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Frida Kahlo: An Artist “In Between”

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Abstract:

The Tate’s recent exhibition of Frida Kahlo’s work paradoxically resists and engages ‘Fridomania’, the cultural phenomenon more concerned with her exotic persona and spectacular biography than with her art. The iconic status Kahlo posthumously enjoys, however, does not supplant the striking encounters with sexual and national identity in her oeuvre.

This article bypasses the mythology surrounding Kahlo’s life to focus on her paintings. Close readings of her self-representations unsettle the binary hegemonic structures which seek to homogenize and normalize dissident subjectivities by eliding ambiguity. Working at the interstice of queer and post-colonial theory, I will demonstrate how her images of ‘self’, which exceed culturally constructed polarities of race, sex, gender and sexuality, exploit locations ‘in between’. The dynamic narrative of subjectivity her images weave looks towards the simultaneous coexistence of opposites wherein identity exists alongside difference.

Keywords: Frida Kahlo, Sexual Identity, National Identity, Bisexuality, Difference



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‘I never painted dreams. I paint my own reality.’ Such was Frida Kahlo’s resolute response when conferred with the title ‘Surrealist’ (Kahlo, 1953, n.p.).¹ Her work, which seems to impinge on both Surrealist and Magical Realist worlds, brings together the purportedly disparate realms of fantasy and reality; mythology and rationality; native Mexican votive art² and European ‘high’ art. In her self-portraits, the personal, national and political overlap to represent her sundry hybridity. The cultural locations her artwork explores, between *and* across the axes of race, sex, gender and sexuality, ‘queer’³ the binaries through which differences are normatively mapped. It is here that this article makes its intervention. Bypassing the current preoccupation with Kahlo’s celebrity in favour of close readings of her paintings, I will unpick the reweave the threads of resistance to cultural dualisms running through her work. Detailed analysis of her narrative images will focus on the conflicts between duality and plurality, contingency and difference, specifically with regard to her identification as a racial and sexual ‘mestiza’.⁴ Frida Kahlo’s identity and her relations with marginality, I will argue, embody a questioning reality which she embraced and disseminated as both an ardent proponent of ambiguity and an artist ‘in between’.

The sources of Kahlo’s hybrid identity are multiple. Born in Coyoacán on 6 July 1907 to Guillermo Kahlo, a German Jew of Hungarian descent, and Matilde Calderón, a part-Indian devout catholic and meticulous conservative, Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo Calderón was

¹ Kahlo did have some material as well as artistic and personal connections with the French Surrealists. André Breton and his wife Jacqueline Lamba, with whom Kahlo had an intimate love affair, were among the French Surrealists with whom she had encounters. Whilst on a trip to Mexico, Breton invited Kahlo to France to exhibit her work to the European artistic fraternity and general public, but when she took up the invitation she found upon her arrival that nothing had been organized by Breton and it was only with Marcel Duchamp’s help that the exhibition went ahead. On several occasions in her diary and in a letter to her childhood love and life-long companion, the communist activist and leader of Las Cachuchas, Alejandro Gómez Ariaz (he had been with Kahlo in the streetcar when the accident had occurred) she displayed a vehement distain for the movement and its members who were variously described as a ‘bunch of cocoo lunatic sons of bitches...so damn “intellectual” and rotten that I can’t stand them anymore’ (Herrera, 1989, pp.242-45). Ideologically, she expressed an attitude shared by the Cuban writer of Magical Realist fiction, Anjelo Carpentier, that what the Surrealists codified in their Manifestoes as revolutionary had always existed in the fabric of Mexican and Latin American culture (Carpentier, 1949).

² The pre-colonial votive tradition of retablos is influential in Kahlo’s work. Small, brightly coloured oil depictions of religious figures on metal or wood are painted as thanks-giving to the gods.

³ ‘Queer’ is used here as a verb to signify the action of destabilising normative and normalising hegemonic cultural discourses which seek to marginalise dissident and de-centralised subjectivities. Judith Butler has written widely on the re-appropriation of ‘queer’ (see Butler, J., 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge).

⁴ ‘Mestiza’, the feminine form of ‘mestizo’, is the Hispanic term meaning ‘mixed’ and is normally used to describe a person of mixed race. Here I use it to refer to a mixed identification along the axes of sex, gender and sexuality as well as race.

