Fecal Realities and the Making of a Worlded Self: Rigoberta Menchú, Jamaica Kincaid, and Slavenka Drakulić

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Abstract:

In Rigoberta Menchú's testimonial, *I Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), the essays collected under Slavenka Drakulić's title, *Cafe Europa* (1996), and Jamaica Kincaid's generically undefinable narrative, *A Small Place* (1988), relationships to bodily waste are showcased as part and parcel of processes of self-making in relation to the making of national/colonial imaginaries. Such processes involve not just insular practices of individual cultivation but also the material conditions of the world that impact, in a Foucauldian sense, the artistry involved in enacting the care of the self in relation to other people and other times. The concluding argument is that the making of the narrative self, as a carefully "worlded" entity, emerges in Menchú, Kincaid, and Drakulić as a continually shifting work in the art of a nonfictional search for the conditions under which diverse realities and their accompanying truths come to be spoken. It is in the distances that separate different truths, and through the bending of genres like the testimonial and the personal essay that the nonfictional self *becomes* rather than *is,* both in relation to the expose of its most intimate bodily needs and in relation to what that expose leads to: the visceral encounter with its most unknowable others.

Keywords: Care of the Self, Global South, Politics of Excrement, Postcolonialism, Nonfiction

> There are no toilets in the finca. There was only this place up in the hills where everybody went. There were about four hundred of us living there and everybody went to this same place. It was the toilet for all those people. We had to take it in turns. When one lot of people came back, another lot would go. There were lots of flies on all that filth up there.
>
> Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*

> The streets were covered with mud and were so slippery that it was dangerous to walk there. It appears under the asphalt, through the holes and cracks – brownish, sticky, greasy, just like shit.
>
> Slavenka Drakulić, *Café Europa*

> You must not wonder what exactly happened to the contents of your lavatory when you flushed it. You must not wonder where your bathwater went when you pulled out the stopper.

> You must not wonder what happened when you brushed your teeth. Oh, it might all end up in the water you are thinking of taking a swim in; the contents of your lavatory might, just might, graze gently against your ankle as you wade carefree in the water, for you see, in Antigua, there is no proper sewage-disposal system.
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> Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*

The enduring preoccupation with excrement—as metaphor, as matter to be sanitized and managed, as trope, as sensuous substance with color, odor, texture, and consistency—is not limited to the three nonfictional texts I focus on in this essay. Scattered across a range of recent and contemporary narratives from the Global South, it appears for instance in the Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1988 debut novel, *Nervous Conditions*, in the much-acclaimed 2008 British-Indian film, *Slumdog Millionaire,* in the Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie's 2003 novel, *Purple Hibiscus,* and in more recent works of nonfiction like the Indian-American author, Amitava Kumar's *A Matter of Rats: A Short Biography of Patna* (2013) and the Indian journalist, Aman Sethi's *A Free Man: A True Story of Life and Death in Delhi* (2012). Scholars of Postcolonialism and of the Global South have not missed the abundance of scatological rhetoric and references to excrement in the corpora of authors who were writing under conditions of colonialism and/or in their aftermath. Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Jed Esty, Mari Lathers, for instance, points out in her essay titled, "Towards an Excremental Posthumanism", that in the colonial era, the problem of human waste was deflected onto the bodies of "filthy" natives and/or it was medically managed in laboratories as a means of preventing disease and then rendered sterile in the language of scientific reports where it embedded itself in the halo of *The Word* (Lathers 2006, 417-436). The desired effect was to rid civilized cultures of the stench of shit such that the colonizer could transcend not just the foul bodies of natives, but even his own corporeal substantiality. Writers responding to such colonial practices of domination thus often did so by displacing fecal references back onto their colonizers (or ex-colonizers) and/or onto indigenous compradors, while those writing in the shadow of the failures of newly independent nation-states saw the continuing presence of shit in public spaces of the postcolony as a sign of the fracture between elite national collectivities and openly "defecating groups" subaltern to their interests.

Relying on these observations as also channeling them in a somewhat different direction, I choose to reflect on how in the works of the nonfiction writers I consider, relationships to bodily waste are part and parcel of processes of self-making in relation to "others" just as they are of the material realities that both constrain and stimulate the artistry involved in enacting those processes. The Foucauldian care of the self which influences my reflections on the practices of self-making as an art form will resonate with those heterogenous and not-always-completely-knowable real conditions in the world which the texts I read attempt to engage with and probe for their

diverse realities. As Philip Lopate notes in "Facts have Implications: or, is Nonfiction Really Fiction", "nonfiction, including personal essays, has a relationship to factual reality and self-testimony that makes it fundamentally different from fiction" (Lopate 2013, 78). In other words, particularly in the way Rigoberta Menchú stretches the boundaries of the testimonial to include the stories of others in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and the means Jamaica Kincaid and Slavenka Drakulić employ to navigate transactions between the first, second, and third-person pronouns in their respective (personal) essays, these texts become the most appropriate platform for my elaborations about the making of a self, embedded in the most material of her realities, and keenly aware that others inhabit their own distinct realities. The texts I explore show that even though they might be indiscernible in their variety, diverse realities can be identified as the grounds for shaping varied ways of knowing and distinct rules of conduct associated with the cultures and histories of groups and individuals attuned in different manners to what Edward Said has called worldliness—the flawed condition of humans variously shaped by their power/powerlessness, positions, and interests in a world bearing imprints of other peoples and other times.

