

## **Frida Kahlo and Pendular Disability Identity: A Textual Examination of *El Diario de Frida Kahlo***

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Frida Kahlo is undoubtedly one of Mexico's most famous female artists, and her rising popularity led to the 1995 publication of the diary she kept the last ten years of her life. Nonetheless, while the diary has received some critical scrutiny, the text has not been analyzed as an independent unit from the book's visual components. As a result, Kahlo's disability identity has also not been explored, but rather was assumed due to the extensive injuries Kahlo suffered as a young woman. These examinations have also tended to view Kahlo as having a fragmented sense of self and have allowed the diary's artwork to guide this assumption. In dialogue with prior studies of Kahlo's diary, this analysis will view the diary as an independent text and apply Karen K. Yoshida's model of pendular reconstruction of self and identity to demonstrate how Kahlo describes her disability identity and better understand what others have called her 'fragmentation.'

**Keywords:** Frida Kahlo; Disability Identity; Diary and Narrative

### **Introduction**

It is nearly impossible to walk into an art museum souvenir shop and not find prints by Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). Kahlo, born in Mexico City to a Mexican mother and German and Hungarian-Jewish father, is known as much for her artistic output as she is for her tumultuous personal life (Fuentes, 2005). Kahlo's mercurial life has fascinated art historians and biographers alike. There has been great critical interest in her marriage to Diego Rivera, her numerous lovers, and her health. Kahlo's many physical ailments resulted partially from childhood polio, which became further complicated by a terrible bus accident at age eighteen that fractured her back, leg, foot and pelvis and damaged her internal organs. Considered one of the most famous artists of the twentieth century, Kahlo did not begin to paint until she was convalescing after the bus accident. She processed this incident for the rest of her days, including in the diary she kept the last ten years of her life, from the mid 1940s until her death in 1954 (Crosby, 2006: 161-62).

The diary was kept hidden in archival storage for forty years after Kahlo's death. Crosby

(2006) states that the reason for the lack of access to the diary may have been because those in charge of her estate either did not see value in the diary or because of the private material within. With Kahlo's rising iconic status and pop culture fame, a facsimiled version was released in 1995, under the title *El diario de Frida Kahlo: Un íntimo autorretrato*, as well as an English translation titled *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*. Nevertheless, Kahlo's friends had removed some pages around plate 35, and it is unknown whether they were protecting Kahlo or protecting themselves. The diary is an unusual hybrid, mixing sketches and paintings with written sections that range from a few words to a few pages<sup>1</sup>. Because of its eclectic nature, Kahlo's unique manner of self-expression in the diary has escaped classification. Margaret Crosby (2006) has called it a visual autopathography, Hayden Herrera (1983: 250) declares it poem in prose, Sarah M. Lowe (2005b: 25) states it was an entirely private book, while Adriana Dragomir (2009) disagrees with this assertion stating that Kahlo in fact creates a persona for public consumption throughout her diary. What all of these analyses have in common is that they view the visual and textual components of Kahlo's diary as a single unit, reading Kahlo's written sections as subtitles rather than freestanding units worthy of independent literary examination. While María Cristina Secci (2009) in her book *Con la imagen en el espejo* (With the image in the mirror) applies a literary analysis to the diary, she does so with supporting evidence from Kahlo's paintings. This sort of combined analysis seems to focus more on how Kahlo *shows* her identity rather than how she *describes* it, thus losing the important subtexts and messages in her writing.

The text in Kahlo's diary can and should be viewed as a freestanding unit and this sort of approach allows for a more nuanced view of Kahlo's understanding of her disability. This analysis will be applying such a perspective to the text of Kahlo's diary and, by doing so, reveal that what many have called Kahlo's fragmented sense of self (Ankori, 2002; Yang, 1997) can be better understood via the pendular reconstruction of self and identity, as described by Karen K. Yoshida (1993). In the text of Kahlo's diary, the reader sees the author swing like a pendulum between disabled and non-disabled senses of self, dynamically and simultaneously, as she attempts to understand the role of her disability identity during the last years of her life. Rather than focusing solely on the result of Kahlo's accident or the images it inspired, this approach also looks at the process of identity formation in a way that other analyses have lacked.<sup>2</sup> Instead of viewing disability identity as fixed, the pendular model of reconstruction of self and identity defines five disability identity outcomes (the former self, the supernormal identity, the middle self, the disabled identity as an aspect of the total self, and the disabled identity as total self) that are dynamic and mutually influential. An analysis of the textual components in Kahlo's diary via the pendular model demonstrates the vacillations and mixing of disabled and non-disabled senses of self. Such an approximation allows for an examination of her experience of becoming suddenly disabled that transcends the previously assumed fragmentation.

