

‘Where is the “I”?’: Losing and Finding her Selves

I have broken many social norms.

Frida Kahlo¹

Kahlo’s marital drama, intimate friendships and emotional vicissitudes during the 1930s and ’40s engendered insatiable speculations and gossip during her lifetime and continue to titillate audiences across the globe. Yet, even with the vast documentation that is available today – letters, photographs and eyewitness testimonies – Kahlo’s personal experiences and emotions can never be fully known. Nor are they, to my mind, the most compelling aspect of her story. What is accessible, knowable and of utmost significance is Kahlo’s remarkable artistic *œuvre*. Her ability to transpose personal experiences and profound insights concerning the human condition and the world at large into art is what makes Kahlo’s life and legacy poignant, path-breaking and important.

Kahlo began her life with the conventional aspirations available to women of her time, particularly in Mexico. She wanted to become a wife and a mother, perhaps also a teacher and, later on, a doctor. Her physical and emotional experiences, which thwarted these ambitions, were powerful but not unique. Many people suffer from illness, accidents, a bad marriage and divorce. It was Kahlo’s responses to the experiences of her life, rather than the experiences themselves, combined with her rare talent for articulating them visually and giving meaning to them that distinguish Kahlo as a towering cultural figure.

By the mid-1930s Kahlo seems to have realized that the normative gender roles of wife and mother were no longer viable options for her. Other aspects of her life were also crumbling or brought into question. The sudden death of her mother, her painful estrangement from both her husband and sister, and the ensuing social and familial rifts forced her to come to terms with the fact that she was on her own. She also began to think and rethink who she was and who she might become. As has been seen, at a critical juncture, Kahlo portrayed herself holding a palette in her hand, symbolically taking on the identity of an artist. This deliberate shift from identifying as the painter's wife (in 1931) to presenting herself as a painter in her own right (1932) marked a pivotal moment in her remarkable, though inconsistent, path as an artist.

In terms of exhibitions and sales, Kahlo was not very successful during her lifetime. Unlike Rivera, she was not part of the celebrated mural movement of Mexico. She had only two solo exhibitions in private galleries and sporadically participated in group shows over a period of decades.² Moreover, although she obtained a handful of commissions and sold a few paintings – mostly to friends – her ongoing efforts to support herself by selling her art were decidedly unsuccessful. Her brief attempt in 1943 to teach at La Esmeralda, the Ministry of Public Education's school of painting and sculpture, ended abruptly due to her ill health, although four students, nicknamed 'Los Fridos', continued to come to her home for informal instruction and remained loyal to their *maestra* and her memory long after her death.³ Yet, much to her distress, throughout her life Kahlo was never self-sufficient and was financially dependent on Rivera until the day she died. 'All I've done is fail', she wrote in a sad epistle to her husband.⁴

In contrast to this perceived 'failure', it is clear today that in terms of quality and significance Kahlo's art is an astounding achievement. Against all odds, she created a revolutionary and innovative body of work. Impacted no doubt by her personal

experiences, but also firmly based on a staggering array of non-biographical historical, literary, artistic, scientific, philosophical and political sources, Kahlo's paintings coalesce into an unprecedented visual discourse on identity. Focusing on her particular search for self as a test case, but moving far beyond a singular biography, she produced more than 100 paintings and countless drawings that provide multiple perspectives on how human beings construct complex, multi-layered and shifting identities throughout their lives.

Informed by her erudition and an overarching philosophical understanding of ontological debates, evidenced by the books she read and a plethora of visual and textual documents, Kahlo critically examined her process of becoming from birth to death, taking into account physical, psychological, genealogical, social, national and religious/spiritual aspects of identity formation. She portrayed her physical self as it developed through time, from her conception and birth to her death and decomposition. She depicted herself as a zygote, a foetus, a child, an adult, a skull, a disintegrating mortal being. She visualized her own body or body parts (heart, feet, eyes) as objective, subjective, metonymic or symbolic signifiers.

Espousing Freudian tenets that view early childhood as the crucial period of identity formation, Kahlo painted a penetrating group of nine works that comprise her Childhood Series. Painted between 1932 and 1938, this series offers compounded visualizations of her childhood experiences, as well as accompanying clusters of emotional memories and sensations, which shaped the woman Kahlo would become.⁵

Concurrently, she examined her various social identities. Her first self-portraits displayed the youthful Frida in traditional female roles, for example as Gómez Arias's 'Botticelli' in 1926 or as Rivera's doting Mexican wife in 1931. Understanding that she could not conform to these normative gender roles, Kahlo presented herself



Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939, oil on canvas.

as a failed wife and mother in her 'anti-Nativity' scene of 1932, *Henry Ford Hospital*, and again in *The Two Fridas* of 1939.

