With the prevalence of mercantilist thinking in the 16th and 17th centuries, the desire for greater economic control over the world increased. Believing that the best way to grow their economy was to minimize reliance on trade, governments sought to control as many people and resources as possible (“Mercantilism”). To this end, the most powerful European empires began to establish colonies throughout the world in order to create a larger market for their goods. Arguably, the most successful empire was Great Britain, which at one point controlled a quarter of the land on Earth, including large swathes of Africa, India, parts of China, and several Caribbean islands. Although these colonies were primarily created to export resources, they also became a means to spread English culture. In her book *Key Terms in Literary Theory*, Mary Klages asserts that the idea behind colonialism was “to import [the colonizing nation’s] customs, laws, educational and disciplinary systems, religions, and literature, and then to assert its culture as superior to the indigenous culture” (16). According to Klages, the conquest of a foreign land by an imperial power is inseparable from the conquest of a native culture by a colonial entity. As such, the societies born from a colonial relationship are not only physically and governmentally controlled by a foreign power, but they are also culturally controlled through a system that is definitionally biased against them.
Antigua and Barbuda, one such colony, is the backdrop of Jamaica Kincaid’s essay “On Seeing England for the First Time,” an examination of the impact of an imposed culture on the identity of a colonized person. From a young age, Kincaid was taught to view England with great reverence. When her teacher described England, “[it] was as if she said, ‘This is Jerusalem, the place you will go to when you die but only if you have been good’” (366). England was presented to Kincaid as Edenic, a place one could only dream of living in, full of people one could only dream of being like. This characterization formed the basis for Kincaid’s sense of inferiority and erasure. The English countryside described by the many English authors Kincaid was forced to read had “gentle mountains and low blue skies and moors over which people took walks for nothing but pleasure” (368). It represented an idyllic way of life that was incongruous with the struggles endured in Antigua and Barbuda, a place where “a walk was an act of labor, a burden, something only death or the automobile could relieve” (368). The gap between the representation of England perpetuated in Antigua and the realities of her own life became a form of oppression. She felt burdened by the daily reminders that Antigua’s environment, the only uncontrolled part of her country, was inferior to England’s. Her life in Antigua began to feel like a punishment where “the sun shone with what sometimes seemed to be a deliberate cruelty [that] we must have done something to deserve” (368). Kincaid felt imprisoned in an imperfect and difficult life, and the disparity between her existence and the lives in England described to her served as a constant reminder of her perceived inferiority to Antigua’s colonizers.

Over time, Kincaid comes to realize that these descriptions of England presented to her were misleading and the systemic deception present in colonial Antigua becomes the focal point of her anger. As she notes, “[t]he space between something and its reality is always wide and deep and dark” (369). But without knowing what the other side looks like, it is impossible to tell just how wide and deep and dark this gap truly is. Kincaid only realizes how distorted her sense of England was when she visited it for the first time. This gap between how England was presented to her through education and literature and how she now perceived England “[h]ad become filled with
hatred, and so when at last [she] saw it [she] wanted to take it into [her] hands and tear it into little pieces and then crumble it up as if it were clay, child’s clay” (370). Kincaid becomes disillusioned with, and resentful of, England because she realizes that its Edenic representation that caused her erasure bore little resemblance to the England that she was looking at. She concludes with frustration that she could never properly articulate her disillusionment because:

If I had told an English person what I thought, that I find England ugly, that I hate England . . . I would have been told that I was a person full of prejudice . . . I may be capable of prejudice, but my prejudices have no weight to them, my prejudices have no force behind them, my prejudices remain opinions, my prejudices remain my personal opinion. (370)

Kincaid could go to England and form prejudices against its people, cuisine, and culture, but because she exists in the subservient role within the colonial power structure, her prejudices would only remain her own personal opinions. Her lamentation does not indicate malicious intent, but instead recognizes that she is unable to impose her prejudices on a people because she lacks the structural power to enforce them. It is the realization that she is incapable of impacting a society in the same way that the English did.

Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o also discusses the negative effects of an imposed culture in an excerpt from his book Decolonising the Mind. In an effort to make Kenya more British, all children were taught exclusively in English, and the schools they went to strictly enforced a ban on their native language, Gikuyu. Thiong’o argues that because “[l]anguage carries culture, and culture carries . . . the entire body of value by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world,” learning in the language of one’s colonizers culture is problematic (339). He states that “[s]ince culture does not just reflect the world in images, but actually through those images, conditions a child to see that world a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition” (340-341). At its core, language is both a carrier and byproduct of culture. As such,
the fact that Thiong’o and his peers were being taught exclusively in English meant that they were seeing themselves through the lens of Anglo-centric history and English culture. Consequently, their understanding and perception of their own culture and identity were tinged with the legacy of bigoted thought expressed in the foreign language. By adopting this foreign language, the people of Kenya displaced their own sense of self and began to be defined by the prejudices of the colonizer’s culture.