### **Trends and tendencies in *El diario de Frida Kahlo***

Before embarking on an examination of Kahlo's diary through the lens of the various outcomes proposed by Yoshida in the pendular model of reconstruction of self and identity, a general understanding of the flow, trends, and structure of the diary is helpful for those who may be unfamiliar with the text. Rather than being a summary of day-to-day events, the diary's 171 pages are scattered, filled with stream of consciousness style lists, powerful one-line phrases (such as plate 134, p. 274 of the diary where Kahlo writes the often quoted 'Pies para qué los quiero/Si tengo alas pa' volar' ['Feet what do I need them for/If I have wings to fly']), and unsent letters to Diego and other friends (Crosby, 2006: 274). The diary is one part sketchbook, one part journal with lists of colors (as seen on plate 15, p. 211) alongside love letters to Diego (as seen on plate 17, p. 213) and reflections on the accident (plate 94, p. 251). The diary begins with several pages of lists of word associations, which are then followed by many pages of letters to and about Rivera, who she calls 'el espejo de la noche. la luz violenta del relámpago. la humedad de la tierra' ['the mirror of the night. the violent flash of lightning. the dampness of the earth'] (plate 17, p. 213). These are descriptions of an all-encompassing love, which in many cases is expressed as maternal. Kahlo later rejects this stance, writing 'No soy solamente tu madre' ['I'm not just your mother'] (plate 57, p. 234). Vacillations such as these, are common in the diary. By getting a view into the artist and writer's mind, the reader sees her make sense of life in a journey that lacks a clear destination. This particular logic can make the diary feel like it jumps around, both by mixing visual/written elements and with its conflicted nature, but the contradictory quality humanizes Kahlo and effectively portrays the multifaceted and erratic pattern of the author's life.

Most of the pages of the diary lack dates, and so it is difficult to know how much time passed between the entries. In spite of its frequently incoherent nature, there are some common themes and trends throughout the diary. Kahlo includes more narrative over the course of the diary, with the first half being filled with lists and the second half being dominated by more traditional prose script, including the majority of the diary's letters. The reader will also find more descriptions of Kahlo's physical state and surgeries in the diary's second half, such as the entries on plates 95 to 97 (p. 252). This increasing amount of prose entries, rather than the long lists seen at the beginning of the diary, is possibly linked to the increasing amount of time Kahlo spent convalescing alone.

Additionally, Kahlo repeats themes of pain, erotic love, memory, and maternal feelings throughout the diary alongside symbolic wings (plate 34, p. 223) and tears (plate 54, p. 231). Kahlo occasionally explores these themes with unexpected metaphors, but also with simple descriptors. For example, on one plate Kahlo poetically writes that Rivera has 'ojos espadas verdes dentro de mi carne' ['eyes green swords inside my flesh'] and then on this same plate simply and erotically states 'Tu llenas y yo recibo' ['You fulfill and I receive'] (plate 20, p. 214). Kahlo shows similar creativity and frankness when describing physical pain, writing

‘Se me han hecho siglos de tortura y en momentos casi perdí la razón. Sigo sintiendo ganas de suicidarme’ [‘It seemed to me centuries of torture and at times I nearly went crazy. I still feel like committing suicide’] (plate 144, p. 278). The repetition of physical pain and Kahlo’s complicated relationship with Rivera- from whom she was estranged during periods of the diary, but to whom she calls in her moments of greatest pain and despair- can feel like a broken record, but it also creates a fitting cycle. Kahlo never escaped the pain she experienced, but this narrative of physical discomfort is broken up with happy childhood memories describing imaginary friends and time with her father as well as occasionally inspirational quotes, such as the previously mentioned ‘Pies para qué los quiero,’ [‘Feet what do I need them for’] that transcend physical pain and the corporeal self.

It is this contradiction in Kahlo’s diary, between the inspirational/in pain and the optimistic/anguished, as well as the mixed and hybrid nature of the work with combinations of the written and the visual – which includes paintings of broken bodies – that has led many to consider Kahlo as having a fragmented sense of self. Yang (1997: 127-30) writes:

Thus, while Kahlo does everything to represent the self, the more mutilated and fragmented her body remains, the more desperately she longs for aesthetic perfection and existential wholeness, which is precisely the unity of the self [...] It is a double process: visual/mental from fragmentation to wholeness and from wholeness to fragmentation; from pain to painting and from painting to pain.

