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# “The Fury and the Mire of Human Veins”: Frida Kahlo and Rosario Castellanos<sup>1</sup>

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*Dying  
is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.*

—Sylvia Plath

Images can be viewed at:  
<<http://www.furman.edu/~rfriis/frida.html>>  
or in Hayden Herrera's *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*.

**Abstract:** This article examines the thematic and stylistic similarities between the poetry of Rosario Castellanos and the paintings of Frida Kahlo. In their poems and self-portraits, these two Mexican artists used root imagery to represent union and separation. They also shared a fascination with medical discourse and the representation of broken bodies. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of these themes and images, we discover a constant pairing of incompatible opposites and the emergence of two similar theories of how to live with pain.

**Key Words:** Castellanos (Rosario), Kahlo (Frida), ekphrasis, medical discourse, Mexico, painting, poetry, portrait, roots

In both intellectual and popular circles, Frida Kahlo is one of the most easily recognizable Mexican women of the twentieth century. Like La Malinche or the Virgin of Guadalupe, Frida's mass-produced image frequently enters the public sphere along with its confused mythology of pain and betrayal. Even before the film with Salma Hayek, there were Frida cosmetics, paper dolls of Frida for children and a handful of odd Frida websites, including the manifesto of “Kahloism”: “A religion that worships Frida Kahlo as the one true God” (Masters). One reason for this popularity is the fact that the majority of Kahlo's paintings are self-portraits that center on her unique facial features and enigmatic expressions. Her canvases are particularly provocative due to their use of sensuous colors, their reliance on rich symbols, their fascination with wounds and blood, and their meticulous attention to detail. Frida's fame is inextricably bound to the perceived relationship between her life and work, a connection she nurtured by creating images that contain seemingly autobiographical references to people, places, and events in her life as an international celebrity in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.<sup>2</sup> The artist's health problems and stormy marriage to the muralist Diego Rivera are popular aspects of her artistic persona and are frequent subjects in her work. Such interrelation of fact and fiction is one of many dualities at the heart of the myth of Frida Kahlo. As Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen indicate, Kahlo's work immediately triggers a reexamination of another duality, the feminist slogan “the personal is the political” (50).

Interpretation of Frida's paintings tends to focus on the personal. Kahlo lived a flamboyant lifestyle and was keenly aware of the impact she had on others. This has led critics to rely heavily on what Margaret Lindauer calls the “author = corpus narrative” in which personal memories and anecdotes are joined with textual clues in order to construct a coherent explanation of an artist and his or her work. One example of this approach comes from Hayden Herrera, Frida's principal

biographer and critic, who uses terms such as “the divorce period” (*The Paintings* 135) to refer to moments in her career. Herrera has done the most complete and authoritative work on Kahlo, though her approach often interprets the paintings as responses to specific life crises, interpretations the magnetic Kahlo would probably have welcomed.<sup>3</sup>

Such intermingling of the public and the private is common too in the poetry of Rosario Castellanos, a writer who has not attained the same level of fame as Frida Kahlo, but certainly is among the most frequently discussed and written-about Mexican intellectuals of the twentieth century. Like Kahlo’s work, many of Castellanos’s poems exact sharp reactions from readers due to their perceptive and satirical examinations of life as a woman in a patriarchal Mexican society. Thematically, both artists dwell at length on women’s roles and the portrayal of a damaged self and critics have both praised and belittled them for these confessional tendencies. The negative reactions by male audiences can be explained, in part, by the observation by María Salgado that in Mexico “no se considera el confesarse acción de hombres” (64). The graphic visual and verbal descriptions of pain common to Kahlo and Castellanos have led many of these same commentators into the trap of biographical criticism.<sup>4</sup> Over-privileging the importance of the private does add certain levels of meaning to a text, but it also draws attention away from appreciation of the artists’ powers of imagination and mastery of form.

