A Small Place

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMAICA KINCAID

Jamaica Kincaid was born in the Antiguan capital of St. John's while the country was still under colonial British rule. Despite the relative poverty in which Kincaid grew up, she received a high-quality education from the island's colonial British schools and from her mother, who was a well-read and intelligent woman. When Kincaid was nine years old, her mother and step-father had three sons in quick succession. After this Kincaid felt increasingly isolated and neglected by her family, especially her mother. When she was 17, her parents withdrew her from school and sent her to the United States to work as a nanny with the intention that she would send her paychecks back to Antigua to support the family. Instead, Kincaid kept her own pay and began taking classes at a community college. Eventually, she found work in journalism, writing for teen magazines, New York City's alternative paper *The Village Voice*, and *Ms.* magazine before landing at the *New Yorker*. As she began writing for publication, Kincaid adopted her pen name as a way to create a new, freer identity for herself. She married Allen Shawn, the son of the *New Yorker*'s chief editor, in 1979. The couple had two children before divorcing in 2002. Many of her novels, including *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1990) draw on events from Kincaid's own life. Both her fiction and nonfiction frequently explore themes of colonialism and imperialism, gender and sexuality, class and power, mother-daughter relationships, and gardening. In 1992, she was appointed professor in the Department of African and African American Studies and the English Department at Harvard University. She lives—and grows a luxurious garden—in Vermont.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Because it deals with Antigua—among the first Caribbean islands to be settled by European colonizers, *A Small Place* engages with a broad swath of history, dating back to Christopher Columbus's arrival in 1493. Other key moments in the island's history include the arrival of the British in 1632, the British abolition of the trade in enslaved people in 1807 and the emancipation of people formerly enslaved by the British in 1830. More recently, the Lesser Antilles Earthquake of October 1974 destroyed many buildings, including the beautiful colonial library, in the Antiguan capital city. However, more recent history animates much more of the book's consideration of the long legacies of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. Antigua became a Commonwealth state in 1967, and it was formally granted its independence from British rule in 1981. Prime Minister Vere Cornwall Bird came to power in 1967 and led the country until 1994 with a brief period of political and physical exile from 1971 to 1976 while George Walter and the Progressive Labour Movement controlled the government. Coming as it did in the early 1980s, Antiguan independence fit into a decade of post-colonial and neo-imperialist political shifts worldwide. These include the final stages of the apartheid regime in South Africa, where a brutal system of institutionalized racial segregation that allowed the descendants of white colonizers to oppress and terrorize the country's Black citizens between the 1940s and the 1990s. Closer to Antigua, the book invokes the situations of Grenada and Haiti. In Haiti, decades of political and social upheaval driven by the forces of imperialism gave way in the 1950s to the Duvalier Dynasty, in which one family seized and held political power through the 1980s, oppressing Haitians and enriching themselves through their corrupt government.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A Small Place offers an extended narrative exploration of long-term effects of colonialism and slavery on former British colony Antigua. It also weaves some of Jamaica Kincaid's own personal history into the broader narrative of her country's past. In these ways, it serves as a narrative nonfictional companion to her novels *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1990). *Annie John* describes the coming of age of its Antiguan protagonist, intelligent and precocious Annie John, while *Lucy* follows a young woman from the West Indies whose departure from her homeland (strongly implied to be Antigua) gives her the critical distance necessary to consider and understand her relationship to her homeland, her family, and the historical forces of colonialism and racism. Kincaid's work also fits into broader imaginative and literary criticisms of colonialism, especially in the West Indies. In particular, her extended musings on the ironies and challenges of critiquing the oppressor in the oppressor's language foreshadow Santa Lucian poet Derek Walcott's prize-winning epic poem *Omeros*, which loosely borrows the plot of Homer's *Iliad* and the poetic style of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Walcott applies these to a Caribbean context to explore the burdens of colonialism and the way that colonialism and the legacy of slavery fragment the identities the descendants of enslaved and oppressed people. Finally, Kincaid's work connects with more recent Caribbean diaspora writers publishing books like Marie-Elena John's 2006 *Unburnable*, which traces the family history of Lillian Baptiste, a native-born Dominican who had emigrated to escape a familial—and cultural—history of betrayal, murder, and vengeance.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Small Place
- **When Written:** 1980s
- **Where Written:** The United States
- **When Published:** 1988
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Narrative Nonfiction
- **Setting:** Antigua
- **Point of View:** First Person and Second Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Light Reading. Jamaica Kincaid's mother taught her to read before the age of four, not by starting with the alphabet but with a biography of the French microbiologist and chemist Louis Pasteur. Then, for some time, the only other book she was allowed to read was the King James Bible.

Dry Land. In an interview with the Harvard student newspaper, Jamaica Kincaid named a bag of sand she inadvertently collected in the Mojave Desert as one of her favorite objects. The sand gathered in her pockets when, on a visit to the desert in 2013, she climbed up and intentionally slid down some of the dunes.

PLOT SUMMARY

The author and narrative voice of *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid, asks readers to imagine themselves as a tourist landing in **Antigua** for vacation. The tourist takes a taxi to the hotel and passes by crumbling buildings, like the colonial **library**, which was destroyed in an earthquake over a decade ago. Having rhetorically delivered the tourist to their room, Kincaid ruminates on how tourists—people privileged enough to escape their mundane lives and temporarily enjoy another place without having to experience its troubles—become examples of human ugliness.

Transitioning into the first person, Kincaid describes growing up in Antigua while it was still a British colony. The streets were named after British naval officers, and British law governed daily life. Institutions like the Barclay's Bank were created with wealth that its founders had generated long ago by exploiting enslaved people. And places like the exclusive **Mill Reef Club** resort functioned almost as colonies within the colony, allowing white North Americans and Europeans to enjoy the island while avoiding contact with native—that is to say, Black—Antiguans. Native Antiguans faced overt racism while being made to honor the legacies of their colonizers and former enslavers. If the descendants of formerly enslaved and colonized people seem to tolerate corruption and abuse, Kincaid claims, it's because they learned from their oppressors to steal, cheat, and repress dissent.

This leads Kincaid to ask whether Antigua was better off under colonial rule than as an independent nation. She lists examples of corruption and disarray including the crumbling library, the poor quality of the education system, corruption among the government ministers, an outsized influence in government affairs by wealthy foreigners, and society-wide groveling to tourists. This is because in a small place like Antigua, people are prone to lose their perspective on history. Modern Antiguans talk about slavery as a dead institution yet subjugate themselves as workers in the tourism industry. And a history of oppression has rendered them passive in the face of governmental corruption. They may complain about the state of things but lack the will to demand change from corrupt, self-interested leaders like Vere Cornwall Bird.

Kincaid closes her essay on the "small place" of Antigua with an exploration of its almost impossible, jewel-like beauty. Its permanence and isolation have frozen it in place and imprisoned its inhabitants in a stasis from which they struggle to emerge.

CHARACTERS

Jamaica Kincaid – Jamaica Kincaid is the author and the narrative voice of *A Small Place*. Three of the book's four sections are written in the first person from Kincaid's perspective. Kincaid was born and raised in **Antigua** under colonial rule, which profoundly influenced her worldview as a child. She voraciously consumed the books in the colonial **library** and internalized the language of the oppressor, which she uses uneasily to form her critiques of colonialism, slavery, the corrupt Antiguan government, and the morally bankrupt tourism industry that supports the island's economy. Kincaid left Antigua long ago, and she leverages her position as a native and an outsider to generate the distance necessary to formulate her critique. Throughout the book, Kincaid describes Antigua and its history with an alternating affection and aversion; her refusal or inability to resolve her conflicted feelings about her homeland, its people, and even her own vexed relationship with the colonialists who at one and the same time disparaged her and gave her an outstanding education illustrates the difficulty of untangling the threads of history from the current moment. Throughout the book, Kincaid invites readers to look through her eyes both at the small island of Antigua and the broader world in which it exists, as well as to consider the ties that bind people and societies together across humanity's messy history.

The Tourist – The first section of *A Small Place* addresses the reader directly and casts them in the role of a tourist visiting **Antigua**. The tourist comes from a European or North

American country where they make a middle-class living. They make enough money to allow them the monetary and time resources to temporarily escape on vacation—but not enough to insulate them from the pressures of modern life. The tourist is clearly meant to be a white person who is prone to forming ill-informed judgments about the lives, countries, and governments of non-white people in places like Antigua while ignoring the role of racism, colonialism, and slavery in world history. This small-mindedness renders the tourist inhumane, selfish, and ugly. By offering the figure of the tourist as a sort of mirror, Kincaid asks her readers—whom she assumes to be primarily privileged and white—to critically assess themselves and their roles in history without directly accusing them of the tourist's faults. In this way, the tourist subtly softens the blow of Kincaid's critique to make it more palatable.

Vere Cornwall Bird – Vere Cornwall Bird was the First Premier and Prime Minister of **Antigua**, where he headed the government with one brief interruption from 1967 to 1994. Bird came to political prominence as a founding member and early leader of the Antiguan Trades and Labour Union, which later evolved into a political party. In *A Small Place*, Bird and his leadership exemplify the rot and corruption that characterizes the modern Antiguan government and which the book sees as the direct result of the lessons taught by the history of northern European colonialism and slavery.

TERMS

Colonialism – Colonialism is the practice of attaining political and economic control over another country or territory. Usually, the colonizing government imposes its language, law, and political system on its colonial subjects. Colonialism has existed for much of human history, but it entered a new, more intense phase in the 15th century as European countries raced to colonize the North and South American continents, Asia, and Africa. The British founded a colony in Antigua in 1632 and exploited the island to generate a great deal of wealth by participating in the slave trade and establishing sugar plantations; they retained complete control of the island through 1967, when Antigua became a semi-independent Commonwealth State, and 1981, when it achieved full independence from Britain.

Racism – Racism is the belief that different groups of people possess distinct physical characteristics, innate qualities, and abilities. Hand in hand with these distinctions, racism usually involves antagonism or oppression toward racial groups to which one does not belong, of which white supremacy is one example.

Slavery – Slavery is the practice of one person claiming ownership over another as property, particularly in terms of their physical labor. After the British founded a colony on Antigua in 1632, they began to establish sugarcane plantations. By 1674, sugar was the island's main crop. Due to the intense labor required to produce sugar, colonial Antiguan planters began to use enslaved people to work the plantations.

White Supremacy – White supremacy is the belief that white people are innately superior to those of other races and thus have a natural right to dominate or oppress them. This political component—the right to rule over other races—distinguishes white supremacy from racism. In many ways colonialism is the institutionalization of white supremacy, since it often involves a government in which a minority of white people control a territory populated by non-white people. In *A Small Place*, members of the Mill Reef Club display white supremacist thinking in their assumed right to exert control over the fate of the library, which belongs to the people of Antigua.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SLAVERY, COLONIALISM, AND INDEPENDENCE

Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* paints a portrait of **Antigua** shortly after it achieved independence and self-rule from Great Britain. For over three centuries, the island existed as a British colony, and for more than half that time, the English planter and traders exploited enslaved people. *A Small Place* has little sympathy for Antigua's former colonizers, acidly pointing out the way colonizers commodified the human beings whom they enslaved, built massive amounts of wealth on stolen land and labor, and systematically neglected the island's infrastructure except when it benefitted the colonizers. But while the book celebrates emancipation and independence, it also expresses deep ambivalence about the corruption and failure of the nation's self-ruled government. For example, Kincaid complains about the inferior education young Antiguans receive compared to those who grew up under colonialism. Similarly, the **library**—a beautiful building and institution built by the former colonial government that the independent Antiguan democracy then allowed to crumble and rot—seems to suggest a preference for the benefits of colonialism, at least in terms of providing a sense of history and culture to the island nation.

But as *A Small Place* deftly explores the connections between Antigua's colonial past and its present, it shows how Antiguan history renders the island and its people vulnerable to outside exploitation. Slavery denied people control over even their own

bodies, and the book sees echoes of this enforced powerlessness in the passive role modern Antiguans take in their self-governance. Similarly, just as colonialism extracted wealth and resources from the island, the impoverished modern government welcomes outside investments that allow foreign nationals an outsized influence over the nation and its affairs. The book thus claims that simply emancipating enslaved people or returning a government to its citizens—without the guidance of education, the repatriation of wealth, and the support of the international community—cannot lead to the development of a truly free, open, and democratic society. It neither blames the independent Antiguan government entirely for its faults nor lets it off the hook for its failures. Instead, by shining a light on these patterns, *A Small Place* shows how modern Antigua represents the logical outcome of its history and asks readers to consider how this history affects their personal history and the histories of their countries of origin, too.

RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

Because **Antigua** existed for most of its history as a British colony and as a site where planters and traders exploited the labor of enslaved people, it provides fertile ground to explore racial dynamics between the descendants of enslaved people (the "native" Antiguans) and white people, including former colonial overlords, foreign nationals, and tourists. The book examines how slavery and colonialism shaped the national psyche of Antigua, instilling deference in its citizens toward those who hold power, even when these people—for example, the Czech dentist who casts himself as a doctor, or the British headmistress of the girls' school—behave in overtly dehumanizing and racist ways. But white supremacy also instills in the (almost all white) members of the **Mill Reef Club** an undeserved sense of ownership over Antigua. This allows them to offer monetary support to the **library**—but only if it is rebuilt according to their preferences. Moreover, because the Antiguan economy relies heavily on tourism, many nameless, faceless, interchangeable tourists from North America and Europe casually take advantage of their native Antiguan hosts, nickel-and-diming them over inconsequential taxi fares, for example. By comparing the Antigua of the past with the Antigua of the book's present, *A Small Place* shows how racism and white supremacy outlived colonialism and the institution of slavery.

