

Teaching *A Small Place* in Wisconsin: A Guide for Educators

2018-2019 Great World Texts Program
Center for the Humanities



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Teaching *A Small Place* in Wisconsin

Great World Texts: A Program of the Center for the Humanities, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Teaching *A Small Place* in Wisconsin: How to Use This Guide

Reading Across Time and Place

A Small Place is a work of nonfiction. While its sociocultural and geopolitical contexts are integral to its impact, and to our critical reflections on the text, it is also important to remember that this is a work of literature. While literature can help us teach culture, history, politics and so on, no one text can bear the burden of representing an entire nation, culture, or people. As you teach this text, please keep in mind and emphasize where you can the cultural specificities that make it unique. Doing so in a clear and explicit way will also help you and your students appreciate the text's ability to speak across time and space. Certain sections of the teaching guide, such as Units 1 and 2, will be especially helpful in this context.

How to Use This Guide

The material in this guide is intended to provide a variety of options for teaching Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* and its many contexts. We believe that the historical and cultural background is necessary for understanding this work and the questions it provokes, but we encourage you to teach the text thematically as well, tying it into other disciplinary issues and regular features of your core curriculum wherever possible.

Readings

The recommended readings in the guide are intended for teachers, but some are also accessible to students. These readings provide further background information for instructors as well as a variety of materials that might aid instructors in creating handouts and supplementing class discussion.

Points for Discussion, Assignments, and Activities

The recommended points for discussion, assignments and activities provided in this guide are designed to be tailored to the way you teach the text in your own course, as well as your particular time constraints, interests, and goals. The individual units might be taught over one or several days, or over the course of a few weeks. You can mix and

match ideas from the various sections to create your own syllabus. Each unit is organized according to themes that include points for lecture and discussion, suggestions for close reading, specific quotes from the text or other readings, as well as in-class activities and assignments that might be used to further discussion

Close Reading Strategies

The guide assumes that you will have read the entire text, but all units also offer suggestions for specific passages within the text that would benefit from careful and attentive reading, analysis and discussion. During discussion and for assignments, students should be encouraged to support their interpretations with evidence from the text. Close reading lends itself well to both large-group work and small-group discussions, and is an excellent way for students to develop their critical thinking skills as they make connections, use evidence to support their views, and discuss the impact of various literary techniques. For close reading to work successfully, it's important that the teacher always remind the students to point to the passage, line, or occurrence that supports their position when they're sharing their ideas. Close reading teaches students the difference between "opinion" or "personal reaction" and "analysis." It also helps teach students to assess the text on its own merits, and to avoid essentializing the cultural components of the text or stereotyping based on generalizations.

Reading a portion of text out loud as a class or small group, followed by discussion, can be an excellent way to develop close reading skills in the classroom. The guide includes a handout on close reading that we encourage you to use in your classes.

Teaching Toward the Student Conference

Schools participating in the 2018-2019 program will bring students to the University of Wisconsin-Madison on **Monday, April 8, 2019** to present their work to their peers, listen to lectures from experts on the text, and workshop with faculty, graduate students and undergraduates from the university. At the conference, they will have the opportunity to meet Jamaica Kincaid. Unit 7 in this guide is explicitly devoted to preparing students for this visit and for the student conference. Prepare them for a successful conference by

encouraging them to challenge themselves with projects that provide critical interpretations of the text in unique and complex ways. There is no limit to the type of project they might prepare. Past projects have included essays, painting, sculpture, weaving, photography, film and other multimedia, dramatic performances, song, dance, and more. The only requirement is that the students' projects must present a critical analysis of the text. Students will be required to write a short summary of their projects, which will be submitted to Aaron Fai (greattexts@humanities.wisc.edu) approximately three weeks before the student conference.

Each school will select one student, or group of students, whose work is exemplary, to present at the **plenary session** on stage. It's recommended that the students themselves select (by voting) the "best" project for this presentation, which will be about 3 minutes in length. It is our expectation that these presentations will be polished, rehearsed and timed, and that they will provide an opportunity for your school to feel pride and investment in its participation in the program. *All other students* are expected to present their work in poster sessions during the conference, and will have the opportunity to stand next to their projects and answer questions about them from other students and conference participants. Every student who attends the conference should present her/his work at the conference.

Unit 1: History and Context

Objectives:

- Provide background and context for the history of Antigua that informs *A Small Place*
- Provide a brief overview of Jamaica Kincaid's bibliography and common themes informing her work

History of Antigua



Antigua is an island in the West Indies. The island has an area of roughly 108 square miles — for comparison, Milwaukee has an area of roughly 96 square miles. Christopher Columbus named the island Antigua upon his arrival in 1493 but the island was not settled by Europeans until the arrival of the Thomas Warner in 1632. The European colonization of Antigua marked a turning point in the island's history. The main groups of indigenous people living on the island — the Arawak and the Carib — were largely decimated by European disease, malnutrition, and slavery.

British soldier Christopher Codrington established the first sugar plantation on the island, Betty's Hope in 1674, and the sugar trade soon began booming in Antigua. Growing and harvesting sugar cane is a labor intensive process and the British began importing African slaves to work on the fields. By 1780 there were almost 400 slaves living and working on Betty's Hope. The lucrative sugar industry soon established Antigua's place as an important colony in Britain's empire. The island was known as the "gateway to the Caribbean" because of its strategic location in the middle of many sailing routes that were vital to the British colonial project in the Caribbean.



Two sugar mills at Betty's Hope

This strategic position was further utilized by the British when Admiral Horatio Nelson arrived in 1784 to establish British naval facilities on the island (on page 24, Kincaid notes that she "lived on a street named after an English maritime criminal, Horatio Nelson"). As part of these efforts, Nelson's Dockyard was established in the English Harbour, on the southern end of the island. The harbour was chosen as the spot for the

dockyard because it was naturally well-suited to protect cargo and ships from hurricanes and other natural disasters. The dockyard was abandoned by the Royal Navy in 1889 and became part of a restoration project in 1951. Today, the dockyard is home to some of Antigua's most famous sailing events, such as Antigua Sailing Week.



Nelson's Dockyard today

Although Great Britain formally emancipated slaves in the colonies in 1834, sugar cane remained the dominant economic force until the rise of tourism in the mid-20th century. Many freed slaves continued to work on the plantations for low wages. Poor labor conditions spurred the formation of the Antigua Trades and Labor Union in 1939 and also provided the impetus for Antiguan to begin agitating for independence. In 1943, Vere Cornwall (V.C.) Bird became president of the labor union and helping to lead sugar cane workers in strikes for higher wages. When the labor union become the Antigua

Labour Party in the late 1940s, Bird ran for office and won. The Labour Party continued to dominate Antiguan politics for decades to come. In 1981, Antigua achieved independence from Britain and combined with Barbuda, a neighboring island, to form the nation of Antigua and Barbuda. Bird was elected Antigua's first prime minister. As Kincaid notes, the international airport in Antigua is named after Bird. Bird was prime minister of Antigua until 1994 and was succeeded by his son, Lester Bird. The Bird political dynasty faced much criticism (such as the criticisms of corruption launched by Kincaid on page 72: "In Antigua, people say that the man who has headed the government for twenty-five years perhaps by now thinks that the government of Antigua is his own business"). Bird's political opponents have also accused him of making Antigua a haven for international con men.

Although it fully gained independence in 1981, Antigua and Barbuda remains a British commonwealth nation, meaning Queen Elizabeth II is the official head of state. Currently, the dominant economy in Antigua and Barbuda is tourism, which accounts for over half of the country's GDP. The majority of tourists who visit Antigua are from the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada. In September 2017, Hurricane Irma decimated the island of Barbuda, destroying roughly 95% of its buildings and infrastructure. All residents of Barbuda were evacuated to Antigua.

Common Themes of Kincaid's writing

Jamaica Kincaid was born Elaine Potter Richardson in St. John's, Antigua in 1949. *A Small Place* was published in 1988. Kincaid notes in various interviews that she was exceptionally close to her mother as a child, following her everywhere and spending every moment of the day with her. Kincaid was an only child until she was nine and her mother gave birth to her first brother. Kincaid eventually became the oldest of four children and her close relationship with her mother became strained due to financial difficulties and less emotional availability from her mother. Much of Kincaid's work revolves around mother-daughter relationships, perhaps influenced by her intense relationship with her own mother as a child.

As previously noted, Antigua did not achieve independence until 1981, so Kincaid was educated in the British colonial education system. She was a bright student

but at the age of 17, she left Antigua to work as an au pair in Scarsdale, New York. She has not resided in the Caribbean for a significant portion of time since. From 1979 to 2002, Kincaid was married to Allen Shawn, a musician and the son of William Shawn, an editor at *The New Yorker*.

Kincaid became a staff writer and columnist for *The New Yorker*, and published her first collection of short stories, *At the Bottom of the River*, in 1983. Her first novel, *Annie John*, was published in 1985. Much of Kincaid's work has a distinctly autobiographical tint — indeed, she writes much about the legacy of British colonialism, racism, imperialism, mother-daughter relationships, and class. For example, *Annie John* is the coming of age story of a young girl growing up in Antigua. The protagonist struggles with poverty influenced by colonization and with gender expectations. In more recent years, much of Kincaid's later work has been influenced by the lessons she has learned through tending her garden. *My Garden Book* was published in 2001 and Kincaid has written extensively about the relationship between gardening and imperialism over the environment. These themes become apparent in *A Small Place*, Kincaid's most famous work. Much of Kincaid's work is stream of consciousness and lyrical in form. Stream of consciousness is a style of writing where the author tries to represent a character's inner monologue or thought process through words, often resulting in associative leaps in thought and/or untraditional or nonexistent punctuation. For example, "Girl" the first vignette in *At the Bottom of the River* could be considered stream of consciousness in the way that it weaves the narrator's conversation with her mother in between the narrator's own thoughts and feelings.

Kincaid is currently a Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University. She lives in North Bennington, Vermont during summers.

Handouts

- What is Close Reading?
- Maps of Antigua

Discussion Questions

- What images or words come to mind when you think of the Caribbean? Why do these particular images or words evoke the Caribbean for you? Where does your prior knowledge of the Caribbean come from?
- What image of the Caribbean came to mind for you when reading *A Small Place*? How does this differ from your image of the Caribbean prior to reading the book?
- How does learning about the history of Antigua change your impression of the Caribbean?

Close Reading

- Guide the students through a close reading of the first paragraph of the book using the “What is Close Reading” handout.

