

Remembrance of an Open Wound: Frida Kahlo and Post-revolutionary Mexican Identity

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# REMEMBRANCE OF AN OPEN WOUND:<sup>1</sup>

## FRIDA KAHLO AND POST-REVOLUTIONARY

### MEXICAN IDENTITY<sup>2</sup>

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Hayden Herrera's 1983 biography of Frida Kahlo set in motion a tidal wave of interest in the artist's life and work. Although Herrera deserves much praise, her psycho-biographic approach led to a flood of criticism that diagnosed Kahlo's art as a symptom of her turbulent private life. Critics who focus on Kahlo's biography tend to overlook her public agency and activism. More than cries for love, or desperate soul searches, Kahlo's self-portraits investigate the cultural and political tensions of her contemporary Mexico.

On the one hand, one can see how the Aztec, Zapotec, and Mexican folk imagery in Kahlo's paintings reflect the nationalist ideology of post-revolutionary Mexico that revered indigenous and past traditions. On the other hand, Kahlo also undermines, complicates and resists the ideologies of nationalism that romanticized the autochthonous. Post-revolutionary *indigenismo*<sup>3</sup> attempted to cauterize the wounds of Mexico's violent history. In her self-representations, Kahlo not only exposes these wounds, she lets them bleed. Through her investigation of her own subjectivity, Kahlo redefines the modern *mestizo/a*.

After the Mexican Revolution of 1910, and with the election of Álvaro Obregón in 1920, Mexico began to emerge from the positivist philosophy that reigned during Porfirio Díaz's thirty-four year dictatorship. The *científicos*, or positivist intellectuals, professionals, and officials of the dictatorial regime viewed society as an organism subject to the universal laws of evolution. "They saw their mission as leading Mexico down the scientifically-founded path towards Western-style 'civilization'" (Hijar Serrano 19). The Díaz administration despised indigenous Mexican culture and held the United States and Europe up as models for economics and culture.

After the overthrow of the Díaz regime, the newly elected government rejected the anti-autochthonous philosophy and policy of

its predecessors. They provided funds for the creation of public, socially effective art that would further transmit the ideals of the Revolution to the masses (Declercq 32).

In 1922, Kahlo entered the National Preparatory School, a center of post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism. During Kahlo's period as a student, José Vasconcelos (1882-1959) held the position of minister of education. Vasconcelos called for "un nuevo arte nacional" that would allow popular revolutionary energies to follow through on a symbolic level (Hijar Serrano 21). In 1921-22 he commissioned a number of artists to paint murals in La Preparatoria, including Kahlo's future husband Diego Rivera (1886-1957). The post-revolutionary government and Mexican muralists such as Rivera, José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974) attempted to bring the conquest and colonization of Mexico, as well as the "hidden histories" of the ancient past, to light. Their glorification of ancient and contemporary native culture encouraged a largely *mestizo* population to embrace a previously disavowed aspect of their heritage.

As Stuart Hall states, this sort of reaching back, this attempt to unearth the past, not only entails a process of rediscovery, it is intimately involved in the production of identity: "not an identity grounded in the archeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past" (Hall 393). While Hall does not underestimate the importance of "imaginative rediscovery" he also recognizes how such acts impose false coherence on the past. "Such texts restore an imaginary fullness of plenitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past" (Hall 394). Rivera's murals, with their communist revision of the Aztec past, restore an imaginary fullness to pre-conquest indigenous life. In other words, they operate like a fetish. By contrast, Kahlo's art, through its ambiguity and tension, suggests that cultural identities are unstable and problematic (Hall 395). Her paintings resist oversimplification and therefore do not provide ready use for nationalist themes (Cooey 99).

Although Kahlo painted her self-portraits on a much smaller scale than the grandiose murals, one cannot describe her art as less political than the muralists'. Many of Kahlo's paintings demonstrate anti-materialist, anti-imperialist, and specifically anti-US themes. For example, Kahlo's *My Dress Hangs There* (1933) provides a critique of industrialized North America.

Kahlo produced this work when she was living in New York with Rivera, who was painting a mural in Rockefeller Center.<sup>4</sup> Unlike

Rivera's mural, with its romantic portrayal of a factory worker in the center, Kahlo's painting is devoid of any portraiture as such. Only a deteriorating poster of Mae West, the Hollywood icon, hangs in the background. Through this image, Kahlo highlights the prominence of sensationalized sexuality in the social fabric of US culture.

