Frida Kahlo and Chicana self-portraiture: Maya Gonzalez, Yreina D. Cervantez, and Cecilia Alvarez

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FRIDA KAHLO AND CHICANA SELF-PORTRAITURE: MAYA GONZALEZ, YREINA D. CERVANTEZ, AND CECILIA ALVAREZ

by

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To Travis
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INTRODUCTION

In her forward to Marsha Meskimmon's insightful survey of self-portraits by women artists during the twentieth-century, artist and author Rosy Martin challenges the dominant mode of engagement between the public and portraiture, calling into question the equilibrium between autobiography and self-portraiture. She challenges the role of self-portraiture as a vehicle for reaching an understanding of an artist’s self and asks scholars to step away from simplistic readings of self-portraiture by women artists. In her plea to re-situate self-portraits by women artists within their intellectual concerns, Martin provides a base for the reconsideration of Frida Kahlo’s work.

The unflagging focus, in both scholarship and popular culture, on elements of Kahlo’s biography denies the artist the power of being the primary agent of meaning in her own work. Kahlo (1907-1954) drew on a wide variety of sources for her self-portraiture to construct culturally engaged works of art. While self-portraiture is inherently about the artist, and, to some degree personal, Kahlo’s self-portraiture is also an example of social commentary. Her transformation or hybridization of imagery rooted in Mexican history re-envisioned Mexican traditions to conform with her identity and with changes in Mexican culture. Chicana artists, especially Maya Gonzalez (b. 1964), Yreina D. Cervántez (b. 1952), and Cecilia Concepción Alvarez (b. 1950) are influenced by Kahlo’s work and utilize a similar hybridizing approach. Additionally, these artists include Kahlo as one of their historical sources which produces a new perspective on Kahlo’s role in Chicana culture.
Unlike the aforementioned Chicana artists, Kahlo is entrenched as a key figure in the art historical canon. As one the most influential figures in the development of Mexican and Chicana art, Kahlo’s work has influenced the self-portraiture of Gonzalez, Cervántez, and Alvarez. While these artists have yet to achieve such broad recognition, their work exemplifies the contemporary reinterpretation of Kahlo’s influence. Gonzalez, Cervántez, and Alvarez create self-portraiture that unites a variety of visual elements, drawn from a sources from Mexican and Chicana/o history, in hybridized form. Their work is notable because it demonstrates a variety of possibilities for the reinterpretation of historical elements to create new meaning. Although they work in different locations and focus on a variety of issues, these three artists share the desire to utilize self-portraiture as a vehicle to engage viewers in a cultural dialogue. Additionally, they share a desire to acknowledge Mexican and Chicana/o traditions in self-portraiture that generates a new perspective on their culture.

Maya Gonzalez was born in Lancaster, California in 1964 to a German mother and a Mexican father. She currently works in San Francisco as an artist, author, and publisher at Reflection Press which she co-founded in 2009. As an undergraduate at the University of Oregon, Gonzalez studied creative writing until she came to the realization that, “I couldn’t take my own writing because it was about myself. Art was this way to negotiate spaces in a way that felt much safer and much more inclusive and complicated to me.” The visual arts, particularly self portrait, allow her to code her personal experiences in a visual language that references both personal issues and larger themes including colonization, Westernization, and identity.
Cecilia Alvarez also uses personal imagery to comment on cultural issues. Much of her oeuvre can be described as self-portraiture yet she considers herself to be a politically and culturally engaged artist. Although Alvarez now works in Seattle, she was raised in Tijuana, Mexico by her Cuban father and Mexican mother. As a student at San Diego State University, Alvarez was told that because of her gender and her heritage, her art could never be considered “fine art,” prompting her to reject art education as “an extension of wall street.” As a primarily self-taught artist, Alvarez regards her work as applicable to any group of society that has been disenfranchised, dismissed, or made expendable. Significantly, she uses the terms “Latina” and “Chicana” not exclusively to define heritage but as metaphors for how human ethnicity, particularly mixed ethnicity, is made less important in society. Self-portraiture is the primary vehicle she uses to communicate with and for groups she feels lack a voice.

Like Gonzalez and Alvarez, Yreina D. Cervántez defines her work as a mix of personal and cultural imagery that draws on both personal experiences and her contemporary Chicana perspective. She was raised in Mount Palomar, California and was exposed to art from an early age. She received her B.A. from the University of California, Santa Cruz and an M.F.A. in 1989 from the University of California, Los Angeles. She currently serves as an assistant professor of Chicana/o Studies at California State University, Northridge. Cervántez is widely regarded as a leader in the Chicana community, specifically as a pioneer of the Chicana mural movement but also for her self-portraiture which often incorporates a blend of Aztec and mesoamerican iconography with elements drawn from contemporary culture.
Although Gonzalez, Alvarez, and Cervántez are different in many ways, their work is linked by their desire to utilize inherently personal images of themselves to enter into a cultural and political dialogue. Each of these artists uses self-portraiture to create complex imagery that engages the viewer on multiple levels. They all incorporate Kahlo’s influence, in addition to cultural symbols from the past and present, to add meaning beyond the personal to their self-portraiture.

The first use of Kahlo’s image in contemporary Chicano/a art was by Chicano artists Rupert García and Gronk. Their work at the height of the Chicano Cultural Renaissance in California during the mid-1970s set the stage for the appropriation of Kahlo’s image as a cultural icon. Alvarez and Cervántez also produced imagery related to Kahlo during this period and were part of the construction of Kahlo’s status as a key figure in Chicano/a culture. From the beginning of this process in the 1970s, Chicana artists have worked to retrofit Kahlo’s image and significance to make it applicable to their work. For Gonzalez, Alvarez, and Cervántez, this process necessitates the rejection of the emphasis on Kahlo’s biography, especially her relationship with her husband, Diego Rivera. Instead, these artists focus on Kahlo’s political and cultural engagement through self-portraiture, her artistic merits, and her ability to communicate abstract ideas through self-portraiture.

The redefinition of Kahlo as a cultural icon is very similar to the reinterpretation of the traditional three mothers of Mexican culture, La Llorona, La Malinche, and La Virgen de Guadalupe by Chicana artists. The essential element of this reinterpretation is the acknowledgment of cultural traditions accompanied by attempts to reconstruct the
meaning of key figures to conform with changing ideals. For example, La Llorona, translated as “the weeping woman,” is the central figure of a folktale prevalent in Mexico, the American Southwest, and parts of Latin and South America. In traditional retellings, La Llorona is the archetypal violated woman, driven to kill her children in response to the adulterous actions of her husband. Contemporary reconfigurations of La Llorona focus, instead on her origins as an Aztec goddess. In this way, a symbol of the lack of agency of Mexican and Chicana women is transformed into a symbol of their power.

La Malinche and La Llorona are often paired as the two “bad mothers” of Mexican folklore. Also known as La Chingada, La Malinche was an indigenous woman who was compelled to serve as a translator for conquistador Hernan Cortés. She is traditionally regarded as a traitor for her role in the Spanish colonization of indigenous Mexico. Norma Alarcón argues that contemporary Chicano/a culture recognizes La Malinche as an, “evil goddess and creator of a new race [mestiza/o] . . . mother-whore, bearer of illegitimate children, responsible for the foreign Spanish invasion.” Reconfigurations of La Malinche point to the fact that blaming one translator for the colonization of Mexico is historically inaccurate and damaging to the identity of Chicana and Mexican women. Additionally, Alvarez argues La Malinche was essentially a slave in a culture where the male was the power figure, stating, “when you are a slave, you have no options.” Alvarez’s perspective on La Malinche illustrates the efforts by Chicana artist to reconsider the historical narrative to return women to a position of power and to recognize and correct gender biases in Chicano/a culture.
The traditional perspective on La Virgen de Guadalupe frames her as the exemplary woman, submissive and obedient, childbearing yet a virgin. As the ideal “good mother,” La Virgen de Guadalupe represents an oppressive ideal constructed to dictate female behavior that was deemed acceptable to men. Additionally, during the Chicano Movement, La Virgen was regarded as the, “biological source of the Chicano brotherhood,” which was and continues to be, problematic for the unrepresented Chicana population. Chicana feminist and author Gloria Anzaldúa advocates a return to the pre-Hispanic origins of La Virgen and identifies mesoamerican goddesses including Coatlicue, Tlazolteotl, Cihuacoatl, and Tonantzin as the true identity of this cultural icon. Returning to the indigenous roots of La Virgen restores what many Chicana artists and authors recognize as her true identity and reconstructs her as a symbol of female agency.

The process through which Chicana artists are working to redefine La Llorona, La Malinche, and La Virgen de Guadalupe parallels the reconstruction of Kahlo’s significance in Chicana culture. The “rediscovery” of Kahlo as a “forgotten woman artist” began is the 1970s with the feminist movement. Subsequently, the commercial popularity, both of her art and of consumer products using her image, blossomed during the 1990s. This rapid increase in her public popularity is largely indebted to the sensationalization of her biography rather than to the analysis of her work. The focus on her biography diverts attention from her art. The work of Gonzalez, Alvarez, and Cervántez, among many others, re-focuses attention on aspects of Kahlo’s work that support female agency.
The reinterpretation of Kahlo’s significance in contemporary Chicana culture creates a reciprocal relationship between Kahlo’s work and that of Gonzalez, Cervántez, and Alvarez. The later artists make a contribution to the development of Chicana art and engage viewers in a dialogue while simultaneously re-valuing Kahlo’s significance. Their work calls attention to deficiencies in the art historical narrative and promotes an understanding of Kahlo’s work that focuses on her artistic merit and her value to later artists as a source of influence. Additionally, in reconsidering Kahlo’s image Chicana artists acknowledge one of their cultural and artistic predecessors.

As noted, the commercialization of Kahlo’s art and biography has contributed to the desire of Chicana artists to reinterpret her image. However, the art historical narrative associated with Kahlo is also a factor. The tendency to focus on her biography as the primary source of meaning in her self-portraiture is reductive. Kahlo, popularly known for her intriguing biography, medical ailments, and a tortured relationship with her husband, has become a household name not through widespread recognition of her creative merit, political involvement, or innovative artistic contributions, but through the titillating details of her life and their popularization in a wide array of media. While scholarship adopting a biographical methodology has sometimes significantly contributed to understanding Kahlo’s work, it often neglects to fully consider her social and political engagement. The scholarship of Hayden Herrera and Raquel Tibol was at the forefront of the development of this historical narrative.

Herrera’s 1983 biography of Kahlo, a seminal work in the field, has served as the methodological foundation for much of the existing literature. Her approach links
Kahlo’s life and work while minimizing, even neglecting, the social and political implications of her art. Similarly, Raquel Tibol’s publications were integral in establishing the biographical interpretation of Kahlo’s work. For example, in her “Fragmentos para una Vida de Frida Kahlo,” published just months before the artist’s death in 1954, Tibol focuses exclusively on the relationship between Kahlo’s life and her work. She states, “it is said, repeatedly, and with reason, that the works of Frida Kahlo are a valiant and valuable testimony to her own existence.” This assertion of the role of biography in Kahlo’s oeuvre is followed by a firsthand retelling of the basic chronology of Kahlo’s life accompanied by many reproductions without substantive art historical analysis. While self-portraiture is indeed personal, Tibol’s writing neglects the social and cultural themes in Kahlo’s work and contributes to the limited understanding of Kahlo’s significance.

The publications written during Kahlo’s lifetime and immediately following her death also shaped what would become the dominant narrative of Kahlo’s work. In a 1938 commentary penned by Bertram D. Wolfe, one of Diego Rivera’s early biographers, the author defines Kahlo as “one of the most spontaneous and personal of artists.” Additionally, he takes care to portray her as an amateur artist, uneducated through any formal system and a painter only by an act of fate. This trend is continued in a set of short tributes and analyses published in a Mexico City newspaper, Novedades. Antonio Rodriguez notes in his “Frida Kahlo: Heroína de Dolor,” that it was the tragedy in her life that transformed her into an artist. Arguments that cite a single life experience, albeit a
major physical trauma, as the sole impetus for her interest in art relegate Kahlo’s education and political views to a place of irrelevance.

This narrow and dangerously reductionist reading of Kahlo is not limited, however, to the work of early scholars. In his introduction to *Frida Kahlo 1907-2007*, a book which accompanied an exhibition commemorating the centenary of Kahlo’s birth, Carlos Fuentes claims that, “Frida’s politics, if one can speak of such a thing, were inseparable from the personality and actions of Diego Rivera.”

This diminishment of the artist’s agency reveals the need for the re-conceptualization of Kahlo’s work, both by scholars and by artists like Gonzalez, Cervántez, and Alvarez. That revision is already underway. Notably, Margaret Lindauer’s *Devouring Frida* considers the role of post-revolutionary nationalism in Kahlo’s work and privileges Kahlo’s social and political resistance over retellings of her biography. Furthermore, in her “Marginalization and the Critical Female Subject,” Joan Borsa urges readers to consider her argument that Kahlo’s works are “much more complicated, politically engaged and analytically subversive . . . than many of the existing texts would have us believe.” While each revisionist interpretation on Kahlo’s work has contributed to a better understanding of her work, the reconstruction of her legacy by contemporary artists is still necessary. As artists work to reconfigure her role in the development of Chicano/ a culture, their work reinforces revisionist scholarship.

As one of these artists, Maya Gonzalez has received little scholarly attention beyond brief articles in texts dedicated to broader themes. For example *Chicano Art for Our Millennium* and *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art: Artists, Works, Culture*, 
and Education, two significant texts in the scholarship of Chicana art, include brief analyses of Gonzalez’s work. González is also featured in Suzanne Bost’s Encarnatón: Illness and Body Politics in Chicana Feminist Art. Bost discusses González’s work as a departure from the often convoluted confines of identity politics and considers her work as a new way to understand the depiction of female bodies by women. Finally, Laura E. Pérez’s volume on the role of spirituality in Chicana art includes a brief analysis linking Kahlo’s Las Dos Fridas (1939) with González’s The Love that Stains (2000), identifying spirituality as a key feature in the work of both artists (figs. A1 and A2).

