

2005

# "In Search of Subjectivity: An Irigarayan Reading of the Body in Self-Representations of Josephine Baker and Frida Kahlo."

Syska, PhD, SFHEA, Alicja

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/15394>

---

*All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.*

## CHAPTER NINE

IN SEARCH OF SUBJECTIVITY:  
AN IRIGARAYAN READING OF THE BODY  
IN SELF-REPRESENTATIONS  
OF JOSEPHINE BAKER AND FRIDA KAHLO

ALICJA SYSKA

The only reply that can be given to the question of the meaning of the text is: read, perceive, feel. . . . Who are you? would be a more pertinent question, provided that it does not collapse into a demand for an identity card or an autobiographical anecdote. The answer would be: and who are you? can we meet? Talk? Love? Create something together?

—Luce Irigaray<sup>1</sup>

In 1987, an American interviewer asked Luce Irigaray a question that clearly revealed a deep misunderstanding of her ideas. Irritated, Irigaray pointed to three possible reasons: one, that her work is difficult to translate from French; two, that "it defines a new horizon of thought;" and three, that people prefer to listen to rumors rather than to actually read the text.<sup>2</sup> Detecting frustration and disappointment in Irigaray's blunt response, this writer became even more interested in exploring the work of this French feminist, philosopher, and psychoanalyst, who played an enormous role in showing the female body "as the site of the production of new modes of subjectivity."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Sexes et Parentes*, quoted in Margaret Whitford, ed., "Introduction," *The Irigaray Reader* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991): 14.

<sup>2</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, translated by Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993): 58.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 17.

In this essay, Luce Irigaray's theory of female sexuality and subjectivity is applied to the artistic lives of two remarkable women – Josephine Baker, an American expatriate, dancer, singer, and actress, born in 1906 in St. Louis and died in 1975 in Paris; and Frida Kahlo, the most popular woman-artist in history, born in 1907 on the outskirts of Mexico City and died in 1954 in her Blue House. In this analysis, it will be shown how Baker and Kahlo used their bodies to find Irigaray's "new mode of subjectivity." By looking at Baker's photographs and Kahlo's paintings and by using feminist readings of their art, it is hoped that the following questions will be answered: How did Baker and Kahlo utilize feminine corporeality to problematize essentializing women and deconstruct binary systems that represent the feminine? How did they use their place in the "borderlands" as a politically empowering positionality? What kind of resistance strategies did they employ to reclaim the self? How did objectifying their bodies work in the process of establishing subjectivity?

In order to answer these questions, this essay is divided into sections with a focus on important aspects of Baker's and Kahlo's artistic endeavors that can be reread through the lens of Luce Irigaray's theory. Providing the historical context in which Frida Kahlo and Josephine Baker lived and worked will allow this writer to demonstrate how existing in the borderlands gave them more political leverage and more ways to escape cultural framing. Irigaray's analysis of women's sexuality will be employed to explore how Baker and Kahlo used their bodies to find their subjectivity in the early twentieth-century masculine discourse. Additionally, feminist interpretations of the Foucaultian idea of "docile bodies" will be used to show how Baker and Kahlo transgressed the social imposition of the "proper" femininity. Finally, it will be explained how Baker and Kahlo offered their cultures a subversive fetish.<sup>4</sup>

Placing together in one short essay Josephine Baker and Frida Kahlo, two extraordinary women, artists, and cultural icons, who have received a lot of attention and will probably be a focus of even more scholarly interpretations, might seem a daring project. However although Baker and Kahlo came from different social and cultural environments, they lived and created in the same historical time. Moreover, they both are examples of female personalities that resist containment and transgress social inhibitions. Furthermore, so is Luce Irigaray. Her writings are as dynamic as Baker's and Kahlo's art, as uncontainable and impossible to be fixed in

<sup>4</sup> In this writer's critical reading of Baker's photographs and Kahlo's paintings, both media are treated as cultural artifacts. This writer considers Baker a co-author of her photographs, interpreting them as a form of her self-representation, similarly to Kahlo's self-portraits.

a single meaning. This writer's purpose in drawing parallels between these three women is to achieve a more nuanced perspective on the issue of female subjectivity and the new consciousness that resists definitions. In this moment of increasing globalization, many women still find themselves on the margin of traditional societies. Therefore, reading Baker and Kahlo in the context of contemporary fractured identities and borderland personalities reflects existing social and cultural phenomena and provides strategies for their transgression. Just as Irigaray hopes she can offer concrete proposals that would help women achieve a cultural identity, this writer believes that Baker and Kahlo may serve as an inspiration for many of us.

