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Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading

Frida Kahlo painted herself but she also unveiled the stories of women who give birth to pools of blood. . . . [Her painting] is the story of women between vigils and dreams, of those who, full of uncertainties, dare to know themselves, paint themselves and create themselves.

— Marjorie Agosín¹

The Mexican Museum in San Francisco knew of Frida Kahlo's presence in the Bay Area among artists of all media — writers, performers, playwrights, painters. That is why it scheduled to show in its galleries during the summer of 1992 *Pasión por Frida*, an exhibit on the legacy of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Nevertheless, the museum's curators were completely taken by surprise when 1,500 people arrived at the exhibit's opening night. They had been even more surprised when, weeks earlier, two hundred people came to audition for a part in the opening night's drama during which five of Kahlo's self-portraits were to be recreated in *tableau vivant*. What came as no surprise, however, to anyone at the museum was this: not all the contestants were artists; not all were Mexican, Mexican-American, or even Latino. Nor were they all women.²

What is it about Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, a woman born in 1907 and who died almost forty years ago (1954), that would draw such a response? What is it about Kahlo that has people from all over the world and of different nationalities, cultures, genders, and ages buying her biographies, traveling to see her portraits, recreating her

imagery in their writing, their paintings, their plays, and their lives? What is it about Kahlo's life and paintings that has hundreds of individuals relating to her in the familiar, referring to her by her first name?

In 1987 I went to Mexico to learn about the Mexican art world. I lived there for a year and a half and have continued to visit on a regular basis. It was there I learned about Frida's importance to artists in Mexico, one of many art worlds whose identity politics has been profoundly influenced by her paintings. Born, the majority of them, between 1945 and 1960, these artists came of age either during or shortly after the period of overt social unrest in the 1960s and 1970s when student-led demonstrations challenged the status quo and especially its rhetorical defense of a Mexican national identity whose obsessive focus on either a Pre-Columbian past or a modernized future seemed at odds with present urban realities of Mexico City. These are artists who have never forgotten the hundreds of university students, mothers, and children who were massacred by government troops on October 2, 1968, while peacefully protesting the failures of the Mexican revolution to address the needs of the people as promised in its constitution — all the people including women, children, students, Indians, the middle class, the poor. Although by dawn on October 3 the bodies and the bloodshed were washed away, the memories of the state's hegemonic measures have festered like open wounds in the minds of these artists, as they have in the minds of many others.

Ever since 1968, Mexican artists — in an effort to sever themselves from the status quo — have sought alternative discourses, alternative icons, and alternative politics with which to construct a Mexican identity that most approximates the realities and demands of life in the world's largest metropolis. The constructions are necessarily varied, yet they share some fundamental concerns. For many, Frida's life and paintings stand at the center of these concerns. She alone has come to symbolize a post-1968 sensibility, and, although she may not speak *for* and *to* all contemporary artists, her central role in post-1968 constructions of identity is indisputable. Indeed, despite the different contexts, it is a role she has come to occupy among individuals and groups all over the world.

In this article I will focus on the life and works of Frida Kahlo with regard to her current significance among artists and other individuals. Central to my argument are the following questions, which I will attempt to answer: What is it about Frida's life and portraits that generates a desire to fully experience them, to step into them, to embody them? Is it possible that Frida's paintings set precedents for

contemporary identity politics? And if so, how? Because so many people identify passionately with the life and works of Frida Kahlo, the answer to these questions should contribute to our understanding of contemporary constructions of self. Drawn from readings of her diary passages, biographies, paintings, and discussions with artists, I have come to understand her self-portraits as above all else representative of a self-generated subjectivity that was consciously gendered and racialized.³ At a time when both women and “mixed bloods” or *mestizas*⁴ were objectified by revolutionary rhetoric and unshakeable bourgeois sensibilities, creating a *mestiza* self as subject — female and mixed blood — was for women revolutionary. While my observations are profoundly influenced by what I have learned from artists in Mexico City, my ultimate goal is to understand Kahlo in a larger global context and to explore her importance in terms of the more broadly defined context of the histories of art, on the one hand, and contemporary identity politics, on the other.⁵

Living Within Conflict

Frida Kahlo came of age in the early 1920s, on the heels of the revolution and at a time when Mexico was forming a new government and reconstituting a new identity. In an effort to consolidate its power and legitimate its authority, the institutionalized revolutionary government of Mexico, from the 1920s up to the current administration,⁶ first sought to extricate itself from the shadow of Europe and its bourgeois ideologies. Most important, the state turned to constructing a new identity and to defining the uniqueness and historical authenticity of Mexico and Mexican identity, locating this uniqueness first in the Mexican people — the working class and the ethnically “indigenous.” Immediately following the revolution this process of “Mexicanization” occurred most overtly within the Mexican art world through government-sponsored art programs in which indigenous traditions were integrated into the European “fine arts” of orchestral music, ballet, and painting. It was a process of authentication based on a policy of cultural and racial miscegenation or *mestizaje*, leading one of its main proponents, José Vasconcelos, the secretary of public education in the 1920s, to proclaim: “We are Indian blood and soul, our language and civilization are Spanish.”⁷ The rhetoric was accompanied by promises of radical social transformation. Among the populations targeted for reform were the marginalized, including women, who were reconceived as key figures in the process of social change.

Yet the political rhetoric espoused by these politicians did not translate into *real* changes for women at all. Campesinos and workers (male and female) found themselves in the same position. It was very much business as usual — by constructing woman as other (as an object), the male power elite was able to continue constituting itself as subject and as those who have the final say in matters of Mexican subjectivity, identity, and nationalism. There is no better place to observe this than in the famous Mexican mural movement. In the early 1920s a handful of artists and their many workers were hired by the new government under the Ministry of Public Education and charged with the lofty responsibility of visually documenting the ideology, achievements, and goals of the revolution. With Kahlo's marriage in 1929 to Diego Rivera, the most vocal and celebrated of all the Mexican muralists (almost none of whom were women), she placed herself quite literally and intentionally in the center of this political avant-garde.

Frida and other women who on occasion modeled for the muralists found themselves scripted into the master narratives of these epic paintings.⁸ Despite the central location their images often occupied (as artisans, farmers, schoolteachers, and revolutionaries, or as such allegorical figures as Chastity, Purity, and Mother Earth), they were anonymous participants in the forward march of Mexican society. It was a march orchestrated by the revolutionary government perhaps, but, as painted, led by such individuals as Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, Lenin and Karl Marx. The historical cosmos was a male cosmos. There were more men in it; the identifiable personae were men; and men occupied the positions of leadership. The pictorial positioning of woman (of whatever class) was changed very little. The roles she played were perhaps more active than in the past (at least in pictorial terms), but men were still the featured actors. Woman was still to be looked at; men, the voyeurs; woman, anonymous; men, recognizable leaders.⁹ The revolutionary program of integrating women into the Euro-centric artistic and political mainstream was largely rhetorical.