Like González, Yreina D. Cervántez, is connected to Kahlo. As a well known as a muralist and as a key figure in Chicana art, Cervántez pioneered the reinterpretation of cultural figures, including Kahlo, to fit a contemporary feminist perspective. While most of the literature analyzing her work focuses on her contributions to the Chicana mural movement, a number of authors have also considered her smaller works. Additionally, Cervántez’s Homenaje a Frida Kahlo (1978) was included in the iconic Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation exhibition in 1991, a major milestone in her career (fig. A3). Alicia Gaspar de Alba considers Cervántez’s role in this exhibition in the context of gender issues in the Chicano movement. Laura Pérez has also considered Cervántez’s work in a variety of contexts, including spirituality, the role of dress and body ornamentation in Contemporary Chicana art, and Chicana philosophy.

Of the three Chicana artists included in this study, Cecilia Conception Alvarez is the least visible in art historical scholarship. Although her Las Cuatas Diegο (1979) was included in the Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation exhibition, her work rarely
appears in studies of Chicano/a art (fig. A4). Generally, discussions of her work are limited to specialized texts dedicated to artists working in the Northwest United States.

The following chapters combine iconographic analysis and cultural context to consider these artists’ reinterpretation of historical imagery as a vehicle to create hybridized, culturally engaged self-portraiture. Each of these artists considers cultural icons in a new light. This reconsideration both acknowledges tradition and looks toward the future. Chapter one challenges the prevalence of dichotomies in the interpretation of Kahlo’s work. Artificial dichotomies, including the loved and the unloved, the Indian and the European, and the violated and the pure, do not fully account for Kahlo’s cultural and political engagement. Additionally, these reductive interpretive structures neglect Kahlo’s ever-present desire to assert her own *mexicanidad* while challenging cultural norms. Kahlo’s manipulation of the Tehuana dress and of Mexican cultural icons including La Llorona and La Chingada exemplify her use of self-portraiture to reinterpret Mexican tradition to account for female agency.

Chapter two reconsiders the multiple potential meanings of Chicana double self-portraiture. Three case studies of the work of Maya Gonzalez, Yreina D. Cervántez, and Cecilia Concepción Alvarez call attention to the richness of their work and the significance of iconographic elements from a wide variety of sources and time periods is a central theme.

Chapter three is dedicated to the consideration of Kahlo’s legacy as it is reconfigured in the work of Gonzalez, Cervántez, and Alvarez. Each of these artists negotiates the commercialization of Kahlo’s image, the scholarly discussion of Fridolatry,
and the popular understanding of her biography in order to produce hybridized images that comment on contemporary issues. While Kahlo’s influence is but one of many factors in the work of these artists, the reconstruction of her legacy is in keeping with the trend in Chicana art to repurpose traditional figures, for example La Llorona, La Malinche, and La Virgen de Guadalupe, to create a visual vocabulary relevant to the Chicana/o community and to the overall development of contemporary self-portraiture.
Notes


3 Maya Gonzalez, interview with the author, September 13, 2012. Gonzalez did briefly attend art school but had difficulty finding resonance with the imagery and the artists in the curriculum.


5 Cecilia Concepción Álvarez, interview with the author, October 2, 2012.

6 Ibid.

7 Keller, Erickson, Kaytie Johnson, and Joaquín Alvarado, 1: 124.

8 Ibid.


10 Kahlo is identified as a cultural hero or icon in a number of prominent exhibitions of Chicano/a art, the significance of this inclusion will be discussed in Chapter 5. Please see Gary D. Keller, Mary Erickson, and Pat Villeneuve, *Chicano Art for Our Millennium: Collected Works from the Arizona State University Community* (Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, 2004). Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarboro-Bejarano, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Reformation, 1965-1985* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, 1991).


12 La Llorona is interpreted by some as an iteration of Cihuacoatl or “Serpent Woman,” an Aztec earth goddess said to have domain over the process of childbirth and death by childbirth. See Inez Cardozo-Freeman, “Serpent Fears and Religious Motifs among Mexican Women,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 1978): 12.
“La Chingada” is derived from the verb *chingar*, a vulgar term generally translated as “to fuck.” When used as a noun, La Chingada reads as “the fucked one” or, more colloquially, “fucked up whore.” *Chingon* identifies the active agent required by the verb *chingar*. Thus, the *chingon* is the aggressor who fucks or violated the *chingada*. Other names used for La Chingada include, Malintzin, Malinalli Tenepal, and Doña Marina. The reader should note that in Mexico and some other Spanish-speaking countries, *chingada* is used as an insult, somewhat equivalent to “bastard” in English but is considerably more offensive and vulgar. For a brief discussion of La Chingada/La Malinche, see Perez, *There Was A Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture*, 30. Also see Lucy Ann Havard, “Frida Kahlo, *Mexicanidad* and *Máscaras*: The Search for Identity in Postcolonial Mexico,” *Romance Studies* 24, no. 3 (November 2006): 242.


The best known vehicle for the popularization of Kahlo’s biography is the 2002 film, *Frida*, directed by Julie Taymor and starring Selma Hayed as Frida. Significantly, Hayden Herrera’s biography of Kahlo (discussed below) is referenced as the literary basis for the screen play.

While Herrera’s biography is arguably her most significant contribution to the field, her “Frida Kahlo: Her Life, Her Art” prefaces the 1983 text in its assertions of the personal and private nature of Kahlo’s work. Herrera’s staunch focus on Kahlo’s biography and its direct manifestation in her self-portraits, which she generally reads as autobiographies, is evident in her early article dedicated to the artist. Hayden Herrera, “Frida Kahlo: Her Life, Her Art,” *Artforum* 14, (1976): 39-40.

Her true subjects were embodied states of mind—her joys and sorrows. Always closely connected with the events of her life, these images convey the immediacy of lived experience, combining fantasy and actual events as if the two were inseparable and equally real. It is significant, too, that in the heyday of the Mexican mural movement, Kahlo chose to make her paintings modest in size, personal in subject and private in purpose.

Herrera’s biographical emphasis is also included in her analysis of Kahlo produced for a broader audience. See Hayden Herrera, “Frida Kahlo: Sacred Monsters” *Ms.*, February 1978: 29-31.
As previously noted, biographically based scholarship dedicated to Kahlo constitutes a significant body of knowledge in the field and continues to serve as a valuable segment of literature, however, the general privileging of biographical information at the expense of a broader conceptualization of Kahlo’s work unnecessarily limits the breadth of understanding of the artist. Major works that foreground biographical issues include, Martha Zamora, *Frida Kahlo: The Brush of Anguish*, trans. Marilyn Sode Smith (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1990); Salomon Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: Song of Herself* (London: Merrell, 2008); Jack Rummel, *Frida Kahlo: A Spiritual Biography* (New York: Crossroad, 2000); Claudia Schaefer, *Frida Kahlo: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2009). Helm includes a brief mention of Kahlo’s work in which he emphasizes Rivera’s role in her artistic production. Regarding Kahlo and Rivera’s divorce, Helm states, “He had told her that separation would be better for them both, and had persuaded her to leave him. But he had by no means convinced her that she would be happy, or that her career could prosper, apart from him.” MacKinley Helm, *Modern Mexican Painters* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 167-171.

“Se ha dicho repetidamente, y con razón, que los cuadros de Frida Kahlo son un testimonio valiente y valioso de su propia existencia.” Raquel Tibol, “Fragmentos para una Vida de Frida Kahlo,” *Novedades, Mexico en la Cultura*, March 7, 1954. Please note that translations are my own unless otherwise stated.


In support of his implied claims that cast Kahlo as an amateur and reinforcing his interpretation of the one-to-one link between her art and life, Wolfe states, “boredom and suffering during a year spent flat on her back in a plaster cast, after an automobile accident, made a painter out of her; and each of her paintings since has been an expression of a personal experience.” Wolfe, “Rise of Another Rivera,” 64.
“Por eso la tragedia a que—produjo en ella uno de los más vigorosos, profundos y emotive artistas de nuestros día.” Antonio Rodríguez, “Frida Kahlo: Heroína de Dolor,” *Novedades, Mexico en la Cultura*, July 17, 1955, 3.

Carlos Fuentes, introduction to *Frida Kahlo. National Homage 1907-2007*, ed. Flor Hurtado, Adriana Konzevik, Alejandra Peña, and Patricia Urías (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes), 30. Interestingly, Fuentes makes a similar argument in his introduction to Sarah M. Lowe’s commentary and analysis of Kahlo’s diary. He states “Frida’s politics, such as they were, could not be separated from the personality and the actions of Diego Rivera.” Carlos Fuentes, introduction to *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, Sarah M. Lowe (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 19. The marked similarities between Fuentes’ contributions to each of these texts suggests that his piece for *Frida Kahlo. National Homage 1907-2007* is a revision of the earlier essay for Lowe’s text. With this in mind, it is significant that in the earlier version he claims that Kahlo’s politics could not have been separated from those of Rivera while in his subsequent revision he makes a stronger and more absolute argument that Kahlo essentially had no political voice.


The work of Lindauer and Borsa is just a sampling of the scholarly output that reconsiders aspects of Kahlo’s work. Other authors in this vein include, Baddeley, “‘Her Dress Hangs Here’: De-Frocking the Kahlo Cult,” 10-17; Mary Katherine Coffey, “The Two Fridas: (A)dressing the National Body” M.A. Thesis (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1996). For a brief literature review concerning the scholarship on Kahlo’s abortions, see Eva Zetterman, “Frida Kahlo’s Abortions: With Reflections from a Gender Perspective on Sexual Education in Mexico,” *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 75, no. 4 (2006): 231-242. For a brief ideological overview and explanation of the feminist perspective on Kahlo’s work, see Elizabeth Garber, “Art Critics on Frida Kahlo: A Comparison of Feminist and Non-Feminist Voices,” *Art Education* 45, no. 2 (March 1992): 42-48.

*Chicano Art for Our Millennium*. Keller, Erickson, Johnson, and Alvarado, *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art: Artists, Works, Culture, and Education*. This multi-volume work also includes a brief biography of the artist in addition to an analysis of Gonzalez’s *The Love that Stains*. Significantly, Gonzalez’s *The Love that Stains* is the cover image of this monumental study.


For a brief biography of Cervántez, see *Artistas Chicanas: A Symposium on the Experience and Expression of Chicana Artists*, symposium program, University of California Santa Barbara, April 13, 1991.


Gaspar de Alba, 57. For the exhibition catalogue, see Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarboro-Bejarano, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Reformation, 1965-1985*.

38 Alvarez is the only artist, of the three being considered, not included in the text largely considered the quintessential overview of contemporary Chicano/a art, Gary D. Keller, Mary Erickson, Kaytie Johnson, Joaquín Alvarado, *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art*. Cervántez is discussed on page 124 of volume one and Gonzalez appears on page 6 of volume 2.

CHAPTER 1: *LAS DOS FRIDAS*: BREAKING TRADITIONAL DICHOTOMIES

The focus on biography in the interpretation of Frida Kahlo’s work has resulted in the development of some firmly-rooted oversimplifications that pervade the scholarly and popular understanding of her oeuvre. The dichotomies of the unloved and the loved, the violated and the pure, or the Indian and European, are among the most frequent in analyses of Kahlo’s *Las Dos Fridas* (fig. A1). However, a careful examination of the work, the scholarship, and the social and political implications generates a much more dynamic interpretation of Kahlo’s work.

*Las Dos Fridas* is one of Kahlo’s largest works at approximately 68 x 68 inches in size.\(^1\) It is a departure from the *retablo* format she frequently used, reflecting Kahlo’s desire for her work to be noticed at the Surrealist exhibition for which it was intended.\(^2\) Two monumental, full length representations of the artist are seated side-by-side on a simple green bench, gently holding hands. Behind them, dark, jagged clouds blanket the sky, eliminating any specific sense of place. The two figures are linked by a shared circulatory system which pumps blood between their exposed hearts. The figure on the left uses a hemostatic clamp in an attempt to stanch the flow of blood falling on her stiff white gown.\(^3\) As the blood pools in the folds of her dress, it spills over and falls onto the hem of her skirt in uniform, circular droplets. The shape of the falling droplets of blood mimics, both in color and shape, the embroidered floral pattern which adorns the bottom of her skirt (fig. A5).

This antiquated frock with an elaborately decorated lace bodice covers the majority of the figure’s body with the exception of her forearms and her left breast, which
is exposed by an irregularly formed void in the garment. Significantly, the lack of loose thread and the absence of the excess fabric that would have been produced had her garment been forcibly ripped open suggests a less violent, perhaps voluntary, method of exposure. Adjacent to the figure’s heart, the lace bodice is interrupted by a cutout which provides a view of the white under-layer supporting the lacework. This oblong cutout, bordered by ribbon and topped with an intricate knot of hair-like fabric, references the female anatomy. The figure’s demure posture and vividly painted red lips convey a sense of femininity which is repeated in her elaborate gown. Her heart is imbedded in her body, a part of her self, whereas the heart of the figure on the right seems to float, affixed to her gown but not to her body. Furthermore, the heart of the portrait on the left has been surgically dissected to reveal its inner-workings while the heart of the figure on the right is intact. The two figures are connected by an elongated artery which wraps around the European Kahlo’s neck, contrasting the white lace of her gown with the deep red of her own blood.

The self-portrait on the right exudes a much more masculine aura than her companion; her lips are unpainted and the slightest shadow of a mustache darkens her upper lip. Additionally, her spread knees and slightly curved back suggest a more relaxed, less demure, pose. The masculine elements of the portrait on the right are complicated by the way in which the thin fabric of her blouse clings to her breasts, highlighting their outline and affirming her femaleness. She is clothed in the Tehuana dress native to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, home to a traditionally matriarchal society known for the strength and independence of its indigenous female residents. The white hem of the
Tehuana Kahlo’s dress is embroidered with a white-on-white floral pattern that mimics the vivid red flowers of the European gown, symbolically connecting the two figures and reminding the viewer that the blood dripping on the white gown comes from the bodies of both figures due to their shared circulatory system. While the vascular system of the figure on the left is completely exposed and travels across the surface of her gown, the main artery of the figure on the right disappears under the shoulder of her blouse, reappearing as it wraps around her arm. The Tehuana Kahlo is penetrated by the artery leading from her heart to the medallion held in her right hand. This artery culminates in an image of Rivera as a child which Kahlo delicately holds near her womb. Alternatively, the cylindrical shape of the medallion and the positioning of Kahlo’s hand suggests a vulgar masculine gesture, reiterating the androgynous nature of the Tehuana Kahlo. In spite of their many differences, the two Kahlo’s are inextricably linked, not only due to their role as multiple facets of the artist’s identity but by their interlocking hands, the continuity of the hems of their gowns, and their shared circulatory system. This symbiotic relationship reiterates the unity of these two figures, not as conflicting elements of Kahlo’s identity, but as the visual expression of dual facets of one complex whole.