TOURISM AND EMPATHY

The first section of *A Small Place* speaks to the reader as if they were a tourist visiting **Antigua**. When the tourist arrives at their resort, the book asks readers to confront the inherent ugliness of tourism, which it claims is harmful because it is inherently voyeuristic. The tourist doesn't belong to Antigua, and, because of their relative wealth and privilege, they can distance themselves from the history that made places like North America and Europe wealthy and powerful and places like Antigua poor and vulnerable to corruption. Becoming a tourist allows a person to temporarily escape the boring, uncomfortable, or unglamorous aspects of their normal lives for someplace beautiful. But the book's detailed portrait of Antigua debunks the island's superficial beauty, showing the boring, painful, and unglamorous aspects of its colonial history and current state of corruption and poverty.

Because the tourist doesn't have a deep connection to a place, they often feel free to criticize it or offer their allegedly enlightened ideas about how it could be fixed or run. In this vein, members of the **Mill Reef Club** function as tourists in *A Small Place*; their love of Antigua extends only as far as the beautiful beaches and warm climate—they stop short of recognizing the humanity of native Antiguans or attempting to alleviate their struggles. Still, the book suggests, there is reason to hope that things can change for the better. If readers—tourists of a sort, if only for the brief time they visit Antigua by reading *A Small Place*—can look inward and interrogate their role in systems of oppression, then they can develop empathy for others. They can thus short circuit the threat of the tourist, who is dangerous as long as he or she steps outside the web of human relationships. Developing empathic insight to the ethical issues that tourism poses, on the other hand, can bolster a person's humanity no matter where they go.

THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

A Small Place paints a detailed portrait of the tiny island nation of **Antigua**, which comprises a mere 108 square miles—an area roughly a third the size of New York City. Because the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean further isolate Antigua from other places, the book describes it as a veritable prison, enclosing its inhabitants literally and through the weight of its long and difficult history. People trapped in a small place, the book claims, lose their sense of perspective. They blow small events out of proportion yet fail to appreciate the meaning of major historical events. Likewise, tourists who escape their lives and countries for a short stay in Antigua all too often lose their global perspective while on the island.

But small places have advantages, and the book leverages Antigua as an example that unlocks important lessons about the long legacies of colonialism and slavery, the relation of wealthy places like North America and Europe to less wealthy nations in the global south (sometimes called the developing world), and the ways in which tourism and global travel bring both economic opportunity and social threats. One key to understanding the relationship of the local and particular with the global and universal lies in the way the book focuses on

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even smaller places within Antigua, such as the Barclay's Bank, the **Mill Reef Club**, the **library**, to explore its themes. The Mill Reef Club residents isolate themselves from black Antiguans, demonstrating the perseverance of racism and white supremacy. The Barclay's bank allows the book to point out the economic abuses of slavery in addition to its human abuses—the founding brothers made their fortune on the stolen labor of enslaved people. And the library demonstrates the ways in which the forced dehumanization of slavery informs modern Antiguans' passive approach to their government—upset at its abuses yet unwilling to hold it accountable. Thus, the reader eventually realizes that the events in Antigua are anything but small, both for the island itself and in the broader context of world history. By focusing on the local and particular, then, the book draws attention to the urgent lessons of history and economics in ways that can help the reader understand the broader world.

ROT AND CORRUPTION

A Small Place describes both the beauty of **Antigua** and the rot and corruption that characterize its government and society. Government ministers engage in illegal activities and self-dealing, while racism and white supremacy poison relationships between native Antiguans, tourists, and the foreign nationals who live at the **Mill Reef Club** or finance real estate developments elsewhere on the island. Early in the book, the narrative voice of Jamaica Kincaid tells the reader, as a tourist, to *not* think about happens to the sewage that leaves the bathroom of their resort hotel, since Antigua lacks a sewage treatment plant. The wastewater flows, untreated, into the oceans, and the tourist is invited to think about how their vast size will dilute the sewage down. Kincaid ironically suggests that little harm can be done to the tourist if they can't see the contamination. And indeed, the book gives multiple examples of the ways in which distraction and ignorance feed social rot and government corruption. This suggests that fixing the problems of society begins with looking at and grappling with the issues. And *A Small Place* does this looking and grappling, not only listing the dishonesty of the Antiguan government, but tracing it to the lessons that slavery and colonialism taught current Antiguans' ancestors. Thus, by bringing Antigua's rot and corruption to light, the book performs the crucial first step toward elimination corruption. And, because the whole modern world rests on a foundation of colonial exploitation and chattel slavery, the book's exploration of Antigua's example invites readers to open their eyes and look at global patterns of rot and corruption—because once a person knows about the sewage in the seawater, they no longer have the luxury of ignoring it.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

ANTIGUA

In *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid offers the island nation of Antigua as a microcosm—a small world that provides lessons that one can apply to the larger world—in which to examine the legacies of slavery, racism, and colonialism throughout the world. Small, beautiful, and decidedly different from the North American and European countries from which its early colonizers and recent tourists hail, *A Small Place* describes Antigua as an island suspended in place and time. This allows it to function fluidly throughout the course of the book, becoming at one time or another a refuge for tourists to escape their mundane lives, a prison locking in its citizens, and a textbook example of how government corruption and mismanagement can continue the oppression of an allegedly free people.

LIBRARY

The library in the Antiguan capital of St. John's symbolizes Jamaica Kincaid's ambivalent feelings about colonialism in her native land of **Antigua**. The old, colonial library was a grand, peaceful, and beautiful place which nurtured Kincaid's love of reading when she was a child. In this way, the library seems to suggest her respect for the British or a belief in the superiority of their culture. This is especially true in comparison to the current library which, under the auspices of the independent Antiguan government, sits in an ugly warehouse and doesn't take proper care of its books. Yet, while Kincaid on one level seems to yearn for the order and culture of the colonial government, she traces the current disregard for the library and the educational and cultural values it suggests to the lessons that native Antiguans learned from their colonial overlords. Thus, the library both allows Kincaid to acknowledge the culture that shaped her while also giving her the critical distance necessary to analyze the negative effects of colonialism on herself, the Antiguan people, and other formerly enslaved and colonized people around the world.

MILL REEF CLUB

The Mill Reef Club exemplifies the ways in which racism and white supremacy continue to shape the trajectory of independent **Antigua**, especially in relationship to the tourist industry there. Founded by people who wanted to own and enjoy a part of the island without having to mix with the native (in other words, Black) Antiguans or face any of the issues of corruption and mismanagement that influence life

there, the Mill Reef Club operates as a colony-within-a-colony, a place cut off almost entirely from its host country of Antigua. Money and privilege allow the Mill Reef Club residents to hold themselves apart from Antiguans while residence on the island gives them a sense of ownership over its amenities—like the **library** they want to restore—and citizens—at least the ones that Mill Reef Club residents employ in their homes as domestic workers or in their businesses as employees.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition of *A Small Place* published in 2000.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Antigua is […] more beautiful than any of the other islands you have seen […] but they were much too green, much too lush with vegetation, which indicated to you, the tourist, that they got quite a bit of rainfall, and rain is the very thing that you, just now, do not want, for you are thinking of the hard and cold and dark and long days you spent working in North America (or, worse, Europe), earning some money so that you could stay in this place (Antigua) where the sun always shines and where the climate is deliciously hot and dry for the four to ten days you are staying there; and 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 […] must never cross your mind.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3-4

Explanation and Analysis

In the first section of *A Small Place*, the book casts the reader into the role of a tourist visiting the island for the first time. In this passage, the reader/tourist catches a glimpse of the island from their landing airplane, and they marvel at its beauty. However, the book immediately introduces problems with this attitude, since what makes Antigua attractive as a tourist destination—its hot, arid climate—makes it a challenging place to live permanently. *A Small Place* argues that the moral corruption at the heart of the tourism industry arises from tourism's neocolonial structure and the tourist's lack of connection to the communities they visit.

This passage points to both problems. First, the places from which the tourist may come have a long history of colonial subjugation (Europe) or enthusiastic participation in the enslavement of human beings (the United States and, to a lesser extent, Europe). The diverging fates of wealthy North American and European countries and poor nations like Antigua argues that the legacy of colonialism and slavery continues to benefit the oppressors at the expense of their victims.

Second, the tourist visits for a short time and thus remains unaffected by the structural and ecological challenges of life in places like Antigua. In fact, the very things that would make life livable for Antiguans—regular rainfall to support crops and livestock—would in fact make the island less desirable for tourists. Structurally, the book points out Antigua's problems, forcing the reader to acknowledge them, even while reminding the reader that their character—the tourist—should or would remain ignorant of them. Problems would, after all, ruin a vacation. This forces readers—especially white readers from North America or Europe—to reckon with the ways their lives may be implicated by the historical abuses *A Small Place* touches on.

How do they afford such a car? And do they live in a luxurious house to match such a car? Well, no. 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 […] 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 are not so easily available; and if you ask again why, you will be told that the two main car dealerships in Antigua are owned in part or outright by ministers in government. […] You pass a building sitting in a sea of dust and you think, It's some latrines for people just passing by, but [then] you see [it] has written on it PIGOTT'S SCHOOL.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Having landed the reader/tourist in Antigua, the book places them into a taxicab and describes what they would see as they look out the window on their ride to their resort.

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The luxury Japanese cars make a horrendous noise because their Antiguan drivers can only fill them with leaded gasoline, which ruins their modern engines (made to run exclusively on healthier unleaded gasoline).

This passage describes the corruption that lies beneath the oddly luxurious taxis. A government that had the best interests of its citizens in mind, Kincaid implies, would be more focused on ensuring that people had good housing or tolerable schools. But because the government ministers focus on their own enrichment, the government prioritizes things that will benefit them—like subsidizing car loans—rather than the population as a whole.

At this point in the book, Kincaid hasn't yet delved into the sources of governmental corruption, but she still speaks to her readers in the character of the tourist, who lacks the local perspective that would allow them to see the connections between corruption, the car, and their presence on the island. Thus, the book implies that tourism contributes to the problems on the island—or at the very least does nothing to improve the lives of normal Antiguans.

❝ You have brought your own books with you, and among them is one of those new books about economic history [...]explaining how the West [...] got rich: the West got rich not from the free (free—in this case meaning got-for-nothing) and then undervalued labour, for generations, of the people like me you see walking around you in Antigua but from the ingenuity of small shopkeepers in Sheffield and Yorkshire and Lancashire, or wherever; and what a great part the invention of the wristwatch played in it [...] (isn't that the last straw; for not only did we have to suffer the unspeakableness of slavery, but the satisfaction to be had from "We made you bastards rich" is taken away too, and so you needn't let that slightly funny feeling you have from time to time about exploitation, oppression, domination develop into full-fledged unease, discomfort; you could ruin your holiday.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9-10

Explanation and Analysis

On their taxi ride to the hotel, the tourist passes the old colonial library in the Antiguan capital city, which an earthquake destroyed in 1974—14 years before the book's publication—and which has yet to be repaired and reopened. Luckily, tourists won't be needing the library since they brought their own books, including the one this passage describes. *A Small Place* has already presented tourists with ample evidence that their quality of life far outstrips that of most Antiguans.

The hypothetical book that Kincaid imagines tourists bringing to Antigua allegedly explains why their North American or European country enjoys wealth and a high standard of living—but it does so in a way that absolves the descendants of colonialists and enslavers of the abuse and exploitation they perpetrated. Whitewashing history, it neatly skirts the issue of slavery—the theft of the labor and all too often lives of human beings—which dominated the colonial economies in places like Antigua, where the British established a sugar plantation and slave colony in the 17th century. But *A Small Place* traces a direct line between American and European abuses and exploitation in the past and their present wealth and global power. Slavery and colonialism allowed small groups of people to gain an unequal share of the world's resources, wealth, and power. Thus, Kincaid claims—in direct opposition to the tourist's book—that slavery founded the modern world order.

She also connects it directly to the modern tourism industry. Even though the hypothetical tourist she constructs in this section clearly comes from a nation made wealthy by abusing enslaved people, the tourist chooses to close their eyes to this truth. Recognition of the role of slavery in establishing the power of North America and Europe would at the very least make it harder to enjoy the hospitality of people descended from kidnapped and enslaved Africans brought into the colonial system for the sole purpose of making their masters wealthy.

