

## Neither Home nor World: Unhomeliness in Kincaid's *A Small Place*

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### Abstract

Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (2000) brings up the challenges of (post)colonialism Antigua experiences through critical views. Kincaid demonstrates her criticism of the colonial legacies in Antigua, that were left behind by the British Empire, by presenting the issues through the situation of Antigua's tourism industry. In this paper, I would like to argue that the problem of Antigua's dependency on colonial legacies is linear to the concept of unhomeliness proposed by Homi Bhabha. Unhomeliness, as defined in this article, is the state of being alienated in one's own place due to external factors. In *A Small Place*, unhomeliness is articulated through the racism and cultural imperialism, as well as the dependency on tourism that the Antiguans experience.

**Keywords:** *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid, unhomeliness, post-colonial tourism

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### Introduction

*A Small Place* exposes the harsh realities of living on the Caribbean island of Antigua. The story centers around the narrator's opinion towards the present-day Antigua which is still impacted by the legacy of British colonization, racism that is fostered by modern tourism, and the isolated worldview of its residents. The novella is structured as a "guided tour", and it focuses not only on the islands of Antigua and the people who live there, but also on the impressions of them that are held by the reader, by Antiguans, and by the narrator herself (Gauch, 2002). *A Small Place* takes the genre of autobiography and fiction to present Jamaica Kincaid's, the author, homeland. Prior to her "confrontational, cynical, and angry" tone of writing, Jamaica Kincaid got "informally" banned from Antigua by the government, particularly after the release of *A Small Place* in 1988. Kincaid wrote the book-length essay in response to her visit home, after a twenty-year absence from Antigua (Osagie, I., & Buzinde, 2011).

Homi Bhabha introduces the idea of "the unhomely" in his book *The World and the Home*, which was published in 1992. Although Bhabha asks the reader to permit the awkward word (Bhabha, 1992), he argues that unhomeliness is the shock recognition or psychological suffering of when someone's home and world are intertwined (Bhabha, 1992). Later on in the book, he adds that unhomeliness is the strange state of belongingness as well as the uncanny sense of "the home" or of having a home. Being homeless does not imply that a person is lacking a home nor the opposite of having a home, but it indicates the thin line between the world, also known as the public, and the home is breaking down.

To emphasize his notion about not belonging to both "the home" and "the world", he draws on

Sigmund Freud's concept of "The Uncanny" or "*Unheimlich*". Babha argues, " "In this case too," we may say with Freud, "the *Unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, home like, familiar; the prefix 'un' is the token of repression." (Bhabha, 1992). *Unheimlich* is described by Freud as the exact opposite as *heimlich*, *heimisch*, that means "belonging to the house", "not strange", "familiar", "tame", "intimate", "comfortable", "homely" (Freud, 1919). The definition of the word "home", according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is described as a place where something naturally lives or is located. The usage of the prefix un- is described as the prefix used to reverse a state (Lehrer, 1995). As a result, the state of not belonging to the place in which one lives can be regarded as the meaning of the word "unhomeliness".

According to the descriptions and details presented above, it is possible that Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* portrays the issue of unhomeliness in its narrative. One of the key concerns that are highlighted in *A Small Place* is the colonial legacy left by the British Empire and how it continues to have a significant impact on Antigua as a nation. Despite the fact that Antigua had gained its independence in 1981, the British colonial influences continue to have a profound influence on Antiguans' culture and daily lives. Everything in Antigua tends to fall apart, even after they obtain independence, from the way a public place is named to the horrible corruption culture in the government. The narrator takes the readers on a "journey" across the entirety of the novella, detailing the hardships that the people of Antigua had to endure, including from the country's primary source of revenue; tourism. The Antiguans have also encountered other sorts of discrimination from the "global world". Later on, these problems become the fuel to the unhomeliness that the Antiguans had to experience in their own nation.

The practice of racial discrimination against Antigua's native people is one of the legacies left over from the nation's colonial past. It has a significant role in the history of Antigua. The majority of Antiguans are the descendants of enslaved Africans who were forced to work on British sugar plantations in the 17th century (Nevins, 2022). The skin-color-based distinctions have existed for thousands of years and eventually build the background of Antigua's significant practice of discrimination. In the novella, during Antigua's colonial time, there was a refugee from Czechoslovakia who worked as a dentist. He is portrayed as someone who is very "clean," as he does not like anything, even his patients, to be "dirty". He even instructed his wife to check on the patients and make sure that they were "clean", except for the darker complexion, before the patients met him (Kincaid, 2000). The narrator, whom I believed is Kincaid herself, was also once taught by a young Northern Ireland teacher who used to yell at her students not to hang on the tree like "the monkeys" (Kincaid, 2000).