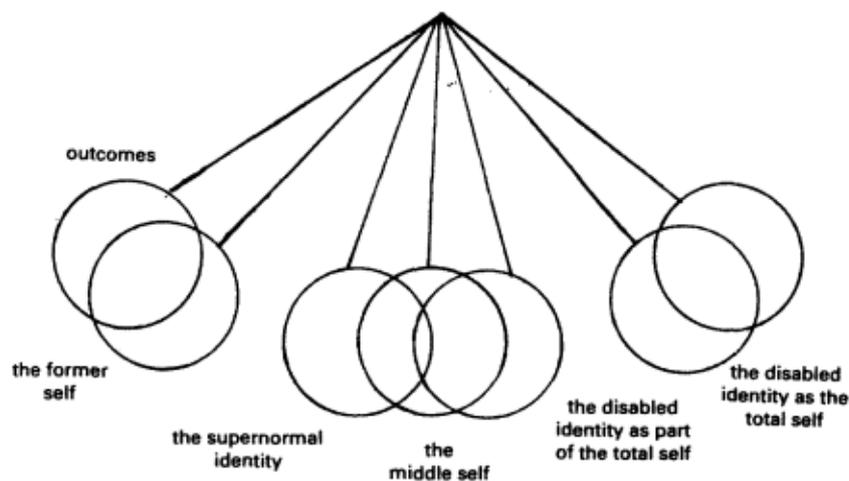
Other scholars have expressed similar sentiments.<sup>3</sup> However, this is a highly problematic way of looking at disability identity in general and at Kahlo’s identity in particular. It posits that one can only be fragmented or whole and that ‘aesthetic perfection’ is a necessary requirement for being a whole person with a unified sense of self. Even though the newly disabled individual may not have the same self-conception they once possessed pre-disability, he or she can still consider him/herself a whole person, even when it is difficult to make sense of such drastically changed circumstances. Setting up a binary between fragmentation and wholeness ignores that both fragmentation and wholeness can occur simultaneously, and that the process of disability identity formation is one of constant negotiation with a variety of ambivalent middle points between fragmentation/wholeness and disabled/non-disabled. The following application of the pendular reconstruction of self and identity allows the reader to understand these ambivalent confluences of identity that create the middle points between fragmentation/wholeness and disabled/non-disabled in Kahlo’s diary.

### **The pendular reconstruction of self and identity: an overview**

Before embarking on an analysis of specific textual examples in *El diario de Frida Kahlo* and the diary’s unique qualities via the pendular model, a general overview of Yoshida’s model is

necessary. Yoshida (1993) describes five different disability identity reconstruction outcomes in her study of adults post-spinal cord injury: the former self, the supernormal identity, the middle self, the disabled identity as part of the total self, and the disabled identity as total self. It is important to note that ‘outcome’ does not signify final point in this study. Rather Yoshida (1993: 223) states that the person with a disability ‘may oscillate between these identity views depending upon the definition of life situations’ and, even after reaching the middle state where the disabled and non-disabled components of self are most joined, the individual will ‘still carry the identity views with them’ with the pendulum of disability identity swinging across the spectrum throughout the individual’s life. Instead of viewing disability identity as a series of fragments, it is like a series of Russian nesting dolls in which each identity rests inside and with the others, continuing to be mutually influential.

*Figure 1: The pendular reconstruction of self and identity. Source: Yoshida (1993)*



*Theoretical considerations and benefits of the pendular reconstruction of self and identity*

The pendular reconstruction of self and identity possesses several qualities that make it especially appropriate for understanding Kahlo’s diary. Yoshida (1993: 222) developed the model by interviewing adults – not children – with spinal cord injuries. Though the youngest of the respondents was eight years old when the spinal cord injury occurred, the average age at onset of injury was twenty-two. This was Kahlo’s age when she married Rivera, and four years after the bus accident. Additionally, Yoshida defines the role of core components of self (the ideas and characteristics that we define ourselves by) that are created by life experiences. As an example of someone who lacks these core components, Yoshida (1993: 224) describes a respondent who was sixteen at the time of his spinal cord injury, and states that the respondent experienced ‘a lack of defined aspects of self upon which to rebuild a valued self.’

With this in mind, it seems that Yoshida's theory is best applied to adult populations. Such an application of Yoshida's theory is confirmed by the fact that researchers most often apply the concept to adult individuals who were not born with their disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

Even though Kahlo experienced physical difference as a young girl, it seems that the bus accident she faced as a young adult influenced the vast majority of the disability identity expressed in her diary, thus allowing Yoshida's model to be especially useful. While it is true that Kahlo experienced physical maladies from polio and scoliosis as a child, these events are better defined as illnesses or impairments, while her life post-accident is better framed through the lens of disability. These terms come from the social model of disability. This model, in the simplest terms, differentiates between impairment (physical limitations) and disability (the values and judgments placed on those limitations by society) (Shakespeare, 2013: 215). Though the social model has been critiqued in recent years for negating the importance of the body in influencing our identities, this distinction is still a useful one in separating Kahlo's childhood injuries from her adult change of identity<sup>5</sup>. Before Kahlo's accident, the young woman had been a 'carefree student at Mexico's finest educational institution, the National Preparatory School. Irreverent, ebullient, fun-loving, intellectually avid, with a large group of comrades, she flew through corridors like a bird and created anarchy in the classrooms' (Goldsmith, 2004: 725). Her childhood illnesses, while causing physical impairment, did not keep the young Kahlo from filling her goals, caused chronic pain, or seemed to have placed substantial stigma, whether societally or self-imposed, on her. In contrast, Kahlo described her life in a letter to her boyfriend around a year after the accident: 'Yo envejecí en unos instantes, y ahora todo es insípido y raso,' ['I became old in instants and everything today is bland and lucid.'] indicating a fundamental change of self (cited in Rodríguez, 2011: 69; English version in Herrera, 1983: 75).

