

## TALKING BACK TO FRIDA: HOUSES OF EMOTIONAL *MESTIZAJE*<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

“Talking Back to Frida: Houses of Emotional *Mestizaje*” is, in part, a historical meditation on the silencing of three women, Frida Kahlo, Maria Enríquez, a Mexican woman who was sexually assaulted in 1924, and me. Written in an innovative historical fashion that joins techniques drawn from fiction, journalism, and history, the article attempts to understand specific assaults on women’s voices by drawing readers into the historical worlds of the protagonists. “Talking Back” also seeks to respond to Hans Kellner’s incisive theoretical challenge: how do historians’ personal histories affect their historical choices?

The article’s organization depends on my understanding of language, color, and physicality, as the emotional architecture of the Deep Southern and Mexican places tend to both enclose and partially free the protagonists. The essay begins by leading the reader into my own past in the Deep South, a past where German Jewish and Russian Jewish rel-

1. This experiment in mixed forms—history, oral history, fiction, fictional autobiography—emerged from my participation in the California Institute of Technology “Narrating Histories” workshop, Pasadena, April, 1994; from my experiments in innovative writing, including *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and from the classes I have been teaching in innovative historical writing at the University of Southern California. Those classes, in turn, represent a continuation of certain kinds of personal and intellectual explorations I began during my 1973 studies in Spain and continued in South America, Mexico, New Haven, Israel, and the U.S. Deep South. On the one hand, these places served as partial destinations I imagined when, upon graduating from college, I devised a “ten-year plan.” Because even then, linear organization of time struck me as inadequate, I hoped to explore kinds of work that somehow might speak to me more fully. This included, in random order, journalism, the writing of fiction and poetry, third-world developmental work, history. On the other hand, these voyages amounted to a search for a linguistic form that reproduces contemporary experience.

In the midst of the continuing crisis of civility and judgment that has seeped into the walls of the historical discipline, it is a comfort to know writers and scholars who maintain kindness and regard for fellow writers and intellectuals. I am particularly grateful to Mary Louise Pratt and the Spanish and Portuguese Department of Stanford University for inviting me to present this work at the Making and Remaking of Mexico Conference (Palo Alto, November, 1997). I am also grateful for the opportunity to present it at the Yale University conference that honored my dissertation advisor, Emilia da Vosta. And I am grateful to my University of Southern California colleagues Carolyn Dewald, Gordon Berger, and Elinor Accampo, for inviting me to use this essay in collaboration with Professor Dewald to introduce the colloquium “Models of History: Ancient and Contemporary,” as part of the USC Humanities Initiative on Memories, Narratives, and Identities, funded by the Ahmanson Foundation, September 2000.

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atives engaged in a cultural battle over form, personal style, and will. Confronting a German Jewish world where only things—never feelings—seemed to matter, I found solace in the friendship of a black servant. That friendship, in turn, helped prompt a particularly empathic historical voice.

The southern section is followed by a journey into Frida Kahlo's Mexican world. In that world, Kahlo's severe physical pain and solitude construct inner and outer universes. The people who populate these worlds are friends, lovers, husband, and the Mexican poor. Kahlo's artistic renditions of these people reflect, the article suggests, both the depth of her love for them and a tendency to use them in response to her despair.

Finally, "Talking Back" reconstructs the world of María Enríquez, a Michoacán peasant woman assaulted in public by her former boyfriend. Abandoned by friend, sister, and Catholic women on the way to church, Enríquez develops a voice laced with generosity, cultural insight, and a rare self-possession.

#### I. TALKING BACK TO "TALKING BACK TO FRIDA:" A META-REFLECTION

How can I make my abiding love for history explicit? How can I express something of my disappointment at the conventional ways it has been rendered during the twentieth century? How, for that matter, can I clarify the rationales behind the linguistic experiments I undertake in this article, explain how I do what I do before I *show* it by doing it?

In fact, in "Talking Back to Frida," I approach a specific historical issue, the silencing of American women in the U.S. and in Mexico during much of the twentieth century. Perhaps as a sort of tribute to several women who had much more to say than they were ever allowed to, I write about that issue in an unconventional way. But how? Why? What does the article seek to accomplish that more traditional forms of historical narration do not? In terms of my own rather extensive and rigorous historical training, how does it fail?

If nothing else, "Talking Back to Frida," attempts to give voice. It gives voice to people who historically were silenced. It contends that notwithstanding differences in national origin, ethnicity, and class, many women in the U.S. and in Mexico have historically been silenced. The piece gives voice to what a few of these women said. It contextualizes their lives, focuses on their concerns and unfulfilled hopes. And, by allowing them to say both what they said, and in some cases, what they failed to say, it does a bit more.

In part, "Talking Back to Frida," brings a commonplace longing to life. It allows its characters to speak by creating a historical environment enabling people who never met to speak with one another. While this may appear to be a dubious procedure, in fact it can also be understood as a version of what historians routinely do. Historians regularly study characters they've never met, people who lived in places and times foreign to the historian's own experience. Then, notwithstanding those constraints, historians regularly remove their characters from the documents, and create, using nothing more durable than words and paper, a new location for what their characters did and said. This procedure places long dead people into conversations with people they never met, with us.