In the testimonial of the Guatemalan, Rigoberta Menchú (*I, Rigoberta Menchú: an Indian Woman in Guatemala*, 1983), the counter-travel narrative of the Antiguan Jamaica Kincaid (*A Small Place,* 1988), and the collection of essays by the Croatian Slavenka Drakulić (*Café Europa: Life after Communism*, 1996) it is the fleshly reality of feces—accessible to *all* the senses rather than removed from them—that is paramount to the authors' self-compositions in relation to the varied realities of "others".[1] These could be others with whom they share the most intimate of mundane experiences or others from whom their lives are profoundly alienated. In Rigoberta Menchú's case, for instance, having to defecate in the wild, and share a "toilet" with four hundred other workers on a coffee plantation is an intimate affair she shares with people she barely knows. However, it is ignominious insofar as it is filthy and attracts flies, not because the experience of co-existing with others in what, to more privileged defecators, should be a private space, is unknown to the severely impoverished Mayan communities of Guatemala on behalf of whom Menchú claims to speak. For example, Menchú tells us that "Most children" in these communities "*know* when their parents are having relations", and in doing so, draws attention to the material realities of cramped spaces as the breeding ground for certain kinds of knowing (Menchú 2009, 70; emphasis mine). Recognizing such relationality, Menchú also understands why it is not until later in her life, when she is working as a maid in the capital city, that she comes to *know* that "with rich people [...] even their toilets shine" (Menchú 2009, 111). What is left unsaid (but nonetheless implied) in Menchú's new knowledge resulting from her new reality is that despite her mistress thinking her to be "dirty", it is she who is responsible for the cleanliness of the latter's lavatory. The quiet irony is razor-sharp, for while the mistress probably does not know the first thing about how to realize the spotless toilet she demands of her maid, Menchú too, having never known a toilet either at home or on the plantation where she worked, is compromised in relation to this demand. Until "the *other* girl" teaches her how to make toilets shine (Menchú 2009, 111; emphasis

mine). On the ladder of relayed subalternity, this other servant girl's minimally superior position is established not only because she knows how to clean, but by the fact that she *is* clean—that is, she speaks Spanish, unlike Menchú at the time, and wears *ladino* clothes.[2] However, as they work together, Menchú and the other girl become close, and it is notable that for Menchú that closeness is sealed, not in her naming of the girl (which she does not do), but in the reality of shared food. With her "privileged" access to the masters' leftovers, the other girl gives some to Menchú and this moment becomes especially poignant in light of what the latter says to her amaneunsis, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray: "we only trust people who eat what we eat" (Menchú 2009, xvii). Presumably if one eats what the other eats, then one also evacuates from one's body what the other does, and so to come back to Menchú's experiences on the plantation—where she and the other workers eat the same food and are asked to share the experience of filth when they defecate in groups—one can assume that they too are to be underlined by trust.

In a different move that apparently turns the tables on this idea that food habits could be a ground for self and other meeting, Jamaica Kincaid in *A Small Place* warns precisely about the suspect (and therefore, *un-trustworthy*) nature of food for a tourist to Antigua. Repeatedly and relentlessly hitting notes of accusation in its second-person address to Euro-Americans who vacation on Kincaid's native island only to perpetuate colonial-style exploitation, *A Small Place* reminds tourists that the nice fresh lobster from the clear waters of the island and the "delicious, locally grown food"—staples of touristy plans for holidaying—are precursors to what one might imagine are the-not-so-glistening contents of a glistening hotel lavatory (Kincaid 1988, 13). The nonfiction makes clear that bodily waste may be rendered invisible for a tourist to Antigua, but being aware of the lack of a proper sewage system on the island, Kincaid is in a position to caution that waste from the tourist's toilet probably touches him at his most credulous moment as he happily splashes about in the Caribbean Sea. In a familiar, yet still stylistically breathtaking anticolonial posture, the problem of bodily waste is here displaced onto the "ugly" Anglo-American tourist, with Kincaid purposefully crafting a technique to speak back to the tourist's habitual objectification of native bodies. Blinded as he is—albeit for the most part in innocent naivete—by the dazzle of imperial lights, the tourist does not know where the feces of Antigua's shiniest lavatories go, in the same way as he does not stop to think that the "local" food he is craving probably came off a plane from Miami. "It was grown dirt-cheap", Kincaid tells us, in someplace like Antigua, then went to Miami, and came back nicely plumped up in a healthy first-world price-tag (Kincaid 1988, 14). In this scenario, food cannot in any meaningful way be shared between the western self and native others just as fecal realities are more real (in the sense of being more apprehensible to the senses) for the latter than the former: thus, the distrust between them.

