Post-Colonial Theory: A Discussion of Directions and Tensions with Special Reference to the Work of Frida Kahlo

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Abstract
There are many positions which can be taken within post-colonial theory. The canon of English literature can be re-read from post-colonial perspectives, and subordinate or minority voices from the 'margins' of various imperialisms can be unearthed and amplified. But this body of theory in itself contains dimensions of tension and contradiction. Do postcolonial readers, in focusing upon re-readings of canonical works, merely give the canon a new lease of life? To what extent are re-readings actual reinforcements and perpetuation of such canons? To ask if we continue the project of colonialism through such re-readings is also to raise a question mark over our 'amplification' of marginalized voices.
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There are many positions which can be taken within post-colonial theory. The canon of English literature can be re-read from post-colonial perspectives, and subordinate or minority voices from the 'margins' of various imperialisms can be unearthed and amplified. But this body of theory in itself contains dimensions of tension and contradiction. Do post-colonial readers, in focusing upon re-readings of canonical works, merely give the canon a new lease of life? To what extent are re-readings actual reinforcements and perpetuation of such canons? To ask if we continue the project of colonialism through such re-readings is also to raise a question mark over our 'amplification' of marginalized voices. To what extent is our attention given to such voices a complex assimilation and neutralization of the voice of the 'other'? Do we, by accommodating the voices of the 'colonized' in our Western academies, cultural contexts and marketplaces (the post-colonial literature course, the black writing conference held in the predominantly 'white' university, the Spielbergerization of The Color Purple) merely endorse a new colonialism — what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has seen in the contemporary expansion of the curriculum as merely another phase of 'the neocolonial production of knowledge' which keeps 'a Euroamerican centrum alive'?1

Such issues link in interesting ways with a question posed by Stuart Hall: 'When was the "post colonial"? In asking this question it will be the project of this essay to explore some dimensions and tensions in post-colonial theory through the work and figure of Frida Kahlo. Kahlo has been chosen because she and the effects she has had on writing upon cultural issues, can be explored in a range of ways. She can be incorporated into broad artistic movements which stress her similarity to dominant trends, and she can be 'read' and interpreted as an exotic 'addition' to such projects. Kahlo also exists as a colonized artist who must now be liberated by the critical establishment, an icon of a colonized culture whose authentic voice must now be relayed. She also exists as an artist whose work has entered our
culture at the level of the ‘symbol’; the distinct ‘signature’ of her paintings, or of her face and dress as represented in photographs, now has a currency which operates at levels ranging through the colour supplement feature, the advertisement for Mexican holidays and the postcard from the Athena chainstore. Kahlo isn’t, of course, the only artist to suffer such a fate, but she remains, for most, an ‘exotic’ whose history and context remains ‘foreign’. The paintings themselves are seductive and exotic in the reception of their ‘naivety’; the photographs of her present to Western culture, a beauty that calls to us across a distance – and arguably, this distance remains precisely the gulf between the first and ‘third’ worlds.

Using theoretical ideas drawn from the works of Stuart Hall and Frantz Fanon this essay will attempt to explore the politics of the ‘bridge-building’ which has sought to close or exploit the gap between Kahlo and the West, while also attempting to read the politics of Kahlo’s own work as it confronts the experience of the post-colonial.

The Uses of Kahlo
There is no denying that there are many myths and stories surrounding Frida Kahlo, some of which she cultivated herself. My aim here is to show how some writers have utilized such ‘fictions’ for diverse, if usually laudable purposes.

In *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* Whitney Chadwick’s biographical notes to Kahlo wrongly attributes her birth date as 1910. Her actual date of birth was 1907, but Kahlo manipulated the figures in order to allow her birth to coincide with the outbreak of the Mexican revolution, a fact that Chadwick fails to note. Chadwick’s book stresses the sexual politics of Surrealist painters, but in failing to rectify or note Kahlo’s self-mythologization Chadwick buys into a myth at the expense of the political point which the changed birth date foregrounds: Kahlo *aligns* herself with the revolution at the same time that she symbolically gestures towards a natural affinity with it. It is this ambivalent use of politics and myth which Chadwick fails to document, opting instead, albeit unconsciously, for a representation of Kahlo which is symbolic in its very beginnings.