❝ Overlooking the drug smuggler's mansion is yet another mansion, and leading up to it is the best paved road in all of Antigua—even better than the road that was paved for the Queen's visit in 1985 (when the Queen came, all the roads that she would travel on were paved anew, so that the Queen might have been left with the impression that riding in a car in Antigua was a pleasant experience.) In this mansion lives a woman sophisticated people in Antigua call Evita. She is a notorious woman. She's young and beautiful and the girlfriend of somebody very high up in the government. Evita is notorious because her relationship with this high government official has made her the owner of boutiques and property and given her a say in cabinet meetings, and all sorts of other privileges such a relationship would bring a beautiful young woman.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

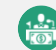
Explanation and Analysis

As their taxi drives through the Antiguan capital on its way to the resort, the tourist sees even more monuments to the corruption and grift that characterize the Antiguan government. Drug smugglers and the friends and family of powerful government ministers enjoy a lush life while normal Antiguans suffer. The criminals' houses that this passage describes sit on a well-maintained modern road, and this aligns them with the colonial authorities who formerly abused their Antiguan subjects. Living at the top of a road that's even nicer than the roads prepared for the Queen of England, the minister's girlfriend becomes a local, Antiguan queen. Her opulent lifestyle, made possible by taking advantage of her fellow countrymen and women, indicates that colonial attitudes are alive and well in Antigua, even if they have been adopted by local powerbrokers in the absence of the former colonial authorities.

The fact that criminals enjoy roads made nice for the ultimate colonial authority—the Queen of England—suggests the causal connection between the legacy of colonialism and slavery and the corruption of the modern Antiguan government—a connection that Kincaid will explore in greater depth in later sections of the book. The minister's girlfriend exploits her relative power and wealth to shift resources from fellow Antiguans to herself. But the parallelism between the girlfriend and the colonial authorities works the other way too, implying that all colonialists are to some degree criminals.

❝ 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 gently 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 as very big and the Atlantic Ocean is even bigger; it would amaze you to know the number of black slaves this ocean has swallowed up.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13-14

Explanation and Analysis

The tourist finally arrives at their hotel room, where they use the facilities and enjoy the view of the ocean that lies outside their window. This passage offers readers a stark reminder of just how small Antigua is. And in a small place, if something breaks or isn't running well, it will affect everyone at some point. The tourist, as a temporary visitor to the island, can ignore its history of colonial exploitation or slavery, the government's corruption, or the low standard of living available to most Antiguans. But not knowing that their toilet waste ends up in the ocean where they plan to swim in the morning doesn't change the fact that the island lacks a functional wastewater treatment plant. The tourist's ignorance offers a form of bliss—or at least the ability to avoid worry—but it doesn't actually protect them from the island's conditions. And, without knowing the problem, the tourist has no incentive to try to improve things for themselves or others—yet again reminding readers that the tourist's isolation from the local community contributes to the tourist's inability to ethically participate in the places they visit.

Superficially, Kincaid seems to try to soothe the tourist by reminding them that the size of the oceans will dilute any grossness washing off the island. But that doesn't reduce readers' sense of horror or disgust. Thus, this passage also pushes back on the assumption that tourists can safely ignore small places can be safely ignored because of those places' size. And if the thought of even minute amounts of waste in the ocean (rightfully) horrifies readers, Kincaid challenges them to feel the same discomfort and horror at the ways—both big and small—in which readers' histories entwine with the legacy of slavery and colonialism.

❝❝ 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, and it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you […] They do not like you. They do not like me! That thought never actually occurs to you. Still, you feel a little uneasy. Still, you feel a little foolish. Still, you feel a little out of place. But the banality of your own life is very real to you; it drove you to this extreme, spending your days and nights in the company of people who despise you, people you do not like really, people you would not want to have as your actual neighbor.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

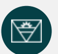
As the tourist looks out their window, they see other tourists on the beach, many of whom they judge to be physically ugly—fat and pale. But Kincaid pushes this idea farther, setting aside superficial appearances to get at what makes all tourists ugly: the moral emptiness of the entire idea of tourism. She suggests that people leave their homes and become tourists because they feel unfulfilled in their own lives. But instead of looking for—or creating—meaning in their daily existence, they prefer to travel elsewhere where they can voyeuristically enjoy the pain and suffering of other people. In this way, the tourist metaphorically becomes a piece of trash drifting on the currents of wind and water and ruining the place where it lands.

The damaged infrastructure and simple lives of native Antiguans can make the tourist appreciate their own life better; like the colonialist or the slaveholder, the tourist benefits from the suffering and exploitation of others. In this way, the tourist becomes a direct parallel to the British colonialists who, Kincaid will claim in a subsequent passage, could only find pleasure in feeling superior to others. Similarly, the tourist can only escape the pain of their small life by comparing it to the lives of people whom they look down on. And indeed, in the final pages of the book, Kincaid confirms this connection when she brands slaveholder and colonialists "human rubbish."

❝❝ That the native does not like the tourist is not hard to explain. […] Every native lives a life of overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom and desperation and depression, and every deed, good and bad, is an attempt to forget this. Every native would like to find a way out, every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour. But […] most natives in the world […] cannot go anywhere. They are too poor […]to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go—so when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 18-19

Explanation and Analysis

In the final paragraph of the first section, Kincaid continues to muse on the relationship between locals and tourists. All tourists are locals somewhere, and all locals long to be tourists. Privilege differentiates the two groups: locals with resources of time and money become tourists; locals without these resources remain locals. Tourists aren't just morally vacuous because of this freedom, however; they add insult to injury by using their freedom to travel—seemingly on purpose—to places where people have fewer resources and opportunities than themselves. The tourist thus becomes a voyeur, gaining pleasure from observing—but not participating in—the strife and struggle others experience in their inescapable daily lives. This voyeuristic enjoyment, turning the banality and boredom of others, aligns directly with the legacy of slavery.

The slaveholding planter derived wealth and value from the labor of enslaved people. His modern descendant, the tourist, derives value and pleasure from the lives of the enslaved people's descendants. Thus, in this passage, Kincaid directly connects tourism to slavery and colonialism, suggesting that tourism is a neocolonialist activity. Tourists can enjoy themselves only insofar as they can ignore the history of exploitation and abuse, and Kincaid's book aims to draw readers' attention to this history in an inescapable way.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ The Barclay brothers, who started Barclays Bank, were slave traders. That is how they made their money. When the English outlawed the slave trade, the Barclay brothers went into banking. It made them even richer. It's possible that when they saw how rich banking made them, they gave themselves a good beating for opposing an end to slave trading (for surely they would have opposed that), but then again, they may have been visionaries and agitated for an end to slavery, for look at how rich they became with their bank borrowing from (through their savings) the descendants of the slaves and then lending back to them. But people just a little older than I am can recite the name and the day the first black person was hired as a cashier at this very same Barclays Bank in Antigua. Do you ever wonder why some people blow things up?

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25-26

Explanation and Analysis

In the second chapter, Jamaica Kincaid describes the Antigua in which she grew up, with special emphasis on how the Antigua that tourists—or, for that matter, locals—experience today diverges from it. This entails clearly drawing the connections between the island's history—especially as it relates to colonialism and slavery—and its present. This passage describes how the Barclay Brothers, who founded the bank that served Antigua in Kincaid's youth, made their money. Kincaid's clarity stands in direct contrast to the passage in the economic history book she imagined her tourist bringing to Antigua on vacation. That account ignored the key role slavery played in generating the wealth and power of modern European and North American countries.

As the descendant of people who were enslaved and subjected to colonial authority, however, Kincaid, sees this history from a different vantage point. She straightforwardly points out that the Barclays not only made their initial fortune from the labor of enslaved people, but they also continued to benefit from the legacy of slavery even after emancipation occurred; rather than returning their stolen wealth, they instead loaned this wealth to their victims' and their victims' families, continuing to benefit from slavery even after the British government outlawed it.

This passage also introduces the idea of racism and white supremacy in modern Antigua, where the emancipation of formerly enslaved people did not grant Black Antiguans equal participation in society, especially British colonial authorities ruled the island. Thus, Black Antiguans provided capital to the bank in the form of their free labor under slavery and then in the form of interest payments on loans after emancipation. But they were not allowed, until quite recently, to make money off the bank—that seems to have been the provenance of its white owners, directors, and employees.

❝ We thought these people were so ill-mannered and we were so surprised by this […] We thought they were un-Christian-like; we thought they were small-minded; we thought they were like animals, a bit below human standards as we understood those standards to be. We felt superior to all these people; we thought that perhaps the English among them who behaved this way weren't English after all, for the English were supposed to be civilized, and this behaviour was so much like that of an animal, the thing we were before the English rescued us, that maybe they weren't from the real England […] We felt superior, for we were so much better behaved […] (Of course, I now see that good behaviour is the proper posture of the weak, of children.)

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis

Describing the Antigua of her childhood, Jamaica Kincaid lists a few examples of the types of overt racism she and others historically experienced, including a Czechoslovakian emigree who escaped Hitler's European genocides only to disparage Black Antiguans as dirty and a school headmistress who frequently talked labeled her students primitive monkeys.

Despite the obvious animus of these behaviors, however, Kincaid claims that most Antiguans didn't consider them racist. Instead, they seem to have gone out of their way to find other excuses or explanations for the abuse they suffered—and their chief reaction seems to have been surprise. Colonial powers often claimed the right to subjugate and rule their colonies based on their allegedly superior civilization and morals. So, when the actions of the colonial authorities and other white people failed to live up to the standards Antiguans expected from the very people who claimed a right to exploit others through their superior societies, the locals confusedly concluded that, perhaps

these rude people are the exception to the rule. Except, as Kincaid makes painfully clear throughout the text, racism is the rule, not the exception.

It's important to note that, just before this passage, Kincaid criticized a British school headmistress for comparing her Antiguan students to primitive monkeys. Now, just a few pages later, she's putting similar sentiments into the mouths of Antiguans who find the colonial authorities and other white newcomers to the island falling short of human standards. It sounds like the islanders—through Kincaid's words—make the exact kind of statements that she criticizes others for making. And while it's possible that she means to insult and degrade people like the Czech doctor and British headmistress, her diatribe also arises out of a long history of justifying colonialism and slavery under the guise of enlightened, civilized white people improving the lives of the subjects by teaching them civilized manners and behavior. And in this context, the white outsiders fail repeatedly to live up to their own stated standards since they abuse and exploit their colonial subjects rather than help them.

❝❝ But what I see is the millions of people, of whom I am just one, made orphans: no motherland, no fatherland, no gods, no mounds of earth for holy ground [...] and worst and most painful of all, no tongue. (For isn't it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime? And what can that really mean? For the language of the criminal can contain only the goodness of the criminal's deed. The language of the criminal can explain and express the deed only from the criminal's point of view. It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted upon me.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31-32

Explanation and Analysis

Jamaica Kincaid explains how Antiguans celebrated the birthday of Queen Victoria, who ruled Britain and its colonial holdings from 1837—1901. Other British subjects traditionally celebrated the date of her death; Kincaid exploits the fact that Antiguan celebrations gave Victoria a kind of immortality (by neglecting to acknowledge her death) to show how the legacy of colonialism long outlives its active practice. From there, she launches into a diatribe against American anglophiles (people who have a fascination with or love for Britain and its culture). Her anger suggests that mostly—or only—white people can feel untainted appreciation for British culture. Their privilege shields them from the trauma that non-white British colonial subjects have suffered. But she puts these traumas on vivid display for readers of *A Small Place*, asking them to extrapolate from the small and specific Antiguan experience to the broader experience of colonial subjects everywhere.

Despite their altruistic narrative, the British Empire decimated societies, deprived people of their language and culture, and generally abused its colonial subjects in order to enrich itself. Even in the present, 20th-century moment, Kincaid feels this abuse as a visceral attack. She debates the British assertion that their subjects needed to learn language and culture, arguing that the British took away their colonial subjects' language and culture. The language of the criminal can never express the full damage of criminal's deed because the very fact that the victim must use it points to the ways in the history of colonialism irreparably shapes former subjects' modern consciousness and life experience. Without their original language, they lack the full autonomy of their colonizers, according to Kincaid's formulation.

❝❝ Have you ever wondered to yourself why it is that all people like me seem to have learned from you is how to imprison and murder each other, how to govern badly, and how to take the wealth of our country and place it in Swiss bank accounts? Have you ever wondered why it is that all we seem to have learned from you is how to corrupt our societies and how to be tyrants? You will have to accept that it is mostly your fault. Let me just show you how things looked to us. You came. You took things that were not yours, and you did not even, for appearances' sake, ask first [...] You murdered people. You imprisoned people. You robbed people. You opened your own banks and put our money in them. The accounts were in your name. The banks were in your name.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

By the second chapter, Kincaid no longer addresses readers

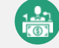
in the role of the tourist. Instead, the "you" she talks to has become a much more diffuse, global identity loosely associated with white, privileged, and relatively wealthy citizens of the United States or wealthy European countries. However, she still demands that readers open their eyes to the damage wrought by colonialism, slavery, and white supremacy as the first step toward imagining a way to heal some of the wounds that readers' ancestors delt. This passage takes the form of a series of rhetorical questions Kincaid poses.

Kincaid presents a direct counternarrative to the story of Western domination by cultural superiority. Colonialists and enslavers left their European countries and sailed around the world over the course of several centuries, using their (in many cases superior) military technology to overwhelm and overthrow societies and civilizations—especially in parts of the world with valuable natural resources. These actions belie any claims to cultural superiority that colonizers made.