The essay may seem dubious in other ways, for it not only gives voice to the women I study by enabling them to speak to strangers. It also re-creates a fraction of my own history. Why? In one regard, I believe that all histories, no matter how conventionally told, reflect their writers. They strike me as unique and as personal as our fingerprints. Why historians choose specific topics, what elements of their documentation they focus on, what they cast aside, how they represent their material, all such choices are personal. Other scholars—the Latin American *dependistas*, Hans Kellner, Hayden White—have long recognized this. And yet they correctly note that most historians attempt to obscure the personal rationales behind their choices. I hoped to avoid this by demonstrating something of the ways my experiences of being silenced, and my experiences of kindness and compassion at the hands of people who had no obligation to me, led to the particular sort of history I have written.

It also must be said that just as in other places I attempt to decode theoretical language so that the “ordinary” reader can understand my work, just as my historical writing is full of the sort of concrete examples that give theoreticians something to discuss, so too in this work, to the extent that I reveal personal elements of my life, that revelation is never meant to be gratuitous, or to encourage intellectual voyeurism. Rather, in this work, the personal is always employed in the service of history. More specifically, it seemed fair to my readers to unravel why my historical work tends toward the historically empathic rather than the more purely critical.

It strikes me that one problem with conventional history writing is that in a variety of ways, and for many reasons, it creates a fence between whatever happened historically and the reader. In other words, it shields readers from experience. One might think that this is a problem with language itself, until one recalls that other forms of writing (such as Agee’s, Faulkner’s, Halberstam’s *The Children*) are deeply experiential. Of course, reading about an experience is not the same as experiencing something. Still, historians should not be prevented from allowing their readers an entrance.

To encourage readers to re-experience the empathy I feel toward my characters, and the experiences of these characters themselves, the article includes many elements of the worlds of my characters. It is full of descriptions of color, sound, and food; it is full of descriptions of sadness, jealousy, emotionality, longing. It is in fact replete with elements that the small band of Southern Jews I write about experienced. In addition, in an effort to understand Frida Kahlo’s artistic world, the essay includes certain artistic experiments. The intention is to allow its readers and listeners to experience what its writer, and perhaps its subjects, experienced.

From the perspective of more conventional history, this article may be problematic. Such history insists on the primacy of the text. It also insists that historians construct histories allowing subsequent researchers to follow their archival tracks. Nonetheless, it is inarguable that in Mexico social science simply cannot be fully replicated. That is because archival documentary numbers have been

regularly and systematically changed. At times, documents are systematically destroyed. Others are stolen and hoarded. Some archives allow only certain researchers to use the documents.

Nonetheless, because I recognize that written and oral historical documents contain realities that the ruminations of historians do not, I regularly engage in extensive historical research. Perhaps because of the intensity of my focus, I have not only worked numerous archives in rural and urban Mexico, and in the Deep South, I have also conducted many oral interviews with participants in the events I retrace. I have obtained access to virgin documents, have been partially responsible for opening archives. I have endured my share of physical danger and assault. Because I believe historical documents, despite their partial nature, tell us something, I will do it again.

And yet, because documents are so partial, so scarce, because most people didn't (or in the case of most Mexican women, couldn't) write, much is missing. Whole worlds, vast compilations of experience, remain unwritten. In many regards, this article responds to a sadness over what is missing, over those who teach us not just to make do with what little there seems to be, but to believe that that little is all there is.

To the extent that the article reflects that sensibility, it also attempts to reflect the enormous care, the unsolicited and unexpected kindness, that my grandfather's black servants showed me. It is fair to say that to the extent that I am personally and historically empathetic, it is because of the kindness of the people my grandfather employed and the relatives he scorned. Those people and their kindnesses taught me to look again, think again, perhaps even to feel again.

Feel again. This article combines fairly conventional—if perhaps over-ripe—descriptions of flowers, plants, colors, and particularly foods in an effort to make readers' experiences of the piece truly experiential. And in fact readers have told me that they feel drawn to the piece, drawn into the piece. Some of them, a particular sort of historian, also claim that "we historians aren't supposed to do this." I fully agree that we have been trained to leave certain elements of history—of ourselves—out. And yet I also deeply feel that the histories that concern me go down very deep, are at times composed of longing and tenderness, and that experiences, too, are historical.

## II. TALKING BACK TO FRIDA: HOUSES OF EMOTIONAL *MESTIZAJE*

No one lives alone; he is speaking with those who are no more, their lives are incarnated in him; he is retracing their footsteps, climbing the stairs to the edifice of history. Their hopes and defeats, the signs left behind, be it a single letter carved in stone—here is the way to peace, to mitigating the judgments he imposed on himself. Happiness is given to those who have the gift. Never and nowhere will they feel alone, as they are comforted by the memory of all who have struggled, like themselves, for something unattainable. Whether or not Thomas was rewarded, such moments as those spent in the company of his grandfather abided with him, anticipating an age when voices muted by time would become precious.