Kahlo’s paintings and the poetry of Rosario Castellanos yield many overlapping messages, especially concerning the role of woman as artist, mother, and wife. In addition, both artists borrow freely from Mexican Catholic symbolism and other Western cultural traditions. The fact that Castellanos wrote poems with Greek mythological personae and cultivated classic poetic forms highlights one of the many differences in their work as well. Frida embraced the Mexican folk tradition of *ex voto* or *retablo* painting, while Castellanos drew inspiration from masterpieces of “high culture.” Where Kahlo’s work employs symbols from institutionalized politics, Castellanos’s texts are more discreet and localized politically and emanate from a self-described literary outsider operating from within the academy. Both women, however, coincide in their interest in the plight of Mexico’s indigenous populations, though Castellanos, interestingly, chooses to address this issue in genres other than poetry. In terms of their careers, Castellanos and Kahlo both fought for “rooms of their own” in which they could be creative without the direct patronage of a spouse. Although Frida herself was wildly popular in artistic circles, Castellanos enjoyed more professional success during her life than Kahlo, whose work has largely been re-discovered after her death in 1954.

There are two terms that immediately come into play when comparing poetry with painting. The first is the more general “pictorialism” which involves the presentation and ordering of visual images in a poem and the poetic depiction of stasis, or lack of movement. The second and more common approach to poetry and painting concerns “ekphrasis,” what Emilie Bergmann has called “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art” (1). Often, these interpretations concern descriptions of specific art objects that function either as models for or major intertextual components of a poem.<sup>5</sup> This involves a difficult mental transposition of time and space, one in which the poem “makes explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication” (Heffernan 5). Margaret Persin’s *Getting the Picture: The Ekphrastic Principle in Twentieth Century Spanish Poetry* describes the ekphrastic text as one that “makes reference to a visual work of art, whether real or imagined, canonized or uncanonized, and thus allows that art object, in truth the object of (artistic) desire, to ‘speak for itself’ within the problematically ruptured framework of the poetic text” (18).<sup>6</sup> Persin’s argument boils down to the affirmation that “ekphrasis comes to represent art’s questioning stance faced with Otherness” (30); it is a “special case of intertextuality” (23) that “embodies the textual wound” (30). These definitions bring to light the shared thematics of Castellanos and Kahlo, as do the following observations by James A.W. Heffernan, who writes that ekphrasis is a “literary mode that turns on the antagonism—the commonly gendered antagonism—between verbal and visual representation” (7). Heffernan also reminds us that the etymology of ekphrasis is:

“speaking out” or “telling in full.” To recall this root meaning is to recognize that besides representational friction and the turning of forms into narrative, ekphrasis entails prosopopeia, or the rhetorical technique of envoicing a silent object [...].

In talking back to and looking back at the male viewer, the images envoiced by ekphrasis challenge at once the controlling authority of the male gaze and the power of the male word. (6–7)

Rosario Castellanos has written only a small number of truly ekphrastic poems but when her work is examined in the context of Kahlo’s paintings, her use of painterly techniques and discourse lends a voice, a gendered supplement, to Frida’s silent portraiture. In lieu of searching Castellanos’s poems for intentional intertextual nods or outright references to the Mexican painter, I will focus instead on three main and interrelated points: the shared imagery of the arabesque or wandering line, the presence of medical discourse, and the graphic presentation of broken bodies.<sup>7</sup> These comparisons will provide, as Hugo Méndez Ramírez has stated in the case of Pablo Neruda and the Mexican muralists, “another perspective or interpretation of the same reality” in which both artistic genres can contextualize and evaluate the other (89).

One key image shared by Castellanos and Kahlo is an organic view of life in which subjects are tied to the earth and to each other by root systems. Herrera calls these recurrent webs in Frida’s work her “life-lines” (*The Paintings*, 81). Roots are the result of growth and interconnectedness, and just as they hold plants to the life-giving soil and guard against flood waters or strong winds, roots are what bind people to places, and events to memories. This is part of their double nature, too, since a network of roots makes one immobile, or, in a sense, trapped. Herrera sees Kahlo’s use of roots as a symbol of her unfulfilled desire to carry a pregnancy to term (*The Paintings* 91) but they also serve the more practical and visual purpose of connecting figures in her paintings.<sup>8</sup>

