

Traveling Old Policies: A Guided Tour by Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*

Viajando através do anacrônico sistema colonial: uma excursão guiada por Jamaica Kincaid em A Small Place

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Abstract

*Through her book *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid provides the readers with the critical vision of the ones who belong to countries submitted to IMF policy, and the devastating effects on local communities. By speaking out her anger against the globalized economy, Kincaid shows the other side of the so-called neo-liberal economy and how the US tourists ignore the problem by having fun at the beaches without showing any concern to the extreme poverty disguised by the five-star hotels, the exquisite food and the customary tourist attractions. By analyzing this piece of Kincaid's nonfiction work, I intend to bring to fore the concept of a neo-colonial country facing a globalized world and how this transition is done under grievance, sufferance and loss of sovereignty. The choice of a text written by a woman writer provides a powerful and original way of looking over the economic facts making use of literary discourse.*

Key words: Mimicry, neocolonial, globalization.

Resumo

*Através do livro *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid fornece aos leitores uma visão crítica daqueles que pertencem a países submetidos à política do FMI, e os efeitos devastadores sobre as comunidades locais. Ao articular a sua raiva contra a economia globalizada, Kincaid mostra o outro lado da economia neoliberal e como os turistas estadunidenses ignoram o problema ao desfrutarem o sol nas praias sem mostrar nenhuma preocupação com a pobreza extrema disfarçada pelos hotéis cinco estrelas, a comida deliciosa e as costumeiras atrações turísticas. Ao analisar este ensaio de Kincaid, eu pretendo trazer à discussão o conceito de país neocolonial em relação ao mundo globalizado e como esta transição é feita com rejeição, sofrimento e perda de soberania. A escolha de um texto escrito por uma mulher oferece uma maneira original e forte de analisar fatos econômicos, utilizando-se de um discurso literário.*

Palavras-chaves: Arremedo, neocolonial, globalização.

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Textura	Canoas	n. 6/7	mar.2002/mar.2003	p. 19-23
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If you go to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see.

Jamaica Kincaid

In this paper I want to analyze two issues, which happen to arise as the internal dynamics of Jamaica Kincaid's piece of nonfiction — the burden of a colonial past and the role of the so-called global tourism in contemporary Antigua. Both the colonial past and the way the Antiguan deal with tourism exhibit an intricate relationship where the former 'masters' actually become 'strangers' and the former 'slaves' become the 'hosts' of the land.

In *A Small Place*, written in 1988, Kincaid makes resource of Antigua's native attractions for American and Europeans tourists in order to approach the socioeconomic political plight experienced by this Caribbean island. She opens the essay by enumerating the tourist attractions such as five-star hotels, the permanent sun, the aphrodisiac fish, the lush vegetation and the incredible navy-blue water of the astonishing sea. At every step the tourist gives, Kincaid blends the beauty of the place with the harsh reality of the population. What seems a permanent source of delight for the tourists like bad roads in contrast with the splendid roads of North America, for the native population means a setback from colonial legacy. Along the path from the five-star hotel, the tourist, who is comfortably sitting on a Japanese car, starts asking herself if the driver's house can match such a brand-new car. Moreover, the tourist will also notice that the dusty building that they happened to pass by has a sign, which reads PIGOTT'S SCHOOL.

Throughout the text, Kincaid will recall both her past while still a child and the present of Antigua as well. In the first part of the essay, Kincaid draws attention to the most important historical references of the island. In each building, we can perceive that the negligence and the passage of time caused big damage to the cultural spots. The library, for example, after the earthquake of 1974, is still waiting for the reforms as the sign placed on the front of the building says: THIS BUILDING WAS DAMAGED IN THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1974, REPAIRS ARE PENDING (p.9).

Kincaid's text reveals a postcolonial trend of highlighting obscure features concerning

the ex-colonies. In the case of Antigua, a small island (nine miles wide by twelve miles long) that composes the region known as the Caribbean islands, we can observe the process of domination on the part of the British colonizers who contributed in the sense of dwarfing self-government. If in the colonial times, Antigua was scenery of a whole pantomime of the British Empire under brown colors, the exit of the British from the island did not change the course of politics for Antigua. Even today, they make use of the same political way of government the British do. The regime followed by the Antiguan population is the constitutional monarchy with UK-style parliament; Queen Elizabeth II (since 6 February 1952) as chief of state represented by Governor General James B. Carlisle (since 1993); the head of government – Prime Minister Lester Bryant Bird (since 8 March 1994); the cabinet composed by the Council of Ministers appointed by the governor general on the advice of the prime minister; the monarch is hereditary; the governor general chosen by the monarch on the advice of the prime minister; and the prime minister appointed by the governor general.

