



A Small Place: Re-Looking Universals and Distinctions

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ABSTRACT

The theme of universals and distinctions in discourse is particularly relevant to our contemporary times when globalization has impacted on every aspect of life and living. Borders, both literal and metaphorical, have become porous, admitting easy exchange between the universals and the distinctions, the local and the global. However, despite the fluid movement of things, people and ideas, we cannot overlook the reality that on many fronts, borders are precarious and smaller countries are swallowed up by the global culture. This paper looks at some of the tensions that emerge within the overlap of the local and global. In this context, Jamaica Kincaid's (1989), *A Small Place* is a riveting narrative which reveals the importance of viewing and placing the smaller places of the world against the larger, more powerful countries. In this text, Kincaid (1989) speaks passionately about her country which she feels has been swept aside and forgotten. The paper hopes to show that by acknowledging the transformative effects, sometimes positive, sometimes crippling, that come out of the universals-distinctions exchange, the smaller, often formerly colonized nations of the world, can find and define themselves and not drown in the tide of sameness, a quotidian feature of global culture.

Keywords: Globalization, Kincaid, place, tourism, travel

INTRODUCTION

The theme of the conference, *Universals, Distinctions and Cross-disciplinary Perspectives*, is particularly relevant to

our contemporary times. Today, we cannot move away from global systems of cultural interactions and the way in which local/distinct locations and cultures engage with forces of globalization and its universalising mission. This paper looks at the theme of "distinctions" and "universals" in terms of the dialogic between the local and the global. More than ever, as a result of globalization,

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we are witnessing a changing organization of world-wide social relations.

Globalization, the “all-purpose catchword in public and scholarly debate,” has become such an inflated word that it risks becoming “a global cliché” (Lechner & Boli, 2000, p.1). Yet, for now, the word still reflects, to a large extent, the changes taking place on the world stage. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* defines globalization as the process “whereby individual lives and local communities are affected by economic and cultural forces that operate world-wide. In effect, it is the process of the world becoming a single place” (p.110). The term gained prominence in the mid-1980s but as many postcolonial theorists have repeatedly pointed out, globalization had its early origins in imperialism and this is apparent in the way both phenomena structure power and social relations between places and cultures. Indeed, the way in which the local engages with the global parallels the way in which former colonized cultures have engaged the forces of imperialism. It is said that the history of globalization “is embedded in the history of imperialism” (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998, p.112). Scholars point to sixteenth-century Europe as the early source of globalization when Europe started establishing trade connections on their own terms, defining the way in which cultures were to interact with each other (see Lechner & Boli 2000).

Just like concepts of “civilization” and “development” and other key terms in early- and classic-modern thinking, the idea of “globalization” initially conveyed

ideas of hope and harmony and the intention of a universal order in which life conditions and chances would be equal and possibly improved. It cannot be refuted that the globalizing mission seeks to unify. However, though universalism assumes the irreducible qualities of humanity, and in that, possibilities for oneness existing beyond the local context; it also, on the flip side, offers a hegemonic view of life by which the values, ideas and aspirations of a dominant culture are held to be true for all peoples. As Zygmunt Bauman says in *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, the present discourse of globalization primarily refers to “global effects” and not “global initiatives and undertaking.” He continues that globalization is “not about what we all . . . wish or hope to do. It is about what is happening to us all (p.60). Indeed, this seems to be our reality.

A SMALL PLACE

Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* is a vivid account of the experience of globalization and the way in which a distinctive/local place engages with global processes. Published in 1988, this slim volume is, on many levels, a profound indictment of the brutalities of colonialism and its capacity to uproot and make homeless an entire race. In a voice unrelenting in its anger and frustration, Kincaid denounces colonial conquest and its legacy of destruction and decay in her homeland Antigua. Though it became self-governing in 1967, Antigua did not achieve the status of an independent nation within the Commonwealth until 1981. Kincaid

highlights the fact that independent Antigua is still reeling from the effects of British colonial rule and states that the country is in a worse off situation now because of the corruption of the ruling party. Hence, *A Small Place* aims to renounce any kind of oppression.

