

# FRIDA KAHLO AND THE FEMININE

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This essay outlines Frida Kahlo's gender representation in her various portraits. Kahlo self-represents various masculine and feminine traits in a variety of her pieces, as evinced through *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940). This androgynous representation has much to do with her familial relationships as well as her relationship with her husband, Diego Rivera. Kahlo additionally also demonstrates her political prowess through artwork such as *Moses*, and thus brings herself into the masculine political realm. In this essay, Mushro delves into gender constructs, sexuality as a radical weapon, and physical appearance as a challenge to hegemonic masculinity.

Frida Kahlo, born in 1907 in Mexico City just years before the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, was an artist, a political activist, a feminist, and a lover. Well known for her striking self-portraits and traditional vesture, her paintings engaged concepts of tragedy, sadness, femininity, and masculinity. Kahlo suffered many disabilities throughout her life, including an accident that left her almost unable to walk, and polio, which crippled her and ultimately lead to her death in 1954. In this essay I will outline the way in which Kahlo portrayed her own specific performance of femininity and masculinity through her portraits. By examining a series of her personal letters, as well as two of her most famous paintings, I will expound upon her use of artwork as political expression and self-representation.

Frida Kahlo, or Magdalena Frida Carmen Kahlo, lived from July 6, 1907 to July 13, 1954 in Mexico City, but she claimed to be born in 1910, which was the year of the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution. Historians assume she claimed to have been born in 1910 as an “ideological proclamation” and connection to the political turmoil that Mexico underwent during the revolution.<sup>1</sup> Frida identified heavily with her “*mexicanidad*” and her “*mestizaje*” heritage, which she often portrayed through her traditional Tehuana outfits and hairstyles.

At age 6, Frida struggled with a bout of Polio that deformed her leg, and later in 1925, Frida suffered a terrible injury in a bus accident.<sup>2</sup> These two accidents shaped her self-image, and her sense of pain and suffering is evident throughout most of her portraits. In addition to portraying herself as a suffering individual, she often performed the male gender rather than the female. *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, which will be touched upon later in this analysis, delves into the difference of power in femininity and masculinity. In various portraits taken of her family, Frida disguised herself as a male, almost unrecognizable at first glance. In contrast with this “boyish” persona that she often played, Frida also played an extremely lavish and unique Mexican woman. She wielded her *mexicanidad* as a source of power and a source of personal identity, and because of this she has become an international icon for the feminist movement.

Frida Kahlo’s husband, Diego Rivera, was a famous Mexican painter well known for his frescoes and murals during the Mexican Revolution. Frida was Diego’s second wife, and they had a very open relationship in which both Diego and Frida had extramarital relations. As Ankori states, Frida struggled with her sexuality and challenged her Catholic upbringing.<sup>3</sup> She had several affairs with wom-

July 6, 1907-July 13, 1954  
Magdalena Frida Carmen  
Kahlo

en, including African American entertainer Josephine Baker and American painter Georgia O'Keefe. Though Kahlo did often play into the patriarchal society and convention, she just as actively defied the machismo culture within Mexico. As she grew older, she began to reject these conventional, Catholic teachings for more liberated views on sexuality.

Through Frida's "Cartas apasionadas," the reader can see her progression as an artist, political activist, and feminist. The letters begin with her time in the hospital after her accident on the tranvía. In a letter to Alejandro Gómez Arias, one of her earliest lovers and friends, she simply writes one sentence that defines the way in which her accident affected her: "The only good thing is that I'm starting to get used to suffering."<sup>4</sup> Her pain and suffering, not only physically but also mentally from her sense of limbo in between genders, satiated all of her works and self-portraits. Her portraits convey her own personal struggle as well as the greater struggle of the Mexican population, specifically Mexican women. As Judy Chicago states in her book *Frida Kahlo: Face to Face*: "Kahlo succeeds in representing her view of life on a grand scale—the interconnectedness of all things—as well as on a personal one."<sup>5</sup> Through her letters with Diego, the reader can visualize the inequality of their relationship and the disparity between their love for each other. In a letter to Diego, Frida states: I love you more than my own skin, and that even though you don't love me as much, you love me a little anyway—don't you? If this is not true, I'll always be hopeful that it could be, and that's enough for me. Love me a little, I adore you.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that though Frida is very sexually liberalized and is not afraid to self-rep-