Kincaid's historical sweep also points toward the vast disparities in wealth and power that exist in the modern world. While white-supremacist thinking looks at political and social failures in places like Antigua and takes this as evidence for the inability of people deemed less advanced (usually Black people) to take care of themselves, Kincaid suggests that North Americans and Europeans need to look in the mirror instead, since the actions of their ancestors set the model for others to follow. And once again, she uses the small example of Antigua's history and Antigua's fate to extrapolate lessons for the broader world, since Europeans colonized places all around the globe over the course of centuries.

❝ Do you know why people like me are shy about being capitalists? Well, it's because we, for as long as we have known you, *were* capital, like bales of cotton and sacks of sugar, and you were the commanding, cruel capitalists, and the memory of this is so strong, the experience so recent, that we can't quite bring ourselves to embrace this idea that you think so much of. As for what we were like before we met you, I no longer care. No periods of time over which my ancestors held sway, no documentation of complex civilisations, is any comfort to me. Even if I really came from people who were living like monkeys in trees, it was better to be that than what happened to me, what I became after I met you.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 36-37

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jamaica Kincaid continues to explain to her reader—portrayed as a mostly well-meaning but clueless white person from North America or Europe—the long legacies of colonialism, racism, and slavery. She commits herself to this work out of a profound sense that problems can't be addressed until they're seen and acknowledged, and a sense that people must take personal responsibility and ownership for their part in their communities and in history.

Yet, Kincaid doesn't pull any punches, reminding readers in brutally clear and simple prose that, for centuries, people like her (mostly Black people) were forced into slavery and servitude for people like her readers—or at least the clearly white "you" she addresses throughout *A Small Place*. And in light of the horrific abuses that enslavers and colonizers enacted, Kincaid would prefer to be completely uncivilized than subject to the hypocrisy and cruelty that colonial rule and the institution of slavery wrought.

Slavery wasn't just evil while it was happening; the institution helped countries like the United States to accumulate the wealth and power that still gives it a prime position in the world order. The very foundations of American society, most importantly its free enterprise capitalism system, grow out of the legacy of slavery and the unpaid labor of generations of slaves. This is why, Kincaid claims, white people shouldn't be shocked when Black people distrust them or the systems, like capitalism, that they invented. It's that the descendants of enslaved people failed to learn the lessons of their slave masters and colonial overlords—it's that they learned too well that the color of their skin and their access to wealth and power—not their humanity—determined their value. Kincaid thus claims that she and the descendants of formerly enslaved people have a clearer perspective on North American and European society than its own members.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ But if you saw the old library, situated as it was, in a big, old wooden building painted a shade of yellow that is beautiful to people like me, with its wide verandah, its big, always open windows, its rows and rows of shelves filled with books, its beautiful wooden tables and chairs for sitting and reading, […] the beauty of us sitting there like communicants at an altar, taking in, again and again, the fairy tale of how we met you, your right to do the things you did, how beautiful you were, are, and always will be; if you could see all of that in just one glimpse, you would see why my heart would break at the dung heap that now passes for a library in Antigua.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 42-43

Explanation and Analysis

Jamaica Kincaid opens the third chapter of *A Small Place* by asking herself whether independent, self-ruled Antigua is better off than colonial Antigua was. This isn't an easy question to answer, and this passage, which describes the beauty of the old colonial library, helps to show why. Clearly, the library meant a great deal to Kincaid, and she misses its grand beauty and spiritual quietness.

Yet, as a colonial institution, the library played an important role in British cultural indoctrination, since it housed books in English that addressed the stories the British wanted told and in ways that favored their version of history. The content of these stories, which Kincaid hints at when she describes the "fairy tales" of white beauty and the moral imperative of British imperialism, helps to contribute to a belief in white supremacy among the colonial authorities and white tourists and foreign nationals like the residents of the Mill Reef Club. Being exposed to these stories in childhood also may offer another piece of the puzzle when it comes to explaining why modern Antiguans passively tolerate corruption in their government, since these stories taught them to be submissive to those in power.

Yet for all its faults, the colonial library offered Antiguans an oasis of peace and beauty on an otherwise challenging island. For this reason, the library, as both an institution and as a symbol, illustrates the complicated nature of Kincaid's (and Antigua's) relationship to colonial rule—a vexed relationship that Kincaid never fully resolves. In part this ambiguity seems to suggest that the question of Antigua's relationship to colonial rule can never be fully resolved because the answer is contrafactual: Antigua would be better off if neither colonialism nor slavery nor racism and white supremacy had ever happened there. But because we cannot erase history, everyone—the descendants and benefactors of the oppressors and colonialists as well as the descendants of their victims—must grapple with the complicated inheritance of the past.

❝ (In Antigua today, most young people seem almost illiterate. On the airwaves where they work as news personalities, they speak English as if it were their sixth language. Once, I attended an event at carnival time called a "Teenage Pageant." In this event, teenagers […] paraded around on a stadium stage singing pop songs […], reciting poems they had written about slavery […], and generally making asses of themselves. What surprised me most about them was […] how stupid they seemed, how unable they were to answer in a straightforward way, and in their native tongue of English, simple questions about themselves. In my generation, they would not have been allowed on the school stage, much less before an audience in a stadium.)

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

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Page Number: 43-44

Explanation and Analysis

Musing on the fate of the library, Jamaica Kincaid wonders if its young librarians cannot find books in their collection because the lack of a proper library building forces them to keep much of the collection in cardboard boxes or because the librarians lack a good education. This leads her to a lengthy aside about Antiguan youths and what she sees as massive faults in their knowledge and ability to express themselves. This passage forms a part of that aside. Earlier in the book, Kincaid complained about the injustice of having only English—the language of her ancestors' and her oppressors—to express herself with. Yet, as *A Small Place* testifies, her colonial education and native intelligence together give her a stunning command of this language, despite its limitations. Because reading and writing form a core part of Kincaid's self-perception and self-presentation in this book—as demonstrated by her loving tribute to the library—she notes the declining quality of Antiguan

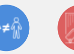
education in how poorly she feels the younger generations express themselves verbally and in writing.

It's worth noting that her critique of the teenagers and twenty-somethings described in this passage come perilously close to some of the behaviors she decries in colonialists elsewhere—Kincaid returns to Antigua and immediately seems to set about judging the people who live there in ways that imply she knows more or better than they do. Throughout the book, Kincaid leverages her position as an Antiguan who left the island to claim a narrative point of view that looks at Antigua from a critical outside distance (the better to examine its faults) while maintaining affection and sympathy for the island and its people.

A generous reading of this passage sees it demonstrating the inherent difficulty of overcoming colonialist and white supremacist thinking—even if one realizes the degree to which these institutions and beliefs have wreaked havoc on a global scale. A less generous interpretation would see Kincaid devolving here to a role uncomfortably close to that of the tourist in the first chapter, who comes to Antigua from afar and can leave whenever they want to, yet still feel comfortable passing judgment on the locals who lack the resources or the desire to leave. Both interpretations likely have some element of truth to them.

❝ I then went to see a woman whose family had helped to establish the Mill Reef Club [...] who was very active in getting the old library restored [...] After I mentioned the library to her, the first thing she told me was that she always encouraged her girls and her girls' children to use the library, and by her girls she meant grownup Antiguan women (not unlike me) who work in her gift shop as seamstresses and saleswomen. She said to me then what everybody in Antigua says sooner or later: The government is for sale; anybody from anywhere can come to Antigua and for a sum of money can get what he wants [...] I could see the pleasure she took in pointing out to me the gutter into which a self-governing—black—Antigua had placed itself.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

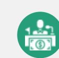
Dismayed by the state of the library, Jamaica Kincaid tries to use whatever small influence she has (by the time the book was published, she was already a fairly well-known writer in America) to see if she can't help the library restoration project along. Several of the Mill Reef Club residents seem to share Kincaid's conviction about the importance of this project, so she tries to encourage their support. But this meeting quickly reveals how thin their support for the library as a site of cultural and educational opportunity for Antiguans really is.

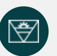
The Mill Reef Club residents remain so wedded to their own image of Antigua (and so addicted to the power their wealth gives them) that they would prefer to hold up the whole project by insisting that the original building be restored than contribute funds to build a new library. And the woman with whom Kincaid talks in this passage displays the casual racism that Kincaid claims as a hallmark of colonialists and their modern-day counterparts—tourists and foreign nationalists—when she refers to her adult employees as "girls," patronizingly encouraging them to use the library as if it wouldn't occur to them otherwise.

In this vignette, Kincaid dramatizes the outsider, tourist attitude she descried in the first chapter, which looks on the dysfunctional government of a place like Antigua and incorrectly concludes that its chaos and disorder arise from letting non-white people run a country. Instead, as Kincaid maintains elsewhere in the book, political chaos and disorder seem to be the natural result of colonialists and enslavers occupying territories and overthrowing civilizations for their own benefit. And this white woman who refers to Antiguans as if they were all children doesn't seem aware of her own hypocrisy; when she complains that anyone with enough money can buy influence with the government, even "outsiders," she clearly doesn't count the influence that she, her family, and the other Mill Reef Club residents have exercised in Antigua.

❝ Countries with Ministers of Culture must be like countries with Liberty Weekend. Do you remember Liberty Weekend? In the week before Liberty Weekend, the United States Supreme Court ruled that ordinary grown-up people could not do as they pleased behind the locked doors of their own bedroom. I would have thought, then, that the people whose idea it was to have the Liberty Weekend business would have been so ashamed at such a repudiation of liberty that they would have cancelled the whole thing. But not at all; and so in a country that had less liberty than it used to have, Liberty Weekend was celebrated.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 49

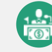
Explanation and Analysis

After trying and failing to receive support from the Mill Reef Club residents, Jamaica Kincaid briefly considers making a case for the library to the Minister of Culture. She can't because he's abroad—and she doesn't believe he would help out anyway. Given that the Minister of Culture largely seems concerned with sports and that most of Antiguan culture seems to derive from the tutelage of British colonizers, Kincaid thus concludes that the only reason Antigua has Minister of Culture is to give outsiders the impression that Antigua has a culture to begin with. At this point, in an aside that includes this passage, she makes a rare break from her focus on Antigua to turn her eye to corruption in the United States.

Making the case that hypocrisy, corruption, and government overreach aren't a problem only in so-called "developing" nations but also in the wealthiest and most powerful countries, she calls attention to Liberty Weekend and a 1986 Supreme Court ruling (Bowers v. Hardwick) that denied same-sex couples the right to private, consensual sex. The "Liberty Weekend" Kincaid describes was a multi-day celebration in 1986, on the hundredth anniversary of dedication of the Statue of Liberty. Yet, at the same time the American government professed its dedication to the principles of liberty and democracy with a flashy public spectacle, its government denied freedoms to its citizens. Thus, Kincaid equates the Antiguan government's insistence that they have a culture despite evidence to the contrary with the American government's insistence that it has liberty and justice for its citizens even at times when it denied rights to large swaths of its population.

❝ Once there was a scandal about stamps issued for Redonda. A lot of money was made on these stamps, but no one seems to know who got the money or where the stamps actually ended up. Where do all these stamps, in all their colourfulness, where do they come from? I mean, whose idea is it? I mean, Antigua has no stamp designer on the government payroll; there is no building that houses the dyes and the paper on which the stamps are printed; there is no Department of Printing. So who decides to print stamps celebrating the Queen of England's birthday? Who decides to celebrate Mickey Mouse's birthday? Who decides that stamps from this part of the world should be colourful and bright and not sedate and subdued, like, say, a stamp from Canada?

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 51-52

Explanation and Analysis

While considering her plan to speak to the Minister of Culture about the library restoration project, Jamaica Kincaid concludes that she's better off leaving him alone; her mother once picked on him for his involvement with the Redondan stamp scheme. This draws Kincaid into an aside about these stamps and the island of Redonda itself, from which this passage comes.

In general, this passage considers the ridiculousness of life for people under colonial authority, in large part because people who lived very far away didn't fully understand the situation were making decisions about colonial subjects' lives. These distances—for example, the more than 4,000 miles of ocean between Antigua and England—foster insufficient understanding of or concern for local needs. And this lack of concern leads to islands being lumped together into awkward countries (in the colonial past) and to stamps being issued for uninhabited islands (in the present).

In addition, the distance destroys transparency for current and former colonial subjects. Just as no one in Antigua seems to have been consulted about including Redonda and Barbuda in the nation, so too does someone make the decision to design, print, and issue stamps without seeming to consult any of the locals. And this aligns with a general lack of concern on the part of colonial authorities for the needs, concerns, or culture of their subjects. The colonizers set the agenda and decide the national holidays—which always reflect the culture, history, and even aesthetics of

the colonizers and their friends rather than the aesthetics, culture, or history of their subjects.