The earliest use of the loved/unloved dichotomy to interpret Kahlo’s work was by MacKinley Helm in Modern Mexican Painters in 1941. He wrote, “one of them is the Frida that Diego loved,” referring to the Tehuana Kahlo in Las Dos Fridas. Helm went on write that he was viewing Las Dos Fridas with the artist when Kahlo received word of Diego Rivera’s request for a divorce. As he recounted, “When the divorce papers arrived,
while we were looking at the picture, I half expected her to seize the dripping instrument [the hemostatic clamp depicted in Las Dos Fridas] and fling it across the room.”

Helm’s use of the dichotomy of the loved and unloved Kahlo shifted the locus of the artist’s identity to her husband which influenced later authors, most notably Hayden Herrera.

In her 1983 biography of Kahlo, Herrera quotes Helm’s explanation of Las Dos Fridas at length. She expands on Helm’s comments, noting, “The Frida Diego no longer loves wears a white Victorian dress; the other wears a Tehuana skirt and blouse.”

Additionally, Herrera presents an interpretation that situates Rivera as the active party while Kahlo suffers passively. For example, she wrote, “abandoned by Diego, she holds her own hand, and links her two selves with a blood vein. Her world is thus self-enclosed, a dead end.”

Raquel Tibol also focuses on Rivera as the primary source of Kahlo’s identity in Las Dos Fridas. She identifies Kahlo’s “vital, instinctive, organic and wholly necessary adhesion to Diego Rivera.”

As foundational figures in the scholarship of Kahlo’s life and work, Herrera’s and Tibol’s commentary on Las Dos Fridas was very influential in the development of the art historical narrative. Their propagation of the dichotomy of the loved and the unloved set the stage for decades of Kahlo scholars.

Marsha Meskimon identifies Helms’s text as the basis for interpretations that identify Rivera as the locus of Kahlo’s identity. This reductive understanding of her work is common and underscores the fact that married women artists, especially those wed to male artists, are often portrayed as deriving their identity exclusively from that of their spouse. Discussions of Las Dos Fridas as a one-to-one expression of her “loved”
and “unloved” selves, two distinct parts of a broken whole that Diego Rivera’s request for a divorce painfully split down the center, confirm Meskimmon’s allegations.

The foundation laid by Helm, Herrera, and Tibol started the widespread use of the loved/unloved dichotomy and the more general tendency to interpret Rivera as the primary source of Kahlo’s identity. In her analysis of the socio-political context of Kahlo’s work, Margaret Lindauer decries the propagation of Helm’s dichotomy in recent scholarship. For example, in her 1994 study, Robin Richmond argued that, “she [Kahlo] is unsure who she is, without Diego.” Additionally, Gannit Ankori’s 2002 study of identity and fragmentation in Kahlo’s work posits that the two figures in Las Dos Fridas represent, “not merely the loved and the unloved, the European and Mexican. They are also two female personae placed in disparate socially constructed roles played out in relationship to a male partner,” amplifying Rivera’s role in Kahlo’s definition of her own identity. While Ankori acknowledges Kahlo’s self-construction of her public image in her analysis of Kahlo’s diary, her reliance on dichotomies distracts the reader.

Kahlo described the development of Las Dos Fridas as a representation of two facets of herself in a diary entry dated 1950. She wrote of a childhood memory of an imaginary friend who inhabited her house in Coyoacán. This fictional companion, described by Kahlo as a young and joyful girl approximately the same age as the artist, served as both confidant and friend. Kahlo illustrated her entry with a sketch of herself as a young child. Her imaginary friend is depicted as a disembodied eye, hovering above the youthful Kahlo. Both figures are integrated into their environment and appear to dissolve into the background. On the wall of the room they occupy, Kahlo wrote, “LAS DOS
FRIDAS,” on a framed canvas. The text is divided into four separate lines, which required her to break her first name in two, “FRI” on one line, “DAS” on the line below (fig. A6). Ankori interprets this as a typographical manifestation of Kahlo’s sense of having two selves, one embodied by the artist herself, the other by her imaginary friend and posits that Kahlo was aware of the multiple facets of her identity at a young age.

Nowhere in the diary entry, which is explicitly labeled “Origen de Las Dos Fridas = Recuerdo,” did the artist mention her 1939 divorce or her relationship with Rivera. Instead, she situated the origins of the painting in her youth, prior to Rivera’s involvement in her life. Kahlo’s retroactive explanation of Las Dos Fridas is an example of her efforts to self-fashion her public identity. By setting the scene in her childhood with an imaginary friend, Kahlo depicts herself as the sole controller of all parts of her identity. Kahlo’s purposeful construction of a public identity is a recurring phenomenon throughout her career. Kahlo purposefully misrepresented the year of her birth, 1907, to coincide with the beginning of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Additionally, many scholars now argue that Kahlo’s supposed desire to mother children and the likelihood that this desire was calculated to conform to cultural expectations.

Las Dos Fridas serves as a depiction of the multiple facets of Kahlo’s identity which span centuries of Mexican history. Kahlo’s use of elements drawn from throughout Mexican history forges a sense of unity that encompasses Mexico’s pre-Columbian, Colonial, and Revolutionary past. Thus, rather than dichotomies, Las Dos Fridas embodies the unity of seemingly incompatible parts which express Kahlo’s
conceptualization of Mexico and her personal identity as it related to the history of her country.

Because Kahlo’s father was German and her mother was Indian, *Las Dos Fridas* is often interpreted as a visualization of her mixed European/Mexican heritage. The concept of the Colonial is of particular importance. As a product of the European colonization of Mexico, Kahlo literally embodies both the colonizer and the colonized. In *Las Dos Fridas*, Kahlo uses a lacy, white and characteristically European or American gown to represent outside influence in Mexico. In her 2006 study of identity in Postcolonial Mexico, Lucy Ann Havard argues that Kahlo’s understanding of colonialism was two-fold and accounted for the Spanish conquest of Aztec Mexico and the continuation of “gringo,” (American) power. In addition to her mixed heritage, Kahlo quite literally utilized her self-portraiture, especially manipulations of costume, to transform herself into a representation of Mexican history and identity.

Kahlo’s manipulation of Mexican tradition to comment on contemporary politics is exemplified by her appropriation of La Llorona in *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932 (fig. A7). In this self-portrait, Kahlo depicts the aftermath of the abortion of her most recent pregnancy. The popular perception of Kahlo’s views on motherhood assert that, “she lived as well with a yearning for a child she could never have—her smashed pelvis led only to miscarriages and at least three therapeutic abortions.” This traditional view does not account for the fact that Kahlo herself requested an abortion and voluntarily ingested castor oil in the hope of ending her 1932 pregnancy. That Kahlo clearly expressed her doubts concerning motherhood, and made a direct request for an abortion casts a shadow
on the assumption that she longed to bear Rivera’s child.\textsuperscript{28} Lindauer notes this, stating, “the consistency with which writers describe Kahlo’s maternal longing and despair, alongside the absence of any expression in Kahlo’s letters of intense desire, suggests that she may have orchestrated a false notion that she yearned for children.”\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Henry Ford Hospital} is a self portrait of a crying Kahlo, laying naked and disheveled on a hospital bed following her 1932 abortion at the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. Her bed rests at a precarious angle, situated in a vast expanse of barren land, possibly a reference to the loneliness a Mexican woman felt who rejected deeply imbedded cultural norms about womanhood and motherhood.\textsuperscript{30} In the background, Kahlo added a skyline reminiscent of the River Rouge Plant in Detroit, calling to mind the role of the female body as a site dedicated to the production of children.\textsuperscript{31} Placing herself against a stark white sheet soaked in her own blood, Kahlo included prominent tears rolling down her face. These tears are the most straightforward link between Kahlo and La Llorona.

In depicting herself as La Llorona, Kahlo utilized the power of folklore to address social issues far beyond the scope of her personal angst. She appropriated a cultural symbol as a direct commentary on societal norms and their restrictive nature regarding women and their ability to control reproduction. In \textit{Henry Ford Hospital}, Kahlo explicitly challenges the dichotomy of the virgin and the whore that categorizes women as either good or bad mothers.\textsuperscript{32} This dichotomy leaves little freedom for women to exist between these two extremes and is clearly tailored to the preservation of male power. Kahlo does present herself in a vulnerable state, but her brazen depiction of her disregard cultural
norms which equated womanhood to motherhood references the powerful mesoamerican goddesses rather than the violated Llorona. In depicting herself as La Llorona, Kahlo lays the groundwork for Chicana artists to redefine the role of women in these cultures without abandoning their three mother figures, La Llorona, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and La Malinche. *Henry Ford Hospital* challenged cultural norms concerning womanhood and allowed Kahlo to publicly address issues she was otherwise unwilling to discuss.

Of Kahlo’s efforts to fashion her public identity, both through her painting and through her presentation of herself in the public sphere, her use of the Tehuana dress is perhaps the most significant. While the Tehuana dress originated in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and was traditionally worn only by women of Tehuantepec heritage, this indigenous style of dress gained popularity among intellectuals in Mexico City in the 1920s. The women of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec were well-known throughout Mexico for their control over a matriarchal society. Additionally, the economic independence of these indigenous women was interpreted by many of the politically-engaged women of Mexico City as a symbol of freedom from patriarchal European control. Kahlo maintained the Tehuana style long after it had gone out of vogue, suggesting her commitment to the ideology expressed by the Tehuana dress and the relevance of its symbolism to her identity.

As an expression of both feminist and anti-colonial thought, the Tehuana costume was regarded as a fashionable marker of nativist sympathies. Baddley highlights the fact that the Tehuana dress was much more than a passing fad for pre-Hispanic clothing. She argues that in addition to its status as a symbol of women’s independence, it was also
a manifestation of La Chingada or La Malinche. While the traditional understanding of La Malinche emphasizes her role in the conquest of Mexico, the women of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec were notably unconquered. Their matriarchal society exemplifies the existence of Mexican culture unadulterated by colonial influence. Therefore, Kahlo’s adoption of the Tehuana costume was an assertion of her identity as a Mexican women, fully aware of her past and willing to redefine elements of her culture to express her political views.

Kahlo’s depiction of herself in a Tehuana dress in *Las Dos Fridas* pairs her decidedly anti-colonial and feminist perspective with a second depiction of herself in an old-fashioned Victorian gown. The two figures, however, are not in conflict, they hold hands in a gesture of mutual support and share a circulatory system. Each recognizes the presence of the other. The relationship between the facets of Kahlo’s personal identity can be extended to a discussion of Mexico as a whole. While Kahlo was anti-colonial, in *Las Dos Fridas* she recognizes this part of Mexican history and of her identity. Kahlo cannot disregard her heritage and Mexico cannot return to a period prior to colonial influence. Therefore, both embrace their past and look toward the future.

Significantly, as Helga Prignitz-Poda notes in her 1994 catalogue raisonné, Kahlo had never worn, nor painted herself wearing, this style of dress prior to her marriage to Rivera. This purposeful decision highlights the artist’s ability to craft a meaningful public identity. For example, by referencing the matriarchal Tehuantepec society in which the men were more domestically-oriented while the women largely controlled
commercial and social interactions after her marriage, Kahlo asserted her intention to maintain her independence.

In her 2000, “Primitivist Construction of Identity in the Works of Frida Kahlo,” Wendy B. Faris returns to Rivera as a major part of Kahlo’s understanding of her identity. Faris argues that while Kahlo’s adoption of the Tehuana costume did allow her to associate herself with the strong women of Tehuantepec, it also exemplified her willingness to conform to Rivera’s conceptualization of her identity. Rivera championed Kahlo as an uneducated painter, unadulterated by art world norms. Additionally, he supported interpretations of Kahlo’s adoption of the Tehuana dress as a fashionable manifestation of “nativist primitivism.” During Kahlo’s lifetime, Rivera’s biographer Bertram Wolfe also worked to develop a public recognition of her as a primitive painter. He wrote that Kahlo, “did not attain her style by following the methods of that school [Surrealism]. Nor is she influenced by her husband’s manner in her work. Quite free, also, from the Freudian symbols and philosophy that obsess the official Surrealist painters, hers is a sort of ‘naïve’ Surrealism, which she invented for herself.”

The assumption that Kahlo’s use of the Tehuana costume was a manifestation of her desire to please Rivera supports the loved and unloved as an interpretive model. As previously noted, when this dichotomy is applied, the Tehuana Kahlo is always loved while the other figure is unloved. This implies that the two figures must be in contention, that they are fully incompatible. Specifically, because the Tehuana Kahlo is loved, while the European Kahlo is not, it can be assumed that heritage is the reason for Rivera’s love, or lack thereof. Lindauer cites the creation of this incompatibility by scholars as the root
of the loved/unloved dichotomy.\textsuperscript{43} She also argues that interpretations that rely on this dichotomy assume that Kahlo’s dual heritage (her mother was Indigenous Mexican while her father was German) is problematic. Therefore, the idea that the Indian part Kahlo was loved by Rivera while the European portion Kahlo was unloved implies that the European aspect of Kahlo’s identity contributed to Rivera’s request for a divorce. Lindauer convincingly argues that the assumption that the dual facets of Kahlo’s identity depicted in \textit{Las Dos Fridas} are in contention suggests that Rivera no longer loved Kahlo because she did not identify as completely Indian or primitive.\textsuperscript{44} This simplistic interpretation rooted in biography illustrates the weaknesses of the loved/unloved dichotomy. Because is based on the assumption that the parts of Kahlo’s identity are in contention, it fails to account for the fact that her identity is a complex expression of numerous facets, depicted in \textit{Las Dos Fridas}.