resent outside of her gender she still adheres to very traditional Mexican norms of hegemony and patriarchal dominance. In this quote, one can visualize Frida essentially pandering to Diego, begging for him to love her. However, conversely, in a separate letter she discusses "the endless adventures, cracks in the doors," and the infidelities that they both partake in.<sup>7</sup> While it is clear that at least in the beginning of their relationship she loves Diego more than she even loves herself, she still retains her right to be with whomever she wants sexually.

In a letter to then President Miguel Alemán of Mexico, the reader sees Frida's political activist persona. In her letter she protests the veiling of Diego Rivera's mural "El Nigromante" in the Hotel del Prado. In this mural, Rivera portrays Ramirez, or El Nigromante, holding a sign that says "Dios no existe/God does not exist." She speaks to Miguel Alemán very defiantly and demands that Alemán unveils Rivera's mural to the public, as it is a representation of secular Mexican culture. She very boldly states: "the Law does not duly guarantee anybody's artistic property, but as a lawyer, you know very well that the Law is and has always been flexible."<sup>8</sup> Not only is she very passionate about the issue, but she is also very knowledgeable and is able to demonstrate this through her writing. She asks Alemán not to look at her as the wife of Rivera, but rather as an artist and a citizen of Mexico--the way that any independent woman should be looked at. In this letter, Frida represents herself not as a wife defending her husband, but rather as a woman defending her own rights as a citizen of Mexico and the rights of Mexico itself as a country. She embodies the political activist persona that many Mexicans, normally male,

embodied during the Mexican Revolution.

Kahlo continues to demonstrate her political activism through paintings such as *Moses*, which depicts a child in a womb in the middle of the painting and many different historical figures in the periphery of the work. Frida portrays various historical heroes (in her eyes) such as Buddha, Karl Marx, Lenin, and Gandhi, and various historical antiheroes such as Hitler, Stalin, and Napoleon. She additionally paints many Mayan and Aztec symbols such as thunder, lightening, Tlaloc, and Quetzalcoatl, in addition to the Egyptian heroine Nefertiti. Her use of traditional Mexican symbolism demonstrates the way in which she closely identifies with her culture as a mestizaje artist. Kahlo's goal in this painting was to repre-

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sent the birth of a hero through the fetus at the center of the painting and to additionally represent the need that the human race has to create heroes to follow. Freudian concepts such as the fear of life and death are present throughout the painting, which demonstrate Kahlo's intellect and interest in concepts such as mortality. Lastly, her use of strong female goddesses such as Nefertiti demonstrates that her heroes were of both genders; perhaps Frida at times was even her own heroine.

Frida's *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* makes a comment on the idea of performing gender and sex during her time period. At the

top of the portrait she writes, "Mira que si te quise, fue por el pelo. Ahora que está pelona, ya no te quiero/Look, if I loved you, it was because of your hair. Now that you are short-haired, I don't love you anymore." After Kahlo found out that Diego and her sister had an affair for nearly a year, she chopped off all her hair and created this self-portrait. According to Frida, Diego's favorite part of her was her hair, and her hair came to represent her power and sexuality in their relationship. As Judy Chicago states, "stripping herself of her hair was to lose or give up her sexual power, perhaps as an act of vengeance."<sup>9</sup> Long, flowing hair is often associated with the very feminine, and short hair is looked upon as a more masculine representation. In her self-portrait, not only does she show herself in a suit with cropped hair, but she also paints scissors in her hand and the clumps of hair that she chopped off. Distancing herself from the very feminine, she demonstrates that she is completely in control of her sexuality and her power over Diego. Though she may have forfeited some of her sexual power over Diego, perhaps she gained more individual power as a woman. Distancing herself from her biological gender allows her to occupy more of the male dominated space or the space outside of the domestic sphere. Not only does she demonstrate her ability to control Diego through her sexuality, but she also demonstrates the power of masculinity. This self-portrait is completely striking, and the use of a black suit makes a statement of power. However, even though she dons a black pantsuit, she also wears dangling, feminine earrings. While this self-representation is overtly masculine, she still retains bits of her femininity. This paint-

ing represents a divergence from her previously feminine and decorative self-portraits and shows a more solemn and masculine side of a Kahlo after her divorce from Rivera.