❝ The people in a small place cannot give an exact account, a complete account, of themselves. This cannot be held against them; an exact account, a complete account, of anything, anywhere, is not possible. (The hour in the day, the day of the year some ships set sail is a small, small detail in any picture, any story; but the picture itself, the story itself depend on things that can never, ever be pinned down.) The people in a small place can have no interest in the exact, or in completeness, for that would demand a careful weighing, careful consideration, careful judging, careful questioning. It would demand the invention of a silence, inside of which these things could be done. It would demand a reconsideration, an adjustment in the way they understand the existence of Time. To the people in a small place, the division of Time into the Past, the Present, and the Future does not exist.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52-53

Explanation and Analysis

In *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid examines the history of Antigua as a means of understanding its current situation and attempting to answer the question of whether Antigua was better off under colonial rule than as an independent, self-governed nation. The relationship of Antiguans to time and history forms the crux of both questions. This passage offers Kincaid's best understanding of what keeps Antiguans stuck in cycles of corruption and poverty. Some of this lies outside of their control: as Kincaid says, it's pretty much impossible for finite and fallible humans to give a full explanation of anything. And a history of enslavement and colonial oppression further disadvantages Antiguans when it comes to contextualizing their history. After all, so many of the individual stories and histories of the enslaved people kidnapped and forced to labor in colonies like Antigua have been lost in the sheer, oceanic scale of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This comingling of lives and stories, Kincaid suggests, makes it harder to grasp the full picture.

Yet, Kincaid also charges her fellow Antiguans with a failure to create the space to carefully assess their past. In part, this may be a protective gesture, since it shields Antiguans from the traumatic histories of enslavement and colonialism. But, Kincaid insists, this long-term failure to look at history has serious consequences—most importantly, Antiguans' failure to see the through lines between the events of the past and the corruptions of the present.

❝ [A]n institution that is often celebrated in Antigua is the Hotel Training School, a school that teaches Antiguans how to be good servants, how to be a good nobody, which is what a servant is. In Antigua, people cannot see a relationship between their obsession with slavery and emancipation and their celebration of the Hotel Training School [... or] between their obsession with slavery and emancipation and the fact that they are governed by corrupt men, or that these corrupt men have given their country away to corrupt foreigners [...]. In accounts of the capture and enslavement of black people almost no slave ever mentions who captured and delivered him or her to the European master. In accounts of their corrupt government, Antiguans neglect to say that in twenty years of one form of self-government or another, they have, with one five-year exception, placed power in the present government.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist, Vere Cornwall Bird

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55-56

Explanation and Analysis

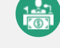
Having posited her thesis that modern Antiguans, trapped in a small place with a traumatic history, cannot fully contextualize themselves either in history or in the world, Kincaid proceeds to offer some examples to support this claim. This passage examines one example—the Hotel Training School. In the colonial past and the years before the British formally outlawed the slave trade (otherwise known as emancipation), colonial authorities, traders, and sugarcane planters enslaved the ancestors of modern Antiguans. And, as Kincaid points out elsewhere, modern Antiguans rightly speak of this exploitation with horror and celebrate the granting of their freedom.

Yet, despite their horror of slavery, modern Antiguans seem incapable, at least in Kincaid's eyes, of connecting the historical institution of slavery—in which Black Antiguans

were forced to provide free labor to ease the lives of white people who came to the island from faraway places—with the modern tourism industry, in which Black Antiguans provide undervalued and underpaid labor to ease the lives of (predominantly white) tourists who come to the island from faraway places. While the Hotel Training School certainly lacks the coercion and horror of slavery, other vignettes in the book have clearly shown how the attitudes that support slavery (that Black people are less intelligent or more childlike than white people) persist among the tourists and outsiders whom graduates of the Hotel Training School prepare to care for.

> These offshore banks are popular in the West Indies. Only tourism itself is more important. Every government wants these banks, which are modelled on the banks in Switzerland. I have a friend who just came back from Switzerland. What a wonderful time she had. She had never seen cleaner streets anywhere, or more wonderful people anywhere. She was in such a rhapsodic state about the Swiss, and the superior life they lead, that it was hard for me not to bring up how they must pay for this superior life they lead. For […] not a day goes by that I don't hear about […] some dictator, […] some criminal kingpin who has a secret Swiss bank account. But maybe there is no connection between the wonderful life that the Swiss lead and the ill-gotten money resting in Swiss bank vaults; maybe it's just a coincidence.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 59-60

Explanation and Analysis

As Kincaid lists a cornucopia of Antiguan government ministers' abuses of power and unethical practices, she arrives at offshore banking. This problematic practice—in which people store money in countries other than the one they live in, usually to avoid local regulations or taxes—tends to attract money from bad actors like criminals and corrupt politicians. Thus, while offshore banking (like tourism) brings much-needed money into the Antiguan economy, Kincaid suggests that the moral liability isn't worth the economic reward. Even if most of the benefits flow to well-connected government ministers and wealthy bankers, normal Antiguans who refuse to take a stand against corruption in their country share the culpability.

Moreover, as she points out, offshore banking represents yet another model that Antiguans borrow directly from western European countries—the same countries that have oppressed and abused them and their ancestors for centuries. She insinuates that Europeans who profit off the bad actions of others become complicit in those bad actions by association. If the Swiss have a high and desirable standard of living but that standard of living comes at the cost of crimes perpetrated against the vulnerable in other parts of the world (the citizens of the corrupt dictators, for instance), then their standard of living isn't worth it in a moral sense.

> The papers of the slave-trading family from Barbuda (the Condringtons), the records of their traffic in human lives, were being auctioned. The government of Antigua made a bid for them. Someone else made a larger bid. He was the foreigner. His bid was the successful bid. He then made a gift of these papers to the people of Antigua. And what does it mean? The records of one set of enemies, bought by another enemy, given to the people who have been their victims as a gift.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 67-68

Explanation and Analysis

The Condrington family, who arrived soon after the British founded their colony in Antigua and who founded the first British settlement on the nearby island of Barbuda, are an important (if painful) part of Antiguan history. Kincaid has claimed elsewhere that modern Antiguans' poor grasp of how their lives fit into broader historical narratives contributes to their ongoing disenfranchisement and abuse at the hands of tourists, outside investors, and even their own independent government, and so it would seem to be of utmost importance that Antigua possess the Condringtons' papers. The papers, after all, provide an important source of historical contextualization. And while the government does try to buy these papers, outsider outbids them and then presents them the papers as a gift.

Although this outsider gives the papers to the Antiguan government, Kincaid asks readers to think about what his

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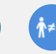
motives may have been—this is the thrust of her questions about what this odd circumstance "means." And it seems that self-interest primarily motivates him—things he wishes to do or the influence he wishes to have in Antigua. In this way, he sounds a lot like the colonialists (and people like the Condringtons) who covered their selfish exploitation of other people and faraway lands in the language of helping, civilizing, or improving people they considered less civilized or less human.

> The people who go into running the government were not always such big thieves; nor have they always been so corrupt. They took things, but it was on a small scale. For instance, if the government built some new housing to be sold to people, then a minister or two would get a few of the houses for themselves [...] Everybody knew about this. Some of the ministers were honest. One of them, a famous one in Antigua, a leader of the Trade and Labour Union movement, even died a pauper. Another minister, when his party lost power, had to drive a taxi. It is he, the taxi-driving ex-minister who taught the other ministers a lesson [...] All the ministers have "green cards"—a document that makes them legal residents of the United States of America.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist, Vere Cornwall Bird

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

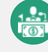
Jamaica Kincaid has spent much of this chapter detailing the corruption that infects the modern Antiguan government. To address the (unhelpful and frequently demeaning) contention that outside observers have offered—that this state of affairs seems to offer proof that Antiguans (and, by implication, Black people and former colonial subjects generally) cannot govern themselves—Kincaid carefully traced the connections between the actions of colonialists and slaveholders in the past with Antigua's current situation.

In this passage, she offers some proof that corruption and chaos aren't necessarily the natural state of affairs in the Antiguan government. Of course, humans being what they are, Antiguan government ministers and other powerful people on the island have always sought to take advantage of their situations, at least in minor ways. But the abuse that Prime Minister Bird and his government have perpetrated is on such a vast scale that one can only understand it by looking at historical precedents.

Perhaps more importantly for Kincaid's primarily white, North American and European audience, powerful countries like the United States aid and abet the situation in Antigua by supporting corrupt government ministers. In other words, places like the United States, while prone to judging harshly the Antiguans' evident failure of self-governance, simultaneously enable the very corruption they criticize by enabling crooked government ministers to thrive. And notably, the government ministers' possession of green cards—and their tendency to flee to America to access services like healthcare or to escape accountability for their actions at home—aligns government ministers far more closely with the isolated and morally corrupt tourists than with the rest of the Antiguan population.

> And so they anchor the merchant-importer's books being burned to the event of the original, honest leaders of the Antigua Trades and Labour Union being maneuvered out of the union they founded and dishonest people taking their place; and they anchor that to the decline of one sort of colonialism and its debasement and its own sort of corruption; and they anchor that to this man, this Prime Minister, who from time to time had seemed like a good man, so well could he spell out the predicament that average Antiguans found themselves in.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), Vere Cornwall Bird

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

While Jamaica Kincaid places much of the responsibility for the broken system of government in Antigua—and, by extension, other former colonies—on the exploitative and morally corrupt institutions of colonialism and slavery, she doesn't let her fellow Antiguans completely off the hook, either. While claiming that their inability to contextualize their country and its history may render them more prone to exploitation, Kincaid also tries to break through their sense of apathy and victimhood by showing the ways in which they have become complicit in the political mess.

The prime example that Kincaid offers is Antiguans' ongoing support—or at least tolerance—of Vere Cromwell Bird, longtime Prime Minister of Antigua. This passage shows how he came to power through underhanded means. Nevertheless, Antiguans elected him and have kept him in office for decades. Kincaid claims that Antiguans tell themselves a story about how somehow bad people corrupted a good institution as a way to avoid responsibility for their role in that corruption. And then, by linking this corruption to the evil of colonialism, they suggest a sort of inevitability to the current state of affairs that allows them to complain but not fix things. In this context, Kincaid offers *A Small Place* to her fellow Antiguans as a mirror that she hopes will break through their shallow and timeless sense of victimization and allow them to regain the agency they were denied for so many centuries.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Antigua is too beautiful. Sometimes the beauty of it seems unreal. Sometimes the beauty of it seems as if it sets a stage for a play, for no real sunset could look like that; no real seawater could strike that many shades of blue at once; no real sky could be that shade of blue [...] and no real cloud could be that white and float just that way in the sky [...] And what might it do to ordinary people to live in this way every day? What might it do to them to live in such heightened, intense surroundings day after day? They have nothing to compare this incredible constant with, no big historical moment to compare the way they are now with the way they used to be [...] Nothing, then, natural or unnatural, to leave a mark on their character. It is just a little island.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 79-80

Explanation and Analysis

As the book nears an end, Jamaica Kincaid muses on the beauty of her island homeland. This passage explores the possibility that the very beauty and uniqueness of Antigua contributes to its exploitation; if the place seems too beautiful to be real, then it's easy to see how visitors wouldn't fully recognize the humanity of the people who live there. But Kincaid reminds readers that the tourist's inability to recognize and value the humanity in the people who live in the places they visit is a sign of the tourist's privilege. Tourists have resources that allow them to travel, and so they choose to make their lives feel more tolerable by voyeuristically consuming the lives of trapped locals.

And, lest readers forget, Kincaid invokes the ways in which the timelessness and changelessness of Antigua forces its inhabitants to exist in a kind of timeless stasis outside of history. Unfortunately, this doesn't exempt Antiguans from the historical currents that have washed over their island; instead, it traps them in a state where the historical institutions of colonialism and slavery continue to exercise powerful influence over current affairs. And by reminding readers of Antigua's smallness, Kincaid invites them one last time to think about how the example of Antigua illuminates broader global trends.

Kincaid also reminds readers that one of the things that makes it hard for tourists to maintain their sense of ethics and morality—to avoid taking advantage of the people who live in the places they visit—is precisely the temporary nature of their stay. A temporary visitor may find Antigua almost too beautiful and strange to be real, but this unreality will fade as soon as they leave. In contrast, most Antiguans are too poor to leave the island and don't have this option. They instead must grapple with the facts of their history and the related corruption of their current situation—if they don't, they have no other options, for they have no places they can go to temporarily feel better about their constrained lives.

❝ ([A]ll masters of every stripe are rubbish, and all slaves of every stripe are noble and exalted; there can be no question about this) to satisfy their desire for wealth and power [...]. Eventually, the masters left in a kind of way; eventually, the slaves were freed, in a kind of way. The people in Antigua now, the people who really think of themselves as Antiguans [...] are descendants of those noble and exalted people, the slaves. Of course, the whole thing is, once you cease to be a master, once you throw off your master's yoke, you are no longer human rubbish, you are just a human being, and all the things that adds up to. Once they are no longer slaves, once they are free, they are no longer noble and exalted; they are just human beings.

Related Characters: Jamaica Kincaid (speaker), The Tourist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 80-81

Explanation and Analysis

Jamaica Kincaid closes *A Small Place* with a fast and furious survey and summation of Antiguan history, beginning when Christopher Columbus charted the island for his European patrons in 1943. Shortly thereafter, the British founded a colony in Antigua with the explicit purpose of profiting from the slave trade and the sugarcane cultivation made possible by exploiting the labor of enslaved people. Kincaid takes the immoral depravity of the slaveholders—"human rubbish"—as a given. And if slaveholders are wicked by definition, then this same logic would suggest that slaveholders' victims are inherently noble.

