JAMAICA KINCAID

Jamaica Kincaid was born Elaine Potter Richardson in 1949 on the Caribbean island of Antigua. She attended school in Antigua and struggled to become independent of her mother and her place.

"I was supposed to be full of good manners and good speech," she has recalled. "Where the hell I was going to go with it I don't know." Kincaid took it to New York, where she went at age 17 to work as a family helper. She briefly attended Framon College on a photography scholarship and did odd jobs in New York. In the early 1970s, she became friends with George Trow, a writer for The New Yorker. Soon she was contributing to the magazine, and in 1976 she became a staff writer. Soon after, she began writing fiction, eventually producing a collection of stories, At the Bottom of the River (1983), and two novels, Annie John (1985) and Lucy (1990) — all based on her own life on Antigua and as an immigrant. Kincaid now lives in Vermont with her family.

The Tourist

The island of Antigua, where Kincaid was born and raised, was a British dependency until 1967 and did not become independent until 1981. In A Small Place (1988), Kincaid denounces what she sees as the ruin of the island and its culture by the colonial rulers and their political heirs. "The Tourist," an excerpt from the book (titled by the editors), defines a particularly unattractive island species.

The thing you have always suspected about yourself the minute you become a tourist is true: 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 realize that you are not as revolting a presence as you think you are (for that look just told you so). And so, ordinarily, you are a nice person, an attractive person, a person capable of drawing to yourself the affection of other people (people just like you), a person at home in your own skin (sort of; I mean, in a way; I mean, your dismaying puzzlement natural to you, because people like you just seem to be like that, and so many of the things people like you find admirable about yourselves — the things you think about, the things you think really define you — seem rooted in these feelings): a person at home in your own house (and all its nice house things), with its nice backyard (and its nice backyard things), at home on your street, your church, in community activities, your job, at home with your family, your relatives, your friends — you are a whole person. But one day, when you are sitting somewhere, alone in that crowd, and that awful feeling of displacedness comes over you, and really, as an ordinary person you are not well equipped to look too far inward and set yourself aught, because being ordinary is already so taxing, and being ordinary takes all you have out of you, and though the words "I must get away" do not actually pass across your lips, you make a leap from the being that nice blob just sitting like a blob in your amniotic sac of the modern experience to being a person visiting heaps of death and men and feeling alive and inspired at the sight of it; to being a person lying on some faraway beach, your stillled body stinking and glistening in the sand, looking like something first forgotten, then remembered, then not important enough to go back for; to being a person marvelling at the harmony (ordinarily, what you would say is the backwardness) and the union these other people (and they are other people) have with nature. And you look at the things they can do with a piece of ordinary cloth, the things they fashion out of cheap, vulgarly colored (to you) twine, the way they squat down over a hole they have made in the ground, the hole itself is something to marvel at, and since you are being an ugly person this ugly but joyful thought will swell inside you: Their ancestors were not clever in the way yours were and not ruthless in the way yours were, for then would it not be you who would be in harmony with nature and backwards in that charming way? An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that, and it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness (you do not look the way they look);
the physical sight of you does not please them; you have bad manners (it is their custom to eat their food with their hands; you try eating their way; you look silly; you try eating the way you always eat, you look silly); they do not like the way you speak (you have an accent; they collapse helpless from laughter, mimicking the way they imagine you must look as you carry out some everyday bodily function. They do not like you. They do not like me! That thought never actually occurs to you. Still, you feel a little uneasy. Still, you feel a little foolish. Still, you feel a little out of place. But the banality of your own life is very real to you; it drove you to this extreme, spending your days and your nights in the company of people who despise you, people you do not like really, people you would not want to have as your actual neighbour. And so you must devote yourself to puzzling out how much of what you are told is really, really true (is groundup bottle glass in peanut sauce really a delicacy around here, or will it do just what you think ground-up bottle glass will do? Is this rare, multicoloured, snout-mouthed fish really an aphrodisiac, or will it cause you to fall asleep permanently?). Oh, the hard work all of this is; and is it any wonder, then, that on your return home you feel the need of a long rest, so that you can recover from your life as a tourist?

That the native does not like the tourist is not hard to explain. For every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere. 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. Every native would like to find a way out, every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour. But some natives—most natives in the world—cannot go anywhere. They are too poor. They are too poor to go anywhere. They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go to. So when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself.

QUESTIONS ON MEANING
1. What is this essay’s purpose?
2. Why does Kincaid describe being a tourist as “hard work” (para. 1)?
3. What are some of the tourist’s motivations?
4. Why does the native dislike the tourist?

QUESTIONS ON WRITING STRATEGY
1. What is Kincad’s intended audience more likely “tourists” or “natives”? How do you know?
2. What is the effect of the second-person you in this essay? Is it offensive? If so, why would Kincaid want to offend?
3. Discuss the function of the parenthetical aside in this essay. How do they relate to the statements in which they are inserted? What kinds of thoughts do they represent?
4. Why did Kincad not provide a dictionary-like definition of the word “tourist”?
5. Other methods. Kincaid uses classification to distinguish tourists (nonnatives) and natives (nontourists). At what point do the classes overlap? What keeps them separate?

QUESTIONS ON LANGUAGE
1. Kincad’s book A Small Place, from which “The Tourist” comes, has been described as “a masterpiece of invective” — that is, of hostile language that denounces or abuses. Find examples of invective in “The Tourist.” Do you agree with the quotation?
2. Kincad describes a tourist on the beach as a “stilled body stinking and glistening in the sand” (par. 1). What is the image here? What are its connotations?
3. Check your dictionary if any of these words are unfamiliar: millennia, taxing, amniotic, banality, aphrodisiac.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING
1. In a short essay of your own, define what it is to be a native of the place you are from. You may want to draw on Kincaid’s description of tourists and natives, but your work should rely heavily on your own experience. Provide examples to back up your definition. What kinds of experiences are essential to being a native? How can others tell a native from a tourist or a visitor?
2. Taking the point of view of either Kincaid’s native or her tourist, write a brief monologue about your opposite (native about tourist, tourist about native). Don’t be afraid to be subjective. Match your tone to your point of view. (It may be helpful to imagine an encounter between native and tourist — say, registering at a hotel, negotiating the price of souvenirs, riding in a taxi or a bus, touring a local landmark.)
3. Critical writing. Kincaid writes for The New Yorker, and all of her works, with one exception, have been published or excerpted in the magazine. The exception is A Small Place, the source of the “The