Hi, my name is Natalie (she/her) and I am an undergraduate at the University of Washington. I have created an altar for Frida Kahlo. Known for her self-portraits, Mexician Artist Frida Kahlo depicted both the female experience and the culture of Mexican and Indigenous people in the early 1900’s. Kahlo was multicultural, with her father being from Germany and her mother was part Mexican and part Native American. Kahlo was also disabled for most of her life, having had Polio at a young age and then having been in a serious bus accident as a teenager. Kahlo’s fame grew in the 1970’s when the feminist movement began to recognize her work in portraying the female Mexican experience. Being a multicultural, disabled artist, Kahlo is able to run parallel to the Chicana experiences that are showcased in altars. Kahlo’s altar displays many elements of her self-portraits, including parrots shown in her self portrait *Me and My Parrot*, roots that reflect mother earth and were shown in her self portrait *Roots,* and a paintbrush for her historical impact on art. Elements of Chicana Altars were used for four key elements: fire, water, wind and earth and represented by a candle, flag, glass with water, plants/flowers, bread, and stuffed animals. The backdrop and cloth for Kahlo’s altar is bright, vibrant fabric similar to the colors used in many of her paintings and serve to further represent her Mexican identity. Overall, I created an altar in memory of Frida Kahlo and her importance in remembering Mexican Women’s lived experiences in the early 1900’s as well as creating a route for more women to have this space.

**Introduction**

Known for her self-portraits, Mexician Artist Frida Kahlo depicted both the female experience and the culture of Mexican and Indigenous people in the early 1900’s. Kahlo was multicultural, with her father being from Germany and her mother was part Mexican and part Native American. Kahlo was also disabled for most of her life, having had Polio at a young age and then having been in a serious bus accident as a teenager. These incidents left her in chronic pain and physically disabled for the rest of her life. Kahlo’s fame grew in the 1970’s when the feminist movement began to recognize her work in portraying the female Mexican experience. Being a multicultural, disabled artist, Kahlo is able to run parallel to the Chicana experiences that are showcased in altars. Feminista altars began as a way for Chicana women to retake a portion of the home as a place to showcase their own lived experiences. The term Chicana is built from the ideals of the Mexican Women living in the United States and their own lived-experiences. Chicana Feminism is open and empowering with roots in the Chicana Culture. Altars are able to connect to Mexican Traditions and play an important role in connecting culture to feminism practices. An altar for Kahlo will discuss her own resilience practices, those of Chicana women and the importance of art in showcasing a woman’s lived experiences.

**Literature Review**

The Chicana movement began with the women’s resistance to cultural oppression that was rooted in religious tradition. These traditions say that women belong in the home as caretakers. Amelia Mesa-Bain’s academic article, *El Mundo Feminino: Chicana Artists of the Movement: A Commentary on Development and Production*, explained the growth of the Chicana movement and the struggles that Chicanas faced. Catholicism is largely practiced by Mexicans and Chicanos due to the missionaries and conquests onto the Indigenous Land of the Americas. Catholic rituals are male dominated and place a large importance on traditions. Therefore, Chicanas were often denied space in both religion and culture to tell their stores. Mesa-Bains writes that “Chicana art alters the relationship of women to domination by affirming positive histories so often denied in the larger society and by relocating women to a central, emancipated history” (Mesa-Bains 306). This connects to the art of Frida Kahlo who actively created paintings with her own experiences placed at the forefront of the discussion. The self-portraits, such as *Self Portrait - Time Flies,* portray Kahlo with bright colors that are representative of her Mexican roots and her many other identities. Kahlo was one of the first Mexican women to create her own space in art, something that Chicanas were often denied. Through her art, Kahlo broke out of the female traditional roles through creating paintings. These paintings were able to serve as representations to the Female-Mexican experience.

In the article, *In Pursuit of Latina Liberation,* Martinez explains how Chicanas began to reclaim their identities and make space for themselves in society. Home altars are rooted in pre-colonial time and tradition. Women redefined these home altars to visually display their experiences and record their daily life. In this way, Chicanas passed on their identities and experiences to their children. Chicanas were able to connect the tradition of having home altars to support themselves in defining a new Chicanas identity. The home altars largely are the beginnings for them reclaiming space in the homes. Chicanas felt as though anything having to do with only women meant that it was a feminist idea. However, Chicanas resisted the term Feminism as a white women ideology. Instead, Martinez states that Chicanas “defined [their] own Chicana Feminism” (Martinez 1026). Chicana Feminism was formed with roots in giving everyone a voice to fix all injustices and still holding true to family traditions. Defining this identity came after Frida Kahlo passed away; however, Kahlo herself formed an identity independent of society's critiques. Kahlo portrayed herself with the physical appearance of a man in *Self Portrait With Cropped Hair* which is compared to her *Self Portrait With Braid*. These contrasting paintings show the complexity of Kahlo’s own identity and her own struggle to find an identity that would be accepted by those around her and society. Kahlo experiences parallel that of the Chicana struggle in that women were inserting themselves into the conversation, no longer wanting to be on the outskirts of society.