According to Chadwick’s biographical note André Breton, the ‘founder’ of European Surrealism, ‘discovered Kahlo’s work in Mexico in 1938’. Chadwick’s assumption here is a common one, but Kahlo’s work pre-existed Breton’s coming; he might have popularized her work and *appropriated* it for the forwarding of certain of his own ideals, but the metaphor of ‘discovery’ is singularly inappropriate here – although it is entirely appropriate to a first-world treatment of Kahlo’s role in the history of a Eurocentric movement. Breton himself expressed Kahlo’s significance in European and (infantilized and eroticized) feminine terms: ‘We are privileged to be present, as in the most glorious days of German romanticism, at the entry of a young woman endowed with all the gifts of...
seduction, one accustomed to the society of men of genius'. Sarah M. Lowe has an interesting observation to make on the relationship between Breton and Kahlo:

Kahlo was unmoved by Breton’s charismatic self-importance, in part because of the predominantly intellectual and abstract cast of his notions. While Breton was inspired by what was alien to the rational world of the white European male – madness, women, the exotic – Kahlo’s creative impulse came from her own concrete reality.

Here the critic merely paraphrases the artist’s own resistance to appropriation by a ‘movement’, for Kahlo herself ironically stated: ‘I never knew I was a Surrealist ... till André Breton came to Mexico and told me I was’. Her own reaction was to reject the arrogance of Breton and the label of Surrealism, saying of herself that ‘I never painted my dreams ... I painted my own reality’.

The opening lines of Hayden Herrera’s own introduction to Frida Kahlo: The Paintings describes the power of Kahlo’s work through a quotation from Breton (her work is like ‘a ribbon around a bomb’). Both Chadwick and Herrera also romanticize Kahlo, presenting her in a mysterious, bewitching light, representing the foreign as unknowable, sensual and mystic:

With her carnal lips, surmounted by a slight mustache, and her obsidian-dark eyes slanted upward beneath eyebrows that join like outstretched bird’s wings, Frida Kahlo was bewitching almost beautiful.

Here Kahlo straddles the border between the exotic and the grotesque. She is almost an animal (hirsute, ‘carnal’, bird-like) and ‘almost’ beautiful (she is seductive, just as she was for Breton). The blurring of her ‘species’ and her gender (‘a slight mustache’) present her as a disruptive, carnivalesque figure, and this was reinforced by what many critics cite as her often unconventional (native) dress (Herrera notes elsewhere that ‘children used to follow her in the streets. Asking “Where’s the circus?”’). It must be acknowledged that Kahlo is simultaneously romanticized and ‘othered’ by her commentators here. While attempting to present the fascination to which her appearance gave rise, their commentary walks a thin line between celebration and racial stereotyping, valuing Kahlo as an artist but also as that which Edward Said has suggested might be a Western sexual fantasy of the ‘orient-as-other’, or that which offers ‘sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality ... deep generative energies’ to the observer. That Kahlo’s biographers and critics wish to popularize and make known the work of a female Mexican artist is commendable, but the sensual ‘tailoring’ of Kahlo as an object for easy ‘first-world’ consumption seems to be an integral part of her entry into the popular canon. Once again, the price of admission to first-world knowledge and markets seems to be a colonization of image and identity.

