silenced and ignored experiences of Antiguan natives like Kincaid until reading this text— inadvertently exemplifying the way that education systems co-opt their subjects? In what ways have the students we teach today been disciplined to meekly accept uniform national histories of places they have never been to without question? In engaging in conversations such as these, Kincaid’s “I” transforms from an autobiographical rendering to a powerful and alternative collective perspective that exposes students to under- and mis-represented voices in the postcolonial canon.

Conclusion: Caribbean Writing and A Case for the Critical

A Small Place is not made unique by its brevity and form, but its hybridity between fiction and nonfiction, its focus on the legacies of colonization which plague Antigua, specifically, but can be applied to many formerly colonized nations of the West Indies and the Caribbean broadly, its allegorical juxtaposition of the “tourist” and the “native,” and the text’s familiar use of the second-person renders it a piece of experimental Caribbean writing, pushing the boundaries between reading and being read. *A Small Place* remains noteworthy for its displacement of its reader—both in terms of subject position and temporality. The text’s allegorical nature is useful not only because of its applicability to numerous postcolonial locales and venues—Stephanie Black’s incorporation of chunks of *A Small Place* to narrate her documentary *Life and Debt* (2001), detailing the effects of decolonization and tourism on Jamaica, is a good example of this—but also because its lack of specificity underscores that its commentary on oppression, exploitation, and privilege is *timeless*. As Diana Brydon argues, texts like *A Small Place* help to call into question politics of scale across geopolitical borders: “...literary experimentation may best be understood in performative terms as an intervention that seeks to trouble the prevailing paradigms and scales through which readers understand knowledge production, artistic practice, and interpretation. The goal of this troubling is to imagine forms of cognitive justice that can free the imagination to create social justice,” a task she argues will take different forms in different social settings (28). The way that Kincaid speaks directly *to* her reader throughout the text—critiquing him for his Euro-American assumptions and blissful ignorance—transforms the practice of reading, typically a personal and private endeavor, into an interactive experience that allows us to recognize ourselves and someone else simultaneously, causing what Lesley Larkin has referred to as the “repeated identification and disidentification with others” (195).

Within the framework of teaching the text across disciplines, these modes of interruption open up the possibility of dialogue—between the reader and writer, as well as between instructor and student; yet, connected to this idea of dialogue requires reinforcing Kincaid’s work as one that is inherently critical and

theoretical—an exceptionally artistic rendering of the critical, but critical nonetheless. *A Small Place* shares characteristics with both primary and critical/secondary textual categories, but it also upholds core features of postcolonial writing such as ambivalence, appropriation, a reimagining of the contact zone, and ecological imperialism in a way that breaks down the boundary between reader/writer that “fiction” tends to keep firm. Kincaid’s hybrid style brilliantly underscores the complexity of this issue; the difficult to label prose style of *A Small Place* keeps the text relevant and, more importantly, also helps prevent a forgetting of the important marginalized historical record it sheds light upon.

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