If you go to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see. If you come by aeroplane, you will land at the V.C. Bird International Airport. Vere Cornwall (V.C.) Bird is the Prime Minister of Antigua. You may be the sort of tourist who would wonder why a Prime Minister would want an airport named after him — why not a school, why not a hospital, why not some great public monument? You are a tourist and you have not yet seen a school in Antigua, you have not yet seen a public monument in Antigua. As your plane descends to land, you might say, What a beautiful island Antigua is — more beautiful than any of the other islands you have seen, and they were very beautiful, in their way, 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 going to be staying there; and since you are on your holiday, since you are a tourist, the thought of what it might be like for someone who had to live day in, day out

in a place that suffers constantly from drought, and so has to watch carefully every drop of fresh water used (while at the same time surrounded by a sea and an ocean — the Caribbean Sea on one side, the Atlantic Ocean on the other), must never cross your mind.

- What are your gut reactions to the opening paragraph? How does it make you feel?
 - Why do you think Kincaid chooses to open the novel with the airport?
 - Why might she include such a long, run-on sentence at the end of this first paragraph?
 - Why do you think Kincaid suggests that Europe might be worse than the United States?
 - Why does she employ a second person point of view?
- If this is some students' first introduction to in-depth close reading, feel free to emphasize that there is no correct answer to these questions. They are open-ended on purpose. The goal of close reading is not to have the most correct answer but rather to use evidence collected from the book to support a well-thought out argument. As students are answering these questions, encourage them to point to specific lines or words that support their answer.

Assignment and Project Ideas

- Divide students into groups and distribute different maps of Antigua to them. Have them close read these maps and write a list of what they are able to analyze just from looking at the maps. Bring the class back into a larger group discussion and ask students what they learned about Antigua from close reading each individual map. This will help students realize how much analysis can be gleaned from a simple image and stress that close reading is not just for books — it can be applied to all sorts of texts and documents.
- Using the history of Antigua and the background about Kincaid's life, have students construct a timeline with the following dates:

- 1632: First colonization of Antigua
- 1674: Sugar plantation Betty's Hope is established and slaves are imported in order to provide a labor force
- 1834: Formal emancipation of slaves
- 1939: Establishment of labor union
- 1981: Independence from Britain
- 1949: Kincaid's birth
- 1988: Publication of *A Small Place*
- 2017: Hurricane Irma

Students are free to include more dates if they want but the timeline should include at least these dates. It can often be difficult to comprehend the length of certain periods of history and this assignment will help students visualize the long-scale of slavery and colonization in Antigua and how brief their independence has been in comparison.

Additional Reading

- "Interview with Jamaica Kincaid" by Kay Bonetti
 - This interview was conducted in 1991, shortly after the publication of Kincaid's second novel, *Lucy*. Bonetti and Kincaid discuss, among other topics, the experimental forms of Kincaid's writing, Kincaid's decision to leave Antigua, and her relationship with her mother.
- "10 Questions with Jamaica Kincaid" from TIME Magazine
 - A reporter interviews Kincaid about her most recent book of fiction, *See Now Then*. For students who prefer to watch a video as opposed to reading an interview, this is an alternative "reading" that still touches upon many major themes in Kincaid's writing.
- "Vere Bird, 89, who led Antigua to Freedom" by Michael T. Kaufman
 - This obituary of Bird, published in the New York Times after his death in 1999, provides more detail and history about Bird's life and various scandals that plagued his administration.

- Students might read this obituary and then compare it to the section from pages 67-74 where Kincaid talks directly about Bird's government and its status as a "monument to rottenness" (69).
- "How and Why We Read Literature" Video by John Green
 - Green, a young adult novelist, discusses authorial intent, close reading techniques, different literary devices, and why it is important to analyze literature at all. This could be a companion to the "How and Why We Close Read" handout, especially for students who learn better visually and through video than through just text.

Unit 2: Colonization and Reception

When *A Small Place* was published in 1988, reaction to the novel was immediately mixed. Some critics praised the sharp tone of the work and Kincaid's unflinching look at postcolonial life in Antigua. For example, the Kirkus Review admired the way Kincaid "spit her lovely venom" at American tourists. Michiko Kakutani of the New York Times also gave a favorable review of the book, noting that "Kincaid writes with a passion and conviction" as well as a "musical sense of language, a poet's understanding of how politics and history, private and public events, overlap and blur."

But not all readers reacted to the novel so favorably. In a particularly biting essay "A Small Place Writes Back," Jane King criticized Kincaid for what she viewed as a one-dimensional portrayal of Antiguan. King took issue with Kincaid's portrayal of Antiguan as lacking education and the insight necessary to critique a corrupt government, writing that "I would like the evidence of a few more Antiguan, some of whom actually still live there. There are at least a few [Antiguan] who are literate, politically aware and not living on corruption" (897). Apart from the reception of *A Small Place*, Kincaid is also frequently criticized for continually writing about the Caribbean experience while residing in Vermont. King draws on this when she writes, "I do not see why Caribbean people should admire her for denigrating our small place in this destructively angry fashion. High time she started writing about the beauty of Vermont" (899).

Reviews aside, since its publication, *A Small Place* has become a canonical work of postcolonial and Caribbean literature. In this unit, we will explore what postcolonial literature is and use this working definition in order to better understand why Kincaid's novel has become so often included on postcolonial syllabi.

Objectives

- To provide an understanding of what is postcolonial literature
- Provide a brief history of the reception of *A Small Place* and contextualize Kincaid's role as a canonical author of Caribbean literature

- To evaluate the different ways this novel can be placed and the different canons where it can exist

British Imperialism

For the entirety of Kincaid's childhood in Antigua, the island was a British colony which meant it was part of the huge collection of nations known as the British Empire. At its height in 1920, the British Empire was the largest empire in history, covering nearly 25% of the world's land area. British colonial imperialism necessitated the complete takeover of an entire area, and the imposition of a British way of life in economic, political and sociocultural spheres. For example, because Kincaid was born in Antigua during the reign of Britain, she was subjected to a traditional British schooling system. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Kincaid said "In my generation, the height of being a civilized person was to be English and to love English things and eat like English people. We couldn't really look like them, but we could approximate being an English person." She notes in various interviews that she grew up reading English classics such as *Jane Eyre* and *Paradise Lost*. Sometimes, these "great texts" of the English canon were used as punishment for her — one time, she was even forced to copy large chunks of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. While Kincaid noted that being immersed in these classics often felt like erasing her Antiguan side, she also found a way to take the themes from *Paradise Lost* and make them her own by imparting her own unique point of view. As Diane Simmons notes in "Jamaica Kincaid and the Canon," Kincaid is "part of a new wave of post-colonial writers" as opposed to a previous waves of writers who "have tried to ignore the colonial language and literary traditions in their efforts to get at their own authentic story and language" (67). Kincaid does not shy away from the colonial past but rather confronts it and its effects on her and Antigua in order to, as Simmons puts it, "take these great works of English literature, to read them in her own terms, and to turn them to her own use" (68). This is of course not to say that colonialism was a wholly good institution but rather to give one example of how colonial and postcolonial subjects reacted to the ways of life that were imposed on them.

Another example of how imperialism can affect people's everyday lives is Kincaid's name itself. She was given the name Elaine Potter Richardson at birth — the

name Elaine has its origins in Arthurian legend and Potter and Richardson are classically English surnames. Kincaid notes that she changed her name at the age of 24 because “I wanted to write and I didn’t know how. I thought if I changed my name and I wrote and it was very bad, then no one would ever know” (An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid, 14). She went on to say that her new name “had the significance I wanted it to have since that is the area of the world I’m from” (15). This is an example of linguistic imperialism (that is also evident in the close reading passage for this unit) and can be seen not just in former British colonies but in America itself. For example, students can think about how Mount McKinley was officially recently re-named its original native name, Denali.

The effect of British imperialism is also present in the text of *A Small Place* itself. For example, on page 49, Kincaid writes “In Antigua, cricket is sport and cricket is culture.” The forcing of a British way of life onto the colonies ensured that sports such as cricket are still popular in former colonies today. In fact, cricket is the most popular sport in India today. As these examples show, imperialism is perhaps at its most effective when one country completely takes over another country’s way of life — schooling, naming, and everything else included.

Slavery in the Caribbean

Slavery is another form of imperialism and colonialism. Sugar was the most common crop grown in the Caribbean and was most efficient when grown on large plantations with many workers. The transatlantic slave trade provided British plantations in Antigua with the labor necessary to meet the growing demand for sugar in Britain and beyond.

Sugar production was a labor intensive and oftentimes dangerous process. For example, during the sugar boiling process, the boiling house reached very high temperatures, and combined with the heat and humidity of the Caribbean itself, slaves would often leave with swollen limbs due to the heat. Harvesting sugar cane was also an intensive process because a mature sugar cane’s texture is so hard that it requires a machete to cut through. During harvesting season, it was common for slaves to emerge from a day’s work with cuts throughout their body. Conditions for slaves remained poor

because it was often cheaper for plantation owners to simply buy new slaves instead of properly caring for their workers.

These facts are not intended to merely shock or make students feel guilty about the brutal past of slavery. Rather, you may emphasize that these examples show how slavery was made possible by an interconnected system of domination over land, people, and ways of life. The demand for sugar was partly due to the immense popularity of tea in Britain and this demand spurred the intense colonization and production of sugar in the Caribbean. Goods like sugar and rum (made from molasses, a byproduct of the sugar production process) were traded to West Africa to purchase slaves, who were shipped to the Caribbean to join the sugar trade. Slavery was a part of the institution of British imperialism and colonization. The immense wealth that colonial powers such as Britain were able to extract from their colonies also made further colonization possible.

Differences between American and British slavery

It may be useful to have students compare their knowledge of American slavery with the British system of slavery in the Caribbean. Some important differences to consider would be the demographic differences and the different treatment of slaves in the Caribbean versus America. Although conditions in slavery were poor all around, British plantation owners relied more on the slave trade to maintain their labor force, while the American system of slavery had become largely self-reproducing by 1800. This meant that British plantation owners did not care much about improving conditions for slaves to make sure they lived longer; as long as the slave trade was thriving, it was often cheaper for plantations to continue buying new slaves than to improve conditions for their current ones. This fact, combined with the humid weather, tropical diseases, and mosquitoes which often plagued the Caribbean, meant that there was on average a higher death rate in the Caribbean than in the South for slaves.

