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Podcast Transcript

Today I'm going to talk about early-twentieth century Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and how her rediscovery in the 1970s and 1980s was due, in large part, to the rising Chicana feminist movement. Additionally, I will examine how Frida continues to influence Chicana culture long after her death as well as the many parallels between Frida's time and the issues faced by Chicanas in the U.S. Through my analysis, listeners will come to realize that Frida's legacy is intimately intertwined with Chicana culture.

For those less familiar with Frida Kahlo, I will start by provided a little background information. Frida was born in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacan in 1907 to a German-Austrian father and a Mexican mestizo mother. Interestingly, she later changed the date of her birth to 1910 to coincide with the Mexican Revolution. Frida so identified with the ideals of the Mexican Revolution, including *indigenismo* and *mexicanidad*—ideals that favored native cultural values and rejected Eurocentrism while promoting Mexican nationalism, that she wanted the date of her birth to mirror that historic moment.

In addition to her art and her political passions, Frida is also known for her poor health and her tumultuous and multiple marriages to Mexican Renaissance artist Diego Rivera. Frida suffered a traumatic trolley accident at the age of eighteen which left her in pain for the rest of her life. Frida also contracted polio at the age of six, an experience that left her with a withered right leg. Frida's alignments throughout the course of her life included multiple miscarriages, operations to

try and fix the lasting damages of the trolley accident, and ultimately the amputation of her leg. Frida's marriages to Rivera included many infidelities on both sides and the pair traveled together in the United States to promote Rivera's work. It is generally acknowledged that Frida's partnership with Rivera is overanalyzed and overemphasized. Much of this has to do with Frida's limited exposure and popularity as an artist in her own lifetime. For example, the headline of her death in 1954 in the *New York Times* read "Frida Kahlo, Artist, Diego Rivera's Wife." Also, the fact that Frida documented her relationship with her husband frequently in her own work has led to this critical obsessive focus on her personal life. Although Frida's personal narrative is significant in any discussion of her artistic identity, the excess of it has the tendency to mask her significant contributions to modern art and Latinx culture. When speaking of Frida's artistic reception, British writer Jeanette Winterson (2005) claims, "Creative women in the arts find themselves explained by, and reduced to, the circumstances of their lives in a way that men are not. Perhaps it is a fear of genius, of women's genius, that no matter what we create, it is ultimately defined in terms of autobiography, the world of the very small" (100).

Frida's turbulent, and one might even say abusive, marriage also draws into question her status as a feminist icon. Frida herself did not identify as feminist, however, much of her work preempts emerging feminist thought. Building on the work of other scholars, I assert that Frida's distinctive style was developed through the feminized vehicle of embodiment in her self-portraits. Tace Hedrick (2003) contends, "Kahlo used her own mestiza body to figure the paths through which might flow this combination of modern machine and traditional indigenous energies" (48). Thus, although Frida herself is often essentialized by others, her own work challenges such static categorization.

It is Frida's work, more so than any other Mexican artist of her era, which retains a contemporary translation and visibility in discussions of modern art today—particularly Chicana feminist art. For example, the early work of Chicana artist Ruby Chacon included a work of self-portraiture. Additionally, in her thesis *Frida Kahlo and Chicana Self-Portraiture*, Lauren Freese contends that the style of Chicana self-portraiture can be traced directly back to Frida.

The concept of feminist *mestizaje* was popularized many years after Kahlo's death by Gloria Anzaldúa in her 1987 seminal text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Although Anzaldúa does not directly pay homage to Frida in her book, her treatment of gender and sexuality is certainly a nod toward not only Frida's work but her life as well. Anzaldúa states, "For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior" (20). Unusual for her time and class, Frida was openly bisexual and took many female lovers throughout her lifetime. Consequently, Frida has become a significant icon in the global gay community today.

In the Introduction to *Chicana Feminist Thought*, Alma Garcia notes that because Chicanismo retained the male-dominant essence of traditional Mexican-American culture, Chicanas turned to feminism to address their own unique concerns and needs in the 1960s and 1970s (5). Garcia notes that it was the critique of machismo within Chicana feminism that helped propel and define the sub-movement, specifically the glorification of the "Ideal Woman" (6). The role of the ideal woman in machismo culture was to act as a haven and to be subordinate to male power. Chicana

feminists were harshly criticized for questioning this unrealistic ideal and found little support amongst the Chicanismo community at large (7).

These issues of gender and sexuality in the Chicana movement parallel the environment that Frida contended with in early twentieth-century Mexico. According to Jolie Olcott (2005), during the post-revolutionary era the 'cult of Mexican femininity' intensified and contributed toward the stagnation and marginalization of women. This espoused stereotype of femininity became a source of national pride for all Mexicans, both male and female alike. The female body, then, became a symbol for the qualities that contributed toward what Olcott (2005, 15-16) describes as female *abnegación*, which includes: "selflessness, martyrdom, self-sacrifice, an erasure of self and the negation of one's outward existence."