These struggles with the sudden changes to identity that are caused by disability and pain are magnified when the individual becomes suddenly disabled after adulthood, which Yoshida's model recognizes. Generally, as a child, our identities are highly malleable. What can drastically recalibrate the identity of an adult can be reconceptualized as a new 'normal' when we are young. However, when adults become suddenly disabled- after images of self have been constructed, plans created, and practical goals set- the change can be even more challenging to wrap our minds around. Without a doubt, Kahlo had to reimagine her adult life after she had her accident. The young woman's artistic skills did not take hold until after her previous dreams of medical school disappeared post-injury (Goldsmith, 2004: 723). As an artist, Kahlo frequently described her accident and its repercussions as having much greater influence on her creative life than her childhood experiences. As Salomon Grimberg (cited in Yang, 1997: 126) summarizes: 'Kahlo said her art emerged from three experiences: the motor vehicle accident, her inability to bear children, and her relationship to Rivera, which she called her "second accident."' Moreover, Kahlo only mentions her childhood illness twice in the diary (plate 94, p. 251 and plate 104, p. 255), and these illnesses do not have the same

degree of influence as the over thirty surgeries Kahlo had after the accident (Goldsmith, 2004: 725).

After Kahlo's accident and in her diary, the reader sees her grapple with value judgments placed on her body by herself and society: her inability to bear children, to be an effective revolutionary, to be productive enough, or to be healthy enough for Rivera. These inner battles were only magnified by the chronic and frequently severe pain that Kahlo faced, and that often isolated her from the greater world. In the same letter to her boyfriend where Kahlo describes herself as having instantly aged, she speaks about the new painful world that she inhabits (Herrera, 1983: 75), echoing what Thernstrom (2010: 9) calls the 'magical mountain of isolation and despair' that chronic pain sufferers find themselves on. This degree of separation is distinct from what Kahlo faced as a child. Though Kahlo would experience periods of relatively good health after the accident, the diary reveals her struggles to put her life and pain into words. As Elaine Scarry (1983: 4) poignantly states in her seminal work *The Body in Pain*, '[w]hatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability.' Though the reader will never be able to fully understand the unsharability of Kahlo's pain, the pendular model allows us to see the vacillations and ambiguities in her construction of identity that incorporates disability and chronic pain.

### **A textual analysis of the diary via the pendular reconstruction of self and identity**

Because of the dual directional nature of the pendular model, Kahlo's diary does not proceed smoothly from one end of the pendulum to the other, but rather jumps around from one point to another depending on the circumstances surrounding her at the time. Due to this quality of the diary, this study will not utilize a linear analysis of the work—starting at the beginning and concluding at the end—but rather will show examples of each outcome within Kahlo's words to show her pendular, rather than fragmented, identity. Additionally, this application will be beginning on the left side of the pendulum with the former self, proceeding to the supernormal identity, middle self, and disabled identity as an aspect of total self with disabled identity as total self being the last outcome examined. Kahlo's diary is very rich in descriptions, and all of the examples that demonstrate the five outcomes in the pendular model of disability identity reconstruction, do not fit in the confines of this paper. For this reason, the following sections will give one example and a detailed discussion that demonstrates each component of the pendular model, though many others can be found throughout the text.

#### *Outcome 1: The Former Self*

Yoshida (1993: 224) defines the former self as 'who the person was prior to the injury [...]

This identity view consists of “core” and “peripheral” aspects of the nondisabled self.’ The clearest examples of this former self are found in the sections of the diary in which Kahlo describes her childhood. Between plates eighty-two to eight-five (pp. 245-47) of the diary, Kahlo describes her childhood experiences with an imaginary friend. Kahlo refers to this story as ‘Las dos Fridas’ [‘The Two Fridas’] and describes this parallel self:

Era ágil. y bailaba como si no tuviera peso ninguno. Yo la seguía en todos sus movimientos y le contaba, mientras ella bailaba, mis problemas secretos. ¿Cuales? No recuerdo. [...] Yo era feliz. [...] Han pasado 34 años desde que viví esa amistad mágica y cada vez que la recuerdo, se aviva y se acrecenta más y más dentro de mi mundo. (plates 83-85, pp. 246-47)

[She was agile and danced as if she were weightless. I followed her in every movement and while she danced, I told her my secret problems. Which ones? I can’t remember. [...] I was happy. [...] It has been 34 years since I lived that magical friendship and every time I remember it it comes alive and grows more and more inside my world.]

