

## On Seeing England for the First Time

*This essay gives an account of the personal journey and reflection by Caribbean American writer Jamaica Kincaid when she finally sees England for herself.*

When I saw England for the first time, I was a child in school sitting at a desk. The England I was looking at was laid out on a map gently, beautifully, delicately, a very special jewel; it lay on a bed of sky blue - the background of the map - its yellow form mysterious, because though it looked like a leg of mutton, it could not really look like anything so familiar as a leg of mutton because it was England - with shadings of pink and green, unlike any shadings of pink and green I had ever seen before, squiggly veins of red running in every direction. England was a special jewel all right, and only special people got to wear it. The people who got to wear England were English people. They wore it well and they wore it everywhere: in jungles, in deserts, on plains, on the top of the highest mountains, on all the oceans, on all the seas, in places where they were not welcome, in places they should not have been. When my teacher had pinned this map up on the blackboard, she said, 'This is England' - and she said it with authority, seriousness, and adoration, and we all sat up. [...] And so finally, when I was a grown-up woman, the mother of two children, the wife of someone, [...] finally then, I saw England, the real England, not a picture, not a painting, not through a story in a book, but England, for the first time. In me, the space between the idea of it and its reality had become filled with hatred, and so when at last I saw it I wanted to take it into my hands and tear it into little pieces and only indulge in not-favorable opinions.

There were monuments everywhere; they commemorated victories, battles fought between them and the people who lived across the sea from them, all vile people, fought over which of them would have dominion over the people who looked like me. The monuments were useless now, people sat on them and ate their lunch. They were like markers on an old useless trail, like a piece of old string tied to a finger to jog the memory, like old decoration in an old house, dirty, useless, in the way. Their skins were so pale, it made them look so fragile, so weak, so ugly. What if I had the power to simply banish them from their land, send boat after boatload of them on a voyage that in fact had no destination, forced them to live in a place where the sun's presence was a constant? This would rid them of their pale complexion and make them more like me, make them look more like the people I love and treasure and hold dear, more like the people who occupy the near and far reaches of my imagination, my history, my geography, and reduce them to everything they have ever known to figurines as evidence that I was in divine favour, what if all this was in my power? Could I resist? No one ever has. And they were rude, they were rude to each other. They didn't like each other very much. They didn't like each other in the way they didn't like me, and it occurred to me that their dislike for me was one of the few things they agreed on.

I was on the train in England with a friend, an English woman. Before we were in England she liked me very much. In England she didn't like me at all. She didn't like the claim I said I had on England, she didn't like the views I had of England. I didn't like England, she didn't like England, but didn't like me not liking it too. She said 'I want to show you my England. I want to show the England that I know and love.' I had told her many times before that I knew England and I didn't want to love it anyway. She no longer lived in England; it was her own country, but it had not been kind to her, so she left. On the train, the conductor was rude to her; she asked something, and he responded in a rude way. She became ashamed. She was ashamed at the way he treated her; she was ashamed at the way he behaved. 'This is the new England,' she said.

*Jamaica Kincaid, On Seeing England for the First Time, 1991*