Similarly, through the colonial school system’s romanticized portrayal of England, Kincaid’s sense of self and place began to be defined by the prejudices of English culture. She didn’t have the power to define her own identity in the colonial society because, just as Thiong’o observes about the people of Kenya, where Kincaid stood in the world was “defined by . . . the culture of the language of imposition” (Thiong’o 341). Kincaid notes that “England was to be our source of myth and the source from which we got our sense of reality” (366). This quotation illustrates Kincaid’s understanding of the colonial power dynamic through the double meaning of the words “myth” and “reality.” In one sense, Kincaid is stating that England was intended to be their sense of fiction and truth. But in another sense, Kincaid is stating that England was also intended to be their source of mythology, their source of cultural lineage. As a result, her sense of self worth was diminished because England was granted, through a definitionally prejudiced power structure that aimed “to assert its culture as superior to the indigenous culture,” the capacity to dictate the very nature of Kincaid’s identity (Klages 16).

“How to Write about Africa,” a satirical essay by Binyavanga Wainaina, describes this power dynamic through an ironic how-to manual on how a Western author should write about Africa. The satirized author in this piece exists as an avatar of the Imperial Gaze, an inherently unequal perspective that grants the Western author the power to define the people he or she is observing. In the narrative described by Wainaina, “African characters should be colorful, exotic, larger than life—but empty inside, with no dialogue, no conflicts or resolution in their stories, no depth or quirks to confuse the cause” (530). In this hypothetical book about Africa, the people who actually live there are given the supporting role to the colonizer’s protagonist.
The continent is flattened of its depth and character, and pushed to the background because the people who live on it are not allowed to define it in the Western narrative. Wainaina argues that the real purpose of this book is not to tell stories about Africa, but to assert a sense of Western heroism. The continent and the people who live on it exist only to accentuate the triumphs of the Western protagonist.

Kincaid’s sense of erasure, caused by the enforcement of English mythology, is an example of the dynamic presented by Wainaina. In school, “[she learned] the names of all the kings of England . . . [She] knew their conquests and was made to feel good if [she] figured in them” (Kincaid 368). The historical narrative presented to Kincaid placed the English as the protagonists. As a result, the morality and benefit of their actions were defined through the colonizer’s biased perspective. They were the heroes of their own story, the leading players in the imported mythology that now defined Kincaid’s reality. Consequently, Kincaid and her fellow countrymen remained in the background of their own country’s history. Just as Africa became a place to accentuate a sense of Western heroism, Antigua became a place to celebrate the triumphs of English colonization and conquest. Just as the African characters in Wainaina’s hypothetical story are one dimensional and exist purely to support the Western protagonist, Kincaid became a minor character in her own life. Because England held narrative control in the colonial power structure, the story of colonialism was not written by or about the people that lived through it; it was written by and about the people who created it. Kincaid exists in a supporting role because the narrative of colonial life in Antigua was used as a means of asserting English cultural dominance instead of representing the lives of the colonized people.

This relationship can be seen from another perspective in “On Not Winning the Nobel Prize,” a speech by Doris Lessing discussing the importance of literature in society. Lessing, an English author who spent part of her childhood in Southern Rhodesia, points out that, prior to the nation’s colonization, its “[p]eople might have been storytellers working in the oral tradition” (537). Before the introduction of written language and Western literature by the English, Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, did not have a well-developed written linguistic tradition. Lessing points out that “[i]n order to
write, in order to make literature, there must be a close connection with libraries, books, with the Tradition” (536). Lessing claims that for a country to develop a literary culture, they must have a connection not only with written language, but also the Western literary tradition. This statement has merit, but is fairly problematic. It is true that it would be difficult for a country to develop a literary culture without any books. She cites, for example, three authors born in English colonies who only became authors after being exposed to the vast wealth of Western literature. But Lessing’s argument falls short at the necessity of a connection to the Western tradition. The act of teaching the people of what is now Zimbabwe how to write did not inherently damage their culture; the damage came from enforcing colonial culture as an absolute good and an unquestionable necessity. In other words, here the tool of written language is again used as an arguably oppressive force that asserts the Western tradition as the aspirational standard of written expression. However, without the imposition of a colonial framework, written language would not be damaging because it would not necessarily be a cultural imposition.

This distinction between cultural exchange and cultural imposition is critical to understanding Kincaid’s claims about the nature of prejudice and its greater implications. She argues that because she, and the people of Antigua, exist in the subservient position of the colonial dynamic, “[t]he people I come from are powerless to do evil on a grand scale” (Kincaid 370). Transferring this logic into the context of cultural interaction, one can now see that Kincaid’s sense of erasure wasn’t a direct product of English culture, but the power structure that allowed it to become so dominant. She became a supporting character in her own life story not because it contained elements of English culture, but because it was actually being written by the English. The root cause of a colonized people’s minimization stems from the colonizers’ power’s to define their place in society. Without the ability to impose a biased cultural narrative, the presence of a foreign culture is not inherently damaging to the native identity.

Perhaps the greatest arguments in support of this point are the texts themselves. By writing their works in English, Kincaid, Thiong’o, and Wainaina have appropriated English culture and the English language as a means of critiquing the colonial system. They
have taken control of the narrative from their former colonizing powers and are using the imposed language to tell their side of the story. Kincaid is now the main character and England is cast as the antagonist. Antigua is no longer a setting that demonstrates English superiority, but a prison of carnival mirrors skewing the perception of everyone inside. By using English outside of the constraints of a colonial structure, its purpose is no longer defined by the people who imposed it. It now has the power to communicate a revised narrative of colonialism, granting the colonized people a level of agency and power to influence others. Perhaps Kincaid and all those who lived under colonial rule lack the ability to do evil on a grand scale, but their words now have the power to do good.

WORKS CITED