The African and African American population in America has always remained a minority whereas in Antigua, 91% of the population identifies as black. The fact that black people make up the majority means that the mechanisms of colonialism and racism may be more difficult to detect, though they are still present. Kincaid calls

attention to this when she writes that “In Antigua, people cannot see a relationship between their obsession with slavery and emancipation and their celebration of the Hotel Training school; people cannot see a relationship between their obsession with slavery and emancipation and the fact that they are governed by corrupt men” (55).

Antigua’s Economy Today

Today, tourism has replaced agriculture as the largest industry in Antigua but the remnants of British imperialism can be found even in the tourism industry. An English naval Officer sailed into Antigua’s English Harbour in 1949 and helped finance its restoration. He also started Antigua Sailing Week, now considered one of the top regattas (a series of boat races) in the world. The 2018 Antigua Sailing Week, brought 120 boats and 1000 sailors to the island, and generated around \$4 million in direct revenue to the island. In an attempt to democratize the event, Antigua established a national sailing academy in 2010 and introduced sailing into the island’s curriculum. In an interview with CNN, the Sailing Week’s commercial director Allison Sly-Adams said, “Yes, you’ve definitely still got that demographic of being a sport for white people, a sport for rich people but we’re really seeing a lot of the youths getting into the sport and into the industry which is ultimately the goal -- to get them trained in sailing and confident so they’re happy to go looking for jobs in the industry, of which there are many here.” Popular resorts on the island, such as Curtain Bluff and Blue Waters, were built by an American pilot and a British airman respectively. The Mill Reef Club, an exclusive resort that most Antiguanians are too poor to access and which Kincaid mentions on page 44, was founded by an architect from Connecticut. Again, these are examples of the residual effects of imperialism. Although 91% of Antiguanians are black and only 1.9% of the population is white, the fact remains that the tourism economy of Antigua relies heavily on travel from white American and British citizens. Tourism has given a certain wealth and economic prosperity to Antigua that Barbuda, which is communally owned by its residents, lacks. But relying on the tourism industry has made the Antiguan economy more vulnerable to the ebb and flow of tourism, especially in times of hurricanes and other inclement weather.

Handouts

- What is Postcolonial Literature?

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think *A Small Place* has so resonated with readers, decades after its publication? Why do you think it has been chosen as the “Great World Text” for Wisconsin high schools in 2018?
- Why do you think the book was so polarizing upon its initial publication? What was your initial reaction to the novel — was it closer to the reaction of Kakutani or of King? Why do you think you had the initial reaction that you had?
- Why do you think it might be important to note the distinctions between American and British systems of slavery? What did you know about slavery in the Caribbean prior to reading the book? What do you know after and how does this affect your reading and reception of Kincaid’s book?
- Discuss the different canons that the novel can exist in. Why does it make a difference if we call this “Caribbean,” or a “postcolonial” novel? How else could we describe it? Does the novel defy being definitively placed in one canon? Do you think Kincaid deliberately wrote *A Small Place* to try to defy canons? Why or why not? What do we gain/lose in our reading of the text by “placing” it in these different ways?

Close Reading

- Guide students through the following passage on pages 31 and 32 in which Kincaid details her rage at having only the English language through which to criticize England.

I cannot tell you how angry it makes me to hear people from North America tell me how much they loved England, how beautiful England is, with its traditions. All they see is some frumpy, wrinkled up person passing by in a carriage waving at a crowd. 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 which might lead to the things that an excess of love sometimes brings, and worse 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 this crime? And what can that really mean. For the language of the criminal can only contain the goodness of the criminal's deed.)

- What are your gut reactions to this paragraph? How does it make you feel?
- Why do you think Kincaid describes the lack of a mother tongue to be “most painful of all”?
- What literary devices jump out at you when you read this page? What is the effect of using them?
 - Hint: students might look for repetition and symbolism
- Why do you think Kincaid refers to England as the “criminal”? What effect does this achieve?

Oh, what beauty! Oh, what beauty! You have never seen anything like this. You are so excited. You see a beautiful boy skimming the water, godlike, on a Windsurfer. You see an incredibly unattractive, fat, pastrylike-fleshed woman enjoying a walk on the beautiful sand, with a man, an incredibly unattractive, fat pastrylike-fleshed man; you see the pleasure they're taking in their surroundings...You see yourself taking a walk on that beach, you see yourself meeting new people (only they are new in a very limited way, for they are people just like you). You see yourself eating some delicious, locally grown food...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

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

- Why does Kincaid dedicate such attention to describing the bodies of tourists? Why does she use the descriptions “godlike” and “pastrylike”?
- Why does she bring up the sewage system? What might the lack of a proper sewage-disposal symbolize or represent?
- Discuss Kincaid’s use of size here. The woman and man in this passage are described as “fat” and “pastrylike” and the vastness of the Caribbean and Atlantic Seas are also noted, whereas we already know that Antigua is a very small place.

Assignment and Project Ideas

- Write a 1000-word review of the novel. What would you include and not include? How does your review differ from that of Kakutani or King?
- Have students research the history of another British imperial colony of their choosing (alternatively, teachers could also split their students up into groups and ask students to pick a colony based on region, like Southeast Asia, Northern Africa, Caribbean, etc). How does the history of this colony differ from what they’ve learned about Antigua? How did their understanding of postcolonialism or imperialism change after doing this research?

Additional Reading

- “*A Small Place Writes Back*” by Jane King
 - Published in 2002, this scathing piece critiques Kincaid’s work and position as a Caribbean writer. King draws on specific passages from Kincaid’s bibliography to argue that her portrayal of Caribbean people is one-dimensional and overwhelmingly negative. King is a St. Lucian poet.
- “Portrait of Antigua, Warts and All” by Michiko Kakutani
 - A positive review of *A Small Place* by the legendary *New York Times* former chief book critic.

- “Antigua Sailing Week” article from CNN
 - This April 2018 article about Antigua Sailing Week provides a brief look at how tourism is currently affecting the Antiguan economy and native Antiguans.
- “Beyond Denali: Restoring Native American Names” by Katia Hetter
 - This article discusses the power of naming and recent moves to restore indigenous names to many historical or natural landmarks in America. This can be related back to Kincaid’s changing of her name and can also be used as an example of American imperialism so that students can better understand that colonialism was not just an isolated British phenomenon.

Unit 3: Identity and Literature

Objectives

- Define decolonization and discuss the ways in which *A Small Place* might aim to decolonize the island experience
- Analyze the tone of Kincaid's writing, particularly the anger that is apparent throughout much of the book
- Read and analyze "Girl" from Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River* to understand how Kincaid's multiple identities inform her perspective and writing

Decolonization

Decolonization can be very simply defined as the process of trying to undo colonization. The end of World War II ushered in an era of vast decolonization all over the world. Much of Britain had been damaged by German air strikes and the country was left bankrupt after the war, avoiding crisis only by taking a \$4 billion loan from the United States. India, the most powerful and valuable British colony, achieved independence in 1947 after decades of protest and agitation. In the five decades to come, Britain would slowly lose its empire piece by piece until 1997, when Hong Kong, the last remaining British colony, was returned to China.

Decolonization often involved the re-drawing of national borders and re-defining of boundaries, even if this redrawing had disastrous outcomes for the people that actually lived in these former colonies. For example, the Partition of India in 1947 created two independent nations, the largely Muslim state of Pakistan and the largely Hindu and Sikh state of India. This partition resulted in massive population exchanges based on religion, with about 14.5 million people crossing borders to what they hoped would be relative safety as part of the religious majority. Another example of the effects of colonial redrawing of borders can be seen in the former Belgian colony of Rwanda. The Belgians enforced an ethnic divide between the two main tribes of the region, the Hutu and the Tutsi. Each Rwandan was issued an ethnic identity card and the Tutsi were seen as genetically superior to the Hutu. After gaining independence from Belgium, the Hutu took control of the government. From April 7 1994 to mid July 1994,

the Hutu government undertook a genocide of the Tutsi following the assassination of the Rwandan president. An estimated 500,000 to 1 million Tutsi were killed in this 100 day period. Many scholars have speculated that the ethnic strife between these two tribes was largely exacerbated by the period of Belgian colonialism.

As these two examples demonstrate, even after independence is achieved, the messy process of decolonization continues and the legacy of colonialism persists. The transition away from a colonial government often created a power vacuum that could be exploited by opportunistic leaders and result in corruption and ineffectual government, as discussed by Kincaid in her section on Antigua's prime ministers.

Many postcolonial scholars point to the need to decolonize one's mind — to reject the idea that a colonizer's way of life is the correct one and to instead return to a way of thought and life that existed pre-colonialism. In his book *Decolonising the Mind*, Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls on Kenyans to reject English and instead write in their native languages. He states that "the choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a person's definition of themselves" (4). He raises the question: "Why should we, as African writers, come to be feeble toward the claims of our languages and be so aggressive in our claims on other languages, particularly the languages of our colonization" (9). Connecting the violence of war and colonization with the violence inflicted on a child forced to learn English, he writes "the physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom" (9). But other African authors, such as Chinua Achebe, feel that it is possible to still write a distinctly African and decolonized novel using the English language. The question of language is one often discussed by postcolonial theorists and scholars and there is no definitive answer. This shows that decolonization is a complicated and ongoing process in the former colonies of the world, and that the effects of colonialism are long-lasting.

On Violence

Decolonization was almost always accompanied by violence. In fact, in his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, influential postcolonial scholar Frantz Fanon includes a chapter on violence and the postcolonial condition, stating that "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon (34). Fanon, a psychiatrist and

revolutionary from the French Caribbean colony of Martinique, argues that since colonization itself is a violent process, “one carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons,” a reversal of this system would necessitate violence as well. According to Fanon, true decolonization requires that “the last shall be first” — last as in colonized and first as in colonizer.

The question of whether violence should be used to achieve independence and civil rights is a fraught one and one that continues to have implications today. Modern movements such as Black Lives Matter have often been criticized for their use of violence and force. Many cite Martin Luther King Jr.’s concept of nonviolence as a reason to continue using peaceful protests to convey messages and enact social change. But toward the end of his life, even King began to question the effectiveness of non-violent protest. In a speech delivered in September 1967, King discussed the inevitability of rioting:

“Urban riots must now be recognized as durable social phenomena,” he told the assembled crowd of mostly white doctors and academics. “They may be deplored, but they are there and should be understood. Urban riots are a special form of violence. They are not insurrections. The rioters are not seeking to seize territory or to attain control of institutions. They are mainly intended to shock the white community. They are a distorted form of social protest. The looting which is their principal feature serves many functions. It enables the most enraged and deprived Negro to take hold of consumer goods with the ease the white man does by using his purse. Often the Negro does not even want what he takes; he wants the experience of taking.”