Kahlo depicts the destruction, greed and squander of capitalism through a variety of stylistic techniques and symbolic markers. The uncharacteristically dark palette creates a somber, seedy cast over the urban sprawl. The collage method at the base of the painting pieces together newspaper photographs of Depression-era food lines and military parades. The city as industrial machine dwarfs the ant-like masses. The pollution from the steamboats and smokestacks coats the New York City skyline, an uncontrollable fire burns a block of buildings, the almighty dollar appears in a church window, and a garbage can overflows with refuse. The entire scene serves as a reminder of the evils and excesses of industry and consumerism.

In the midst of the chaos and decay a brightly colored Tehuana dress, the traditional costume of Zapotec women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and representative of a style of dress Kahlo frequently wore, hangs on a string suspended between an open toilet and a golden trophy. The Tehuana dress starkly contrasts with the industrial and commercial backdrop of Western urbanism. Because Kahlo did not paint herself in the garment it suggests displacement and absence.<sup>5</sup> The Tehuana dress stands out as a marker of difference. It occupies the place of the exotic Mexican as spectacle in the eyes of the depersonalized, consumer-oriented, over-saturated industrial world.

To some degree, the flat, motionless dress, like the telephone, the toilet, the trophy, and the gas pump, serves as an empty symbol of culture. Kahlo first donned the Tehuantepec costume after she met Rivera, who often traveled to the region, and painted its people. Although the folklore that surrounded Tehuantepec women probably appealed to Kahlo,<sup>6</sup> to a large extent, she wore traditional clothing to please Rivera.<sup>7</sup> He felt that all modern Mexican women should wear traditional Mexican costumes:

The classic Mexican dress has been created by people for people. The Mexican women who do not wear it do not belong to the people, but are mentally and emotionally dependent on a foreign class to which they wish to belong, i.e., the great

American and French bureaucracy. (Rivera qtd. in Herrera *Frida* 111)

Although Rivera often spoke of Kahlo's indigenous roots,<sup>8</sup> her upbringing was quite bourgeois. Furthermore, "primitive" fashions were currently *en vogue* in European and American cultural centers. Even as she criticized superficial New Yorkers for their desire to "go native," Kahlo turned a critical eye towards herself. In a letter to a friend she writes: "Meanwhile some of the *gringa*-women are imitating me and trying to dress *a la Mexicana*...and to tell you the truth they look absolutely impossible. That doesn't mean that I look good in them either" (Herrera *Frida* 173). Nonetheless, Kahlo gained a clearer perspective on Mexico from New York. In New York City, Kahlo achieved a cultural distance that allowed her to stand off and look at her Tehuana dress as a symbol of an idealized and exoticized *Mexicanidad*.<sup>9</sup>

The Tehuana dress depicted in *My Dress Hangs There* shows up in a self-portrait from 1937 entitled *Memory*. Although Kahlo appears in this work, once again, she does not wear the dress. Instead, it hangs on a red ribbon that mysteriously drops from the sky. In the background, another garment, a schoolgirl's uniform, descends from a similar, vein-like string. Kahlo, in the center, wears her hair cropped and dons European-style clothes. A rod penetrates the hole that signifies her absent heart which lies, massive and bleeding, beside her. For Herrera, this painting reads "as simple and direct as a Valentine heart shot through by an arrow." It expresses Kahlo's misery over an affair Diego had with Kahlo's sister Cristina (Herrera *The Paintings* 112).

While Herrera convincingly supports this reading, in my view this painting expresses a conflict that reaches beyond Kahlo's relationship with her husband. Kahlo depicts herself as triply divided in this painting. Neither Frida the schoolgirl, Kahlo the Tehuana, or Kahlo the Europeanized Mexican appears complete. While the Kahlo in the center lacks arms, each of the dresses contains one. Unlike Vasconcelos's celebration of "la raza cósmica," his conception of a "fifth race" of people who represent the genetic and cultural combination of all of the races of the world, Kahlo's bizarre self-portrait conveys her experience of gender and cultural identity as fragmented.

Kahlo, whose creased skirt and blouse accent her division, rests one foot upon land and another, boat-like foot, floats in the ocean. The landscape evokes the Spaniards' arrival on the shores of the Americas. The heart, which stains the soil with blood, symbolizes the ensuing

violence and devastating legacy of the conquest. The rod, with its potential to teeter back and forth, implies Mexico's past and current political instability. Its position through Kahlo's chest further suggests her, and all Mexicans', crisis of national identity.