In ‘Art in America’, a review of Kahlo’s recently published Diary, Jill
Johnston states that ‘Even without foreknowledge of Kahlo or her work, or the circumstances of the Diary’s creation, one can hold it in hand unopened, certain that there is much to enjoy within it.’ Johnston’s review is both positive and accurate. However, it is perhaps in their function as an indicator of Kahlo’s assimilation into Western culture that her words are most interesting. Even ‘unopened’ we have now received enough information about Kahlo for her to have lost her anonymity and otherness – it is as a markedly aesthetic object that Kahlo’s book can now be appreciated. Johnston’s review treats the biographical contexts of Kahlo’s work, testifying to her suffering as a Mexican woman, wife and artist. However, her Diary can now perhaps ‘transcend’ its own political circumstances: ‘Her diary is a gorgeous phoenix; it adds to the lustre of her posthumous life as an artist’. The ambivalence of such an overcoming of suffering through art is firmly reflected in the Western reception of Kahlo’s paintings. Many of them portray a woman’s psychic and physical suffering, and these are the ones which arouse the most curiosity. But how much of this curiosity takes these images out of their context, seeing only (and being stimulated by) an abject and suffering woman, often naked with her wounds bleeding? Again, Kahlo’s reception walks a line between categories. Is it politically engaging or titillating? What is the significance of the bleeding human body – the bleeding female body, the bleeding brown female body?

The ‘uses’ of Kahlo persist. Martha Zamora, for example, uses a hyperbolic prose to romanticize and invent a narrative (which is almost a fable) in which to represent Kahlo and her work. At the other end of the scale, Linda Martin Alcoff presents an article called ‘Philosophy and Racial Identity’ with graphic reproductions throughout. It is an essay that describes itself as an attempt to explore the importance of ‘Map-making and race-making’, and the crux of the content is classification and the importance of definitions of race and the implications for philosophy, because ‘It has committed both crimes of omission – the neglect of race, and crimes of commission.’ However, the inclusion of illustrations actually reinforce the very point that Alcoff is making in order to raise the reader’s awareness.

The illustrations are as follows: David Alfaro Siquerios ‘Ethnography’; Matisse’s ‘The Hindu Pose’; Kahlo’s ‘Self Portrait with Cropped Hair’ and Cheri Samba’s ‘Self-Portrait’. The illustrations don’t really highlight or explain any of the key issues that Alcoff is dealing with. Subliminally, however, the illustrations are convenient; the subject matter in all four are ‘foreign’ and are perhaps used in order to ‘fit in’ with the overall issue of race. While they enhance the lay-out of the piece their relevance is (literally) marginal. The pictures are ‘reduced’ to the status of decoration. The assumption seems to be that the article is about race, therefore artistic representations of and by non-white people are legitimate and self-explanatory.

The entanglement of ‘Kahlo’ with ‘Kahlo myths’ is inevitable, however, and often gives an insight into the specifically post-colonial position that she inhabits. In Hayden Herrera’s biography of Kahlo she is described as a
'Mexican Ophelia', a romantic victim. Carlos Fuentes, in his introduction to Kahlo's *Diary*, however, identifies her with a range of Aztec and Toltec goddesses:

It was the entrance of an Aztec goddess, perhaps Coatlicue, the mother deity wrapped in her skirt of serpents, exhibiting her own lacerated, bloody hands the way other women sport a brooch. Perhaps it was Tlazolteotl, the goddess of both impurity and purity in the Indian pantheon, the feminine vulture who must devour filth in order to cleanse the universe. Or maybe we were seeing the Spanish Earth Mother, the Lady of Elche, rooted to the soil by her heavy stone helmet, her earrings as big as cartwheels, her pectorals her breasts, her rings transforming her hands into claws.

Here we have a continuation of allusions to things predatory and monstrous, but they are drawn from Kahlo's own cultural context - their meanings remain hidden for a European audience. For Western readers, Fuentes provides a much more familiar analogy: 'Frida Kahlo was more like a broken Cleopatra ... showing us all that suffering could not wither, nor sickness stale, her infinite variety.' Here, however, Fuentes' allusion to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* makes a recognizable political point. The link between Kahlo and Cleopatra is an interesting one on many levels. Both women have ambiguous and diverse racial origins; Kahlo's father was a German-Hungarian Jew, and her mother was of both Spanish and Mexican-Indian descent. Cleopatra's origins are lost in the mists of time, but to the Western mind she appears white if 'exotic', while her historical context suggests that she was black. Both are credited with the ability to enchant and bewitch, and, while powerful in her relations with Antony, Cleopatra is ultimately the pawn of the Roman Empire. Fuentes' allusion suggests that the parallel between Cleopatra and the 'uses' of Kahlo might be extended to include questions of the European 'colonising' of the indigenous female. As a Mexican writer Fuentes has to show his familiarity with the Western canon in order to gain acceptance. What is interesting, however, is his refusal to separate his use of the canon from questions of colonial politics; his refusal to 'buy into' myths without ironically suggesting the political effects of such mythologies.