King’s realizations about riots parallel Kincaid’s own discussions on violence and rage. The following passage comes from page 32:

“When I say, ‘I am filled with rage,’ the criminal says, ‘But why?’ And when I blow things up and make life generally unlivable for the criminal (is my life not unlivable too?) the criminal is shocked, surprised. 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, and only the impossible can make me still: can a way be found to make what happened not have happened?”

Here, Kincaid justifies her rage as a by-product of British colonialism and imperialism. She echoes King in saying that not even taking money from the criminal will ease her feelings of rage; rather, her inner rage manifests itself in violence because she wants the experience of taking something away from those who have taken away from her.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theory of interlocking oppression that originated from feminist thought. Although the word “intersectionality” was first used by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, feminist scholars, especially black feminists, have long been theorizing similar concepts. For example, the Combahee River Collective was a Black feminist lesbian organization that was active from 1974 to 1980. In 1977, they published a collective statement that defined their key beliefs and identified areas for growth moving forward. Here is an excerpt from the statement that provides a clear definition of intersectionality:

“The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. *The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.* As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.”

The women of the Combahee River Collective realized that combating oppression meant first and foremost reckoning with how their different identities synthesized and created complex experiences. This came partly out of a feeling that the second-wave feminism movement — a period that roughly lasted from the early 1960s to the early 1990s — was largely dominated by white women who could not understand the struggles faced by Black women and other women of color. To be sure, black women and white women shared similar struggles based on their identities as women but a theory of intersectionality stresses that merely looking at one identity category is not enough — to truly understand how oppression works, it is necessary to look at the

various different identities a person holds and how these identities impact how a person navigates the world. Crenshaw defines intersectionality as “a framework ... to trace the impact of racism, of sexism, other modes of discrimination, where they come together and create sometimes unique circumstances, obstacles, barriers for people who are subject to all of those things.”

Because Jamaica Kincaid writes from the position of black woman, it is important to consider her own writing from an intersectional approach. Henry Louis Gates Jr., the influential African American literature scholar, has stated that “[Kincaid] never feels the necessity of claiming the existence of a black world or a female sensibility. She assumes them both. I think it’s a distinct departure that she’s making, and I think that more and more black American writers will assume their world the way that she does. So that we can get beyond the large theme of racism and get to the deeper themes of racism and get to the deeper themes of how black people love and cry and live and die. Which after all, is what art is all about.” Indeed, although Kincaid is often characterized as a Caribbean author, her position as a woman also greatly impacts her writing, as students will see when they read “Girl.”

Handouts

- “Girl” from *At the Bottom of the River*

Discussion Questions

- How do you think identity affects an author’s literature? For example, do you think that the passage on 32 concerning rage and blowing things up might have been different if it were written by a black man? A white man?
- What is a distinctly Caribbean literature? Is a Caribbean literature one that is written in a native Caribbean language? What constitutes native-ness in the Caribbean, a region now largely populated by the descendants of African slaves who arrived there against their will?
- How did you feel initially reading *A Small Place*? If you have ever been a tourist in the sorts of places Kincaid describes, did you feel attacked? Angered?

Defensive? Does learning more about the history of colonialism change your reaction? Why or why not?

- How did you initially react to the rage that is throughout the book? Were you sympathetic initially? How did your reaction change as you learned more context about the book?
- Do you think there are cases in which violence is justified? Why or why not? Is violence sometimes an effective way of bringing about change?

Close Reading

- This passage comes on page 26, when Kincaid is describing the various businesses on High Street.

In the middle of High Street was the Barclays Bank. 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...But people just a little older than I am can recite the name of 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? I can imagine that if my life had taken a certain turn, there would be the Barclays Bank, and there I would be, both of us in ashes. Do you ever try to understand why people like me cannot get over the past, cannot forgive and cannot forget? There is the Barclays Bank. The Barclay brothers are dead. The human beings they traded, the human beings who to them were only commodities, are dead.

- What are your gut reactions to this passage?
- Why is it significant that Kincaid fixates on a bank in this passage? What might a bank represent or symbolize?
- How would you describe the tone of this passage? Why do you think Kincaid employs this particular tone?

- Why does Kincaid ask “do you ever wonder why some people blow things up?”
- Why might she include such a long, run-on sentence at the end of this first paragraph?

“Girl” Close Reading

- Have students pick no more than three lines from “Girl” to close read. Then, have them write a short paragraph or two analyzing the lines they have chosen. With the freedom to choose their own passage, students will realize that some passages are more ripe for analysis and close reading than others. This will help them learn how to carefully choose evidence in the future. You can then lead students in a discussion comparing “Girl” to *A Small Place* with some of these discussion questions
 - Why did you pick your specific lines from “Girl”?
 - How is “Girl” and more specifically, your chosen passage from the piece, an example of intersectionality? What different identities do you see intersecting with each other and how does this affect your perception of each individual identity?
 - Compare and contrast the tone of the two different passages.
 - Now that you have read two pieces of Kincaid’s work, what would you say are major themes apparent in both pieces? How does her island perspective inform her writing and these themes?
 - How would you compare the Antigua portrayed in “Girl” with the Antigua written about in *A Small Place*? What do they seem to have in common? How are they different?

Assignment and Project Ideas

- Have students reflect on their own identities and the various intersections of these identities. Please explain that for this particular assignment, you want students to reflect on their social identities — gender, race, sexuality, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, citizenship status, ability, age, geographic

location, etc. They very well may find other identities important to them — their identity as a video gamer, as a football player, etc — but because this assignment is meant to allow students to reflect on the ways they are privileged or not privileged in society, it is best to focus on social identities. Students can approach the reflection in a variety of different ways — through writing, through drawing, through music, through sculpture. You can provide these guiding questions to stimulate thought:

- What are the identities that you hold?
- What identities do you think about the most often? Least often?
- What identities do you think you know the least about?
- Which ones do you feel most comfortable talking to others about? Least comfortable? Why?
- How does the place you grew up in affect these identities? How does living in Wisconsin affect the ways you navigate these identities?
- Where do you see intersections with your identities?
- If you have any identities in common with Kincaid that you know of, did that affect the way you perceived her works? If you do not share any of her identities, how does that affect your experience reading her works?
- Have students read “The African Writer and the English Language” by Chinua Achebe and the excerpt from *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngũgĩ. Put them into teams of four and have them prepare a debate, with one side representing Achebe’s argument and one side representing Ngũgĩ’s. Each pair must use at least two quotes from *A Small Place* or “Girl” as evidence to support their argument.

Additional Reading

- Jamaica Kincaid reads “Girl” from Chicago Humanities Festival
 - This short video of Kincaid reading “Girl” might be helpful to show to students so that they can hear the lyrical flow of her writing. You might ask students if hearing the text read changed their perception of it.
- “Teaching at the Intersections” by Monita K. Bell

- This resource from Teaching Tolerance provides a brief and concise overview of Crenshaw’s work and the historical development of intersectionality. It also includes a 3 minute video on intersectionality, with examples for students who might find it more helpful to learn through a video.
- “The African Writer and the English Language” by Chinua Achebe
 - Achebe, author of *Things Fall Apart* and arguably one of the most famous modern African writers, makes the case for writing African literature in English.
- Excerpt from *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o
 - In this excerpt, Ngũgĩ details his own experience in the Kenyan education system while Kenya was still a colony of Britain, and how he was denied access to his indigenous language. He outlines why he feels it is important for the colonized to reclaim their native languages and produce art in these languages.
- “By the End of his Life Martin Luther King Realized the Validity of Violence” by Hanif Abdurraqib
 - A short piece on MLK and violence. Reading about the riots of 1967 alongside *A Small Place* may allow students to recognize that colonialism and imperialism are not merely practiced by European countries such as Britain and France, but that independence movements in colonies had much in common with the civil rights movements of the United States.

Unit 4: The Island Perspective

Objectives

- Evaluate why Kincaid choose to write from the perspective of the island as opposed to the perspective of the mainland where she currently resides
- Relate the issues surrounding tourism in *A Small Place* to specific Wisconsin experiences
- Draw parallels between treatment of Native Americans and Native reservations in Wisconsin to British colonialism in Antigua
- Use gardening as a colonial allegory to further emphasize colonialism's control over the environment

Writing from a Small Place

A Small Place is radical in many ways but perhaps one aspect of the book that continues to surprise readers is the distinct point of view which Kincaid assumes. The Caribbean island is often seen in Western popular culture as a pristine paradise, a serene escape from the worries and stresses of everyday life. For example, a quick Google image search of “islands” conjures up blue waters, lush green landscapes, and white sandy beaches. Yet, as Kincaid shows, this is a very narrow view of island life. Kincaid disrupts traditional representations of island life, writing from the perspective of not the tourist but rather the native islander whose life is constantly affected and shaped by the tourist.

In this way, *A Small Place* can be regarded as part of a canon of island literature that attempts to reposition the island as the center because it is so often regarded as the margin. Many factors contribute to people viewing islands as marginal. One factor that Kincaid draws much attention to is the issue of size. As previously noted, Antigua is only roughly 100 square miles in size, only a little bit larger than Milwaukee. The smaller size of islands such as those in the Caribbean make them appealing as spaces for colonization for larger, more powerful countries such as the United States or Britain. The smaller population of islands also means that historically, they have found it difficult to fend off colonizing or imperialistic forces. There are exceptions to this, of course —

the only successful slave rebellion happened in Haiti, after all, but generally, small islands have found themselves vulnerable to militaristic forces from larger nations. Additionally, small islands can find themselves in economic difficulty because their size makes it difficult to diversify their economy and they are often dependent on tourism. In a study on small island economies, economist Charles Tisdell notes the following challenges faced by these economies:

Such [island] economies frequently depend on aid from foreign or overseas places for maintaining the levels of income of their inhabitants; income levels which in many cases are relatively low. Income levels may be precarious in such economies because they are vulnerable to variations in economic, natural and political forces. They usually lack diversity in their natural resources and in their exports. A natural disaster can devastate their whole island economy so that little resilience remains to deal with the disaster by relying on the island's own resources.

These are challenges certainly reflected in Kincaid's own life and in the history of Antigua that students will have learned. Kincaid herself migrated from Antigua in search of more economic opportunity in America. Hurricane Irma so devastated Barbuda that all of its residents had to evacuate to Antigua. It is important to recognize the challenges faced by island nations because so much of popular culture merely depicts islands as a blissful paradise and this one-dimensional account fails to accurately capture the complexity of island life.