thrust into the restless social climate that prefaced the Mexican People's Revolution.⁵ The historical moment and cultural location of her early experiences contained in a chrysalis the major elements that would mark her art and life: an uncompromising commitment to resistance and belief in the value of change woven into and from an abiding racial and sexual heterogeneity which itself became an identity she both struggled with and seized. In a deferential introduction to her diary, Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes aligns Kahlo with her homeland, suggesting that the pain and resilience endemic in her work underscores both her personal turmoil and the political state of Mexico. Describing her birth in coincidence with the 1910 uprising he writes: 'Born with the Revolution, Frida Kahlo both mirrors and transcends the central event of twentieth-century Mexico...mak[ing] her fantastically, unavoidably, dangerously symbolic – or is it symptomatic? – of Mexico' (Fuentes, 1995, p.10). Even a brief encounter with Kahlo's oeuvre suggests that her art in some way reflects and reproduces a 'reality' which is both individual and national, raising questions which examine how and with what effects culture is composed of regimented divisions implemented and sustained to repetitively separate, codify, order and define its varied components. Indeed, so rigorous was Kahlo's ideological fervor, and so strong her affiliations with her nation - which she conceived in her painting and writing as a living, breathing and dynamic corpus - that she reassigned her date of birth to match the year of the Peasants' Revolt, erasing a chronology purportedly etched in stone by making herself three years younger. As a student she was a member of 'Las Cachuchas' (The Caps), engaging fully in Marxist endeavors to conquer inequity in a way that elided divisions of theory and practice, academe and activism. The reality that she claimed and painted as hers was doubtless a complex 'mestizo'.⁶ Neither wholly external nor wholly internal, both symbolic and symptomatic, and crucially symbiotic, her inconsistent and inter-connected realities, it seems, also painted her.

Schisms, absences, and excesses - the conjoined causes *and* effects of her 'in between' identity - are woven into the narratives of Frida Kahlo's life and work, and none more so than in the depictions of her 'self' seen in the mirror. Bed-ridden for months after a horrific streetcar accident in her teens that left her spine, pelvis, legs, and reproductive organs permanently damaged, her family arranged for a mirror to be fitted over her bed so that she could recover

⁵ For a detailed biography of Frida Kahlo see Herrera, 1989.

⁶ 'Mestizo' is used here to suggest that Frida lived and painted a reality that is itself a complex mix, dependent on multiple and intersecting axes of subjectivity including sex, gender, sexuality, race, nationality, political affiliation, personal history, pre-colonial mythology and spirituality.

while painting herself (Herrera, 1989, p.27). Her explanation for the enduring exploration of her own subjectivity began here: ‘I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best’ (Rodríguez, 1945, n.p.). In this sense, her ‘self’ was her reality, and her paintings of the reality she saw reflected in the mirror became the Frida that lives on in her self-portraiture as well as the Frida she lived as every day.⁷ The Casa Azul, her family home where she was born, lived most her life, died, and now houses the Museo Frida Kahlo, is full of mirrors. Lola Alvarez Bravo’s image of Frida walking in the courtyard there (‘The Two Fridas’, [Figure One](#)) shows her simultaneously peering into and out of a mirror built into an external wall.



Figure 1

Alvarez Bravo’s two Fridas seem engaged in the search for something undefined, yet specific, which the focal point of their convergent gazes paradoxically locates both inside and outside of their selves. Oblivious to the viewer’s gaze and looking into a space between the two planes

⁷ These two Fridas, which might be conventionally described as ‘public’ and ‘private’, are in this instance not so easily demarcated. Their contingency is heightened by Kahlo living quite a public private life and by the fact that her paintings have not always been very accessible to the public. Once again, oppositional ‘certainties’ are undermined.

they occupy respectively, their eyes rest on the same point but from two different perspectives; a point that the viewer of the photograph presumes exists although it remains to them unseen. The picture critiques the tendency to put faith in ‘reality’ without questioning what ‘reality’ itself signifies or with what motivations and effects it is constructed. Alvarez Bravo remarks that ‘it seems as though there really is another person behind the mirror’ (Grimberg, 1991, n.p.). Indeed, the mirror image appears as ‘real’ as the ‘real’ Frida, yet there is little sense that the reflected Frida is situated ‘behind’ the mirror. The fact that she seems in both images to be operating in the same spatio-temporal plane reinforces that similarities co-exist within and between differences. ‘Sameness’ and ‘difference’ do not inevitably operate as discrete binary oppositions. Furthermore, as a representation of the distinction between reflection and reality - of the invisible space between the two Fridas that exists as a division or bridge rather than in and of itself - it brings to light the idea that both Fridas are in fact reproductions whose contingency unsettles the viewer’s sense of how ‘reality’ is conceived, managed and (re)deployed. The photograph corresponds to Kahlo’s understanding of how ostensibly incongruent positions converge in her varied subjectivity. While the conflict of opposites in which she was consistently entangled remained an elusive mystery to her, the plurality she insisted upon impelled an extraordinary creativity that cross-examined how subjects are both normatively constructed as - and in - singular realities *and* strategically bound in the static binary distinctions of naturalised ideological truths.⁸ In so doing, a viable ‘in between’ space, or at the very least a possibility for it, is opened up. Kahlo’s self-portraits, which comprise roughly a third of her entire oeuvre, explore precisely this tension.

