

MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN A SMALL PLACE BY JAMAICA KINCAID

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ABSTRACT	RESUMO
<p>This essay explores the themes of memory and identity in <i>A Small Place</i> (1988) by Jamaica Kincaid. In order to understand how both themes interact, the role of language is analyzed along with the concepts of discourse, colonialism, tourism and freedom. The essay incorporates Ann Hua's (2005) feminist theory of memory and identity, Foucault's concept of "counter-memory" (1975-1976), and the relationship between language and power as expressed by Frantz Fanon (1967). Additionally, it examines Quijano Anibal's (2007) concept of the "colonization of the imaginary" and the notion of the "tourist gaze" as presented by Urry (1990). At last, for the purpose of understanding how the author's identity is asserted, it has been selected some passages from the book that explore the past and the present of Antigua. These excerpts illustrate the connection between the author's identity and the destruction of Antigua.</p>	<p>O presente ensaio tem como objetivo explorar os temas de memória e identidade em <i>A Small Place</i> (1988) de Jamaica Kincaid. Com o intuito de entender como ambos temas interagem, o papel da linguagem é analisado juntamente aos conceitos de discurso, colonialismo, turismo e liberdade. O ensaio incorpora a teoria feminista de Ann Hua (2005) sobre memória e identidade, o conceito de "memória de resistência" por Foucault (1975-1976), e a relação entre linguagem e poder como expressado por Frantz Fanon (1967). Ademais, ela examina o conceito de Quijano Anibal (2007) de "colonização do imaginário" e a noção de "olhar turístico" como apresentado por Urry (1990). Por fim, para entender como a identidade do autor é estabelecida, foram selecionadas algumas passagens do livro que exploram o passado e o presente de Antigua. Esses trechos ilustram a conexão entre a identidade do autor e a destruição de Antigua.</p>

KEY-WORDS	PALAVRAS-CHAVE
<p><i>A Small Place</i>; Jamaica Kincaid; Identity; Memory; Antigua</p>	<p><i>A Small Place</i>; Jamaica Kincaid; Identidade; Memória; Antigua.</p>

INTRODUCTION

A Small Place (1988) is an essay written by Jamaica Kincaid that focuses on praising the beauty and denouncing the corruption of the Caribbean Island of Antigua. To do so, she divides the book into four sections commenting on its history and politics and adding her own memories to the narrative. Thus, in the first part, she addresses the reader as a potential white tourist coming from North America or Europe and guides them through their experience. Then, she talks about the main events that shaped Antigua into what it is in the present time and compares how different generations deal with the remnants of colonialism. Finally, Kincaid ends the essay wondering about the fact that all of the people that took part in this history are human beings. That way, she is able to cover a number of themes while guiding the tourist through their awaited vacation in Antigua.

In this regard, two stylistic tones can be seen throughout the book: the tourist guide and the ironic angry one. The former refers to the way the reader is escorted through the island displaying all the possibilities they might encounter, as seen in the starting sentence of the book "IF YOU GO to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see." (Kincaid, 1988, p. 3). The latter is used whenever she talks about the contradictions of colonialism and to show to the reader the ugly side of the island, "You are feeling wonderful, so you say, 'Oh, what a marvelous change these bad roads are from the splendid highways I am used to in North America.' (Or, worse, Europe.)" (Kincaid, 1988, p. 5). Once again, both of them contrast in order to create a portrait of Antigua that includes both what is expected and seen from the outsiders and what is felt, but tried to be forgotten by the islanders.

In this sense, it is important to note that her angry tone is only perceived by the reader when she highlights the atrocities done by the colonizer, its consequences, and criticizes the corrupt capitalist way the people in power run the Island. Hence, by pointing out these facts, she is stating the events that take part in the memory of Antigua's past and present constructing its identity, as mentioned by her in an interview: "There isn't a man who has written a book that's too Angry. It's something that happens all the time to me, my work is considered angry. It's not angry at all. It's very frank, and it's truthful. There isn't a line, there isn't anything you can say, that never happened." (Kincaid, 2016). Consequently, we can consider this perception to be gender biased and her essay an effort to state what she and her country has been through.