In 1943’s “Roots” (*The Paintings* 128), for example, a tangle of green vines flows from a Magritte-like window in the chest of a reclining Frida. The shoots lead to leaves which are sprouting human veins of their own. Despite the sense of interconnectedness the roots provide, the background colors in combination with the subject’s facial expression and barren breast create an uneasy sense of stunted growth. Hair, which in “Roots” parallels the image of the vine and hides one of the figure’s hands, is a common web-like image in Frida’s work. In many self-portraits of the 1940s, Kahlo’s hair falls about her neck like a noose, subtly suggesting the suffocating influence of the man in her life and the reality of marriage in Mexican society.<sup>9</sup> The image of an implied noose is duplicated with a ribbon in “Self-Portrait with Monkey” (1940) (*The Paintings* 149) and with a necklace of thorns in “Self-Portrait” (1940) (*The Paintings* 143). In the latter, the thorns draw blood from the neck of the subject who shares the canvas with a black monkey to her right and an arched-backed black cat to her left. The viewer is accustomed to seeing Kahlo wear large Pre-Colombian jewelry and, at first glance, the bird on her breast appears to be part of a necklace, which, in reality, it is, only the necklace is formed by a real bird and a chain of thorns that drapes the subject’s shoulders. Kahlo’s head emerging from the spines is a metaphor of a difficult birth, a motif common to her canvases.<sup>10</sup>

Besides producing wounds, the sharp thorns form a violent contrast to the lush tropical leaves of the background and the stunning, rosy-cheeked, if enigmatic, subject. Such juxtapositions of life and death, moisture and dryness, fertility and barrenness are key to the impact of Frida’s work. The bird, as Herrera indicates, is a dead hummingbird that reflects a lack of fulfillment in life and social stagnancy (*The Paintings* 142). Herrera also notes how the dead hummingbird negates an inferred Aztec myth of reincarnation (*The Paintings* 142). This message is mirrored as well in the metallic butterflies that adorn Frida’s hair and the sexually suggestive dragonfly/flower creations (made from noticeably cut stems) that are both visually appealing and monstrous at the same time.

As in the fractured spine of “The Broken Column” (*The Paintings* 181) or the gory slashes of “Tree of Hope” (*The Paintings* 210), one of Kahlo’s most famous paintings, “Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair” (1940) (*The Paintings* 150) uses cut roots to disrupting and disturbing ends. The organic unity invoked by root systems in many of her paintings is slashed, as is the normal perspective and background. The painting portrays Frida dressed in a man’s suit, seated open-legged

in a ladder-back chair, surrounded by a chaotic mess of hair clippings. As Herrera writes, "In her left hand she holds a lock of her shorn hair like an emblem of her sacrifice. In her right, she holds the scissors with which she martyred her femininity" (*The Paintings* 151). Herrera sees the canvas, complete with its "mood of suppressed fury," acidic colors, and menacingly-placed scissors as a threat to the cheating Rivera, whose suit the subject appears to be wearing (*The Paintings* 151–52). This message is also echoed in the two song verses that adorn the painting's upper margin ("Mira que si te quise, fué por el pelo, / Ahora que estás pelona, ya no te quiero"). The power of "Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair" comes from the subversion of Kahlo's already established use of roots as a symbol of her longing on personal, political, and sexual levels for the oneness of all life.

In a visual and a very real sense, hair is like the limbs of a tree or the veins of leaf, but in Kahlo's work, hair is also a touchstone for the feminine. Frida's hair, in her paintings and in photographs, was always meticulously parted and styled, and hair formed two of her most unique attributes: the close-knit eyebrows and light mustache that were often exaggerated in her self-portraits. Thus the violently cropped hair and open scissors held near her genitals become overt symbols of the influence of male otherness. The fact that the damage here is self-inflicted (by a woman wearing a man's suit) signals the larger issue of women's agonistic interaction with patriarchal Mexican society and the need for a new social order, what Castellanos calls "[o]tro modo de ser humano y libre" (316; v. 20).

The uneasiness that underlies "Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair" is central to Castellanos's "De mutilaciones," an indictment of a female reader, written in the second person, of folding to societal pressure.

