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Frida Kahlo: The Complexity of Being

Sydney Reis
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Alejandro Gomez Arias, Frida Kahlo's childhood sweetheart, once wrote that she was "so contradictory, so multiple".¹ Notably, scholar Grimberg asserts that Kahlo exacerbated her disabilities to invoke caring responses from those around her.² And attributes the artist's bisexuality as a technique to "avoid feelings of emptiness".³ Furthermore, Mulvey interprets Kahlo's self-portrait artistic style as indication of "her obsession with her own image".⁴ Such analyses suggest that Kahlo was more of an infantile attention seeker than a capable woman drawing from her rich life experiences and identities to create meaning. Kahlo's depictions of pain, for instance, are drawn from her valid experiences as a disabled woman and force the viewer to acknowledge her presence as such.⁵ Even Andre Breton, the "pope of surrealism" asserted that Kahlo was surrealist, and in the process, dismissed the truth that underlies her art as fantasy.⁶ In response to Breton's assertion, Kahlo succinctly retorted, "I never painted dreams, I painted my own reality."⁷

This paper will argue that rather than a narcissistic victim of unfortunate life circumstances, Kahlo is a compelling noninstitutional feminist figure whose artistic works adhere to modern day cultural and socialist feminist perspectives. Kahlo's place as a cultural and socialist feminist demonstrates her nonconformity to liberal feminism, which further solidifies her stance as a multifaceted, non-Western feminist figure. Indeed,

¹ Salomon Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo Song of Herself* (London: Merrell, 2008), 13.

² Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo Song of Herself*, 21.

³ Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo Song of Herself*, 21.

⁴ Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. "Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti," In *Art in Modern Culture 1992*, Edited by Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris, New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., (1992): 149.

⁵ Marta Zarzycka, 2006. "Now I Live on a Painful Planet'," *Third Text* 20 (1): 76.

⁶ Sharyn R. Udall, "Frida Kahlo's Mexican Body: History, Identity, and Artistic Aspiration," *Woman's Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (2003): 12.

⁷ Udall, "Frida Kahlo's Mexican Body: History, Identity, and Artistic Aspiration," 13.

the cultural and the socialist feminist approaches can analyze the methods by which Kahlo successfully forced her identity and subjective experience into public consciousness.⁸

This paper will begin with a brief biography of Frida Kahlo, and an overview of the complexity of identities and artistic subjects she embodies. Following, Kahlo's place as a noninstitutional feminist actor will be established. Kahlo's art will then be analyzed from the socialist feminist notion of 'intersectionality', specifically from Latina feminism's interpretation of intersectionality as "borderlands". Next, the cultural feminist approach will be used to explore how Kahlo merges her identities and life experiences to create feminist discourse. Lastly, Kahlo's incompatibility with liberal feminism will be analyzed and presented as essential considering her relation to indigenous Mexican feminism.

Kahlo was born to an Indigenous-Spanish mother, and a German-Jewish father in 1907.⁹ However, Kahlo would later insist she was born in 1910, to establish herself as a child of the Mexican Revolution (Mexico's emergence from colonialism).¹⁰ Kahlo's attachment to her indigenous and national identity would prove to be central themes in her art.¹¹ Also prevalent in her works is the experience of pain. At the age of six Kahlo contracted polio, leaving her with a small left leg and a permanent limp.¹² At 18, Kahlo was involved in a bus accident that fractured her spine, pelvis, and leg, and dislocated her

⁸ Zarzycka, "Now I Live on a Painful Planet," 78.

⁹ "Frida Kahlo Biography," *Frida Kahlo the Complete Works*, <http://www.frida-kahlo-foundation.org/biography.html>

¹⁰ "Frida Kahlo Biography,"

¹¹ Cynthia Freeland, "On Frida Kahlo's Self-Portraits," *Oxford University Press Blog*, http://blog.oup.com/2010/06/kahlo_portrait/

¹² Zarzycka, "Now I Live on a Painful Planet," 77.

foot.¹³ Following the accident Kahlo was bound to a full body cast, in which she took up painting to pass time.¹⁴ The accident would revisit her 30 times over throughout her life in the form of surgery.¹⁵ As a result, Kahlo was constantly re-evaluating her relationship with pain and her disabled body. Her paintings provided release from her body and provided the ability to express pain in lieu of sufficient words.¹⁶ In 1929, Kahlo married Diego Rivera (a famous Mexican muralist), joined the communist party, and experienced her first of three abortions.¹⁷ Each of these three facets of her life would also prove to be significant in her artistic works.