The Two Fridas – an almost life-sized monumental painting – presents Kahlo in two distinct roles established by the costumes she dons and the props she holds in her hand. The left Kahlo is the bride whose white wedding dress is decorated by bleeding flowers, evoking her 'defloration'. The right Kahlo is a Tehuana mother, who holds an egg-shaped portrait of Rivera as a toddler near her loins. Both Fridas appear with exposed (broken) hearts, and their open arteries bleed incessantly. It seems that the failure to conform to confined gender roles, but also the very attempt to do so, can be oppressive, wounding and detrimental to the integrity of the self.

Kahlo's *Two Nudes in a Forest* from the very same year offers a radical alternative to the conventional roles presented in *The Two Fridas*. In *Two Nudes in a Forest*, Kahlo painted two naked women who embrace in a jungle-like, pre-social setting – an interracial, same-sex couple embracing and comforting each other. The entire composition, with its snake-like vines and monkey, is reminiscent of Henri Rousseau's *Eve*, known to Kahlo from reproductions. In Kahlo's reconfigured Garden of Eden, however, two loving women (perhaps Lillith and Eve) replace Adam and Eve and, by implication, the sorrow and grief that relationships between man and woman entail.⁶

Kahlo's espousal of a lesbian option is related to another bold subversion of conventional gender divisions and to her identification as an androgynous being. *Self-portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940) is often interpreted as her 'direct' response to Rivera's demand for a divorce, a reflection of her hurt feminine pride, and as masochistic self-punishment following the breakdown of her marriage. But the fact that in early photographs the nineteen-year-old Kahlo already sports male garb indicates that while the divorce may have instigated her recourse to this particular androgynous self-image, the work reflects a more profound understanding of aspects of her identity.

By cropping her hair and by displaying the evidence of her actions, Kahlo creates a multivalent symbolic image. *Self-portrait with Cropped Hair* includes three distinct references to hair. First, two remnants of her braids appear in the work. Kahlo's left hand holds one cut plait upon her lap; a second is discarded near the foot of the chair. Her braided hair – beribboned or decked with flowers – was a central feature of the exotic coiffures that helped construct her identity as 'La Mexicana'. By lopping off her locks, Kahlo, the artist-protagonist, rejects her former identity as the traditional Mexican wife.

Kahlo included a second reference to hair in her 1940 painting. At the top of the canvas – with brushstrokes that resemble her hair



Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940, oil on canvas.



Family photograph showing Frida in man's suit, 1926, photo by Guillermo Kahlo.

in colour and texture – she inscribed the lyrics and music of a song. A distinctly male voice utters a cruel rejection: 'Look, if I loved you it was for your hair, now that you are hairless, I don't love you any more.' This verbal and musical statement, a product of culture, articulates the social convention that links female desirability with luxurious hair and gives men power over women's lives and hearts.

In addition to the braids and the hair-like music and lyrics, wild strands of loose hair fill the scene. As they float in the air, litter the ground and writhe around the chair, these dark, animated tresses recall the attributes of La Llorona, the Weeping Woman. As noted in chapter Five, Kahlo first portrayed herself as La Llorona in *Henry Ford Hospital* of 1932.⁷ *Self-portrait with Cropped Hair*, then, expresses Kahlo's unwillingness to accept female roles that place her in subordination to men. Her cut hair and masculine attire define her self-creation as an alternative, androgynous being.

In addition to La Llorona, Kahlo portrayed herself in the role of another 'evil woman', La Malinche/La Chingada, a figure whose non-conjugal sexuality and maternity also threatened the patriarchal order, challenging and potentially destabilizing societal norms. La Malinche, the Indian translator and mistress of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, is one of the most notorious and contentious characters of Mexican lore. She is popularly viewed as a traitor, a sinful and sensuous Mexican Eve, who is responsible for 'the fall' (or the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish). In her role as the mother of Cortés's *mestizo* son, she is considered a primal maternal being, the mother of all Mexicans.⁸