Kincaid's narrative serves to restore a sense of humanity to the enslaved people while also criticizing their masters—in the past. But time passes on. In the present moment, the former colonizers and enslavers have assumed a new humanity; this suggests that their descendants—even the tourists Kincaid criticizes throughout the book—have the capacity to move through the world taking responsibility for the legacy of their ancestors and making better choices for themselves.

But, yet again, the same logic applies to the descendants of enslaved Antiguans. Despite the fact that the long legacies of colonialism and slavery continue to have an outsized effect on modern Antigua, Kincaid doesn't let her fellow Antiguans avoid responsibility for the state of their country. When Antiguans were emancipated, they became responsible for their own fate. The helplessness and passivity they adopted as survival techniques in the context of slavery no longer serve them, even though they cling to these patterns of behavior. Just as the example of Antigua transcends the local, pointing to global histories and patterns, the exemplary groups of "masters" and "slaves" dissolve into individuals, each responsible for looking at the world, taking history into account, and forging their own path forward.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The book addresses the reader directly, casting them as a tourist and describing an imaginary trip to **Antigua**. As the tourist, you arrive at an airport named after the Antiguan Prime Minister at the time of the book's publication, Vere Cornwall Bird. You might feel surprised that he would choose to put his name on an airport instead of a school or hospital, but only because you haven't yet seen the state of Antiguan schools, hospitals, or other public services.

The book spends a lot of time considering the moral emptiness of the tourism industry, so it's disconcerting for readers to be cast into the role of "the tourist" in the first section. The contrast between the tourist's freedom to travel and hints about the rot and corruption that characterize the island's political system creates a distinct sense of unease.

From the air, you, the tourist, might consider **Antigua** beautiful. Tourists like you chose to come here from Europe or America to enjoy the sunshine, since it hardly ever rains. You will leave soon, so you don't worry about what it might be like to live here permanently, in a land surrounded by oceans yet parched for useable fresh water, because it almost never rains.

The dry, warm climate that makes Antigua attractive to tourists makes it inhospitable for residents. The moral bankruptcy of tourism arises in part from the fact that tourists stay in a place for such a short time that they can ignore (or not realize) the difficulties a place's climate, politics, or history creates for its inhabitants.

When the plane lands, you, the tourist, disembark. You pass through customs seamlessly, unlike the native Antiguans returning from abroad with boxes of cheap clothes to give to their relatives. As you step outside, you feel cleansed and purified by the hot, dry air. You hail a taxi to take you to your hotel, and when he quotes a ridiculously high price, you show your travel savvy by asking for the official price list and refusing to pay a cent more. On the ride to your hotel, you notice the difference between the terrible state of the road, the taxi driver's erratic and dangerous driving, and the taxi itself—a new, high-end Japanese car. Its engine makes a terrible noise, however; despite being designed for unleaded fuel, only leaded gasoline is available on **Antigua**.

As the tourist takes a taxi to the resort, the book draws a comparison between the ways that white colonizers and slaveowners took advantage of Black people in the past and the ways that modern white tourists continue to extract an unfair bargain from Black workers in the tourism industry. The contrast between the terrible roads and the fancy Japanese cars points toward the corruption and rot that characterize the government and its officers. And the privileges accorded to white travelers over Black citizens show how white supremacy continues to operate in Antigua despite its independence from its former colonizers.

In fact, most of the cars are new and expensive, although their engines make a terrible grinding sound. You, the tourist, don't realize that the government makes loans for cars accessible because government ministers own most of the island's car dealerships. And it won't occur to you to wonder about this, really, because you are on holiday. You drive past what looks like a public bathroom, only to notice a sign identifying it as a school; you drive thoughtlessly past the hospital. You should know that Antiguans don't trust the hospital and avoid it at nearly all costs; those who can afford to travel to the United States for healthcare—including the Minister of Health and almost all other government officials—do so. But you don't.

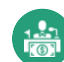
Pretty much everything the tourist encounters on the taxi ride points toward the rot and corruption of the government, which seems to exist more to improve the lives of government ministers at the expense of normal Antiguans. The tourist's focus on escaping their mundane life blinds them to the implications of the strange juxtapositions they notice, such as nice cars with bad engines or schools that look like outhouses. The tourist's ignorance and lack of concern recalls colonizers' callous attitude toward their subjects and highlights the ugly selfishness of tourism.

Luckily, you, the tourist, brought your own books to read, since an earthquake—referred to by native Antiguans including Jamaica Kincaid as "*The* Earthquake"—hit in 1974, destroying the splendid, graceful, colonial **library** that used to grace the Antiguan capital. Soon afterward, someone put up a sign promising repair. But you pass it nearly a decade later and no repairs have been made. The sign seems quaint to you, as if the islanders can't distinguish between 12 minutes, 12 days, and 12 years.

The fact that enriching themselves takes higher priority than repairing the library points toward Antiguan government ministers' corruption. But the tourist ignores this truth and instead observes a quaint and less-civilized approach to time among the island's natives that drips with racist condescension. Notably, at this point Jamaica Kincaid's narrative voice first identifies itself as an Antiguan native—asserting its separation from the tourist/reader.

Soon after "The Earthquake," **Antigua** gained independence from Great Britain. A national holiday marks the date, during which Antiguans go to church and thank a British God for this blessing. But you, the tourist, should not worry about this irony or the permanently damaged **library**. You have your own books to read, including an economic history describing how the West got rich by economic ingenuity and inventing wristwatches, not by exploiting the free and undervalued labor of enslaved and marginalized people. You shouldn't ruin your holiday by letting any uncomfortable feelings about oppression or exploitation blossom now.

The destruction of the library—a colonial icon—reminds readers that the island has achieved independence from its former masters. Yet, the failure of the independent government to repair an important cultural and educational institution lays the foundation for Kincaid's later argument that some of its failures are worse than its fate under colonialism. The fact that the loss of the library doesn't affect the tourist negatively reminds readers that traveling through but remaining unaffected by a place's troubles makes tourists morally bankrupt and ugly. Finally, the book that Kincaid imagines the tourist reading shows how white supremacist beliefs gloss over the fact that the societies in the global north—North American and Europe—benefitted from colonialism and slavery but fail to acknowledge or atone for this. As such, Antigua stands as a representative example for all former colonies, colonial subjects, and enslaved people.



As you, the tourist, pass the Government House, the Prime Minister's Office, the Parliament Building, and the American Embassy, you feel some pride for your people's role in helping the Antiguans achieve these modern institutions. Then you pass mansions belonging to immigrants who have enriched themselves by leasing property to the government, drug smugglers, and the mistresses of government officials. You notice that the roads improve in this part of town; the government repaved them for Queen of England's 1985 visit.

Colonialism and white supremacy have many points of connection. The tourist's pride in their culture's contribution to Antiguan society, like democracy, overlooks the island's brutal history of slavery and oppression. Like the streets improved for the Queen's visit, these "benefits" are all too often superficial and incomplete. The slaveholders and colonialism of the past have a modern counterpart in foreigners who use their superior monetary wealth to come from the outside and gain control over aspects of Antiguan society and politics.

By now you, the tourist, feel tired and anxious to get to your hotel. Through the windows in your room, you can see the breathtakingly blue waters of the ocean, the soft white sand of the beaches, and the fat, pastry-fleshed tourists walking there. You imagine the rest of your vacation: basking in the sun, walking on the beach, meeting new people, and eating delicious local foods. Just don't think about where the sewage wastewater goes. **Antigua** lacks a functioning sewage-disposal system other than the vastness of the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. And don't think about how the delicious "local" food mostly comes from the United States via plane.

The natural beauty that makes Antigua attractive to tourists contrasts sharply with the decay and corruption the tourist observed on their way to the hotel. Yet this decay remains inescapable: the rot and corruption remain even if the tourist cannot or will not see the sewage in the seawater. Looking out the window at the resort beaches also forces the tourist (and readers) to confront the ugliness of the tourism industry. It requires massive resources (for example, importing delicious foods from elsewhere) that benefit only a few people.

You, the tourist, may suspect that tourists are ugly. It's true; they are. This doesn't mean you're always ugly. In your normal, day-to-day life, you are nice, appreciated, loved, and others think you're important. You feel comfortable in your own skin, you enjoy your house with its nice backyard, and you participate in your local communities. But being ordinary in this way requires great effort, so when a feeling of displacement comes over you, you can't look into yourself to discover its source. Instead, you decide to escape to another place where you can lie on a warm beach, marveling at the colorful, exotic, and ingenious practices of people living in some distant place. And there, you become ugly when you consider these people inferior because their ancestors weren't as clever as yours.

At this point, the book states one of its main claims: the corruption and moral emptiness of tourism makes tourists into ugly people. While the narrative voice of the book, Jamaica Kincaid, draws this conclusion, she forces readers to reckon with it by casting it as the tourist's—and readers'—realization. Several things contribute to the tourist's ugliness, including white supremacy (which causes the white tourist to believe that their privilege comes not from their ancestors' oppressing and enslaving Black people but from their natural superiority), a lack of connection to the local community, and the voyeuristic enjoyment of quaint—by implication, inferior if not backward—local practices.

On some level, you, the tourist, realize that the people who live in this place where you come to visit don't like you. It becomes so exhausting to have to figure out whether the things they tell you are true or lies that you will need to recover from your stint as a tourist when you get home. But it is easy to understand why natives hate tourists: the life of a native is banal and boring. Everyone would like to escape it. But the natives of most parts of the world lack the resources necessary to do so; too poor to live properly in their native country and too poor to escape it, they envy you, the tourist, for your ability to leave and for deriving pleasure and diversion from their banal, inescapable lives.

Tourists exist outside the bounds of community relationships. This sense of freedom makes travel attractive to the tourist. But it also renders tourists untrustworthy in the eyes of locals, who remain bound to their local context. And because tourism requires privilege in the form of excesses financial and time resources, it reinforces the disparity between the largely impoverished and stuck native Antiguans (who descend from enslaved people and colonial subjects) and tourists (who mostly descend from the enslavers and colonizers).

CHAPTER 2

Jamaica Kincaid grew up in an **Antigua** that no longer exists, so you, the tourist, wouldn't recognize it. In part, the changes arise from the passage of time, but they also result from the specific event of Antiguan independence from Great Britain. Kincaid sees the English, who used to rule Antigua, as a "pitiful lot" because they don't seem to understand the grave immorality of their imperial project. Instead of repenting it, they fret about what went wrong for them. Any formerly colonized person could explain that the error lay in leaving England. And their pain comes from the irony that they chose to leave England but tried to make the rest of the world English. It seems only having a sense of superiority over others gives the English any happiness.

Kincaid grew up under colonial rule—Antigua achieved independence from Britain in a peaceful transfer of power in 1981. To former colonial subjects like Kincaid, colonialism telegraphs colonialists' moral vacancy to the rest of the world. The fact that the English—former colonizers of not just Antigua but many parts of the world—don't understand their colonial project as inherently immoral and still seem surprised that the people they formerly oppressed remain upset over the oppression points to their sense of racial and cultural superiority.

Kincaid describes the thoroughly colonial **Antigua** of her childhood: she lived on a street named after "English maritime criminal" Horatio Nelson in a neighborhood where all the streets were named after English naval officers. Government House, where the Queen's representative lived, stood behind a high white wall that no one dared to deface with graffiti.

Kincaid identifies Horatio Nelson—a naval officer known as a hero in England for his service during the late 18th- and early 19th-century Napoleonic Wars between England and France—as a maritime criminal because in his early career, he acted as a privateer. Essentially ordered by the crown to capture and loot the vessels of the British Empire's enemies (often, rival colonial powers like the Spanish and French), Nelson became rich on others' suffering. And, as a friend of many colonial planters and traders living in Antigua in the 18th century, he espoused pro-slavery views. The different perspectives from which the former colonial subjects and British people view figures like Nelson betray a nearly unbridgeable gulf between the two groups. And Antiguans' inability to even imagine making a statement against the colonial powers suggests the degree to which their history of colonial subjugation and forced servitude has deprived generations of Antiguans of political autonomy and empowerment.

High Street housed the **library**, treasury, post office, the court where local magistrates applied British Law, and Barclays Bank. The Barclay brothers were slave traders who turned to banking when England outlawed slavery. They grew their fortune by lending money to the descendants of the people they enslaved. It feels unfair to Kincaid that both the Barclay brothers and their victims died without any justice being served for the brothers' abuses; in her mind, eternal punishment or reward cannot sufficiently balance the scales.

Under colonial rule, Antigua ran like a tiny replica of England; English law and custom held sway over any other customs or forms of government that native Antiguans might have claimed. Although by the time Kincaid was born slavery had long since been outlawed, its long legacy persists in the generational wealth it provided people like the Barclay brothers and the institutions they founded.

The **Mill Reef Club** also represents the **Antigua** of Kincaid's childhood. North Americans founded the members-only, invitation-only club because they wanted to live in Antigua but keep themselves apart from the locals. Antiguans (in other words, Black people) could only go there to work as servants. Club members made it so hard for native Antiguans to enter that practically everyone remembers the date and identity of the first Black person to eat at the clubhouse or play a round on the golf course. As a child, Kincaid and the people around her considered Mill Reef Club residents unmannered pigs, strangers who refused to acknowledge the humanity of their hosts even while occupying part of their home (Antigua itself).