### Art in the Borderlands

Traditionally, women have rarely been in control of their own representations. The dominant phallus-centric cultures represented them for them, gazed upon them, objectified their bodies, and restrained their voices. Art and entertainment were two of very few venues women could achieve recognition and reclaim the self. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Josephine Baker in France and Frida Kahlo in Mexico demonstrated how culturally imposed "otherness" leaves room to play with masculine canons of art and allows for multi-dimensional representation.

Josephine Baker's career was fueled by French negrophilia—a love for African cultures manifesting itself in fascination with black entertainers, but also with anything that represented exoticism and eroticism. By exoticizing and eroticizing her black body, Baker delivered what was expected from a black woman-performer. However, it is important to note that although she was black, she did not come from the French colonies—a fact rarely acknowledged by her French audiences. Her black female body was mediated by America, the most modern nation in the world. Thus, she was suspended between two worlds, living in the borderlands of each. This double representation allowed her to take control over her image. She did not agree to an easy classification and by presenting a multiplicity of representations she revealed ambivalence about her stage persona. Her photographic self-representations combined tropes of civilization and savagery, primitive conventions and refinement, the comical and the glamorous, the lure and the threat, and also, black and white (Fig. 9-1). Once she posed as a savage *femme fatale* with nothing on but a shiny cloth around her loin, in an animalistic pose with sharpened "claws;" soon after, she stood like a beautiful statue inviting the voyeuristic

look (Fig. 9-2). She used her own body as canvas—exposed it, over-eroticized it, and played with its representation. Baker was not the traditional passive female nude; most of her poses in photographs reveal dynamism and agency. Even when she was there purely for the enjoyment of the male viewer, she employed techniques that troubled one-dimensionality of feminine representation and sent deeper messages.

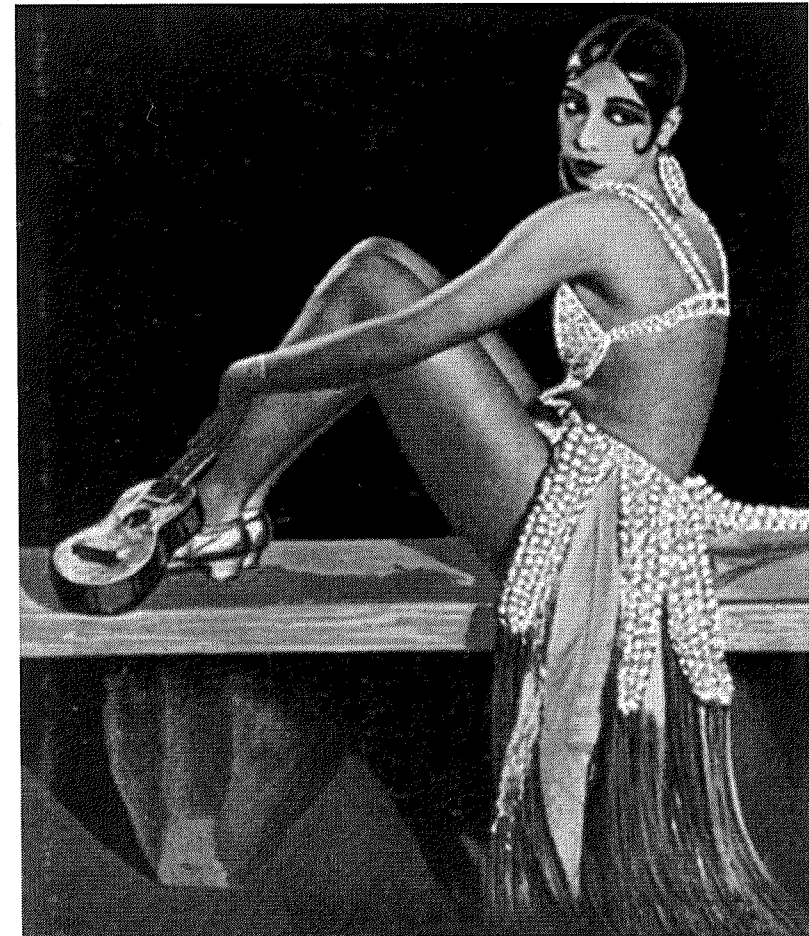


Fig. 9-1: Josephine Baker, in *Un Vent de Folie*, 1927. Walery Studio, (Stanislaus Walery; French, 1863-1935). Collection of Olivia Lahs-Gonzales, St. Louis Missouri.



Fig. 9-2: Josephine Baker in more erotic attire, © 2006 Josephine Baker by CMG Worldwide.