In *The Dream* (1940), Kahlo painted herself as La Malinche, based on the Indian woman's portrayal in Antonio Ruíz's painting, *The Dream of the Malinche* (1932).⁹ Like Ruíz's Malinche, she depicts herself in passive slumber upon a bed covered by a blanket that metamorphoses into a plant. Both painters evoke the archetypal link between woman and nature, but also suggest a more specific analogy between the conquest of the land and the invasion of the continent, and the sexual violation of the Indian woman. La Malinche's passivity is conceived as an inherent and defining trait. Whereas Ruíz's Malinche is transformed into a Mexican village, Kahlo's body is associated with a thorny vine. The thorns suggest pain, but they also conjure up specific Christian symbolism, alluding to Christ's crown of thorns and by inference to his

humiliation, suffering and sacrifice. The leaves that Kahlo painted – each composed of five elongated pointed segments – are based on a particular Mexican plant popularly called *Tripa de Judas* or ‘Judas’s entrails’.¹⁰ The name relates to the story of Judas’s suicide that caused his intestines to spill out in a repulsive display of corporal vulnerability, viewed as fitting punishment for his betrayal of Christ. Through this intentional botanical allusion, Kahlo links her Malinche self to the skeletal ‘Judas’ figure that lies above her, transforming her bed into a ‘double decker’ tomb. This particular Judas *calavera* (skeleton) was an actual papier mâché artefact that Kahlo placed on top of the canopy of her bed. In Mexico, Judas effigies were traditionally blown up with firecrackers on Holy Saturday.¹¹ Kahlo here identifies with a skeleton, with Judas and with La Malinche – all infamous characters popularly associated with betrayal, suffering and death.

Kahlo’s *Roots* depicts the artist in a pose that emulates that of the passive Malinche from both *The Dream* and *The Dream of the Malinche*. In *Roots*, however, the connection of Kahlo-Malinche with nature is even more pronounced. Rather than being covered by a blanket that turns into a vine, Kahlo literally metamorphoses



Frida Kahlo, *Roots*, 1943, oil on metal.

into a plant. The uneven hole that perforates her body, surrounded by the red fabric of her costume, resembles an open wound. This vivid image of an open wound relates to the vulgar Mexican term 'La Chingada' – an epithet that characterizes La Malinche as 'forced open', a 'screwed' or ravaged woman.¹²

The plant that sprouts from the violated body of Kahlo-as-Chingada has many leafless branches and bleeds profusely into the barren terrain. In this work the artist chose to link herself with a specific plant, *Calotropis procera*, popularly known as the Apple of Sodom. The prominent veins in the leaves of this plant contain a poisonous fluid that was used by the Indians of Latin America to kill or commit suicide.¹³ The name of the plant evokes additional biblical connotations, linking its deadly botanical potential with Eve's transgression ('Original Sin'), as well as with the sexual deviations associated with Sodom. Kahlo's identification with the stony earth (the Mexican *pedregal*) and with the plant of death is further accentuated as she transforms the lethal serum that courses through the leaves into blood-red paint, with which she signs her own name upon the parched land.¹⁴

Kahlo's by now obsessive identification with La Malinche is expressed once again in *The Mask* of 1945. In this unusual self-portrait, rather than depicting her features, Kahlo conceals her face completely with a red mask. It is a typical Malinche mask, which was traditionally scarlet, symbolizing the 'sexuality and . . . lasciviousness that led [La Malinche] to become Cortes's mistress' on the one hand, and the 'violence and bloodshed that Malinche brought upon her own people with the Conquest' on the other.¹⁵ But the masked Kahlo-Malinche appears neither sensuous nor treacherous. Both she and the mask are crying. At the bottom left-hand corner of the painting, a cactus plant sheds tears as well. The cactus and the leaves that serve as a backdrop for this image have a brownish-green colour that makes them look dry and lifeless. Behind these plants, dark shadows reinforce the sombre mood.

Kahlo's self-depictions as the Malinche may relate to her personal experiences of being caught in a web of deceit and multiple betrayals.¹⁶ But they simultaneously recast La Malinche – a central character of Mexican history – and allow us to see her and empathize with her as the tragic victim she really was rather than the mythic traitor constructed by the popular imagination. In fact, Kahlo's revisionist view of the Indian woman seems to be more in keeping with the historical facts of La Malinche's life.

La Malinche was born to an Aztec family of chiefs. When she was a small child her father died. After her mother remarried and had a son she sold her daughter to a group of traders. The girl was repeatedly sold and resold from tribe to tribe until she was finally 'given' to the Spanish Cortés. She was fourteen years old at the time. Her fluency in several indigenous languages as well as in Spanish, her vast intelligence and her proficient knowledge of the native cultures were clearly great assets for the Spanish expedition. She was used and abused in other ways as well. After becoming Cortés's mistress and bearing him a son, he married her off to another Spanish man. She died at the age of 24. Kahlo signed several letters as 'La Malinche' and referenced her repeatedly through her imagery, thus cementing her identification with the Chingada-Malinche. In doing so she rehabilitated the most despised and misunderstood character of Mexican history and exposed the misogynist forces that maligned her and continued to oppress her daughters during Kahlo's lifetime.

