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## **“Frida Kahlo’s Catachresis and the Subversion of Gendered Space”**

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### **Introduction**

Frida Kahlo’s life was one of physical pain. In 1914, when the Mexican artist was seven years old, she was stricken with Polio. Kahlo recovered from her illness only to be a victim of a street car accident ten years later in which she sustained a broken pelvic bone, spinal column, collarbone and ribs. She was impaled by a handrail through her back and vagina, which would lead to thirty- two subsequent surgeries, the necessity of wearing orthopedic corsets, the amputation of a gangrenous foot and lifelong suffering. According to Elaine Scarry, author of The Body in Pain, pain is resistant to being translated into language. Pain represents one aspect of Kahlo’s unspeakable life, whose complex catachresis can be found in the colors and lines of the art and words contained in her private diary. In an irony that suits Frida’s story and its implications, the force of her streetcar accident left her body bloody and bare, except for a covering of gold which had exploded and spilled from a pouch of gold dust carried onto the car by an artisan. Though Kahlo’s suffering can be viewed as tragic, it also forever reoriented her in space, and allowed her to create proof, through her diary, that the result of challenged limits and the redrawing of lines is an honest account of queerness, whose strange truth challenges ideas of what is ugly versus what is normal. The plates of Frida’s diary form an object through which we may challenge the restrictive rules of gender binaries by following the lines she drew about and toward a liberated space. This project matters because it will

seek to answer the question of how gender freedom and recognition might become available, how the accessibility of non- normative art might make certain lives more visible and the ways in which gender freedom is both political and necessary. By analyzing The Diary of Frida Kahlo using texts and theories by Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst and Sara Ahmed this paper will develop an understanding of how space and social constructs influence and facilitate gender binaries. The thesis of this paper is that what we are able to see and express constitute who we are and the ways in which we are able to live and that the paths, objects and spaces to which we have access shape and gender our lives.

### **Private Metamorphosis, Public Masquerade**

Kahlo's diary, as it was private and not created for public consumption or for the purpose of providing a historic of cultural reference or reflection, was a means for Kahlo to negotiate her relationship to herself. In an essay that precludes The Diary of Frida Kahlo, Sarah M. Lowe, who has authored several analytical studies of Frida Kahlo's paintings, writes that the self portraits Frida made for public consumption were made with forethought. Lowe explains that in these portraits, Kahlo "constructs herself in a variety of settings, creating an artistic persona with an audience in mind"(25). Kahlo's paintings for the public and her public image masked her while her diary was a means of unmasking. Through her diary, Kahlo and that which surrounds her are metamorphosed.

Sara Ahmed, author of Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others, writes about how objects like doorknobs and tables begin to feel different or even begin to appear to move, when our orientations are obscured or redirected. When we become

disoriented, the objects surrounding us change and we see them again, changed, for the first time. Kahlo draws attention to, then deconstructs and warps into beauty and power, the objects of her pain. Pain, and the ways in which it manifests, are conquered through their queering. Disorientation through metamorphosis becomes empowering. According to The Body in Pain, the room and the objects contained within it are sources of pain for victims of torture. Normal objects with benign and harmless purposes like a hammer, a chair, the floor; all become weapons and objects of fear. Scary writes, “the de-objectifying of the objects, the unmaking of the made, is a process externalizing the way in which the person’s pain causes his world to disintegrate; and, at the same time, the disintegration of the world is here, in the most literal way possible, made painful, made the direct cause of the pain” (41). Kahlo’s de-objectification of objects yields the same influence, but with the opposite result. On plate 66 the trophic ulcers plaguing Kahlo’s right foot are highlighted using splotches of dark color to give her foot the appearance of deformity, but these splotches are made to be read as celestial bodies, or prints of the sun. There is a heavenly feel to the image, making her pain mythic and its source seems glorious rather than torturous. At the bottom of the page a phoenix is seen dominating a background of flames as a symbol of Kahlo’s tenacity and will. On plate 69 Kahlo writes, “Tragedy is the most ridiculous thing man has but I’m sure that animals suffer, and yet they do not exhibit their ‘pain’ in ‘theatres’ neither open nor ‘closed’ (their ‘homes’). And their pain is more real than any image that any man can ‘perform’ as painful.” For Kahlo, the performance of pain is the release of pain. Images can redefine objects of pain by bringing them to life and allowing their aesthetics to perform, teaching us, as Sara Ahmed has written, that “when objects come to life, they leave their

impressions”(163). The politics of disorientation are not formally political, but they are political and they are imperative. A new way of seeing and a way that moves us away from the familiar creates the possibility for new realities and the livability of closeted, pained lives that are unable to or struggle to perform gender. Like the objects of pain, the traits of gender can be made into performance.