⁸ The prominent binary distinctions that are naturalized as ‘truths’ which are then organized into hierarchies in which one term is normatively deemed positive and the other negative include male/female (sex), masculine/feminine (gender), heterosexual/homosexual (sexuality), white/black (race), and these are inscribed to maintain political and discursive border between inside/outside. (See Cixous H., 1986. ‘Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays’ in H Cixous and C Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. B Wing, Manchester: MUP, and Derrida, J., 1982. ‘Différance’ in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A Bass, Brighton: Harvester Press, for important theoretical insight into how binary oppositions have formed the bedrock of Western metaphysics of difference).



Figure 2

One of her most famous paintings, also called 'The Two Fridas' ([Figure Two](#)), shows her direct encounter with, and resistance to, the established notion that subjects cannot inhabit and house the oppositional terms of contradictions at the same time. Framed in the same spatio-temporal moment, her two 'selves' are different yet connected in a visually brutal and tender image: they share the same heart. The rich, lustrous colours that swathe the body of the Mexican Frida radiate in stark contrast to the stiff white purity of her European self. In traditional Tehuana dress she sits, legs parted and facing the viewer, more open than her somewhat prim counterpart whose knees are appropriately held together and turned in. Her left hand presents a talisman bearing a portrait of her beloved Diego, which acts as a symbolic origin-destination of the main artery that twists around her arm to carry life-supporting blood to her heart and back. In the right hand of her neatly embroidered lace-clad self, she holds a surgical clamp to halt the flow of blood, which if left untapped would hemorrhage and result in death. Her 'rational' self, then, whose heart chamber is empty, is also fighting to sustain life at a time when, recently divorced from Riviera,

Kahlo is documented to have temporarily lost her characteristic *joie de vivre*. To let her heart rule over her head might in such circumstances prove fatal. In ‘The Two Fridas,’ heart and head are at once in conflict and connected by multiple lineages that surpass mutually exclusive polarities.⁹ This allied dissonance, so crucial to Kahlo’s subjectivity, is condensed in the joining hands at the centre of ‘The Two Fridas’. The white Frida, with gravity and reason on her side, pushes her hand down into the Mexican Frida’s hand, which embraces it while resisting a pressure that might otherwise submerge her. Before a turbulent skyscape, Kahlo’s two selves are conjoined yet separate, generically similar and crucially different. Not simply opposed to each other, the conflicts exist between *and* within them, and knitted into these disparities is a vital dependency. Her exposed internal organs, seamlessly ejected into the external world, question the presumed inevitability of binary distinctions and make visible the concealed ‘in between’ space of Alvarez Bravo’s photograph. Kahlo’s doubling, which enacts a complex negotiation of her ‘self’ at one specific point in the continuing narrative of subjectivity, suggests that the process of division itself cannot be detached from the contexts it is surrounded by and attempts to separate. In ‘The Two Fridas’, Kahlo paints a reality in which differences are mutually dependent. The dominant assumption that the world and its components are always and already divided into two columns of hierarchical binary terms that are horizontally and vertically discrete is painted out of this canvas. Indeed, for Kahlo, it seems never to have existed as a natural law at all.

Interesting here is a diary entry entitled ‘Origin of The Two Fridas’ in which Kahlo describes the memory of an imaginary friend of her childhood:

my imaginary friend always waited for me...I do remember her joyfulness – she laughed a lot. Soundlessly...I followed her in every movement and while she danced I told her my secret problems...How long had I been with her? I don’t know. It could have been a second or thousands of years...I was happy... It has been 34 years since I lived that magical friendship and every time I remember it it comes alive and grows more and more inside my world (Fuentes, 1995, plates 82-85).

⁹ Paradoxically, in this arresting painting, as in the narrative of Kahlo’s life, Riviera, whose love inspired her, represents her gravest threat (she was reported to say to a friend after discovering his affair with her sister: ‘I have suffered two serious accidents in my life, one in which a streetcar ran over me...The other accident is Diego’ (Zamora, 1990, p.37). She also wrote in her diary a lament to Riviera in which her consuming love and admiration for him is emphatic: ‘Diego beginning/Diego builder/Diego my child/Diego my boyfriend/Diego painter/Diego my lover/Diego “my husband”/Diego my friend/Diego my mother/Diego my father/Diego my son/Diego=me=/Diego Universe/Diversity within Unity’ (Fuentes, 1995, plate 60).

The unity of which Kahlo writes recalls the imaginary plenitude of the primordial and pre-oedipal realms; sacrosanct and innocent places where established markers of time make no sense, where the past comprises the present and the future is speculative, and where magic is an integral part of reality. Rooted in nostalgia, the remembered friendship describes an association with her 'self' which might be understood in psychoanalytical terms as an imaginary reconciliation of ego and id – of consciousness and unconsciousness - whose connection had been severed by a perceived unloving relationship with her mother.¹⁰



Figure 3

'My Nurse and I' ([Figure Three](#)), which she regarded as one of her finest pieces, denotes the rejection she felt well into adulthood in being passed on to a wet-nurse while her mother carried and gave birth to her younger sister, Christina. This fracture in the maternal relationship was amplified by Kahlo's inability to bear a much wanted child: her damaged womb and vagina resulted in several miscarriages, one of which she depicted in 'Henry Ford Hospital' ([Figure Four](#)) where an overwhelming sense of loneliness is explicit.