Czeslaw Milosz, *The Issa Valley*

Shortly after Frida Kahlo's death in 1954, I began to experience two Saturday houses. My grandparents' Macon, Georgia homes each spoke to me throughout my childhood. In their own ways, each was showy, possessive, somehow greedy, somehow splendid.<sup>2</sup>

There is the night house, a home that relies on plump, sweet music to lure me back. I return in memory to find my Russian-American Jewish grandmother sitting at her Steinway baby grand, playing a Beethoven sonata. When she moves into can-can music, I grab my sister. Dragging her to the center of the room, I weave lopsided circles of dance, moving faster and faster until finally we fall into a drunken heap. Grandma's sister catches us and plies us with all kinds of foods forbidden at home—candied fruit, devil's food cakes, Hershey's kisses. My sister wanders off with her snack. My great-aunt opens cupboards searching for two clean decks of cards and a pink plastic tray. When she gets back, she and I sit cross-legged in the deep carpet as she patiently, nearly ploddingly, teaches me canasta, careful to let me win.

Why could I never win in the day house? It belonged to my maternal grandfather, Joseph W. Popper, Sr., whom we called Papa. Anyone from either side of the American Jewish divide—the recent Russian immigrants, like my piano-playing grandmother, or the assimilated German Jews, hungry for others' patina and heritage—might have felt the house's pressure. Papa's house was full of hidden surprises, the long chutes where towels descended to the maid's secret room, the croquet set prepared for emerald lawn games, the steely linens opening to plain, proud monograms.

It is that house that calls me back. That surprises me, for up to now I have found the house nearly washed out, as though the Jews living there hoped for nothing more overt than a quiet correct Episcopalian life, a life of proper manners, an end to broken public tears, to open celebrations punctuated by candles and incense, feasts of flesh transforming participants into the flesh of strangers.

Something is different now. The house seems alive. I find that puzzling, for this house, any house, was always animate. It was, yet this house's voices were

2. There has been a veritable taboo against historians revealing to their readers, within the text, the ways their lives have led them to their subjects. True, there was an initial, experimental effort to pursue this, during the era when the *dependistas* such as Samir Amin, Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Arghiri Immanuel led Latin Americanists to understand that specific sociological locations influenced scholars' worldviews. Yet because these scholars refused to contemplate how their personal experiences led them to their perspectives, the structure of their texts remained traditional. A significant analysis of this sort of problem can be found in Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). I consider this taboo still so strong that in this article, I use footnotes, in part to reassure scholarly readers that what I write is based on historical and ethnographic research, as well as on imagination.

On the other hand, Robert Rosenstone and Alice Wexler have recently developed experimental work binding history and biography in intriguing ways. See Robert Rosenstone, *Mirror in the Shrine: American Encounters with Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), and Alice Wexler, *Mapping Fate: A Memoir of Family, Risk, and Genetic Research* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Another exception might be my "When I Was a Child, I Danced as a Child, but Now that I Am Old, I Think about Salvation: Concepción González and a Past that Would Not Stay Put," in *Rethinking History* 1, no. 3 (December 1997), 343-345.

hard to make out—perhaps because the rooms were full of decisive architecture and opinion. Nonetheless, the house was always full of other voices struggling for quiet moments, spaces, where they could be heard.

It is not, then, especially surprising that the house speaks. Yet just listen to what it says:

*You have always felt this house was silent. You never felt that a Jewish girl with your forest of hair, your deep streams of longing and laughter, was welcome here. It was something strange about your granddaddy. You thought he could love nothing but expensive things, things like the boy statue by the goldfish bowl, so naked and lifeless. Something about his character made you polite without fail, and always very quiet.*

“It won’t be like that now,” the house promises. “Just invite an outsider, say, Frida Kahlo, for a visit. When she comes, something will change for you.”

I begin a silent argument that I can perhaps best describe figuratively. It is as though a small trowel begins digging into the topsoil of my mind. As it digs, I hear a timid, subconscious voice responding to the house.

*You can’t know how the absence of open emotional life in this house has somehow merged with the structure of a historical profession, a profession seemingly determined to dislodge magic, to throw it out of history. Maybe the most courageous among us imagine ourselves to be artists, using language to paint our stories, but even we use the page as a linear sort of easel. Thus at the top of the canvas we place words containing lives of musty, irrelevant people. At the bottom we place cleaner, fresher, younger, and considering our bias toward progress, better people.<sup>3</sup>*

*As Latin American historians, we have refused to paint jazz, punctuated by a child’s voice, chiming in off-key. We have not created forms of representation allowing us to show time and emotion in all its messiness, to portray the rape victim as first stabbing her assaulter, but later, taking him home.<sup>4</sup>*

Something inside my brain turns the soil and the words that emerge now feel rawer:

*Hell, we can’t even speak of ourselves as corroded and luminous people, using other people, their pasts, to create our own futures. We don’t talk about how this house led me to find the African American women, the South American peasants who would listen. About how being silenced here by you, Papa, while being treated nicely by your servants, led me to pay attention, particularly to slight and muted voices. Who can say, but perhaps something about your character—even our slight relationship, however little you considered it—led to my empathy, an empathy that eventually extended to the Mexican proto-fascists I interviewed because their attitudes resembles nobody’s as clearly as yours, Papa, and I will*

3. For an exploration of this issue, see Marjorie Becker, “Why Was Maria Enríquez so Generous?: Rapto and Ghost Time in Michoacán, 1924,” paper presented at Latin American Studies Association Meeting, Guadalajara, Mexico, 1997.