Many times in the text, Kincaid mentions the fact that Antigua is a small place: “Antigua is a small place, a small island. It is nine miles wide by twelve miles long” (p.80); “In a small place, people cultivate small events” (p.52); “...but perhaps in a world that is twelve miles long and nine miles wide (the size of Antigua) twelve years and twelve minutes and twelve days are all the same” (p.9). There is much insistence in the narrative that this is a small island, hence the title of the book. Besides referring to the physical smallness of Antigua, the title of Kincaid’s text also alludes to the reduced circumstances and small-mindedness of the native people forced to still live under the double yoke of colonialism and the current regime. Apart from that, and equally important, the title is also a metonymy for the way in which the colonizers viewed the land they occupied — “a small place,” insignificant, empty of history and identity. Indeed, this “justified” conquest.

More to the point of the topic, but also in line with the theme of suppression underlying the text, *A Small Place* is also an intense account of the effects of globalization on a nation-state. The narrative shows the devastation which globalization can wreak on smaller economies. In doing

so, *A Small Place* exposes the plight of Antigua, a small island so alike many other small places of the world, which is battling to survive in global systems of interactions. The text evokes what Bauman refers to as the *effect* of globalization, “*what is happening to us all*” (p.60).

TRAVELLERS AND VAGABONDS

Globalization forms an important part of the background for the rise of contemporary mobility, generating the major transnational movements characterizing recent times — diaspora, travel and migration, among them. In line with this, the figure of the “tourist” is pervasive in contemporary discourse. In *A Small Place*, Kincaid imagines her own country through the eyes of a tourist. Apart from being a very effective strategy in presenting her island nation to the uninitiated reader, the tourist narrative in the text also encapsulates a particular way of understanding relationships between cultures and places within a global context.

In *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, Bauman devotes one chapter to travelling in the global world. There is a distinction between the way the first world and the rest of the world travels:

The first travel at will, get much fun from their travel...are cajoled or bribed to travel and welcomed with smiles and open arms when they do. The second travel surreptitiously, often illegally, sometimes paying more for the crowded steerage of a stinking unseaworthy boat

than others pay for business-class gilded luxuries—and are frowned upon, and, if unlucky, arrested and promptly deported, when they arrive (p.89).

Not only does Bauman distinguish between first and second world travel, he goes on to categorize these travellers into groups. The first world travellers are called “tourists” who “stay or move at their hearts’ desire,” “they find the world within their (global) reach irresistibly *attractive*.” The second world travellers are “vagabonds.” They “move because they find the world within their (local) reach unbearably *inhospitable*” and are “the waste of the world which has dedicated itself to tourist services” (pp.92-3). Kincaid’s use of the tourist motif in *A Small Place* alludes to Bauman’s ideas above. The very first pages of *A Small Place* demonstrate this binary between the tourist (who is usually white and from the first world) and the native/vagabond. Kincaid refers to her own return to her homeland and the treatment she receives by officials. In a tone dripping with irony, she says that because the tourist is not “an Antiguan black returning to Antigua from Europe or North America with cardboard boxes of much needed cheap clothes and food for relatives,” she or he can move through customs “swiftly” and “with ease” (pp.4-5). A part of the Caribbean diaspora in North America, Kincaid, the returning native, is also a vagabond. She questions this kind of double standards and seems to ask where is the ‘freedom of movement which

one eulogizes as the topmost achievement of the globalizing world and the warrant of its growing prosperity?” (Bauman, 1998, p.76). While acknowledging that tourism is a major economic resource for Antigua, Kincaid is incensed that the Antiguans are indiscriminately being made use of by their present government to promote tourism. She is equally angered by her own people who have allowed themselves to be part of this industry: “And it is in that strange voice, then—the voice that suggests innocence, art, lunacy—that they say these things, pausing to take breath before this monument to rottenness, that monument to rottenness, as if they were tour guide; as if, having observed the event of tourism, they have absorbed it so completely that they have made the degradation and humiliation of their daily lives into their own tourist attraction” (pp.68-69).

Right from the start, Kincaid fashions the reader as a tourist who is visiting her home country: “If you go to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see” (p.3). Automatically, Kincaid becomes our tour guide and the narrative unfolds in this way: Kincaid taking us around her island, telling us about its past and its present condition. It is admittedly an interesting approach. The dominant metaphor of travel which governs the text, enables the writer to deal with many issues simultaneously. She takes us to a place, discusses its present state and goes on to tell us what this place was like before and her childhood memories linked to it. The movement that inheres in the act of travel images the way in which

Kincaid, and as consequence, the reader, comes to terms with Antigua, i.e. empirical survey, historical data, stories and memories combine to link Antigua's past and present narratives.