¹⁰ In psychoanalysis, the 'ego' refers to a subjects structured mechanisms and enforces the reality principle, while the 'id' is concerned with the pleasure principle and instant gratification. (See Rycroft, C., 1968. *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* Harmondsworth: Penguin for a detailed history of the use of these terms in psychoanalysis.) In 'normal' development, the ego and the id operate together. Freud's seminal essays, 'Three essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1903) give a psychoanalytic reading of the possible causes and consequences of severed connections between these aspects of the subject (Freud S., 1991. *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*: The Freud Library, Volume 7 London: Penguin.



Figure 4

The memory of cohesion and contentment, which feels more and more ‘real’ to her each time it is recalled, seems to be sought in the passionate attachments Kahlo made throughout her life: in friendships and fixations, and most notably in her love for Riviera. However, while these intense dependencies have been deliberated and theorized as attempted resolutions of narcissistic tendencies - or as ‘self-objects’ - in a recent study by Salomon Grimberg (Grimberg, 1998), the small but significant drops of blood on Frida’s lap ([Figure Two](#)) have been largely overlooked. They point us again to the complex plurality of Kahlo’s identity, and act as a point of departure from which to question the political motivations and effects of absorbing racial *and* sexual ambiguity into the binaries of oppositional thought.

The ‘One Drop of Blood’ myth (Klein, 1978, n.p.) decrees that a person with one drop of ‘negro’ blood is black. As a ‘mestiza’, Kahlo is neither a native Mexican Indian (descendant of the Aztecs) nor a Mexican European (descendant of either the Spanish conquistadors or succeeding French invaders). However, the imbalance of racial hierarchy does not simply posit her ‘in between’ cultures, for the cultural location of ‘mestizos’ in Latin America, like ‘criollos’ in the Caribbean and ‘mulattos’ in the Southern United States, is complex. Racially neither black

nor white, nor a simple combination of the two, ‘mestizos’ are caught in a volatile battleground between cultural assumptions of ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’. Alongside these constructed categories of contained and containable racial purity, the ‘mestizo’ presence plays across the slash of visibility/invisibility, destabilising its oppositional logic. On the one hand, ‘mestizos’, like ‘bisexuals’ in the sexual hierarchy, are deemed ‘preferable’ to blacks and gays respectively for their greater proximity to the hegemonic citadels of whiteness and heterosexuality. On the other hand, and in the same breath, they are despised for the stain of the ‘opposite’ they bare, for the racial and heterosexual privilege that ‘passing’ as either white or straight might earn, and thus for daring to claim an identity of any sort within *or* outside the binaries that govern established identity politics. The trace of oppositionality remains, and, as such, any value the ‘mestizo’ or ‘bisexual’ is accredited, positive or negative, is derived through the terms of binary opposites and, most pertinently, allocated by those who, in one way or another, ‘belong’. As Fritz Klein explains in a proposal that aligns bisexuality with racial hybridity:

Why is the person not seen as white at least in degree? The answer is as simple as it is profane. A threat is best dealt with if it is dismissible. In the world of sexual choice the homosexual is the black...the bisexual is really a homosexual with a screw loose...the homosexual may have been despised for his ‘perversion,’ but his or her psychosexual existence has never been in question. The homosexual belongs. He or she has a culture. He or she can be loyal to a team. (Klein, 1978, n.p.)

In such a scheme, the threat of undecidability can purportedly be contained in and by the ‘excluded’ terms of binary hierarchies, in this case black and gay, where it can then be marginalized so that white heterosexuality continues to reign supreme. However, ‘mestizos’ and ‘bisexuals’ represent a graver threat to heteronormativity than blackness and homosexuality. Cultures structured around polarities need groups its members can identify either with or against. Normative cultural practices, which carve racial and sexual topographies into territories of ‘us’ and territories of ‘them’, are always suspicious of those who traverse or tread the borders in between. The reactionary discursive tropes of invisibility and silencing ensure that for those subjects who blur the cultural boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’ by resisting the mechanisms through which these divisions are continually re-etched, it can be difficult to enact a viable ‘identity’. However, the drops of blood in ‘The Two Fridas’ escape the surgical clamp, exceeding the boundaries of the two conjoined bodies striving to contain them. Certainly, the

difference between difficult and impossible is a creative challenge which this painting refuses to deny and which Kahlo's dissenting desires continue to re-enact.

In spite of – and, perhaps, because of – difficulties there inherent, Kahlo sought out unpredictable places where meanings could be untied and rearranged to create things anew. The self-identifications she presents in her paintings invoke Jo Eadie's discussion of bisexuality as a miscegenate location which he describes as 'a place where there is a difficult mixing of supposedly incompatible orientations...dangerous exchanges, which disrupt the identities we have built up, and lead to unpredictable places' (1993, p.158). The 'Exquisite Corpse' pictures she created with Lucienne Bloch, which replicate the Surrealist game of the same name, exploit such unpredictability and in so doing enable seemingly contradictory oppositions to co-exist ([Figure Five](#)).