The dominance of the patriarchy in Mexico was especially strong during the Mexican Revolution, and Frida clearly defies this hegemonic masculine power in her *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*. Some critics look at this painting as a loss of female pride and an evocation of self-punishment for the failures of her marriage. However, rather than demonstrating a loss of female pride, Frida demonstrates control over her own self-representation and a decisive choice to represent herself in an androgynous space. In Mexican societies “marriages are often based on the concept of *respeto* and have a hierarchical power structure in which a woman is often relegated to the demands and desires of her husband.”<sup>10</sup> while this structure of marriage still persists today, Frida actively defied this in her various extramarital relations as well as her demand for a divorce upon finding out about her husband’s affair with her sister.<sup>11</sup> While many male revolutionary officials attempted to silence women’s contribution to the narrative, Kahlo used her art and her appearance to throw herself into the mostly male dominated sphere. In 1924, bob hairstyles became fash-

ionable for Mexican women, and portrayal of *las pelonas* (short-haired women) in print media “spilled over into physical violence against women donning this style.” Many advocated that this hairstyle endangered indigenous heritage, mestizaje culture, and the femininity of Mexican women. However, Kahlo continuously demonstrates her value for her indigenous roots regardless of her hairstyle or her image as female. Her existence in the “limbo” or androgynous space between feminine and masculine is something that threatens traditional patriarchal values of Mexican society.

It is impossible to examine Frida without noting that she is inherently female; however, this alone does not make her work feminist. What makes her work feminist is her treatment of her Mexican heritage and her personal experiences and traumas as components that add to her womanhood and “female sensibility.”<sup>12</sup> Rather than paint her surroundings, Kahlo most often focuses on her self-representation and treats herself as her own muse. Most of her works are autobiographical, and these personal experiences define her artwork. The viewer can pick up the tensions between her exterior self as a “constructed social being” and “the powerful forces of the instinctual life” of her interior self.<sup>13</sup> When the viewer is able to look past the outward

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self-representation Kahlo puts forward, often through traditional Tehuana dress, he or she is able to see the deeper symbolism Kahlo lays throughout her artwork. Kahlo deals with many subjects that are inherently feminine: miscarriage, childbirth, physical appearance, sexuality, and mestizaje identity in terms of gender. Gender is the central theme that connects her works together, and her art continuously acts as a means of therapy and survival.

Kahlo's mestizaje identity intersects heavily with her performance of gender and transforms the meaning of her work. Mestizajes, or people of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage, have faced prejudice and discrimination since the arrival of Spaniards in 'The New World.' There is a racist tendency, or "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race [Spanish] over all others and thereby the right to dominance," present in Mexican society that marginalizes indigenous communities.<sup>14</sup> However, Frida openly addresses the intricacies of the Tehuana culture and the power that Tehuana women hold. Rather than bury the differences between classes in Mexican society, Frida openly addresses the beauty of indigenous women. As Audrey Lorde states, the "refusal to recognize [and reclaim] those differences" is where women of different races and classes run into issues.<sup>15</sup> Rather than look at difference as an endemic part of society, women must look at difference as a way to achieve the same common goal. Not only does Frida identify with her Mexican side and her fight for Mexican independence, she also deliberately chooses to dress in traditional Tehuana style in order to appeal to the Mexican population. Mulvey and Wollen believe that Kahlo's decision to dress in traditional costume is a distinctly political

People see  
[Kahlo] as the creator  
of the first female  
"selfie."

choice, as the "long dresses of the women of Tehuantepec in Southern Mexico...enjoyed a mythic reputation for their personal and economic independence."<sup>16</sup> Not only was it an appeal to the "common" Mexican people, but it was also an appeal to her independence as a woman who made her own living through painting and creating. Gender and race overlap continuously, and Frida used her identity as a mestizaje to empower other women.