The tourist may be unseeing of such distinctions in lived conditions, but the Antiguan state machinery is not, so it comes as no surprise that Kincaid's fiery accusations do not leave unscathed the latter's failure to provide its people with a proper sewage system or rid them of exploitative market practices involving basic necessities like food. *A Small Place* clearly indicts, in one fell

swoop, both the autonomous government of Antigua as well as the Euro-American tourist industry and its continuing imperialist adventures, but Kincaid's rhetoric importantly establishes that the two are not identical. She reserves for the tourist on the one hand, a loudly accusatory second person pronoun that is not afraid to aggressively point to him as ugly in mind and body, and at the same time turn around with bitter sarcasm to show that in his everyday life, he is not in fact ugly, but intensely ordinary in a way that it takes everything out of him, taxes him so much that he is driven to become the ugly tourist.[3] For the self-governing apparatus of Antigua, on the other hand, Kincaid usually maintains a third person pronoun ("the government") in which anger at corrupt politicians mingles with an acute awareness of how complicit comprador classes come to be, and how they crisscross the lives of other Antiguans who repeatedly bring them to power and continue to docilely bear their brunt.

In "Ideological Crossings: 'you' and the pragmatics of negation in Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place",* Sandrine Sorlin has written searchingly about how Kincaid's use of the second person pronoun interpellates the reader, narratively locking her into a class of white, North American or European tourists who exploit native Antiguans and take pleasure in the appropriation of their lives (Sorlin 2014, 11-25). Both Sorlin and Jane King (in "*A Small Place* Writes Back") argue that Kincaid identifies with neither the native Antiguan nor the white tourist, and while Sorlin is gentler in her analysis, King's reading seethes at the author's proclivity for a rhetorical position from which she can easily "despise both" (King 2002, 895). According to King, Kincaid's view is that the tourist is of course an "ugly human being," but led by elite Antiguan politicians and government officials (who are despicable for their corruption), post-independence citizen-subjects are so completely customized by the event of tourism that they too are willing to make the degradation and humiliation of their banal lives into tourist attractions in themselves (Kincaid 1988, 14). Simply put, for Kincaid in King's view, one group is to be abhorred for its ugliness, another for its corruption, and still another for its passivity. The question then becomes: if she does not identify with any one of these repugnant collectivities, why does Kincaid need to assert early on in *A Small Place*, and with a good degree of enunciative force, that she is Antiguan: "We Antiguans, for I am one [...]" (Kincaid 1988, 8)? Why, when addressing the tourist and telling him that local Antiguans do not like him, does she add in italics that they do not like her either? Would not the syntactical arrangement of "They do not like you. *They do not like me*!", and in particular, the italicization of the second sentence suggest that Kincaid is surprised and agitated at the idea that Antiguans do not like her and the tourist in the same way (Kincaid 1988, 17)? Is there a continuum between you and me, or between I and we that cannot be denied? The answers to these questions are not simple and the complexities they bring with them have to do with the unsteady realities of Kincaid's positioning vis-a-vis groups she may have been a part of, or, could potentially be a part of. After speaking of "We Antiguans", the author has to awkwardly pause and script herself in as an "I" who is part of the collective, as if she is not sure whether as an expatriate, she will be perceived as Antiguan. Contrastingly, when she is writing about her childhood and past in

Antigua, Kincaid does not have to qualify the relationship between the "we" and the "I" ("Since *we* were ruled by the English, *we* also had their laws"), perhaps because a migratory rupture has not yet torn her from her native land and peoples (Kincaid 1988, 25). Similarly, the slippage between the "you" and "me" in the adult Kincaid's context is a loaded one, because the condemnation that is directed against "you, the tourist" (who Kincaid well may be seen as) in *A Small Place* also points at certain moments in the text to "you" the English colonizer who has formatively shaped Kincaid's meeting with the world, the language she is forced to use to interact with it, and even perhaps her cognition of what she understands to be the truth of Antigua's present.

The Interstitial "I"

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon presents a sentient analysis of Kincaid's torn locations as a colonized subject and as an expatriate Antiguan who lives and works in the United States. The extract is worth quoting at length not only for its pained tone, but also for its attention to what happens to the authority to represent truth and reality in the case of such tautly rent writers:

> When you have ascended economically as a black woman or man into the middle classes, where do you stand in relation to those whose plight you depict [...]? Where do you belong in the historically sanitized, colonially hued inter-national marketplace in environmental relaxation? In writing about tourism, poverty, and clashing cultures of nature, Kincaid [...] attempt[s] to negotiate, through memoir and polemic, the minefields of race, class, and gender that confront [her] on entering a realm of nature industry tourism clearly not designed for [her] yet to which [she] can afford class access [...].The public role such figures assume is often animated both by an expressive anger and by the fear that their novel, precarious privilege is temporary or illusory—that one misstep may plunge them back into a viscerally remembered familial indigence (Nixon 2011, 26).