The Mill Reef Club operates almost like a colony within colonial Antigua, a place made to insulate white tourists from Black Antiguans. The Mill Reef Club shows how tourism functions as a form of neocolonial exploitation. Black Antiguans provide the necessary labor to make it comfortable, but the Mill Reef Club's founders barred from using the place's amenities for many years. The fact that small events—a person playing a round of golf or eating a sandwich—become momentous points toward the stranglehold that colonial attitudes and racism had (and still have) on Antigua.

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In Kincaid's mind, the kinds of people the **Mill Reef Club** represents seemed to enjoy behaving in inhuman ways. She remembers a Czechoslovakian refugee who fled to **Antigua** from Europe to escape Hitler. Although he was just a dentist, he set himself up as a doctor on the island. He would make his wife inspect any patients to make sure that they were clean enough to enter his presence for exams. Kincaid's mother innocently assumed that this "doctor" feared germs, just like she did. Similarly, a Northern Irish headmistress sent by the colonial authorities to run a local girls' school constantly characterized her students as "monkeys just out of trees." Local Antiguans interpreted these as examples of shockingly bad manners, betraying outsiders as small-minded, un-Christian, or animalistic. The word racism never occurred to them. In fact, the Antiguans felt superior to these allegedly civilized outsiders.

Kincaid's tone, as she coolly discusses examples of overt racism, suggests the commonplace nature of events like these, implying that racism and colonial superiority went unquestioned. Notably, the school's headmistress comes from Northern Ireland—not only another colony of Britain, but also one of its earliest and most enduring. Still, the headmistress has a sense of superiority based on of her British citizenship and her white skin. The fact that local Antiguans interpret gross acts of racism as poor manners points toward the gap between the colonialists' claims to cultural superiority and their actions. And it suggests the degree to which generations of oppression taught Antiguans to passively accept being victims of abuse and exploitation.

Kincaid remembers celebrating Queen Victoria's birthday as a national holiday. She (and others) appreciated the holiday and never questioned why they continued to celebrate an "extremely unappealing person" who had been dead for decades. Later in her life, Kincaid mentioned this celebration to an Englishman, who replied that his school celebrated the day that she died. Kincaid bitterly replied that at least they knew she *had* died. These kinds of memories inspire anger in Kincaid when she hears North Americans waxing lyrical about how they love England and its beautiful traditions. They don't see the millions of people the British made into orphans by stealing their motherland, traditions, religion, and language and replacing them with English rule, traditions, religion, and language.

Kincaid's negative attitude toward Great Britain (as a former colonial subject) puts her at odds not only with British people but also with a surprising number of the Americans among whom she lives. She suggests that only people personally unaffected by racism and oppression can unquestioningly appreciate British heritage. By extension, she implies that if readers find themselves among the appreciators of British culture, they need to pay more attention to history. This kind of appreciation can only grow from willful blindness to the pain and suffering the British colonial project caused worldwide—of which Antigua provides just one small example.

The imposition of English—the language of the oppressor—particularly bothers Kincaid. The criminal's language inherently privileges the criminal and silences the agony and humiliation the criminal inflicts on victims. If she calls something "wrong" or "bad," the criminal hears his own concerns, not hers. Therefore, he cannot understand why she feels such rage or why he gets angry when she tries to make his life uncomfortable. She does this because nothing can erase the rage she feels except the impossible—somehow preventing what happened from happening.

Kincaid considers the loss of a native language the most harrowing of all the abuses perpetrated by British colonizers. Because she can only critique the colonial project in the exact same language and terms with which others praise it, her words have little power. And expressing pro- and anti-colonial or pro- and anti-slavery arguments in identical language creates a false sense of equivalence between the stories of the oppressors and the stories of the oppressed.

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Kincaid learned to speak English at a school that an English princess dedicated. Later, she learned that the royal family dispatched this princess on a tour that included **Antigua** to get over a failed romance. The contrast between this mundane, everyday heartbreak and the lengths Antigua went to to entertain the princess—repairing and repainting buildings, making public beaches private—shows how the Antigua of Kincaid's childhood revolved entirely around England. Kincaid anticipates criticism of her argument—all these terrible things happened long ago; her ancestors would have done the same if they'd had the opportunity; everyone behaves badly. But she points out how the Antiguans couldn't understand this kind of behavior. They refused to see racism where they could blame bad manners.

The fact that the native Antiguans couldn't imagine racism animating the abuses and oppression they experienced suggests how deeply they had internalized colonial belief systems about their cultural, political, and social inferiority to their colonial rulers. This disconnect arises from their willingness to take the British at their word—to believe that the colonialists possessed a better form of government or more advanced cultural standards. But taking the British at their word only highlights the extent to which lies about cultural superiority support colonial power.

Kincaid asks the reader if they have wondered where people like her—formerly colonized and enslaved people—learned to murder, steal, and govern poorly. Their oppressors taught them these lessons by coming and taking what they wanted without even pretending to ask politely first. They murdered those who stood up to them. They put stolen wealth into their own bank accounts. Only after their victims resort to enough violence do they pull up stakes and leave. And then, from afar, they watch the dysfunction of the government returned to its own citizens and take this as proof that formerly colonized and oppressed people will never be able to command themselves. They never acknowledge how their policies, bureaucracies, and laws have interfered in their victims' societies. And the victims cannot remember how they did things before the colonialists came.

In the closing lines of the second section, Kincaid directly attacks the hypocrisy underlying colonialism, slavery, and white supremacy. Believing in the superiority and advanced state of their culture, white outsiders from North America and Europe tend to look down on places like Antigua, taking their corrupt governments and low standards of living as proof that formerly colonized people cannot govern themselves. That's why, according to this line of thinking, Antiguans were liable to colonization or enslavement in the first place. Kincaid exposes the lie at the heart of this argument. Colonialists, in taking land, resources, and autonomy from colonized people, taught uncivilized behavior like lying, theft, and murder. Claiming to have a superior civilization cannot cover up the uncivilized actions that colonizers perpetrated—at least as long as people (and readers) willingly face the truth of their actions and their history.

CHAPTER 3

One day while visiting **Antigua**, Kincaid stands in the street in and looks around herself and asks if Antigua is better off under self-rule than colonialism. The very fact that she asks this question indicates the situation's direness: the government is corrupt, and its ministers are thieves. The **library** crystalizes this question for her, because after years, the government has not repaired or replaced it. The current library sits on the second floor of a run-down storefront. The old library, in contrast, was extremely beautiful, with its yellow walls, its wide porch, its windows open to admit the fresh smell of the sea, and its rows and rows of quiet, orderly bookshelves.

At the beginning of the third section, Kincaid uncovers the impetus for the book itself: she visits Antigua, sees signs of the rot and corruption that have taken root since the end of colonial rule in the fate of the library, and decides to investigate why this has happened. Downshifting from the global questions about tourism and colonialism in the first two sections to the very specific example of the public library in the Antiguan capital may feel like a radical shift in tone. But in doing so, Kincaid asks readers to think about how the morally corrupt tourist industry in the present grows out of the colonialism of the past. Because Antigua has shifted from colony to independent nation relatively recently—and within Kincaid's lifetime—it becomes a rich site in which to explore these links. And within the already-small place of Antigua itself, the fate of the library focuses these threads of commentary and exploration into one burning focal point. Kincaid hints at the colonialist perspective, which would likely interpret the beauty of the old, colonial library as representing the order and peace of colonial rule, especially compared to current social and political disorder. But her own relationship to the library remains far more complex. The old library also represents the cultural domination of the colonizers, who exercised control in part through imposing their language onto Antiguans. In a way, then, Kincaid's use of the library as a symbol for the devolution of Antigua enacts her complaint about her inability to explore her people's oppression except in English. She loves the library for giving her the foundation of knowledge and language to explore the fate of Antigua in writing. But at the same time, the library also represents the limitations that colonizers have placed on the expression, culture, and freedom of their colonial subjects.

The librarians in the new **library** often can't locate the books patrons want, either because inadequate storage space forces them to store many books in cardboard boxes or because the quality of Antiguans' education seems to have declined since the country achieved independence. Kincaid notes that young people seem to speak English "as if it were their sixth language," and she feels embarrassed watching youths in a "Teenage Pageant" unable to answer simple questions about themselves in cogent language.

If the old library suggests the colonial authorities' power and control of Antiguans, the new library perfectly captures the chaos and dysfunction of the independent government—especially its lack of concern for services that benefit the public. Since this doesn't enrich any government ministers, Kincaid implies, none of them care about its fate. The lack of regard for the library itself mirrors government ministers' lack of investment in education. Kincaid's complaints about the improper language of the youth points toward her vexed relationship with the English language—although she rails against being constrained to use the language of her oppressors in earlier sections, she also clings to the power of language as a means of looking at (and possibly changing) the world. Therefore, she worries about the declining skills of younger generations.

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Like the **library** itself, the head librarian has changed over the years. Kincaid remembers her as "imperious and stuck up," but now she appears apologetic and desperate. The people from the **Mill Reef Club** will contribute money for repairing the old library—but not to make the new one more useable. The Mill Reef residents love the old **Antigua**, just like Kincaid—but they have very different "old" Antiguas in mind.

The librarian shows how the end of colonialism didn't necessarily free Antigua—instead, it made it dependent on a different set of outsiders and their wealth. The nominal control she had over the library under the colonial system disappeared after "The Earthquake," and now she must beg for funding from tourists. Remember that the Mill Reef Club was founded by white tourists who wanted to enjoy Antigua without having to mix with local (Black) Antiguans socially, and so their involvement always carries a hint of racism and potential white supremacy. Their ability to hold up the project carries a subtle reminder of their influential wealth, especially compared to the Antiguan government—let alone average Antiguan citizens.

Kincaid remembers spending time at the **library**. She would go on Saturday afternoons to sit, read, and to feel sorry for herself in a child-like way. She had finished the book in the children's section by the age of nine. She remembers the librarian watching her carefully to make sure she didn't steal books or take out more than her allowance. Kincaid's deeply personal connection with the old library explains why looking at the crumbling façade of the building—which now houses a carnival troupe—inspires her to consider the state of post-independence **Antigua** and ask why **Mill Reef Club** residents should have such a say over the library's future.

Kincaid's history with the library suggests the power that language and literature have over her personally and helps readers to understand her rage over being forced to use English (the language of her oppressors) to communicate both her love for and disappointment in Antigua, as well as her hatred for (but dependence upon) the lessons of the people who subjugated, colonized, and enslaved her ancestors. Colonialism has a long legacy, even after independence, and the effects of racism are difficult to root out of a place.

Kincaid visits the daughter of the **Mill Reef Club**'s founder. This woman has a vested interest in restoring the old **library**—but also a reputation for disliking Antiguans who aren't her servants or employees. She tells Kincaid that she always encourages her "girls"—the grown-up women who work for her in her various tourist businesses—to use the library. And she complains about government corruption: anyone can come from anywhere with enough money and get what they want from it. Kincaid senses that this woman takes pleasure in pointing out to a Black woman and native Antiguan how poorly the native, Black Antiguan government runs the country. And anyway, while she wants to help restore the library, she's not sure if it's possible. Someone might be about to redevelop that part of town.

Kincaid represents this woman as a prototypical example of the Mill Reef residents as neo-colonizers. The woman's casual dismissal of her employees as her *"girls" smacks of the history of slavery, in which white people claimed the right to own other (Black) human beings. And it points toward the casual assumption of cultural supremacy on the part of colonizers and enslavers, since the Mill Reef woman thinks of and presumably treats her adult employees like children. She also exemplifies the (white) outsider's perspective on Antigua that Kincaid has invoked throughout the book when she claims that the native (Black) Antiguans lack the sophistication to run their country as effectively as their former colonizers did.*

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Kincaid considers trying to talk to the Minister of Culture. But he's out of town, and anyway, she suspects that this meeting would have been fruitless. Her mother gained some notoriety on the island for her strong political convictions and once insulted him for stealing stamps from Redonda. Kincaid isn't quite sure what this meant; Redonda is a distant, barren island that the English included in the colony—and then nation—of **Antigua** along with Barbuda. The Condrington family, which exploited and sold enslaved persons, originally settled Barbuda. But back to Kincaid's mother and her insult. Once, the government issued stamps for Redonda. Someone made a lot of money from this, but no one knows who. The government and its decisions—what stamps to print, what they look like, what events to celebrate as national holidays—are opaque.

Redonda points to the past and the present moment in Antigua. In the past, it shows the often cavalier attitudes of colonizers toward their subjects, as it doesn't make social or political sense to lump Redonda with Antigua. If there was a reason, Kincaid implies, it must have had to do with the interest of slaveholders like the Condringtons. In the present, a lack of clarity and oversight in the government of Redonda allows for grift and abuse of power. The English enriching themselves by claiming control over tiny islands in the Caribbean Sea sets the example for government ministers to sell Redondan stamps to enrich themselves.