A consideration of a sample of Kahlo’s other uses of the Tehuana dress illustrates the symbolic importance of costume in her work. In \textit{Memory} (1937), the multiple facets of her identity are expressed through her centrally-located self-portrait which is flanked by two costumes, that of the Tehuana and the schoolgirl, each of which contains one of the artist’s arms (fig. A8). An armless Kahlo, dressed in an austere white frock and a cowhide bolero which complements her cropped hair, stands at the center of the composition, straddling the divide between the craggy beach on the left and the ocean on the right.\textsuperscript{45} The artist’s left foot is disguised as a sailboat which is often interpreted as a reference to something that is hidden or not understood for what it truly is.\textsuperscript{46} Where the artist’s heart should be, a pointed wooden spear, adorned with two minuscule cupid
figures, thrusts menacingly through her chest. A thin, ribbon-like vein passes through the opening, physically connecting Kahlo to her school uniform in the background and to the Tehuana gown on the right. Kahlo’s heart lies on the sandy beach, pumping rivers of blood into the ocean.

Biographical readings of Memory suggest that the Tehuana part of Kahlo’s identity is assisting her wounded, violated, and helpless European self. For example, Herrera argues that the helpless and handless Kahlo is an “excruciatingly accurate rendering of the pain of love.” She suggests that the parts of Kahlo embodied by the Tehuana dress and her school uniform must unite to help the powerless European Frida, left violated, heartbroken, and stranded between two barren landscapes. In depriving the figure of the European Kahlo of her power, Herrera’s understanding of Memory directly echoes the loved/unloved interpretation of Las Dos Fridas by casting the primitive (represented by the Tehuana costume and by Kahlo’s youth) as the figures with agency.

It is also possible, however, that Memory is a depiction of Kahlo’s identity that flouts the use of dichotomies to represent the unity of multiple parts of her identity unified into one whole. Her depiction of three facets of her identity that is more complicated than a dichotomy of two opposing parts. The reference to her youth and adulthood explores the formation of identity over time like Las Dos Fridas. In this context, the Tehuana dress can be read as part of Kahlo’s purposeful construction of herself, part of a complex whole rather than two opposing halves. Thus, consideration of the Tehuana dress, not only as a political statement but also as a key tool in her formation of her identity, problematizes the biographical approach to Kahlo’s oeuvre.
The Wounded Table (1940), Kahlo’s largest work, is a surreal tableau framed by two voluminous red curtains. Kahlo is seated at the center of a fanciful table with human feet in place of wooden legs. The figures are arranged at the table in a parody of the Last Supper. Kahlo is surrounded by a skeleton, a pre-Hispanic clay figurine, and a figure, drawn from Mexican popular art. The children in the scene, Kahlo’s niece and nephew, do not acknowledge the bizarre happenings. Their innocence is mirrored by the deer on the opposite side of the table, a representation of the soul. Kahlo positioned herself at the center of the scene, occupying the position of Christ in renditions of the Last Supper, clad in a Tehuana dress.

The similarities between Kahlo’s use of the Tehuana dress in The Wounded Table (1940) and Las Dos Fridas call into question the strictly biographical interpretation of her work (fig. A9). In The Wounded Table Kahlo depicts herself in a Tehuana dress similar in both color and cut to the one she wears in Las Dos Fridas. The green skirt, which is trimmed with a white ruffle and embroidered with delicate flowers, remains nearly unchanged while Kahlo substitutes the vivid blue of the dress in Las Dos Fridas with a muted red huipil, or blouse, in The Wounded Table. The decorative vertical gold bands which frame the figure’s breasts and neckline remain constant. The Wounded Table recalls the spilling of Kahlo’s blood in Las Dos Fridas by repeating the floral-shaped blood droplets on the white hem of her gown. This stylized blood spatter links the Tehuana Kahlo and the European Kahlo, adding blood stains to the gown of the Tehuana Kahlo where they had previously been exclusive to the other figure. It is possible that Kahlo is
suggesting that the blood seeping from the table’s wounds is her own, mingling symbolically with the blood shed in *Las Dos Fridas*.

Kahlo’s allusions to the spilling of blood are continued in her symbolic use of color. Prignitz-Poda suggests that the red bodice of Kahlo’s Tehuana costume references *tlapali*, the traditional term for the color of the fruit of prickly pears and argues that this deep red fruit evokes the sacrifices of the Aztec gods.\(^{50}\) This interpretation is based on a page of the artist’s diary in which she explicitly refers to the “old TLAPALI” as one of the meanings behind her use of magenta.\(^ {51}\)

As previously noted, any suggestion that one of the figures depicted in *Las Dos Fridas* is loved by Rivera while the other is not, requires the interpreter to distinguish between the positive characteristics of the Tehuana Kahlo that make her able to be loved and the negative characteristics of the European Kahlo that allegedly precipitated Rivera’s request for a divorce. The pre-Colonial purity of the Tehuana Kahlo is cast in opposition with the violated Colonized Kahlo. In this context, Kahlo’s self-portrait must be interpreted as a confrontation between the opposing iconic figures of Mexican womanhood, the Tehuana and La Chingada.\(^ {52}\) The Tehuana Kahlo stands in for the Virgen de Guadalupe while La Chingada is represented by Kahlo’s portrait of herself in Colonial garb.

This dichotomy of the virgin and the whore is one of the key tenets of Chicana feminist thought.\(^ {53}\) However, the assumption that the two parts of Kahlo’s self are in contention does not account for Kahlo’s quest to define her Mexican identity, her *mexicanidad*. Havard convincingly argues that Kahlo utilized manipulations of dress in
order to construct her identity. As an expression of the unity of elements from pre-Columbian, Colonial, and postcolonial Mexico, Kahlo deliberately confuses the boundaries between the pure and the violated. Additionally, in joining these figures anatomically and symbolically Kahlo uses her body as an expression of the unity of Mexico.

Kahlo’s manipulation of the traditional figures of Mexican culture, the unviolated Virgen de Guadalupe and La Chingada, creates a new, hybridized image of her *mexicanidad*. The definition of the Colonial Kahlo as the violated body while the Tehuana Kahlo remains unviolated fails to consider some key visual elements of *Las Dos Fridas*. For example, while the Colonial Kahlo’s left breast is indeed, exposed to reveal her heart, the implied vaginal opening in the bodice of her gown remains white and unblemished. Additionally, the opening of her heart may imply self-exploration rather than physical damage sustained during the intense pain of her divorce. Finally, this figure’s hand rests on top of that of the Tehuana Kahlo, asserting the legitimacy of this aspect of Kahlo’s identity and her relative power over the Tehuana Kahlo. Conversely, while application of the virgin/whore dichotomy to *Las Dos Fridas* suggests that the Tehuana Kahlo is the loved and unviolated figure in the composition, Kahlo explicitly implies penetration, thus violation, in her depiction of the figures’ shared circulatory system. While the arteries of the European Kahlo remain on the exterior of her gown, the vein that leads to Rivera’s image clearly penetrates the right shoulder of her garment. The fact that both figures in *Las Dos Fridas* are simultaneously violated and pure suggests
that the application of the virgin/whore dichotomy does not fully account for the richness of Kahlo’s identity.

The prevalence of Aztec imagery in Kahlo’s work is related to the hybridized image of *mexicanidad* produced by her reconfiguration of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Chingada. This not only relates to the indigenous aspect of Kahlo’s heritage but also to the larger post-revolutionary movement that touted the glory of the indigenous peoples of Mexico. In “Aztec Imagery in Frida Kahlo’s Paintings” (1990-1991), for example, Janice Helland links the opened heart of the figure on the left, which sheds drops of blood, to hearts in the Aztec iconographic tradition. Furthermore, according to Laurette Séjourné in 1956, this image of the open heart signifies a personal spiritual search, identifying the Aztec conceptualization of the heart as a “place of union where the luminous consciousness is made.” In *Las Dos Fridas* this sentiment of unity is literally embodied in the role of the heart and vascular system which physically connects the two figures.

Kahlo’s symbolic use of Aztec elements continues in the serpentine pattern of the trim of her *huipil* in *Memory*. Prignitz-Poda asserts that the snakelike, intertwining pattern of the gold trim serves as an invocation of the goddess Coatlicue, one of the most prevalent Aztec figures in Kahlo’s iconography. Known for her fear-inspiring costume, a skirt made of serpents and a shirt-like covering fashioned from the interwoven hearts and hands of sacrificial victims, Coatlicue is the earth goddess, a prominent figure in the Mexican myth of creation.
Without exception, Kahlo’s use of Aztec imagery is combined with the Tehuana costume.\(^{59}\) This combination of the costume of the women of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which symbolizes independence and freedom, and Aztec imagery, a reference to pre-Columbian Mexico summarizes Kahlo’s political beliefs.\(^{60}\) The Aztecs were viewed by Mexican nationalists, Kahlo included, as the last independent political rulers. Kahlo’s combination of Aztec iconography with the Tehuana costume simultaneously expresses anti-Spanish and anti-imperialistic ideology while affirming a pro-indigenous point of view.\(^{61}\)

The reevaluation of the significance Aztec culture in Mexican identity as it relates to Kahlo’s work stems from the abolition of colonial racial categories with Mexico’s independence in 1821.\(^{62}\) In “Conforming Disconformity: ‘Mestizaje,’ Hybridity, and the Aesthetics of Mexican Nationalism” (2004), Ana María Alonso notes that the anticolonial aftermath established the Aztec people as the “first Mexicans” and prompted a reconsideration of racial prejudice against indigenous peoples.\(^{63}\) Following ten years of revolutionary war (1910-1920), the decidedly anti-imperialist and anticolonial cultural revolution reconsidered mixture, mestizaje, in a positive light.\(^{64}\) Kahlo was part of the intellectual elite who adopted this nationalistic perspective which highlighted Aztec iconography as a symbol of Mexican unity and nationalism.\(^{65}\)

In other interpretations, Kahlo’s use of Aztec and Indian iconography is reduced to a union of the indigenous and the European. However, this perspective neglects Kahlo’s manipulation of Mexican history to create a new, unified image of Mexico. In *Las Dos Fridas*, Kahlo brought together imagery from pre-Columbian, Colonial, and
postcolonial Mexico. Her juxtaposition of references to periods throughout Mexican
history created a hybridized image of herself as an embodiment of her country. In
depicting multiple iterations of herself, dressed in garments that were not contemporary
to the period in which she worked, Kahlo utilized her image as a means to depict a
unified Mexican identity based on recognizable imagery from the country’s past.

Thus, *Las Dos Fridas* coalesces into one image of her conceptualization of the
unity of the pre-Columbian, Colonial, and postcolonial Mexico. Kahlo depicts not only
the complexity of her personal identity, forged through her understanding of what it is to
be Mexican, female, artist, and human, but a complex image of Mexican womanhood.
Through her manipulation of costume, iconography, and personal identity, Kahlo presents
*Las Dos Fridas* as an embodiment of her understanding of *mexicanidad*. In *Las Dos
Fridas*, Kahlo manipulates iconography and her personal and cultural identity to produce
an image which transcends temporal and geographic boundaries. Its expression of the
great potential for meaning beyond that which is strictly personal in self-portraiture
creates a rich work of art in which numerous registers of meaning are layered to form a
whole.
Please note that The Wounded Table (whereabouts unknown) is Kahlo’s largest work, measuring 48 x 96.5 inches. Both The Wounded Table and Las Dos Fridas were part of the International Exhibition of Surrealism organized by Wolfgang Paalen and Tomás Moro at the Galería de Arte Mexicano in January and February, 1940. International Exhibition of Surrealism: Apparition of the Great Sphinx of the Night, ed. Andre Breton, Wolfgang Paalen, and Cesar Moro (Mexico City: Galería de Arte Mexicano, 1940).

Tibol, “The Two Fridas,” 200. Kahlo had originally committed to produce four smaller paintings but opted, instead, to submit two large-format works.

Lindauer, 144.

Prignitz-Poda, Frida Kahlo: Life and Work, trans. Bram Opstelten (Munich: Schemer/Mosel, 2007), 140. Prignitz-Poda convincingly argues that the continued interpretations of this garment as characteristically European are flawed. She argues that dresses of this nature were worn in Mexico, although not as contemporary fashion while Kahlo was painting Las Dos Fridas. Additionally, Prignitz-Poda notes the similarities between this dress and Kahlo’s mother’s wedding gown. Throughout this study, Kahlo’s white dress in Las Dos Fridas will be referenced as the “Colonial” gown due to the likelihood that elements of this gown were inspired by European fashion and are not “indigenous” to Mexico.


Lindauer, 148. Richmond, 110.


Ibid.

11 Ibid., 278.

12 Ibid., 279.


14 See the introduction for a discussion of Herrera’s influence on the development of the art historical understanding of Frida Kahlo.


16 Margaret A. Lindauer, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Culture of Frida Kahlo* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 144.


18 Ankori, 161.

19 Ibid., 99.

20 Lowe, *Diary of Frida Kahlo*, 85. Sarah Lowe’s text contains full-color reproductions of Kahlo’s diary in its entirety. For an analysis of this diary entry, see, Ankori, 99-100.

21 Lowe, *Diary of Frida Kahlo*, 85.

22 Ankori, 99-100.

23 Lowe, *Diary of Frida Kahlo*, 82. The translation of the quoted text reads, “The Origin of The Two Fridas = Memory.” For an interpretation of *Las Dos Fridas* which makes use of Kahlo’s diary entry, see Teresa del Conde, *Frida Kahlo* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1976), 36. Del Conde interprets *Las Dos Fridas* exactly as Kahlo describes it in the aforementioned diary entry, noting that it depicts, “un recuerdo infantil relativo a una supuesta amiga imaginaria que habitaba con ella en su casa de Coyoacán.” (A childhood memory of an imaginary friend that inhabited her house at Coyoacán).


In a letter sent from Kahlo to Doctor Leo Eloesser from Detroit on May 26, 1932, Kahlo candidly shares her feelings on her most recent pregnancy, writing, “The important questions now and what I want to consult you about before anyone is that I’m two months pregnant, that’s why I went to see Dr. Pratt, who had told me he knew my general condition, because he had talked with you about me in New Orleans, and I wouldn’t have to explain to him again the question of the accident, hereditary factors, et cetera, et cetera. Since I thought that, given the state of my health, it was better to abort, I told him so, and he gave me a dose of quinine and a very strong castor oil purge. The day after I had a very slight hemorrhage, almost nothing.” See Raquel Tibol, ed. Frida by Frida (México: Editorial, 2006), 117. The author also consulted the following for the original Spanish version of this correspondence Raquel Tibol, ed. Escritoires: Frida Kahlo (Ciudad Universitaria: Universidad Nacional Autonomy de México, 1999), 104. Also note that both caster oil and quinine have been historically used as abortifacients, see Joseph W. Dellapenna, Dispelling the Myths of Abortion History (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1994), 41-42.