As the text progresses, we, the tourist, move through our day of sightseeing, sunning on the beach, making cursory judgements on what we see, eating meals at local restaurants, witnessing a spectacular sunset. Kincaid closely details what could be taking place in the mind of a tourist—the anticipation, excitement, flashes of fear at the unknown, the thrill of getting a good bargain, the fervent desire for hot weather so that the holiday will not be ruined by rain. More than anything, Kincaid highlights the unquestioning mind of the common tourist: “since you are a tourist, the 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 mind” (p.4). This and many other instances in the text show that the tourist/reader and generally all of us who are so utterly uninformed and yet glibly impose judgement and value on other cultures are morally wrong in doing so: “An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that” (p.17). Kincaid's narrative strategy here is to equate the indifference of the tourists who visit Antigua to the white colonizers who took over the land. The tourist is likened to the colonialist in the way s/he perceives and treats other cultures and peoples.

But it does not end here. Kincaid moves beyond the indifference of the tourist towards local matters to a wider context to demonstrate how we, the tourist, are also unaware of the global processes operating on us. The very nature of transnationality, with its confluence of imperialism and capitalism and its tendency to corrode boundaries, also tends to blur vision, actions and comprehension. As a result, Kincaid's cherished homeland, like the other small places of the world, continues to be held victim by more powerful forces. One early example of this in *A Small Place* is the use of the familiar, and often notorious, figure of the cab driver. “You see a man, a taxi driver; you ask him to take you to your destination; he quotes you a price. You immediately think that the price is in local currency... Your driver is reckless; he is a dangerous man who drives in the middle of the road” (p.5). Kincaid goes on to say that we so easily forget that ours is a cosmopolitan world and that “most of the taxi drivers in New York are from places in the world like this” (p.6).

Kincaid's descriptions show that the Antiguans live in a situation that is inhospitable and they have had to move to other countries to escape poverty. Poverty in small countries like Antigua, Kincaid keeps asserting in the text, is also a legacy of western enrichment. This is the current world situation with people having to leave their homes to find jobs abroad for the sake of survival. Kincaid also chides the traveller for thinking that the Antiguan cab driver in his huge Japanese car is well off. He actually lives in a derelict house and was forced to

buy his car from a government owned car dealer. He cannot afford unleaded petrol: “You will be surprised, then, to see that most likely the person driving this brand-new car filled with the wrong gas lives in a house that, in comparison, is far beneath the status of the car; and if you were to ask why you would be told that the banks are encouraged by the government to make loans available for cars, but loans for houses not so easily available” (p.7).

Similar to Bauman’s views on the different kinds of travel undertaken by the rich and the poor, Kincaid erects a dichotomy of difference between the tourist and the native. The tourist views the vagabond/native as starkly different from his/her self and this perception is, to some extent, understandable. “Difference” is vital to the tourist—that is the reason why he or she left her home in the first place, to revel in something far removed from routine and the everyday. But this touristic impulse to differentiate is flawed on many levels. Essentially it is purely a vicarious exercise. Like the colonizing impulse to view a place as empty (and thus justifying forcible occupation), the tourist’s need for difference subordinates a place and culture, removing them from their inherent realities. The difference consumed by tourists is not spatially separate. Indeed Kincaid goes on to show in her narrative that these differences and the perceived distance are largely illusory. Everywhere are stories of connections that link and shape places and *A Small Place* urges us to acknowledge that fact.

There are many instances of inequality and tourist ignorance in Kincaid’s narrative. She writes about the food the tourists eat:

When you sit down to eat your delicious meal, it’s better that you don’t know that most of what you are eating came off a plane from Miami. And before it got on a plane in Miami, who knows where it came from? A good guess is that it came from a place like Antigua first, where it was grown dirt-cheap, went to Miami, and came back. There is a world of something in this, but I can’t go into it right now.
(p.14)

Hence, the food that we take to be “authentic” Antiguan cuisine has actually gone through the process typical of a transnational agricultural corporation. Multiple places, part of the global system of production, are implicated in the evocation of “the Antiguan experience”: a poor island, a wealthy, western centre, a multinational agricultural industry which sends the product back to the poor island to be packaged as genuine and home-grown. No local person, however, can afford this food which s/he has helped produce. In this whole production line, there are so many connections yet inequalities abound and often, they are structured into the system. However, the tourist remains unaware of these connections and chooses to be ignorant, sometimes to his/her detriment:

You see yourself taking a walk on that beach, you see yourself meeting new people (only people just like you). You see yourself eating some delicious, locally grown food. You see yourself, you see yourself. . . You must not wonder what exactly happened to the contents of your lavatory when you flushed it. You must not wonder where your bathwater went when you pulled out the stopper. You must not wonder what happened when you brushed your teeth. 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 against your ankle as you wade 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 up (p.14).