Therefore, it is feasible to read *A Small Place* in light of Anh Hua's feminist theory of memory and identity. According to the author, feminist writers tell stories from a point of view that shows how their reality is filled with hierarchies (gender, race, and class) and



“testify to their resistance to varied and intersecting oppressions” (Hua, 2005, p. 192). Thus, we can see that Kincaid’s intent to reveal her truth is based on a past of repression and exploitation, her being a woman makes the reader believe she is expressing anger when in fact she is demonstrating her resistance.

Furthermore, understanding the concepts of memory and identity is ideal to comprehend the past and the present which is set by Kincaid in her work. As affirmed by Hua (2005), the intention of memory is not to relive the past, but to construct it and its sites are both collective and individual. Additionally, she states that “memory can evoke identity formation, the rewriting of home and belonging, nostalgia, mourning, and a sense of loss frequently found in diaspora, exile, and immigrant narratives” (Hua, 2005, p. 200). That way, as writing from outside of Antigua, Kincaid constructs its past through her memory and asserts her identity with all its intersectionalities.

That being said, this essay aims to explore the following concepts: memory, identity, and language in a post-colonial context. It focuses on how they are articulated by the author considering the influences of colonialism and tourism on the cultural imagination of Antigua. Hence, the text is divided into two parts. The first one discusses memory, colonialism and language, while the second one addresses identity, land and tourism.

1 MEMORY AND DISCOURSE

1.1. COLONIALISM THROUGH A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

In her narrative, Kincaid exposes a version of the facts not typically explored in traditional and dominant discourses. She attempts to give voice to the silenced people during the British colonialism in Antigua. When analyzing any text, it is necessary to consider which voices are included, and more importantly, which are excluded. Kincaid’s narrative includes parts of the history that are often omitted, showing an effort to raise a counterpoint to the history written by those who have privileged positions in power relations. Ultimately, that idea can be exemplified by a passage at the beginning of the essay in which Kincaid signals to the reader that the tourist has an economic history book that tries to explain how the West got wealthy. However, the narrator emphasizes that it does not actually reveal the true history of exploitation behind the origin of the money.

Accordingly, while Kincaid’s critique of colonialism challenges the dominant narrative, it also highlights its power of destruction and oppression. She shows how

Antiguans were forced to adopt European customs and values while being denied access to education and economic opportunities.

And to everywhere they went they turned it into England; and everybody they met they turned English. But no place could ever really be England, and nobody who did not look exactly like them would never be English, so you can imagine the destruction of people and land that came from that (Kincaid, 1988, p. 24).

Furthermore, the author's account reveals how this destructive process continues to shape Antigua's present-day reality. The island remains dependent on foreign aid, tourism, and multinational corporations, perpetuating its subjugation to external powers. In addition, this silenced discourse presented in *A Small Place* is embedded in the traumas left by the colonizers in the narrator's memory, through her words the domination and oppression suffered by the people from Antigua acquires not only a new version of facts but a powerful channel of dissemination. That new portrait presents what Michel Foucault (1975-1976) called 'counter-memory', the resurrection of subjugated knowledge. The author discusses how dominant discourses can suppress marginalized narratives, and how counter-memory can bring these narratives to light. Similarly, Jamaica resurrects her voice, also representing the voice of her people, to expose the devastating effects of colonialism on her birthplace. In fact, she even shows a contrast between the common idea people have of the island and the reality behind all that.

That water - have you ever seen anything like it? Far out, to the horizon, the colour of the water is navy-blue; nearer, the water is the colour of the North American sky. (...) you must not wonder what exactly happened to the contents of your lavatory when you flushed it. (...) Oh, it might all end up in the water you are thinking of taking a swim in (...) (Kincaid, 1988, p. 13-14).

Thus, the author recognizes that colonial powers often seek to erase or distort the histories of the people they colonize, in order to justify their own presence and control. However, the author brings her memory, the counter-memory, as a powerful tool for resisting this erasure and exposing the reality behind the legacy of colonialism in the island.

Similarly, by raising her voice to tell the history of her country, Kincaid shows an effort to put her people as the protagonists, she tries to reclaim their agency and assert their own identities despite the ongoing oppression. Therefore, the reader gets in touch with



Antigua not as a background of any other dominant discourse, in the text, the island is the one in focus, it is the one telling the facts, and, consequently, the subject of its own history.