Un día dices: La uña. ¿Qué es la uña?  
Una excrecencia córnea  
que es preciso cortar. Y te la cortas.

Y te cortas el pelo para estar a la moda  
y no hay en ello merma ni dolor. (311, v. 1–5)

The complex truth that Kahlo's painting and this poem uncover is that fashion crimes are often intentionally perpetrated by women themselves. There is little doubt that societal pressure creates the desire to conform and that the true target of "Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair" and "De mutilaciones," the real object of their pointed commentary, is complacency. The consequences of conformity shape the conclusion of Castellanos's text which is as much a social commentary as it is a didactic warning. The poem ends by describing how the woman who martyrs herself and commits herself to silence ("parálisis" [311, v.15]) is worn down and reduced to being so insignificant that there is hardly a tombstone small enough to hold the few letters that remain of her name when she dies. For Castellanos, language and our ability to wield it is life itself.

The impulse that led the reader to cut her nails is just a small symptom of a larger pattern of sacrifice put into motion by male-dominated society:

Otro día viene Shylock y te exige  
una libra de carne, de tu carne  
para pagar la deuda que le debes.

Y, después. Oh, después:  
palabras que te extraen de la boca,  
trepanación del cráneo  
para extirpar ese tumor que crece  
cuando piensas. (311, v. 6–13)

The parallel between Frida Kahlo's work and this poem is strengthened by the use of medical discourse and its traditionally masculine gaze. Castellanos frequently exploits this paradigm in which love is diagnosed as an illness. In "Segunda elegía del amado fantasma," for example, the

speaker describes herself as “convaleciente de tu amor y débil / como el que ha aposentado largamente en sí mismo / agonías y fiebres” (38, vv.1–3).

The forced dependency of women on men in Castellanos’s literary world wounds her speakers and causes either distress or a blissful ignorance, through repression, that is portrayed with biting sarcasm. The later is prominent in poems such as the much anthologized “Kinsey Report #6” in which a naive young woman awaits a Prince Charming to come along and make her whole. An interesting element of the Kinsey poems is that while they are set up within the traditional male/doctor-female/patient paradigm, Castellanos only presents us with the female half of the dialogue. In fact, medicine surfaces in most of the poems as a point of gendered contact—be it through abortion, artificial insemination, or simply as the subject of the interviews themselves. Castellanos’s allegories of penetration call to mind the Mexican stereotype of the *chingada* that is displayed in even more graphic fashion in Kahlo’s ghoulish “A Few Small Nips” (*The Paintings* 110), or the poignant “The Little Deer” (*The Paintings* 189).

As Claudia Schaefer has noted, scenes of medical procedures and their consequences are as important a part of Frida Kahlo’s work as they were her life. Kahlo often painted her doctors and images of herself bleeding on hospital beds or gurneys. Her personae, especially her Fridas, consciously display their open wounds like anesthetized patients beneath a surgeon’s invasive scalpel. When it comes to medicine, the parallels between life and art are too strong to overlook and we should remember that Kahlo underwent numerous surgical procedures, many from quacks, attempting to ameliorate the effects of the debilitating bus accident of her youth. In one version of the crash, which is beautifully reenacted in the film, the young Frida is pierced by a twisted metal pole. The ups and downs of Kahlo’s physical condition directly informed her work, as Hayden Herrera has shown, and she is said to have first taken up painting during one of her long periods of bed-rest. These phases of physical immobility led to Frida’s oft-cited observation that she had to paint her own reality. As Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen write, “This private, personalized world that gave rise to [Kahlo’s] art seems encapsulated by the fact that she often painted from her bed, the most private part of the private world of the home” (52). The home and what happens behind closed doors is exploited by Castellanos as well in poems such as the well known “Economía doméstica” and “Autorretrato.”