Scholars in postcolonial studies attempt to disrupt this one-dimensional view of former colonies. The emerging field of archipelagic American studies, which could be considered a branch of postcolonial studies, aims to decontinentalize American studies by shifting the focus from the continent to the vast archipelago of islands that also constitute the Americas. In the introduction to the Archipelagic American studies anthology, Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens note that American society prioritizes the continent and views islands as merely secondary to the exceptional geography of the continent. Joseph B. Palaz's poem "Da Mainland to Me" shows that "even island residents sometimes assume a continentalist perspective that views the continent as the *main* land" (13). Stephens and Roberts call for "a decontinentalization of perceptions of US and generally American space and a shift

toward recognizing the Americas as a set of spaces that has been persistently intertwined with, constituted by, and grounded in the archipelagic” (17). For example, they ask “how might we imagine maps that challenge widely held American assumptions that larger countries situated on continental landmasses are more important than smaller countries situated on islands and among archipelagoes?” (17). Indeed, fields such as postcolonial studies and archipelagic American studies and books such as *A Small Place* are valuable because they challenge traditional understandings of islands, of geography, of perspective.

The Island Perspective in Wisconsin

Students reading Kincaid’s *A Small Place* in Wisconsin might first think that there are not many connections to be drawn — after all, we are roughly 2500 miles away from Antigua, roughly 1000 miles from the nearest ocean (not counting the third coast of the Great Lakes). Yet, there is great significance to reading this book in Wisconsin and many important connections to be made.

For example, Kincaid’s book is enormously helpful for thinking through questions of scale and power and how this affects indigenous populations. One such example is the history of Native Americans in Wisconsin. Before the arrival of Europeans, Wisconsin was home to several thriving Native American tribes. The Ho-Chunk tribe, now headquartered in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, was among the largest tribe in the territory at the time. However, disease and war in the 17th century reduced their population to as few as 500 individuals. Today, the tribe, has a population of roughly 12,000. Throughout the tribe’s history, their ancestral lands have been taken over and over again and many Native Americans now reside on reservations that are a fraction of the size of their ancestral lands.

Indian reservations act as an island within America — on reservations, Patty Loew notes, “tribal governments have sovereign immunity — meaning as, with all governments, they cannot be sued” and “disputes can end up in tribal rather than in county courts” (166-67). Reservations also provide a sense of cultural identity and community that urban Native Americans express difficulty finding. Yet, reservations also come with their share of problems. Forty percent of on-reservation housing is

considered substandard and 16 percent lack indoor plumbing. Alcoholism is highly prevalent on reservations. The Indian Health Service is chronically underfunded and 1 out of 3 Native Americans lack health care.

There are many similarities between the conditions that Kincaid describes and the history and lived experiences of Native Americans in Wisconsin. Just as Kincaid was forced into a British schooling system, young Native American children were often taken from their families and enrolled in boarding schools. This has resulted in a decline in Native languages. A 1994 study found that only 9 percent of Ho-Chunk members were fluent in their native language and most of those were tribal elders over the age of sixty. Just as many Antiguans rely on tourism as a source of income, the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act legalized gambling on reservations which has led to casinos becoming a major source of income for Indian Nations. For example, the Ho-Chunk Nation operates six casinos throughout Wisconsin, in locations such as the Wisconsin Dells and Madison. Recall Kincaid's scathing take on the Native: Every native everywhere 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....Some natives — most natives in the world — cannot go anywhere" (18).

Kincaid, Gardening, and the Environment

In recent years, much of Kincaid's focus has revolved around gardening. She has given multiple interviews about her passion for gardening, wrote a gardening column for the *New Yorker*, and in 2001, published *My Garden Book*, a book-length essay mostly about her own home garden in Vermont. But gardening is not simply a hobby for Kincaid. After reading Kincaid's interview about gardening with Kathleen Balutansky, students might begin to draw connections between gardening, colonialism, control over the environment, and climate change. Indeed, in the interview, Kincaid even notes that "you could write a history of empire through plants" (793). Gardening, to Kincaid, may look "wonderfully unthreatening, but it's an exercise of power" (793). For example, the Latin names given to plants is yet another way that the British exerted their language and enforced it as the status quo.

Beyond gardening, the relationship between the environment, race, and colonialism has been a fraught and complicated one. The term environmental racism can be used to describe environmental injustice that is often disproportionately experienced by people of color — marginalized racial communities are often subject to more pollutant exposure, have less access to clean water and air, difficulty accessing healthy fruits and vegetables, and often have difficulty garnering political support to address these issues. For example, in April 2014, the city of Flint, Michigan, a predominantly black and poor neighborhood, switched water supplies. Residents immediately began complaining about the smell and taste of the water. It is not until late September 2015, when a group of doctors finds high levels of lead in the blood of Flint children that Michigan's governor acknowledges the problem and pledges to take action. Similarly, a slow government response after Hurricane Katrina decimated largely black and poor neighborhoods of New Orleans has been attributed to racial reasons.

The relative isolation and small size of many islands in the Caribbean and Pacific means that islands are especially vulnerable to environmental disasters. As noted in a previous unit, Hurricane Irma so devastated Barbuda that all residents evacuated to Antigua. In 2017, Hurricane Maria brought catastrophic damage to Puerto Rico and Dominica. The power grid in Puerto Rico was essentially destroyed, leaving millions of Puerto Ricans without electricity for months. Small islands are also very susceptible to climate change and changing sea levels. For example, the very existence of the Maldives, an archipelago of islands in the Indian Ocean, is threatened by climate change. According to the World Bank, with “future sea levels projected to increase in the range of 10 to 100 centimeters by the year 2100, the entire country could be submerged.” The Marshall Islands, another group of islands threatened by rising sea levels was also the site of United States nuclear testing in the 1940s and 1950s. The United States forcibly resettled residents of Bikini Atoll onto nearby islands such as Kili Island. Unfortunately, Kili Island is too small to sustain the population of Bikini Atoll refugees, so residents must rely on shipments of food from the United States to sustain them.

Handouts

- “On Gardening: An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid” by Kathleen Balutansky
- “Da Mainland to Me” by Joseph B. Balaz

Discussion Questions

- What do you think is the relationship between environmental history and colonial history? Why do you think the two might be related? Why might it be important to think these histories and legacies together? What do we have to gain by doing so, and what drops out of the picture when we do not?
- What do you think the significance of reading *A Small Place* in Wisconsin is? How does your personal geographic location affect the way you read the book?
- Besides the connections to Native American life on reservations, what other connections might you make between *A Small Place* in Wisconsin? What other islands — metaphorical or physical — exist in Wisconsin? How do these compare to Antigua?
- How does *A Small Place* change your perspective of island life? What do you think it personally means for one to decontinentalize one’s view of the world? Why do you think it might be important to do so?

Close Reading

- This passage comes on page 79, when Kincaid explains why Antigua is *too* beautiful.

It is as if, then, the beauty — the beauty of the sea, the land, the air, the trees, the market, the people, the sounds they make — were a prison, and as if everything and everybody inside it were locked in and everything and everybody that is not inside it were locked out. 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?

- What are your gut reactions to this passage?

- What does it mean for an island to be too beautiful? Why do you think Kincaid compares this beauty to a prison?
 - What connections might you make between the “heightened, intense surroundings” of Antigua to other islands? How do *you* think it affects people to live in such surroundings day after day?
- This passage comes on page 42 and 43, when Kincaid is discussing the old library that was damaged in 1974.

Why is the old building that was damaged in the famous earthquake years ago, the building that has the legend on it THIS BUILDING WAS DAMAGED IN THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1974. REPAIRS ARE PENDING, not repaired and the library put back in the place where it used to be? Or why, years after The Earthquake damaged the old library building, has a new library not been built? Why is the library above a dry-goods store in an old run-down cement-brick building?...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 veranda, its big, always open windows, its row and rows of shelves filled with books, its beautiful wooden tables and chairs for sitting and reading, if you could hear the sound of its quietness (for the quiet in this library was a sound in itself), the smell of the sea (which was a stone's throw away), the heat of the sun (no building could protect us from that), 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.

- What are your gut reactions to this passage?
- What literary devices stand out to you in this passage?

- Hint: If students are having trouble locating devices, you might ask what the library symbolizes or you might draw their attention to the line “sitting there like communicants at an altar” and ask what device this is.
- What is the effect of these literary devices? Why does Kincaid describe the old library at such length?
- Why do you think the library remains damaged after all this time? What connections might you draw between the still-damaged library and current events?
 - This could be a good opportunity to connect to the environmental lesson — for example, you can discuss how Puerto Rico still has not had their power completely restored, months after Hurricane Maria devastated the island. Or you might bring up the United States’ response to Hurricane Katrina and the critique that had the disaster happened in a wealthier, whiter part of America, the response would have been markedly different.
- While describing the old library, Kincaid evokes many traditional descriptions of tropical islands — the sun, the ocean, the balmy weather, the beauty. Yet the effect of these descriptions seem markedly different from more one-dimensional representations of island life which merely present the Caribbean as an island paradise. Why do you think the effect is different in Kincaid’s passage?
- Based on what you have learned about the environmental problems facing islands and marginalized communities, what connections might you draw from this passage?

Assignment and Project Ideas

- Have students work in groups to research a Native American tribe indigenous to Wisconsin. *Indian Nations of Wisconsin: Histories of Endurance and Renewal* by Patty Loew is a thorough and informative book that students might refer to. Then, have them reflect on their work and create a presentation to deliver to the class.

The presentation can be in any shape or form but should provide a brief history of the tribe and their practices. Here are some questions that can generate reflection:

- What similarities did you find between the tribe's history and the experience Kincaid writes about? Why do you think these similarities exist?
 - Think about the ways in which this tribe's history and geography might be similar to that of an island.
 - What was one thing you learned about the tribe that surprised you? Why did this surprise you?
- Have students journal about a time when they were a tourist. A tourist does not necessarily mean the student travelled outside the country or even outside the state — they can simply journal and reflect about a time they visited a town that wasn't their hometown. Here are some possible questions to generate reflection:
 - When they were a tourist, did they consider the place they were visiting from the perspective of the native? Why or why not?
 - What sights did they seek out while they were a tourist? Why did they choose to go to these specific places?
 - Did they interact with locals while they were in this new place?