1.2. LANGUAGE AND OPPRESSION

According to Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967, p. 18), “To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this and that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization”. In agreement with Fanon, Kincaid’s writing shows the loss of Antiguan’s cultural identity through the imposition of the English language, as the inability to express oneself in one’s language turns the colonized individual into someone without an authentic cultural voice. The use of the oppressor’s language to communicate acts as a validation tool for colonial values and as a way of oppressing the colonized people. Besides, the author highlights that the language used by the colonizers in Antigua has been imposed on the natives, that process also dialogs with what Fanon (1967) portrayed as the forced adaptation of the black people to the ‘white world’. In the case of *A Small Place*, the English language has been used to erase the identity of the Antiguan and impose a foreign culture upon 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, no excess of love sometimes brings, and worst and most painful of all, no tongue (Kincaid, 1988, p. 31).

In that sense, by controlling language, those in power can shape the perceptions and limit the ability of the individuals to relate to their own origins, since “to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (Fanon, 1967, p. 38).

Further, this linguistic domination also denies the colonized people the right to denounce the crimes committed by the oppressors: “For isn’t it odd that the only language you have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?” (Kincaid, 1988, p. 31). Therefore, Kincaid’s reflection upon language shows that this is a fundamental tool for those in power to maintain their domination, by destroying the language of the colonized, the colonizers destroy their voices, their culture, and, consequently, their chance to fight back or to even recognize the exploratory relation. At last, by controlling language, those in power can shape people’s perceptions and limit their

ability to express themselves, and as result, the identity of the colonized people suffers a profound reshaping caused by the language of the oppressors.

1.3. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST

In the plot of *A Small Place*, while reconstructing the colonial past of Antigua, the narrator says: “Do you ever try to understand why people like me cannot get over the past, cannot forgive and cannot forget?” (Kincaid, 1988, p. 26). The reflection brought by the previous statement shows how Kincaid refuses to dialogue with the history of her country without criticizing the colonial practices and violence that have shaped and destroyed the Antiguan, their history, and their culture. She wants to make it clear to the reader that what happened in Antigua should not be forgotten, or better it must be remembered. Hence, the reader has to face the anger and revolt in the narrator's voice, who is self-aware of her past, and the past of her people, and, as a consequence, seeks to show her desire for justice.

Firstly, memory appears in Kincaid's discourse as a tool for the recollection of past experiences or as proposed by Morrison (1995), a process of re-appropriation. The author tries not only to use her memory to bring her past back to the present, but also as a way of claiming her right to remember. By arguing that the legacy of colonialism is still present in the island, Kincaid highlights how memory plays a crucial role in understanding the effects of said process.

Secondly, memory also is a way of seeking justice for a crime that has no forgiveness. For that purpose, the author conducts the reader to a reflection upon the past experiences of the Antiguan and how the loss suffered cannot be repaired: “But nothing can erase my rage - not an apology, not a large sum of money, not the death of the criminal - for this wrong can never be made right [...]” (Kincaid, 1988, p. 32). As a result, the act of remembering is fundamental to the process of dealing with the wounds left by colonialism, and it appears as the only feasible way of surviving the anger of not being able to repair the long-lasting consequences of the past.

Equally important, memory in the narrative is also intrinsically connected to the suffering of the Antiguan, in fact, the memory of the suffering was “what united in an irremediable way all of her people” (Vieira Junior, 1988, p. 247). Thus, this traumatic remembrance reveals how the bruises left by the colonial violence have also modified what significantly characterized the past of a whole group, which has been forever changed and marked with the bruises of colonial exploitation.



As for what we were like before we met you, I no longer care (...) 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 you (Kincaid, 1988, p. 37).

2 IDENTITY AND LAND

The Antigua of modern times has to deal with the consequences of colonialism that shape its people's identity. One of the main effects of this scenario is what can be described as the Colonization of the Imaginary, as mentioned by Quijano Anibal (2007, p.169): "beliefs and images served not only to impede the cultural production of the dominated, but also as a very efficient means of social and cultural control, when the immediate repression ceased to be constant and systematic." This control is expressed in the book when the author talks about the characteristics they have directly inherited from the colonizer, such as corruption, murder, and tyranny. In this manner, she adds:

You will forget your part in the whole setup, that bureaucracy is one of your inventions, that Gross National Product is one of your inventions, and all the laws that you know mysteriously favour you. 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 (Kincaid, 1988, p. 36).