Frida was an ardent supporter of the mural tradition and all it claimed to be and do; her interest in marrying Rivera had much to do with his revolutionary politics. Rivera was the quintessential revolutionary artist. However, in her painting she rejected much of it, especially its masculine bravado. Her narrative was a personalistic narrative rooted not in the Italian Renaissance, the Beaux-Arts traditions of historical painting, or the school of Russian socialist-realism as

was her husband's, but in the European traditions of portraiture and in the Mexican tradition of religious folk art.

In the pictorial construction of her own revolutionary, Mexican identity Frida addressed, rather than ignored, the conflicts brought on by revolutionary ideology. What was it to be Mexican — modern, yet Pre-Columbian; young, yet old; anti-Catholic, yet Catholic; Western, yet New World; developing, yet underdeveloped; independent, yet colonized; mestizo, yet neither Spanish nor Indian? Frida, in constructing for herself a subjectivity, identified with the contradictions of her *mestizaje* by combining together in her life and works Pre-Columbian and modern objects, Church and national icons, male with female, man with woman, Indian with European, art with craft, high with low, crossing from one strata to the other with little regard for such elite constructions of difference. She flaunted her racial as well as cultural hybridism, and granted few privileges to her European heritage. Frida's literal as well as conceptual cross-dressing was in part made possible — as inversions of otherwise rigid social roles often are — within the liminal interstices that revolutionary upheavals create. The narratives of self and person Frida posited in the 1930s and 1940s were decisively different from the dominant style and iconography of her male counterparts, including the revolutionary Mexican muralists. In a culture dominated by bourgeois sensibilities, nationalist ideologies, and Church doctrine — all of which designated separate roles and domains for men and women, as well as Indian and European — she emerges as an anomaly in Mexican pictorial history and in the history of Western art in general.

From early childhood, Frida was uncomfortable with Mexico's cultural conceptions of gender and with the roles and domains attached to them. She demonstrated her discomfort in various ways. Sometimes she did so overtly, by donning male attire. In 1926 at the age of nineteen, she wore a suit and tie in a family portrait her father photographed, and in 1940, angered at her husband's philandering, she painted herself in a man's suit, having cut off her long hair, a sign of Mexican womanhood and female beauty. When painting her portrait, she frequently exaggerated her facial hairs, fashioning herself as a mannish-looking woman. This gender-blending is particularly evident in a portrait she painted, merging half of her face with half of her husband's, creating an androgynous whole, underscoring the pictorially created, sexual ambiguity that characterizes much of Frida's work (Fig. #1).¹⁰

Frida also exhibited contempt for the status quo that restricted women's behavior in other ways. She took to the streets in support of

communist revolutionary movements, vociferously entering the political arena — a male domain. She ignored the restrictions placed on married Mexican women to remain in the house (with the children) and had several extramarital affairs with both men and women; and she referred to her friends, both men and women, as her *cuates*, then a term generally used by a man to refer to his male friends.¹¹

Furthermore, although Frida was upper-middle class and supported many elite notions of the revolutionary state, she was troubled by the race and class differences they presupposed. She demonstrated her discomfort in various ways. She decorated her house not with European and American imports but with Mexican *artesanías*, a common practice among her artist friends, her husband included. Her collections of paintings were not those of "great artists" but the *ex-votos* (religious narratives) of everyday people. When she married Diego Rivera, she wore a dress belonging to her housekeeper who lent it to her for the occasion rather than a fancy, expensive gown. In 1952 she had her photograph taken with all her servants, not a common practice among Mexican elites.

As an art teacher (from 1943 to 1953) at Mexico's revolutionary, alternative art school, La Esmeralda, Frida not only refused the hierarchical role of *Maestra*, asking her students to address her with the familiar, second-person *tu* instead of *usted*, but, in addition, she rejected the tendency to take students to the country to paint the outdoors, popular among teachers then. Instead she took them to see Francisco Goitia, an artist who retreated from the Mexico City art scene to live a bonafide peasant life (not "bohemian") in Xochimilco, a town south of Mexico City. She also took them to drink at local bars and to visit slums, marketplaces, convents, and churches. "*Muchachos*," she would announce, "locked up here in school we can't do anything. Let's go into the street. Let's go and paint the life in the street."¹² She once had her students paint a mural, but not as the other art teachers at La Esmeralda had their students do (her husband among them). Instead, she chose the wall of a *pulquería* (a type of popular bar) on which to do it. This is what she meant by "life in the street." When she and her students were not in the streets, she encouraged them to paint what was in her house — popular art, traditional papier-mâché Judases, clay figures, popular toys, and handcrafted furniture.¹³

Creating the Self as Sacred and Secular Subject

There were many reasons why Frida may have felt the conflicts of Mexican revolutionary identity more than others. The awareness of her historical identity was exaggerated by her acute physical misfortunes. First, a bout with polio as a young girl left her with one permanently handicapped leg. Then, on September 17, 1925, at the age of eighteen she was in an accident in which a trolley car ran into the bus on which she rode. She was left with a crushed pelvis, a broken spine, an impaled vagina, a severely broken leg, and a mangled foot. These were injuries from which she never fully recovered. In addition, it appears that she suffered from spina bifida, a congenital disease of the spine.¹⁴ For most of her life she endured operations, numerous miscarriages, and abortions due to the complications of this disease, the accident, and subsequent surgeries. Unable to have children, she was to be childless until her death in 1954, an identity that plagued her. Her preoccupation with the self-portrait is comprehensible if we understand the power of a self-portrait to, like a mirror, reflect a unified self-image, in the Lacanian sense, and to project that unified self into a public arena through exhibits — important steps to subjecthood (Figs.#2–3).¹⁵

During Frida's life there were basically three areas in Mexican culture where women could achieve wide recognition: in the entertainment world (e.g., opera and ranchera singers, movie stars), in marriage (i.e., to a famous man), or in the religious sphere (e.g., by sainthood). In the construction of her subjectivity, Frida carefully makes of herself a recognizable persona. In her own fashion she draws upon all three of these spheres simultaneously to accomplish her task. As subject of her own paintings she occupies center stage, which helps make her into a celebrity; images of Diego Rivera (usually positioned on her forehead) associate her with a famous husband; Christian and Pre-Columbian religious iconography link her to the religious world. Frida's fame, however, derives not from a simple appropriation of these images but from a carefully worked out relationship to them.

By starring in her self-portraits (as opposed to a film), Frida very methodically (frame by frame) builds a repertoire of Imaged-I's (or Imaged-bodies) within which she offers us a small window onto her world, a kind of case-study methodology. By painting her husband's image on her forehead, she not only associates herself with a well-known person, but (in cartoon-like fashion) she sets into motion her thoughts of him by representing him in miniature form (since he is here a thought).