As Chicanas defined their identities and position in society, they developed resilience practices and talked about them through art. In the article, *Rhetoric of the Object: Material Memory and the Artwork of Amalia Mesa-Bains*, Gonzalez explains the importance of altars in explaining a person’s identity and experiences in ways that words were not able to. Gonzalez states that the artwork “comes from within a particular community … and extends beyond this community to argue for a new vision of the past” (Gonzalez 40). Chicanas are redefining their own identity and telling about the historical experiences of past Chicanas in order to remake the past. In many ways, Chicanas were able to express much more of these experiences in art than they were able to in words. In the article, ‘*Death to Racism and Punk Rock Revisionism': Alice Bag's Vexing Voice and the Ineffable Influence of Canción Ranchera on Hollywood Punk,* Habell-Pallan furthers this explanation saying that “performance can be read as an archive of embodied knowledge” (Habell-Pallan 264). Both Gonzalez and Habell-Pallan explain how Chicanas expressed themselves in ways that went beyond the outward appearance. In many of Kahlo’s art, the deeper story of the art is only known to those who understand Kahlo’s lived experiences. For example, in Kahlo’s famous self-portrait *The Broken Column*, Kahlo shows herself covered in nails, with a broken column as her spine and wearing a corset. Kahlo is nude and has tears leaking from her eyes. This pain and anguish shown in the painting reflect Kahlo’s own pain from her disabilities. However, this painting further shows Kahlo staring at the viewer which could invoke a sense of determination and resilience despite being broken. In this way, Kahlo’s is able to speak more deeply to the viewer about her life experiences without using any words. Kahlo is also able to show the female resilience practices that have enabled her to use her disability in art and not be debilitated by her chronic pain. This embodied knowledge is that of the Chicana experience and broadcast to a larger audience who may connect to it or be influenced by it.

Finally, in Perez’s chapter, *Altar/Altar* in the novel *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic of Altarities,* she discusses the importance of altars for Chicanas. Perez states that “Chicanas have a more radical view because of altars and identity” (Perez 92). Chicanas are have been empowered to create their own space in society despite discrimination, violence and prejudice pushing them back. They also use altars as avenues to represent themselves and their heritage. Similar to Kahlo’s use of self-portraits, Chicanas have used altars as a nonverbal expression of the historical contexts in which Chicana Feminism was created.

**Elements of my Altar**

Ofelia Esparza stated that creating community altars is about “pass[ing] on the tradition of remembering our loved ones, celebrating their lives, and keeping up their legacy for the next generation” (Huerta para. 9). An altar for Frida Kahlo must embody the resilience practices that she used in defining her identity and space that were out of the ordinary for women in her time. The backdrop and cloth for Kahlo’s altar should be a bright, vibrant fabric similar to the colors used in many of her paintings (which were used to showcase her Mexican identity).

The top level will represent Heaven and God. One of Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits should be placed in the center to represent Kahlo in heaven. A candle should also be placed on this level to represent her eternality and fire. Other identities that Kahlo held was that of an artist, being disabled, and having roots in many cultures. For these elements, I would add a paint brush and bed (she began painting while injured from her bed), a bus (which represents the bus that crashed when she was a young adult) and elements of both México and Europe, such as the two different types of money. I would also place sports equipment, such as a swimming cap, as during her youth Kahlo played many sports.

The middle level will represent earth and include many elements of the earth. The elements included in water, wind and earth. For water, I would place an ornate cup filled with water. For the wind, I would include a Mexican flag that is able to fly in the wind. For the earth, I would include a traditional bread from México to represent the country where she spent most of her life. Here I would also include bright colored flowers and butterflies, both of which are significant in the Mexican culture as being able to guide the spirits from the cemetery to the altar.

The bottom level will represent the dead and underworld. On this level, pieces of the plants should be placed here, such as roots. Roots would be significant because one of her portraits showed herself covered in roots. One this level, fruits and vegetables should also be placed, such as Mangos which are popular fruits in México. Elements of animals should also be placed on this level due to the fact that Kahlo had a great love of animals and had many pets. One of her most famous self-portraits included Kahlo with her parrots. A stuffed parrot should be included.

**Conclusion**

While researching about Frida Kahlo and learning about the Chicana movement and Feminism, I began to see the parallels between Kahlo’s and Chicana identities. These identities were rooted in the female fight to be seen in society. Kahlo had to fight to be recognized and needed to work past her own struggles in order to become a famous painter. However, her paintings still were not fully understood by all because a larger acknowledgement of her culture and life explain many of the paintings that she drew. The experiences that she connected to her paintings reflect the altars symbolizing Chicana space in the home. Chicanas used their home altars to tell their stories and give them confidence to become a more visual part of seeking justice. Both Frida Kahlo and Chicanas used/use art to allow the rest of the world to glimpse into their lived experiences in the borderlands of society.

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