Nixon's observations would suggest that Kincaid's forceful rhetoric of anger in *A Small Place* may be fueled by a fear of the first-person pronoun collapsing into a third-person collective with which it no longer identifies, and indeed, such a claim is somewhat evidenced by the numbers the text throws up. That is to say, it is not coincidental that the phrase "We Antiguans" occurs *only once* in the entirety of the essay, a fact perhaps pointing toward the author's discomfort with situating herself in what she sees as a national tableau of passive and/or corrupt selfhood. I maintain however that this discomfort is two-pronged rather than bearing in only one direction as Nixon seems to imply, for it is only in being so that it morphs into the stronger emotion of fear that he detects. Kincaid may have been discomforted by the "I/me" coinciding with the "we" of her native Antigua, but she becomes *frightened* by the idea that the "I" could just as easily collapse into the "you" that is the English colonizer she has been shaped by, and more importantly, into the "you" that is the Euro-American visitor to the island. After all, in an interview with Allan Vorda soon after the publication of *A Small Place,* our author does let slip the following sentiment, in regard directly to the British colonizers no doubt, but with undertones that bring Kincaid herself into

the fray: "I wish everyone would stay where they come from because when *we* go to other places, *you* eventually exploit" (Vorda/Kincaid 1996, 67). Despite the often-unguarded practice of conversation during interview processes, the sliding of the third person into the second person pronoun in Kincaid's statement cannot go unremarked. On one hand, this could be construed as the interviewee including herself in a "we" that has gone to other places, and at the same time distinguishing herself from the "you" that exploits. On the other, it could be that Kincaid's stumble from the "we" to the "you" marks her fear of becoming herself exploitative, or worse still, of being condemned as such. This was a problem not unknown to her after the publication of *A Small Place*, for which Kincaid drew as much praise as ire, the latter coming largely from critics who were convinced that it was from the position of a metropolitan migrant (an American who cannot understand the realities and truths of native Antiguan lives), that Kincaid had turned vituperative against the Antiguan state and its peoples.

I am by no means one of those critics. What I sense in *A Small Place* is the persistent pain of the postcolonial writer without a home, and the relentless agitation that is born of occupying a liminal space between indigent/passive native and exploitative migrant. This agitation that becomes a full-fledged fear when the displaced subject perpetually teeters on the brink of being captured by, and boxed into, either category is also paradoxically a mindset in which the native-turned-expatriate subject finds her keen critical temper, which is all she has in place of the comfort of a home. It is in understanding this remarkably fraught positioning that I can see how, like Kincaid, Slavenka Drakulić, in crafting personal essays on the lives of Croatians after Communism becomes trapped in a pronominal quagmire of "I"s, "they"s and "we"s: is Drakulić, a reputed author married to a rich Swede and privileged enough to divide her time between Sweden and Croatia, being patronizing in referring to her countrymen as "they" who have failed to imagine themselves as individuals, or is the "I" of *Cafe Europa* part of a collective "we", comprising all those children of the post-Communist world who will always, as she puts it somewhat snidely, need a "daddy" to rule them (Drakulić 1996, 107)? Is there a "you" that for Drakulić mediates the relationality between the first and third person pronouns but is elided somewhat in her writing? Before going into the specifics of that matter however, it would be important to elaborate how *Café Europa* inserts its author's processes of self-making as textual-grammatical practice into this particular essay's discussion of the linkage between self-cultivation and fecal realities by narrativizing Croatians after Communism as people who cannot rid themselves of the pestilence of "shitty" slime-like mud.

With the color, texture and consistency of "greasy shit", the mucous substance cleaves obdurately to the everyday lives of Croatians who have made their homes even in the most allegedly disciplined of urban formations, away from all that they thought was associated with their origin in the countryside:

> You might associate mud with rural areas, but in Eastern European cities, it returns to haunt you, the ghost of your peasant origins [...]. As I approached the market, I felt as if I were plunged into some

> kind of primordial soup, dragged back to the origins of life, dissolving into basic elements, so primeval did that mud look to me, so omnipresent, so inevitable (Drakulić 1996, 199).