It is in associating herself with the religious sphere that Frida accelerates the plotting of herself as subject. By pictorially linking her represented body to both Christ and the Virgin, she traverses sacred gender domains.¹⁶ The crown of thorns, iconography incontrovertibly associated with Christ, becomes a yoke of thorns in Frida's self-portraits, and an indigenous ritual Tehuana headdress worn by women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Oaxaca, Mexico) creates a Virgin-like halo around Frida's face. Frida's use of traditional attire¹⁷ transforms her "into a Mexican artifact."¹⁸ Her conscious use of Mexican symbols as attributes of her saintly self in conjunction with her calm, hieratic face serves to enhance her iconic image.¹⁹

However, Frida does not think of herself as a typical religious icon, at least not as figured in (male-centered) Christian terms (i.e., female virgins, martyred men). Instead she stages a drama in which she associates her mortal, secular self with the sacred world of both the Christian/Pre-Columbian world *and* the post-revolutionary world of "messianic nationalism"²⁰ and its attendant symbolism. She exploits the strength she draws from this association — a strength needed for subject status. While she leads the spectator to think of conventional religious icons, the icon she really wants to create of herself is fundamentally unconventional: simultaneously sacred *and* secular.²¹ While she draws upon the power the Christian association offers, her aim is not to produce a theological symbol of the self. Frida's interest in representing a Christ-like, incarnate self is rooted in exposing the materiality of her existence rather than transcending it. In *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I* (Fig.#4), we can see her program well. Depicting a family tree, her parents and grandparents float above her in heavenly clouds, but the focus of the painting is not on heavenly ascent. Rather, it is on the biological generation of life, that is, on the biological generation of Frida's life. The child Frida stands at the center of the universe; this family tree is her nativity scene. In contrast to the birth of Christ, however, Frida's human life is rooted in the materiality of reproduction, not saintly mysticism. An egg, a sperm, fertilization, a zygote, a fetus, a mother's womb — these are the origins and components of Frida's incarnation. The pollinating plant in the lower left-hand corner underscores the earthiness of her reproduction. Frida's origins are sexed, not gendered; biological, not cosmic.

However, Frida's mission (it seems) was not to lose herself in nature but to recognize it as the primary referent of culture and as the source of its raw material. In contrast to the modernists of her day, however, Frida approaches nature not as something to be organized,

smoothed out, transformed, and controlled. Rather, she establishes a system of differentiation between nature and culture that gives to her an aura not of the transformation of nature but of a naturalness that is indeed more natural than nature. In her 1943 self-portrait *Roots* (Fig.#5), it is Frida's reclining body, dressed in the colored clothes of culture, from whose chest sprouts a verdant and fertile vine that covers the landscape with its large green leaves and blood-filled veins. The parched, infertile terrain sprouts nothing. While Frida communes with nature, however, she never becomes nature. It is through communion with nature and the Mexican landscape (but not her confusion with it) that Frida begins to gain an authenticity needed for her *mes-tiza* identity.

Along with identifying with the body and life of Christ, Frida drew inspiration from a type of popular religious art known as the *ex-voto* and to certain schools of portraiture from which the *ex-voto* most likely derives.²² As Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen noted almost a decade ago, these "popular forms made it possible for her to develop the limits of the purely iconic and allowed her to use narrative and allegory. In this way she created a mode of emblematic autobiography."²³ The *ex-voto* is a votive painting offered to Christ, the Virgin, or a saint in recognition for help received at a critical moment in life — an accident or illness suffered. Within its small and intimate space (about 8 x 11 inches) both the accident and the saintly intervention are portrayed. Discursive text almost always accompanies the visual text. The visual as well as the written narrative is a short, personal story authored by the victim or relatives of the victim; as such it is not unlike a self-portrait. An *ex-voto* is a kind of *event-oriented* self-portrait whose text describes not an inner, cerebral self, but an outer, experiential self, an embodied and vulnerable self. Most important, the *ex-voto* portrays the self as something that is acted upon by someone or something outside it. The *ex-voto* is a devotional art form that suggests human vulnerability in the face of God, and it is a popular art form that reveals the powerlessness of the lower classes. Above all else, it expresses the position of the Other in society. Frida loved the *ex-voto* and had a collection of them hanging in her house. Identifying with the victims, they reminded her, perhaps, of the frailty of her own existence.

Frida is profoundly concerned with representing her own flesh and blood, which she sees as quintessential ingredients of the visual definition of her womanhood. Frida's incarnated suffering, therefore, is ultimately of the human, rather than the spiritual, world; it is human survival, not spiritual anguish, she seeks to depict. Yet it is mostly

through the imagery associated with representations of Christ — a sacred, bloody, sacrificial victim, strong and enduring — that she explores her embodied self.

In the pictorial representation of her crushed and penetrated body, Frida introduces the unrepresentable to the study of the female nude (Fig.#6). Her acted-upon female is a mutilated woman, pictorially self-defined, and, as such, challenges the institutionalized objectification of the female nude in Western art which, as Lynda Nead cogently demonstrates, acts as “a paradigm of Western high culture with its network of contingent values: civilization, edification, and aesthetic pleasure” as well as “possession, power, and subordination.”²⁴ In contrast to her husband’s nudes, Frida’s nudes de-eroticize the female by presenting blemished, imperfect, bloody bodies. Her nudes are not positioned in desire as are the odalisques, Western painting’s reclining nudes (originally female concubines). Feminist art history rightfully claims that the painted odalisque, which has come to epitomize the genre of the nude in Western art, is the most objectified of visual representations of women. The reclining nude’s body, smooth and voluptuous, is there for the taking, and it is the male gaze, according to feminist art critics, which conquers and dominates the passive figure.

Frida’s nudes do not privilege the voyeuristic gaze as does the odalisque. Instead, her nudes are “a constant challenge, irreverent toward the values of the dominant ideology,” in which “her vision of life and death [is filled] with blood.”²⁵ There is an unspoken taboo in the art world (and in society) against representing female blood or menstrual blood. Indeed all blood that flows from a woman falls under this taboo. Because Frida ignores these taboos, her figures are truly out of the ordinary and shocking. (This is why the dean of surrealism, André Breton, upon seeing Frida’s work for the first time in 1938, claimed her — albeit mistakenly, I think — as a surrealist.) Contrary to depictions of the mutilated male, where blood and guts are a sign of sacrifice as seen in the blood of Christ and the guts of the war hero, the mutilated female represents absolute violation (“protect the women and children”) and, by extension, signifies a breakdown in the social order. And that is exactly what Frida’s nudes attempt to signify. They challenge and expose long-standing sexual paradoxes — men’s blood is holy as in the blood of Christ or courageous as in the blood of the war victim (“the red badge of courage”); women’s blood is profane and evidence of a violation. For Frida, the exposure of her blood is a symbol of emancipation. In the pictorial upheavals she creates, Frida opens an opportunity for the “long-suffering Mexican

woman" to come out of her culturally constructed silence and express herself and, in the expression of herself, gain subject status.²⁶