**Against 'Post-Colonial' Theories**

At this point it is interesting to consider Stuart Hall's 'When Was "The Post-Colonial"? Thinking at the Limit', which is a sophisticated examination of key issues within this theoretical field. Hall addresses some interesting issues concerning the difficult demarcation line between the colonial past and a post-colonial present. Hall brings into question the word 'post', because the term implies an after-event, as though the liberation process had taken place; thus, in the after-condition, issues connected with colonization are depoliticized, and questions of the identity of the colonized become clearer. Hall quite rightly cites the work of Ella Shohat, who is also critical of
the depoliticizing nature of the term ‘post-colonial’:

She criticizes the ‘post-colonial’ for its theoretical and political ambiguity – its ‘dizzying multiplicity of positionalities’, its ‘a-historical and universalizing displacements’ and its ‘depoliticizing implications’.\(^{18}\)

If critics feel free to celebrate the ‘multiplicity’ that the figure of Kahlo depicts (‘her infinite variety’) then we must also attend to the political ambiguity of the ways in which this ‘multiple’ image has been constructed and utilized. What is important, perhaps, is to explore the political implications of such divisions and usages, rather than celebrate divided identities and euphorically declare that one’s divided self is a necessary symptom of our post-modern condition, and a sign of the decay of outmoded ‘unities’. Kahlo is a multi-faceted person, but such multiplicity needs itself to be examined in its multiple contexts. Otherwise, as Hall warns, multiplicity itself becomes a form of neo-colonialism:

It is precisely this ‘double inscription’, breaking down the clearly demarcated inside/outside of the colonial system on which the histories of imperialism have thrived for so long, which the concept of the ‘post-colonial’ has done so much to bring to the fore ... It follows that the term ‘post-colonial’ is not merely descriptive of ‘this’ society rather than ‘that’, or of ‘then’ and ‘now’. It re-reads ‘colonisation’ as part of an essentially transnational and transcultural ‘global’ process – and it produces a de-centered, diasporic or ‘global’ rewriting of earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives. Its theoretical value therefore lies precisely in its refusal of this ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘then’ and ‘now’, ‘home’ and ‘abroad’ perspective.\(^{19}\)

Analysing the multiple ‘uses’ that Kahlo is put to adds a political dimension to her work, one which reflects back upon our own cultural practices. In a sense, her own struggle to find a voice is mirrored in these ‘uses’: we speak for her, and she, being assimilated in such fragmentary ways, is effectively silenced. In effect ‘post-colonial’ as a term ‘dissolves the politics of resistance because it posits no clear domination and calls for no clear opposition’.\(^{20}\) The thing that we must recognize is that our own ‘acceptance’ of Kahlo is at the same time a resistance to her specific cultural experience. Our post-colonial identification with her perpetuates distortions of her already ‘dissipated’ voice.

One of the main criticisms that Hall and Shohat voice against the concept of the post-colonial is the ‘celebratory’ nature of the term (rather like the other post-isms that are currently fashionable). What Shohat and Hall try to address is the importance of examining terminology critically, and thus taking on theoretical responsibility and accountability – being sensitive to the assumptions which our thinking makes, and remaining aware of the inherent biases in our classifications. Hall highlights the fact that the term post-colonial has made us think about how we actually set up this binary opposition between the ‘good and the bad’ periods. The ‘post’-colonial
assumes a global chronological frame in which clear boundaries exist between epochs. Shohat suggests that rather than clearly demarcated periods we are left with 'fragmented sets of narrated memories and experiences'. Hall feels, however, that Shohat leaves us with a somewhat ambiguous state of affairs. To supplement her reading of the 'post-colonial' he cites Peter Hulme's interpretation of the 'post' in post-colonial, which,

has two dimensions which exist in tension with each other: a temporal dimension in which there is a punctual relationship in time between, for example, a colony and a post-colonial state; and a critical dimension in which, for example, post-colonial theory comes into existence through a critique of a body of a theory.