The fact that in this entry dated 1950, Kahlo is describing, a happy childhood memory prior to her accident, is the first indicator that she is in the outcome of the former self. What is more interesting, is how she describes this childhood memory from a current state of loneliness and focuses principally on the physical nature of her imaginary friendship. In 1950, Kahlo underwent six operations to her spine and spent the majority of the year in the hospital (Lowe, 2005a: 292). By focusing on her childhood self, Kahlo is able to escape the isolation she must have felt during this time. It is also important to note that because this story is titled ‘Las dos Fridas,’ [‘The Two Fridas’] the dancing imaginary friend is a mirror image of Kahlo. It is not just the friend who is dancing, but Kahlo as well. In addition to dancing with/as her alter ego, in this same story, Kahlo describes how she was able to run (plate 84, p. 246).

By entering into her childhood memories, Kahlo is able to remember a time when she was able to move and follow all of the movements of her imaginary friend. Kahlo also tells us that she relives this memory frequently, and that it continues growing inside of her. The verbal tenses in this description provide an interesting way to understand the excerpt. Kahlo describes these memories with both the imperfect (*era, bailaba, contaba* [was, danced, sang]) and the preterit (*viví* [lived]). The use of the imperfect with the verbs ‘bailar’ [‘dance’] and ‘ser’ [‘to be’] indicates a habitual and constant place of movement and connection with her imaginary friend. Additionally, the phrase ‘Yo era feliz’ [‘I was happy’] indicates that happiness was an essential and constant part of Kahlo’s childhood identity. Rather than saying ‘estaba,’ [‘I was,’ but implying a temporary state] which would indicate a more variable level of happiness, Kahlo uses ‘era,’ [‘I was,’ but implying permanence or habit]

indicating that her happiness was a relatively steady quality. However, Kahlo indicates that this time is done, with her concluding use of the preterit. Thirty-four years have passed since Kahlo lived in that time, which she closes by saying ‘viví’ [‘I lived’]. Nonetheless, the reader sees the memory come alive again with the present tense verbs ‘se acrecenta’ [‘grows’] and ‘se aviva’ [‘becomes alive’]. Even though the easy ability to exist in movement and happiness is gone, this former self still lives within Kahlo and her world, continuing to gain strength. In this way, Kahlo’s former self (in childhood) and present self (in adulthood) do not exist as separate pieces, but rather cohabitate in the same being.

### *Outcome 2: The Supernormal Self*

The next outcome moving away from the former self is the supernormal identity. Yoshida (1993: 226) defines this outcome as ‘manifested when a respondent engages in activities of an extraordinary nature.’ The ‘super cripp’ phenomenon has been well observed in disability studies. In our ableist world, people love to see the super cripp who is pictured as overcoming physical limitations.<sup>6</sup> If this is still true in our supposedly ‘progressive’ time, imagine the world Kahlo inhabited in mid-twentieth century Mexico. After the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), the Mexican government promoted strong bodies as being key parts of a strong nation and the province of Veracruz even adopted a eugenics-based sterilization law.<sup>7</sup> The person who has been able-bodied and then becomes suddenly disabled has absorbed this rhetoric portraying disability as something to be overcome or eliminated throughout the lifespan and, therefore, is likely to seek out ways to minimize his or her disability.

In Yoshida’s study, the respondents describe doing physically taxing activities such as horseback riding in order to demonstrate both to themselves and to others that they are physically capable. The quote ‘Pies para qué los quiero/Si tengo alas pa’ volar’ [‘Feet what do I need them for/If I have wings to fly’]), on plate 134 of Kahlo’s diary (p. 274) can be understood via the idea of the supernormal identity. By the time Kahlo made this entry in 1953, gangrene had taken over her right foot, and her leg had to be amputated from the knee down (Lowe, 2005a: 274). Although Kahlo had been too sick to get out of bed or to do the sort of feats described by Yoshida’s respondents, the reader sees her expressing an extraordinary ability in this short, but powerful, quote. Kahlo rejects her feet as a useful part of her body and imagines herself with wings. Even though this statement is phrased as a question, Kahlo does not use a question mark, but marks the sentence with a period. In this way, the question is rhetorical. Kahlo’s feet do not serve a purpose for her, as she imagines herself as a supernormal being instead.

This sentence is a stark contrast to other sections in her diary, such as plate 169 where she writes ‘Te vas? No. ALAS ROTAS’ [‘Are you leaving? No. BROKEN WINGS’] (p. 269). Instead, on plate 134, Kahlo writes about herself as having wings that allow her to escape

from her recently amputated leg. She sees herself as overcoming her disabled self the best way she can, given her circumstances. In a world that does not value her disabled body and in which she experiences extreme pain, she turns to escapism of the physical self. Given that she cannot actually prove her capability to engage in physical feats, she finds alternative paths – in this case, writing – to mentally achieve this supernormal identity. While this technique allows her to imagine a temporary escape, it does so at the cost of negating her current body post-amputation, which does not possess the wings she describes, but instead possesses pain, which firmly anchors her to the earth. Lowe (2005a: 274) signals that the statement on plate 134 could have divine connotations with pleas to the angels, giving the statement a dark foreshadowing. The following year, in 1954, Kahlo would die of a suspected suicide (Lowe, 2005a: 292). Perhaps Kahlo saw that, given the physical suffering and barriers surrounding her, that the only way to truly achieve this supernormal self was the final escape from her stigmatized and painful body.