Frida Kahlo developed her artistic style in, and despite, Mexico's strictly domestic paradigm for women. Like Baker, she utilized different strategies to transgress the limiting measures imposed on her by the patriarchal society. She was a product of mixing races and ethnicities—Jewish, Hungarian, Spanish, and Indian—standing at the cultural crossroads and always seeking roots. Living within conflict, Kahlo combined in her work contrasting ideas—modern and pre-Columbian, religious and national, male and female, Indian and European, art and craft, high and

low.<sup>5</sup> By marrying a famous muralist Diego Rivera, she put herself in the midst of political and artistic arena and she used her position to speak against the existing social order. Her paintings shocked people. She did not present herself as a traditional odalisque, but de-eroticized her body using blood imagery, so far reserved for men-heroes—symbol of emancipation, a cultural taboo that challenges the social order—and by exaggerating her masculine features. When she painted her *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, where she presented herself in short hair and man's suit but with earrings and women's shoes hinting on a combination of male and female in one body, Kahlo played with traditional categories of masculinity and femininity betraying the Mexican gendered social system. She challenged the viewer. She was there not for enjoyment of the male spectator but for provocation; she was the speaking subject, not an object of the male gaze.

Living in the era of early twentieth-century modernity, both Baker and Kahlo adopted a rather post-modern approach to art, life, and their identity. They were racial and cultural hybrids—Baker, as a black American woman in white colonial Paris, and Kahlo, as a mestiza, woman of mixed blood—objectified by Mexican revolutionary rhetoric. Existing in the racial, sexual, and cultural borderlands gave Baker and Kahlo the ability to see themselves as objects and experience the internal splitting through self-alienation.<sup>6</sup> This added vision did not passively accept the status quo, but created contradictions, ambiguities, and unsettling discrepancies, which resist one-dimensional reading, transgress containment, and still evoke multiple interpretations. If, as Gloria Anzaldúa has observed, “the feature depends on the breaking down of paradigms, . . . on the straddling of two or more cultures,” Josephine Baker and Frida Kahlo are excellent examples of artists who lived their lives in borderlands and successfully created their “new consciousness.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Liza Bakewell, “Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading,” *Frontiers* (vol. XIII, no. 3): 165-189.

<sup>6</sup> Fatimah Tobing Rony called this sensation “the third eye.” See Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Duke University Press, 1996): 4.

<sup>7</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands* has shown how uprooting the dualistic thinking and transcending the subject-object duality will change the way women perceive themselves and, therefore, end intolerance, liberate women from the cultural domination, and create the new consciousness. Cf. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999): especially pages 99-113.

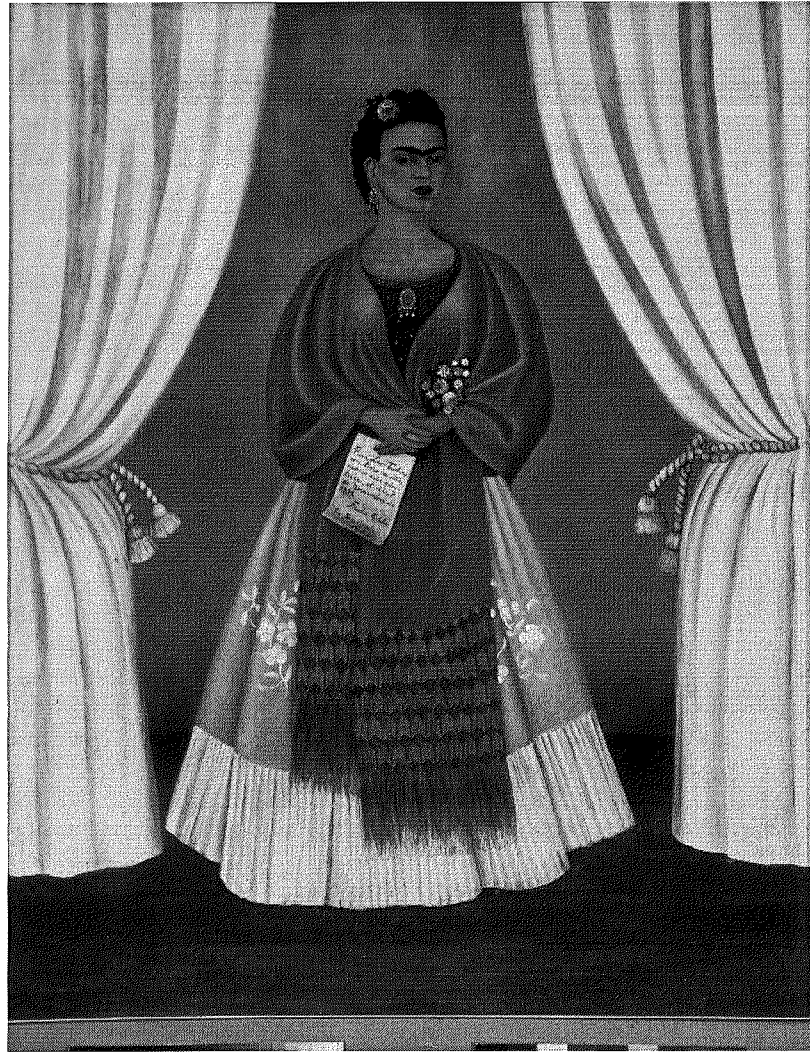


Fig. 9-3: Frida Kahlo (Mexican, 1907-1954). *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky*, 1937. Oil on Masonite, 30 x 24 in. National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. Gift of the Honorable Clare Boothe Luce.