In the same letter quoted in note 27, Kahlo writes, “I don’t think Diego is very interested in having a child, since what preoccupies him most is his work and he’s perfectly right about that. Kids would come in third or fourth place. For my part I can’t tell you if it would be good or bad to have a child, since Diego is constantly traveling and I would be no means wish to leave him alone and stay in Mexico, that would only cause difficulties and problems for both of us, don’t you think? . . . If the operation to abort were most advisable, I beg you to write Dr. Pratt, because he’s probably not aware of all the circumstances and since it’s against the law to have an abortion, perhaps he’s afraid or something and later it would be impossible to perform the operation for me. . . If you think I should have the operation immediately I would appreciate your sending a telegram referring to the matter in a veiled way, in order not to compromise yourself in any way.” See Tibol, Frida by Frida, 119. The author also consulted the following for the original Spanish version of this correspondence Tibol, Escritoires: Frida Kahlo, 104-105. Please note that Dr. Pratt was Kahlo’s physician in Detroit while Dr. Eloesser, gave her medical advice from San Francisco. Kahlo and Eloesser met in Mexico in 1926 and developed a close friendship beginning around 1930 when Kahlo was in San Francisco.

Lindauer, 28.
30 Zetterman, 233.

31 Ankori, 155.


33 Lindauer, 139.

34 Ibid.

35 Lindauer, 139.

36 Baddeley, 13. Faris, 228.

37 Baddeley, 13.

38 Havard, 244. Havard discusses Kahlo’s use of the Tehuana costume as a means of stereotyping herself to call attention to her notion of mexicanidad. This forms a bond between Kahlo’s identity as a woman in Mexico in the late 1930s and as a Mexican more generally, an identity which embodies the country’s complex history.

39 Prignitz-Poda, 31.

40 Faris, 228.

41 Ibid. Also see Diego Rivera, “Frida Kahlo y el Arte Mexicano,” Boletín del Seminario de Cultura Mexicana, no. 2 (October 1943): 89-101.


43 Lindauer, 146.

44 Ibid.

45 Herrera, Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo, 188.

46 Prignitz-Poda, 33.

For an extended discussion of the elements in *The Wounded Table*, see Prignitz-Poda, 36-39.

Ibid., 34. While Prignitz-Poda acknowledges Kahlo’s extensive knowledge of Pre-Hispanic sculpture due to the Rivera’s extensive collection, she does not adequately acknowledge Kahlo’s appropriation of these figures for purposes beyond the innovative depiction of her biography through her self-portraits. “Thus, if Frida incorporates ancient sculptures into her self-portraits, she does so not out of romantic nostalgia for the Mexican past; rather, they are encoded reminiscences of a childhood she simply is unable to shake off.” Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, 280, notes that, “Like *The Two Fridas*, it [*The Wounded Table*] is a dramatization of loneliness.” She used the table as a clear symbol of domesticity, suggesting that its wounds call attention to Kahlo’s and Rivera’s broken marriage. Additionally, she interprets *The Wounded Table* as a theatrical performance: “the play being performed was a way of sending a message to Diego.”

Prignitz-Poda, 34.

Lowe, *Diary of Frida Kahlo*, 211.

Coffey, 3.

Lara, 99.

Havard, 243.

Janice Helland, “Aztec Imagery in Frida Kahlo’s Paintings: Indignity and Political Commitment,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 11, no. 2 (Autumn 1990): 10. It is also possible that Kahlo’s imagery of the human heart, especially depicted in a wounded state, references her personal pain. The interpretation of the Aztec precedent for the use of this sort of imagery, however, allows for the complication and enrichment of strictly biographical approaches to Kahlo’s work.


Prignitz-Poda, 32. For an explanation of the frequency of Kahlo’s use of iconography related to Coatlicue, see Ibid., 8. Other examples of Kahlo’s use of the same patterned huipil include *My Dress Hangs There* (1933).
It is essential to note that the complexity of Coatlicue is such that a full explanation is not possible in this study. The multiple aspects of her being are succinctly described by nineteenth-century Mexican scholar Alfredo Chavero: Coatlicue is a “beautiful and awesome, fearful goddess figure.” Lara, 103. In her essay which explores the formation and propagation of the dichotomy of the virgin and the whore in Mexico, Lara notes that the complexity of Coatlicue, in addition to Tonantzin, Cihuacoatl, and Tlazolteotl, dictate that these goddesses cannot be designated as either “virgins” or “whores.” See also Cecilia F. Klein, “A New Interpretation of the Aztec Statue Called Coatlicue, ‘Snakes-Her-Skirt,’” *Ethnohistory* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 229-250. Klein offers a revised interpretation of the largest intact Mexica statue, generally regarded as a depiction of Coatlicue, housed in the Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico.

Havard, 243. Havard notes another instance in Kahlo’s oeuvre in which she combines indigenous dress, in the form of the Tehuana costume, with Pre-Columbian traditions. She notes that Kahlo’s use of the Tehuana dress is exemplary of the artist’s performance of her identity, defined as masking by Paz. Following this logic, Havard argues that if Kahlo’s appropriation of the Tehuana costume is indeed masking, the artist is also engaging with the pre-Columbian use of masks as integral elements in sacrificial rituals. Due to the fact that Kahlo and Rivera had an extensive collection of pre-Columbian artifacts, it is likely that Kahlo would have understood the cultural significance of masks as contributing to the formation of Mexican identity.

Helland, 10.

Ibid. Helland notes the importance of both Aztec imagery and the Tehuana costume for Kahlo’s presentation of her own brand of *mexicanidad*. She also posits that Kahlo’s gravitation toward Aztec culture, rather than other indigenous Mexican groups, for example the Maya or Toltec, directly corresponds to her interest in the development of a unified and independent Mexico.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Helland, 10.
CHAPTER 2: CHICANA SELF-PORTRAITUDE: IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Frida Kahlo has become a reference point for the work of a broad group of Chicana artists, although this influence can be overstated.\textsuperscript{1} The self-portraiture of Maya Gonzalez, Yreina D. Cervántez, and Cecilia Concepción Alvarez exemplifies the manipulations of traditionally Mexican imagery to create new, hybridized self-portraits. *The Love that Stains* (fig. A2), *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo* (fig. A3), and *Las Cuatas Diego* (fig. A4) represent the artists’ redefinition of elements drawn from Mexican history. Just as Kahlo’s work discussed in chapter one revealed Kahlo’s cultural engagement through her manipulation of imagery related to Mexican history, the work of Gonzalez, Cervántez, and Alvarez illustrates the creation of new, hybridized meaning through self-portraiture. Additionally, these artists include Kahlo and her image as one of their historical sources which produces a new perspective on Kahlo’s role in Chicana culture.

Gonzalez, Cervántez, and Alvarez face a general set of concerns shared by many Chicana artists. Laura E. Pérez argues that at the root of their existence is a “terrain of contestation.”\textsuperscript{2} Their work may be regarded as culturally subversive due to their efforts to challenge cultural norms that privilege male agency. Chicana women who pursue art are frequently considered social outliers, especially because the arts seem to offer little potential for financial benefit.\textsuperscript{3} The production of art extends beyond the traditional gender roles in Chicano/a communities where female influence is relegated to the private sphere.\textsuperscript{4} Chicana artists, already part of a marginalized population in the United States, work within longstanding patriarchal structures which require them to develop modes of self-expression that separate them from the *machista* Chicano culture. Additionally, the
work of Chicana artists is often judged before it is complete. Art historians and cultural critics alike immediately conjure a plethora of racial and sexual assumptions.\textsuperscript{5} These artists must also grapple with interpretations that emphasize their race, a visually apparent marker of otherness, as a primary source of meaning.\textsuperscript{6}

Maya Gonzalez’s *The Love that Stains* (2000) depicts two iterations of Gonzalez set against a vivid red background which precludes any speculation regarding the location of the figures and reaffirms the spiritual nature of the image. The seated figure closest to the picture plane glances sideways toward a hummingbird but does not respond to the creature and maintains a neutral facial expression. Her exposed heart is affixed to the front of her gown, neatly between her breasts rather than in an anatomically correct location. As it beats, her heart spills rivers of blood down the front of her white overdress which then spills onto the blue and violet gowns she wears underneath.\textsuperscript{7} She is unaware of the blood spilling down her body and is engaged only with the other figures in the scene. Her lack of movement is confirmed by the stillness of her heavy turquoise earrings which hang from her slightly elongated earlobes. The addition of jewelry differentiates the two figures and signifies their unique characteristics and their status as separate beings.\textsuperscript{8}

Although the second figure lacks jewelry, both figures wear crowns of woven roses which encircle the dark mass of their hair elegantly piled on top of their heads. The second figure threads her arm around the waist of the frontmost figure, delicately allowing her companion to grasp two of her fingers in her fist. The figure in the background is depicted in a softer, less saturated palette of colors. Her closed eyes, muted
skin tone, and simple garment suggest an ethereal quality. A hummingbird hovers near her left ear, suggesting that the bird is somehow communicating with the contemplative figure. The anatomical similarity between the two figures increases the impact of Gonzalez’s choice of color, clothing, and jewelry to differentiate the two. These differences seem to hide the fact that the figures represent different aspects of the artist.

Gonzalez describes this scene as a depiction of a spiritual experience during which a hummingbird pierced her heart, filling her with a love that could not be contained by her body. The blood from her punctured heart cascading down the multi-layered gown of the figure closest to the viewer represents the transformative power of truth and love, permanently staining everything it touches. The 2004 exhibition, Chicano Art for Our Millennium at Arizona State University, highlighted the spiritual meaning of The Love that Stains. Gonzalez’s work appeared in a gallery dedicated to “Espiritualidad,” with works grouped under the heading of “Espíritu Humano.” The catalogue entry for The Love that Stains described Gonzalez’s work in otherworldly terminology, labeling the second figure as a “spirit or specter.” This recognition of the otherworldly qualities of The Love that Stains is consistent with Gonzalez’s understanding of her creative process. She considers her spirit to be the source of all other aspects of her being. Additionally, Gonzalez states that she “prays into her pieces,” as she paints, which transforms the act of painting into a spiritual experience.

Cheney, Faxon, and Russo argue in Self-Portraits by Women Painters (2009) that women who continually return to self-portraiture embark on a “spiritual journey,” during which their interpretation of form becomes a surrogate for human existence as well as a
personal quest for self-knowledge. This recognition that self-portraits can be at once personal and rife with cultural and political meaning acknowledges the complexity of *The Love that Stains*.

As with Kahlo, Gonzalez’s work has often been interpreted biographically. The entry on her work in *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art*, for example, describes her art as “permanent and deeply personal,” and her imagery as a record of the “meanings of life experiences that are protected as personal mythos.” Although Gonzalez’s biography is relevant to her work, this argument is tangential to Gonzalez’s view of her art. She describes her creative process as the act of coding her personal experiences in a visual vocabulary which can be universally understood. Her approach allows her to comment on her personal identity and her political views simultaneously.

At first glance, the similarities between the biographies of Gonzalez and Kahlo are uncanny. Both claim German/Mexican heritage, both suffered a severe illness early in life, and both were confined to hospital beds for a significant portion of their adult lives. While it is tempting to consider the biographical similarities between these women as significant, they are merely a distraction. The links drawn between Kahlo and Gonzalez tend to reduce Chicana women to the private sphere where strictly personal meanings do not threaten traditional masculine power structures.

In *The Love that Stains*, Gonzalez utilized a variety of iconographic traditions, drawn from a number of periods in time, including Aztec imagery and ancient Buddhist and Tibetan art. Suzanne Bost posits that Gonzalez’s hummingbird symbolizes the Aztec deities Huitzilopochtli and Xochiquetzal. The god Huitzilopochtli was believed to
preside over many elements of Aztec culture, as were many deities in this complex pantheon. He is linked to the sun, fire, the continuation blood lines which ruled Aztec society, and is regraded by some scholars as the leader who directed his people to Aztlan, their mythical place of origin. Huitzilopochtli, translated by Jesper Nielsen and Christophe Helmke as “Hummingbird of the Left or South,” is closely associated with the hummingbird, a decidedly territorial bird which was also associated with military might and the sure aim of archers. According to Elizabeth H. Boone, Huitzilopochtli is the only Aztec deity directly associated with the hummingbird and thus, the hummingbird helmet is exclusive to images of this god (fig. A10). This combat-oriented attribute of a male deity, when viewed in contrast to Xochiquetzal, in The Love that Stains, creates a dynamic situation in which multiple meanings are attached to one iconographic element.

Xochiquetzal, a female lunar goddess, is associated with artisanal skills ranging from weaving to embroidery and is also considered the patron goddess of creativity and pregnant women. Additionally, this deity is recorded as the protector of artists, prostitutes, the producers of handicrafts, and housekeepers. June Nash notes that in the Aztec pantheon, female deities were linked to the arts and creative production with much greater frequency then their male counterparts. The union of the war and battle oriented Huitzilopochtli with the creative and artistic Xochiquetzal politicizes this portrait and allowed Gonzalez to address her role as an artist creator and her fight to produce imagery that resonates with a wide base of viewers. Gonzalez firmly believes, “that people should not long for their own image,” and her self-portraiture should be viewed as the result of
her desire to make images that nurture creative and independent thought.\textsuperscript{26} Thus one interpretation of \textit{The Love that Stains} suggests that it engages creative combat against a narrow perception of the world.

