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Tourism and its effects on Hawaii: From a Tourist's Perspective

After visiting the beautiful island of Oahu, Hawaii, as soon as I got back, I read a very ironically timed essay by Jamaica Kincaid called *A Small Place*. An essay about the island of Antigua and how tourism has affected it. Hawaii is quite similar as it also has beaches, warm weather, and it has beautiful sights to see. But after learning more about Hawaii's history and even seeing some things myself when I visited, I realized that Hawaii isn't the perfect paradise that most imagine it to be. Hawaii went through colonization, the loss of land, and major cultural changes, and those issues didn't just disappear. Thanks to tourism, which plays a huge role in the islands, it continues the same patterns that started during colonial times. Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* helped me understand this better because she talks about how tourism can cover up the struggles local people face. Many of her ideas connect to what I noticed and experienced on my trip. By looking at Hawaii's history, Kincaid's criticism of tourism, and using my own experiences, I want to see how tourism causes harm.

When my brother told me his wedding would be in Hawaii, I was nothing but excited. I had a year to wait, and I was counting down the days. I had never been somewhere that far or even been on a plane. For months I started to save up money, plan outfits, and would just look at pictures of Hawaii. My family couldn't afford many vacations, so I was excited to finally go somewhere after many years of going nowhere. As soon as I found out, I immediately started bragging to my friends, saying stuff like "Guess who's going to Hawaii next November". I was

looking forward to the beautiful scenery, the water, all of it. I didn't really think about anything deeper than that. I was just focused on having a good time and being there for my brother Brandon and his fiancé Nikki. Looking back, I realize that I went into the trip with the same mindset most tourists have, thinking only about the fun vacation part and not about the people who actually live there or what the place is really like beyond the resorts. It wasn't until I got there that I started to notice things that didn't match the perfection I had in my head.

Hawaii didn't just one day randomly become a tourist destination, it was shaped that way through a long history of colonialism. Missionaries arrived in Hawaii in the 1800s, followed by American businessmen who slowly gained power and influence over the islands. This eventually led to the overthrow of Queen Lili'uokalani and the forced annexation of Hawaii by the United States, which took away Native Hawaiian sovereignty. After that, huge amounts of land were taken or sold off, the Hawaiian language was discouraged in schools with punishments threatened if it was spoken, and the islands were reorganized to fit the needs of the United States instead of the people who already lived there. Which relates directly to Jamaica Kincaid's ideas in *A Small Place*, where she argues that colonialism transforms a place, so it better serves the people in power, not the locals. Hawaii is a clear example of this, because the islands were reshaped politically, culturally, and economically to benefit the U.S., which you can see through the rise of tourism.

Even though Hawaii was overthrown more than a hundred years ago, the effects of colonialism didn't just disappear, they show up today through tourism. When I got home from the family trip to Hawaii for my brother's wedding, I started to notice how the whole experience was designed for visitors rather than locals. My brother's wedding wasn't something private or personal that reflected Hawaiian culture, it was part of a package deal. We had a bus that picked

us up, took us to a pretty outdoor spot, and then brought us to dinner afterward. We even got to the wedding site a little early, and there was another couple getting married right before us, like it was an assembly line for tourists who wanted their Hawaiian wedding moment.

At the time, I thought it was cool because everything looked beautiful and organized, but looking back, it showed me how Hawaii has been turned into a product meant to be consumed. Weddings, beaches, and any experiences are packaged and sold in a way that makes Hawaii a product instead of a home to Native Hawaiians. Jamaica Kincaid talks about this in *A Small Place*, where she explains how tourism takes over a place and turns it into something for visitors. I am happy for my brother and now sister-in-law but their wedding, which is a big life event, got pulled into this system that keeps Hawaii a tourist paradise, while the issues local people face are ignored.

Once the wedding was over and I spent more time walking around Hawaii, I started noticing other things that made me think. One moment that stuck with me the most was when I was walking down Waikiki Beach and saw a person digging through a trash can for food. It just shocked me because it was happening just a few steps away from expensive stores, giant hotels, and crowds of tourists. It was two totally different worlds right next to each other, and most people either didn't notice or pretended not to. It was eye opening and upsetting.

Another moment happened when I visited a more private beach. It was much more peaceful and less crowded than Waikiki's beaches. Once I made the long trek down to the beach, I started to notice many tents set up where people were living. I realized that homelessness wasn't just something in the busy areas, it was everywhere, even in the "secret spots" tourists like myself thought they discovered. Native Hawaiians are one of the groups most impacted by homelessness because of rising housing costs and tourist development which makes it almost

impossible for many families to stay in their own communities. It was when I got home from the airport that really made me contemplate. My stepmom's dad had come over to drop off our dog that he had been watching and my stepmom immediately started complaining about how many homeless people she saw in Hawaii, almost like they were ruining the aesthetic of her vacation. It just really upset me because they are human beings who were clearly struggling, and she never stopped to think about why they were struggling. How the tourism industry she just helped play a huge role in has been pushing locals out. Hearing her talk like that irritated me and looking back at it makes me realize how easy it is for tourists to ignore real people and view their problems as inconveniences.

Unfortunately, homelessness has been increasing at large rates in Hawaii. According to the 2024 "Point-in-Time" count, a total of 6,389 people in Hawai'i were experiencing homelessness, with 4,494 of them on Oahu. On Oahu, the homeless population grew by 12% between 2023 and 2024, and 62% of those counted did not have any shelter. Hawaii unfortunately has the highest rate of homelessness out of all the states, at 80.5 homeless individuals per ten thousand people. It has the largest increase in rate among all U.S. states from 2019 to 2024 going from 44 to 80.5 per ten thousand. Tourism and homelessness in Hawaii are very clearly connected, since Hawaii is such a popular vacation spot, huge amounts of land and housing get turned into hotels, resorts, and rentals instead of affordable places for locals to live. This drives the cost of housing up so much that many Native Hawaiians can't afford to stay in their homes. Tourism also creates lots of low paying jobs that can't match the high cost of living. While tourists see Hawaii as a sweet vacation, the reality is that the tourism industry increases homelessness and makes life harder for the people who live there.

Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* helped me understand everything I saw in Hawaii in a different way. In the excerpt I read for class, she explains how tourism can make a place look beautiful and exciting to outsiders while hiding the real struggles that local people face every day. Kincaid talks about how tourists only see the surface of a place; the parts designed for them and ignore the history of colonialism and the harm that still affects the community. Hawaii felt exactly like that. All I saw was a beautiful island paradise which covered up problems like land loss, high housing costs, and Native Hawaiians being pushed out of their own homes. One quote that really stuck with me from the reading was: "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 – 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." (Kincaid 1179). Reading *A Small Place* made me realize that what I saw on my trip was part of a much bigger pattern where tourism continues the same inequalities that started during colonial times.

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