Please see the Centrefold for this image in colour.

### In Search of Subjectivity

Luce Irigaray suggests that men in the patriarchal system need to immobilize women, keep them under control and dependent, solidify them—the very tactics Baker and Kahlo actively resisted. Irigaray claims that men fear “the *fluid*, that which flows, is mobile.”<sup>8</sup> As a practicing psychoanalyst, she engages in a feminist reconstruction of psychoanalysis (from within) that leads to new interpretations and helps to open up new conversations. She reads Freud’s patriarchal text against the grain and uses it in ways unintended by Freud, claiming, quite subversively, that his theory provided tools to disrupt the order of this philosophical discourse. She proposes the idea of an “other woman” as countering the male representation and opening a different, non-masculine discourse. According to Irigaray, this woman could not be confined within any system and her transgressive nature would shake the base of patriarchy. Although Irigaray ultimately believes the “other woman” does not yet exist, perhaps women such as Josephine Baker and Frida Kahlo, who use their bodies in unconventional ways to reclaim their subjectivity, can be considered precursors in the project of the erosion of this particular symbolic system called patriarchy. The manner in which Irigaray employs psychoanalysis to scrutinize feminine corporeality helps illustrate how women can exceed patriarchal representations.

According to Irigaray, women are not given a proper place in the patriarchal world. In this world, the phallus is the meaning of making power and female sexuality is “conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters.”<sup>9</sup> In those parameters, women are perceived in terms of “lack”—lack of a phallic organ, since their “sexual organ, which is not *one* organ, is counted as *none*”—and, therefore, their sexuality is “incomplete.”<sup>10</sup> Denied wholeness and self-determination by their phallus-centric cultures, women assume passive roles. Trying to fit the “proper” gender roles assigned to them by the patriarchal society, they abandon agency and become “commodities” exchanged by men, between men, and for their pleasure. In the process, “A *commodity--a woman--is divided into two irreconcilable “bodies”*: her “natural” body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine

<sup>8</sup> Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985): 23.

<sup>10</sup> Irigaray, “Commodities among Themselves,” *This Sex*, 26.

values."<sup>11</sup> Thus, here, again, the female body is a site of self-alienation, a schism within, seen and experienced by the third eye.

The socio-political arena markets women-as-commodities where they are placed as a commercial products (which are the very condition of culture and social life)<sup>12</sup> and have a masculine homo-social/sexual character. In the transactions "between man and himself," women's desire is eradicated and feminine homo-sociality/sexuality ignored. However, Irigaray argues that female homosexuality exists, although it "has eluded psychoanalysis."<sup>13</sup> She claims that if women embraced their homo-social/sexual relationships and refused to "go to the market," they would disrupt the masculine order, and thus, dismantle the patriarchy. Although ultimately she admits it sounds utopian, Irigaray insists that there are other avenues of resistance that have not, as yet, been explored.

Josephine Baker and Frida Kahlo did not quite refuse to go to the market, but they did recognize some of those avenues of resistance. Their femininity was socially constricted to such degree that the only way to negotiate its representation was to stay within the patriarchal paradigm and attempt its re-interpretation within the patriarchal horizon. Consistent with the view of woman's sexuality as theorized by Irigaray, Baker and Kahlo exploited the physicality of their female bodies and objectified them in order to find their subjectivity.

Accordingly, Baker submitted herself to the philosophy of lack and in the eyes of men she became "complete" by adorning herself with bananas symbolizing penises. Her infamous banana skirt was a highly sexual costume, with its naked legs and breasts, additionally underscored by phallic banana shapes, and became Baker's iconic outfit. However, she re-designed the skirt several times in her career, playing with the image of the phallus. Her photographs reveal an almost shy Baker, in a primitive version of the banana skirt; a playful Baker, in a glittering adaptation of the outfit; and an intimidating Baker, armored with large spikes in place of bananas. Besides modernizing, or "technically upgrading" the banana outfit, Baker's "savage" look in the photographs is additionally troubled by the drooping jewelry on her neck, suggesting a savage and a star persona in one image. Allegedly "just" witty and playful, as most of her biographers have claimed, the banana skirt was treated seriously by Baker. She saw it as a tool of her work and used it to play on socially established racial and sexual norms. She problematized erotic ways of looking at black

<sup>11</sup> Irigaray, "Women on the Market," *This Sex*, 180.

<sup>12</sup> Here, Irigaray analyzes the ideas of Claude Levi-Strauss, who stated that society is based upon the exchange of women.