We see these artificial ideals of femininity in the Chicano culture as well. For example, in *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros tells the story through the eyes and experiences of a young girl, Esperanza. It is through the lens of Esperanza that the reader learns about the Chicana experience and Chicana feminism in particular. Two of the most defining features of this narrative are Esperanza's perceptions of the gender differences in her culture and the fates that are culturally prescribed to Chicanas. For example, in *Boys & Girls*, Esperanza notes that, "The boys and the girls live in separate worlds." The boys cannot be seen to associate with the girls and the girls are limited in their mobility. In *My Name*, Esperanza makes a connection between Mexican and Chinese culture by stating, "the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong."

This ideal woman who is selfless and submissive in both Chicana and Mexican culture can be traced directly to the twinned female myths of Malintzin and La Virgen de Guadalupe.

Malintzin plays the sinner in the dichotomy. Malintzin (or the dishonorable ‘La Malinche’) is the story of an indigenous woman who is both credited and blamed for giving birth to the first *mestizo* (Hernán Cortes’ son) and for betraying her fellow indigenous people in Mexico (Misemer 2008). Some scholars have attempted to resurrect the figure of Malintzin, positing that she is in fact a proto-feminist—a woman who did what was necessary to not only survive but flourish (Kessler 2005; Lara 2008).

La Virgen de Guadalupe, of course, is the saint figure in the Mexican dichotomy of femininity. As a national treasure, La Virgen is the unreachable ideal for all Mexican women. The myth of La Virgen is one that appealed strongly to the post-revolutionary sentiment as well, particularly given that she “appeared” to an indigenous commoner and that her appearance is “given [a] racialized “New World” face” (Lara 2008). In addition, the values of female *abnegación* are embodied by La Virgen. It is in the spaces between these extreme views of femininity and motherhood that Frida painted. Frida provides alternative and revolutionary interpretations through the exploration of her own body. In particular, Frida’s dramatic visual representations of miscarriage, abortion, breast-feeding and conception challenge the traditional dichotomy of mother-woman in Mexican culture. For example, in *Henry Ford Hospital* 1932 Frida depicts the physical and emotional pain of her miscarriage. This image is in direct contrast to the Western images of virgin and child that evoke serenity and peace.

Likewise, in *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Alterities*, Laura Perez notes that, “Numerous Chicana writers and visual artists, from at least 1972 to the present, have reinterpreted traditional religious symbols used to control female sexuality in more egalitarian ways...Others have made use of pre-Columbian mythology and art history ironically and for fun” (4). The dominance of the Catholic Church in Chicana culture is used as a springboard for writers and visual artists to challenge, question, and present a new way of seeing Chicana women within that framework. With its ties to colonization and female oppression, the Church, and religion in general, is a natural site for Chicanas to express social concerns artistically. Again, it is no surprise that Frida’s rediscovery and current popularity is indebted to Chicana feminists. Frida’s work consistently addresses Catholic and Pre-Columbian themes as they relate to issues of nationalism, gender, sexuality, and race. Although not a Chicana, Frida’s combination of mestizo and European backgrounds, as well as her sexuality, give her a similar vantage point as Chicanas (that of an outsider) to address key components of Latinx culture. For example, *Las Dos Fridas* 1939 depicts Frida’s duality as both European and traditional as well as native and independent.

In my article “Made in her image: Frida Kahlo as material culture” I assert that Frida enjoys a celebrity status equal to any movie star. This adulation has several names, including ‘Fridamania’, ‘Fridolatry’, or even ‘Kahloism’. For example, my business card holder has one of Frida’s self-portraits on it. I can’t remember if I bought (and if so where I bought it) or if someone gave it to me. Since I started working on my dissertation (*The Critical Geographies of Frida Kahlo*) around 2010, friends and family routinely give me some type of Frida trinket on gift giving occasions. I’ve gotten socks, aprons, stylized portraits, you name it. I particularly like

having my business card holder on hand, because although Frida's image and name are part of the popular discourse, people sometimes have trouble connecting the two. If I say I did my dissertation on 'Frida Kahlo' people will sometimes look puzzled, but if I show them my business card holder then they know who I'm talking about typically. It's almost as if Frida's name and image have two different audiences. This commodification of Frida's image and art is highly controversial. I've even seen hashtags on Twitter proclaiming, "Stop appropriating Frida Kahlo!" In 2018, the most recent offense in the commodification of Frida is the Frida Kahlo Barbie doll from the Inspiring Women Series. This very controversial doll that has been banned in Mexico, due in large part to disagreement over who owns Frida's image.

Frida's celebrity mirrors that of Chicana musician Selena Quintanilla. Like Frida, Selena is known simply by her first name. Selena's tragic murder at age 24 did nothing to dampen the culture of celebrity that surrounds her image and music. For example, in 2016 MAC Cosmetics launched a Selena make-up line that sold out instantly at their retail outlets across the country.

The work and life of Frida Kahlo continues to be a cultural touchstone for the Chicana community and serves as a locus for her continued popularity and relevance. As Chicanas draw inspiration from Frida's artistic and political identities, the image and myth of Frida grows even stronger on the global stage.

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