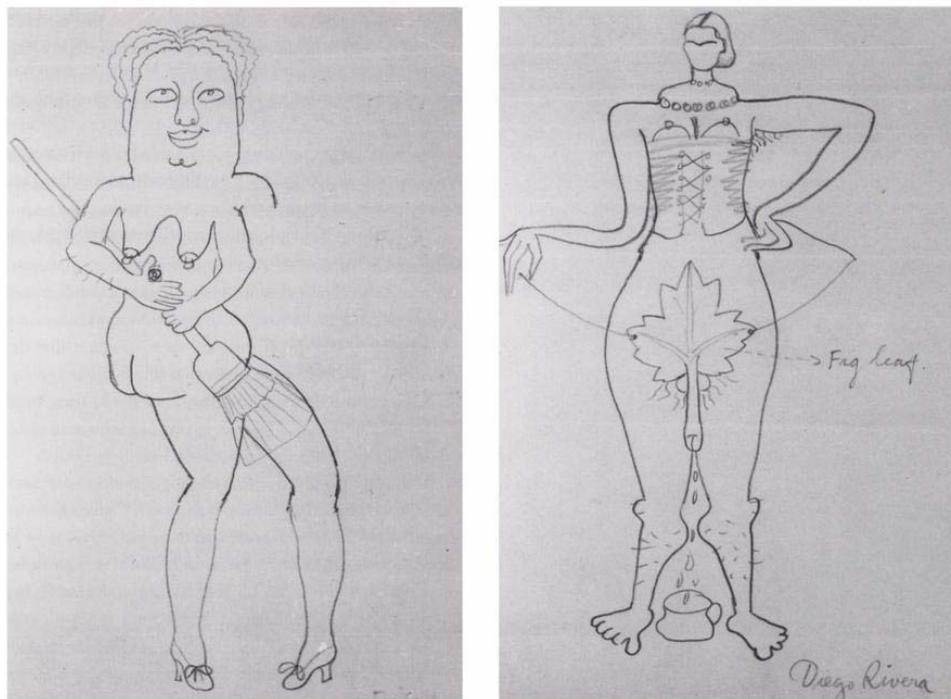


Figure 5

A form of shared automatic drawing, one person draws the head, folds it over to conceal it from the other person who then draws the body, and so on. In this case, the result is a pair of comical yet revealing portraits of Kahlo and Riviera. Taking the head as the identifying marker of each lover, Frida, round-breasted with full hips, holds a fig leaf on strings over prominent male

genitalia which drips into a cup placed between hairy legs, while Diego's broad head tops a broom-bearing twisted torso adorned with breasts, male buttocks and curvaceous feminine legs. These sexual hybrids recapitulate the excesses of gender in Kahlo's self-portraits where her stern masculine expression, characteristic single eyebrow resembling a bird in flight, and fuzz of facial hair are juxtaposed with the exotically feminine dresses, jewels, ribbons and braids with which she adorned her small and shapely body. Interestingly, as a young adult she dressed in men's suits for several family portraits, an image that she returned to in 'Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair' after her split with Riviera ([Figure Six](#)).



Figure 6

In the painting, a musical score, with the lyrics 'see, if I loved you it was for your hair; now you're bald, I don't love you anymore,' is inscribed overhead. Frida pictures herself cutting off her 'femininity': an act of resistance that expresses the frustration provoked by feeling valued solely for her original costumes and striking long dark hair. However, in her left hand she holds on to a tress and in her right ear she still wears a dangling earring, and the masculinity she wears

in the form of an oversized dark suit is ill fitting; her tiny feet, hands and head seem lost. The combined strength and vulnerability of this portrait, then, is a rejection of the mutual exclusiveness of masculinity and femininity in favour of a simultaneous co-existence of both. In this way, Kahlo performs the polarities of the normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix concomitantly, putting into practice Jo Eadie's theory of (bi)sexual hybridity: 'the hybrid acknowledges the part that the past has played in constituting new cultures and identities, and then displaces the dominant (and dominating) culture's attempt to enshrine itself...by supplementing it and thereby rewriting the future' (Eadie, 1993, p.159). By questioning the parameters of the gender dualism specifically and the binary edifice in general, these provocatively jarring images begin to extend the discursive limitations of the hierarchical sexual matrix through which dissident sexualities are discursively policed. Furthermore, sexual differences are posited as contingent with, rather than separate from, the multiple axes of subjectivity through which individual subjects and group identities symbiotically come into being.