The first wave of feminism occurred between the 1830s and the early 1890s in which women began to fight for suffrage, equal working, and property rights. The second wave, which began after World War II, focused on the workplace, family, and reproductive rights. At this point, the Equal Rights Amendment, which constitutionally grants rights equally to all persons regardless of gender, still had yet to pass. This time period also had a huge focus on the white woman's movement, which tended to marginalize third world women (black and latina) as the 'other.' The third wave, which still continues today, addresses the many aggressions and micro-aggressions that occur daily in a male dominated society. Women continue to fight for their workplace and reproductive rights. The current feminist movement is likewise beginning to recognize that the "literatures of all women of color rec-

reate the texture of our lives”—not all women are the same, and this recognition is what will lead to progression.<sup>17</sup> This is a main reason why Kahlo’s work is so frequently represented in pop-culture. The feminist movement gains by learning from strong women of color.

One can apply Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of “borderlands” to Frida in a different context. Just as *las chicanas* “straddle the borderlands,” Frida straddles the borderland between iden-

tification with each gender.<sup>18</sup> Whereas Chicanas struggle to find their identity in both Mexico and the United States, Frida actually gains independence and power from being able to identify in an androgynous space between male and female. When she performs the male gender, she is able to feel the freedoms of being a male, and she is empowered to partake in the political realm. However, she is also able to just as easily perform the female gen-

Feminism Movements:	1st wave of feminism	2nd wave of feminism
YEARS:	1830s-1890s	After World War II
MAIN FOCUSES:	Suffrage Equal Working Rights Property Rights	Workplace Family Reproductive Rights



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der and gain power through her sexuality and Tehuana identity. Her existence in the borderland is more a source of power than a struggle.

Today, Frida is an international icon for the independent, strong woman archetype that many young women search for. Her face is plastered on shirts, backpacks, notebooks, pins, and tattooed on many as a symbol of female liberation. Her image transformed into a cult-like admiration, and people see her as the creator of the first female 'selfie.' She represents a strong woman who was unafraid of androgyny, death, or the male political realm. Not only did she value her identity as a mestizaje from Mexico, but she also valued her identity as a woman and the way in which this identity changed throughout her life. It is evident that she did not solely identify with the feminine and that this did not define her womanhood. Rather, it seems as though she felt more restricted by strict femininity and saw the possibility of empowerment through androgyny. Her ability to interchange between her identification with each gender demonstrates her true power and existence in a metaphorical "borderland" between male and female.<sup>19</sup> Through her self-portraits, one can observe the various ways in which she self-represents and performs gender, female or male. The present day obsession with Frida resounds with the millennial generation and the current wave of feminism taking place among the younger population.





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## ENDNOTES



- 1 Gannit Ankori, *Frida Kahlo* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 22.
- 2 Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 44.
- 3 Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 67.
- 4 Martha Zamora, *The Letters of Frida Kahlo: Cartas apasionadas*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995), 23.
- 5 Judy Chicago, *Frida Kahlo: Face to Face*, (Munich; London; New York: Prestl, 2010), 42.
- 6 Zamora, *The Letters of Frida Kahlo: Cartas apasionadas*, 68.
- 7 Zamora, *The Letters of Frida Kahlo: Cartas apasionadas*, 67.
- 8 Zamora, *The Letters of Frida Kahlo: Cartas apasionadas*, 139.
- 9 Chicago, *Frida Kahlo: Face to Face*, 91.
- 10 “Women, Men, and the Role of Gender in Immigration,” in *The Student Research Series* 3, no. 3 (2009).
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Elizabeth Garber, “A Comparison of Feminist and Non-Feminist Voices,” in *Art Education* 45, no. 2 (1992): 43.
- 13 Garber, “A Comparison of Feminist and Non-Feminist Voices,” in *Art Education* 45, no. 2 (1992): 45.
- 14 Audrey Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (California: Crossing Press, 1984), 115.
- 15 Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” 155.
- 16 L. Mulvey and P. Wollen, *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1982), 18.
- 17 Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” 118.
- 18 Gloria Anzaldúa, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” in *Borderland/La Frontera, The New Mestiza*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 2954.
- 19 Anzaldúa, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” 2954.



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