4. It is nonetheless true that Steve J. Stern has unearthed numerous complex, messy connections which he analyzed with his customary insight in *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men, and Power in Late Colonial Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

*enter this house that welcomes me now, and perhaps I will even come to love you, come to see the connections between you, Frida Kahlo, and the Michoacán woman who was assaulted. I suppose against my will I will also see the connections between your determination to stifle emotion, Frida's to rebuild herself out of the emotions of others, and María Enríquez's desire to push us Americans toward a new sort of emotional mixture, emotional mestizaje.*

I give in. I shyly invite Frida to my ancestors' house. I wonder about the shyness and close my eyes. I suddenly envision silken chords surrounding my neck, then a woman stuffing gardenias down my throat. I open my eyes, hoping at last to evade, in a small way, the historical profession's collusion with secrecy. As Hayden White has reminded us, virtually anyone can be a historian.<sup>5</sup> Historical training explores neither the scholar's personal gifts nor idiosyncrasies, the ways a bent toward German history can mask a broken past filled with abuse, the ironic ways thoughtless historians mimic alcoholic fathers throttling their sons. Any historian can avoid and obscure their motivations. Somehow, though, the voices in my grandfather's house ask to be heard in their own terms.

### III. OF ASPARAGUS, WISTERIA, AND ANXIETY: PAPA AND HIS HOUSE OF PAPERWEIGHTS<sup>6</sup>

Frida arrived early to find a black gardener tending plants near a stream. Alongside the water, she saw near-geometric lines of simple daffodils, punctuated by paper white narcissi, their early smell returning, returning, like a line from Bach. She looked longer and found it true. Yellows led to white and back again in lines of constraint, like separate tones blending into one another while remaining studiously alone—no call and response here. She turned to the black man and said, "I am Frida Kahlo, but sometimes I go by Frieducha. Are you the gentleman who tends this lawn?"

"Miss, they told me you were coming. Mr. Joe gave me my orders about what to do with the front lawn. He wanted it formal, so I keep it that way. In the back, though, I do as I please. Here, let me show you what I am talking about."

They walked behind the house where the flowers became jazz musicians, cutting up the long yard, stepping in, pushing one another to the ground in deep dance, embrace. They played long sets with space, with colors, as violet freesia touched shocking pink, then splintered off toward bright yellow. Off to the side, one-time servant huts were covered by lavender wisteria, their pods dropping to an unpredictable beat. There was a long pause for the stately dogwoods, but then the near-

5. See Hayden White, "The Burden of History," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

6. Ethnohistorical information in this section is based on oral interviews with Carrie Popper Becker conducted in 1973, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2000, and 2001, Macon, Georgia; interviews with Joan Becker, conducted in 1997, Atlanta, Georgia; a complex interplay of observations and conversations with Joseph Popper, Sr. from 1954 until 1972, Macon, Georgia; interview with Mary Rainey, 1977, Macon, Georgia; interview with Peggy Popper, 1977, Macon, Georgia; conversations with Clara Eschmann, 1995 through 1998, Macon, Georgia; weekly conversations with Ann Matthews, 1954 through 1964, Macon, Georgia.

by gardenia scent fell through the air promising a sweetness as unforeseen as brush strokes moving across the open-mouthed drum.

He escorted her up the gravel path leading to the white square of a house. Annie Mae, the black maid, opened the door and took her to the living room off to the left. Frida approached the piano, asking, “May I?”

“Don’t be fooled, Miss Frida. I try to keep it nice, dust it and all, but no one has touched that piano for years.”

“Nobody every played it?”

“You know, Miss Charlotte—she was Mr. Joe’s wife—during the war years she went over to the base for the Red Cross. There was this friend of hers—Dottie. Mr. Joe thought she was white trash, I know he did. A seamstress. But she knew songs. Miss Charlotte would sneak her in when he was working late. I’d bring out some of those almond moon cookies she liked. That girl would play war songs, and they would sing and sing. But you know, I imagine by now the piano’s gone tuneless.”

Annie Mae opened the bay window facing the stream below. She said, “Miss Frida, why don’t you just rest a spell on the sofa. I’ll go let Mr. Joe know you’re here.”

Once Annie Mae left, Frida sat down, pushing into the deep cushion. She looked around the room. Two Botticelli angels, one sweetly blonde, the other dark and passionate-looking, peered out. Silver bowls engraved with seashells were scattered everywhere. A scent of tea olive wandered up from below. Then she heard a voice. She immediately knew it was Dottie, musing: “He thought I didn’t hear him.