In reconstructing the nude, however, Frida ultimately focuses on the vagina, for it is here where the many stereotypes of women's inferiority coalesce. "Women are inferior beings," wrote Mexican essayist and Nobel laureate Octavio Paz in his description of the Mexican character. "Their inferiority is constitutional and resides in their sex, their submissiveness, which is a wound that never heals."²⁷ A woman's open anatomy, as stereotyped by Mexican society, makes her perpetually vulnerable, constantly susceptible to injury and violation. A "wound that never heals" is an open wound, a bloody wound, and, as the locus of sex between a man and a woman, it is a concept that emphasizes the violence with which the Mexican conceives of sex as described by Paz. In addition, the "wound that never heals" places women's sexuality in the negative; it is an open wound. Chastity, offered as the only decent alternative for women, was never a possibility for Frida, for it disembodies women, as the manner in which the Virgin is attired makes evident. Through relentless exposure of a woman's so-called inferiority, Frida critiques not only the androcentrism of the representation of blood but the phallogentrism on which the definition of the "open wound" concept rests.²⁸

Three of Frida's paintings in particular radically redefine the "open wound" concept and provide clear examples of this redefining process: *The Broken Column* (1944), *My Birth* (1932), and *Remembrance of an Open Wound* (1938) (Figs.#6-8). *The Broken Column* shows Frida in a barren terrain. Her body is Christ-like; nails pierce her; tears run down her cheeks; and a white sheet, a loincloth, covers her lower torso. Medical straps bind her since her spine — a broken, Ionic column — betrays her. This is a painting about pain, but it is also a painting about penetration — penetration of Frida's body by the accident, by machines, and by modern medicine, — by the patriarchy. "To some observers," Hayden Herrera notes, "the column is analogous to a phallus."²⁹ But, I would add, it is a broken phallus, whose erection crumbles. Indeed, Frida's painting suggests that phallogentrism cannot support or define her female body. The choice of an Ionic column, I think, is no coincidence. The canons of beauty promulgated in the Academies of Rome, Paris, and Mexico are rooted in the ideals of beauty formulated in Classical Greece, where men chiseled columns into geometric perfection and female forms into emblems of beauty — conceptions more "beautiful" than biologically figured women as in Pygmalion's Galatea. While referring to her own degenerating spine — "life is replaced by a crumbling ruin," she writes in her diary³⁰ —

Frida deconstructs the Pygmalion complex. Classical beauty, alas, is hypothetical since it is based more on geometry than reality; in practice it crumbles. Frida's backbone is not a perfectly chiseled form; it is not a male construction.

In *My Birth* (1932) Frida portrays, as Herrera describes it, "one of the most awesome images of childbirth ever made."³¹ A woman lies dead on a bed, her face covered with a white sheet. Above her head hangs an image of the Virgin Mother, the Mater Dolorosa, the Sad-denied Virgin. The Mater Dolorosa, who weeps for the loss of her child, suggests the sorrow Frida felt at the time she painted this canvas, when shortly before, Frida had had to terminate a pregnancy. Yet this seemingly dead mother, covered from the waist up, is naked from the waist down, and is giving birth to a child, a child whose protruding head is unmistakably that of Frida. The mother is both Frida and Frida's mother, Matilde Kahlo, and the child is both Frida and the child she lost. Generations merge in a confluence of female bodies giving birth to one another, all defined by the physicality of one's female origins. Indeed what is most "awesome" about this painting is the audacious redefining of the vagina. In contrast to the *Broken Column*, *My Birth* is not a critique of the social order, nor of the ordering of the female body, nor of the passive voice the female as the "open wound" assumes. The vagina is not something that is a negative space, defined only by penetration. Rather, drawing upon Pre-Columbian sculptures of childbirth as an alternative source for pictorial antecedents, Frida presents birth as something that opens onto the world, which offers, from which all human life begins. Birth is quintessentially of woman.

It is in her painting *Remembrance of an Open Wound* (1938) that Frida challenges the "open wound" concept most satirically. Theoretically, we could identify three "wounds" in this painting, yet only one is overtly "open." Frida's wounded foot is covered in bandages, and her vagina is covered with the folds of her long skirt, but exposed is a large, vagina-shaped wound on her inner thigh. This third wound is not a real wound; it is a "psychic" wound, according to Frida, and it was caused by her husband's betrayal.³² His philandering violated her trust. But however psychic it may be, its rawness and bloodiness are pictorially real; it marks a bold rejection of the "long-suffering woman" who is expected to silently endure her macho and, therefore, unfaithful husband. Frida, in her defiance, lifts up her dress (ladies do not do that) and exposes an "open wound" that is not a real vagina.³³ However, its shape is not coincidental since vaginas are symbols of violation (although rarely represented). The vagina as "open wound"

is a vagina defined by the patriarchy — not as defined by biology — hence Frida's relocation of it. While Frida dismisses the reigning mythology, she leaves us with a reconstructed sexuality by claiming her actual, biological vagina as hers and does so by depicting herself masturbating, as she told her friends.³⁴ ("Instincts themselves are not dangerous; the danger lies in any personal, individual expression of them," Paz says³⁵). In conclusion, Frida defines the vagina not passively as something penetrated and violated, not as something maternal, but as the locus of pleasure that she grants her self.

Confronting Nationalist Discourses

In creating her subjective identity as a woman, as something to announce proudly rather than negate, Frida ultimately focused on the gendered vision of Mexicanness, Mexican colonization, and the sexual discourses embedded in constructions of revolutionary Mexican identity, especially those dealing with colonization. It is here that many elite ambivalences toward woman as well as toward ethnically indigenous peoples of all genders coalesce. Focusing in on her mestiza identity, Kahlo confronted revolutionary paradoxes and sexual metaphors in a way no one had done before her.

The Mexican revolutionary state conceives of its territory as female — passive, fertile, and virgin — and Indian. As Mexican essayist Octavio Paz, writing in the 1940s, described her, "In a world made in man's image, woman is only a reflection of masculine will and desire. When passive, she becomes a goddess, a beloved one, a being who embodies the ancient, stable elements of the universe: the earth, motherhood, virginity."³⁶ The language used by the state to express concern over its sovereignty is metaphorically cast in gendered (and often sexually hostile) terms in which the Mexican people, culture, and territory (the fatherland, *la patria*) are penetrated and violated by foreigners. As Paz once dramatically put it, the mestizo is the child of the violated Indian mother and raping foreign father.