The reproduction of the same political regime demonstrates on the part of the Antiguan a clear idea of the wreck the English empire inflicted on that specific island. From the very beginning of its formation as a colonial territory, Antigua gives signs of a process of development known as mimicry. According to Bhabha (1994, p. 86), mimicry reports to the XIX century when the colonized subject suffers the assimilation of the language, customs, ideals, habits, attire of the colonizer making part of the representation where the original identity is substituted by the culture of the Other. Consequently, the colonized subject seems to be something he is not, exhibiting behavior and attitudes that are "almost the same but not quite".

The issue of mimicry is based on psychoanalytical terms that report to Freud and Lacan. Bhabha (1994, p. 90) adapts the concept of mimicry to postcolonial theory reminding "mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically". The mimic subject becomes



parodic in relation to what it represents. And it is parody that Kincaid offers to the readers when she describes the Antigua of her childhood. As exemplary of the mimic condition to what the island and the subjects were submitted to, it is worth transcribing the whole excerpt:

And so everywhere they went they turned it into England; and everybody they met turned English. But no place could ever be England, and nobody who did not look exactly like them would ever be English, so you can imagine the destruction of people and land that came from that.

[...] In the Antigua I knew, we lived on a street after an English maritime criminal Horatio Nelson, and all the other streets around us were named after some other English maritime criminals. There was Rodney Street, there was Hood Street, there was Hawkins Street, and there was Drake Street. There were flamboyant trees and mahogany trees lining East Street. Government House, the place where the Governor, the person standing in for the Queen, lives, was on east Street. [...] There was the library on lower High Street, above the Department of the Treasury, and it was in that part of High Street that all colonial government business took place. In that part of High Street, you could cash a cheque at the Treasury, read a book in the library, post a letter at the post office, appear before a magistrate in court. (Since we were ruled by the English, we also had their laws.) [...] It was in that same part of High Street that you could get a passport in another government office. In the middle of High Street was the Barclays Bank. The Barclay brothers, who started Barclay bank, were slave-traders (KINCAID, 2001, p. 24-26).

Besides the farce engendered by the British trying to disguise the native culture of the residents (black slaves) with names of British history, Kincaid also recalls the way the children were treated by the doctor (actually a dentist) who would ask his wife to examine them before being admitted to his clinic, so she would check whether they did not have dirt under their nails, or did not smell. The school system also reproduced the same mimicry policy. The children would be taught the names of the Kings of England and the 24th of May was a holiday (Queen Victoria's official birthday). Kincaid speaks out that she came to meet the world through England.

Following its independence on November 1st, 1981, Antigua started facing problems typical of Third World countries, which obtained a late independence. Nowadays the issues that haunt Antigua are not slavery and the British process of colonization any longer but corruption and the ferocious competition in the global market against conglomerates. The marks of a long period as colonized subject left some sequels that hinder Antigua's full development.

In the Caribbean, the European imperial enterprise ensured that the worst features of colonialism throughout the globe would all be combined in the region: the virtual annihilation of the native population of Caribs and Arawaks; the plundering and internecine piracy against the European powers; the deracination and atrocities of the slave trade and plantation slavery, and the subsequent systems of indenture which 'stranded' Chinese and Indians in the Caribbeans when the return clauses of indenture contracts were dishonoured. The present-day population of the West Indies consists of a variety of racial groups all more or less in ancestral exile, and all still subject to the hegemonic pressures of their former European owners, and, more recently, to that exercised in the region by the USA (ASHCROFT et al, 1989, p. 145-146).

Contemporary Antigua reveals strong bonds with the colonial past. The country's economy has its main sources in agricultural products such as cotton, fruits, vegetables, bananas, coconuts, cucumbers, mangoes, sugarcane, and livestock. Nevertheless, the main product of exportation, bananas, was put aside in the fierce struggle for international markets. According to the speech for the Caribbean American Chamber of Commerce and Industry delivered by the Prime Minister of Antigua, Mr. Lester B. Bird (29th June 2001):

Sadly, it is the United States primarily that caused Caribbean countries to lose their preferential access for bananas in the markets of the European Union. One US multi-national company, which was a significant election campaign contributor to both main political parties in the US, owns banana estates in Central America. That company caused the US to successfully challenge the Caribbean's preferential access in the World Trade Organization (the WTO).