Suzanne Bost argues that Gonzalez’s work includes iconographic elements and cultural understanding derived from a number of regions and periods in time.\textsuperscript{27} For example, \textit{The Love that Stains} combines ancient Aztec iconography with features drawn from the Buddhist tradition. Throughout her oeuvre, Gonzalez draws on ancient art from mesoamerican, Tibetan, Buddhist, and Indian traditions. Gonzalez reinterprets the imagery she uses to create work she hopes will be able to communicate her message through time.\textsuperscript{28}

In \textit{Mayan Ball Gown}, 1999, Gonzalez dressed a figure with facial features she describes as “very meso-American” in a European ball gown (fig. A11).\textsuperscript{29} Conversely, the woman’s light skin calls to mind westernization and the colonizing forces that have been at work in the Western Hemisphere for centuries. The symbolic content of \textit{Mayan Ball Gown} is drawn from a variety of periods of time and cultures, producing a hybrid representation of Gonzalez. Gonzalez adopted an approach similar to that of Kahlo’s \textit{Las Dos Fridas} in her usage of references to a variety of historical periods.

Similarly, Yreina Cervántez’s work utilizes ancient source material and references to past artists and to contemporary culture.\textsuperscript{30} Her unification of iconographic traditions includes a variety of symbols that combine in a contemporary political dialogue. One of Cervántez’s seminal works, \textit{Homenaje a Frida Kahlo}, is one of the earliest feminist appropriations of the iconography associated with the Virgen de Guadalupe.\textsuperscript{31} As a
canonical piece in the development of Chicana art *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo* exemplifies the complexity of Chicana self-portraiture. It was the only work by a Chicana artist which depicted Frida Kahlo included in the “Cultural Icons” section of the groundbreaking *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* exhibition.\(^\text{32}\)

*Homenaje a Frida Kahlo* is a dense composition with many iconographic elements. The central figure is a pregnant Frida Kahlo astride a jaguar surrounded by an aureola associated with the Virgen de Guadalupe. Kahlo’s right hand cradles her dissected stomach and her left hand holds a mirror to depict a small circular self-portrait of Cervántez.\(^\text{33}\) This central group of figures is surrounded by calla lilies and, near Kahlo’s feet, a frog with the face of Diego Rivera and a butterfly.\(^\text{34}\) The mirror Kahlo holds reflects an image of the artist’s face which implies that Kahlo was present during the creation of *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo*. This is significant because Cervántez is manipulating the concept of time in order to express her link to Kahlo.

Cervántez’s appropriation of Kahlo’s image conflates Kahlo’s image with that of the Virgen de Guadalupe and identifies these female figures as contributors to her personal and cultural identity. By inserting Kahlo’s image into an aureola, Cervántez symbolically elevates Kahlo to the cultural status of the Virgen. This references the efforts of Chicana artists to re-imagine traditional cultural figures to serve as symbols of female agency. She identifies Kahlo as a key cultural figure and manipulates her image to create a hybridized meaning. Thus, *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo* combines references to Cervántez’s artistic and cultural predecessors as an assertion of her foundations as a Chicana and as an artist. Her use of Kahlo and La Virgen suggests Cervántez’s desire to
embrace and update traditions rather than abandoning them. La Virgen is depicted as an active, mesoamerican figure atop a jaguar while Kahlo is elevated, literally, above the references to her biography and takes her place among Mexico’s cultural icons.

Significantly, Cervántez inserts herself into this image. While Pérez describes Cervántez as an “impish” observer in this scene, the artist takes a much more active role. As she reinterprets the significance of Kahlo and La Virgen in Chicana culture, she adds herself as a key figure. This addition completes a cycle which began in pre-Columbian Mexico. When Colonial influences redefined mesoamerican goddesses as the subservient and Catholic Virgen, they denied the power embodied in these ancient female figures. Kahlo actively engaged with Mexican tradition to assert her identity and to engage in a political dialogue. Subsequently, sensationalized accounts of her life denied her artistic and cultural contributions and redefined her identity in terms of her husband.

In *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo*, Cervántez restores the pre-Columbian elements of La Virgen and relegates Rivera’s role in Kahlo’s identity to the bottom of the scene. In doing so, Kahlo becomes, as Pérez argues a “Christian, pre-Columbian, and art world goddess all at once.” Finally, through the addition of her own image, Cervántez identifies her role in the restoration of female agency in Chicana culture.

Cervántez also combined self-portraiture, Aztec imagery, and Kahlo’s legacy in *Danza Ocelotl* (1983). Translated as “Jaguar Dance, *Danza Ocelotl* is a bust-length portrait of Cervántez occluded by a Nahua sun mask (fig. A12). She wears a blouse drawn directly from Kahlo’s *Self Portrait with Loose Hair*, 1947 (fig. A13). This huipil was drawn from the tradition of the Tehuana dress and incorporates golden, snakelike
embellishments that recall the powerful mesoamerican goddess, Coatlicue. Cervántez also incorporated iconography drawn from contemporary Chicana culture in her use of the intertwined rubber bracelets worn by East Los Angeles cholas.

Cervántez’s hand is covered by a transparent glove which symbolizes the Aztec ritual performed in honor of the god of regeneration, Xipe Totec. In the Aztec calendar, the month of Tlacaxipeualiztli was dedicated to the feast of the Flaying of Men. In his 1995 study of this feast, anthropologist David Carrasco analyzes Tlacaxipeualiztli as a, “metamorphosis of place and power,” which transformed the center of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, into a ceremonial battlefield. One of the key components of this festival was the ceremonial wearing of the sacrificed enemies’ skins by Aztec warriors. These skins were worn exclusively by Aztec males as a display of their power and success. Pérez’s brief analysis of this feature focuses on the metaphorical act of literally wearing someone else’s skin. However, Cervántez’s gesture is also significant as a rejection of gender norms and as an expression of female power. Cervántez’s appropriation of a tradition exclusively practiced by men, blurs the distinction of genders. Additionally, by covering the majority of her face with a mask, Cervántez undertakes what Pérez terms the de-familiarization of her image. Moreover, over the transparent glove of skin, the rubber bracelets of East Los Angeles cholas draws a link between pre-Columbian tradition and contemporary Chicana culture. This link positions these cholas as cultural warriors, fighting to preserve tradition. Finally, Cervántez’s appropriation of a skin-glove de-familiarizes her image, by literally slipping into someone else’s skin, she transforms her own identity.
De-familiarization is also a key element of *Big Baby Balm* (fig. A14). Cervántez depicts the practice of facial tattooing, a taboo in Western culture in this bust-length self-portrait. By marking herself as a member of the social periphery, she calls attention difficulties faced by Chicana feminists who continually fight for relevance outside of the private sphere. Her tattooed face diverts attention from her ethnicity to focus instead on Aztec culture. Specifically, her face is tattooed with a stylized jaguar mouth while the spotted print of her clothing echoes the coat of a jaguar. In both Central and South American, the jaguar was associated with social status, warfare, spiritual and political power, shamans, and chiefs. In Aztec culture, specifically as it is recorded in the Florentine Codex, the jaguar is documented as a brave and fierce creature that was both wise and proud. Cervántez’s combination of jaguar and human imagery infuses the positive characteristic of the jaguar into her identity as a Chicana women.

While Cervántez utilized Kahlo as a symbolic surrogate, Cecilia Concepción Alvarez appropriated her family as surrogates. Marylou Gómez notes that the artist’s use of imagery related to the family allows her to address issues of cultural and community preservation. Preservation is particularly important for Alvarez because she recognizes that family and cultural values are frequently abandoned in the pursuit of capitalist goals. Additionally, in using her mother and aunt as surrogates, Alvarez asserts her cultural identity as it has developed over time. Chicanas/os in the Pacific Northwest are often regarded as an “invisible minority.” Alvarez’s interest in the depiction and preservation of cultural identity is integral to her iconographic vocabulary which focuses
broadly on women as both the sharers of culture and as symbolic representatives of the earth.\textsuperscript{52}

*Las Cuatas Diego* is a bust-length double portrait of Alvarez’s mother and her twin sister clothed in identical blouses (fig. A4). The two figures are only subtly different. Both look toward the viewer and merge into one figure where their identically styled hair becomes one shared coiffure. Obviously representing the pictorial unification of the two women, this also alludes to the twins’ development from a shared ova. According to Alvarez, the two women shared more than a similar physical appearance; they were both exceedingly generous and fully engaged in their community. She argues that generosity is often interpreted as a synonym for stupidity or gullibility, but that being truly generous allows one to open one’s mind and heart to new ideas.\textsuperscript{53} Therefore, *Las Cuatas Diego* is not only an image of the artist’s family but of her conceptualization of the best elements of her cultural identity.

The figures in *Las Cuatas Diego* can be interpreted as surrogates for the artist. Alvarez depicts her cultural and familial heritage as an expression of Chicana culture. Although the two figures are personally significant to Alvarez, their images also address cultural preservation and the Americanization of Chicana/o culture. Throughout her oeuvre, Alvarez is critical of commercialization as a product of westernization. Her explanation of *Las Cuatas Diego* as a depiction of generosity works intended to counteract the goals of western consumerism.

Alvarez depicts the female form in many of her works as an iconographic symbol for both culture and the earth.\textsuperscript{54} The union of personal and cultural commentary in this
self-portrait is also evident in the work of Gonzalez, Cervántez, and Kahlo. The political and cultural meaning of *Las Cuatas Diego* include the desexualization of the racialized “other” and opening a healthy dialogue about American thought and culture as it relates to Chicana/a culture. Therefore, one of the overarching themes in her work is the depiction of powerful and unique women. *Las Cuatas Diego* depicts her mother and aunt as a source of power unrelated to their physical form and therefore neither exotic nor sexual. Alvarez often cites, art critic Dolores Tarzan who described her work as depictions of “handsome Hispanic women.” This misinterpretation exemplifies the tendency to immediately identify the race of the figures as essential to their meaning. Tarzan’s review was one of many catalysts that prompted Alvarez to consider how Chicana artists could create a visual vernacular that referenced cultural origin that would not be misinterpreted as sexualized or exoticized.

An integral piece of Alvarez’s reconfiguration of the Chicana woman is her creation of an alternative definition of power and beauty. This often required her to deviate from the iconography established during the Chicano movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Alvarez recalls depictions of females “with a sub-machine gun in one hand and a baby on their hip” which she immediately recognized as “incorrect” interpretations of the Chicana experience. These images used the female form as a prop to support depictions of male power and did not account for the reality of life as a Chicana. By contrast, *Las Cuatas Diego* reinterprets power and value through its depiction of nurturing women and the sharing of wealth and resources.
La Tierra Santa (1983) presents another depiction of Alvarez’s conceptualization of power and the role of women in Chicano/a art (fig. A15). The primary figure in this composition is a monumental Chicana woman standing in a powerful and assertive pose with the moon depicted behind her head as a celestial halo. As she uses her inner strength to protect the earth from further damage inflicted by humans, this woman represents female gender and the aspects of humanity that have been devalued due to the characteristically Western focus on the accumulation of goods as a source of power.61 Lois Allan interprets the monumental female figure in La Tierra Santa as a modern interpretation of a pre-Columbian goddess, a guardian of traditions.62 As a guardian, this figure serves as a recognition of Chicana cultural heritage and as a new symbol of power and agency.

Through the non-violent visual vocabulary she developed in works like Las Cuatas Diego and La Tierra Santa, Alvarez encourages a cross-cultural dialogue. She notes that one of her goals is to alert viewers to the process through which large groups of human beings are made less important in society.63 Central to this goal is Alvarez’s belief that homogeneity should be rejected. She argues that art should shed light on the power of the dominant culture to impose values rooted in commercialism and colonialism on minority populations.64 By confronting viewers with the process through which one becomes powerful, Alvarez creates art that empowers both her subjects and her viewers.

Gonzalez, Cervántez, and Alvarez make use of the image of their own bodies to engage with larger issues. Significantly, few of the works discussed in this chapter would be considered “likenesses.” Rather, they are symbolic reconfigurations of the self that
respond to and comment on contemporary culture. Gonzalez, Cervántez, and Alvarez all use self-portraiture to create something new. Their transformation of imagery related to the history of Mexican and Chicana culture draws inspiration from the past but engages with viewers in the present. This hybridized imagery recognized the richness of historical traditions as a platform for contemporary self-portraiture. Frida Kahlo’s role as a cultural icon and artistic predecessor is an essential element of this historical foundation.

Gonzalez, Cervántez, and Alvarez each reconfigure Kahlo’s legacy and image in their self-portraiture.
Notes


6 Pérez, Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities, 281.

7 In an interview, Gonzalez noted that her depiction of herself with multiple layers of clothing refers to her emotional response to stress. She explained that, in the event of difficult situations, her first impulse is a desire to wear layers upon layers of clothing to shield herself from the outside world and protect the innermost facets of her identity. Maya Gonzalez, interview with the author, September 13, 2012.

8 Ibid. Gonzalez notes that she frequently utilizes jewelry as a means to code different meanings into each figure. Mayan Ball Gown, discussed later in this chapter, is another example of Gonzalez’s use of this technique to create meaning in her work.


11 Ibid.

12 Maya Gonzalez, interview with the author, September 13, 2012. While the lighter figure in this portrait is often described as a spirit figure, each figure in *The Love that Stains* seems to represent two discrete iterations of the artist herself, her “big self and the origins of her artistic creativity,” and her “small self.” Gonzalez’s describes her big self as “the gestalt of [her] larger consciousness” which has the ability to synthesize her daily experiences into meaningful creative output. In *The Love that Stains*, Gonzalez’s inner-self is the figure depicted in a less saturated palette and the frontmost figure is the physical portion of her being. Gonzalez regards her self-portraiture as depiction the communication between these parts of her self.

13 Cheney, Faxon, and Russo, 167.


15 Maya Gonzalez, interview with the author, September 13, 2012.

16 For information on Kahlo’s biography, see Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) and Sarah M. Lowe, *Frida Kahlo* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1991). For critical interpretations of Kahlo’s biography, see Margaret A. Lindauer, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Culture of Frida Kahlo* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999). For Gonzalez’s biography, see Keller, Erickson, Johnson, and Alvarado, 2: 6. Kahlo was born of a German father and a mother of indigenous Mexican heritage while Gonzalez’s mother is of German descent and her father is Mexican; Gonzalez self-identifies as Chicana. At the age of seven, due to an accident, Gonzalez suffered a serious head injury which required her to take medication for many years to prevent seizures. As a child, Kahlo contracted polio and was forced to wear leg braces which severely limited her mobility. Following a trolley accident at the age of twenty-five, Kahlo experienced numerous medical complications which troubled her throughout her life. In 1996, Gonzalez suffered from heavy metal poisoning which severely damaged her health and limited her ability to work for ten years.

