

Epilogue: Permanent Impermanence

In a recent essay, Jamaica Kincaid allegorizes the political situation in the United States of 2020 with the image of a snow dome. The short text “Inside the American Snow Dome” was written on the occasion of Joe Biden’s election to be the forty-sixth president of the United States.²⁴⁰ The essay celebrates the political change of the election of a Democratic president and derides the nationalist claim to permanence which links whiteness with Americanness in a presumed historical disposition. Using the image of the snow dome, the text applies Kincaid’s general interest in dissipating fixity and totality to the current situation in which it was written. In this, it well exemplifies the results of my observations on how Kincaid’s works understand representations of both the past and present: nothing is permanent, and the very proposal of permanence contains the promise of impermanence. I have shown this with my analyses of how Kincaid’s use of media engages with the fixity of colonial representations of history. In formally revising the media they invoke, Kincaid’s texts and images signify hitherto hidden perspectives on the past.

In “Inside the American Snow Dome,” Kincaid presents Donald Trump’s period in office as an extension of colonial history, whose beginning she traces to when Christopher Columbus set sail on his voyages of “discovery” in 1492. She describes Trump’s presidency as fixing her within “a snow dome that resembles the United States of America.” Yet, while the snow dome appears to freeze in permanence, she argues, impermanence is inherent to its ontology:

[A] snow dome is an object, dome-like in shape, resting on a flat piece of material that is fitted to it and sealed perfectly to its base. The entire structure is made of a material that is easily shattered. [...] Scenes of one kind or another are created and fixed to the bottom of the dome. Flakes of something white made to resemble snow are settled at the bottom of the dome, and when the dome is shaken, as it often is by a playful hand passing by, the flakes rush up in a flurry around the scene that has been fixed to the bottom of the dome. All the figures and objects are lost in a blur of the pretend snow, they are consumed by it, and for a moment, it seems as if this will be the new forever: they will never be seen clearly again. Then the false snow slowly settles back to the bottom of the dome and everything returns to the way it was. The scene remains just as it was before, fixed, fixed, and fixed!

Although fixity is implied in the figurines glued to the bottom, and the glass dome implies totality by encasing it all, Kincaid’s description of the snow dome simulta-

²⁴⁰ First published in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, republished online in *The Paris Review* on November 11, 2020. I cite the essay from the online version, which has no page numbers.

neously points to the inherent impermanence of what it contains. The fake snowflakes dissipate any fixity in swirling around the glass. Moreover, applying a change of perspective and looking at the snow dome from the outside reveals the fragility of the whole object, since the glass shatters easily. As such, both fixity and totality are represented as carrying their own destruction within themselves.

I read this snow dome not only as an allegory of Trump's America, but also as a representation of Kincaid's conception of representations in general: reading the snow dome as a sign or a received representation often means emphasizing one of its conditions, to wit, the moment when it appears to us in its fixed state. Kincaid's work on the sign shakes up this fixity and presents snowflakes both as already present and settled within the dome, and as meant to be shaken up in the praxeology of the object. In their immobile state, the snowflakes might be thought in analogy to Henry Louis Gates's repressed meanings of a word that lie in wait to be activated by Signifyin(g). Once shaken up, the signs might settle again, as the flakes in the snow dome do, but the fixity the essay proclaims in three exclamations does not ensue. Indeed, although momentary stillness gives the impression of fixity, the swirl of flakes always settles in new and different arrangements. In this sense, the chaos here – as with Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation – has a productive and renewable quality.

In this conception, the possibility of shaking up form and thus significations – be it of colonial history, current politics, or gendered or racialized bodies, etc. – is inherent to any representation. Finally, Kincaid points to the fragility of the representation, which also means it may cease to serve its purpose: the snow dome may shatter. And at the end of her essay, it indeed falls and shatters. Kincaid then describes herself as picking up only the pieces of the figurines she favors. She mends them, but grounds the rest to dust with a hammer. This destructive image contains the positive outlook that a representation can be remade. Its seeming fixity and totality do not have to be accepted, but can be taken apart and made anew in useful ways, as Kincaid's poetics of impermanence demonstrate throughout her works.

In this, the allegory of the snow dome read as a representation of Donald Trump's presidency really is a comment on power structures whose assumed permanences (since colonial times, as the reference to 1492 implies) have always been fraught. Allegorically shattering the snow dome, Kincaid simultaneously decenters the assumed superiority of whiteness when her essay points out that definitions of whiteness, too, were not permanent throughout history, such as the racialization of Catholics in the Elizabethan era. In this way, the essay shows that whiteness – as well as Americanness – is just as prone to external definition (here through racialization) as is any other social or ethnic group inside and outside the United States. Seen in this light, through a history of its external definitions, whiteness

proves to be as fragile as a snow dome's glass, and any claim to white exceptionalism shatters just like the dome itself. Kincaid's essay shows that American history is thus not a history of whiteness, but really a history of immigration (of multitudes of different people), of segregation (between various kinds of groups), and of being "not free." In deconstructing the key assumption of American nationalism, the essay in fact shifts the focus to African Americans, who bring an intimate understanding to this different view of American history. Hence, Kincaid places them at the center of Americanness – "we are the true Americans" – emphasizing the presence, importance, and value of Black people in the United States, which white nationalism and racism continually seek to repress.

In the short text "Inside the American Snow Dome," Jamaica Kincaid applies the same fundamental thought of impermanence to the snow dome and to the recent history of the United States. What is at stake here is contemporary white racism against Black people, which Kincaid identifies as the continuation of colonial history. Her text negates the assumption of permanence, as do her poetics throughout her oeuvre. It is in this "permanent impermanence," as she puts it, that the potential lies for the emergence of other voices and perspectives that the totality of assumed Western superiority – both its history and its present – has always sought to silence. In revealing white nationalism as an extension of colonialist ideology, Kincaid's strategies of destabilizing structures of fixity in her engagements with colonial history prove equally useful as responses to the totalizing forces of the present. They offer strategies for recognizing the multiplicity of peoples and histories that make up the United States, in the same way that they offer strategies for resisting History with a capital *H* in postcolonial Caribbean contexts.