The center Kahlo stands apart from the hand that reaches out of the schoolgirl's uniform. In this way, Kahlo emphasizes her distance from her childhood innocence. Instead, the center Kahlo locks arms with the Tehuana dress. This gesture conveys solidarity between the indigenous and the *mestiza*; the same red bloodline connects them. Nonetheless, the Kahlo in the center weeps for the disunity that still informs their relationship.

Kahlo revisits the themes introduced in *Memory* in her famous painting from 1939, *The Two Fridas* (fig. 1). Upon first glance, this work calls for a dualistic reading. As Herrera suggests, "the two Fridas... stand for Kahlo's dual heritage" (*The Paintings* 135). Upon closer examination, however, Kahlo destabilizes a neat duality in *The Two Fridas*. While one Frida wears a Tehuana costume, the other wears a Victorian blouse. Nonetheless, the Frida in the Victorian blouse also wears a Tehuana skirt. This Frida's exposed breast confounds traditional notions of Victorian prudishness and propriety. Furthermore, the Zapotec Frida grasps a nineteenth century photograph,<sup>10</sup> a product of European technology that illustrates European conventions of representation.

With their stern gazes, the two Fridas confront the viewer with their multiple locations of self. While some of the imagery suggests connection and interdependence, themes of interruption and violence also operate within the painting. Although the Fridas share a bloodline, the artificial means through which it functions underscores the precarious basis of their relationship. The Fridas attempt to cauterize the exposed vein with a small photograph, on one end, and a surgical clamp, on the other. Despite their efforts, blood spills on the white Tehuana skirt, and replaces its floral pattern. Once again, the violence of the past makes up the social fabric of the present.

*The Two Fridas* does not reproduce the stability of a dyad, but exemplifies the process of transculturation. This painting acknowledges a third cultural position, not *criollo*,<sup>11</sup> not native, but *mestizo*. Nonetheless, Kahlo avoids an excessively harmonious celebration of the interaction of cultural components in this painting. The Fridas hold hands, but rather dispassionately. The stormy sky and the extreme tilt of the bench add further tension to the scene. The portrait does not exude



Figure 1: *The Two Fridas*

peace and harmony, but uneasiness and awkwardness. In this way, Kahlo destabilizes the post-revolutionary fantasy of the *mestizo* as the harmoniously balanced genetic and cultural combination of the Meso-American autochthonous and the Spanish conquerors. In *The Two Fridas*, Kahlo exposes an unconscious signifying chain that challenges the structure of this newly formed ideal (Ragland-Sullivan 59, 63).

Even when Kahlo's physical body remains unified, her image does not necessarily convey coherence. In her painting from 1932, *Self-Portrait on the Border Line between Mexico and the United States*, Kahlo appears in a conservatively long, old-fashioned, pink dress and wears white lace gloves. The stone pedestal she stands on bears her Christian first name "Carmen" and her husband's last name "Rivera," not her usual "Frida Kahlo." In other words, at least partially, Western patriarchal tradition defines her identity.

Although her garments do not reflect the Tehuana style, Kahlo adorns a *Coatlicue*<sup>12</sup>-like necklace. In further contradistinction to her rather delicate raiment, her confrontational gaze is anything but demure. The cigarette she holds in her right hand and her visible nipples all signify rebelliousness, defiance. Kahlo represents herself as a combination of European civility, stoic indigenusness, and macho grit. Kahlo not only resists an essential femininity, but an essential mexicanness in this painting. She represents herself as a product of both constructs.

In this work, like *My Dress Hangs There*, Kahlo presents a critique of the US. The US landscape, with its billowing smokestacks and skyscrapers, reveals the United States' disregard for its native past. While the Aztec landscape supports a variety of firmly rooted vegetation, on the side of the United States machines sprout cords underground. Kahlo stresses the United States' imperialist desires as well as its artificial relationship with the land in this painting. The US machines feed off of the Aztec vegetation. Although Janice Helland suggests that Kahlo provides an "idealization of the Aztec past"(8) in this painting, certain details do not support this view. For example, Kahlo does not paint the pre-Columbian artifacts in an exalted way; instead, they are small and fairly haphazardly strewn.