<sup>13</sup> Irigaray, "Women on the Market," *This Sex*, 193 and 196.

women. Her appropriation of seductive femininity was juxtaposed with visual cues that offered an almost post-modern play on the construction of gender and race. Josephine Baker thus constructed her body as a site of competing images and inserted herself into an ideological inscription of gender and race as both fascinating and threatening. She polarized her image to protect it from the imposition of injurious representations of blackness and femininity.

Frida Kahlo also incorporated very physical imagery, albeit in a different fashion than Baker. Her life was marked by physical suffering and, undoubtedly, it had a great influence over her art.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, as a consequence of the tragic events of her life, Kahlo's painting style is often interpreted as conditioned by this suffering. Those interpretations, consciously or not, remove her suffering body from the social world she lived in and, limiting her to her body, grant her narrow voice. In this analysis, Margaret Lindauer's argument will be followed that Kahlo's art did not merely illustrate the state of her body and psyche but was created with a broader audience in mind and is purposefully political.<sup>15</sup> For example, in one of her self-portraits, *The Broken Column*, Kahlo painted a huge column in place of her spine, which Hayden Herrera read as a phallus, the symbolic base of the patriarchal society. In the painting, her body is visibly in pain—large tears drop from her eyes and nails are piercing her flesh. The column violates the body, symbolizing its penetration by the patriarchy. But the Ionic column, a symbol of classical beauty and traditional culture, is cracked—"the painting suggests that phallogocentricity cannot support or define her female body."<sup>16</sup> Thus, the artist engages in the critique of the social order by disfiguring its very foundation.

Kahlo did not limit her physical images to the phallus, however. In *Remembrance of an Open Wound*, she redefines the vagina by relocating it onto her inner thigh. "Un-ladylike," according to the traditional expectations of femininity, her skirt is lifted up revealing an open wound on her inner thigh, shaped like vagina, which reminds the viewer of the male violation

<sup>14</sup> In 1925 Kahlo was in a bus collision that had major influence over her health for the rest of her life. When a metal handrail pierced her body, she was left with a broken spine, pelvis and ribs, fractured leg, and a crushed foot. Over the years, she underwent multiple surgeries. First, she had several toes surgically removed, and subsequently, her leg below the knee was amputated. She spent years in bed or in a wheelchair.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret A. Lindauer, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999): 114.

<sup>16</sup> Bakewell, "Frida Kahlo," 175.

of the female body. By misplacing the vagina, the artist conveys that her sexuality is socially, and not biologically, constructed. This *social* sexual organ is made visible. But her biological sexuality is hidden under the skirt and, as Herrera points out, reclaimed by Kahlo masturbating herself.<sup>17</sup> She repossesses her female desire and, thus, is no more passive and "penetrated." She presents her female body as a source of pleasure and agency, despite patriarchal constructions and limitations imposed by the society.

### In the Docile Bodies?

If the bodies of Baker and Kahlo speak to us in unexpected ways, can they be considered "docile bodies"? Foucault's concept of a "docile body" refers to a socially and culturally regulated body, which is trained, shaped, and "improved" according to the dominant standards of beauty and utility. Although Foucault had in mind purely male docile bodies, the concept proves even more useful when applied to female bodies.

Women's bodies are more coerced and regulated than male bodies, because they are required to participate in a daily spectacle of femininity. According to Irigaray, women "continue to be used as the material or instrument for male self-affection, thus cutting women off from the articulation of their own desire. The masquerade for women, then, is a way of providing themselves with a protective skin."<sup>18</sup> In this masquerade, women are judged by "an anonymous patriarchal Other" who resides in their consciousness and requires a mastery of femininity under the threat of being ridiculed or dismissed in case of failure (although those sanctions are disguised). As Sandra Lee Bartky has observed, the female body is considered feminine when it has ideal proportions and size, "behaves" in the right way with "proper" movements and gestures, and is used as an "ornamental surface" for cosmetics.<sup>19</sup> Docile bodies internalize the discipline of "proper" femininity and police themselves in order to fulfill the societal expectations of femininity and bodily perfection. Thus, women diet to fit the "proper" size, dress in ways that limit their bodies to the "proper" movements, and put make-up on to hide any "improper" facial imperfections and insufficiencies. As Bartky states, "This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy. It is also the reflection in woman's

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>18</sup> Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*, 77.

<sup>19</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and Patriarchal Power," ed. by Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988): 61-86.

consciousness of the fact that *she* is under surveillance in ways that *he* is not, that whatever else she may become, she is importantly a body designated to please, or to excite."<sup>20</sup> Those cultural practices are thus inscribed onto women's bodies, centered on them, and normalized, resulting in a very insidious form of control over the mind.