"All our anxious tensions express themselves in a [single] phrase we use when anger, joy or enthusiasm cause us to exalt our condition as Mexicans," to recall Paz. "*¡Viva México, hijos de la chingada!*" Long live Mexico, children of the violated woman."³⁷ What does it mean to have as the "Eve" of Mexico a raped woman (as opposed to a seduced woman), and to have as Adam a raping father? In this world view, according to Paz, "every woman — even when she gives herself willingly — is torn open by the man, is the *Chingada*." ("The Mexican

conceives of love as combat and conquest," Paz stated. "It is not so much an attempt to penetrate reality by means of the body as it is to violate it."³⁸ "In a certain sense," Paz concluded, "all of us, by the simple fact of being born of woman, are *hijos de la Chingada*, sons of Eve."³⁹ The *chingada*, in other words, is not some amorphous personification of the maternal image. Rather, she is the mother of every Mexican child, and although she stands in opposition to the Virgin, she, like the Virgin, epitomizes the long-suffering Mexican mother. The legacy of the Mexican conquest is the submission by force of the Mexican people to the "penetrating" (and violating) foreigner, the Spaniard. This is the 20th-century view of colonization. The conquest was not only the violation of a people, both women and men, but of the monuments of that land, of indigenous cultures, and especially of the Mexican earth.

In her paintings, Kahlo does not dispute the assumption that the Mexican earth is female, but her earth-woman is one whose identity rests not on a presupposed virginity, the repudiation of some violators, or the denial of her sexuality through the veneration of her passivity. In her paintings Frida transforms the passive earth into an active, sexualized woman, by focusing on her own embodied experiences. In so doing she grants subject status not only to the preconceived earth-mother and Indian-mother, but to her children, the Mexican mestiza and mestizo.

Frida's interest is in the mestiza. Perhaps *What the Water Gave Me* (Fig.#9) is Frida's best example of exposing the psychology of being *mestiza*. Frida sits in the bathtub; the water is still; her toes surface. Although Frida's torso and face are absent from the canvas, her legs appear beneath the water's surface. Upon seeing this painting for the first time André Breton exclaimed;

My surprise and joy was unbounded when I discovered, on my arrival in Mexico, that her [Frida's] work has blossomed forth, in her latest paintings, into pure surreality. . . . The painting that Frida de Rivera was just completing at that moment — *What the Water Yields Me* — illustrated, unbeknown to her, the phrase I had once heard from the lips of Nadja: "I am the thought of bathing in the mirrorless room."⁴⁰

This is, in fact, a painting of a "mirrorless room," just as Breton described. It is a painting of the body, as it *knows* itself without the mirror. Speaking of post-modernism and mass communication, Jean Baudrillard offers an observation that also speaks to Frida's painting, although inadvertently: "today the scene and the mirror no longer

exist; instead, there is a screen and network. In place of the reflexive transcendence of mirror and scene, there is a nonreflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold."⁴¹ Frida's painting anticipates these operations.

What the water gave Frida is knowledge of her body as landscape, but a landscape of eruptions. A skyscraper bursts forth from a volcano onto the "scene"; below it sits a skeleton that overlooks Frida's parents, who stare out as they did in her family portrait; a naked body of a woman, perhaps Frida's, is tied down, a rope wrapped around her neck and waist, threatening her life; the rope comes from a masked man to her left; on the water's surface floats Frida's Tehuana dress; and above it a 16th-century galleon sails as if in conquest toward the roped woman.

The bathtub's non-reflecting surface is a surface not of the imaginary, not of images of the unified self, but a landscape in which conflict is portrayed and problematized. There is nothing passive about this landscape/woman — that "being who embodies the ancient, stable elements of the universe: the earth, motherhood, virginity." It is interesting to note here how Breton here is nourished by the strange ecstasies of puberty and the mysteries of generation, and, far from considering these to be the mind's private preserves, as in some colder climates, she [Frida] displays them proudly with a mixture of candour and insolence."⁴²

But Breton overlooked Frida's political and personal context. Although *What the Water Gave Me* represents a highly sexualized landscape, it is not one of ecstasy as Breton would have it. This is a landscape inspired by the contradictions and consequences gendered visions of the Mexican landscape — of passivity and motherhood, of violence and penetration — contrive. This is a landscape of upheaval, excess, disorder, and rupture. It is of love as conceived in stereotypical terms of combat and conquest, but it is also of the love Paz describes that breaks from those stereotypes: "few persons anywhere ever succ[e]ded in doing so, and even fewer transcend the possessive stage to know love for what it actually is: a perpetual discovery, an immersion in the waters of reality, and an unending re-creation."⁴³ Yet while Frida exposes these androcentric metaphors she offers an alternative discourse. Among these scenes, in the lower right-hand corner, away from the ruptures and conquests, two women, one dark-skinned, one light-skinned, both naked, compose a discourse of *mestizaje* that has nothing to do with the violence that surrounds them.

Other paintings explore this *mestizaje*. *On the Border* (Fig.#10) features a pink-ruffled Frida; it is 1932. She stands on the border

between the United States and Mexico, but more significantly she stands between a Pre-Columbian pyramid (to her right) and pyramidal skyscrapers and factories (to her left), an anthropomorphic, cloud-enveloped sun and moon (to her right), and a faceless, factory exhaust-enveloped American flag (to her left). Like *What the Water Gave Me*, *On the Border* is a landscape painting. Here, however, the landscapes are nation-bound, and the boundaries, so drawn, juxtapose the landscape of Mexico as human-made with the landscape of the United States as mechanically rendered. The Mexican landscape is one full of human artifacts and organic plants. The United States is an industrial landscape in which sounds (loudspeakers) and sights (light-bulbs) have replaced organic plants and whose life is mechanically generated. Frida traveled to the United States several times and despite Rivera's love for the United States, its factories, its mechanical reproductions, she herself never felt at home there. Her heart was always in Mexico; by holding the Mexican flag in her hand, she makes this clear.

There is more to this painting than juxtaposition of landscapes, however. Frida, standing in her pink ruffles, is the grand interpreter of a *mestizaje* that is at once Mexican and European; and yet she never confuses the two. Vasconcelos's "cosmic race" attempted to blend two cultures together so as to create a new people; it was an idea not far from the melting pot. To Frida, however, *mestizaje* may have meant mixed, but mixed without confusion, without losing the flavors and distinctions of the two worlds.

Frida's many still lifes are perhaps the clearest example of her agenda (Fig.#11). Like the fruits and plants of Georgia O'Keefe's still lifes, Frida's painted fruits merge with anthropomorphic references, confounding the fleshiness of fruits with the fleshiness of female genitalia. However, Frida's agenda is rooted less in the abstract, visual relationships characteristic of O'Keefe's work and more in the celebration of Mexican fruits of the female Mexican earth. The *tuna* or prickly pear, which Frida often featured, for example, is commonly thought of as the bleeding heart of Mexico; in fact, its color is an important color to Frida's palette, which she describes in her diary as "REDDISH PURPLE: Aztec. Tlapali [Aztec word for "color" used for painting and drawing]. Old blood of prickly pear [fruit of the *nopal* cactus, indigenous plant of Mexico]. The most alive and oldest."⁴⁴

The vagina-like fruits of Frida's still lifes are not paintings of vulnerability and penetration; they are not open wounds; they are not passive.⁴⁵ They are, in other words, the fruits of fertilization. One could even say that Frida's fruits are inversions of the Spanish term for

still life, *naturaleza muerta*, which literally translates into "dead nature." They are instead *naturaleza viva* or "living nature," a pun that she herself exploited as all her still lifes were so very much alive.⁴⁶

In sum, Frida introduces to the study of the Mexican landscape, indeed to revolutionary conceptions of self, what she introduced to the study of the female nude. Celebrating the openness of the (female) earth's anatomy, she celebrates the active, not passive, nature of the Mexican mother-earth, of the representation of woman. It is Frida's pictorial challenge to the myth of the *chingada*, the myth that locates woman as weak and vulnerable, where she is able not only to represent woman, but reconfigure the representation of Mexican *mestizaje* as well.⁴⁷ Frida's mestiza-self, as embodied Mexican nation, is an active, fertile, female agent with a self-generated subjectivity and self-defined sexuality, which challenges the post-revolution constructions of the conquered and raped fatherland.