In a small place like **Antigua**, Kincaid explains, even small events become larger than life, oppressive and overly determinant of the direction of society. People from a small place struggle to understand themselves in the context of a larger picture while at the same time resisting the exact, complete account of the events that shape their society and lives. A complete account requires considering, questioning, and judging events. And a division of time into "the Past, the Present, and the Future," which the inhabitants of a small place seem to lack. The feel past events more vividly than present ones; they undertake actions in the present without consideration of the future.

In Kincaid's eyes, Antigua's small physical size and location in the vast blue ocean contribute to making it a "small place." So too does the way in which its history has taken autonomy from its people. The "native" Antiguans primarily descend from formerly enslaved people; according to Kincaid, their communal history of subjugation and exploitation makes it hard for them both to take an active role in their society and to reflect upon the reasons why they struggle to do so. They thus exist in a sort of timeless limbo.

Kincaid sees this absence of the bigger picture and fluid sense of time in the way Antiguans talk about slavery as a series of bad things that ended with emancipation. They talk about emancipation so frequently that it seems like a current event, rather than a historical event. And even while they celebrate emancipation, Antiguans hold the Hotel Training School, where locals learn to be modern-day servants in the tourist sector, in high regard. Kincaid thinks no one can see the relationship between the historical institution of slavery and the modern institution of the Hotel Training School or between the historical institution of slavery and their corrupt government. In slave narratives, almost no one names their captor. And in **Antigua**, complaints about the corrupt government conveniently omit the fact that Antiguans have allowed one government to retain power for 15 of the last 20 years of independence.

Lacking the perspective to understand the weight of history or fully see how it affects their present lives doesn't mean that Antiguans do not know the facts of their history; everyone on the island understands the role that colonialism and slavery played in the foundation of their country and in the lives of their ancestors. But without a global perspective (like the one Kincaid feels she gained by leaving the island), modern Antiguans don't seem to see the direct connections between the colonialism of the past and the tourism industry of the present—both of which grant outsized privilege and power to outsiders—or between slavery and the tourism industry, which continues to exploit the undervalued labor of Black Antiguan workers. And while the foundational sins of colonialism, racism and slavery play an important role in laying the foundation for these modern problems, the learned passivity of Antiguans, who permit a corrupt government to remain in power, contributes as well.

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Antiguans don't just domesticate world-changing events into the everyday. They also blow mundane happenings into events, like an argument springing up at the market which turns into an enduring feud. In this small place, the event and the everyday exist in a state of constant flux, and this makes it hard for the people who live there to make sense of their history, their society, and the way they live. Kincaid looks at Antigua and wonders if Antiguans' confusion of past and present and conflation of the trivial with the important make them naïve, sublime performance artists, or lunatics.

Lack of perspective goes in both directions, and Kincaid suggests that Antiguans' struggle to contextualize their experiences with the history of their island and its people arises in part from their inordinate attention on minor events and happenings. These distract them from seeing the truly important connections. And because this disconnect between past and present is so disconcerting, Kincaid can't decide whether it arises from genuine confusion or extreme denial.

Kincaid sees naivete, performed astonishment, and lunacy in Antiguans' complaints about the corruption in the government, including increasingly privatized beaches; a Syrian national owning the largest car dealership; government ministers benefiting financially from the sale of Japanese luxury cars; the fact that Vere Cromwell Bird's son owns a cable television company and adds his lines to public utility poles free of charge; government ministers owning many of the businesses patronized by the government; the Prime Minister's friends openly running a brothel and other ministers trafficking drugs; and that Antiguan banks host dirty money from abroad (and these banks also often enrich government ministers).

Much of the government's corruption happens in the open, where everyone can see it, and Kincaid lists a myriad of moderate and extreme examples. Some of these reflect concerns about colonialism, like the wealth and influence of people born outside of Antigua—some of whom are now naturalized citizens and others of whom remain foreign nationals transferring huge amounts of wealth out of Antigua. Yet, in the face of these abuses, no one seems to take a stand for political morality.

The Antiguan banks borrow from the Swiss model, and this reminds Kincaid of a friend who recently traveled to Switzerland and came back impressed with Switzerland's cleanliness and superiority. But she neglects to ask how the Swiss pay for their superior life, although it's common knowledge that dictators, tyrants, and criminal kingpins make a habit of depositing their ill-gotten gains in Swiss bank accounts. People revere the Swiss for their banks, their watches, and their neutrality; money and time are both neutral commodities.

Yet again, Kincaid points out how many of the ills and abuses in modern Antigua mirror those in other places. No one complains about Swiss corruption, even though their world-renowned banks often shelter criminals' ill-gotten wealth. Because the Swiss have a high standard of living (and, Kincaid implies, are white), people usually ignore potential corruption in their system. In contrast, a history of racism and white supremacy predisposes people to condemn Antigua for trying out the same tactics—albeit less successfully.

Kincaid notes the way the government accepts bribes to allow American mobsters to run casinos on **Antigua**, since all West Indian countries seem to want casinos. The government helped circumvent the United Nations' embargo on ammunition for the apartheid government of South Africa. It sold irradiated meat. It borrows large sums from rich Antiguans and foreign nationals. Foreign nationals own large plots of land and buildings, which they lease to the Antiguan government at exorbitant prices. Native Antiguans despise them as "foreigners," and even though many of them have Antiguan citizenship, they haven't cultivated a true presence on the island with any cultural institutions.

Kincaid refuses to let American readers off the hook for their country's role in Antigua. And government ministers who can run off to America when the need arises sound much more like tourists and the despised foreign nationals whose lack of true social and cultural ties to Antigua renders them unconcerned about the lives and fates of those too poor and disenfranchised to escape. And this callousness extends to the fate of other former colonial subjects. The UN embargo Antigua circumvented was designed to keep certain weapons out of the hands of the white minority government of South Africa, which brutally repressed Black Africans through political disenfranchisement and outright violence between the 1940s and the 1990s.

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Murders go unsolved in **Antigua**. A government minister investigating his colleagues for financial mismanagement died, electrocuted trying to open his refrigerator door. One year, two Acting Governor Generals died in quick succession; one was electrocuted at the home of a foreign national. The other became publicly ill at a funeral. And although the doctors said he died due to heart failure, everyone suspects poison. An $11 million grant from France vanished without a trace. Government ministers own all the media outlets and never allow airtime to opposition parties. The government built a failed oil refinery, enriching a foreigner who did "bad things" in the process. This same foreigner now wants to gift Antigua a museum and library. Another foreigner outbid the government for important historical documents, then made a big show of presenting them to the government as a gift. Most government ministers have American green cards.

Kincaid's list continues, and she forces her readers to look at the mess of modern Antigua. Earlier, she said that the only way her rage over the history of colonialism, racism, subjugation, and exploitation could dissipate would be for colonialism, racism, subjugation, and exploitation never to have happened. As her list of corruption continues, she forces readers to acknowledge the truly astonishing degree of dysfunction in Antigua. And she offers continual reminders of the ways this dysfunction grows directly out of colonialism and slavery. Even the colonial authorities cannot escape the chaos that their selfish and immoral drive to rule the world has created. And even when foreigners try to help, they do so in ways that infantilize Antiguans and deprive them of control over the narrative of their own history.

Not everyone in the government is corrupt, or at least not on this scale. But honesty reaps the reward of poverty. Honest government ministers have to make a living driving taxis when their party loses power, or they die as paupers. The scale of government corruption becomes a monument to rottenness that Antiguans point out almost as if it is a tourist attraction.

If a history of exploitation and abuse provides the long-term explanation for Antiguan political and social dysfunction, a more immediate cause lies in the simple fact that honesty and plain dealing tend to lead to poverty. The situation has become so entrenched that Antiguans treat corruption like an act of nature which, like The Earthquake, wreaks unavoidable and irreparable damage.

Kincaid relates an important event in the history of **Antigua**, the founding of the Antigua Trades and Labour Union in 1939. Eventually, it became a political party that demanded the right to vote, returning the ownership of Antiguan land to Antiguans and demanding self-rule. The president of this union eventually became Premier and then Prime Minister; he has headed the government for 25 of the 30 years that Antiguans have had some form of self-rule. Sometimes Vere Cornwall Bird seems like a new George Washington; at other times he seems like the disgraced head of an American union imprisoned for embezzling its funds. An opposition Prime Minister interrupted Bird's rule for one five-year term before losing his reelection bid. Once back in power, Bird had him arrested, charged, and jailed for profiting from his government office.

Another proximate cause of Antiguan corruption lies in the character of the man that Antiguans chose to head their government. Antiguans' mixed feelings about Bird—whom they see as alternately a savior and a criminal—mirror Kincaid's vexed sense of anger and nostalgia for aspects of colonial rule. Moreover, while Antigua's present corruption grows from past abuses—especially colonialism and slavery—Antiguans know this history and could, potentially, make different choices in the present. They remain accountable to some extent for their current situation, even if the greater share belongs to the colonialists and slaveholders who exploited their ancestors and trained them to be passive.

Prime Minister Bird started out as a bookkeeper for a merchant-importer and banker. Eventually, his boss became suspicious because Bird seemed more prosperous than his salary would warrant. And when the merchant-importer asked to see the books, Bird grabbed them, ran to a nearby bakery, and tossed them into the oven to be consumed by flames. People in **Antigua** connect this event to his elbowing out the original, honest leaders of the Antigua Trades and Labour Union and the eventual debasement of the free Antiguan government. Bird treats the government like his own personal business and seems to expect his family to profit from it; two of his sons run the Treasury, Tourism and Public Works departments. It seems that a family so tied to the government—and in charge of what little military force this island has—might not relinquish their power willingly.

Although people knew about Bird's corrupt character before he came to political power, Kincaid suggests that most Antiguans want to avoid responsibility for allowing him to hold office for so long. And, after so many years of avoiding accountability, Bird treats the government like a family business and the country like his personal possession.

A similar scenario—a political family running the government like a family business—played out in Haiti, where Françios "Papa Doc" Duvalier seized control of the government and lived an opulent, corrupt life of power before he died and his son, "Baby Doc," succeeded him. But perhaps **Antigua** will be spared this event, Antiguans say—one of Bird's sons has no apparent desire to rule while the other one has a terminal illness. Instead, they imagine (or hope) someone like Maurice Bishop—a political revolutionary from Grenada—will materialize in Antigua.

The nepotism (when those in power show favor toward their relations and friends) in the Antiguan government mirrors that in other former colonies—other small places. Kincaid invokes two examples of strongman leaders that show how narrow Antiguans' political imaginations have become. In Haiti, "Papa Doc" Duvalier came to power in an open election but then turned into a dictator. Haiti thus traded autocratic rule by colonial authorities for autocratic rule from within. In Grenada, Maurice Bishop seized control of the government with aims including Black liberation and improving the lives of the common people. Yet, his grip on power alarmed others in Grenada leading to his arrest and execution. These examples suggest that as long as Antiguans remain content to take a passive role in their country and its politics, their hopes for a stable, functional government remain slim.

CHAPTER 4

Antigua's exceptional beauty seems impossible. No real sunsets could be that beautiful; no real sea or sky could be that blue; no real sand so soft or pink or white; no real flowers, fruits, vegetables, houses, or clothing so vibrantly hued; no days could be so sunny or nights so black; no real cows so scrawny or real grass so desiccated. This makes the country seem more like a soundstage than a place. This impossible, unreal beauty starts to feel like a prison, trapping everyone involved inside and everyone else outside. Kincaid asks readers to consider what it might do to a person to live in such a beautiful, timeless prison. So little seems to change the character of the island's people or the trajectory of its history. It's just as fantastically beautiful now that its residents are free as it was when they were enslaved.

Antigua's beauty explains part of its attraction to colonialists in the past and tourists in the present. But, as Kincaid has detailed throughout the book, the experience of living in Antigua as a citizen is very different from the temporary pleasantness of visiting there for a few days at a time. She muses that this unreal beauty might contribute to the cavalier and exploitative attitudes that outsiders have taken toward Antigua and its people. If the place doesn't seem real, then the people who live—or are trapped—there don't seem fully real. And people denied their full humanity become far easier to exploit and abuse.

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Antigua is a small place, just nine miles wide by twelve miles long. Christopher Columbus stumbled on it in 1493; soon after, "human rubbish from Europe" occupied it, using "enslaved but noble and exalted human beings" to enrich themselves. Eventually, the masters left (in a way) and freed the enslaved people (in a way). Modern Antiguans descend from those noble and exalted human beings. But once the masters cease being masters, they cease being human rubbish. And once the enslaved become free, they cease being noble and exalted; former masters and former enslaved people all become just human beings once again.

Lest Antiguans take Kincaid's denunciation of colonialism, slavery, racism, white supremacy, and tourism as providing absolution for their role in their own current subjugation to a corrupt government and the control of outsiders, Kincaid reminds them—and her readers—that everyone, from the most inhumane slaveowner to the most noble enslaved person, is ultimately human. And human beings are all responsible for their actions. For the descendants of colonialists and slaveholders, this means understanding the privilege that their race has conferred on them. It also means recognizing that their wealthy societies were built on stolen labor. For the descendants of enslaved people, this means taking ownership for their lives and societies now, unlearning the passivity and subjugation that slavery taught them, and forging a path in the world on their own terms.

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