Certainly, Kahlo's delight in difference was pervasive and it disregarded cultural distinctions between and across the terms of sex, gender, sexuality and race. As an active advocate of 'in between-ness', she also challenged perceived partitions among the realms of art, politics, and lived experience. Accordingly, the hopes and anxieties she entertained in her paintings were entangled in the way she lived her life. A significant 'detail' which has for the most part been silenced by studies to date on Frida Kahlo (and where spoken, only as an appendage) is that although devoted to Diego Riviera, her sexual subjectivity was not confined to him. She had many intimate and sexual affairs with other men and women, during Diego's infidelities, marital rifts and the years of divorce. Notably, though not surprisingly, those with men are well documented while those with women remain largely concealed.¹¹ However, in her diary Frida includes a transcription of a love letter written to painter Jacqueline Lamba, wife of André Breton, shortly after her return from France where she visited Lamba:

¹¹ Kahlo's bisexuality is mentioned as an after thought (Grimberg, 1998, p.87), seemingly as no more than an apparent mark of evidence for what is explained as 'an exotic persona that could not help but draw the attention of others.' Also, in the recent biographic film of Kahlo's life, *Frida* (2002), her affairs with women are only briefly touched upon. However, her bisexuality seems never simply a personal choice or sexual preference but also a political stance.

I have not forgotten you – the nights are long and difficult. The water. The ship and the dock and the parting...and you gazing at me so as to keep me in your heart. Today, I wish my sun could touch you. I tell you, your eyeball is my eyeball...Yours is the huipil with magenta ribbons. Mine the ancient squares of your Paris...You too *know* that all my eyes see...is Diego...You felt it, that's why you let that ship take me away from Le Havre where you never said good-bye to me. I will write to you with my eyes always. Kiss xxxxxx the little girl. (Fuentes, 1995, plates 11-13)

The intimate connection between these two women is severed, it seems, by Kahlo's eclipsing adoration of Diego, yet there remains an important bond that exists alongside Diego's omnipresence. This understanding of dissident desires fissures and redefines the established conception of sexuality which determines a subject is either 'straight' or 'gay' at any given point in time. In revealing here that she is neither one nor the other, Kahlo, as an embodiment of the discursive trope of absence and excess,¹² destabilizes the dominant cultural framework that seeks to order and curtail insurgence. Indeed, the space surrounding the oblique stroke of oppositional difference is Frida Kahlo's domain. Her liminal stance is entwined with the personal demands and political obligations that she set for herself. As an incitement to cultural revolution as well as a guarantor of diverse sexual subjectivities, her location 'in between' sees her caught in, resisting, defined by and breaking out from complex culture discourses of race, gender, sexuality and subjectivity which are continuously writing themselves and being re-written, as she re-writes herself from and into them. This is, perhaps, where both her strength and fragility are inextricable: she pushes the boundaries of a reality which seeks to paint her, turning back on it to re-paint it (and) herself.

¹² The discursive trope of absence and excess, whereby bisexuality is on the one hand elided and on the other hand deemed an excess of sexual desire, is historically prevalent in literature, art and discourses on sexuality from the Greeks through sexology and psychoanalysis right up to Lesbian and Gay liberation movements. (For thorough and varied accounts of this trope in scholarship on bisexuality see Cantarella E., 2002. *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*, New Haven: Yale university Press; Garber M., 2000. *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, New York: Routledge; Hall D. and Pramaggiore M. (eds), 1996. *RePresenting BiSexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*, New York: New York University Press.)