Conclusion

The question was raised earlier: "Is it possible that Frida's paintings set precedents for contemporary identity politics? And if so, how? For almost two decades, Frida's self-portraits have provided numerous individuals, both male and female, with models to challenge and redefine prevailing gender stereotypes and give a visual voice to emerging expressions of gender, racial, and ethnic variance. Her popularity worldwide is particularly noteworthy in regard to contemporary feminist issues concerned with the relationship of gender to race, class, and ethnicity."⁴⁸ I would argue that it is precisely due to her sexual frankness and racially self-conscious discourse that Frida's portraits *do* set a precedent for the representation of contemporary subjecthood. I think *precedent* is a particularly appropriate word, for subjectivity and identity, as Nancie Caraway recently suggested, is a "precondition" for one's engagement in "identity politics" today, especially if that engagement involves the "oppositional *praxis* of resistance to oppression."⁴⁹ I would like to suggest that the popularity of Frida's work is best explained as offering models with which individuals today can attempt to meet those preconditions. In many ways, Simone de Beauvoir and Frida Kahlo have much in common.⁵⁰

Again, it is interesting to note here that the signs of this role were anticipated over fifty years ago by André Breton, who, upon seeing Frida's work for the first time in 1938, wrote:

Frida Kahlo de Rivera is delicately situated at that point of intersection between the political (philosophical) line and the artistic line, beyond which we hope that they may unite in a single revolutionary consciousness while still preserving intact the identities of the separate motivating forces that run through them. Since this solution is being sought here on the plane of plastic expression, Frida's contribution to the art of our epoch is destined to assume a quite special value as providing the casting vote between the various pictorial tendencies.⁵¹

For young artists today, Frida's work represents a personalistic identity, a pictorial self that stands in contrast to the mainstream. In the 1930s and 1940s she constructed her messages on the margins of the Mexican mainstream and set in motion a discourse that has become a model for the expression of contemporary identity for feminists, gays, Chicanas, and numerous other individuals seeking to gain subject status through self-generated representations of self. Frida spoke from the position of a woman and painted the intersection of her own subjectivity and the gendered system in which she operated, a system that not only subordinated but condemned personal expressions of embodied femininity. Defiled, violated, caressed, and soothed, Frida's self-representations critique the male-gendered taboos with their sanctions against the public expression of such physiological realities as female blood.

In addition, Frida spoke from the position of a female "half-breed," a mestiza, perhaps recognizing the similarity between the positioning of the Indian in state constructions of Mexicanness and that of the Mexican woman — exalted while simultaneously constructed as other — and in an unprecedented move in pictorial representation of women in Mexico and, consequently, of Mexican, post-revolutionary national identity, Kahlo questioned the psychology of being mestiza and claimed herself as subject. It is with this understanding of Kahlo — as someone who (in the aforementioned ways) introduced subjectivity to her culturally imposed "otherness" and thereby created new models of femininity — that we can fully understand contemporary interests in her work and life. Frida is hardly a fad, as some have claimed. On the contrary. It is my understanding that Frida's reputation will continue to grow as individual political strategies move to address the growing multicultural demands and sensibilities of non-mainstream peoples.

What do Kahlo's paintings mean in terms of the histories of art? After spending the past six years involved in the lives and works of

Mexican artists and studying Frida's paintings and lecturing about them in classes, I have come to understand her canvases as not merely paintings, but political and epistemological events that unlike post-modernist constructs really do stand in challenge to the modernist agenda.⁵² I think of her paintings as introducing a paradigm shift into the history of twentieth-century artistic representation, a shift that is profoundly feminist in its orientation. When I look at her paintings, and when I talk to artists, I read narratives that challenge the hegemony of modernism and its tendency to whitewash aesthetic experience, to engender it as manly, and to remove it from embodied human experience. While many other 19th- and 20th-century artists have introduced challenges to the structures of modernist representation, I can think of no example that does so in a way that questions the privileges modernism has granted white, European-American male sensibilities to the extent that Frida's do. Her paintings stand in contrast to the modernist agenda in almost every particular. In her work one sees a sensibility that is racially mixed, bisexually engendered, and situated inextricably within the flesh and blood of her own human embodied experiences. In sum, I would argue that her paintings represent a "feminist intervention in the histories of art."⁵³

Notes

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1. Marjorie Agosin, "Ceremonies of a Sliced Body," in Marjorie Agosin, *Women of Smoke: Latin American Women in Literature and Life*, trans. Janice Malloy (Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1989), 85.
2. I am grateful for a description provided me by Javier Castellanos, Mexican artist responsible for making arrangements for *Pasión por Frida* to come to San Francisco.
3. Some might argue that Frida was motivated by her passions. I would agree. However, reading her diary indicates how conscious she was of her passions and her pictorial constructions of self.
4. I would like to underscore the feminine version of the noun here. The combination of woman and *mestizo* is important to understanding Frida's program.
5. For another point of view, see Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser, *Drawing the Line: Art and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Latin America* (London: Verso, 1989). I stand in contrast to Baddeley and Fraser, who express regret over the fact that many feminists have "denied [Frida] an active and participatory role in the formation of a specifically Latin American art, or as existing within the specifics of her own cultural history" (p. 93). I found that in Mexico Frida signifies both *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) as well as freedom of sexual expression. However, Frida's contributions to a distinctly Latin American art (and I would say not so much Latin American as Mexican) are inextricably tied to her position as a woman in Mexican society. Furthermore, if there is concern that she has been universalized or decontextualized, there should be equal concern with over-Mexicanizing her. As Paz pointed out recently, Frida was very cosmopolitan — not only was her father European-born, but she was well educated and well traveled. See Octavio Paz, "María Izquierdo, Sitiada y Situada," *Vuelta* 144 (November 1988): 21–26.
For other opinions, see Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983). Other important biographies include: Raquel Tibol, *Frida: Una Vida Abierta* (Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Oasis, 1983); Raquel Tibol, *Frida: An Open Life* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, in press); Marta Zamora, *El Pincel de la Angustia: Frida* (Mexico, D.F.: Zamora, 1987); and Martha Zamora, *Frida: The Brush of Anguish*, trans. Marilyn Sode Smith (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1990).
6. The revolution was fought between 1910 and 1917, but it has been institutionalized since then.
7. Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 201.
8. For an interesting discussion of this period's gender stereotypes and master narratives, see Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), esp. 102–128.
9. The secretary of education has played a crucial role in the construction of gender in 20th-century Mexico. There are two relevant examples. In Franco's discussion of the years following the revolution she described Vasconcelos' policies in the early 1920s as appearing to actively incorporate women as teachers in literacy campaigns. Teachers, sent to educational missions established in remote areas of the country, were glorified as national heroes and heroines. However, Franco states, these missions were not unlike nunneries. Teachers "were expected to be unmarried and chaste, they had little expectation of rising in their profession, and moth-

