

Echoes of Intersubjectivity in Frida Kahlo's *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong*

In this paper, I will discuss how Frida Kahlo's *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong* artistically portrays Frantz Fanon and Jean Paul Sartre's claims of the effects intersubjectivity imposes on identity and the resulting need for the assertion of self-definition. I will do this by first discussing the existence of a third-party consciousness known as the Other. Once the Other is defined, I will discuss Fanon and Sartre's claims on the implication that these external perceptions fragment the individual sense of self and create a multiplicitous self. At this point, we will take a look at the elements of Kahlo's painting where she showcases this same process. The last part of this paper will return to the philosophers and focus on their argument that in spite of the Other comes the need to define one's essence for oneself.

The theme of identity being intertwined and defined by the perception of The Other is found in Fanon's *The Fact of Blackness* and Sartre's concept of "The Look" from *Being and Nothingness*. While sharing the same argument, the way in which these philosophers write about these ideas reveals their own personal tone and voice. Fanon does so by looking at the objectification and racialization of Black people and the consequent effects on their ontology and consciousness. Meanwhile, Sartre discusses how objectification is an inevitable and universal part of the human condition. After analysing these texts, we will be able to understand the meaning of double consciousness - this realization of conflict between our own being and being the subject of the Other – which is the basis of Kahlo's Art. When we have tuned our minds to the philosophical views, we will tune our eyes to recognize the qualities of her paintings that express these thoughts.

To start us off, within *The Fact of Blackness*, Fanon introduces the idea of intersubjectivity through his account of experiencing the world. He begins writing about viewing

the world as a place for him to find meaning, to define himself. His spirit having a desire to attain being as he believed he was the center of the universe. However, he soon realizes that he is merely one consciousness in the sea of many other human consciousness', and thus his initial ideology and beliefs do not flow in the real world. Shattered by the conclusion that he is not the source of his reality he is crushed into the belief of the objecthood of humanity. This is to say, he reduces himself, and all others, as objects in the midst of other objects. This hurts him deeply because it results in a loss of self and non-being. In desperation to cope, he turns to others for attention which feels liberating at first as their gaze fills him with purpose for and acknowledgment of his being. Yet, he rapidly devolves into despair when the gaze put upon him is not a positive one, but one filled with hate and disgust towards a black man (Fanon 109). Through this, we see Fanon's argument for the existence of the Other due to the external human consciousness' he is forced to acknowledge and factor into his being. Despite trying, he could not have continued in his single consciousness reality. For him, there is no escaping the fact that we are not sole sources of the universe, the Other is unavoidable. While we have our individual abilities to move our bodies and interact with the world, "Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third party consciousness" (Fanon 110), even our bodily schema is subject to the Other's perception.

Building off this, Fanon shows us that the gaze we are subject to, comes with predeterminations that then affect being. He focuses on the argument that for racialized groups objectification comes with predetermined stereotypes. We see this in his account of hate filled attitudes, glances, and speech against him when he turns to others for self-definition. The stereotypes thrust upon the racialized subject perpetuate a feeling of non-being. This is because when essence is defined by the Other, one's notion of self-identity is removed. You no longer

know who, what, or why you are. Especially when there is not solely one external gaze but the gazes of hundreds of people you encounter daily. The constant bombardment of different perspectives onto a subject creates a conflict between the infinite versions of selves that are endowed upon them. This idea of conflicting versions of the self is called having multipliscious selves. Fanon describes the idea of multiplicitous selves when he writes about not even understanding what the true essence of a black man should be since he must cater to so many nuances of what the white man imposes on his being. The white man has already determined the being of the black individual and colonized society has thrust this construct onto them as a means of oppression (Fanon 110). This predetermination of being from the Other highlights how external perceptions fragment the self. Like Fanon, Sartre believes our conscious is never fully self-contained. It is instead always in relation to the Other.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre also grapples with trying to separate his reality from the perception of the Other. He tries to do this by looking at the world around him, observing the human beings in the street, as they walk towards him and talk to each other. His reflections on his surroundings lead him to say that people outside of his consciousness are without a doubt objects to him. Objects in the sense that he is perceiving them with a sort of object-ness from his point of view within reality. However, he continues to say that this relation of object-ness is not actually the primary state of the Other. He reflects on seeing a man at the park near a bench, two yards away, and he describes how this man has a spatiality that is different to his spatiality. Furthermore, this man can be perceiving this lawn as something completely different to Sartre, he could be blind or daydreaming about some project without actually being aware of his surroundings. So, this perception he has of the Other by very nature refers to something other than itself. This is to say that the essence of what he views as the Other must be referring to a

primary relation between his consciousness and the consciousness of the Other. He is perceiving the Other while the Other has a perception for himself that is outside of Sartre, it escapes him. Even Sartre's surrounding reality such as the green grass in the lawn, takes part in a regrouping by external consciousnesses. Sartre cannot be experiencing the green grass as it appears to the man near the bench. This confounds Sartre as he realizes that the world is no longer centered to him. Similarly to Fanon, he feels decentralized from the world in which he is simultaneously affecting, because this relation to the Other is inescapable. He describes feeling that the world has been stolen from him as everything is in relation to the Other (Sartre 305).