In her public art and in her public life, Frida constructed herself to appear to be an elegant and regal Mexican woman. She wore lace, ribbons, bangles and braids to conceal her mangled body. Women in modern United States mainstream culture do the same with makeup, dresses and even surgeries that change or mask the appearance of their bodies. Judith Butler, a gender studies scholar and Professor of Rhetoric and Women’s Studies, analyzes in her work, Gender Trouble, the concept of feminine behavior as a means of masking the true nature of gender, which is that of a social construct. Masquerade masks identity through performance. According to Judith Butler, masquerade reduces “all being to a form of appearing, the appearance of being, with the consequence that all gender ontology is reducible to the play of appearances” (Gender Trouble, 60). Frida’s ornate costuming, Butler would suggest, was a means for Frida to adorn herself as body appropriate for public consumption or as a performance worthy of applause and approval. Understanding and interpreting Frida’s diary will allow us to see Butler’s conclusion that gender is a masquerade subject to the perceptions and sentiments that characterize time and place. Kahlo’s dressing, especially in the later years of her life was ceremonial, painful and extremely time consuming. She had to wear multiple corsets to maintain the posture of a “lady.” Appearing to fit the proper ideal of female was a strain for Kahlo. Her dressing was what Judith Butler would deem a “stylization of the

body” inherent in any performance of gender. Gender takes work and we must be able to see that this work, as imposed upon others by institutions and restrictive social and cultural norms, is a harm. We can also use this theory to examine the dynamics of some changes Frida made to her personality to avoid public scrutiny then connect it to the agony that accompanies one who’s desires and life is not suitable for or acceptable in public space.

Kahlo’s beauty has been referred to by Andre Breton as “a ribbon around a bombshell” (Fuentes, 17). According to Carlos Fuentes, who is a literary figure, Mexican ambassador, diplomat, and author of the Introduction to The Diary of Frida Kahlo, Kahlo often used diminutives and humor as a form of “put on submission” to defend herself against the “higher ups” of Mexico’s intellectual circles (16). The performative nature of Frida’s life is unveiled in her diary and can be used to create a comparison to and illustration of the performative nature of gender. Just like Kahlo used lacey clothing and gentle language to mask her explosively opinionated and original nature and aggressions, gender uses its manifestations to cover its truth. Judith Butler, writes in her work Gender Trouble that, “gender is a repeated stylization of the body” (43). One repeats acts and mannerisms to produce an appearance of substance that mimics the ideal of either a male or a female. Gendered bodies, Butler contends in her writing, are ones that are socially constructed and that convey only the illusion of naturalness. Kahlo, who was trapped by the physical pain of living in her destroyed body, can serve as a representative for all those whose identities have been created or limited by the constraints of their world’s possibilities. Judith Butler’s goal is to develop a new grammar of thought that expands the imaginable domain of gender and removes harmful and trapping binaries. Frida

Kahlo, who's visible, public life followed the rules of gender binaries, created a liberated and free life, derived from her subconscious, in the pages of her diary.

### **The Means of Seeing**

Kahlo connects us to Butler's idea that who we are is an effect of who the social powers and forces around us want us to be when she writes that "we direct ourselves towards ourselves through millions of beings- stones- bird creatures- star beings- sources of ourselves"(Plate 90). In this excerpt, Frida also hints at something deeper. She directs us towards discovering an understanding of the ways in which her writings were directed. A phenomenological interpretation of her work allows us to see the means by which Frida's diary was produced and why we are able to see what she created. In the final pages of her diary, Kahlo writes, "I am writing to you with my eyes"(Plate 153). In phenomenology, one comes to know the world through interactions with the objects with which she is familiar and to which she has access. Frida's diary comes to us through its being intercepted, transcribed and published by others, but others were able to achieve access to Frida's words, thoughts and lyrical impulses because Frida was capable of accessing various tools and mediums. Phenomenology explores how orientations lead us to see, do and interpret actions and thoughts.