What Drakulić goes on to document is the haphazard emergence of cities in Eastern European countries that were once overwhelmingly peasant. The frenzied push in these contexts was toward accelerated industrialization, a "giant leap from feudalism to communism", and dizzyingly quick expansion plans which drew on largely unprepared labor from the countryside (Drakulić 1996, 36). Farmhands with little to no experience in construction, built houses that were prone to collapse, and laid down streets that heaved and cracked. The problem was only exacerbated by the fact that these very farmhands who were responsible for the construction stole building materials, which they could not otherwise access because they were either too expensive, or simply not available, and which they needed to patch together their own decrepit abodes. Despite these hazardous conditions, a migrant worker and his family felt lucky to move into a severely cramped apartment on the eighth floor of a skyscraper because they believed there, they could make themselves anew at a distance from the reality of "the stench, the poverty of Grandma's [village] house, the mud at its threshold, the outdoor toilet" (Drakulić 1996, 200).

The mud lingers in the new urban formations, however—as an obstacle against precisely that new self-cultivation that attempts to detach itself from the reality of its past. It is to be found everywhere in the cities Drakulić reflects on; it appears from under the asphalt in the fissures of streets, it fleshes out streetcar tracks, it spews from gutters that are access points to drains, and it even follows posh humans up elevators and onto the carpets in their homes. When it seems to have dried, it is still always there, lurking to make a comeback. Mud is a migrant to cities from the agrarian world in the same way Kincaid and Drakulić are from places native to them, and just as the Kincaids and Drakulićs of the globe are thorny reminders for the metropolis of how it has come to be and on whose labors and lives it continues to ride, so too mud reminds Eastern Europeans who move from the country to the city, of their beginnings, of their parents who were born to grandparents who still live in their village homes. But is this elaborate attention to the prevalence and relevance of mud on the part of Drakulić peculiar only to urban formations in Eastern Europe and to the peoples they have come to house?

In speaking of the intractability of mud for the urban Croatian, Drakulić moves through the first person, second person and third person pronouns within the space of a mere three paragraphs—"*I* felt I was plunged into some kind of primordial soup [...]. When the mud comes out it follows *you* to your house [...] the soil is what *we* want to forget" (Drakulić 1996, 199-200). Commenting on her stylistic adventures such as they are, Rob Nixon argues in "Non-fiction Booms, North and South: A Transatlantic Perspective", that like other post-communist citizens, Drakulić found herself "in the early to mid 1990s in a state of pronominal transition. What would the relationship between 'we' and 'I' become? How—politically, emotionally, imaginatively—would new-found freedoms recast the way citizens felt about selfhood [...]?" (Nixon 2012, 37). These queries are significant to our author's highly ambivalent relation to communist rule in her native home,

but it is also the case that in contextualizing her particular situation, Nixon elides the possibility that the "we" that Drakulić tells us wants to forget its past, addresses humankind itself, rather than Eastern Europeans alone. After all, if mud is a reminder of an agrarian past, then that past is the past of historical man and one that has only recently been dislodged (and still only marginally) by a present in which, according to a 2018 United Nations Report, fifty-five percent of the world's population is now urban (https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html). Moreover, to come back to a continuing thread, mud for Drakulić has the somatic substance of "shit", which despite its best efforts as we have seen, the politest human body cannot transcend, and so both shit and mud are always *there* to remind the anonymous Everyman of his corporality/agrarian origins. Yet, at the same time, in a world where power relations are transparently spatialized, human excrement/mud is more "real" in some places than in others, and as such, it is offensive to people like Kincaid and Drakulić, who may be muddy reminders in the centers of empire of where the metropolis draws its life-blood from, but who are in turn reminded by mud/shit of the material realities they themselves come from.

If the age-old struggle between nature and culture (mud/shit versus shiny toilets/streets that brook no shit and no mud) cannot be restricted to particular peoples, one might argue that a Communist history can, and while this argument may be factually accurate, it does not prevent parts of the world with no past of Communist regimes from being haunted in the contemporary context by what Jacques Derrida calls the spectres of Marx. Published a few years prior to Drakulić's *Café Europa*, Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993) draws attention to the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the celebratory triumphalism that greeted what was considered the end of Communism and ideology. "At a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelise in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realised itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity" says Derrida, as he goes on to see Marx's radical critique spectrally hovering over the whole of the earth, asking for human responsibility in the face of "innumerable sites of suffering" (Derrida 1994, 106). If embedded in this theorization, Slavenka Drakulić's mud would not only be a reminder of its peasant past but would also stand in for the residual effects of the Communist era clinging to the Croatian national populace like the primal, somatic substantiality of shit which the human body cannot overcome. But more importantly in this context, mud/shit can be understood as spectral in the specifically Derridean sense, the specter being both a sign of what has been and of what is to come in the wake of an unthinking and too hasty embrace of the ideals of Western liberal democracy and the flash of commodities flooding newly opened capitalist markets. This is why mud emerges in urban Croatia, through the crevices of industrialized infrastructures haphazardly put together, in the holes and cracks that appear as a nation "leap-frogs" into a new ideology, and as that ideology begins to buckle—despite its promises and even perhaps, best intentions—under the pressures of the countless "men, women and children [being] subjugated, starved or