Unlike La Llorona and La Malinche-Chingada, who are marked by what patriarchy perceives as a threatening and deviant sexuality, the nun's identity is defined by her celibacy. 'Respectable' Mexican women of the early part of the twentieth century (particularly those who were brought up in Catholic households like Matilde Calderón's) had very limited social options. They could become conventional wives and mothers and engage in what was considered 'legitimate' marital sex, or they could become nuns and take

Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait Dedicated to Leo Eloesser*, 1940, oil on masonite.



vows of chastity. All other options were considered immoral or transgressive, and could result in a tarnished reputation.

In several self-portraits from the 1940s (for example, *Self-portrait with Dead Hummingbird*, *Self-portrait as a Tehuana*), Kahlo explored the possibility of playing the role of a Mexican nun. For example, in *Self-portrait Dedicated to Dr Eloesser* of 1940 she wears the habit of a nun, its dull brown colour symbolizing mortification, mourning and humility. A crown of thorns encircles her neck and punctures her skin, making her bleed. Kahlo portrays herself from the neck down as an ascetic, engaged in *imitatio Christi* self-mortification. The artist's head is crowned with flowers whose voluptuousness

contrasts with the asceticism of her lower half. Emmanuel Pernoud has convincingly argued that this type of self-portrayal is modelled after portraits of 'Crowned Nuns', a Mexican genre that was famous in viceregal times.¹⁷ The nun is characteristically portrayed bedecked with flowers on the day she takes the veil. The sensuousness of her apparel contrasts with her austere future life in the convent. By adopting the symbolism of this genre, Kahlo displays herself as a deeply divided being, split between sensuality and asceticism.¹⁸

Kahlo's espousal of Christian symbols, however, goes well beyond her interrogation of social roles. As the next chapter shows, it intertwines with her ongoing explorations of religion and spirituality and her search to understand the mystery of life.

- 67 Grimberg, *Song of Herself*, p. 101.
 68 Judith Ferreto (Crommie interview, 1960s, author's archive).

7 'Where is the "I"?'

The quotation in the chapter's title is taken from Frida Kahlo in a conversation with Julien Levy (Julien Levy, Herrera interview, 24 April 1997, author's archive).

- 1 Salomon Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: Song of Herself* (London and New York, 2008), p. 91.
- 2 For a comprehensive list of Kahlo's exhibitions, see 'Selected Exhibition History' compiled by Maria Cristina Tavera in *Frida Kahlo*, exh. cat., Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2007), pp. 302–10. Group shows mounted during Kahlo's lifetime are listed on pp. 304–5.
- 3 See Hayden Herrera, *Frida* (New York, 1983), pp. 328–43. I was very fortunate to meet and interview Fanny Rabel, one of Los Fridos, in 1989 in her home in Mexico.
- 4 Frida Kahlo, letter to Diego Rivera, 11 June 1940; Raquel Tibol, ed., *Frida by Frida*, trans. Gregory Dechant (Mexico City, 2006), p. 237.
- 5 For a comprehensive discussion, see 'The Child Self: Kahlo's Childhood Series', in Gannit Ankori, *Imaging her Selves: Frida Kahlo's Poetics of Identity and Fragmentation* (Westport, CT, and London, 2002), pp. 61–92.
- 6 For further analysis, *ibid.*, pp. 159–64, 167–74.
- 7 For a detailed account of the various interpretations of this work, with full citations of sources, see 'The Androgynous Self', *ibid.*, pp. 175–87. Kahlo again appears as La Llorona in a self-portrait of 1949 titled *Diego and I*. In this work her tear-spotted and grief-stricken face is framed by wild hair that sweeps around her throat as if threatening to strangle her. Kahlo painted Rivera's portrait upon her brow, suggesting that he is on her mind. Rivera has a third eye on his forehead and a red shirt that appears as a bleeding wound piercing Kahlo's flesh. Blood-red dots also spot the green background in several places. At the upper right-hand corner of the canvas Kahlo used the same blood-red colour to write a caption: 'Mexico. Frida Kahlo. 1949. Diego y yo.' The use of a red dot within a large area of green evokes a metaphor that she used in 1949 in order to describe her unusual relationship with her husband:

- 'Within my role, difficult and obscure, of being an ally to an extraordinary being, *I have the compensation that a green point has within a great quantity of red: the compensation of equilibrium*' [emphasis added]. Complementing this verbal portrait, *Diego and I* depicts Rivera within Kahlo both as a 'portrait within a portrait' and as a red 'point' within the green expanse. It seems significant that, at the onset of their marriage, Kahlo had used a colour scheme dominated by the complementary red and green to create her marriage portrait of 1931. See Ankori, *Imaging her Selves*, pp. 220–22.
- 8 For a fuller discussion of La Malinche with citations of historical and cultural sources, *ibid.*, pp. 87–9.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 189–93.
 - 10 This information appears in a book from Kahlo's library: Luis G. Cabrera, *Plantas curativas de México* (Mexico City, 1936), p. 245.
 - 11 Kahlo photographed the Judas lying on the ground and used the photograph as a model for this painting. See Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, ed., *Frida Kahlo: Her Photos* (Mexico City, 2010), pp. 410–11.
 - 12 For a profound and nuanced understanding of La Chingada in Mexican culture, see Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York, 1985), pp. 74–82.
 - 13 D. Palevitch and Z. Yaniv, *Medicinal Plants of the Holy Land* (Tel Aviv, 1991), vol. II, pp. 274–5 [in Hebrew].
 - 14 *Roots* also relates to Kahlo's mixed cultural 'roots'. For a detailed analysis, see Ankori, *Imaging her Selves*, pp. 193–200.
 - 15 Donald Cordry, *Mexican Masks* (Austin, TX, 1980), pp. 38, 170.
 - 16 Ankori, 'Trapped in a Web of Deceit and Betrayal', in *Imaging her Selves*, pp. 189–200.
 - 17 Emmanuel Pernoud, 'Une autobiographie mystique', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, ser. 6, CI (January 1983), pp. 43–8.
 - 18 Ankori, 'Ascetic Self', in *Imaging her Selves*, pp. 203–22. Kahlo turned to the *Crowned Nun* genre in self-portraits such as *Self-portrait with Dead Hummingbird* (1940) and *Self-portrait as a Tehuana* (1943). Both contain distinct biographical references, but they also reveal a profound existential schism that was part and parcel of Kahlo's complex identity. Pernoud convincingly argues that *Self-portrait as a Tehuana* places the young Diego on Kahlo's forehead, suggesting their celibate second marriage and displaying a 'mystical marriage' between

Kahlo and her husband, which would parallel the lofty betrothal of a nun and Christ.

8 'Everything is All and One'

The quotation in the chapter's title is taken from *The Diary of Frida Kahlo* (New York, 1995), p. 77.

- 1 Salomon Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: Song of Herself* (London and New York, 2008), p. 89.
- 2 My ongoing research and book project 'A Faith of their Own: Women Artists Re-Vision Religion', conducted at Harvard Divinity School's Women's Studies in Religion Program since 2005, has helped me understand that Kahlo's ambivalence towards religion is similar to that of other modern and contemporary artists. She rejected institutional religion, but her art displays a close affinity with certain religious energies. My gratitude to Ann Braude, Director of the wsrc.
- 3 Several symbols (the bleeding heart, for example) amalgamate Catholicism with pre-Columbian rituals; see Gannit Ankori, *Imaging her Selves: Frida Kahlo's Poetics of Identity and Fragmentation* (Westport, CT, and London, 2002), especially pp. 89–90, 128–9, 159–2.
- 4 See the 'The Ascetic Self', 'Imitatio Christi' and 'Emulating Christ's Mystical Bride', *ibid.*, pp. 201–22. Kahlo's use of Christian iconography figures prominently in the publications of Teresa del Conde and Salomon Grimberg (see especially the latter's 'Frida Kahlo's *Memory: The Piercing of the Heart by the Arrow of Divine Love*', *Woman's Art Journal*, xi/2 [Fall 1990–Winter 1991], pp. 3–7).
- 5 The artist's niece, Isolda, claimed that every time Kahlo faced a medical crisis, she reverted to prayer and belief in God (Ankori interview 1989, and Isolda P. Kahlo, *Intimate Frida* [2005], Bogotà, 2006). As Lomas and Howell have cogently observed, 'It is a paradox that given her avowed rejection of Catholicism Kahlo constantly draws on its rich visual traditions; the tears, wounds, and broken hearts are those of the Mater Dolorosa, whom she repeatedly invokes to symbolize her plight'; David Lomas and Rosemary Howell, 'Medical Imagery in the Art of Frida Kahlo', *British Medical Journal*, CCXCIX/6715 (23 December 1989), p. 1597.