I have quoted quite extensively here because the passage reveals a few important ideas. For one thing, it highlights, again, the thoughtlessness of the tourist. However, this ignorance could have serious implications for the tourist. A few pages earlier, Kincaid, as she takes us on our guided tour, stops at the local hospital. She tells us that no local Antiguan trusts the inept doctors who work there and that when the Ministers fall ill, they take the first flight out to New York!

Hence apathy could cost us our health and well-being. Apart from that, Kincaid is again asserting a point that underlies much of the text which is that Antigua is not a separate place but is bound to a global world. The waters surrounding this island is the transporting element that brought diverse people to its shores and Antiguan culture, identity and history have been shaped by the voluntary and involuntary links and overlaps with other places and peoples. Yet, the global community chooses to be oblivious to these connections. Antigua's poverty is also created in part by transnational dealings which are uneven in its distribution of wealth. In order to borrow from Jeremy Seabrook, "The poor do not inhabit a separate culture from the rich. . . they must live in the same world that has been contrived for the benefit of those with money. And their poverty is aggravated by economic growth" (qtd. in Bauman, 1998, p.95). And at some point, the tourist may not be free of the consequences of an unfair stratification of global economy.

A Small Place exposes the legitimate and illegitimate transnational economic flows effecting modern-day Antigua: drug dealing, prostitution, wholesale selling of the island's land to Middle Eastern foreigners, money laundering, rising crime rate and the dominance of foreign power and influence on the island. Kincaid reports: "Some gambling casinos in the hotels are controlled by mobsters from the United States. . . If they benefit from the operation of these casinos, they—people in Antigua—cannot see in what way, except

for the seasonal employment it offers a few people” (p.60). She is distressed that in “the Antigua telephone directory, the Syrians and Lebanese have more business addresses and telephone numbers than any of the other surnames listed” (p.63). She also refers to the rampant corruption that transnational capitalism has generated: “Why can’t the government of Antigua build its own government buildings? What is the real interest paid on these loans made to the government? And are the loans made to the government or are they really made to persons in the government but charged to the government?” (p.62). She wryly comments: “But maybe there is no connection between the wonderful life that the Swiss lead and the ill-gotten money that is resting in Swiss bank vaults, maybe it’s just a coincidence” (p.60). The glow of the wealth of others highlights local poverty. In the midst of this, Kincaid talks about her self and the other Antiguan who have been marginalised and unacknowledged in this whole process of globalization and change: “I cannot tell whether I was brought up by, and so come from, children, eternal innocents or artists who have not yet found eminence in a world too stupid to understand, or lunatics who have made their own lunatic asylum, or an exquisite combination of all three” (p.57).

The Antigua that emerges in the pages of Kincaid’s book is a sad place, intensely beautiful in its scenery but poor and without a sense of direction and hope. Its people have become small-minded and extremely fatalistic. These vagabonds are an object of pity and ridicule by the tourists: “And you

look at the things they can do with a piece of ordinary cloth, the things they fashion out of cheap, vulgarly coloured (to you) twine, the way they squat down over a hole they have made in the ground...their ancestors were not clever in the way yours were” (pp.16-7). Unfortunately, what we, the tourist, return home with after our travel, is a renewed sense of our superiority and a more enclosed view of the world.

CONCLUSION

A Small Place is a dramatic account of the experience of globalization. Globalization is the process of making the world into a single place but this process, Kincaid argues, is ambivalent. Her text calls for the importance of viewing the smaller places of the world against the larger, more powerful countries. Many of these small places have been swept aside and forgotten in the global whirlpool. Kincaid’s ideas resonate with most of us. This is particularly so because Antigua is her cherished homeland and her love for the island nation is everywhere evident in her narrative. This small place has defined and shaped her and she laments that the current neglect of this nation has severed her and her people’s sense of belonging to Antigua. Today, one’s feelings of home necessarily extend into the global system of cultural interaction. When there is no dialogic exchange, feelings of self-worth, dignity and belonging are threatened. Kincaid asks then for there to be a greater consciousness of living in a world society. *A Small Place* throws us that challenge.

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