*He told her to stop having me over. He said, “I don’t properly understand what you see in that girl you bring in here. I don’t want to get Annie Mae to count the silver every time that little piece leaves.” You know, he had a point. I ain’t never had no nice clothes. Just tried to please myself, to wear something red whenever I could. But I didn’t take none of those precious spoons.*

Frida thought to herself, *Where am I? Gringos are always on the move. Can’t seem to stop. Here I am in this room, with all this ivory and gold furnishing everywhere, but at first it just seemed empty. Now it’s filling up, strangely. The girl’s words seem old. They also seem like nobody ever placed them properly, claimed them.*

Different smells—baby slipper peas, okra, fresh asparagus—drew her toward the middle of the house. Leaving the living room, Frida pursued the smells down the hall. She walked painfully onto the thin Persian rugs, their patterned reds and blacks swallowed by the relentless appeal of symmetry. Halfway down the hall, she discovered the source of the smells. She turned into the kitchen. Everything there seemed plainer and less anxious, as though Mr. Joe had let the help have the room to themselves. Jars of preserved fruit filled cabinets throughout the room. The stove and sink were large, old, and immaculate. On the wall were photographs of dark men sitting on stools, laughing. There were other pictures of a church picnic.



Annie Mae was looking out the window as she polished asparagus tongs, souf-fle dishes, nut spoons, corn holders, corn bread cradles, seemingly anything that could be made of silver. Frida walked toward her, stopping to look at jars of colored water in the window sill.

“Annie Mae, where did these colored waters come from?”

“Don’t pay them no mind, Miss Frida. My children wanted to make me something pretty. But you need to get going don’t you? Mr. Joe and them is waitin’.”

“Can’t I stay here a while? You’re nice to talk to, and I’m sorry to say, but, I’m afraid this Mr. Joe is going to be a little stuffy, and maybe not so pleased to have me here, after all.”

“Now Miss Frida, he wouldn’t have asked you if he didn’t want you to come. His son is out there. His relatives. They all want to meet you. Maybe you can even sell him a picture or two.”

“Can’t I talk with you instead?”

“Miss Frida, come on now. I’ll walk you back. You come on out there with me, honey. They’ll all just love those pretty butterflies in your hair.”<sup>7</sup>

They walked down the hall arguing. No sooner would Frida take Annie Mae’s arm, Mexican style, then Annie Mae would pull away, whispering, “Don’t you get me into none of that levelin’ mess, Miss Frida. They’ll have a durned hissy fit.” On the screened porch, the food took over. Country food mixed with both plain Southern fare and unusual delicacies. A glass table was covered with ivory-colored plates, all in an austere, gold-rimmed pattern. When Annie Mae returned, she filled them from platters of tomato sandwiches laced with homemade mayonnaise, tiny fried chicken wings, biscuits the size of a peso, homemade peach preserves, mounds of fresh asparagus. Shad and its roe. Strawberries. A mocha roll.

The food seemed gregarious, chatty, telling of broken origins, long backwood days hunting for mushrooms, shiny dinner parties with the European haute bourgeois, waiting for the first asparagus of spring. Who was this man?

Frida’s eyes wandered to the head of the table where he was surrounded by brothers, sons, and law partners. His face was blank as he glanced at her. Then he said, “Miss Frida, how do you do? Please just make yourself at home with the other ladies down at the foot of the table.” He went back to a low conversation, punctuated with phrases like “Clisby Durham must be seeing that durned woman, then buying up her husband’s downtown property.”

Another slow voice said, “Only Oak Street.”

The man next to him said, “He wants to get the prostitutes off Eighth, push them where they good and belong on the other side of the river. That’s what he’s drinking with Danny for.”

It was slow, unanswerable talk, the words falling without argument. Then Joe said, “He’s not to have Third and Anchor.”

At the other end of the table, the women all looked the same to her. *Which is the Adeline, the Evelyn, the Louise?* She busied herself filling her plate with

7. This rendition is based on Frida Kahlo’s “Self-Portrait, 1940,” reproduced in Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), plate XVI.

chicken wings, mushrooms, biscuit. When no one said anything, she smiled and said, "My name is Frida, ladies. You don't have to worry about me. I just bet you've never made the acquaintance of a Mexican country girl like me. Do you want to see my earrings?" she said, taking off a cascade of grape colored beads, interspersed with silver drops and fat, misshapen hens.<sup>8</sup> "Don't worry. This is just the sort of thing we Mexican women like to wear to dinner."

One by one, they started talking under their breath. "He won't let us talk with them, can't stand it, acts like women and children are stupid. Worse if you look Russian Jewish, won't even give that granddaughter of his a hug, the poor baby girl with those thick eyebrows."

The meal was over, and the women went upstairs to nap. The men held back, smoking. Frida said she would nap in the guest room, but a light drew her to a side parlor. A room full of beautiful and curious objects. On the mantelpiece, a row of tiny wooden ducks, giraffes, and zebras. Silver baskets overflowed with shells from foreign coasts.

Then a light drew her toward the end of the room. There shelf after shelf was covered with antique glass paperweights. Drawn by luminous blues, greens, flowers reaching up toward the light, a stray iris suspended away from its fellows, a cranky mushroom, birds with crooked smiles, replicas of faces turned stiff, she walked toward the weights.

She glanced down at one of them. It looked like a slow liquid, falling over a bouquet of violet flowers surrounding a small yellow rose. She grabbed it and aimed, watching it shatter against the wall.

"What are you doing?" He had entered the room.