exterminated on the earth" (Derrida 1994, 106).[4] Slavenka Drakulić's arguably shaky position vis-a-vis her communist past itself instantiates such a reading. It seems without a doubt, at first, that she is one of the triumphalists of the post-communist world—she expresses a visceral disgust at the thought of a gathering of "comrades", she hates the "we" and the "us" that stubbornly affix themselves to "the people of ex-communist countries" (Drakulić 1996, 2), and she sings praises of a capitalist system in which the "chance to make money, a chance those people never had before, is indeed a condition to developing the first-person singular" (Drakulić 1996, 4). More dramatically, in "On Bad Teeth", one of the essays in Drakulić's volume, the author notices upon her return to Croatia from a short trip to the United States that her friends, relatives, acquaintances and neighbors *all* had bad teeth, indeed the *whole nation* had bad teeth. For Drakulić, the reality of their bad teeth is a symptom not just of political and economic failure at the level of the state (bad dentists and bad food cause bad teeth), but more importantly, of a failure of its citizens to imagine themselves as individuals who need to take care of themselves and their bodies, especially as compared to Americans who have a "national obsession with health in general" (Drakulić 1996, 127). She even goes so far as to associate the "stinking, decrepit toilets throughout the communist world" with the idea of collective responsibility (ascribed to communism), and therefore with the attitude that no one person should be responsible for their hygiene because everyone is responsible (Drakulić 1996, 34). Democracy is about demanding toilet paper, Drakulić suggests in no uncertain terms.

Leapfrogging from "We" to "I"

Doubts about Slavenka Drakulić's position vis-a-vis the truth of the Communist regime begin to emerge however when for all her animus, she cannot help but admit to its achievements:

> You are not starving any longer, your children go to school and have proper shoes, and everyone has electricity nowadays. No more tuberculosis or epidemics of other terrible diseases! [...] And communism has brought you all that. It was true: the majority of our people lived in even poorer conditions before communism, and they still remember that (Drakulić 1996, 30).

Part of this extract in which Drakulić employs the second-person pronoun to describe "the people" may well be laced with irony, the use of the "you" implying an authoritarian communist state speaking to its citizens and impressing on them the many advantages it has brought with it. But Drakulić does seem to admit sincerely that what that state said was not inaccurate, even though it translated into a population led to believe that in the face of such benevolences it could not ask for more. The apparent infallibility of Drakulić's armor against communism thus appears to crack rather early in *Café Europa* and there continue to be similar instances later on, when our author argues that what peoples of the ex-communist world miss most in the new order is a climate of protections. They used to have a predictable paradigm of "jobs, pensions, social and medical security, maternity leave, sick leave", and in the absence of that paradigm, they ruthlessly grab what

they can, while they can (Drakulić 1996, 67). This sensibility on Drakulić's part becomes more apprehensible in her more recent collections tellingly named *A Guided Tour through the Museum of Communism: Fables from a Mouse, a Parrot, a Bear, a Cat, a Mole, a Pig, a Dog, & a Raven* (2011) and *Café Europa Revisited: How to Survive Post-Communism* (2021), the first title indicating that communism has indeed calcified into a museum-piece and the second demonstrating that her 1996 work on life after communism needs revisiting. More openly cognizant in these texts of the reality of violences being borne by people who now live in the cold embrace of the economic and political system that replaced communism, Drakulić emphasizes that the new order requires strategies even for bare survival. If communism had cured its peoples of starvation, tuberculosis and other deadly epidemics, then in the post-communist era, those very peoples are being forced to live with the fatalities of ethnic and religious warfares, immigrant crises, techno-financialized terror attacks, burdens of debt both individually and nationally untenable, and widespread, hidden unemployment.[5] In *Café Europa,* Drakulić is apprehensive of the possibility of such conditions, but perhaps still somewhat naively enamored of the promises of a western liberal democratic order and its capitalist markets, she is unable to grasp them in a visceral way. The holes and cracks in the streets of Eastern European cities, which bear mud as a reminder of both the peasant beginnings of Eastern Europeans (and humankind itself) as well as a metaphor for their communist past clinging to them, are also the holes and cracks in the cognitive lens of Slavenka Drakulić, laden with the weight of the past, attempting to navigate an emergent order and all the while anticipating a still unborn future whose dangers are increasingly discernible.

There is a startling similarity in the doubtful claims to representational authority in Kincaid's declaration, "*We* Antiguans, for *I* am one" and a line on the very first page of Slavenka Drakulić's *Café Europa*:

> Clearly, in the context of this book, "we" and "us" mean the people of ex-communist countries, *and as I am one of them* I believe that I can justify using the first-person plural to describe our common experience (Drakulić 1996, 1).