Returning to vegetable, rather than human roots, the image of a tree with upwards-reaching branches figures prominently in two of Kahlo’s most personal paintings. In the early “My Grandparents, My Parents and I” (1936) (*The Paintings* 17), an image of Frida as a child holds a ribbon that extends upwards to form the limbs of a family tree that contains portraits of her ancestors. The naked girl’s left foot appears to grow from the trunk of an orange tree, thereby establishing the organic unity of humankind with the earth, the mountains, and the ocean, as well as with the artist’s country of Mexico. “Tree of Hope” (*The Paintings* 210), painted ten years later in 1946, is a study in contrast. A dead or wounded Frida lies facing away on a gurney beside a strong, forward-looking Frida which has shed the restraining corset she wore through much of her life. The figure in *tehuana* costume bears the corset in one hand and a flag that reads “Árbol de la esperanza mantente firme” in the other. Here, life and death are joined though the triumphant Frida that sits in a position of privilege in front of her fallen other.

Whether literal or figurative, as in the case of a family tree, trees and roots imply the bonds between mothers and daughters for these artists and both women create surprising criticisms and indictments of each. One only need think of “Se habla de Gabriel” which describes Castellanos’s son as a burden or “My Nurse and I” (1937) (*The Paintings* 11) in which a baby with a large Frida head is nursed at the veiny breast of an indigenous figure.

Kahlo used monkeys, dogs, cats, and birds to depict movement and juxtaposed these images with her own as one bound to the earth, to her obligations, and to Diego.<sup>11</sup> Castellanos’s work often portrays the masculine through animals or the wind that contrast with the constancy of rooted plants. “Origen” pulls together trees, roots and motherhood in its poetic recreation of a birth scene:

Sobre el cadáver de una mujer estoy creciendo,  
 en sus huesos se enroscan mis raíces  
 y de su corazón desfigurado  
 emerge un tallo vertical y duro.

Del feréetro de un niño no nacido:  
 de su vientre troncado antes de la cosecha  
 me levanto tenaz, definitiva,  
 brutal como una lápida y en ocasiones triste  
 con la tristeza pétrea del ángel funerario  
 que oculta entre sus manos una cara sin lágrimas. (36–37, v. 1–10)

In the first stanza, the speaker creates an atmosphere of guilt, of living at the expense of another woman's life, much as Kahlo does with her birth scenes. The life that originates here is in the image of a stalk that emerges from the bones of a mother's corpse.<sup>12</sup> The poetic voice does not, however, describe herself in human terms, but rather with images from the vegetable and mineral realms as a personified stem or rock. "Origen" concludes with an ekphrastic description of the speaker as a stone sculpture of an angel. This sculpture, although made of natural matter, has been molded by the hands of others and is unable to express her sadness. The typical association of birth and human growth is problematized by an abrupt metamorphosis. As in many of Frida's paintings, this speaker's tears are subtle, unnatural, and, as a statue, she is no more able to act than is a self-portrait bound by a necklace of thorns.

The juxtaposition, by no means novel, of male movement and female stasis is what drives Castellanos's "Elegías del amado fantasma," in which the speaker describes herself as a stout tree that shades the shore of a river bed that is her lover.

Con un afán inútil mis ramas se despliegan,  
 se tienden como brazos en el aire  
 y quieren prolongarse en bandadas de pájaros  
 para seguirte adonde va tu cauce.

Eres lo que se mueve, el ansia que camina,  
 la luz desenvolviéndose, la voz que se desata.

Yo soy sólo la asfixia quieta en las raíces  
 hundidas en la tierra tenebrosa y compacta. (37, v. 8–15)

Woman here is associated once again with interior, almost secretive growth, with the longing to soar, with stifling silence, and with the inability to move or act as a fully realized subject. In the second movement, the speaker demonstrates her fragmentation by lamenting: "Yo quedaré dormida como el árbol... Y estaré ciega, ciega para siempre / frente al escombros de un espejo roto" (38, v.8, v.12–13). These images also lend force to "Lamentación de Dido," in which the Virgilian character is described as "la abandonada, la que puso su corazón bajo el *hachazo* de un adiós tremendo" (93, v.16; emphasis added).<sup>12</sup> In the aftermath of her affair with the travelling Aeneas, Dido laments, "Lo amé con mi ceguera de raíz, con mi soterramiento de raíz, con mi lenta fidelidad de raíz" (95, v.57) and in the end, "—La mujer es la que permanece; rama de sauce que llora en las orillas de los ríos" (95, v.55).