Sara Ahmed introduces us to the orientations and histories of orientations inherent in the construction and uses of various tables as well as the objects and tools involved with and surrounding those tables. Ahmed writes about how philosophers have been enabled and disabled by the spaces and objects with which they are familiar and to which

they do and do not have access. Adrienne Rich's experience of writing a letter is recounted. Rich, a philosopher and feminist, upon attempting to sit down and access the tools necessary to writing a letter, is interrupted by the needs of her child (Ahmed, 32). The child, rather than her typewriter or her desk, became her foreground and the focus of letter writing became relegated to the background. The child felt the need to be the focus of Rich's space, thereby disallowing Rich's space to include any alternative focus, such as the objects and tools necessary to the process of letter writing. The table is the space from which thought is transcribed through motion and thoughts are allowed to manifest. According to Ahmed, "For such movement to be possible, consciousness must flow: we must not be interrupted by other matters. This flow of consciousness is made possible by having the time and space to attend to the table" (35). The assumption, based on a heterosexual frame of thought, that women are meant to bear and care for children, interferes with the accessibility of the tools necessary to expressing thought.

### **Pain and the Accessibility of Space**

As a result of her accident, Frida Kahlo was unable to have children. Her diary laments the physical and emotional pain of several miscarriages. Her accident and miscarriages, however tragic, may have served to remove the possibility of children as part of the foreground of Frida's spaces. We must ask then, if Frida's space had not been invaded by the treacherous streetcar, influencing the atmosphere of and her orientation to subsequent spaces, would Frida's work have been possible? Would we have access to what she saw with her eyes? To the limits she deconstructed through her use of charcoals, colored pencils, pens and paper? How could Frida's pain, which inhibited her,

be something that helps liberate us? Frida's art was created and her diary written often during times when she was confined by her pain and resulting poor health to her bed or wheel chair; the materials or objects most accessible to her crippled body being the pages of her diary and her writing and drawing implements. According to Ahmed, "The objects that appear within phenomenology also disappear in the 'passing over' of what is given and familiar... This disappearance of familiar objects would make more than the object disappear. The writer who does the work of philosophy might disappear, if we are to erase the signs of 'where' it is that he works"(34). This supports the aim of this project, which is to prove that our access to space, place and the objects found there is political. If free thinking minds did not have access to the tools necessary to creating language and imagery for integration into new discourses, there would be no hope for the opening of new spaces. Our conversations, choices and minds would never be free to expand and many of us would be doomed to be trapped within oppressive spaces.

Frida's orientation within and to spaces were results of an accident in which a streetcar's aberrant movements in space, its failure to follow a line or an intended path, caused her bodily limitations to originate. Frida writes that "we take flight into irrationality, magic abnormality, in fear of the extraordinary beauty of the truth of matter and dialects, of whatever is healthy and strong... fear of knowing that we are no more than vectors direction construction to be alive"(Plate 89). Frida writes that discontent results from not being able to "stop freely to play by the wayside" of paths set and traveled (Plate 87).



## **Seeing and Living Outside the Constraints of “Normal”**

Though Kahlo’s writings are not free of external influence, a fact of which she seems to be hyper-aware, they escape some of the constraints of reality by constructing a new reality. Kahlo’s imagination and expressions of her subconscious show us a world outside reality’s borders. Mexico City in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a city limited by tradition. Kahlo’s art expresses desires and thoughts that would not, in traditional public space, be allowed. As Carlos Fuentes writes, the artist is shaped by his or her society and “the artist then gives to the society what a repressive, authoritarian system takes from, or deprives the society of” (15). The sketches, prose and poetry found in Kahlo’s diary reveal the desires and lives that exist on the periphery of what her society, that of Mexico City in the early twentieth century, allows. Kahlo writes because of the conditions created and made available by her pain but also to escape the confines of the limits of her social environment. On plate 50 of her diary, Frida draws the faces of people of different ages, races and genders close together, conveying a sense of the masses. Each face is encircled by a thick black line, as if they are being magnified. On the page the exclamation “How ugly ‘people’ are!” is written. Kahlo is expressing her discontent with the familiar or with the common masses especially upon close examination. For Frida, the lives that we are able to see are ugly and escaping their presence and power is a necessary task for the subconscious imagination. From Kahlo’s imagination come those elements necessary to naming that which normally would be unnamable. On the pages of Kahlo’s diary are shades and shapes that harbor the potential to give voice and vocabulary, through images, to those lives that are, through their namelessness, unlivable. Everything living and organic, the pantheistic art found in Frida’s diary tells us, is sacred.