"You just can't stand it, can you? You think you can push feelings out of this house. Everything here is about show, about how you look, never about how you feel. Hell, only your servants show any interest in other people. You've somehow managed to trap all emotion in glass. I just couldn't stand it."

"You don't impress me as a stupid woman. But you clearly haven't understood anything. Here I spent years and years afraid they would treat me like a Jew. So I'm Jewish. Didn't I try to get rid of anything too showy, any hint of those God-awful Talmudic chants, men dancing with each other. Not that *my* people were like that, of course. It's true I married a Jewish woman, but Charlotte was a blonde beauty, a wealthy orphan. Besides, when I first saw her, she seemed timid. It took me years to see the willfulness."

"She was your wife."

"Yes, and at first she seemed a perfect Southern lady. The calling cards, the horse, the thank-you notes, the attention to detail. Do you know you're not supposed to wear navy blue and black at the same time?"

"She seems like what you bargained for."

8. I developed this version of Frida's costume based loosely on Erika Billeter, *The World of Frida Kahlo: The Blue House* (Seattle: University of Washington Press in association with Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1993), 56; and research trips to Kahlo's "Blue House," Coyoacán, Mexico, 1996, 1997.

“You understand nothing at all. We might as well have lived apart. She got up before the sun, rode her horse to where the gardener was planting—she insisted on the most exotic flowers, wild iris, johnny-jump-ups, pansies, everything purple, nothing delicate.”

“Didn’t she bring you any flowers?”

“You know, I’d come home to my study full of purple flowers, but the kitchen would have them too. She spent hours with the Negro maids. You’d think they were friends.”

“I thought things were as bad as they could be between us, but then her niece started seeing this Russian Jew. Those people across the river. They all lived together, smelled up their houses with onions, gefilte fish, the Lord only knows what all. The groom’s mother was crazy about my wife, was over here all the time with her gossip.”

“The last days, when there was no hope for a remission, I kept looking through my paperweights. Every one was color coded to something, or somebody, I had loved. They didn’t work for me any more. Then I remembered this one. I had bought it years before when I still had some hope. To me, it was what she was, the rare golden flower, surrounded by deep purple. It was the wild beauty she always was.”

“I took it to her in her hospital room. She had lost all strength, but when she saw it, she gave me a big hug. I hoped that maybe she would see I wasn’t as cold as she thought.”

“Then why do you seem so sad?”

“Just a few days after I gave her the paperweight, she died. I wanted to keep the piece nearby, but it was gone. I thought the maid had put it with the rest of them, but I couldn’t find it anywhere.”

“Then one evening, after work, the doorbell rang. It was that woman, as tacky and Russian as ever in her chintz and velvet, the coral and jet brooch, all those extravagant touches, all begging for attention.”

“What do you want, Bertha?” I said.

“Joe, I want to give you something.”

“She opened her overstuffed pocketbook. The Lord only knows what she kept in there, pots of rouge and lipstick, dirty handkerchiefs. The kind of jumble you expect from immigrants. But as a matter of fact, she reached in and handed me the weight.”

She said, “Charlotte gave it to me when I visited her that time in the hospital. She said, ‘You like beautiful things, and they become you. Take it.’”

Frida said, “There are other ways to arrange things. Why don’t you come to visit? Why not come to my house in Mexico?”

“No, but why not invite my granddaughter? She knows Spanish, and to tell the truth, she deserves to get out of here. Let her go visit you.”

IV. OF QUETZAL FEATHERS, CHERIMOYA, TENDER BRUSH STROKES:  
KAHLO'S HOUSE OF CARIBBEAN, OF DESERT<sup>9</sup>

I am outside her house in Coyoacán before I remember. There has been an almost archetypal sense, in the U.S., but particularly here in Mexico, that the U.S. is a faceless, dry, scavenger of a desert. Mexico, however, is ripe, passionate, Caribbean. Yet we also know that Mexico was somehow infected by jealousies, longings to bring the outside in. Out of that infection, it is suggested, the Porfiriato, the nineteenth-century dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, emerged as a long, sandy beach with little enough space for ripples, currents.

While it is true that the political economy of the Porfiriato was largely based on outside domination, a domination that had enabled scholars, including the brilliant late anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil, to view Mexicans as pure victims, and outsiders as seamless oppressors, this formulation is too narrow.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, the Porfiriato stifled human possibilities in dramatic, violent, and subtle ways. And in metaphoric terms, the 1910–1920 revolution, which overturned the Porfiriato, could be likened to water, swallowing up Porfirian sand. The revolution could be viewed as water that dissolved apparently firm identities. Nonetheless, it is my view that it was the rigidity of the Porfirian regime, the dryness, as it were, that harbored a longing for transformation, for water.

In fact, if there was any clarity to the revolutionary and immediate postrevolutionary age, that clarity was based on multiple and contradictory desires to destroy what had seemed firm and firmly oppressive, then to re-establish a fairer world. It was a desire for both explosion and order. Perhaps it should be seen as a will to build an emotional architecture at once liquid and solid.