Unfortunately, the racial discrimination is still present in Antigua. Discrimination is still practiced in modern-day Antigua, though it is not as visible as it was during colonial times. When a group of white tourists visits Antigua, they often find the different cultures fascinating and surprising—in an unpleasant manner. The narrator refers to the event as "they collapse helpless from laughter, mimicking the way they imagine you must look as you carry out some everyday bodily function." (Kincaid, 2000). The tourists frequently try to imitate Antiguan cultures during their visit, such as eating with their bare hands, but fail and laugh at their failure. They overlook the fact that their actions are extremely disrespectful to the Antiguans themselves, as it appears that the tourists ridiculed the "uncivilized" Antiguan culture.

Second, cultural imperialism is still evident in Antigua today. The term "cultural imperialism" refers to a practice of cultural expansion and the imposition of one's own economic, political, and

ideological norms and values on other countries. In *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*, John Tomlinson argues that "Much of the writing on cultural imperialism assigns a more central role to economic practices. Often the implication is that these are what are really at stake, and that cultural factors are instrumental in maintaining political-economic dominance." (Tomlinson, 1991). From the passage, it can be implied that cultural imperialism can be used as a sort of colonialism to conquer a specific country. Antigua is one of the countries that find the issue still relevant. Every May 24, the Antiguans celebrate Queen Victoria's birthday as a national holiday (Kincaid, 2000). Although the narrator also questions the significance and relevance of the Queen's birthday celebration for Antigua, the Antiguans seem to take the event for granted as they are happy to have a day off. Another example is when the narrator describes how proud Antiguans are of their independence and how they praise God for the occasion. The God that they pray to, on the other hand, is referred to as a "British God" (Kincaid, 1988). The fact that the people of Antigua continue to worship the God who was "left" by the British colonizers after the country gained its independence demonstrates that the expansion of religion under the British Empire had such a profound effect on the nation. Later in the novella, the narrator shows the way the important buildings, roads, and areas are named. There is still a strong "English" influence on Antigua's place names, as seen by the fact that many of the cities are named after Christian saints.

Lastly, dependency on the tourism sector. In her book that discusses the history of Antigua and Barbuda, Debbie Nevins highlights the historical slavery that occurred on both islands. The innocent native people are forced to travel from Africa to Antigua in order to work at the sugar plantation established by the British Empire. The sugar trade later becomes Antigua's main source of income before the Antiguans demanded independence which was started by the leader of the Antigua Labour Party in the 1940s, Vere Cornwall Bird (Nevins, 2022). Bird, who plays an important role in advocating the Antiguans to demand better wages and working conditions, later led the Antigua's first democratic elections in 1980 and became the country's (and Barbuda's) first prime minister. The sugar trade then came to decline after Antigua gained its independence, and is being replaced by tourism (Nevins, 2022). However, the shift is not going well either, especially for the natives in Antigua. In *A Small Place*, the story highlighted how the Antiguans are "banned" from the public beaches. The narrator tells that "Even though all the beaches in Antigua are by law public beaches, Antiguans 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 Antiguans." (Kincaid, 2000). The narrator also pours out her disappointment towards the Antiguan government who turned the old national library into a gift shop (Kincaid, 2000) in order to strengthen the tourism sector even more, while being careless with the development of Antiguan children's education. From the two examples, we can see how Antigua is still "indirectly colonized" by the British by putting themselves behind "white" tourists.

To conclude, I think the idea of Bhabha's unhomeliness can be seen in *A Small Place* by looking at the socio-political problems that the Antiguans had to endure during the postcolonial era. The racial discrimination, cultural imperialism, and dependency on tourism portrayed by Kincaid show how the Antiguans feel like they do not belong in their own homeland, as the government and external surroundings are not on their side. They are banned from their own nation's facility, the government neglects their educational needs, and having to celebrate a national holiday that is not even relevant to the nation making it obvious for them to feel unhomely at their own home.

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