Susan Bordo, in her book *Unbearable Weight*, has demonstrated how "docile bodies" are "sensitive to any departure from social norms" and how their self-policing perpetuates disempowerment of women due to concentration on impossible requirements that lead to inevitable failures.<sup>21</sup> Bordo reveals how the strategies of feminine self-management are, in reality, disguised strategies of management of female desire in the culture. She views the female body "as a site of struggle, where we must work to keep our daily practices in the service of resistance to gender domination, not in the service of docility and gender normalization."<sup>22</sup> Exercising power involves a potential for resistance; therefore, theoretically fixed identities can be contested in different ways. The resistance, however, does not need to depend on the removal of the external impediment but may spring from the internal empowerment.

This theoretical background finds an excellent application in the case of Josephine Baker and Frida Kahlo. Baker and Kahlo realized that, as women, they were socially constructed and that this construction was reinforced by oppressive male discourses. At the same time, they seemed to recognize that what was socially constructed could be socially deconstructed and then reconstructed. Being aware of that, they played with the "normative femininity" and refused to be what they were "supposed" to be. One might come to a conclusion that they were no docile bodies; instead, they consciously *played* docile bodies while subverting the very idea of female docility.

Baker seems to have submitted herself to the discipline of a docile body, although it was greatly troubled by the color of her skin. Her black body was trained and objectified in a way that had historical roots in French colonialism with its fascination with black women and their "unbridled sexuality." Baker conformed to the racial stereotypes by creating an image of herself as an aforementioned savage *femme fatale* but she troubled this representation by photographing herself in elegant clothes and eventually becoming one of the most stylish women in Paris.

The rules set for white femininity, however, did not apply to Baker. The black color of her skin was a factor that accounted for a particular

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>21</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 186.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 184.

change in the normative femininity. She was not supposed to be slender, frail, and glamorously clad, but exotic, erotic, and "primitive." Thus, her body was suspended somewhere outside the white norm. This construction left Baker room for resistance to docility, but at the same time, it made her body a site of struggle. Paradoxically, she strove to act not like a black docile body, but according to the rules of white docility. She rubbed her skin with lemon to lighten it and powdered her whole body with the lightest face powder available on the market. She chose white men as her husbands and desired to be seen and treated like a white woman. These strategies, however, worked only partially. She was loved for being an exotic entertainer, but the French never considered her one of the white "ladies." Nonetheless, although she could not escape her outsider's position, Fatimah Tobing Rony has observed, "her awareness of it and the finesse and exuberant parody of her theatrical performance allowed her at times to transcend the gilded cage of her situation."<sup>23</sup>

Baker escaped her social confinement by employing playfulness that fascinated the early twentieth-century French society. She never stopped creating multiple images at a time, which fueled interpretations and sustained public interest around her persona. In the rich archive of her images, there are photographs presenting Baker barely dressed or naked with wild animals and in a cage, in chic gowns and by grand pianos, with gelled hair in men's outfits, and with blonde wigs. In her various personifications that once affirmed and once challenged the feminine normativity, she parodied the culture she lived in as if turning the mirror back on it and questioning its conventions.

Frida Kahlo, on the other hand, completely resisted representation of her body as docile. Her nude self-portraits present imperfect, bloody, mutilated bodies. In *My Birth*, Kahlo portrays a dead woman delivering a baby that can be identified as Frida. The laboring woman's head is covered with a white sheet, her legs are enfolded revealing her genitalia and a seemingly lifeless child's head on a bed of blood. Above the bed, on the wall, there is a portrait of Mater Dolorosa ("mother full of grief") representing the Virgin Mary at the crucifixion. The painting is usually interpreted as Kahlo's birth. She portrays the mystery of the myth of origin; however, the mystery is not mysterious. It is very physical, material, and corporeal. It is stripped from the conventional atmosphere of serenity and beauty, delivered with surprising detail, and wrapped with a disturbing image of death and suffering. The exposed genitalia of the woman are not a locus of lust; conversely, they seem to be conquering the

<sup>23</sup> Rony, *The Third Eye*, 203.

phallus.<sup>24</sup> The feminine image, as an object of desire traditionally dictated by male discourse, gives way to Kahlo's exploration about female sexuality, motherhood, and standards of femininity.

*A Few Small Nips* is another "bloody" painting that comments on the social standards toward the feminine normativity. A naked woman, apparently dead and with stab wounds in her body, is lying on a bed. A macho-style man is standing beside her with a blood-splattered knife in his hand. A ribbon carried by two birds over their heads reads: "A few small nips." The title of the painting was inspired by a true story reported in a local paper that described a murder of an unfaithful woman. But Kahlo's disturbing depiction of the incident was probably also influenced by her own life. At this moment, she and Rivera agreed to lead sexually uninhibited lives. However, since in Mexican culture "only men . . . are granted sexual subjectivity," Rivera could be much more open about his extramarital affairs, whereas Kahlo, although even more sexually experimental than her husband, had to be very discrete.<sup>25</sup> In her painting, then, Kahlo refers to the Mexican attitude toward sexually active (meaning openly "promiscuous") women. Highly invested in marking the social gendered boundaries, the patriarchal culture allowed for male "virility" but did not create a social category for extramarital relationships of women. By depicting social consequences of ignoring the standards of female docility (for even if she were not killed, she would be "dead" socially), Kahlo exposed the double standards governing sexual mores of men and women, at the same time not submitting herself to those expectations.