### *Outcome 3: The Middle Self*

This lack of understanding and support for disabled bodies was a huge obstacle for Kahlo in achieving the next outcome on Yoshida's pendulum, the middle self. Yoshida (1993: 229-30) defines the middle self:

It refers to individuals who act upon both the nondisabled and disabled aspects of self. The middle self, however, incorporates three additional elements. First, the individual with a spinal cord injury understands that he/she is in a wheelchair and this is the way it is and will be. [...] Second, the individual understands that there are limitations associated with having a spinal cord injury. [...] The third element of the middle self is a 'collective disabled consciousness.'

The reader can see components of these first two characteristics throughout Kahlo's diary, but the third component is hard to find. In a post-revolution Mexico that valued able bodies, it is hard to imagine a cohesive disability community that would allow Kahlo to enter into its collective disabled consciousness. Steven E. Brown (2002) argues that disability culture is essential for those with disabilities, but that disability culture and disability rights are parallel forces. Mexican society in Kahlo's time did not have a substantial basis for disability rights and, therefore, it is not a surprise that disability culture was lacking. The closest Kahlo comes to expressing an ability to enter into the collective consciousness of any group occurs in the pages where she identifies with the Communist revolution. While this is not a disability community, a disability community would have been challenging to come by in Kahlo's Mexico. In spite missing this final component of the middle self, the reader can still identify the first two components of the middle self, the point of the most acceptance of disability identity in Kahlo's diary. Yoshida (1993: 223) herself states that the pendular model 'allows

for variability in response over time and situationally,' thus permitting an appropriate analysis that recognizes Kahlo's cultural context.

In plates ninety-five to ninety-seven (p. 252), the reader sees Kahlo balance accepting her physical limitations with the self-awareness that is a crucial part of the middle self. As Yoshida (1993: 229) states, the disabled person in the middle self knows that the situation is the way it is, and that his or her disability will continue to exist in the future. Kahlo writes:

1950-51. He estado enferma un año. Siete operaciones en la columna vertebral. El Doctor Farill me salvó. Me volvió a dar alegría de vivir. Todavía estoy en la silla de ruedas, y no sé si pronto volveré a andar. Tengo el corset de yeso que a pesar de ser una *lata pavorosa*, me ayuda a sentirme mejor de la espina. No tengo dolores. Solamente un cansancio de la... tiznada [...] Sin embargo, tengo ganas de vivir.

[1950-51. I have been sick for a year now. Seven operations on my spinal column. Doctor Farill saved me. He brought me back the joy of life. I am still in the wheelchair, and I don't know if I'll be able to walk again soon. I have a plaster corset even through it is a *frightful nuisance*, it helps my spine. I don't feel pain. Only this... bloody tiredness [...] I'm still eager to live..]

The writer expresses the middle self in various points of this quote. First, she acknowledges that she is in a wheelchair and that she does not know what, if anything, her recovery will bring. Whereas Yoshida's respondents were all paralyzed, Kahlo's injuries were unique with questionable medical options, therefore it makes sense that she does not totally reject the possibility of walking in her middle self. Kahlo also sees the value and utility in the plaster corset that she is forced to wear, even though the emphasis on '*lata pavorosa*' ['frightful nuisance'] and the use of the word '*tiznada*' ['bloody'] also expresses frustration. Nonetheless, rather than seeing it as a totally negative piece of adaptive equipment, she, like Yoshida's respondents, accepts her adaptive equipment – the wheelchair and the plaster corset – as necessary accessories for her life. Kahlo's optimism here is directly connected to her identification as a productive member of the Communist revolution, and the fact that she is able to feel optimism and productivity as a part of the revolution, also places her in the realm of the middle self.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Outcome 4: Disabled Identity as an Aspect of Total Self*

As we follow Yoshida's pendulum, moving away from the former self to disabled identity as total self, the next stop is disabled identity as part or aspect of total self. While this outcome is similar to the middle self, it is different in some important ways. Whereas the middle self implies acceptance and balance, disabled identity as part of total self, incorporates disabled

and nondisabled aspects of self ‘in varying proportions’, and is connected with how the disabled individual reconstructs his or her life domains – especially in terms of future employment and productivity – rather than finding acceptance for how things are, as the middle self emphasizes (Yoshida, 1993: 28). This is the most frequent outcome in the diary as it is the most flexible outcome to contextualize. The present analysis will direct its examination to a section of Kahlo’s diary in which she focuses on how she will use her body to be a productive and incorporated part of the world. In this excerpt, Kahlo’s disability identity is a relatively small part of the description, and the reader can see that it is not merely a case of totally disabled or totally focused on the former self, but that these two components can vary in proportion throughout the lifespan.