Frida Kahlo's diary questions the most oppressive claims, which are those to normalcy and to the natural.

Judith Butler equates not having a claim to the natural with not having a claim to a real existence. If one does not have a real existence, one does not lead a grievable life and one is unprotected from violence and suffering. On page 25 of Undoing Gender, Butler laments, "so it is not just that a discourse exists in which there is no frame and no story and no name for such a life, or that violence might be said to realize or apply this discourse. Violence against those who are already not quite lives, who are living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark." Frida Kahlo's diary, as demonstrated by her drawings, poetry and prose, illuminates her desires and releases the reader from a world constrained by rational possibilities. Frida writes that she wishes she could do whatever she liked "behind the curtain of madness" (Plate 74), but Frida's diary is capable of lessening the necessity of any curtain and expanding the stage of possibility for all those excluded from even its wings. Frida's diary contains elements that have the potential to create a dialectic that would help make the lives that are confined and condemned to private or hidden spaces part of what it means to be "normal" or part of what it means to exist as a human being. To exist, we must be part of a discourse. Kahlo's diary adds to a discourse that explores what it means to not fit into or accept a binary gender category.

Judith Butler speaks of the power of the possibility of life, a lack of which may lead to a life that "bespeaks an ongoing agony" (29). For Frida Kahlo, the possibility of leading a possible life, as rendered real in her diary, was what sustained her through her pain and what may inspire others to do the same. Frida asks, "what would I do without

the absurd and the ephemeral?”(Plate 47) Her rhetorical question indicates that without the ability to transfer her subconscious to paper, her life would not be one of possibility. Frida’s diary challenges gender norms through imagery that ranges from beautiful and liberating to grotesque and threatening. We can see the scale of her libidinal desires, fears and frustration in her letters to lovers and intimates and through the application and usage of various symbols in her sketches and drawings.

### **Binaries and Becoming**

According to Carlos Fuentes, Kahlo was a member of a group called “Las Cachuchas” or “The Caps.” The group was “proud and defiant in their denim clothes and proletarian, urchin- like caps, making fun of solemn figures, roaring and ripping through the halls of academe, planting banana peels at the foot of the statues of Scientific Order and Progress and stealing streetcars”(Fuentes, 11). Kahlo, from a young age transgressed the lines of gender binaries, participating in masculine behaviors and dressing in masculine fashions. In Space Place and Sex by Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst, in their discussion of rural sexualities, the authors discuss how boys are seen as part of nature while girls’ “tomboyism” is forced to shift to become aligned with polite and mature culture. They quote Owain Jones’ observation that “the ‘natural’ state of childhood is wild, innocent maleness. “Tomboyism” can be seen as a resistance to narrow and strict gender delineations, but also reveals the gendered basis of construction of childhood”(105). If we are shifted from our childhood to fit the rules of our culture, then what is the effect of having given up our nature? Do we grieve our childhood as a loss because with it we loose free will and autonomy? Plates 82- 85 of Kahlo’s diary

indicate that Kahlo's disconnect from the person she was as a child has caused her to lose an ineffable freedom and security. It is on these plates that Frida gives new meaning to who each member of her famous 1939 painting, "Los Dos Fridas" is. "Los Dos Fridas" have been revealed as the self Diego Rivera, Frida's husband who divorced her in 1939, once loved and the self Rivera no longer loved. These plates reveal "Los Dos Fridas" as Frida's adult self who, in times during which she needs to "share her problems" goes to visit her imaginary childhood best friend, allowing the friend to help her recapture the happiness, joy and activity of her childhood. Kahlo writes, "She was agile and danced as if she were weightless. I followed her in every movement"(Plate 83). Binaries preoccupy Kahlo's life. There is the contrast between her performance as a passive "feminine" Mexican lady and her true aggressive, intellectual "masculine" self, a contrast between the free child she grieves having been and the woman she has become and a contrast between herself and the love of her life, Diego Rivera.