Additional Reading

- "Boston Students Get a Glimpse at a Whole New World, With Different Maps" by Colin Dwyer
 - This 2017 NPR article chronicles how Boston public schools changed to maps that more accurately depict the real size of the continents. A good example of decontinentalizing one's viewpoint can often be as simple as changing the map through which one views the world. "This is the start of a three-year effort to decolonize the curriculum in our public schools," said Colin Rose, assistant superintendent of opportunity and achievement gaps for Boston Public Schools.
- "Where Black Lives Matter Began" by Jamelle Bouie

- A look at the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, ten years later. This piece connects race, the Black Lives Matter movement, and current dissatisfaction with the government among the black community.
- “Power Is Mostly Back in Puerto Rico, but the Frustration Remains” by James Wagner
 - A short *New York Times* piece about Puerto Rico’s struggle to restore electricity after the devastation of Hurricane Maria. This piece demonstrates how vulnerable an island’s entire ecosystem and economy is to natural disasters.
- “Behind the Beauty of Orchids, Centuries of Violence” by Weishun Lu
 - An essay by a current UW-Madison graduate student about the colonial history of orchids. Could be a good companion piece to Kincaid’s interview on gardening because it is an in-depth example of how the history of empire can indeed be written through plants.

Unit 5: Narrative Structure and Genre

Objectives

- Analyze the narrative structure of *A Small Place*, with particular emphasis on the novel's reference to the jeremiad structure utilized by abolitionists in the antebellum period
- Examine the novel's classification as a memoir or a work of creative nonfiction
- Have students create their own short piece of creative nonfiction in order to further reflect on why Kincaid might have chosen this specific genre

The American Jeremiad

A jeremiad is, by its most basic definition, a long literary work criticizing and lamenting the flaws of society. In *A Small Place*, Kincaid draws from the long history of the American jeremiad — so much so that Salman Rushdie described the novel as “a jeremiad of great clarity and force that one might have called torrential were the language not so finely controlled.” The Jeremiad is a form which first originated among 17th century New England Puritans. The Puritans believed they had been called by God to flee a corrupt Anglo Church in England and to start their own “beacon on the hill” in the New World. According to historian David Howard Pitney, “the American jeremiad arose as a form of ritualistic complaint and self- reproach because of the apparent failure of Puritan society to fulfill its task of self-perfection and world redemption” (482). Jeremiads were named after the biblical prophet Jeremiah and were characterized by a “long list of perceived social ills, denounc[ing] people for their sins and misconduct, and warn[ings] of worse tribulations and divine punishments to come if they did not quickly repent and observe their social covenant” (482). The traditional jeremiad was composed of three parts: citing of God's promise, lamenting the current moral decline of society, and prophesying the promise's imminent fulfillment.

As you can see, this sort of genre was a socially acceptable way of expressing strong criticisms of society. Thus, the jeremiad soon became a form utilized by African-Americans seeking to protest the injustices of American society. One of the most famous jeremiads, David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, was

published in 1829 and appealed to readers to take an active role in fighting their own oppression. It also urged white Americans to recognize the moral and religious failings of slavery. Other notable abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass also wrote scathing jeremiads; for example, after the Dred Scott decision, he delivered an oration lamenting that freedom and liberation seemed now unlikely.

Even after slaves were legally emancipated, the tradition of the black Jeremiad continued. As Howard-Pitney notes, W.E.B. Du Bois “was particularly instrumental in returning a forceful Afro-American jeremiad to the forefront of black rhetoric where it has remained down to the present” (487). Du Bois was the founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as well as the editor of the NAACP’s publication, *The Crisis*. Through a series of caustic editorials in *The Crisis*, Du Bois condemned American racial attitudes and exposed the racial injustices in American society. DuBois “never wavered in his conviction that by dragging the nation's sins into the open, *The Crisis* performed the necessary if unwelcome function of prophecy,” a key element of the American jeremiad (488). The tradition of the black jeremiad continued with civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. Howard-Pitney concludes his article on the jeremiad by comparing the black jeremiad with the white jeremiad. To him, the black jeremiad “has been consistently more searching in its examination of American social faults and more radical in its prescriptions for immediate social and political reform than its most common white counterpart” which has allowed people like Du Bois and King to “transform such once “radical” causes as the public campaign against racial segregation into eminently “respectable,” moderate goals in the minds of most Americans” (490).

Creative Nonfiction

Certainly, Kincaid’s text falls in the category of the jeremiad but it has also often been characterized in many other genres — such as memoir, creative nonfiction, autobiography, travel writing. Part of the power of the book is how it defies genre, so strictly defining Kincaid’s work in one genre is not the goal of this unit, but understanding the various frameworks from which Kincaid draws from will help students better understand her project.

Creative nonfiction might at first seem like a misnomer — after all, if nonfiction is strictly factual, how many liberties can writers take with the facts? Lee Gutkind, the editor of the literary journal *Creative Nonfiction*, provides a working definition of the genre and dispels some common myths about creative nonfiction:

The word “creative” simply refers to the use of literary craft, the techniques fiction writers, playwrights, and poets employ to present nonfiction—factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner. The goal is to make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that your readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy. The word “creative” has been criticized in this context because some people have maintained that being creative means that you pretend or exaggerate or make up facts and embellish details. This is completely incorrect. It is possible to be honest and straightforward and brilliant and creative at the same time.

Creative nonfiction can take the form of an essay, a newspaper article, a research paper, a memoir. In some cases, such as with *A Small Place*, it might be several different forms at once. For example, *A Small Place* is certainly a memoir because it draws from specific moments in Kincaid’s life — the incident with the librarian, the specific places that Kincaid grew up visiting. The book is also a long essay about the history of Antigua and the country’s current political system. Authors experiment with genre to elicit different reactions in their audience. For example, the jeremiad, by constantly decrying the evils of society, is attempting to urge the audience into action to combat a particular social issue. By writing in a memoir and essay form, Kincaid is able to use specific personal experiences to help the reader better connect to the story and is able to present a history of Antigua that is not bound by any chronology. Kincaid can jump around as she pleases, and thus, crafts a more engaging portrait of Antigua, especially since most readers will likely be unfamiliar with the country.

Narrative Structure

The book is divided into four parts of varying lengths; however, these parts are unnamed and only marked by greyscale illustrations of colonial Antigua life. The first part details a tourist's arrival in Antigua and what their journey might look like and ends with a scathing criticism of the tourist. The first part opens with an illustration of four black people, women and children, working in the fields. The second part is an account of Kincaid's Antigua and her experience growing up in a British colony. In this part, Kincaid maintains the same scathing tone she used when addressing the tourist, but she widens her criticism and rage toward British imperialism as a whole. The second part opens with an illustration of black people gathered underneath a tree near some houses. In the third part, the rage is still there but now is directed mostly at Antiguan, and more specifically, the Antiguan government and its corruption. The third part opens with an illustration of a black man, woman, and child out in the fields, with the ocean and rolling hills in the background. The fourth part is by far the shortest section of the book, only about five pages in length. In this section, Kincaid focuses much of her writing on the island of Antigua itself. She re-emphasizes the island's smallness and again urges the audience to think from the perspective of the native and how it might affect someone to live in such "heightened, intense surroundings day after day" (79). The fourth part opens with an illustration of some colonial houses and a horse and cart, surrounded by palm trees.

In a book as short and compact as *A Small Place*, every choice is deliberate. It is just as important to take note of the structure of the words as it is to analyze the words themselves.

Handouts

- Excerpts from David Walker's *Appeal*

Discussion Questions

- Compare the tone of Walker's preamble to the beginning few pages of *A Small Place*. What is similar? What do you think accounts for these similarities?
- Why do you think the form of the jeremiad has endured for so long in African American rhetoric? What aspects of the form do you find compelling?

- Why do you think Kincaid breaks up her book with scenes of colonial Antiguan life? Why do you think each image is paired with each particular part of the book? Why are the pictures in grey scale and not color?

Close Reading

- Guide students through the following passage on pages 14 and 15 in which Kincaid criticizes the tourist.

A tourist is an ugly human being. You are not an ugly person all the time; you are not an ugly person ordinarily; you are not an ugly person day to day. From day to day, you are a nice person. From day to day, all the people who are supposed to love you on the whole do. From day to day, as you walk down a busy street in the large and modern and prosperous city in which you work and live, dismayed, puzzled (a cliché but only a cliché can explain you) at how alone you feel in this crowd, how awful it is to go unnoticed, how awful it is to go unloved, even as you are surrounded by more people than you could possibly get to know in a lifetime that lasted for millennia, and then out of the corner of your eye you see someone looking at you and absolute pleasure is written all over that person's face, and then you realise that you are not as revolting a presence as you think you are (for that look just told you so).

- What are your gut reactions to the opening paragraph? How does it make you feel?
- What aspects of the jeremiad do you see here? Why do you think Kincaid employs this specific form and tone?
- Why can only a cliché explain the tourist?
- Why do you think Kincaid uses the adjective “ugly” to describe the tourist?

Assignment and Project Ideas

- Have students write a creative nonfiction piece of their own about an injustice they recognize and personally connect with in Wisconsin. This may take the form of a newspaper article, a letter to the editor, a blog post, or other examples of public writing. After students finish writing their pieces, they will workshop their pieces in small groups. Students will distribute their pieces to their group members in advance of the workshop and then each member will have the chance to receive feedback on their work. See the additional reading section for guidelines for a workshop setting.
- The jeremiad is just as much an oratory practice as it is a literary one. Have students choose a jeremiad, practice it, and then deliver it in their workshop groups. This will help them work on their public speaking skills in advance of the conference in April.

Additional Reading

- Creative Writing Workshop Etiquette
 - Some helpful guidelines for students during the workshop assignment. Although this guide was written for creative writing workshops in mind, this is also useful for peer review in general.
- “Why is the Negro Lynched” by Frederick Douglass (first 10 pages)
 - This is a classic example of the African American jeremiad and reading more examples will help students better understand the tradition from which Kincaid is drawing from.
- “What is Creative Nonfiction” by Lee Gutkind
 - A clear and concise description of the genre of creative nonfiction. For students who have never heard the term, this will be a useful introduction.
- Jesse Jackson’s 1988 Democratic National Convention Speech
 - A helpful visual and auditory example of a jeremiad delivered in front of an audience.

Unit 6: Critical Pedagogy

Objectives

- Provide strategies to guide teachers through the teaching of a racially charged text that may elicit discomfort or anger in students
- Help students cultivate an awareness of *A Small Place* as not merely a literary text but as a document which is intricately bound up in class and racial relations between different communities
- Have students acknowledge their own privileges and possible discomforts in reading a text such as *A Small Place* and help them channel this discomfort through active engagement with the text
- Have students use, rather than react to, the island perspective that Kincaid provides; in other words, have students make connections between the oppressions that Kincaid highlights and oppression they might witness in their everyday lives

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education rooted in the idea that “education should be a transformative activity aimed at self-production through an understanding of inequitable power and social relations” (Weil 26). Paulo Freire, a leading advocate for critical pedagogy and author of the seminal critical pedagogy text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* explains the difference between traditional and critical pedagogy using the “banking model of education.” To Freire, the banking model of education represents traditional pedagogy; in traditional pedagogy, teachers treat students as empty vessels into which they impart knowledge. However, in a critical pedagogy lens, educators learn from students just as much as students learn from educators.