Except for her early paintings that present gentle, frail, and conventionally feminine Fridas, Kahlo painted herself with all detail average women choose to ignore or improve on. Her facial features are not retouched but very naturalistic. She overemphasizes her facial hair creating a black moustache above her lips and an arch of joined brows. In *The Broken Column*, she additionally exposes her suffering body. The gaze of a spectator is at the outset drawn to the anguish represented by the penetrating column, straps enveloping the torso, nails piercing it, and tears flowing from Frida's eyes. But the body is also erotic—Kahlo carefully paints her full round breasts and tender curves of her arms and hips; her face is calm and docile. The body is thus open to the voyeuristic gaze but this gaze is troubled by violating elements. The painting has other meanings explicated earlier in the essay but, by concentrating solely on

<sup>24</sup> Irene Herner de Larrea, "Frida Kahlo: My Birth," ed. by Erika Billeter, *The Blue House: The World of Frida Kahlo* (University of Washington Press, 1993): 69.

<sup>25</sup> Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*, 43.



Kahlo's rendering of her trauma, one can see "both collusion with moral and social standards that oppress women and a subversion of those standards at the same time. The woman who makes an art of her illness accedes to her 'place' in the patriarchal system, but she controls that place."<sup>26</sup> Thus, Kahlo resists her feminine passivity and uses her body politically to achieve an active, controlling position.

### Subversive Fetish in the Making

In "The 'Mechanics' of Fluids," Luce Irigaray argues that women are "flowing," "fluctuating," and "blurring" beings. Men, who are "solid," cannot comprehend and, therefore, control the "fluid."<sup>27</sup> In order to get a hold of women as objects of desire, men need to transform them from fluid to solid, thus sealing "*the triumph of rationality*."<sup>28</sup> Fetishizing women, then, means turning them into the "forms" that attend to male desire, creating the ultimate "things," objects that can be exchanged on the socio-political market and manifesting "the circulation of a power of the Phallus, establishing relationships of men with each other."<sup>29</sup>

As a result of female subordination in the "mechanics of fluids," the world of art and entertainment has usually portrayed women as objects, not subjects, and becoming a subject often requires breaking, or at least challenging, the dominant canons of art. Josephine Baker's photographic images or Frida Kahlo's representations in paintings, at first look, privilege masculine pleasure and voyeurism--the women are seen as bearers and men makers of the meaning. However, as Laura Mulvey observed, "the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content and it is woman as representation/image that crystallizes this paradox."<sup>30</sup> Caught in the patriarchal fantasy of castration anxiety, in what Irigaray has called "the exclusively masculine symbolic world," where voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia are escape avenues from the threatening presence of women, Baker and Kahlo objectified their bodies by turning them into works of art, thus offering their cultures a fetish. This fetish, however, in both cases had a subversive character, since both Kahlo and Baker winked at their spectators and played with masculinist canons of art.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>27</sup> Irigaray, "The 'Mechanics' of Fluids," *This Sex*, 106-118.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>29</sup> Irigaray, "Women on the Market," *This Sex*, 183.

<sup>30</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," ed. by Constance Penley, *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988): 62.

Frida Kahlo painted about sixty documented self-portraits and Josephine Baker posed for hundreds of photographs. Extensiveness of their self-fashioned public presence is exceptional considering the time and the social milieu they lived in. Both created or co-created multiple and diverse self-representations—as exotic and seductive, often naked, sometimes bending gender boundaries, provocative. In case of Baker, those artifacts fueled French negrophilia, which turned in a sort of Bakerphilia of interwar Paris, and in case of Kahlo, they inspired American Fridaphilia or Fridamania, forty years after her death.

Fascination with Baker was instigated largely by her banana skirt and the theme of bananas dominated Baker's commodification. After her debut on the Parisian stage, where she introduced her infamous outfit, bananas conquered Parisian streets. Bananas became the main ingredient of a popular pudding named after Josephine Baker, dolls wore dresses that copied her banana skirt, stickers were placed on bananas throughout the city markets to publicize Baker's movie *Zou Zou* and Baker recommended the fruit as an effective anti-aging moisturizer. Her most notorious advertisement, nonetheless, was devoted to Le Bakerfix, a pomade to slick down hair, which brought her more revenue than all her other endeavors, except for her stage appearances.<sup>31</sup> Josephine Baker had a sense of herself as a commodity and she exploited the themes she was most famous for to the end of their commercial possibilities.