Sartre realizes that the relationship between the self and the Other, forms a reciprocal 'gaze'. If the Other has a perception of the same world as Sartre, then fundamentally he must exist as the subject within this perception. Thus, when he is seen by the Other, he becomes an object in the Other's external consciousness. This is what Sartre calls the 'The Look' - the gaze from the Other. This Look objectifies him as the subject in the consciousness of the Other. The same way that the Other is objectified from the perspective of Sartre. Since this gaze works both ways, the idea of the Other existing as an object directly implies Sartre's being as object by induction. Moreover, this gaze is inherently an everyday part of being as we exist not alone but in the presence of others, one's being is intertwined with the Other. In a constantly flow of experiencing the universe through object-subject duality. Sartre realizes that identity itself is affected, he writes, "The man is defined by his relation to the world and by his relation to myself." (Sartre 306), emphasizing that a person's identity is shaped not in isolation but in connection to the Other.

Sartre believes that our essence is defined not only through our actions, but through the way we are seen by others. For him, essence is not predefined and does not proceed existence.

Instead, the self is cultivated by this dynamic relationship with the Other. Thus, the Other can endow onto us aspects of our being. He describes this as the Look having the ability to take us out of our world and put us in a world which is beyond us. For example, when we feel shame or judged by the other. This is because our consciousness and our ego can recognize that we are indeed an object being perceived and we care how this gaze perceives us precisely due to the impact on our essence. Sartre puts this well when he says, “for I accept and wish that others should confer upon me a being which I recognize” (Sartre 308), illustrating our desire for congruency with the person we think ourselves to be. Since the Other has so much effect on who we are, and we can be perceived in millions of ways by the hundreds of people we encounter, we see the repeated theme of multiplicitous selves that we spoke about with Fanon.

However, it is important to highlight where Fanon and Sartre’s concepts of existence diverge to understand how nuanced the Other is. Fanon’s Other, in the form of the white man, predetermined and imposed on his essence. This creates complexity to Sartre’s idea that essence is never predetermined. It is critical to note that Sartre does not have the experience of being imposed oppressive restraints from the Other- one’s that precede existence - as he was a white French man. Therefore, while he realizes the Other has effect on the Self, he cannot conceive essence being predetermined by the Other. Fanon’s case of historical biases preceding him supplement Sartre’s concept of the effect of the Other. Frida Kahlo, being an indigenous Mexican woman in a time of political turmoil, understood the full extent of multiplicitous self, including predetermined biases of essence.

Having established an understanding of Fanon and Sartre’s concept of multiple selves shaped by the gaze of the Other, we will now examine Kahlo’s portrayal of this theme in her painting *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong*. First and foremost, Kahlo depicts different perceptions

and thus identities by painting a dual portrait. She chooses to show two contrasting versions of herself further juxtaposed by the lateral division of the painting by night and day. On the left, Frida paints herself lying down, bloodied and cut open on a surgical table. She is vulnerable as she lies naked, covered only by a white sheet which exposes her open wounds. Interestingly, she is turning away so that we don't see her face, leaving only our perception of her to define her. This is also against the backdrop of the sun, meaning daytime, when she is around and thus perceived by others.

Here, we begin to see Frida's portrayal of the Other and what it means for her. Frida Kahlo's life was marked by tragedy and suffering, she had a near fatal accident when she was eighteen which left her with many injuries having to undergo many surgeries and living with chronic pain. On this side of the painting, she shows the perception society, friends, lovers, and strangers have had towards her based on her disabilities. In fact, the way in which she paints herself not only shows how she is viewed by others, but how she herself has identified as-broken, injured, vulnerable, crippled. She acknowledges that this is the gaze her Other has put on her and does not shy away from the fact that these are all things that are part of her identity. We can directly tie this to Sartre and Fanon's notion of the Other affecting essence. Frida embraces that these views have had an impact on her identity. This version of herself is as true as the one on the right side of the painting. In fact, this is only one conclusion of what the Other was imposing on her essence that we can pull from this painting.

Kahlo was no stranger to the gaze of the Other, in this specific painting she is showing the gaze seeing her as wounded, frail, and debilitated. Yet, this is only the first implication of the Other that Kahlo describes. The Other also represents the predeterminations society imposed on her identity as a Mexican Woman. Kahlo regularly painted about the societal expectations that

were thrust upon females surrounding gender, beauty, cultural identity, and fertility. In this, she relates to Fanon's notion of essence being predetermined as she felt the weight of cultural discrimination and a sexist society. However, like Sartre and Fanon she deeply rejected these impositions. Despite society having more judgements on her after she began painting about topics of miscarriages, disability, and non-conformity in political injustices and 'classical female roles', she persisted. Kahlo dedicated her life to the last argument from the philosophers that we will touch on in this paper: the need to define one's essence for oneself.