A Small Place is a book that benefits from a critical pedagogy approach to teaching; teachers cannot simply impart knowledge about Kincaid and Antigua and feel that their job in teaching the book is complete. Rather, the book encourages critical thinking, challenges ways of thinking about what seems like a familiar topic, and a student-centered pedagogy. Use students’ initial reactions as a way to delve deeper and think critically about the book.

The book may at first be uncomfortable for some students to read because if they have ever been in the tourist role that Kincaid writes about, they may feel attacked and react in anger. This is a perfectly valid first reaction to the book. But encourage students not to simply sit in this initial reaction but to explore these feelings of rage and discomfort. Have them reflect on why they might feel this way and how they can channel these feelings into productive methods of learning. Traditional pedagogy values objectivity and inherent truth but critical pedagogy places more emphasis on the valuable learning opportunities to be gleaned from one's own subjectivity. Indeed, "from the point of view of critical pedagogy, students are encouraged to bring the legacies and narratives of their past and present inside the classroom for critical interrogation...subjective clarification gives way to subjective articulation and enunciation, as students strive to examine their thinking from the point of view of diverse narratives" (Weil 33).

Critical pedagogy also operates from the belief that all education is political. According to critical pedagogy theorist Danny Weil, "education should be valued and assessed for its ability to encourage critical thought, denounce unjust social structures, challenge biased ego and sociocentrally invested assumptions, invite critical disquisition within a climate of investigation, and help students author their own reasoned judgments" (Weil 31). It is also important to note that an educator's job is not to impart their own morality onto students but to give students the tools with which they can think critically in order to reach their own reasoned judgments and arguments. As Weil notes, "the propensity to preach morality as opposed to reasoning through morality hectors much of the critical movement" (Weil 45). It is not enough to simply lecture to students about the evils of colonialism. Rather, students must be put in the position to "proffer their assumptions and evidence to support them, posit reasons for their conclusions, and defend their position in face of often dissimilar points of view" (Weil 45).

Strategies for Teaching Postcolonial Texts

Just as much has been written on critical pedagogy, educators have also published many articles on how to critically teach postcolonial texts and the difficulties

that may arise while teaching postcolonial texts. Here is the opening paragraph of Lindsey Aegerter's article "A Pedagogy of Postcolonial Literature":

Have you ever had that peculiar sense when teaching postcolonial, multicultural, and other non-canonical literatures to mainstream students, that a tape is being replayed and you'd really rather move to another song? At first your students embrace the broad concepts of "other" literatures with liberal largesse; they celebrate notions of diversity; they want all racial, economic, and cultural boundaries to fall away so that the common humanity of all people will be revealed. But then they begin reading and suddenly hackles rise, defenses are up. They start to realize that postcolonial and multicultural literatures are not always benign celebrations of racial and cultural diversity; frequently they are harsh and quite scathing indictments of the kinds of pernicious inequities that characterize the institutions and processes of slavery, apartheid, and colonization. Resistance to racism, and rage and resentment over past and present oppressions, become, in many of my students' eyes, examples of "reverse racism." When power enters the playing fields, their desires for a common humanity often give way to something else. Irritation. Impatience. A wish that "they'd just get over it" so that everyone could just get on with their lives, not having to bother with trying to work out where they fit in this overwhelming picture of global oppressions.

It is possible that students will not react in the manner that Aegerter describes but it is just as possible that they will and it is good to be prepared with strategies as to how to react and navigate these strategies. One strategy that Aegerter uses is to help students "find points of identification or congruence between their own lives and those being represented in their reading" (143). Here is a good opportunity to take to heart the title of this project: "Teaching *A Small Place* in Wisconsin." Wisconsin itself is a state where certain places do depend on tourism. If you are teaching *A Small Place* in Door County, Wisconsin, almost certainly students will have experience being the "native"

who has to navigate summer tourists from Wisconsin and Illinois. If you are teaching near the Dells, students may also be able to relate to this experience. Encourage such students to share their experiences in class.

Another strategy that Aegerter uses is to “investigate moments when the students have been marked by their difference” (145). To do this, students can reflect through writing on moments when they felt like an outsider. Or they can discuss in pairs or small groups a particular passage from *A Small Place* that especially resonated with them and articulate why they resonated with this “outsider” perspective in that moment. Aegerter has students “free write about a time when they were marked by their difference and when that reduced them to a singular and stereotypical sense of self - a self that had little to do with the complexity they embody beneath any superficial marker” (148). Aegerter also had students free write about “turning points in their lives during which they became aware of aspects of their identity that they’d not previously thought of in any focused way.” She has found this exercise particularly fruitful because “white students are able to think about the first time they thought about being white and this particular exercise is the first time they indeed have truly thought about the issue” because the normative status of whiteness has “been so much a given that it has not needed to be named” (148). Aegerter draws on these strategies in order to create a feeling of solidarity and alliance between her students and the people in the stories they read.

In “Teaching the Postcolonial Text: Strategies and Interventions,” Kanishka Chowdhury presents her own strategies for teaching postcolonial texts. One problem that Chowdhury acknowledges is the tendency for postcolonial texts to merely serve as “objects of curiosity documenting the cultural experiences of different people around the globe” (191). She states that “it is not enough merely to acknowledge “other texts”; as educators we have to examine the ways we read these texts. We should not be satisfied with a so-called liberal broadening of the canon whose only purpose is to show our students that the Africans also have a literature; we have to address fundamental questions about the way we study these missing texts and voices” (191). Thus, Chowdhury strives to establish her objective early on in her class. Her objective is “to establish the connection between the literary and the social text” (191). Similarly, when

teaching *A Small Place*, educators can make clear their objectives early on so that students understand they are not merely reading the book just to learn about Caribbean culture. After making her objective clear, Chowdhury tries to familiarize her students with the geography of the region they are reading about. She provides a handout describing a nation's colonial history and its present-day government and politics. She finds this process important because "students are largely unaware of the histories of non-Western nations" and "such a process places discussions about their imaginative literatures within the proper social and cultural context" (194). Chowdhury also employs a list of what she calls "Questions of Reading." These can be useful questions to pose to your students:

- Is there such a thing as a postcolonial/Afrocentric reading of a text — in short, should we read postcolonial texts differently? Should we even attempt to define or locate such a strategy?
- How do we as "outside" readers comment on the cultural and social practices of others?
- How do the cultural experiences of other peoples compare with similar or dissimilar practices in the United States?

Aligning herself with liberatory and critical pedagogy practices, Chowdhury also emphasizes the importance of denaturalizing the myth that the classroom is "an arena for the objective dissemination of knowledge." She stresses that "even as we teach postcolonial texts, these discussions must be located within a larger critique of the ideology of knowledge production and canon formation" (194).

Handouts

- "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh

Discussion Questions

For teachers to think about

- What kinds of productive pedagogical strategies can result from teaching *A Small Place* to students at a U.S. school?
- How can I help students reason more effectively about this or that issue?

- How can I help my students understand the deeper logic of what they are studying?
- How I can help my students identify historical and contemporary assumptions and how can I help them interrogate these assumptions?

Discussion passage for Students

- This passage comes on pages 33-34, when Kincaid explains why her perception of Antigua is so tied to the island's relationship with England.

Have I given you the impression that the Antigua I grew up in revolved almost completely around England? Well, that was so. I met the world through England, and if the world wanted to meet me it would have to do so through England. Are you saying to yourself, "Can't she get beyond all that, everything happened so long ago, and how does she know that if things had been the other way around her ancestors wouldn't have behaved just as badly, because, after all doesn't everybody behave badly given the opportunity?"

- What are your gut reactions to this passage?
- What does it mean that Kincaid "met the world through England?"
- Why does Kincaid address people who would tell her to "get beyond all that" and why can she not "get beyond all that"?
- What connections can you draw between this passage and our current moment?

Assignment and Project Ideas

- Have students read Peggy McIntosh's "Invisible Knapsack" article to get them thinking about privilege. Then, in small groups or as a larger class, have students brainstorm a similar invisible knapsack based on other types of privilege besides the white privilege McIntosh names in her article. See the "Privilege Checklist" link in the additional reading section for ideas of what these lists might look like.

Have students reflect on privileges that they might hold and how this might impact their own reading of *A Small Place*.

Additional Reading

- Rethinking Schools Website
 - Educators who are interested in learning more about different pedagogical methods can visit this website. Rethinking Schools is a small nonprofit organization dedicated to critical pedagogy. Started in Milwaukee in 1986, they have a website with many critical resources as well as a magazine and a blog for educators to read.
- “Teaching the Postcolonial Text: Strategies and Interventions” by Kanishka Chowdhury
 - Chowdhury addresses difficulties that arise when teaching postcolonial literature in a university setting and outlines some strategies she has utilized to stimulate discussion and critical thought in the classroom.
- “Privilege Checklist” from Boise State
 - This list compiled by social justice facilitators at Boise State will help students reflect on aspects of their lives that they might take for granted. It will hopefully help them reflect on their own positionality in the world and which identities they think about the most and the least.
- “What If You’re an ‘Incredibly Unattractive, Fat, Pastrylike-Fleshed Man’?: Teaching Jamaica Kincaid’s ‘A Small Place’” by Rhonda D. Frederick
 - Another pedagogy piece on teaching *A Small Place*.

Unit 7: Preparing to Meet the Author

Objectives

- To prepare students to make the most of the Annual Student Conference through active engagement
- To provide strategies for building student confidence, addressing concerns, and setting expectations for conference participation.

Conference Keynote Speaker: Jamaica Kincaid

This year, the Great World Texts program will welcome Jamaica Kincaid to the Annual Student Conference. Students from across the state will have the opportunity to engage her in a conversation about thoughts on the non-fiction writing, the Caribbean, and other concerns that engaged them while reading her book. This interaction is the core component of the Annual Student Conference.

On Meeting An Author

Meeting an author is a thrilling experience, but it might it also prove a nerve-wracking one for students. To prepare students for this event, consider the following in advance of the conference: What are the expectations for students' behavior? What kinds of questions should they ask and how will they present their work to the keynote speaker? How can they best prepare for this meeting? What should teachers do if students are nervous, disruptive or unprepared? The preparatory materials listed below will help you and your students to develop a deeper sense of Kincaid's work, as well as what to expect at the Annual Student Conference and how to prepare for it.