According to Henderson and Jeydel, noninstitutional politics, also known as informal politics, “encompasses any political activity that does not take place directly within formal institutions.”¹⁸ Henderson and Jeydel also note that women mobilize around noninstitutional politics in their desire to be “seen as a human being” and “use a variety of tactics to achieve their goal”.¹⁹ In accordance with this analysis, Kahlo can be understood a one-women participant in her own form of noninstitutional politics. In Kahlo’s case, artwork is used as the medium to create discourse and understanding. Her status as a disabled, indigenous female constructs the realities that are displayed in her art. Finally, noninstitutional politics seek to impact societies.²⁰ Notably, in *Frida Kahlo’s Abortions*, Zetterman parallels Kahlo’s creation of anatomically accurate abortion art

¹³ Zarzycka, “Now I Live on a Painful Planet,” 77.

¹⁴ “Frida Kahlo Biography,”

¹⁵ Zarzycka, “Now I Live on a Painful Planet,” 78.

¹⁶ Zarzycka, “Now I Live on a Painful Planet,” 78.

¹⁷ Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo Song of Herself*, 74.

¹⁸ Sarah L. Henderson, Sarah L., and Alana S. Jeydel, *Women and Politics in a Global World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 37.

¹⁹ Henderson, *Women and Politics in a Global World*, 40.

²⁰ Henderson, *Women and Politics in a Global World*, 40.

with advancements in Mexico's sexual education.²¹ Therefore, Kahlo's art is a form of noninstitutional politics, whereby cultural and socialist feminism is present.

Socialist feminism argues that in order to create economic equality between men and women, the intersectionality (interaction) of gender and other forms of inequality – such as race, sexuality, ability, and class – must be accounted for.²² Extending from the socialist feminist concept of intersectionality is the Latina feminist notion of borderlands. Borderlands entails using the experience of “hybrid identities” – colour, class, sexuality, and gender – to create individual “autobiographical narratives”.²³ The “inner self” in its honest form is used as a vehicle for feminist activism.²⁴ Considering borderlands is concerned with how identity shapes everyday experience and can be used for activism – whereas intersectionality looks at how the interaction of identities stagnate women in certain economic classes – borderlands will be used to analyze Kahlo's depictions of her female indigenous identity. Kahlo, after all, was largely privileged economically as a result of her marriage to Diego Rivera, and her activism stemmed from her ability to create narratives through her marginalized indigenous reality.²⁵

According to Bakewell, Kahlo was “uncomfortable with Mexico's cultural conceptions of gender and with the roles and domains attached to them”.²⁶ This discomfort is evident in *My Dress Hangs There*, whereby Kahlo interprets Mexico's treatment of women from her indigenous female perspective.²⁷ The indigenous dress

²¹ Eva Zetterman, "Frida Kahlo's Abortions: With Reflections from a Gender Perspective on Sexual Education in Mexico," *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 75 (2006): 230.

²² Lorber, *Gender Inequality*, 75.

²³ Lorber, *Gender Inequality*, 238.

²⁴ Lorber, *Gender Inequality*, 238.

²⁵ Phyllis Tuchman, "Frida Kahlo," *Smithsonian*, November 2002, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/frida-kahlo-70745811/>

²⁶ Bakewell, "Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading" 169.

²⁷ Margaret A. Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*, (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 126.

depicted represents the pre-colonial matriarchal society that dominated parts of Mexico before Spanish, and later American, colonization.²⁸ In Tehuantepec societies, women held distinguished positions in politics and business.²⁹ The dress, therefore, represents the uncorrupted society Mexico once was. In *Self Portrait Along the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States*, Kahlo feminizes herself in a pink ruffled dress on the border between a lush Mexico and an industrial United States. In gendering herself – as an indigenous woman – Kahlo demonstrates how imperialism was justified by the masculine and white United States.³⁰ From a borderlands perspective, Kahlo uses her indigeneity to provide a powerful critique of the systems of oppression that marginalize indigenous women. Kahlo’s autobiographical narrative in *Self Portrait Along the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States* explains why indigenous women are seen as less worthy, less human, than their white, male, and American counterparts. The dress in *My Dress Hangs There* reminds indigenous women of their liberated past, and inspires pride and activism from this history. In this sense, Kahlo embodies the concept of borderlands, and by extension, socialist feminism’s intersectionality.