However, for the careful listener, these lines ring loud not only in relation to Jamaica Kincaid's work, but also in relation to the main axes of the controversy stirred by the anthropologist David Stoll in his response to *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and Menchú's own response to his reading of her use of the first-person pronoun. To counter Stoll's much spoken-of accusation that her testimonial inaccurately depicts others' experiences as her own, Menchú has had no trouble acknowledging that she did indeed insert into what she presented as her own narrative the experiences of *other* people. However, she also added that such implants only lent themselves to her conviction that the possessive pronoun in her reference at the beginning of her narrative to "*my* life" (which is what her narrative is about) cannot be disentangled from the noun attached to the possessive pronoun in *my people,* a phrase that appears in the same expository sentence:

> My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty-three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my people (Menchú 1984, 1).[6]

The way in which Menchú, in the very first lines of her account, displaces the singularity of the I/my regime onto a collectivity of people marks the inalienable relationality between the self and others in her world. It also instantiates the many you's we have so far encountered in other texts as centripetal (rather than centrifugal) forces with regards to the formation of the "I" and the "we". Given the Foucauldian thread that animates my reflections on the art of self-making in relation to "others", it is perhaps pertinent to note here that when Michel Foucault talks about the ancient care of the self, he emphasizes that "it constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice" (Foucault 1986, 51). In Foucault's study, the socialization of the self was not dependent only on singular sites of authority involving "schools, lectures, and professionals of spiritual direction"; rather, for the plurality of its strengths, it drew from a plethora of "customary relations of kinship, friendship and obligation", a bundle of you's that in their meeting with the "I" pave the way for what Foucault suggests is the warmth of the "we" (Foucault 1986, 52-53). This is why leapfrogging, or vaulting from the "we" to the "I" or the "I" to the "we" is untenable. It must be grounded in an affinity, even if ad hoc and fleeting, with the "you". Rigoberta Menchú's "I" encounters the "you" of David Stoll's accusations and from there reaffirms her connection with the "we" of her people, just as Jamaica Kincaid's "I" brushes up against the "you" that was the British colonizer of Antigua in shaping her response to the "we" of contemporary, Antiguan national collectivities, and Slavenka Drakulić's lolloping from the "we" to the "I" in the space of just a few lines (as quoted above) is mediated by a "you" which remains unacknowledged for the most part of *Café Europa*, but is nonetheless as mired in the same mud as the collective and individual selves of post-communist Croatia.

All of these narratives work through some form of relationality between the first, second, and third person pronouns, no matter how strained or tender. Most strongly perhaps of all three writers, Slavenka Drakulić speaks of her n*eed* for others. She writes with pained eloquence about her friends in Croatia who believe that in marrying a rich Swede, Drakulić has escaped being relentlessly battered by the host of misfortunes they are subject to everyday. They therefore do not feel they owe her anything (even their friendship), and only get in touch with her when they find themselves in a position where they have to ask for her aid. Otherwise, it is she, who ostensibly inoculated against *need* and distress by the rosy reality of her life in the west, is expected to establish and nurture communication. What they do not understand is that "I *do* need them", Drakulić writes at the end of an essay titled, "To Have and To Have Not", weighed down as she is by the burden not so much of the need itself but of the secret it is to her friends and of her incapacity to persuade them differently (Drakulić 1996, 45). The sheer force of her need for her friends, no matter how secretive, is a product of what Drakulić perceives as their shared time together and the commonality of their experiences in that shared time. However, given that her friends think she is

no longer part of what they see as the misery of their lives, that need has to be stifled on Drakulić's part, for otherwise it may be construed as disingenuous or worse still, condescending. In contrast, the need for and toward others is something to be proudly flagged in collectivities such as Menchú's which insist that neither is the "I" to be crushed under the weight of the "we", nor can it be disentangled from the "we". In a text like *A Small Place* though, the matter is more complicated. Kincaid stridently abnegates any need to identify with her "national family" ("Antiguans") just as she does her need for her own immediate family (as is evidenced in some of her other works), but one could argue that it is precisely in the fact that her every rhetorical turn is directed loudly against those very people she denies, en masse, that Kincaid paradoxically demonstrates her promiscuous need for others.[7] As powerfully presented (or denied) as they are across several narratives, such base human needs for fellowship are felt in the viscera, or according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* etymology for the word, in the "bowels", "entrails" and "internal organs" of the human body.[8] Like the need to defecate that also emerges from those bodily parts, they must remain clandestine, except when it doesn't matter—to those, for instance, who do not feel compromised in the face of openness. For those to whom openness (of/about defecation) does matter, it is disturbing because it is a sign of making one's most intimate needs known and therefore it is a sign of vulnerability. The need to evacuate bodily waste is offensive not merely because it is related to that which must be hidden away, or alternatively, acknowledged only in relation to the foul bodies of natives and the rank spaces they inhabit, but because it is a reminder of that which cannot be transcended—like the need for others. I am certainly not in this context advocating for a continuation of the practice of openly defecating, nor am I denying the indignity of having to do so in a world where power lies in the ability to privatize and fortify spaces. What I am trying to forward however is a theorization of openness, not as a softened, fluffy, liberal mantra of inclusion and diversity, but as an orientation in and through which practices of self-cultivation become rigorous exercises in the kind of wordliness Edward Said advocates, ones that embed the self in its own material realities, and at the same time are open to the incommensurability of different ways of knowing and being, and the resulting indeterminacy in the making of the self in relation to her others.