In *Self-Portrait on the Border* the artifacts on both sides of the border can be understood as the ideological tools of national propaganda. Kahlo stands on the border between the industry and technology of the United States' present and the ruins of the Aztec past. In this painting, Kahlo represents herself as a border subject. Although she holds a Mexican flag, this does not suggest her patriotism. She does not wave the flag, but casually lets it rest near her waist. Here, Kahlo embodies modern Mexico; she locates the modern *mestiza* between two radically different and faulty ideals.

In *Four Inhabitants of Mexico* (1938) Kahlo further explores the post-revolutionary Mexican psyche. In this work, "the inhabitants" stand larger than life and represent various stereotypes of Mexican identity (McDaniel Tarver 18). As in *Self-Portrait on the Border*, Kahlo includes an imperfect clay idol in this painting. Its broken off feet suggest immobility and instability. Just as the statue exists as incomplete, so are constructed histories of the past. Kahlo covers the Judas figure,<sup>13</sup> or the stereotypical macho, with explosives and fuses that symbolize his violent, dangerous, and self-destructive tendencies (Herrera *The Paintings* 24). The papier-mâché skeleton stands for the Mexican cult



of death or “the myth that Mexicans are unafraid of death” (McDaniel Tarver 19). The straw figure represents a revolutionary, the “fragility and pathos in Mexican life, a poignant mixture of poverty [and] pride” (Herrera *The Paintings* 18).

Despite the title, Kahlo actually depicts five inhabitants in this painting. A small child, similar in appearance to a young Kahlo, sits in wonder and fear as she gazes up at the figures that tower over her. This child symbolizes Kahlo’s entire generation, or the post-revolutionaries who find themselves overwhelmed by the myths of the past and present. In *Four Inhabitants*, Kahlo exposes the shallow national unity of her contemporary Mexico. As Benedict Anderson suggests, regardless of “the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail” the nation is “always perceived as a *community*” or “a deep, horizontal comradeship”(16). In this painting, Kahlo implies that, despite the fervent propaganda, no such bonds exist. The barren landscape, devoid of organic life, underscores this sense of alienation. The figures’ deep shadows confirm their isolated and artificial existence.

Three of the four inhabitants reappear, in slightly different forms, in *The Wounded Table* (1940). No longer a bewildered child, an adult-sized Kahlo claims a seat at the table. Kahlo, as nuevo-Tehuana, bleeds among the others, a martyr for *Mexicanidad*. In this way, *The Wounded Table* supports Roger Bartra’s analysis of post-revolutionary Mexican culture. As Bartra argues:

Postrevolutionary Mexican society produces the *subjects* of its own national culture.... the hegemonic political culture has been creating its characteristic subjects and has bound them to various universally applicable archetypes.... the subjects become actors, and the subjectivity is transformed into theater. (2)

The curtains that frame this work, as well as the foreground’s tilted perspective, suggest a stage. Here, Kahlo comments on the performative aspects of Mexican identity. Kahlo suggests that this performance rests somewhere between mimicry and masquerade. In *Wounded Table*, Kahlo parodies the stereotypes of mexicanness. The shadowless inhabitants appear as one-dimensional caricatures of their former, already caricatured, selves. The skeleton, for example, with its springy appendages, looks like a jack-in-the-box. Tied to a chair for stability, it cannot support its own weight. The Judas’s head, shrunk to an ironically small size, oozes with blood.

Despite her critique, Kahlo also suggests that these archetypes inform her identity. Unlike in *Four Inhabitants*, the figures of this painting interact with the rather stoic Kahlo. The Judas places a possessive arm around Kahlo's neck, the skeleton playfully lifts up a section of her hair, and the Nayarit statue's arm melds with her own. Kahlo does not resist their touch, but accepts it; her identity is inextricably tied to theirs. Bound but also supported by the stereotypes that surround her, Kahlo demands the viewer's recognition. She does not make excuses for her participation, but claims center stage for herself.

In *My Nurse and I* (1937)(fig. 2) Kahlo produces a different take on the myths of Mexican identity that have nurtured her. As in *Four Inhabitants of Mexico*, Kahlo represents herself as a child in this painting. Although her body conforms to infantile proportions, her head appears eerily adult-sized. As in *The Two Fridas*, a pronounced awkwardness defines the relationship between the two figures. The infant Kahlo does not burrow into the nurse's bosom, but stares off distantly into space. She does not suck from the nurse's breast, but passively allows milk to drip into her mouth. Through this resigned relationship, Kahlo



Figure 2: *The Nurse and I*

implicitly critiques romantic representations of the Indian mother as nurturer.