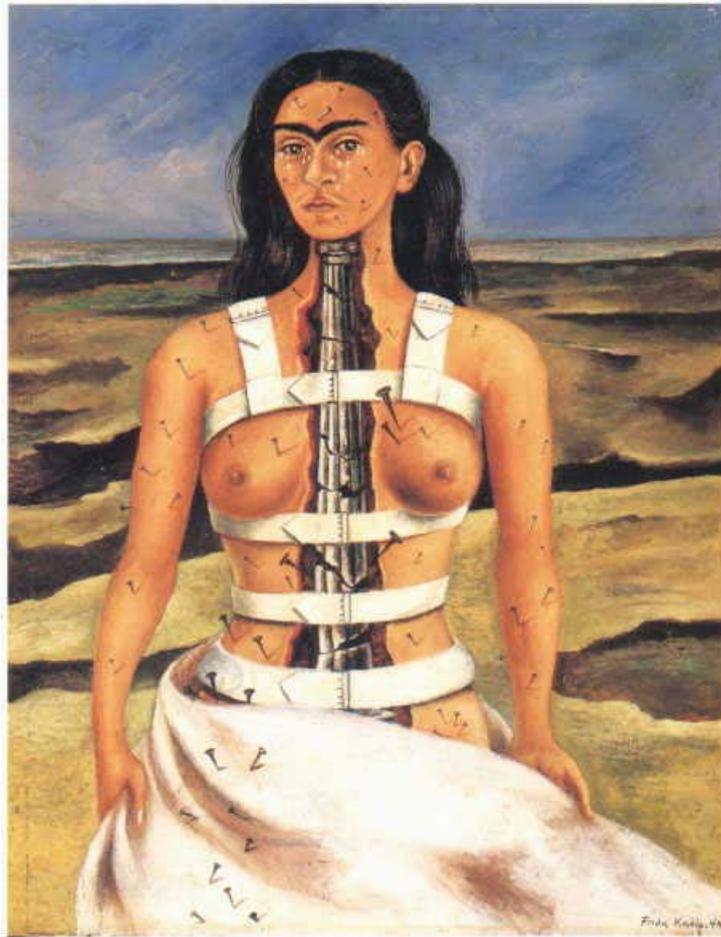


Figure 7

Nowhere is this tension between the resilience and vulnerability more boldly illustrated than in a striking portrait of her broken body, 'The Broken Column' (Figure Seven). Bound in a steel orthopaedic corset, she is constricted by the very framework without which she would collapse. Awkwardly supported by an exposed iconic column riddled with fractures, her noble head looks out from a desolate landscape. The ruptures in her body, between her body and the land, and in the land itself foretell the difficulties endemic in the boundless practices of personal exploration and cultural revolution. Her steadfast gaze not only accepts these challenges without question, it also confronts the viewer's gaze and in so doing returns the challenges to the world beyond the frame. At the same time, the chiasmic landscape, backdrop for her enduring loneliness, seeks to engulf her in an almost apocalyptic image of the last woman in a bleak and barren fading earth. The pins puncturing the surface of her skin present Kahlo as a sacrificial deity, and the cloth she holds below her waist resembles a shroud which covers her legs – as her extravagant dresses did

in life - in preparation for her burial. However, the characteristic mask-like expression, which refuses to succumb to the tears that wash her cheeks, upholds her strongest consistency: a resolve to fight, to resist, and above all to survive being alive. In this context, the bleak ruptures of 'The Broken Column' oddly conceal and endorse the ambiguous ideal of contingent difference that Kahlo extolled. Her flayed and open skin tenaciously holds her splintered self together, connecting disparate and convergent 'selves', which are in no way isolated from the worlds she is inhabited by and inhabits. Representing the personal and political as inexorably linked, she paints the largest pins pierced into her heart and womb: her two great vulnerabilities, which, alongside her staunch political beliefs, caused her so much sorrow and drove her unusual creativity.