After Kahlo had her gangrene infected right leg amputated in 1953, the reader sees her express great despair at her physical state— as will be demonstrated in the next section on disabled identity as total self. However, the reader also sees Kahlo discuss her ability to be a productive person and does not allow her physical losses to dominate her identity. This demonstrates disabled identity as an aspect of total self:

Estamos ya en Marzo Primavera 21. He logrado mucho. Seguridad al caminar. Seguridad de pintar. Amo a Diego más que a mi misma. Mi voluntad es grande. Mi voluntad permanece. Gracias al amor magnifico de Diego. Al trabajo honrado e inteligente del Dr Farill. Al intento tan honesto y cariñoso del Dr Ramón Parrés y al cariñoso Dr de toda mi vida David Glusker y al Dr Elosser. (plate 145, p. 278)

[It is already March Springtime 21. I have achieved a lot. Confidence in walking. Confidence in painting. I love Diego more than myself. My will is strong. My will remains. Thanks to Diego’s magnificent love. To the integrity and intelligent work of Dr Farill. To the earnest and affectionate efforts of Dr Ramón Parrés and to the kindness of David Glusker who has been my doctor all my life and to Dr Eloesser.]

First, there are some structural components of this brief section that communicate Kahlo’s location in the outcome disabled identity as part of the total self. Kahlo writes this section in list form. She acknowledges her disability via her mentioning the various doctors, upon whom she had to depend throughout the years post-accident. She gives them thanks, and by doing so, recognizes their important role in her health management. However, the mention of disability does not dominate this section. Rather, Kahlo mentions what she achieved (walking and painting) alongside mentions of medical treatment.

This ability to focus on other aspects of her life domains, such as her working life and relationship with Rivera, also signal that Kahlo is located in the realm of disabled identity as part of the total self. When the disabled person is in this outcome, the individual sees the

disability as a relatively neutral component that still permits him/her to reach goals. Importantly, these goals may not be the same ones as existed prior to the disability. Yoshida (1993: 228) identifies, for example, a woman classified as in this outcome, and this particular respondent was forced to change jobs post-spinal cord injury. As previously mentioned, Kahlo was also forced to drop her medical school dreams after the accident. Nonetheless, this excerpt shows that at some points, she was able to create new goals, and that painting and her relationship with Rivera are both significant components of her sense of self.

*Outcome 5: Disabled Identity as the Total Self*

Kahlo demonstrates the last outcome on Yoshida's pendulum— disabled identity as total self— in some of her most tragic and pained entries. As Yoshida (1993: 224-25) states, the disabled identity as the total self 'is seen primarily as a negative identity. It is revealed in primarily two situations: when a respondent treats him/her self as disabled by expecting assistance [...] and/or believes that other people should know what a person with a spinal cord injury can and cannot do.' On the diary's plate 133 (p. 273), Kahlo writes what is best described as a poem. Because it appears that Kahlo is creating verses, this will be maintained by keeping the emphasis, spacing, and line structure shown in the diary:

Años.  
*Esperar* con la angustia  
guardada, la columna  
rota, y la inmensa mirada,  
*Sin andar*, en el vasto  
sendero...  
moviendo mi vida cercada  
de acero.

Diego!

[Years.  
*Waiting* with anguish  
hidden away, my spine  
broken, and the immense glance  
*Footless* through the vast  
path...  
Carrying on my life enclosed  
in steel.

Diego!]

Kahlo uses short verses, with the first and the last, each being just a single word. This creates a feeling of hesitancy and despair in the poem that reflects Kahlo's experience of her disability and physical pain as all consuming. Adjectives like 'angustia' ['anguish'] only magnify this aspect. Additionally, Kahlo describes 'el vasto / sendero,' ['the vast / path'] creating a description of her on an empty path; however, by emphasizing 'Sin andar,' [translated as 'Footless,' but also means 'Without walking'] she deems that it is a path that she is stuck on, unable to get to any destination. The short verses are almost like footsteps, but Kahlo states that she is unable to go anywhere. She also connects her physical self to her life with the line 'moviendo mi vida cercada / de acero' ['moving my life enclosed / in steel']. It is not just her body that is closed in steel – most likely referring to the corsets Kahlo had to wear to support her back and/or the metal installed internally to hold her body together – but her whole life. This page was written in 1953, as Kahlo was approaching the future amputation of her leg, and was having more and more difficulties with her foot. The reader sees disability and the physical self consume the writer's identity.

Additionally, the loneliness Kahlo communicates, as well as her plea to Rivera, reflects other qualities in Yoshida's description of disabled identity as total self. Yoshida states that this outcome is frequently caused by the disabled person either asking for help, or believing that other people should understand how a person with a disability feels. This aspect of disabled identity as total self is reflected in Kahlo's loneliness and anger, which was certainly magnified by her unsharable pain. She is unable to walk, needs assistance, and yet no one comes. With her broken back, she is by herself on the path. Her life is closed in steel with no one in sight to assist her. She calls out to Diego Rivera at the end, but the poem ends with no response from him. This intense isolation and anger, coupled with the fact that Kahlo describes her disability as physically and emotionally all-encompassing, clearly locate her in the section of disabled identity as total self.