The positive aspect of the trees in Kahlo's paintings comes from the strength and hope they provide. For Castellanos, trees bear leaves that are the result of her creativity. This message is derived from the Spanish *hoja* which means both leaf and sheet of paper and, by extension, poetry. In "Al pie de la letra," the poet's work is seen as springing from the limbs of a tree:

Lo que soñó la tierra  
 es visible en el árbol.  
 La armazón bien trabada del tronco, la hermosura  
 sostenida en la rama  
 y el rumor del espíritu en libertad: la hoja.

He aquí la obra, el libro.

Duerma mi día último a su sombra. (101, v. 14–20)

Roots and trees convey messages of union for these artists, but always in the context of separation and loss. Distance manifests itself on a formal level in Castellanos's verbal collages which create macabre scenes of dismembered bodies like those in "The Two Fridas" (*The Paintings* 137). This famous canvas features a pair of Fridas, holding hands, that are attached by an artery leading to two visible and free-floating hearts. It is a grim meditation on wholeness and detachment, hope and frustration. Castellanos achieves a similarly-fragmented effect in poems like "Misterios gozosos 2":

Aquí tienes mi mano, la que se levantó  
de la tierra, colmada como espiga en agosto.  
Aquí están mis sentidos  
de red afortunada,  
mi corazón, lugar de las hogueras,  
y mi cuerpo que siempre me acompaña. (81, v. 1–6)

The sensation is similar in Kahlo's portraits: we are being given a selectively guided tour of the speaker's body parts from the outside. The use of the second person is a common device for Castellanos and creates the same sense of confrontation as Kahlo's probing eyes. It is common in her late poems ("Asentamiento de un hecho," for example) and in her suicide poems as well. "Advertencia al que llega" warns:

No me toques el brazo izquierdo. Duele  
de tanta cicatriz.  
Dicen que fue un intento de suicidio  
pero yo no quería más que dormir  
profunda, largamente como duerme  
la mujer que es feliz. (321–22)

"Destino" sums up the doubling and dependency of "The Two Fridas" and overlaps with the imagery of "The Little Deer." In this poem we are overcome by strong fresh images, a painful, confessional poetic voice, and the use of the *nosotros* which implicates the reader in a way that tries to tell us something we might have only suspected about ourselves:

Matamos lo que amamos. Lo demás  
no ha estado vivo nunca.  
Ninguno está tan cerca. A ningún otro hiere  
un olvido, una ausencia, a veces menos.  
Matamos lo que amamos. ¡Qué cese ya esta asfixia  
de respirar con un pulmón ajeno!  
El aire no es bastante  
para los dos. Y no basta la tierra  
para los cuerpos juntos  
y la ración de la esperanza es poca  
y el dolor no se puede compartir.

El hombre es animal de soledades,  
ciervo con una flecha en el ijar  
que huye y se desangra.

Ah, pero el odio, su fijeza insomne  
de pupilas de vidrio; su actitud  
que es a la vez reposo y amenaza.

El ciervo va a beber y en el agua aparece  
el reflejo de un tigre.

El ciervo bebe el agua y la imagen. Se vuelve



—antes que lo devoren—(cómplice, fascinado)  
igual a su amigo.

Damos la vida sólo a lo que odiamos. (171–72)

Frida Kahlo and Rosario Castellanos understood the transformative power of art and how to combine opposites through symbols of union and separation. To what extent their work was therapeutic we will never know, though I imagine it was to a much lesser degree than many now believe. The uneasy sensation of direct address and the tensions between public and private and between animus and anima lend their work the unique ability to make us feel like it is about us, while insisting, quite forcefully, that it is not.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“The fury and the mire of human veins” is a quotation from William Butler Yeats’s “Byzantium.”

<sup>2</sup>Although Frida Kahlo can be considered an international celebrity now, especially after the film *Frida*, her work attracted a much broader following after her death. This fact creates an interesting dilemma in regards to the role of the personal in art. As her biographer and critics point out, many of Frida’s canvases were gifts to friends to the expressed ends that they not forget her. By all accounts, she was a notorious exaggerator. Despite this fact, most of her paintings are intentionally autobiographical. This fact cannot and should not be overlooked, but after-the-fact linking of the production of art to specific crises in one’s personal life is a dicey endeavor and an approach this essay will avoid.