Fanon and Sartre shared the mutual thought that despite the Other's effect on our identity, we have the freedom and the necessity to define our essence for ourselves. Fanon writes about how black people's autonomy, identities, and humanities are attempted to be stripped by the colonizer. He explains how the essence of black people in a colonized society is fixed in advance by the colonizer. However, rather than accepting these racist projections, Fanon chooses to reclaim the right of self-definition. He writes, "I resolved, ... to assert myself as a BLACK MAN, since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution; To make myself known." (Fanon 115), as an act of resistance and declaration of his own humanity forcing others to see his essence as he defines it. While Fanon feels that the gaze of the white man on the black man is fixed, and thus attempts to fix the black man's being, he chooses to deny that definition. He refuses his identity to be fixed by the Other with all his might because he feels in his soul his potential beyond that. While not in *The Fact of Blackness*, in the last chapter of the book *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon writes that he is not a prisoner to history. Neither his meaning nor his destiny lies in the past, it lies with him, as he is his own foundation (Fanon 231).

Similarly, in another one of Sartre's texts studied this semester *Existentialism is a Humanism*, he writes that human essence is ultimately defined by the individual and is a

continuous, on-going project. Despite the Other, Sartre believes that man is responsible for what he is. Man exists first, realizes consciousness, surges up in the world, and then defines himself. Meaning humans exist before they can be defined and thus are self-creating. In fact, Sartre defines the first and most absolute principle of existentialism to be the one that places man in possession of himself and responsibility for his own essence on his shoulders (Sartre 395). This responsibility extends beyond us, for existentialism is a doctrine of action within a universe of human subjectivity. So, we are called to promote the self-fulfilment of ourselves, other and all of mankind. Furthermore, Sartre argues there is not specific end goal or essence to achieve. Instead, Sartre views human existence as a never-ending project. He writes that there is no end to the process of self-definition because man is always yet to be determined (Sartre 415).

Kahlo's work reflects Fanon and Sartre's rejection of a fixed self caused by the Other. Rather than presenting a single version of herself, Kahlo's painting shows her refusing to limit herself to one identity. We already discussed the left side of the painting depicting a wounded Kahlo, showing one side to her, heavily influenced by the Other's gaze. We also defined that for Kahlo, the Other imposed on her feelings of disability and societal predeterminations on her as an Indigenous woman. Now we look at the right side of the painting, the side governed by the moon, showing a different Kahlo. Here she is sitting up, strong and dressed in her traditional Mexican Tajuana dress. The red of her dress and the flowers in her hair matching the red of the blood in her back in the version of Frida beside her. Showing parallel between the selves but in different tones, now she is showing us her empowered Self. Instead of being turned away, she faces the viewer, her face beautiful and confident despite the tears down her face. This shows she has accepted her freedom to define herself, even in the face of painful circumstances. Which in turn transforms the pain into art that creates meaning. Her signature choice of showing her facial

hair and unibrow- arguably Kahlo's most defining feature that makes her recognizable and iconic to this day- shows her refusal to conform to conventional standards of femininity. As discussed earlier, Kahlo was a feminist who rejected traditional roles thrust onto females in that era and instead painted herself unapologetically authentic.

Another example of Kahlo embracing her freedom to self-define and create meaning is in her hands. In her hands, she is holding a medical brace, one that she still wears as part of the lasting effects of her accident. By doing this, Kahlo changes the narrative of her health conditions. She is showing her essence, one which is regal and proud despite the challenges and limitations of her body. Kahlo transcends her being by doing this, a phenomenon shared by the philosophers. Lastly, she is holding a flag, in which words written in the same red of her blood read, "tree of hope, remain strong". With this, Kahlo completes a complex painting with a complex message. Not only is she telling herself to remain strong in her hope of self-asserting her essence and living through her painful conditions, but she is sending a political message. Kahlo, like Sartre, believed in using her freedom to promote the dignity and freedom of others. She was active in politics and used her art to highlight the experiences of oppressed groups, including indigenous Mexicans and women. She did not paint for fame or glory, she painted to express herself and in hope her art would contribute to the struggle for peace and liberty. In this painting, her flag is also her way of directly speaking to the oppressed, telling them to remain strong for hope remains. Highlighting yet another self, one which resonates with Fanon, of a political advocate for marginalized people.

In closing, Kahlo's painting reflects the arguments discussed by Fanon and Sartre of the existence and effect the Other has on identity, while retaining the need and freedom of self-assertion. Kahlo's sense of the Other was from an amalgamation of society, lovers, and strangers

which surrounded her life. Who's gaze imposed predeterminations of disability, gender expectations, and cultural oppression. On one side, she paints herself as the cut open subject reflecting these impositions. While on the other, she affirms her radical freedom to shape her own identity and fight for the freedom of others by painting a self that embraces all aspects of her life on her terms. Ultimately, Kahlo uses this art piece to show viewer her multiple selves while controlling the narrative, asserting and defining her essence.

Works Cited

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