Thus, the livelihood of thousands of small Caribbean farmers was sacrificed for the enlarged profits of a US multinational company with quite devastating effects on employment, the standard of living and the economies of some Caribbean states.

The role of Antigua in the globalized market simply reinforces the concept of dependence on the part of Third World countries facing international corporations. As the Prime Minister of Antigua states in his speech, the issue of globalization is not new for Caribbean countries, considering that “The world has been globalized since the 19th Century in the sense that conditions have crossed borders creating change wherever they were introduced”.

The main issue of the discussion still remains on how the international tycoons are doing business. The core of political interests determines the financial help for developing countries. In the case of Caribbean islands, the US would invest large amounts of money before the decision to “promote and consolidate capitalism in Eastern Europe”. Besides, the advantages given to Mexico by means of creation of the North America Free Trade Area (NAFTA) diminished sensibly the opportunities for the Caribbean islands that had duty free access to the US market for goods by means of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), a trade agreement fixed under Reagan’s administration.

On the topic of corruption, drug trafficking and money laundering, Kincaid describes scenery that is common in many Third World Countries. As she points out, the “big new hotels” are merely a façade for drug dealing. “Even though all the beaches in Antigua are by law public beaches, Antiguan are not allowed on the beaches of this hotel; they are stopped at the gate by guards; and soon the best beaches in Antigua will be closed to Antiguan” (KINCAID, 2001, p. 58). Following the pattern of British colonizers, the modern Antigua presents the same restrictions and impositions for its inhabitants. If in colonial times, the entrance of blacks were forbidden in the Mill Reef Club with the exception of black servants, the international policy hinders once more the growth of ‘postcolonial’ Antigua by means of strategies and

maneuvers that go back to colonialism — from the Japanese car dealership which sells shares to the ministers in government, the prostitution houses whose owners are close to the Prime Minister, the permission given by the government of Antigua to test some special ammunition, the Syrian and Lebanese nationals who regularly lend the government money in exchange of permission to build condos in the countryside for North Americans and Europeans, to the army that stands as decoration to the oil-refinery industry whose platform is rusting.

Trying to overcome the hardships of global economy, Antigua developed “the service industries, tourism and banking in particular, and so were less hard-hit by the loss of markets than many others “ (BIRD). The tourism industry, on its turn, focuses on the marketing of the exoticism, sensuality and exquisite food. By selling an aura of “lost” paradise, Antigua just reinforces stereotypes and images built by the European imaginary. In *Orientalism* (1979, p. 54), Said refers to the term ‘imaginative geography’ by describing that land outside ‘our’ territory. It is enough, Said says, to determine the boundaries of our territory in such a way that everything that encloses our territory might be called “ours” and “ ‘they’ become ‘they’ accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from ‘ours’ “.

Therefore, in a reversal of perspective, the primitive/exotic/savage Other from colonial times becomes object of explicit desire on the part of Developed Countries citizens/tourists. Now instead of the fear constructed by the European imaginary, we observe the use of exoticism sold as commodity. The ‘exotic’ land becomes source of income for the country. As Marianna Torgovnick (1990, p. 38) highlights in her definition of the primitive:

The primitive has in some ways always been a willful invention by the West, but the West was once much more convinced of the illusion of Otherness it created. Now everything is mixed up, and the Other controls some of the elements in the mix. Will postmodernism end Western lust for things primitive – and for the idea of the primitive itself – by obliterating the distinctions between jungle and city, primitive and

modern? I sense not. But the evocation of the primitive is bound to become ever more willful, ever more dependent upon striking a deal – based on mutual pretense – satisfactory to both partners who participate in its creation: the ‘them’ so much more like us now, often garbed in clothing and living amid objects that evoke ‘their’ traditional forms of life.

From what we have analyzed so far, we could state that despite a global world economy, Third World countries like Antigua have been using some of the old colonized mechanisms as means of survival. By advertising the exoticism of the land, the Antiguanians have reversed the role of mere puppets under the hands of giant corporations. In a sense, they have achieved a level of consciousness that makes them no longer slaves but simply ‘human beings’ (KINCAID, 2001, p. 81).

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