Openness, in the way I would like to elaborate it, manifests in varied ways for the self, at different sites of truth and reality, and in distinct moments of cognition and re-cognition. In its openness, the self continually comes to be, or becomes, rather than *is*, and it gives itself both to sudden bursts of insurgent pasts and their realities, as also to the impossibility of any known or knowable referent toward which it deterministically bears. Such an orientation towards openness is often preceded by an unhealable sense of loss—in the case of our particular authors, Jamaica Kincaid's loss of what used to be her notion of a collective selfhood, Slavenka Drakulić's loss of her place in the safety of a homogenous collectivity, and Rigoberta Menchú's loss of the "we" in order to write to a western audience as the testifying "I". Deeply intimate losses as these are, they lead to no less psychologically overwrought a situation than the one brought on by the loss of feces from

the child's body. But unlike in the Freudian schema where the child ideally learns to write himself into "learned" disciplinary structures, the losses these authors face involve "unlearning" what they know and becoming attentive to other ways of knowing and being, aware of their need for others who may seem alien to them. No matter how difficult it is to let go of what they have been taught about managed and manicured bodies, when our authors are able to speak transparently about not knowing how to clean a toilet because they have never known a toilet, when they suggest that thinking on the contents of one's lavatory is more important than being taught *not* to do so, when they are not afraid to confront the shit-like texture of mud and are led therefrom to an entanglement with human needs and histories that cannot be transcended, they come into contact with openness.

This contact zone is what enables an embrace of the elsewheres and others that in turn leads to worlding and cultivating the self as a creature materially grounded in its own reality, keen to the realities of others, and in that intersection, pitched toward myriad unpredicted and unpredictable possibilities. All the narratives that come into view in this essay are engaged in some way or another with history, be it the history of the Mayan in Guatemala, the history of communist Eastern Europe, or the history of colonial and postcolonial Antigua and its peoples. Yet, it is only when the authors embed their own processes of self-making in these histories that their texts become truly *historical* because the self as a continually unfolding textual process is worldly in Edward Said's humanistic sense of being aware of how its reality is intimately tied with the material conditions and rules of conduct in and of different worlds. In its nonfictional encounter with the cognitive practices of other peoples and other worlds, this self turns and turns in a widening gyre of its relations to others, and in doing so, it opens up its history to a future that may be unknowable but is nonetheless imaginable because it involves probing for their truths the realities of others. In this practice which evokes both the force of the imagination and the potency of diverse realities in the approach to the indeterminacy of the future emerges the cultivation of the self as a work in the art of nonfiction.

Endnotes:

1. For elaborations on how to think about the counter-travelogue form in Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, see Lesley Larkin, Janie Beriault, and Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan.
2. The translator of *I, Rigoberta* Menchu, Anne Wright says the following about the difficulty of translating a word such as *ladino.* "Although ladino ostensibly means a person of mixed race or a Spanish-speaking Indian, in this context it also implies someone who represents a system which oppresses the Indian–first under Spanish rule and then under the succession of brutal governments of the landed oligarchy. So a word like 'half-caste' would be inadequate. Hence Rigoberta's father's invention 'ladinizar' (to ladinize, or become like a ladino) which is a mixture of ladino and latinizar (to latinize), and has both racial and religious connotations" (viii).
3. For the remarkably compelling linkage between banality and evil, see Hannah Arendt.
4. "Leapfrogging" has emerged as an important conceptual frame for the international development community which sees it as pointing to the vertiginous changes in the past two decades or so, brought about by the digital revolution. These changes could ensure that less developed nations leapfrog traditional industry into contemporary industry. https://www.csis.org/analysis/need-leapfrog-strategy

accessed September 14, 2021. Slavenka Drakulić speaks of a similar vaulting when she writes about a "giant leap from feudalism to communism."

5. In *Spectres of Marx,* Jacques Derrida employs the term "underemployment" to indicate a condition that cannot anymore be attached to the old term "unemployment". I choose to stay with "hidden unemployment" which underlines Derrida's own point about suffering being more intensified as it is increasingly obscured.
6. For an elaboration of her position on the controversy surrounding *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, see Menchú's interview with Juan Jesus Aznarez.
7. For her familial relationships, see Jamaica Kincaid. *My Brother* and *The Autobiography of My Mother.*
8. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition. Visceral, adj.

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