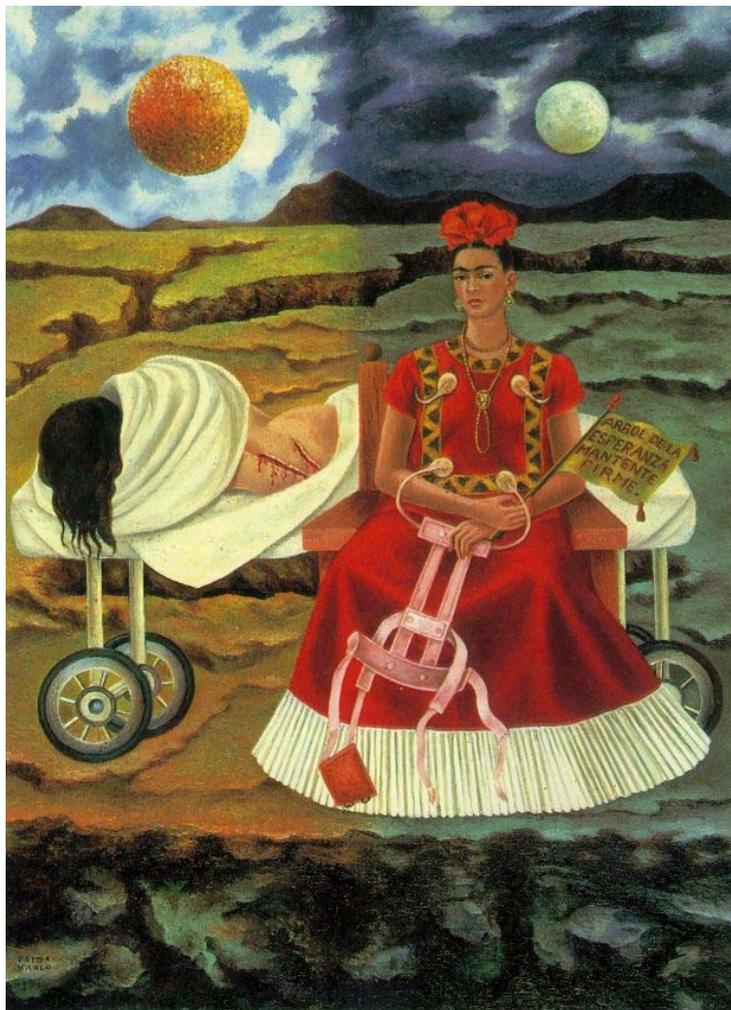


Figure 8

The peculiar veracity and remote solitude that resonate throughout Kahlo's self-portraits do not occlude a sense of hope. In 'Tree of Hope' ([Figure Eight](#)), painted after a major operation on her spine,¹³ she turns her back on the Frida confined to a hospital trolley, takes off her corporeal restrictions, and, luminous in magenta under a full moon, waves a golden flag upon which is written 'tree of hope, stay firm'. The painting celebrates the persistently gritty spirit that narrates Kahlo's self-representations and seems to hold the impetus of her characteristic zeal: in both pleasure and pain, to feel the achievements and disappointments of life is, in Frida's paintings, to be alive. Indeed, the physical torment she endured, and the psychical and emotional unrest she suffered, seemed rarely to numb her. During her final decline towards death she declared, 'I am not sick I am broken. But I am happy to be alive as long as I can paint' (Kahlo, 1953, n.p.). She also famously wrote in 1953, 'Feet what do I need them for if I have wings to fly' (Fuentes, 1995, plate 134). Indeed, Frida believed she could fly, and a year later, as a result of spiritual enlightenment, artistic license, or the cocktail of potent drugs she was by this stage taking, she did. In the final entry in her diary, an expressive ink drawing of an ascending angel whose black boots negate the legs that caused her so much pain, a lifelong desire for peace is finally fulfilled: 'Sleep, sleep, sleep', she writes (Fuentes, 1995, plate 171). Death, then, is not conceived as a decline or an end but as an ascent to another beginning. As Kahlo explains, 'Nobody is separate from anybody else...Anguish and pain, pleasure and death are no more than a process' (Fuentes, 1995, plates 77-78).

Indeed, the ribbons, arteries, roots and vines that run like threads throughout Frida's work are woven together in her mantra, 'diversity in unity' (Fuentes, 1995, plate 60). In tying together the elements that comprise her ambiguous 'self', Kahlo demonstrates an acute awareness of the complex connections within and between subjects and the world while avoiding facile resolutions of the very conflicts which engender her paintings and make them so powerful. This seems to guide Kahlo's vision of equality existing alongside difference. Writings and sketches throughout her diary explore the tangibility of simultaneous opposites, and the painting 'Xóchitl', or 'The Flower of Life' ([Figure Nine](#)) marks an important moment where exclusive oppositions are superseded. The sexualized phallic-vaginal flower uses body parts

¹³ In a letter to Alejandro Gómez Arias dated 30 June 1946 she wrote: 'So the big operation is behind me now...I've got two huge scars on my back'.

recognizable as male and female to engender an image that is not part-male-part-female, but something new that retains contingency alongside difference.



Figure 9

While patriarchal, heteronormative and imperialist ideologies and practices thicken the oblique stroke of binary distinctions, Kahlo's image erodes the very metaphysical premise that upholds them, rendering the divisive slash mutable. Crucially, 'Xóchitl' neither extols nor negates sexual difference. More radically than that, it re-conceives the strictures through which difference is normatively coded, contended, and impressed. As such, Frida Kahlo's artistic ethos, rooted in her ideological outlook, coincides with the theories extolled in bi-sexual politics of the late twentieth century. Jo Eadie, satirising the ruling premise of identity politics, states that:

The Other cannot be inside our own space: its birth destroys the host, so that where 'them' begins 'us' has to stop...the two cannot, ultimately, coexist...to acknowledge, to

give birth to the other in us is supposedly to cease being who we are altogether. The reality, of course, is very different. (Eadie, 1993, p.154)

Through her art, Frida lived this different reality, announcing that giving birth to the other within us is where ‘who we are’ begins.¹⁴

Self-proclaimed as ‘the one who gave birth to herself’ (Feuntes, 1995, plate 49), Frida Kahlo painted her own reality; reclaiming it, reflecting it and repeatedly re-living it. A performer of gender roles, unabashedly excessive in femininity as well as masculinity, and an intimate lover of both women and men, she painted narratives and wrote images that exploit the creative tensions concealed and compelled by oppositional rationale. Boldly confronting the thorny imperative of subjectivity, she embraced her heterogeneous marginality as a valuable political standpoint as well as an innovative personal imperative. Her works re-activate identities as assemblages of dynamic and incomplete parts operating in the various cultural contexts that partially produce *and are produced by* the subjects who inhabit and perform them. Perhaps most compellingly of all, though, her arresting gaze fixes the viewer, unsettling the assumed division between the mobile viewing subject and its inert viewed object, and returning the viewer’s scrutiny towards a consideration of how, and with what effects, identity and marginality are normatively dealt with and reconceived. Hybridity of race, sex, gender and sexuality coalesce in Frida’s work to cogently disrupt the paradigm of sameness versus difference that has historically elided dissident identities. Her paintings, which negotiate the intricate tensions between identity and marginality, situate her ‘in between’. A curious artist and committed idealist, she painted magic with a realist brush, and in so doing dealt with difference differently.

¹⁴ Homi K Bhabha’s hybridity theory, specifically his conception of a ‘Third Space’, is interesting here: ‘...it is the “inter”...the *in-between space* – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture...And by exploring this Third Space we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves’. Bhabha, Homi K., 1994. *The Location of Culture* London: Routledge, pp.38-9.

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