17 Maya Gonzalez, interview with the author, September 13, 2012.

18 Bost, 204. Bost defines Huitzilopochtli as a “war god” and Xochiquetzal as the “goddess of creativity.”


21 Boone, 8. While Boone’s assertions that there are no direct associations between the hummingbird and gods or goddesses aside from Huitzilopochtli, many scholars maintain that there is a relationship between Xochiquetzal and this bird. Bost, 204. Keller, Erickson, and Villeneuve, 86.

22 Maya Gonzalez, interview with the author, September 13, 2012. Please note that Gonzalez’s work is influenced by the painted codices produced in meso-America. She stated that these images “speak very clearly to her” and naturally appear in her painting. Her knowledge of Aztec art and culture suggests that *The Love that Stains* was informed by a number of these ancient sources which allowed Gonzalez to purposefully utilize iconographic elements, for example, the hummingbird, that lend themselves to multiple interpretations.


24 Keller, Erickson, and Villeneuve, 87.

25 Nash, 336.

26 Maya Gonzalez, interview with the author, September 13, 2012.

27 Bost, 205. Bost also notes that *The Love that Saints* includes iconography from pre-Columbian Aztec traditions in addition to the iconography of the Catholic bleeding heart associated with the Virgin Mary.
32 Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarboro-Bejarano, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Reformation, 1965-1985* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery Press, 1991). For an analysis of the exhibit, see Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 57. Of thirteen works in the “Cultural Icons” section of this exhibit, five included representations of Frida Kahlo. These works were Rupert García’s *Frida Kahlo* (1975), Joe Bastida Rodriguez’s *Kahlo Pains* (1977), Alfredo Arreguin’s *Images of Frida Kahlo* (1978), and Marcos Raya’s *Through Frida’s Eyes* (1984, signed and dated 1987). Other cultural icons represented in this portion of the exhibit were the Virgen de Guadalupe, the tripartite mestizo head (a symbol of the Chicano movement), and Emiliano Zapata.

33 The jaguar, a Toltec symbol, is associated with transformation and the spiritual being. Also see Gaspar de Alba, 57. Vargas suggest that the figure sits astride a living jaguar statue, known as a *cuauhxicalli*, which is thought to have served as a receptacle for human hearts during ritual sacrifices. Vargas, 41.

34 The calla lilies are a reference to *Los Tres Grandes*, Diego Rivera, David Alfara Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco. Additionally, the frog references Kahlo’s nickname for Rivera, *sapita*, which translates to “frog-toad.” For an iconographic summary of *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo*, see Gaspar de Alba, 57.


36 Ibid., 281.


39 See note 50 in chapter one.

41 Ibid.


43 Ibid., 15.


45 Ibid.


48 Saunders, 107.

49 Ibid., 108.

50 Cecilia Concepción Alvarez, interview with the author, October 2, 2012. Please note that “Diego” is a family name and was not intended as a reference to Diego Rivera.


52 Cecilia Concepción Alvarez, interview with the author, October 2, 2012.

53 Ibid.


Cecilia Concepción Alvarez, interview with the author, October 2, 2012. In an interview with the author, Alvarez recounted an incident that occurred while she was a student at San Diego State University. In an art class populated almost entirely by white male students, Alvarez remembers an incident when her professor asked her if her work referenced her gender or her ethnicity, stating that, if it did, it could not be considered “fine art.” When her professor argued that his work superseded the influence of gender and ethnicity, Alvarez disagreed and eventually decided not to pursue a formal art education, setting the stage for her career as a self-taught artist.


Lois Allan, Contemporary Art in the Northwest (Roseville East, NSW: Craftsman House, 1995), 20.

Cecilia Concepción Alvarez, interview with the author, October 2, 2012.

Allan, 20.
CHAPTER 3: SELF-FASHIONING: IDENTITY AS LEGACY

Frida Kahlo’s intriguing biography, her reputation as a self-portraitist, and the commercialization and popularization of her art and life have overshadowed the understanding of her influence on Chicana artists and Chicano/a culture. The continued use of terms ranging from “Fridamania” to “Fridolatry” has transformed her very real presence in the development of Chicana art into a cliché. Kahlo’s resurrection in the 1970s as a “forgotten woman artist” of the feminist movement, along with the commercial popularity of her life and work which blossomed during the 1990s, have made it all but impossible for contemporary artists to acknowledge the value of her work without linking themselves to the highly commercialized aura that now surrounds all things Frida Kahlo.¹ Kahlo’s role in the work of Maya Gonzalez, Yreina Cervántez, and Cecilia Concepción Alvarez illustrates the reconfiguration of Kahlo’s legacy. These artists adopted Kahlo as a cultural icon fit for reinterpretation. Much like the transformation of the La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe, Kahlo has been transformed into a symbol of Chicana agency.

Kahlo’s status has been widely recognized. She was identified as a “Cultural Icon” at the groundbreaking Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation exhibition in 1991 and a “héroe,” in the Chicano Art for Our Millennium exhibit in 2004.² However, this acknowledgement does not address the variety of ways in which her image and reputation have been appropriated. Kahlo has become a symbol in Chicano/a art and culture with implications far beyond the artist herself. The reinterpretation of Kahlo’s work and significance has transformed her from an artist to a cultural icon.
While her role is different for Gonzalez, Alvarez, and Cervántez, they each reinterpret Kahlo’s work and reputation to express contemporary issues in a process that George Vargas has described as not unlike the retrofitting of La Llorona, La Malinche, and La Virgen de Guadalupe by Chicana artists. While his recognition of the links between these four figures is significant, he does not account for the differences between Kahlo and the three mothers of Mexican culture. While La Llorona, La Malinche, and La Virgen de Guadalupe are undeniably three of the most recognizable figures in Mexican folklore, Kahlo is a relatively recent addition to the Chicana “pantheon.” Additionally, Kahlo’s popularity is largely the result of consumer culture while the three mothers of Mexico have been enshrined into Chicana/o culture over many centuries. Finally, the widely known “facts” of Kahlo’s biography complicate Chicana understanding of her work. Artists like Gonzalez, Alvarez, and Cervántez must confront the current understanding, both academic and popular, of her biography and her art.

Elizabeth Bakewell argues that in past decades, Chicana artists have begun negotiating cultural stereotypes. This requires them to strip away layers of culturally constructed meaning to identify what they regard as significant. For example, La Llorona, the archetypal violated woman who, in most retellings, was driven to kill her children in response to the adulterous actions of her husband, is recast as an Aztec goddess, a symbol of power. Similarly, reinterpretations of Kahlo’s role often include selective adaptation of her biography, the rejection of the commercialization of her figure, and a redirection of focus to highlight her work rather than her life.
A barrage of scholarly articles dedicated to Fridolatry and Fridaphilia demonstrate that the popular obsession with Kahlo’s life has infiltrated the scholarly arena. For example, the book produced in conjunction with the *Pasion por Frida* exhibit in 1991 at the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes includes two essays which directly address “Fridomanía” and “Fridolatría.” Both recount the ways in which Kahlo has appeared in academia and in popular culture. Most of these types of publications (including Germaine Greer’s “Patron Saint of Lipstick and Lavender Feminism”), lack a thorough consideration of Kahlo’s works, emphasizing instead the cultish collection of her art by celebrities including Jean Paul Gaultier and Madonna. The scholarly interest in the popularity of Kahlo’s work has tainted her legacy as an influential figure on the development of Chicana/o art and culture.

The emphasis of Fridolatry obscures the socio-cultural meaning of Kahlo’s work and her significance for later Chicana/o artists. For example, in conjunction with the major Kahlo retrospective at the Tate Modern in 2005, Greer defined Kahlo as the “patron saint of both lipstick and lavender feminism,” noting that her cult following was “no more than she deserved.” Greer argues that Kahlo “idolized herself,” and offers a number of arbitrary comparisons between Kahlo and artists including Angelika Kauffmann and Elisabeth-Louise Vigée le Brun. The assertion that Kahlo crafted her image to ensure her later popularity as an icon is, at the very least, anachronistic. Although popular reception of her work and biography has posthumously enshrined her as an icon of pop culture, Kahlo’s work existed autonomously long before it was appropriated for commercial purposes.
Contemporary Chicana artists, such as Gonzalez, Alvarez, and Cervántez, have tried to sidestep the commercialized Frida and consider her work for other reasons. In doing so, they confront the scholarly and popular belief that Kahlo’s life and work are one continuous entity. Oriana Baddeley identified Kahlo as an artist whose biography has prompted many viewers to access her work, noting that Kahlo’s persona has grown into an entity entirely its own, removed from her art and often from the reality of her life. In her chapter of *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Culture of Frida Kahlo*, “Fetishizing Frida,” Margaret Lindauer comments on the historiography of Kahlo’s popularity, driven by her intriguing biography. The scholarly model that equates the artist and her corpus has inextricably joined Kahlo’s life and work. In this context, her biography is considered as an autonomous story which occurred simultaneously, albeit independently, from the historical context of Mexican culture. Similar to Griselda Pollock, Lindauer asserts that this notoriety “sequesters [Kahlo’s] creative production,” framing her art as the result of an act of catharsis rather than the result of political or social factors. Thus, contemporary Chicana artists must grapple with Kahlo’s significance by understanding that her popularity has irreparably altered her place in Chicano/a culture. Although Lindauer is correct in noting that the reception of Kahlo’s work has been changed by the popularity of her image and biography, her resonance with contemporary Chicana artists remains strong.

Conversely, in “‘Now I Live on a Painful Planet’ Frida Kahlo Revisited,” Marta Zarzycki cites the “interdependence between Kahlo’s fame and her astonishing biography,” as the catalyst for declining scholarly interest the artist. Zarzycki argues
that in the wake of two major traveling exhibitions in 2005, *Frida Kahlo: Portraits of an Icon* at the National Portrait Gallery and *Frida Kahlo* at the Tate Modern, feminist art history has “moved on.” She posits that, due the repeated assault of biographical interpretations, many believe Kahlo no longer fits feminist criteria. The body of Zarzycki’s analysis refutes these assertions to focus on Kahlo’s representations of pain. In spite of Zarzycki’s bleak prognosis for the continuation of interest in Kahlo, many avenues of exploration remain for Chicana artists who endeavor to rehabilitate Kahlo’s legacy.

To remake Kahlo as a relevant cultural icon, Gonzalez, Cervántez, and Alvarez amplify or reject elements of Kahlo’s work and life. For example, Cecilia Concepción Alvarez readily acknowledges her interest in Kahlo’s work but finds elements of her biography problematic, specifically, the interpretation of the relationship between Kahlo and Rivera that deprives Kahlo of any agency. Alvarez qualifies the role of Kahlo in her development, stating that Kahlo’s ability to be “documented” in *machista* society is remarkable while her relationship with Diego Rivera, “suffering for her man,” is troublesome. Alvarez, recognizes the well-known “facts” of Kahlo’s life and elects to focus on Kahlo’s ability to navigate a male-dominated society.

The late 1970s was largely dominated by the Chicano Movement and its masculine-based culture did not provide a suitable iconographic vocabulary for Chicanas to visually express themselves. One of the primary goals of Alvarez’s *Las Cuatas Diego* was to record the power of generosity in a culture Alvarez felt privileged the accumulation of wealth over the sharing of resources (fig. A4). In doing so, she drew
her inspiration only from the elements of Kahlo's work that she felt were applicable to her own interests, specifically her predecessor’s ability to find recognition for her work in a male-dominated society. Alvarez reinterpreted the significance of Kahlo in a way that was in keeping with the issues she wished to express, recreating an alternative visual vocabulary.

Alvarez’s ability to obtain recognition within the context of the male-dominated Chicano Movement links her to Kahlo. In *Las Cuatas Diego*, Alvarez rejected a traditional visual vocabulary that reinforces male power. She argues, images of “rebel women” associated with the Chicano Movement “basically use the woman as a prop. I began using female images as they were.” Alvarez’s depiction of her mother and aunt as surrogates depicts generosity and familial love as a source of power. Therefore, Alvarez’s connection to Kahlo is primarily conceptual, rooted in Alvarez’s admiration of her Kahlo’s ability to create a new visual vocabulary that recognizes female agency.

Alvarez and Kahlo are also linked by their reconfiguration of La Malinche (La Chingada) through self-portraiture. As noted, in *Las Dos Fridas* Kahlo blurred the line between La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche. By depicting both figures as simultaneously pure and violated, Kahlo created an accurate image of a Mexican women rather than a dichotomy defined in terms of male interests. In *La Malinche Tenía Sus Razones* (The Malinche Had Her Reasons), Alvarez recognizes the role of slavery in La Malinche’s story (fig. A16). Instead of framing the La Malinche as the betrayer of her people, *La Malinche Tenía Sus Razones* depicts what Alvarez describes as, “the dehumanization of institutions that rely on slavery.” This shift recognizes the humanity
of La Malinche and, like *Las Dos Fridas*, complicates the traditional interpretations of the three mothers of Mexican culture.

Maya Gonzalez faced similar issues in dealing with Kahlo’s influence, especially since she and Kahlo share a German/Mexican heritage. In her formative years, Gonzalez was more drawn to the work of Diego Rivera than Kahlo’s due to Rivera’s ability and desire to effectively communicate political ideas. Her more recent work draws on her identification with Kahlo and what she describes as Kahlo’s ability to serve as an “amazing communicator through time.”22 In this way, Gonzalez effectively sets aside Kahlo’s biography and focuses instead on relationships across future generations.