erhood was still regarded as woman's supreme fulfillment" (*Plotting Women*, 103). In Lomnitz and Perez-Lizaur's study of an elite family in Mexico City, a 1901 quote by Justo Sierra, the secretary of education before the revolution, was used to describe today's "feminine ideal in Mexican society." He is quoted as saying "The educated woman will be truly dedicated to the home; she will be a companion and collaborator of man in the formation of the family. . . . Let men struggle with political questions and write laws" (quoted in Larissa Adler Lomnitz and Mariso Perez-Lizaur, *A Mexican Elite Family 1820-1980* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987], 215).

10. There is more to this portrait than gender-blending, of course. Herrera and Franco both emphasized how disjointed the two faces appear — an indication, each claimed, of marital problems, of an unharmonious union. See Herrera, *Frida*, 361; Franco, *Plotting Women*, 112. I have argued in the text, however, that the opposite is equally true. That is, by means of the juxtaposition each half-face becomes the other, and each is, therefore, ambiguously gendered. Frida's half appears as masculine as it is feminine and Rivera's appears as feminine as it is masculine. See note 14.
11. When asked in 1988 to describe the difference between Frida and her contemporary, María Izquierdo, Paz responded with a series of juxtapositions. "In Frida, narcissism is central; in María, like in all the traditional feminine archetypes, the key word is sacrifice. Frida, active; María, passive. . . . In María . . . there is fatality and spontaneity; in Frida there is a tragic will to sublimate and transform through art her terrible suffering" (Paz, "Sitiada y Situada," 26, my translation). Paz also stated: "Frida always had something boyish; thinness, mischievousness, thick lips; from very early on she liked to dress in men's clothing. Frida's masculinity was not only visible physically but in her bisexuality: her great passions were for women." (p. 25). While Paz's reading of Frida's bisexuality is partially inaccurate and reveals perhaps more of Paz's own male-oriented values than it does of Frida's contempt for Mexican social *móres* (men do not have exclusive rights to women, and, therefore, women can have passions for women without being masculine), his overall point is important: Frida's crossing of gender boundaries created an ambiguous sexual identity. In contrast, Paz states, Izquierdo was "Profoundly feminine, her relation with her lovers and her friends was maternal. She was an incarnation of the powerful passivity of the traditional mother, a *la mexicana* . . . put[ting] up with verbal and physical violations from some other with the stoicism of a *sufrida mujer*, a suffering woman" (p. 25).
12. Herrera, *Frida*, 332.
13. *Ibid.*, 330.
14. Philip Sandbloom, M.D., "Congenital Defect," *The New York Times*, December 23, 1990, 4H.
15. See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Phase," *New Left Review*, no. 51. I am referring here to both his concept of the processes of signification as well as the unification of the self with the aid of one's mirrored reflection. See Claudia Schaefer for an interpretation of Frida's unified self, which does not draw upon Lacan. Schaefer, *Textured Lives* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992). See also Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978) for an application of Lacanian analysis, namely, representations of women in advertising on which much of this discussion of Frida and Lacan is based.

Mexican art historian Olivier Debroise wrote that Frida's paintings were "painted in the first person" and went on to say: "The only subject of her own work, Frida disregards the mirror which habitually mediates between her and her representation on the canvas; she adopts a point of view that would correspond

with a subjective plane" (Olivier Debroise, *Figuras en el Tropicó, Plástica Mexicana 1920-1940* [Barcelona, Spain: Océano-Éxito, S.A., 1983], 171, my translation).

My explication of Frida's work is different. While I agree that Frida's paintings are "painted in the first person," I think it is significant to note that one could also simultaneously read them as painted in the third person. Rather than disregard the mirror image, she exploits its ambiguous third-person perspective, and I believe that it is in the very juxtaposition of the third-person image with the first person that animates (or problematizes) her canvases and demonstrates to her the transformative qualities of painting.

16. If we return to look at Figure 1 with this in mind, a quote from Hermann Hesse's *Demian* is enlightening: "I produced . . . a face to which I responded more strongly than I had to any of the others. . . . It resembled a kind of image of God or a holy mask, half male, half female, ageless. . . . I began to sense that this was neither Beatrice nor Demian but myself. . . . One of the aphorisms [of Novalis] occurred to me. . . . and I wrote it under the picture: 'Fate and temperament' are two words for one and the same concept" (quoted in Francis V. O'Connor, "The Psychodynamics of the Frontal Self-Portrait," in *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Art*, ed. Mary Gedo [Hillsdale, N.J.: Analytic Press, 1985], 169-221, quote on p. 182).
17. The Virgin-like halos surrounding Frida's face are also reminiscent of portraits of European queens with the layers of regal, white-ruffled collars setting their heads apart from the rest of their bodies.

Frida's commitment to popular aesthetics was no more evident than in her choice of attire. The Tehuana costume was the hallmark of the actual Frida as much as it was (and still is) of the imaged-Frida, and her wearing it was absolutely essential to her program: that of creating her *mestizo* self as subject. The Tehuana clothing served Frida well in this regard. The bright fabrics, lacey collars, silk threads, and floral patterns called attention to themselves more so than the body beneath it. In practical terms this allowed her to hide her polio-stricken leg and her ailing feet. More important, because it was indigenous clothing (or considered indigenous), it signified (and continues to signify) Mexicanness — not urbane Mexicanness, but a rural, Indian Mexicanness. By donning it, Frida underscored not only her allegiance to the nationalistic rhetoric of the revolution (Rivera encouraged her to wear it), but she also underscored the otherness of that identity, fusing female other with Indian other. Finally, since the Tehuana clothing is worn by the Tehuanas, the women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, Mexico, who are mythologized, even today, as matriarchs, Frida's use of the Tehuana is not as a humble Indian other, but as an empowered other, as a Tehuana. In Frida's day, the Tehuana due in part to her bright clothing and statuesque appearance, had begun to represent to artists, especially to Rivera, the quintessential Mexican Indian. Tehuanas are big, strong, entrepreneurial women who represent a much stronger female archetype than did the small-framed Frida, not to mention the archetypal modern woman, on the one hand, or other Mexican Indian women, on the other.