The pre-Columbian funerary mask does not conceal the nurse's face as much as it suggests that no "true" visage hides underneath. In *My Nurse and I*, "the relationship of the *mestizo* present to the distant pre-conquest past is articulated with wonderful clarity as one governed not by nature but by nurture" (Braddeley 18). Kahlo is not nursed by her Aztec mother, but by a reconstruction of the Aztec past. The mask symbolizes the post-revolutionary government's attempts to mend "the broken rubric" of Mexico's past. Nonetheless, this healing process has not been entirely successful. The milk that falls in the infant Kahlo's mouth, like the rain that falls from the sky, resembles the tears spilt from Kahlo's eyes in *Memory*.

While not immediately apparent, the nurse's long, dark hair and mono-brow suggest Kahlo's likeness. In other words, Kahlo locates her own subjectivity within post-revolutionary reconstructions of the past. As Stuart Hall states, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall 394). Kahlo cannot separate her own identity from the re-tellings of the past she was nurtured on. These re-tellings also include Catholic myth. This classic composition of the Madonna and child, doubles as a *pietà*.

As Daniel Cooper Alarcón explains, mexicanness can be understood as a palimpsest, or "a site where texts have been superimposed onto others in an attempt to displace earlier or competing histories" (xiv). Here, post-revolutionary *indigenismo* has displaced the anti-autochthonous, positivist philosophy of the *científicos*. However, in her paintings, Kahlo suggests that such displacements are never total. "The suppressed material often remains legible, however faintly, challenging the dominant text with an alternate version of events" (Cooper Alarcón xiv). Kahlo's representations of the subject explore the "suppressed material" of the post-revolutionaries' "dominant text."

In her politically charged paintings, Kahlo investigates the tensions of her contemporary Mexico. She does not dismiss or reject the artifacts of Aztec life or the costumes of traditional Mexican people, but refuses to romanticize them. As a result, she presents her viewer with a powerful critique of post-revolutionary propaganda. Kahlo represents Mexico's violent past as an open wound.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I take my title for this chapter from one of Kahlo's paintings, *Remembrance of an Open Wound* (1938).
- <sup>2</sup> I owe a debt of gratitude to the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of Illinois for the Tinker Foundation Summer Field Grant that enabled me to travel to Mexico City and study Kahlo's art.
- <sup>3</sup> Here, *indigenismo* refers to post-revolutionary Mexicans' interest in and support for the native peoples of the Western hemisphere.
- <sup>4</sup> This work was destroyed after Nelson Rockefeller objected to Rivera's inclusion of a portrait of Lenin.
- <sup>5</sup> According to Herrera, Kahlo did not enjoy her stay in New York City, and often complained of homesickness. Part of Kahlo's discontent stemmed from the racism she experienced. The clientele and staff at her hotel frequently snubbed her. Furthermore, her attire often solicited unwanted attention (a child once asked Kahlo if the circus was in town). For further details, see Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*.
- <sup>6</sup> "Theirs is a matriarchal society where women run the markets, handle the fiscal matters, and dominate the men" (Herrera *Frida* 109).
- <sup>7</sup> According to Herrera, Kahlo dressed in modern, European-influenced attire whenever the couple fought, or broke up.
- <sup>8</sup> Kahlo's father was born in Germany, to Hungarian parents, and moved to Mexico City as a young man. He married Matilde Calderón, whose mother was *mestiza* and father indigenous. As discussed, Kahlo attended The National Preparatory School, Mexico's premier institution, where she was one of thirty-five girls in a student body of over 2000 (Herrera *The Paintings* 31).
- <sup>9</sup> *Mexicanidad* refers to the post-revolutionary definition of mexicanness.
- <sup>10</sup> This is a miniature portrait of Diego Rivera as a child (Herrera *Frida* 278).
- <sup>11</sup> A *criollo* is a person of "pure" Spanish ancestry born in the New World.
- <sup>12</sup> *Coatlicue* is a pre-Columbian goddess.
- <sup>13</sup> Judas effigies are brightly painted, wood, plaster, or stone casts covered with paper. They are typically made larger than life size and used during religious celebrations/holidays. The Judas in this painting, with its blue overalls, is reminiscent of Rivera.

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- . *The Two Fridas*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 67" x 67". Collection of the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City.
- . *Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States*, 1932. Oil on metal, 12 1/2" x 13 3/4". Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Reyer, New York.
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