



Dr. Raysa E. Amador

Chair and Professor, Adelphi University, Garden City, NY Raysa Elena Amador, Professor and Chair of languages and literature at Adelphi University in New York, holds a doctorate in Spanish from New York University. She has more than two decades of experience teaching and researching in Latin American culture, civilization, and literature. Dr. Amador is the Director of the Latin American Program at Adelphi. Dr. Amador is the co-author

of *The Female Body: Perspectives of Latin American Artists* (Greenwood, 2002). Prior to this research she undertook a programmatic investigation of a series of questions pertaining to the Chronicle of Indies and the law and published the book *Una aproximación histórica a Los comentarios reales* (Editorial Pliegos 1984). In addition, she is the author of numerous articles on Spanish and Latin American literature. A member of the honor society Phi Beta Kappa as well as former member of the New York Council Speakers of the Humanities Program, she has lectures extensively on the literature of the Discovery of the New World and on Latina writers in the United States.

## **EXPLORING THE SELF: ANGELINA BELOFF AND FRIDA KAHLO\***

“Still, as a general rule, time  
heals all wounds”

Michael  
Scherdson

The writer of fiction attempts to create images that often coincide with the body. In the case of personal narratives, the image of the body has been transferred to the text to evoke something tangible that re-tells experiences generating new fictions. These narratives give women a social-cultural forum in which they can inscribe their inner experiences. Recent research in autobiographical memory asserts that “memory is the scaffolding upon which all mental life is constructed” (Schacter x).

Autobiography, as a literary genre, leads the reader to believe in the truth of the material exposed. However, when it is elaborated at the level of fiction the writer incorporates aspects of an actual life. As Daniel Schacter mentions:

Psychologists have come to recognize that the complexes of personal knowledge that we retain about the past are woven together to form life stories and personal myths. These are the biographies of self that provide narrative that form the core of personal identities. (93)

The autobiographical discourses that create life stories and personal myths make claims for participation while the fragments of memory asserts the existence of a self. Those memories allow the self to be present and to affirm itself. The female autobiography renders importance to homely or bodily events which contrast with the unilineal model of revaluation such as occurs in Saint Paul and Saint Augustine. Being that the case, literature brings to our attention that remembering is central to the elaboration and encoding of cultural and personal history as my mother used to say “recordar es volver a vivir/ to remember is to live again”. In Birgit Neumann’s essay, “The Literary Representation of Memory,” she indicates how literature explore memory:

Numerous texts portray how individuals and groups remember their past and how they construct identities on the basis of the recollected memories. They are concerned with the mnemonic presence of the past in the present, they re-examine the relationship between the past and the present, and they illuminate the manifold functions that memories fulfills for the constitution of identity. Such texts highlight that our memories are highly selective, and that the rendering of memories potentially tells us more about the rememberer’s present, his or her desire and denial, than about the actual past events. (333)

Angelina Beloff and Frida Kahlo struggle to bring about the consequences of memory distortion through disturbing forms of personal disorientation, fractured identities, and broken relations. Lawrence Sullivan reports that, “Striking in the development of memory studies and the understanding of memory distortion is the role of trauma, misfortune, and accident” (in Schater, 394). Beloff and Kahlo’s art conveys a repetitive and exhaustive exploration of their traumatic memory where the problematic incident is repeatedly recollected. These memories are the constant field of struggle of these artists to preserve their grounding sense of reality. According to Beryl J. Wright, the intention of “[the] oppositional strategies has been to set new terms for a discourse in which self-generated subjectivity enfolds the public and the private into the production and interpretation of representational images and texts” (397). The exposure of those personal experiences juxtaposes a confrontation between the reader/viewer and the object.

These artists reproduce a past or a ritual into a living form of our collective spirit to enable the re-experiencing of past and present events. The objective reality of past experience is subordinated to the transforming power of memory. This would explain why the inner perspective of the self represents the elements of those personal experiences that emerge from the self to a larger community. The works of artists Angelina Beloff and Frida Kahlo recognize, in their own right, one's identification with ancestors who have left signals of their passing. The locus of self-inscription for Frida Kahlo is identification with Amerindian ancestors and with the Tehuana women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. For Beloff is the telling of her life as she remembers it: as she puts her life into the story, she gives meaning to her own suffering. For Beloff and Kahlo the memories and the sense of self ensure that they work through their trauma allowing for integration and attempt to forge identity. As Nicola Kings puts it, personal identity "is rehearsed again and again in a narrative which attempts to recover the self who existed before" (1). By writing the stories of their past, Beloff and Kahlo construct their own histories and validate their memories. In this process, they formulate new identities embracing new possibilities that were not previously available to them.