Submerging her body in Tehuana fabrics, Frida gave to herself an aura of other-worldliness, especially when she traveled to New York and to Paris; it was neither of her class nor of her time, both of which the Tehuana headdress, worn in her portraits, only exaggerated since their halo-like appearance placed Frida in yet another realm — the realm of the sacred Virgin. Most important, the Tehuana costume made Frida a symbol of Mexico as well as an advertisement for Mexico. On Frida the Tehuana traveled to worlds far beyond its home — to the art worlds of Mexico City, New York, and Paris, to the political worlds of Mexico City, New York, and Los Angeles, to the social worlds of the Rockefellers and Fords and the André Bretons and the Claire Booth Luces. It appeared in many of her self-portraits, in photographs taken of her, and even in a 1938 issue of the fashion magazine *Vogue*. On Frida the Tehuana dress did not hang quietly as it does today in her home. Instead it was always part of a grand performance.

18. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, *Frida and Tina Modotti* (London: White Chapel Art Gallery, 1982), 18.
19. For a discussion of the self-portrait as a hieratic, self-configuration, see O'Conner.
20. I borrow the term from Franco, *Plotting Women*, 102–128.
21. I am grateful to James Boon, who pointed out to me that Frida's work "is an art that *refuses* the distinction between the religious and the secular." Quoted from Boon's discussion, session "Gender in Genre: Negotiating Identities Through Aesthetic Forms," 88th Annual American Anthropological Association meeting, Washington, D.C., November 18, 1989.
22. One can see the precedents of the *ex-voto* in the work of the 19th-century painter José María Estrada, for example.
23. Mulvey and Wollen, *Frida and Tina Modotti*, 20.
24. Lynda Nead, "The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15 (Winter 1990): 323–335, quote on p. 326.
25. Eli Bartra, *Mujer, ideología y arte: Ideología y política en Frida y Diego Rivera*, Cuadernos Inacabados numero 8 (Barcelona, Spain: la Sal, 1987), 58, my translation.
26. There is an interesting comparison to make between an *ex-voto*-like woodblock print by the Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada, who lived from 1851 to 1913 and whom Frida admired greatly, with an *ex-voto*-inspired painting by Frida. While both are about a similar incident, a male attacker and a female victim, they differ considerably. Frida's scenario is more didactic; the female body is Christ-like, naked and mutilated. In Posada's the scene is more idealized; the body is Virgin-like, fully clothed and pristine. While others have made a comparison between these two works in terms of their similarities, I think it is equally interesting to underscore their differences (Herrera, *Frida*, 188).
27. Octavio Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 30. While Paz's text is dated, I consider it an artifact of its time and of its author. Frida was painting some of her most important paintings when Paz was constructing his famous essay on the Mexican national character.
28. In Mexican terms the "open wound" concept is not Freudian; the vagina (or open wound) is not defined by an absent phallus as it is for the castrated woman. Rather, the vagina is defined by the penetration of a phallus. In the case of the former the action (castration) has happened; in the latter, the action (violation) is always a threat about to happen. The two concepts share a negativity, but are fundamentally different. For an interesting discussion of the *macho's* dependency on the violated woman for his own self-identity, see Toni Flores, "The Center at the Edge: The Formation of Gender Identity, the Ordinary Woman, and the Goddess," paper presented at the 88th Annual American Anthropological Association meeting, Washington, D.C., November, 18, 1989.
29. Herrera, *Frida*, 157.
30. *Ibid.*, 158.
31. *Ibid.*, 188.
32. *Ibid.*, 37.
33. The admission of a woman's suffering is unusual in Mexican society, and this is one reason Frida stands out as much as she does. In a study of urban lower-middle-class women living south of Mexico City, LeVine found that women talked about suffering in economic terms; in emotional terms they were silent. "If your husband's infidelities cause you emotional hardship, that is your personal affair; he is only hurting you, and about that you say, 'Me deprimí' (I was depressed), or, 'Me

enojé' (I was angry). . . . But pride does not allow you to say, 'Yo sufrí' (I suffered), because then you would be admitting, 'Yes, he defeated me.'" If you say 'Yo sufrí' it must be clear that you suffered on behalf of your children. "Family suffering may be admitted, but not *personal* suffering" (Sarah Ethel LeVine, "The Marital Morality of Mexican Women: An Urban Study," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 42 [Summer 1986]: 183-202, quote on p. 197).

34. Herrera, *Frida*, 191.
35. Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, 37.
36. *Ibid.*, 30. While Paz's text is dated, I consider it an artifact of its time and of its author. Frida was painting some of her most important paintings when Paz was constructing his famous essay on the Mexican national character. The fatherland as female, open, and submissive is a metaphor that has prevailed throughout the 20th century. Parts of the landscape, such as volcanoes, however, are male.
37. *Ibid.*, 87.
38. *Ibid.*, 42.
39. *Ibid.*, 80.
40. Mulvey and Wollen, *Frida and Tina Modotti*, 36.
41. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 126-127.
42. Mulvey and Wollen, *Frida and Tina Modotti*, 36, my emphasis.
43. Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, 42.
44. Herrera, *Frida*, 284.
45. Compare with Frida's *My Birth* and contrast with *Remembrance of an Open Wound*.
46. Death for Mexicans generally is thought of and pictured alive, dancing and singing.
47. Frida's approach is underscored by a comparison with still lifes painted by her husband. In the paintings of Frida's famous husband, Diego Rivera, of his calla lilies or his lustful *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (1947), for example, not surprisingly, penetration is what is privileged, not the fruits of penetration.
48. Frida's work has especially become important to feminist artists in the U.S. and, for similar reasons, to those of Mexico. See Armando Ponce y Carlos Puig, "Frida: Fridomanía en Estados Unidos" *Proceso* (April 15, 1991): 44-51. In addition, Mulvey and Wollen write: "If the art of Frida . . . has appeared to be detached from the mainstream this by no means entails any loss of value. In many ways, [her] work may be more relevant than the central traditions of modernism, at a time when, in the light of feminism, the history of art is being revalued and remade" (Mulvey and Wollen) *Frida and Tina Modotti*, 27.
49. Nancie E. Caraway, "The Challenge and Theory of Feminist Identity Politics: Working on Racism," *Frontiers* 12 (1991): 109-129. For a wonderful discussion of role models and preconditions for sexual (and multi-cultural) identity politics, see also Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), esp. 212-229.
50. I anxiously await publication of research conducted by Marilyn Sode Smith, translator of *The Brush of Anguish*, on this topic.
51. Mulvey and Wollen, *Frida and Tina Modotti*, 35.

52. I use Craig Owens' definition of feminism on purpose (Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 57-82).
53. I draw upon Griselda Pollock's words here in regard to feminist art history's agenda as an intervention into modernist art histories: Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988).