That way, she explains that they feel trapped and are not able to be developed by their standards, because of the inhabitation of the colonizer in the memory and the fact that they made them believe that the Antiguanians are not capable of more than what was pre-established by Englishmen centuries before.

This inability of moving away from the remnants of colonialism is explored in the essay by the mentioning of Antigua's library. It is a colonial building that was damaged during the earthquake of 1974 and a sign hangs in front of it saying that the repairs are pending. Antiguanians had access to a new library only in 2014, forty years after its closure. This can be seen, then, as a symbol of how the islanders of today are still stuck in their colonial past and how this affects their being since she mentions: "you might see this as a sort of quaintness on the part of these islanders, these people descended from slaves — what a strange, unusual perception of time they have" (Kincaid, 1988, p. 9). In this passage, she uses irony to complain about her people's conformability with their colonial past and their inability to move on from it and create a new present, a different library elsewhere.

In this sense, they see themselves as confined to the practice of tourism and to still being servants of people coming from America and Europe. To do so, the island (and islanders) is molded to fit the Tourist Gaze (Urry, 1990), the idea that tourism revolves around “consuming places”, mainly visually, but also considering it an embodied multimodal experience, thus involving other scenescapes. That is why, Kincaid worries about describing the whole experience the reader will have as a tourist right after landing in Antigua. All of these aspects, from the color of the water to the state of the roads, are crucial to the formation of the experience the tourist will have while spending their vacation on the Island. Since tourism is their main source of legal income, the Tourist’s Gaze is a crucial point in the construction of Antiguan identity.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the locals are usually taken for granted in this touristic scenario and are seen as the “mad ones behind bars”, for they are stuck and constantly being watched; but, they also participate in the tourist-local relationship actively, they exert power (Urry, 1990). This can be seen in *A Small Place* when the narrator says the following through the eye of the local:

Every native would like to find a way out, every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour. But some natives—most natives in the world— cannot go anywhere. They are too poor. They are too poor to 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 (Kincaid, 1988, p. 18-19).

This shows how the Antiguan asserts their identity in a land that is seasonally inhabited by people who come from rich backgrounds and go there to spend their vacation while they are not able to leave or to enjoy their own lives because they are too poor. Hence, they are claimed in place of ugliness because they are given no other choice but to work in order to provide for these people.

Besides that, in the excerpt shown previously, we can see that the tourists are free to visit the place where the Antiguan is not able to leave for their lack of conditions. Thus, the author emphasizes how, as a reminiscence of colonial times, they are stuck on the island, unable to “escape their boredom”. This happens because, in the present time, they still feel like they are incapable of doing things that were considered superior by the colonizer, which is represented by the minister of health leaving the island to get medical treatment, and so they rely solely on tourism to get by, ending up imprisoned while having



to serve the others full-time. In other words, the tourist's freedom is their prison, once again they have their freedom limited by the ones who come from Europe and do not see them as people but as "the mad ones behind bars".

In brief, the Antiguanos of the present still live with the direct consequences of colonialism due to the place the colonizer has occupied in their imaginary and to their main source of income, which demands from them to be constantly serving people who are exerting their freedom while they are confined to their "boredom". That way, their identity from the point of view of the tourist-reader is confined to reproducing the stereotypes that they are supposed to fit in order to nurture the 'Tourist gaze'.

3 CONCLUSION

Kincaid shows throughout the book two sides of Antigua: the exotic island and the place that struggles to assert itself away from its colonial past. Thus, the Antiguanos need to navigate through different oppressions, old and new, in order to establish themselves. That is, then, the importance of reflecting upon the construction and re-construction of their individual and collective memory to define one's identity in an intersectional context.

This book, then, is crucial for us to understand how countries that have been colonized deal with their past and present since the situations described by the author are both specific and generalized to many places that suffer from the exploitation of bigger nations. Experiences such as tourism, corruption, and lack of investment in health, education, infrastructure, and many fields are a few of the struggles that people in Latin America as well as in other places of the southern hemisphere go through.

Therefore, Kincaid brings the reader back to a small island in the Caribbean in order to raise a reflection upon memory and identity and how these two elements are extremely relevant when dealing with the narratives from colonized countries. Hence, the author resurrects the discourse of the dominated people from Antigua to reveal a side of facts not often heard, she claims their right to speak against a crime as a way of dealing with the trauma of something that may never be repaired.

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