What does Frida's history have to do with this? If this woman clearly sought outside sources of color, of emotion, did she find what she was looking for? Did she remake those outsiders, turn them into balm? And when she wore the outfits of the Indian women of Tehuántepec, when she vacillated between the politics of Stalin and of Trotsky, when she married and remarried Diego Rivera, when she painted images of impoverished Mexicans, was the Caribbean flooding the desert, creating a salve for her broken body? Or did the desert create scabs for open wounds? Was it sometimes one, sometimes another? And were there answers in her house?

Did she invite me as a different kind of *mestiza*, a woman of German, Russian, and Deep Southern descent, a woman partly descended from a victorious German Jewish world where emotions were encouraged to remain aloof from

9. Sources for my understanding and reproduction of Kahlo are varied and extensive. A partial list includes Frida Kahlo, *The Letters of Frida Kahlo* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995); Frida Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* (New York: Narry N. Abrams, 1995); Herrera, *Frida*; Billeter, *The World of Frida Kahlo*; Ansel Adams and Elena Poniatowska, *Frida Kahlo: The Camera Seduced* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992); Michael Cobarrubias, *Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1946).

10. But see Bonfil's stimulating *Mexico Profundo: Una civilización negada* (Mexico D.F.: Grijalbo, 1987) and my review of the English translation in *Ethnohistory* 45 no. 1 (Winter 1998), 152–154.

their containers, from their bodies, stories, and histories? Did she sense that I nonetheless remained enthralled by emotion and its histories?

I enter a room filled with food, flowers, and the memories of her early morning trip to market. She went often, knowing Jorge, and in a nearby stall, Carmencita, waited for her. But for all her visits to them, she sometimes approached other vendors. That morning she had moved slowly toward a young fruit seller, a stranger. Looking him straight in the eyes, she said, "Find me something nice, mi amor. Something to please my old man. The ripest mango, papaya, cherimoya, whatever you have. Something so he'll see just the kind of woman I can be. And look, I have no *vergüenza*, no shame at all. Don't forget I'm no gringuita, stuffed with dollars. Can't you give me it to me barato, baratísimo, mi amor?"

*I don't know her, but she came to my stall. Usually she goes to Jorge or Carmela. Everybody knows this lady tosses cigarettes, even pesos to the compañeros but she came here for my help. She's really beautiful in her Mexican outfit, but she looks different. Those thick brows. The mustache. Sepa Dios that I could use the money, but maybe just once I could let her have a pomegranate, some colored peppers, elote, maybe a bouquet of fruits.*

She invites me to her room as she puts together her Tehuana outfit, binding together a row of white and yellow daisies and pink roses to frame her braid. Though I have never been here with her, the room feels somehow familiar. In fact, suddenly the room fills with people I have known and studied. Indians, socialists, Michoacán *mestizo* teachers determined to teach Tarascan Indians to wear Aztec masks. They are busy making piles of green-gold quetzal feathers, turquoise, black opals, cotton blouses embroidered with shiny blue and red birds. Someone paints a black horse white. And then—is this happening, here?—the people take off their clothing.

The mannequins wander from pile to pile. Frida, too, rummages through the jewels, the headdresses, and emerges dressed in her version of a Tehuana costume, a white blouse embroidered with green vines sprouting golden stars, a long white cotton skirt, its lace inset sweeping the ground. She doubles a long chain of occasional silver beads.<sup>11</sup>

Suddenly, I am worried. It is not because of all the plasticity, the traditional elements seeking other paths, smiles, clothing, voices. The search for ways of connecting that are both plainer and more complex. It's not that it goes too far. Instead, I feel something is missing.

That night in Frida's guest room, I dream of places I somehow recognize. There is a European Jewish boy, dark, and gangly. He looks curiously like Frida's father. Stranger still, he looks a bit like my own grandfather. He is climbing stairs. When he reaches the dark door, he pauses, reaching toward a wooden case housing an ivory scroll.

Mr. Kahlo touches the wood, thinking, *All my ancestors have touched this mezuzah, and immediately kissed their fingers. My grandfather told me that he was touching God's words inside the small box. That to touch the word of God*

11. My interpretation is based on Billeter, *The World of Frida Kahlo*, 52.

*was to flex muscles against disbelief. That he touched it often during his wife's illnesses. Father of the universe, he said he thought a few simple words would be enough.*

*My grandfather saw God's word on fire, burning through flesh, temptation, desire. Maybe he thought if he touched it enough, its permanence would calm him. I loved him, but I touched to sense that hand, reaching into ink, pulling out, moving toward parchment, making the tiny scroll move people. I touched it only to feel the moving hand, to feel flesh. I didn't believe I could stay in that world.*

Then I turn in my bed. I am in a Catholic church watching Frida's mother take communion. Her eyes are sad, remembering Frida's refusals. *She won't come here. She never has, really. She just runs around with those priest-haters, waving those red communist flags.* As she moistens her lips with wine, tastes the wafer, she breathes more deeply, sighs.

I wake and wander nervously into Frida's studio. Suddenly I wonder about my path. Up to now I have attempted to cut through the arrogance of some historical practitioners, the sense that we can chart the past, designate what mattered, map its direction. My technique has instead been what I have called historical empathy. The approach was to learn the context deeply enough to allow for an entrance, to allow an outsider to enter the minds, the hearts, and even the sensibilities of others. Now I wonder if all of this has been based on nothing more than my childhood sense of inadequacy, my inability to affect my grandfather, his relatives. That because of these experiences, I tried to grow new limbs. Is it true that, subconsciously, I tried to absorb the ways and feelings of others, hoping that they would substitute for my own weaknesses?