In *The Love that Stains*, Gonzalez utilized a composition drawn from Kahlo’s *Las Dos Fridas* as a reference to Kahlo’s significance in Chicana art (fig. A2). This indirect reference to Kahlo acknowledges her role as an artists but does not reference her biography. In Gonzalez’s work, these elements take on new meanings. The pair of exposed hearts, one intact and one dissected to reveal its interior, in *Las Dos Fridas* is often interpreted as a reference to Aztec iconographic traditions and as a link between the two iterations of Kahlo’s self. Gonzalez’s image of the heart, however is described by the artist as a visualization of uncontainable love issuing forth from the artist’s beating heart. Additionally, Suzanne Bost argues that Gonzalez’s *The Love that Stains* is a critique of racism and the western tendency to ignore the indigenous aspect of Latin American identity filtered through the lenses of Aztec and Chicano/a culture and Catholicism.23 This process of revision is very similar ways a number of Chicana/o artists work to reinvent La Llorona, La Malinche, and La Virgen de Guadalupe.
With this in mind, Gonzalez’s work is the continuation of Kahlo’s manipulation of the image of the self in order to discuss contemporary issues. Thus, Kahlo’s work is not simply a source of inspiration but a starting point from which Gonzalez reinterprets Kahlo’s significance in Chicana/o culture, paving the way for further aesthetic and political development through the use of self-portraiture. The production of a new cultural icon that speaks to the goals and concerns of the contemporary Chicana sensibility serves as a catalyst for an open dialogue.

Yreina Cervántez also reconfigures visual markers of Chicano/a cultural icons in imagery that addresses a new and evolving set of cultural values. In the late 1970s, when she painted *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo*, Kahlo was emerging as a treasure of Mexico and the focus of a great deal of media attention and, as Ramón Favela has argued, *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo* thus, “entered the pantheon of symbolically major works in chicano [sic] art.” However, the significance of this work relied on more than just its reification of Kahlo. Through Kahlo’s “reclamation” of Pre-Colombian motifs and aesthetics, Cervántez became a pioneering figures who utilized that ancient iconography, along with that of the La Virgen de Guadalupe to address current issues. The result is a self-portrait that conveys what Alicia Gaspar de Alba describes in *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master’s House* as the, “syncretism of indigenous and European traits in the life and work of Frida Kahlo, but also the transformative effects of mestizaje.” While Gaspar de Alba describes Kahlo as the central figure of *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo*, as the artist, Cervántez’s self-portrait draws on Mexican cultural icons to form a hybridized identity.
Cervántez utilizes a wide range of recognizable imagery, be it Kahlo’s face or traditional Aztec tattoo configurations, to construct an entirely new meaning. Laura Pérez argues that forms of decorating the body, from clothing and jewelry to tattoos and scarification, are cultural practices that can be hybridized or reinterpreted to produce new cultural values.28 While Pérez’s discussion is just one aspect of the reinterpretation of the traditions of body alteration and decoration, her argument can be extended to explain the way in which Homenaje a Frida Kahlo reconfigures Kahlo’s image and influence to produce something new. She reconfigures her identity as an updated form of hybridization that sets aside traditional forms of mixing like mestizaje. This purposeful mixing and reinterpretation of sources expresses her agency as the determinant of her identity.

While these three artists represent but a small example of the many ways in which contemporary Chicana artists are currently engaging with historical cultural figures, the challenges they face shed light on the complicated effects of Kahlo’s status as a pop culture icon. Kahlo’s sudden fame and the recent use of her image and artwork as marketing tools serve as catalysts for the reinterpretation of her significance. As these women selectively consider Kahlo’s role in their artistic development and blend her influence with numerous other registers of meaning, they work to construct a new lens through which Kahlo’s role in Chicana art may be viewed. This hybrid view suggests, as do all the self-portraits considered in this study, that Kahlo’s influence is not nearly as straightforward as her commercial popularity might suggest. They do not respond to
Kahlo because her work is popular, but rather for its ability to communicate a new perspective on female agency.

As Gonzales, Cervántez, and Alvarez work to reconfigure Kahlo’s significance in their self-portraiture, they are simultaneously subverting Fridamania and defining a new legacy for their predecessor as an icon of Chicana/o culture. The current craze for Kahlo’s work contributes to the challenges these artists already face. They negotiate the commercialization and misinterpretation of Kahlo to position her as a significant contributor to their work and culture.
Notes

1 Please note that the use of the phrase “life and work” here is an intentional reference to the fact that, in the popular understanding, the two are inseparable. For a critique of the use of this phrase to discuss Kahlo’s work, see Margaret A. Lindauer, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Culture of Frida Kahlo* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 150.

2 Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarboro-Bejarano, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Reformation, 1965-1985* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery Press, 1991). Gary D. Keller, Mary Erickson, and Pat Villeneuve, *Chicano Art for Our Millennium: Collected Works from the Arizona State University Community* (Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, 2004), 118. In the description of “héroes” for the Chicano Art for Our Millennium exhibit, Kahlo is described as “the renowned Mexican surrealist painter who has become a symbol of and for the women’s movement in the Latino/a world.” Other cultural heroes recognized in this exhibit included José Guadalupe Posada, Sandra Cisneros, César Chávez, Cisco Kid, and Muffler Man. While Kahlo is included in the “Héroes” subcategory, other cultural icons are included in the labels “¡Venceremos!” and “Nuestros símbolos,” (respectively translated as “we shall overcome,” and “our symbols.” While Keller, Erickson, and Villeneuve place Kahlo within the “Héroes” subcategory, La Llorona in the “Nuestros símbolos” subcategory, and La Virgen de Guadalupe in the “¡Venceremos!” subcategory; I argue that these three figures, in addition to La Malinche, have all been re-imagined by Chicana artists in the past decades. This reinterpretation of cultural icons created a bond between these four symbols as part of a new visual vocabulary for Chicana artists.

3 George Vargas, *Contemporary Chican@ Art: Color & Culture for a New America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 41.

4 Elizabeth Bakewell, “El legado de Frida Kahlo: toma de conciencia del cuerpo político,” in *Pasion por Frida*, ed. Blanca Garduño and José Antonio Rodríguez (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1991), 162. For an English translation of Bakewell’s contribution, see pages 189-192 of the same publication.

5 La Llorona is interpreted by some as an iteration of Cihuacoatl or “Serpent Woman,” an Aztec earth goddess said to have domain over the process of childbirth and death by childbirth. See Inez Cardozo-Freeman, “Serpent Fears and Religious Motifs among Mexican Women,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 1978): 12.

6 Lindauer, 152. Lindauer pointedly notes that all of the terms popularly used to convey the recent fascination with Kahlo’s work are related to pathological conditions.

8 Germaine Greer, “Patron Saint of Lipstick and Lavender Feminism,” *Tate ETC*, no. 4 (Summer 2005).

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid. Greer finds a point of similarity between Kahlo and Kauffmann in that both women depicted themselves, “time and again, in a variety of costumes.” This flippant remark denies any potential for meaning, political or otherwise, in Kahlo’s choice of garment. Additionally, this comparison accounts in no way for cultural context, proximity of either location or time, nor aesthetic similarities. In linking these two artists, Greer reduces the significance of both their work, noting their nominal similarities, the fact that they are both women and that they both painted self-portraits, is cause enough for comparison.

11 Oriana Baddeley, “‘Her Dress Hangs Here’: De-Frocking the Kahlo Cult,” *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (1991): 11. While Baddeley interprets the prevalence of Kahlo’s biography as the window through which many viewers encounter her work in a negative light, Aída Hurtado and Patricia Gurin take an entirely different position. In their discussion of Cervántez’s *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo* at the CARA exhibition, they interpret Cervántez’s work as a gateway to educating one’s self on Kahlo’s biography and “triumph over physical illness.” Hurtado and Gurin argue that, for persons of Mexican heritage, learning about Kahlo’s biography is a way to better understand one’s origins. Aida Hurtado and Patricia Gurin, *Chicana/o Identity in a Changing U.S. Society: Quién Soy? Quiénes Somos?* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004), 101.

12 The basis of this line of argument is drawn, in part, from Margaret Lindauer’s critique and analysis of Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson’s conceptualization of art history in which the author is equivalent to his or her corpus. Lindauer quotes their argument, stating “purpose and art-historical narration is to merge the authored corpus and its producer into a single entity, the totalized narrative of the man-and-his-work, in which the rhetorical figure author = corpus governs the narration down to its finest details.” Lindauer, 2. For Bal and Bryson’s model, see Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History,” *Art Bulletin* 73 (June 1991): 174-208.

13 Lindauer, 151.


16 Ibid., 75.


18 Cecilia Concepción Alvarez, interview with the author, October 2, 2012.


22 Maya Gonzalez, interview with the author, September 13, 2012. Gonzalez described Kahlo and Rivera as a sort of “mother and father” in her artistic development. She notes, “they both gave me these very specific pieces that were distinctly different because of their genders and their roles.”


24 Ibid., 200.

25 Ramón Favela, “La imagen de Frida Kahlo en la plástica chicana,” in Pasion por Frida, ed. Blanca Garduño and José Antonio Rodríguez (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1991), 146. For an English translation of Favela’s contribution, see pages 185-188 of the same publication. Favela includes a quotation from a 1991 interview with Cervántez in which she notes that it was the increasing popularity and accessibility of Kahlo’s work, specially Hayden Herrera’s article in Ms. Magazine and an exhibition of Kahlo’s work at UC San Diego that prompted her to complete Homenaje a Frida Kahlo. See Hayden Herrera, “Frida Kahlo: Sacred Monsters” Ms., February 1978, 29-31.

26 Favela, 146.


CONCLUSION

Frida Kahlo’s self-portraiture is continuously subjected to biographical analyses that hide her role as the creator of her own identity. As a politically and culturally engaged artist, her self-portraiture is an expression of her ideas regarding mexicanidad and Mexican history. The use of dichotomies including the loved and the unloved, the Mexican and the European, and the violated and the pure does not account for her reinterpretation of imagery drawn from Mexican history. Her reconfiguration of Aztec imagery, Indigenous costume, and traditional figures in *Las Dos Fridas* redefines her image as the embodiment of the development of Mexican history. Kahlo’s acknowledgment and reinterpretation of historical imagery exemplifies her active engagement in a cultural/political dialogue through her art. As a signifier of economic independence and activity in post-revolutionary circles, the Tehuana dress, for example, is symbolic of Kahlo’s purposeful crafting of a public identity through a complex understanding of native persistence within a history of cultural conquest and interracial melding. Kahlo worked to preserve this complexity through her redefinition of cultural icons including La Llorona in *Henry Ford Hospital* and La Malinche in *Las Dos Fridas* by reinterpreting them as symbols of power rather than restrictive archetypes.

In *Las Dos Fridas*, the union of disparate iconographic elements deepens the work’s significance as an expression of hybridized identity, not only for Kahlo personally, but for her culture which modern Chicana artists have inherited. Kahlo’s use of elements with origins in a variety of periods in Mexican history enables her work to cross temporal boundaries as a representation of her understanding of mexicanidad. In depicting herself
in garments from different historical periods (from the Pre-Columbian indigenous Tehuana costume to the white European gown), Kahlo visualizes the evolution of Mexican identity. This multivalence demonstrates the limitations of dichotomies as the primary mode of interpretation of her self-portraits and calls attention to Kahlo’s purposeful appropriation of multiple iconographic elements the temporal allusions in the hybridized final product.

The recognition of Kahlo’s cultural/political engagement of Kahlo’s art creates a framework for Chicana artists to address the role of the past in contemporary self-portraiture. As they combat the legacy of the machista Chicano Movement and the marginalization of women of color, Maya Gonzalez, Yreina Cervántez, and Cecilia Alvarez reinterpret historical imagery. By drawing on the historical precedent of Kahlo’s complex use of indigenous design, mesoamerican culture, and personal portrayals of self image, these artists are transcending these limitations and reinterpreting Chicana/o and Mexican culture to accommodate female agency.

Gonzalez crafts her self-portraits with a universally intelligible vocabulary drawn from personal experience. In The Love that Stains she combines mesoamerican and Buddhist imagery with self-portraiture to create a politically engaged work (fig. A2). Gonzalez’s coding of her personal experience in order to use her image as a vehicle for social and political commentary and opens her personal and political views for interpretation.

Like Gonzalez, Yreina D. Cervántez’s self-portraiture unites Aztec iconography with references to contemporary culture. As a seminal work in the development of
Chicana art, her *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo* exemplifies the melding of Kahlo’s image with that of the Virgen de Guadalupe as a way to generate new meanings (fig. A3). As a traditional mother symbol in Mexico, the Virgen of Guadalupe was the archetypal role model for submissive female behavior. In the hands of Cervántez and other Chicana artists, however, the Virgen is returned to her origins as a mesoamerican goddess. Similarly, in the late 1970s, Kahlo was rising to fame as an artist known for her striking self-portraits which expressed the pain of her existence. Due to the work of Chicana artists, she became a similar figure, whose work could transcend continued marginalization and reemerge as a cultural icon, leading chicana women toward the future. In *Homenaje a Frida Kahlo* Cervántez enshrined these issues, creating a manifesto of Chicana feminism.

Cecilia Alvarez’s use of symbolic surrogates in her *Las Cuatas Diego* draws on Kahlo’s ability to transform the personal into cultural commentary (fig. A4). Alvarez rejects the corruption of capitalism in American life using *Las Cuatas Diego* to express generosity as a cultural value while celebrating the female experience in a depiction of female life free from the machine guns and violence so common in art of the Chicano Movement. Alvarez strives to validate the female experience, rejecting the use of sex and violence to depict the Chicana body, presenting family and generosity as universal ideals.

Chicana self-portraiture is complex, and Kahlo’s influence is an essential component, but its cliched character, constrained in generalized biographical and commercialized celebrity requires Chicana artists to negotiate this barrage to fully engage with Kahlo’s legacy. Selectively appropriating and adjusting their perception of Kahlo’s image and work, Chicana artists focus on Kahlo’s hybridization of iconography to glean
the critical aspects of her contributions to their own work. They recognize and unite the larger implications of Kahlo’s art as a vehicle to express cultural values and to simultaneously embrace and redefine their history. These self-portraits transcend personal biography, race, and slavish adherence to prescribed traditions to serve as both historical artifacts and as living expressions of an evolving consideration of the contemporary world.
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APPENDIX

Figure A1
Frida Kahlo
*Las Dos Fridas*, 1939
Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City

Figure A2
Maya Gonzalez
*The Love that Stains*, 2000
Figure A3
Yreina D. Cervántez
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Figure A4
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Frida Kahlo
*Las Dos Fridas*, detail, 1939
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Figure A6
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*Self-Portrait with Loose Hair*, 1947
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Figure A14
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Cecilia Concepción Alvarez
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