Preparatory Materials

- "An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid" by Allan Vorda
- Jamaica Kincaid interview on Charlie Rose
- "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project" by Selwyn Cudjoe

Additional Readings and Materials

- Cooperative Children’s Book Center (UW-Madison), “Tips on Hosting an Author/Illustrator Visit”
- Dane Gutman, “The Perfect Author Visit” – tips for preparing students to meet the keynote speaker
- Suzanne Roberts, “How to Talk to a Writer”
- Jo Walton, “How to Talk to Writers”

Points for Lecture:

- *Prepare your students for meeting Jamaica Kincaid*

Emphasize that, like all people, our keynote speaker could be nervous, excited, happy, sad, shy, in a good or bad mood, etc. Show clips of her doing interviews, and show the class her photograph so they can think of her as an individual from the start.

- *Emphasize being courteous and respectful.*

Those students designated to ask questions during the keynote should always greet and thank Kincaid, introduce themselves by name and school affiliation, and *then* ask a question. Encourage students to make eye contact, and to be polite and confident!

- *Help students avoid feelings of anxiety.*

Focus on the experience, not the “performance” or act of talking to Kincaid. Emphasize that she is coming to the conference precisely because she is interested in and excited about the ideas students have developed as they’ve read *A Small Place*. She came all the way to Wisconsin just to talk to us—know that she thinks students have something to say that is worth hearing. Emphasize that this is a dialogue, meaning that student voices matter. Kincaid wants to hear from students as much as they want to hear from her.

- *Encourage them to be specific.*

Don’t just say: “I love this book!” Students should be prepared to articulate what they loved most about it. In preparation, ask students to consider what was most inspiring, thought-provoking or challenging about the text.

- *Tips for asking questions.*

Avoid yes or no questions. Instead, ask questions that allow room for thought and interpretation. Consider, too, the “lead in” to the question. Students should give a little context to let the author know where they’re coming from. For example: “Why did you choose to write [X] this way?” would be a much more interesting question if the student first explained what about [X] is interesting or confusing to him or her.

- *Be prepared.*

Ask students to think about how Kincaid might react to a given question. Once you’ve chosen which questions to ask the keynote speaker, role-play possible answers as a class. Prepare a list of follow-up questions, too.

- *On decorum.*

This conference is a serious academic affair and a lot of planning has gone into this event by teachers, students, UW faculty and staff, etc. The people in attendance have traveled far and spent months preparing for this event. Disruptive, discourteous or disrespectful behavior is unacceptable. Teachers whose students do not follow the decorum guidelines are expected to remove students immediately from the room.

Discussion Questions

- How would you like to be treated (or not) if you were the keynote speaker? If you were a student from another school?
- What questions do you most want answered? What do you want to know about *A Small Place* and its reception in Antigua, America and its effect on postcolonial and Caribbean literature?

Assignments, Activities, and Project Ideas

- Hold a conference dress rehearsal. If your group of participating students is small, this might consist of each student giving a brief but formal presentation of her project, followed by a question and answer session. If your group of

participating students is large, split them into two groups. Have one group present their projects first and the other second. Students will alternate between presenting and viewing, just as they will on the day of the official conference.

- Role-play meeting Kincaid. Have students prepared with questions, and practice asking and answering them. What questions got the best (or worst) answers? Why?
- Brainstorm productive questions. In small groups, students should write down as many questions as they can think of to ask Kincaid. Then switch questions with other groups and select those which seem best and those which seem least effective. Use this as the basis for a discussion about how we decide if a question is “good” or “bad”? (Hint: the least effective questions are those that are too easy to answer, produce obvious answers, or could easily be answered by anyone reading the book.) You might have students revise with this discussion in mind, practicing how to construct a clear, direct and interesting question.

What is Close Reading?

Close reading is a specific method of literary analysis that uses the interpretation of a small piece of text as a way to think about the whole. It is the practice of developing multiple interpretations of a given text, object or phenomenon, based on evidence collected from close observation and critical thinking.

Close observation (or reading closely) involves slowing down and paying very close attention to what we are reading or viewing. We do this so we can pull out big ideas or key images as well as identify the details of what is in front of us. When we closely observe something, we are dealing with the “WHAT” aspect of a given object: What am I seeing? What is happening here? What is the context in which this is taking place? When was it written or produced? What is the form in which a story or image is being conveyed?

Critical thinking deals with the HOW and WHY of a given object: How is this story or this set of ideas being communicated to me? How are these ideas being organized into an argument or claim about the world? Why has the author or creator decided to communicate a set of ideas in one specific way, instead of another? Why am I seeing or reading about some things while others are marked, ignored, or overlooked? What are the consequences of these omissions? In other words, critical thinking demands that we ask what the purpose of a given text is, and how its particular presentation of stories, ideas, forms, values, or perspectives have different effects on the world.

The steps below are intended to help you persuasively close read a passage in a literary text (though the skills you develop are applicable to the close reading and analysis of any text anywhere):

1) Distinguish between different kinds of sources, mediums, and modes of address: before you start reading or viewing something, always identify what kind of source it is, what medium or genre it occupies, and who it might be speaking to. Are you

watching a movie, short film, a digital video or a website? What year was it written, produced, or performed and in what context? Who might have read, viewed or listened to this text and where did it circulate? These specifics help you better understand the purpose of a text or cultural object as well as the potential intended audience. They may also help you grasp how different texts impart a range of cultural and political values, or make distinct arguments about the world, using a variety of creative techniques and forms of communication. Not all things are novels, just like not all things are movies, or television or music. The distinctions matter.

2) Identify the argument. Always identify the central argument or claim the author or text is making. Basically the big idea of the piece: what are we meant to take away from reading or view this text?

What is going on here? Who is speaking? What is the speaker / character / narrator saying? In what context? If you are unable to write a 1-2 sentence summary of the passage, read through it again until you have a clearer idea. Don't panic if you're unsure. Many texts are deliberately ambiguous or confusing—it is not always possible to articulate in definite terms what is happening.

3) Follow the organization of ideas. All arguments, claims, or viewpoints are shaped by the way they are articulated or delivered. You can follow the organization of ideas that leads someone to a particular point of view or claim, which might involve simply following the plot structure of a movie or work of literary fiction, or listening to how lyrics are organized around rhythms and beats in a song. In each of these cases, you have to ask yourself: what is the logic by which this text makes its point? It is not enough to understand an argument; you must also know how it came to be made.

4) Identify how the text uses evidence. Circle / underline the specific words, images and literary devices which contribute to the mood and tone you have identified. These might include any of the following:

- a) Unusual vocabulary or diction (archaic words, neologisms, foreign imports, slang, colloquialisms). Use a dictionary if you need to look up words you don't recognize.
- b) Symbols: does the writer use images which would seem to represent something else?
- c) Metaphors and similes
- d) Striking comparisons or contrasts
- e) Personification
- f) Alliteration and / or onomatopoeia
- g) Repetition

5) The bigger picture: what is at stake? Having considered these details, you can start to develop an overall interpretation of the passage. Consider the ways that your passage fits into the text as a whole. What do you think is the text's main message? How does it contribute to the broader themes of the work? How do the particular literary devices you have identified help to emphasize, intensify or trouble the questions and issues with which the text is concerned? This is the "SO WHAT?" of the item. What does this writer or this cultural object want to say? What position is being taken in relation to bigger ideas or conflicts? Why are the ideas being presented important? In order to make your own judgments and form substantive arguments in response to what you read and view, you must be able to say what is at stake in the very sources you are discussing.

This guide is adapted from a worksheet written by Professor Ramzi Fawaz.

What is Postcolonial Literature?

In a broad sense, postcolonial literature is writing which has been “affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft et al, 2). In Antigua’s case, this includes novels, poetry, and drama which were written both during and after the reign of the British, which came to a formal end when independence was gained in 1981. Although writing from Antigua and other formerly colonized countries such as India, Jamaica, and Egypt has distinctive features, postcolonial literature shares some significant concerns and characteristics.

Concerns

1) Reclaiming spaces and places

Colonialism was, above all, a means of claiming and exploiting foreign lands, resources, and people. Enslavement, indentured labor, and migration forced many indigenous populations to move from the places that they considered “home”. Postcolonial literature attempts to counteract their resulting alienation from their surroundings by restoring a connection between indigenous people and places through description, narration, and dramatization.

2) Asserting cultural integrity

During colonization, the indigenous cultures of those countries subjected to foreign rule were often sidelined, suppressed, and openly denigrated in favor of elevating the social and cultural preferences and conventions of the colonizers. In response, much postcolonial literature seeks to assert the richness and validity of indigenous cultures in an effort to restore pride in practices and traditions that were systematically degraded under colonialism.

3) Revising history

Colonizers often depicted their colonial subjects as “existing outside of history” in unchanging, timeless societies, unable to profess or develop without their intervention

and assistance. In this way, they justified their actions, including violence against those who resisted colonial rule. Revising history to tell things from the perspective of those colonized is thus a major preoccupation of postcolonial writing.

Characteristics

1) Resistant descriptions

Postcolonial writers use detailed descriptions of indigenous people, places, and practices to counteract or “resist” the stereotypes, inaccuracies, and generalizations which the colonizers circulated in educational, legal, political, and social texts and settings.

2) Appropriation of the colonizers’ language

Although many colonized countries are home to multiple indigenous languages, many postcolonial writers choose to write in the colonizers’ “tongue.” However many postcolonial authors deliberately play with English, re-molding it to reflect the rhythms and syntax of indigenous languages, and inventing new words and styles to demonstrate mastery of a language that was, in a sense, forced upon them.

3) Reworking colonial art forms

Similarly, postcolonial authors will rework European art-forms like the novel to reflect indigenous modes of invention and creation. They reshape imported colonial art-forms to incorporate the style, structure, and themes of indigenous modes of creative expression, such as oral poetry and dramatic performances.

“Da Mainland to Me” by Joseph P. Balaz (1989)

*Eh, howzit brah,
I heard you goin mainland, eh?*

No, I goin to da continent.

*Wat? I taught you goin San Jose
For visit your bradda?*

Dats right.

Den you goin mainland brah!

No, I goin to da continent.

*Wat you mean continent brah?!
Da mainland is da mainland,
Dats where you goin, eh?!*

Eh, like I told you
dats da continent —
Hawai'i
is da mainland to me.