Cultural feminism emphasizes creating discourse, or language, that depicts women’s “emotions, sexuality, and connectedness with the body”.³¹ Discourse is the creation of knowledge that is entailed, or excluded, from popular culture.³² For example, current Western culture perpetuates the view that women are sexual objects, rather than dynamic, complex humans.³³ Kahlo’s art challenges popular conceptions of the female

²⁸ Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*, 126.

²⁹ Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*, 126.

³⁰ Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*, 133.

³¹ Judith Lorber, *Gender Inequality*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 168.

³² Lorber, *Gender Inequality*, 173.

³³ Lorber, *Gender Inequality*, 174.

nude as “ripe for the taking” and uncomplicated through unapologetic depictions of her own flesh and blood.³⁴ According to Bakewell, “Kahlo’s nudes de-eroticize the female by presenting blemished, imperfect, bloody bodies.”³⁵ In the artistic world, women and blood are taboo, whereas bloodied men represent heroism.³⁶ Kahlo’s understanding of her female body is characterized by experiences of abortion, miscarriage, and pain. Thus, her conception of womanhood involves blood and mutilation, as notably depicted in *A Few Small Nips*, among other works.³⁷ In displaying her nude body in the bloody states that it has endured, Kahlo effectively contributes to the normalization of the female experience of pain through artistic discourse. Therefore, Kahlo establishes herself as a woman who is at odds with the male ideal of female sexuality and perfection. In this process of discourse, Kahlo solidifies her place as a cultural feminist.

Liberal feminism’s tendency towards individualism and emphasis on economic prosperity conflicts with Kahlo’s socialist feminism.³⁸ In *My Dress Hangs There*, faceless citizens of New York City – the supposed epitome of economic opportunity and liberation – occupy their time in “picket lines and chorus lines”.³⁹ Thus, within the capitalist, individualist culture of the United States, the average citizen is empty rather than liberated. A toilet and a trophy occupy pedestals opposite to Kahlo’s indigenous dress.⁴⁰ The trophy represents the industrial and the economic prosperity of the United States, while the toilet emphasizes the United State’s supposed treatment of its citizenry

³⁴ Liza Bakewell, "Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13, no. 3 (1993): 173.

³⁵ Bakewell, "Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading" 174.

³⁶ Bakewell, "Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading" 174.

³⁷ Bakewell, "Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading" 173.

³⁸ Lorber, *Gender Inequality*, 45.

³⁹ Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*, 117.

⁴⁰ Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*, 119.

as “cultural refuse”.⁴¹ Furthermore, Kahlo’s attachment to her indigeneity – a group identity – is at odds with liberal feminisms fixation on individual rights. From a socialist feminist perspective, the marginalized indigenous group identity entails recognition, and by extension, group privileges. Thus, through Kahlo’s assertion of her indigenous heritage in the form of a dress, she actively rejects liberal individualism and greed.

Despite the fact that many were quick to assign reasons for Kahlo’s life experiences and identities, Kahlo herself was no passive recipient of incorrect attributions. Indeed, in response to Breton’s declaration that her art was surrealist, Kahlo addressed the problem of imposition: “I didn’t know I was a surrealist until Andre Breton came to Mexico and told me I was.”⁴² Besides exposing parallels between Breton’s statement and colonialism, Kahlo’s statement is revealing of her ability to effectively draw on her identity to tell her own story of marginalization through art. Her frank depictions of the ‘deficient’ sides of the feminine experience – such as abortion, disability, and indigeneity – are political statements because of the honesty with which they are displayed.⁴³ Indeed, in utilizing noninstitutional methods of politics, Kahlo’s discourse is reminiscent of both cultural and intersectional feminism. Through a cultural and intersectional feminist approach, Kahlo is distant from liberal feminism. This distancing reveals her commitment to telling the stories of the marginalized identities to which she belongs. Thus, Kahlo’s invitation into her complex experiences of marginality through art solidifies her historical status as an influential and non-Western feminist.

⁴¹ Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*, 199.

⁴² Udall, “Frida Kahlo’s Mexican Body: History, Identity, and Artistic Aspiration,” 12.

⁴³ Mary Motian-Meadows, “Kahlo As Artist, Woman, Rebel,” *Solidarity*, November 2016. <https://www.solidarity-us.org/node/2782>

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