Thus the 'post-colonial' signifies the historical and cultural experience of the colonized after the demise of colonialism. But it also signals the critique of a body of theory which underpinned colonialism. As my discussion of the 'uses' of Kahlo has suggested, however, there is a third level of tension; that in which the apparent practice of post-colonial self-criticism actually 'steals' the voice of the post-colonial subject in its very bid to re-assess it.

In a real sense, this neo-colonialism is not restricted to the 'stealing' of voices. Frantz Fanon has written that:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.

Fanon's point is especially relevant if we remember contemporary representations of Kahlo. In a sense, it was her own past that Breton 'disfigured' when he sought to present her use of native mythology as 'exotic', 'uncanny' and 'defamiliarising'. As Lowe remarks in her essay on Kahlo's Diary:

Her response to ancient Mexico was quite different from that of the European Surrealists, who sought 'unfamiliar' myths and artifacts to help revitalize their art. The invocation of Aztec civilisation reverberated as political gesture at a time when the growing interest in indigenous art coincided with a keener sense of nationalism.

Another quotation from Fanon emphasizes the specifically political Mexican identity which Kahlo, Diego Rivera and other Mexican artists were attempting to establish through their use of indigenous cultural images and myths:

The passion with which native intellectuals defend the existence of their national culture may be a source of amazement; but those who condemn this exaggerated passion are strangely apt to forget that their own psyche and their own selves are conveniently sheltered behind a French or German culture which has given full proof of its existence and which is uncontested...
I am ready to concede that on the plane of factual being the past existence of an Aztec civilisation does not change anything very much in the diet of the Mexican peasant of today ... But it has been remarked several times that this passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era finds its legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped.25

Now that the specific political use of indigenous images has been raised it is time to turn our attention to Kahlo’s own writings.

The Diary
While this essay has been critical of other people’s readings of Kahlo, it will now enter into the paradox of providing another reading. Kahlo insists that ‘I paint myself because I am alone. I am the subject I know best.’ (Diary, p.14). However, even the colours that she uses in her paintings evoke cultural meanings at the same time as they exist as ‘personal’ references:

Magenta—Aztec. old TLAPALI
   blood of prickly pear, the
   brightest and oldest
   color of mole, of leaves becoming
   earth ...
   leaves, sadness, science, the whole
   of Germany is this color ...
   color of bad advertisements
   and of good business ...

(VertexArray, p. 211)

For Kahlo, with her mixed origins, the personal and the political intersect in complex ways. What the diary serves to highlight is the politics of her art. She writes that ‘Revolution is the harmony of form and color’ (Diary, p. 243), but acknowledges that ‘I am nothing but a “small damned” part of a revolutionary movement’ (Diary, p. 251). But the political is also linked in essential ways to a pre-Columbian history which colonialism has effaced: ‘I know that the main origins are wrapped in ancient roots. I have read the History of my country and of nearly all nations. I know their class struggles and their economic conflicts.’ (Diary, p. 255). This is perhaps why what appeared to be an ‘ethnic’ surrealism to Breton existed for Kahlo as a ‘REVOLUTIONARY REALISM’ (Diary, p. 256).

However, this interaction between the personal, the historical and the political made Kahlo uneasy about her work. She senses that it cannot be easily and unambiguously ‘put to use’ by European political movements: ‘I feel uneasy about my painting. Above all I want to transform it into something useful for the communist’ (Diary, p. 252). In one of her paintings she combines traditional Aztec imagery with that of the ‘Communist symbols of a crossed hammer and sickle’ (Diary, p. 261). What is important is that these images do not represent Kahlo, or her experience of history, as a linear movement or a unified whole. In the painting ‘MOON SUN ME?’ which faces the hammer and sickle painting, Kahlo uses Aztec motifs, but
the woman who might represent Kahlo herself is gesticulating and asking the question – ‘ME?’ (Diary, p. 261). This image problematizes issues which assume a clear cultural identity and a clear political direction. Similarly, the Diary utilizes many languages. She attempts to write in German (Diary, p. 212), and this recalls the fact that Kahlo adopted a German spelling of her forename ‘Freida’, only to drop the ‘e’ as a survivalist political strategy during the rise of Nazism. The Diary also contains ‘words from Nahuatl, the Aztec language’ for ‘many such words have made their way into everyday Mexican vocabulary’ (Diary, p. 28), and even Sanskrit words and the Eastern yin-yang symbols occur ‘collaged’ into paintings (Diary, p. 240).