As I wonder, the arrogance unfolds, growing like so much southern kudzu. And that is especially true in this room where Frida's past grows upon itself. The days she had captured, crouched, watching Rivera as he painted the Secretariat of Public Education murals. Her countryside encounters with Trotsky. Rivera of her imagination as he swam further and further into the life of her sister Cristina. The residue of dreams, a mother by her hospital bed after the streetcar accident, images of chubby, dark-headed babies.

I turn to these broken sources. I can only imagine pounding them down to powder, making Frida a new set of paints. I work memories of Diego to a rich shade of brown, as surprising as Aztec chocolate. As I catch her friendships with women—with Judith Ferreto, María Felix, Ella Wolfe, Dolores del Río—I pound them to deepest blue, representing her desire for unflinching loyalties. Yet just as I capture the shade, its fraternal twin, the aqua color of Cristina's faithless dress, breaks through. Then Frida's love for the poor, for the Indians, leads me to exoticize, as she did, and I create a kaleidoscope's worth of indigo, silver, clear yellows, oranges, purple. I hand her the paint set.

She grabs the box, finds water, dips in. Although she empties her mind, a parade of images chatter. Her brain fills with Cristina, her father's asthma, Trotsky. The images move quickly, and as quickly disappear. Then Rivera lifts her up like a bird. She flattens the paper, dips into the paint, remembers that she

works with nothing more substantial than paper, paint, and pain. While her elements can flame as easily as flesh, she works to create boundaries, or at least their illusion.

She was a woman whom many considered physically broken, perhaps emotionally so, too, after Rivera's affair with Cristina. Yet she dips into paint, creating an architecture. Rivera emerges within her flesh, but this time not in her womb but in her head, the part of the body that can, at least momentarily, stop a flood. She becomes desert, a boundary for his Caribbean.<sup>12</sup> For all his paintings of her, I wonder if he ever contained her like this.

#### V. A DIFFERENT AMERICAN ROOM

Someone knocks on the door. I open it to a young woman. She says, "You think you know me, señorita, but you don't. I am María Enríquez."<sup>13</sup> You talk about houses. I come from a village where the houses of poor people were stuck on back roads, bad jokes when it flooded. Half the year, my home sunk under mud. There was nothing exotic in there. Madre mía, it wasn't much of a house. No chairs. We slept huddled under threadbare blankets. It's true there was a special corner where my mother kept a small image of the Virgin. Mamá crossed it every day.

But that was nothing to me. The only place I learned to like was the moist green eye of Zamora's valley. Though it was dry for months, then it filled again, like a winking blue eye surrounded by green. I went there for water one time. That's where Antonio Mendoza saw me the first time.

Don't you see that there are other kinds of rooms? People don't see, don't remember, but those rooms are connected to your rooms, so full of sunflowers, Doña Frida. Or even those far away Georgia rooms filled with glass, señorita Margarita. When Antonio came after me that day, he scared me off the plaza. But then later on, I made the courtroom into a truer sort of room."

I think, a room, yes. To me the documents once suggested a frightful room. The man assaulted her in the middle of the street. Her arms, her legs, even her mind flailed around, looking for help. Her little sister. Her girlfriend. Women walking toward the church. The church building itself. She wandered, seeking a simple gesture, a voice, a calm hand. No one was there.

But that was not what María Enríquez was talking about. Somehow, in the dusty Zamora courtroom, she created a different sort of American room. It was no room of gardenias, mimosa, substituting for soul. It was no room where walls, furniture, other people were made into paint, slathering onto the body to cover the wounds. Instead, she was giving a party, complete with whispered introductions. "My sister is the one over there. See how she was little, and she was the

12. This analysis is based on "Diego and I, 1949," reproduced in Billeter, *The World of Frida Kahlo*, 16.

13. For other reconstructions of Enríquez's history, see my *Setting the Virgin on Fire*, 27, and "When I Was a Child." Enríquez's testimony is based on "Instruida en contra de Antonio Mendoza por el delito de rapto," 13 agosto 1924, expediente 13/923/28, ramo penales, Zamora, Juzgado de primera instancia, Archivo Judicial del Estado de Michoacán, Morelia, Michoacán.

one I had told what to do. How was she going to understand that that day I needed her? There's my friend, Antonio's sister. What did I expect. Of course she would be loyal to him. She knows how much family means, the ways men matter here. Look over there. Those fancy Catholic ladies sipping sherry."

Her face fell. She said, "You know, they really love the Virgin. She was poor and they are not, but she heard their prayers when typhoid nearly took their children. How could they not protect their little golden Virgin from someone like me trucking with Antonio?"

I think, she did not reject the men and women in the moment they turned on her. She burnished their hopes, their attempts to stand their ground. She saw them, but not as they were on the day they deserted her, but as they hoped to be, the way on good days, in good light, they sometimes were. She has built a new American room where, free as she is to stay, free as we are to stay, her neighbors have taught her how to leave.

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