Frida Kahlo was part of a tumultuous marriage to the Mexican artist and Marxist, Diego Rivera. In her diary, she seems obsessed with Diego, speaking of herself and him as one being and labeling herself as "she who wears the color" and Diego as "he who sees the color" (Plate 214). Language alone would mistake that Frida is living within a binary relationship, however her drawings of bimorphic forms, minotaurs, androgynous faces and bodies, hybrid body parts and hermaphrodites indicate an attempt to escape and subvert binaries. In Rivera, Kahlo may not have been obsessively seeking the love of a husband, but rather the attainment of his masculine attributes and privileges.

In addition to her marriage to Diego, Kahlo had several relationships with women. One such woman was painter Jacqueline Lamba, who was married to a close

friend of Diego's, Andre Breton. According to Sarah M. Lowe's commentary on The Diary of Frida Kahlo, "Kahlo and Lamba became close in reaction to the academic and theoretical discussions among Breton, Trotsky and Rivera, from which they were excluded"(208). This experience would place Frida on Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum. Within the lesbian continuum, Rich contends in Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence, that women have passion for one another, chose each other as allies and form communities. Rich believes that "woman- identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, violently curtailed and wasted under the institution of heterosexuality"(657).

Whether or not the institution of heterosexuality deprived Frida of power is questionable. Diego, according to Carlos Fuentes, was not jealous of any of Frida's affairs with women and never intervened (20). Kahlo's diary, however, shows a preoccupation with power that would indicate a lack of it in her life. Kahlo draws herself as Nefretiti (Plate 29). When she depicts naked women, they are always shown as grotesque or dismembered so that they avoid becoming objects of desire. The overall theme of Kahlo's diary is one of becoming. According to Carlos Fuentes, Kahlo's diary shows "us the successive identities of a human being who is not yet, but who is becoming" (16). On plate 52 Kahlo draws three stages of a woman's life, where each head, child, adult and elderly, overlaps the other. The woman resembles Kahlo and the heads fade "in and out of each other" (230). In one drawing, Kahlo depicts herself as giving birth to herself. She changed the year of her birth from 1907 to 1910 to coincide with the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. Kahlo was constantly creating and recreating her idea of herself in her diary, just as the idea of gender is being constantly

remade and repeated in attempts to replicate it. According to Judith Butler, “woman” is a term in the process of becoming that is produced both by what we do and what we deny. Both denial and performance limit the possible, reinforce binaries and lead to violence against ignored and hated existences.

## **Conclusion**

Keith Haring, an American pop artist who advocated for gay rights through his art, said in an interview with Sylvie Couderc that, “an artist, if he has any kind of social or political concern, has to try to expose as much as possible what he sees so that some people think about things that they don't normally think about. Sometimes I do that by pushing things to the extreme; in the face of people who try to close their eyes.” Haring frames art as a medium that “liberates the soul, provokes the imagination and encourages people to go further.” Though the artworks Kahlo produced for public consumption were not as challenging to gender binaries as the thoughts kept private in her diary, they were still audacious, subversive and questioning. Her diary is an aggressive interrogation of normalcy. Kahlo performs as a woman through her public actions but exposes herself as less, or something not the same, in her diary. Her diary reveals that she is not only an artist, but a performer. In the spirit of surrealism, her automatic drawings come from her subconscious and bypass the educated part of our minds. Kahlo challenges the falsity of normative gender ideals and rules with her expressions of inner impulse. Her diary, a fantasy which represents that which is considered unthinkable in her actual world, legitimates, by making visible, through painting and writing, feelings and thoughts. This catachresis of Kahlo’s subconscious shows that the nameless may be named, that gender

need not have the final say on limits, and that the possibility of being is vital. Sara Ahmed writes that the queering of spaces and the opening of new paths will create more possibilities for gender and sexual freedom. Gender differences, especially those that stray away from binaries, can create new spaces and uses for objects capable of drawing new lines; lines that form beauty and suggest unimagined orientations. The expression of the subconscious through visual mediums can have a powerful effect on the actualization of lives. Through art, what may not be in the existing lexicon becomes visible. Lives that are visible cannot be ignored.

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