The point here is that Kahlo is a nexus of diverse currents and multiple identities, being herself a product of interacting histories and colonialisms. What the Diary shows, on one level, is her struggle and her need to find a ‘single’ voice. What we read, is evidence of ‘fragmented sets of narrated memories and experiences’, but her striving for unity and identity is paramount. Does this mean that Kahlo resists the modern ‘post-colonial’ condition, or does she in effect introduce another layer of complications into it: the need for coherence and identity in order to resist the colonizer?

Conclusion
Of Kahlo, Hayden Herrera writes:

In Spanish, she loved to use foul language – words like pendejo (which, politely translated, means idiotic person) and hijo de su chingada madre (son of a bitch) ... she enjoyed the effect on her audience, an effect enhanced by the fact that the gutter vocabulary issued from such a feminine-looking creature, one who held her head high on her long neck as nobly as a queen.26

Kahlo was known for her use of expletives, and Herrera sees this as the sign of a spirited woman. What Herrera fails to note, however, is the culturally specific relevance of one of these quoted phrases: hijo de su chingada madre. In The Labyrinth of Solitude Octavio Paz asks ‘What is the Chingada?’, and answers:

The Chingada is the Mother forcibly opened, violated or deceived. The hijo de la Chingada is the offspring of violation, abduction or deceit ... To the Spaniard, dishonor consists in being the son of a woman who voluntarily surrenders herself: a prostitute. To the Mexican it consists in being the fruit of a violation.27

The crucial point here must be traced back to the origins of Mexican colonial history, for the prototype of la Chingada is Malinche, the Indian guide and mistress of Cortés, the original conquistador and violator of the native people. As Paz suggests:

If the Chingada is a representation of the violated Mother, it is appropriate to associate her with the Conquest, which was also a violation, not only in the historical sense but also in the very flesh of Indian women.28
As the biographical details of Kahlo show, she was, from the time of the horrendous accident which ‘deflowered’ her, an open and wounded woman. In a real sense, she became at this point identified with the violated body of Mexican history, a history divided against itself, and one which was all too familiar with the range of ways in which the colonizer could ‘use’ it. Arguably, Kahlo’s works anticipate the ways in which she will always be a ‘victim’ of her own success, and as her life and works are interpreted, marketed, and released in various guises into ‘first-world’ culture, their abject themes and images, insist, in disturbing ways, upon the violation at the heart of colonial experience and colonized history.

The figure and work of Frida Kahlo suggests that critical analysis, like the marketing of a character, is always distorted by personal investments as they utilize and use the subject in question. Post-colonial theory has a lot to offer in terms of examining and re-exploring fundamental historical and contemporary issues. While it is important to discuss and examine the direction an artist takes, consciously or unconsciously, it is perhaps more important to acknowledge our contemporary reasons for such examinations. Failure to do this not only reduces the marginal voice that is being focused upon, but also serves to silence or mask the neo-colonial impulses which are always part of any approach we make to post-colonial issues. By foregrounding the theme of the victim, Kahlo’s work reminds us that theoretical approaches, if they wish to avoid compounding the violations which always accompany the attention of the ‘first-world’, must always acknowledge the cost incurred when we re-articulate the colonized voice.

NOTES


16. The Diary of Frida Kahlo, pp. 7-8.

17. The Diary of Frida Kahlo, p. 8.


24. The Diary of Frida Kahlo, p. 28.

25. Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, p. 168.