## **Conclusion**

The written portion of Kahlo's diary ends with more thanks to her doctors, as she was waiting to be discharged from the hospital once again, and the bittersweet phrase 'Espero alegre la salida – y espero no volver jamas – FRIDA' ['I hope the leaving is joyful – and I hope never to return – FRIDA'] (plate 160, p. 285). Kahlo would die shortly thereafter of a possible suicide, which fills her seemingly hopeful words with a double meaning: that she was both waiting to leave the hospital, and waiting to leave this world. Kahlo's diary, in the end, does not give us neat conclusions or happy endings. She does not overcome her disability or become the perfect super cripp, which are the favorite disability tropes in an ableist world. Instead, she shows the complex ways in which disability identity reconstruction changes and varies throughout the lifetime, travelling from all consuming disability, to focusing on the former self, and back again.

Rather than being fragmented or disjointed as some critics have argued, Kahlo, by contrast, is an example of an adult who becomes suddenly disabled and who, as Yoshida (1993: 219) states, is dealing with ‘disability [as] a continuous adaptive process.’ Via this brief examination of Kahlo’s diary, it is clear that her identities are not fragmented, but interrelated, stacking inside one another and continuing to be mutually influencing. As Yoshida (1993: 223) argues, especially at the outcome of the middle self, the outcomes ‘still carry the other identity views with them.’ In this way, the pendular model provides a useful tool for understanding and categorically analyzing Kahlo’s diary. Though Yoshida’s model demonstrates that new depths of analysis are possible, there is still much to be done. For example, Yoshida names processes that influence the different disability outcomes, which would also be productive points of examination. Conversely, Yoshida’s theory, though beneficial, does not explore questions of gender and sexuality in the identity of people with disabilities, and thus were not included in the scope of this analysis. Both of these components would be fundamental in a holistic understanding of Kahlo’s disability identity, and this deficit demonstrates that there is still much to learn from the diary.

As the field of disability studies continues to grow, questions of understanding the role of disability in the lives and creations of artists and writers will become increasingly salient in our understanding of Latin American creators. This essay is just an initial point of departure with unlimited potential that presents new challenges and applications for disability studies in the field of Latin American literature and literary analysis. By applying the pendular model of disability identity reconstruction to Kahlo’s diary, it is clear that the application of disability models can yield new and fruitful information from texts, and that the application of diverse models can yield productive discoveries. This does mean that the pendular model is or should be the only model applied to Kahlo’s diary or other works created by writers who became disabled as adults. Rather, this analysis shows how one approach can give new life and meaning to a text and asks what other writing and writers would benefit from a similar technique. The work of understanding Kahlo’s and other writers with disabilities is just beginning, but via an interdisciplinary approach combining disability studies and literary analysis, we have the tools to begin reaching this deeper level of understanding.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For ease of reference, this paper will list both the page number and facsimiled plate number for all citations, and will incorporate English translations which all come from the translated version of the diary, alongside Kahlo’s original Spanish pulled from the second edition of *El diario*. Both the 2005 Spanish second edition and the 1995 English edition of Kahlo’s diary utilize the same plate and page numbers and the English translations will be included within brackets after all Spanish-language quotes. For speakers of Spanish, the original text contains some orthographic errors. In order to maintain the diary’s character and Kahlo’s voice, I am including any ‘mistakes’ and will not be signaling them with [sic].

<sup>2</sup> This lack is partially due to the field of Latin American disability studies. While some academics have looked at portrayals of disability in fictional literature created by Latin American or Chicano/a writers— including some by writers with disabilities— overall, there has been little work done exploring the significance of disability and the formation of disability identity in the lives of these writers. See Antebi and Jörgensen (2015), Minich (2013), and Antebi (2009) for examples of disability studies in Latin American and Chicana literature, which tends to focus heavily on physical difference and corporality.

<sup>3</sup> Ankori (2002), for example, presents one perspective on Kahlo as having a fragmented sense of identity.

<sup>4</sup> See Tagaki (2011) and Lightman et al. (2009) for more on short-term and episodic disabilities.

<sup>5</sup> Hughes and Patterson (1997) provide an example of this particular critique of the social model of disability.

<sup>6</sup> See Hardin et al. (2001) for an example of literature on the ‘super crip’ phenomenon.

<sup>7</sup> See Schell (2010) for a review of eugenics in post-revolution Mexico.

<sup>8</sup> See plate 97 (p. 252) for a further example of this. Kahlo states: ‘Debo luchar con todas mis fuerzas para que lo poco de positivo que mi salud me deje hacer sea en dirección a ayudar a la revolución. La única razón real para vivir.’ [‘I have to fight with all my strength to contribute the few positive things my health allows me to the revolution. The only true reason to live.’]

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