<sup>3</sup>The most complete biographical information on Kahlo is Herrera’s *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*. *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings* is the most complete book available for an overview of Kahlo’s life and work. Margaret Lindauer’s excellent *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo* takes a more distanced approach than Herrera’s books. *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* contains a facsimile of Kahlo’s illustrated diary with an introduction by Carlos Fuentes and an essay and commentary by Sarah M. Lowe. See the first chapter of Claudia Schaefer’s *Textured Lives* for an analysis of Kahlo’s autobiographical discourse. In addition, Anjouli Janzon’s article “Writing the Nation: Frida Kahlo and Rosario Castellanos” compares *Balún Canán* and Kahlo’s self portraits in the context of nation-building.

<sup>4</sup>Both Castellanos’s and Kahlo’s deaths are shrouded in rumors of suicide, perhaps the most powerful biographical prejudice, along with gender and sexual orientation, to affect readers.

<sup>5</sup>See James A.W. Heffernan’s Introduction to *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashberry* for a clear survey of the modern incarnations of ekphrasis and how it contrasts with pictorialism and iconicity.

<sup>6</sup>In addition to Bergmann and Persin, for work on the visual and the verbal in Hispanic poetry, see Hugo Méndez Ramírez’s *Neruda’s Ekphrastic Experience: Mural Art and Canto general* (1999) and Cecelia J. Cavanaugh’s *Lorca’s Drawings and Poems: Forming the Eye of the Reader* (1995) both published by Bucknell UP. For more on painting and Rosario Castellanos, see the articles by Persin and Friis.

<sup>7</sup>Although it is not a direct reference, the poem “Nocturno” creates an almost surrealistic collage in the mind of the reader that is reminiscent of Frida:

Y yo en la fiesta. Párpados esquivos  
trenza apretada, labios sin sonrisa.  
De espaldas a la música, con esa cicatriz  
que el ceño del deber me ha marcado en la frente;  
pronta a extinguir las lámparas, ansiosa  
de despedir al huésped  
por que en la soledad yo te escupía a la cara  
el nombre de la culpa. (194, v. 51–58)

<sup>8</sup>Cut roots are also a key symbol in the movie *Frida*. In the scene in which Frida’s mother is dying, the camera focuses on her father’s hands violently dead-heading flowers. In addition, three canvases that rely heavily on cut root imagery (“Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair,” “The Broken Column” and “The Two Fridas”) are dramatically brought to life. In addition, at the end of the film, the branches of “The Dream” (1940) become flames that signal the artist’s death.

<sup>9</sup>See “Diego and I” (1949) (*The Paintings* 172).

<sup>10</sup>This painting was the first in a series Kahlo began of the year-by-year history of her life. In the disturbing “My Birth,” Frida’s head emerges from the womb of a woman who lies on her back with her legs spread out toward the viewer. The mother’s face is covered with a white sheet and there is a portrait of the weeping Virgin of Sorrows above the headboard (*The Paintings* 9). The scene appears to be of a still-birth.

In the famous “Self-Portrait” (1948) (*The Paintings* 168), Frida’s head emerges through the waist of a petticoat that was converted into a *tehuana* headdress (Herrera, *The Paintings* 167–68). The color and shape of the pink band about the artist’s crying face once again recalls a difficult birth from an unnatural womb.

<sup>11</sup>The portrait of Diego himself figures in many canvases and is often expressly named: “Diego and I” (1949), “The

Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Diego, me and Señor Xolotl" (1949), etc.

<sup>12</sup>Another poem in this vein is "Presencia," which offers a unique portrait of life as a knotted jumble of emotions that one day will be cut free by death:

Este nudo que fui (inextricable  
de cóleras, traiciones, esperanzas,  
vislumbres repentinos, abandonados,  
hambres, gritos de miedo y desamparo  
y alegría fulgiendo en las tinieblas  
y palabras y amor y amor y amores)  
lo cortarán los años. (184)

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