The fetishized banana skirt, however, evolved and the plastic fruits, initially witty and good-natured, changed to glittering and pointy, then to thorny and spiky, and in the end, turned into, what Karen Burns has called, a "a prickly suit of armor," with sturdy, white, four-inch tusks that protruded from her breasts, her rear, and her pubic region.<sup>32</sup> The final version of the costume hardly resembled the mockingly phallic shapes of the previous versions but was menacing and looked aggressive. Thus, Baker displayed herself as a sexual object but troubled the pleasure of looking with the demonstration of threat--when the bananas turned aggressive they acquired a potential of signifying the Irigarayan female "lack" and with it--male anxiety. By discomposing the pleasurable look with the slightly intimidating message, Baker subverted her eroticized female body and troubled its largely self-inflicted fetishization.

<sup>31</sup> Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: The Hungry Heart* (New York: Random House, 1993): 171.

<sup>32</sup> Karen Burns, "A House for Josephine Baker," eds. by Gülsüm Baydar Nabantoglu and Wong Chong Thai, *Postcolonial Space(s)* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997): 60.

Similarly, Kahlo's biographer claims that the artist "knowingly reduced her persona to a 'look' . . . and . . . by wearing a Tehuana dress, Kahlo 'transformed herself into an icon for herself and others to worship.'"<sup>33</sup> In 1939, Elsa Schiapirelli designed "La Robe de Madame Rivera" modeled on Kahlo's exotic Tehuana costume.<sup>34</sup> Over five decades later in the United States, with the wave of a cult of the artist (Fridamania), the "Frida-look" became a fashion commodity. Her unconventional image inspired women's magazines and even generated look-alike contests. However, Kahlo's challenging depictions of herself problematized the fetishization for several reasons. First of all, her intense stare interrupts the pleasurable gaze. Secondly, her unplucked eyebrows and mustache are incongruous with the fashion world and, therefore, assert her as a person, not an image or an object. (Here also lays a paradox of the look-alike contests—women fetishized themselves by adorning their bodies and at the same time defeminized themselves by "masculinizing" their features.) A critical examination of Kahlo's *Self-Portrait as Tehuana* reveals even more subversions of gender prescriptions (Fig. 9-3). In the picture, Kahlo is fully covered and asexual, almost Madonna-like. She does not present herself as a typical object of male desire. Her body is removed; her face is not seductive but "marked by paternal ownership, disavowing the reduction of woman to an object of desire and displacing seductive qualities with signs of possession."<sup>35</sup> The painting provokes a critical response to the relationship between a man and a woman (or subject versus object), subverts Kahlo's fetishization, and asserts her subjectivity.

### Conclusion

It is hard to avoid being caught by what Jorge Alberto Lozoya has called, "the virus of fetishism" when looking at Kahlo's and Baker's art.<sup>36</sup> Both artists have been adored by their audiences, despite their potential for escaping any classification and regardless of their open ambiguity.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted by Lindauer in *Devouring Frida*, 155.

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, the Tehuana costume represented "female power" by referring to a Juchitán community with a traditionally matriarchal social structure. Erika Billeter pointed out that for Kahlo, "The dress became a second skin, a magic armor that protected her from the world." See Billeter "World of Truth—World of Utopia: Frida Kahlo," ed. Erika Billeter, *The Blue House: The World of Frida Kahlo* (University of Washington Press, 1993): 15.

<sup>35</sup> Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*, 162.

<sup>36</sup> Jorge Alberto Lozoya, "Kahlo and Ambiguity," ed. Erika Billeter, *The Blue House*, 71.

Paradoxically, this very ambiguity that was to be solidified proved to be the tool that ultimately helped them resist dominance and retain their fluidity.

In creating their subjective identities as women, in their ambivalences, challenges, and tensions, both Josephine Baker and Frida Kahlo fit Luce Irigaray's idea of a woman who "resists all adequate definition."<sup>37</sup> She is never complete but constantly becoming; and in this process she must stay close to herself. Her body "is not to remain the object of men's discourse or their various arts but . . . [to] become the object of a female subjectivity experiencing and identifying itself."<sup>38</sup> In order to exist, women must break out of the imposed norms and strive for sensible representations of themselves. Baker and Kahlo problematized binary systems that represent the feminine by exploiting their feminine corporeality and using their place in the "borderlands" as a politically empowering positionality. As I have shown throughout the essay, the bodies of Josephine Baker and Frida Kahlo speak to us revealing an attempt to assert female desire, transgress the culture, and find new modes of subjectivity.

<sup>37</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex*, 26.

<sup>38</sup> Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, 59.