In these artists, the experiences of remembering become fundamental to their search for identity in which their quests through geographic space and time are transformed into journeys of self-discovery. In the case of these works, derived from memory, such as Angelina Beloff's *Memorias* and Frida Kahlo's *Diary*, the entries represent their recollections in many forms and with diverse intentions giving meaning to their own sufferings as they become subjects who are empowered to find a place in a culture. As Isabel Allende states in her unpublished speech at the 2018 National Book Awards when speaking about her writing:

I write to preserve memory against the erosion of oblivion...I write to understand. What is writing after all but an attempt to sort out the confusion of life. Often I don't know why I feel compelled to write certain story and it is only later that I find out that it is connected to some part of my life, or my psyche, that I needed to understand and sometimes to heal. (n.p.)

Beloff and Kahlo write about their lives as an act of catharsis provoking an empathetic response that facilitates the acceptance and overcoming of the trauma lived.

As Paul Jay states “visual memory, the reading of images from past-be they fixed in a photograph or fluid in the mind’s eye-can often be integral to the construction of identity in autobiographical works” (Ashley). This is the process that forms the core of Angelina Beloff’s *Memorias*. Angelina Beloff’s *Memorias* begins with the statement “I write for writing’s sake, simply to remember, without a preconceived plan” (my translation 17). Her text reveals different voices as she recollects the events that have shaped her whole life. Her story is documented with photographs of Beloff’s family in Russia, of her child with Diego Rivera (1917), her life with Rivera in Europe (1910 to 1921), their common friends, and also her own works and final years in Mexico (1932 to 1986). Beloff creates a space which functions as a social and cultural forum, a public space, in which she retells her personal experiences.

The book *Memorias* contains documents, fifteen reproductions of her own work, and sixteen pages covering her family history.

The strategy she uses to structure her autobiography calls to mind Heilbrun’s statement regarding biographies as “fictions, constructions by the biographer of the story she or he had to tell” (28). The *Memorias* immediately lures the reader into accepting Beloff’s story beginning with her birth in pre-revolutionary Russia, 1879, recalling next her schooling including some childhood drawings while only giving a very brief account of her family life.

These visual texts inform the reader of Beloff’s intention by giving validity to herself, as an artist and subject in the memoirs, escaping from silence and the making of herself as the object of someone else’s spatial creation. In this work, she perpetuates herself in a re-visionary site, which is the text, creating a new locus in which to be seen and observed as a new relational model of culture and society. She is neither the victim nor the supporting wife paying homage to the genius of another. Beloff’s narrative forms part of a new autobiographical act for women in which ambition, achievement and recognition are at the center of self-definition. She realizes and discovers a new narrative, opening a new space other than the one imposed by society, empowering the female reader to join her in this act of self-realization. The centrality of the text is generated by the absence of the importance given to the social constraints, which make the woman occupy a secondary role in men’s lives.

Selecting from the fragments of memory Beloff magnifies those that refer to her creative work, and to the development of her artistic training because this is the focus and locus of her narrative. She frames her artistic development geographically - Russia, Paris, Brussels, Madrid, London, Barcelona, Paris, Normandy, the Balearic Islands and Mexico - in a public testament that transcends the limitations of a woman of her times, becoming the heroine, the weaver, painter and writer of her own triumphant self. The geographical locations in the time span of 1909 to 1969 are sites that are among the most important cultural, political and historical centers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This inscription of herself against the world panorama of the 1900's is a narrative strategy, which Beloff uses to declare that her actions are worthy of being told.

In Kahlo's Diary the reader enters into the realm of the private and transgresses into a personal space that was not meant for public gaze. The uses of different subject pronouns - first, third, and proper nouns like Diego (referring to Diego Rivera, the Mexican painter and her husband), and friends' names - give the diary an urgency of intimacy, which involves the reader in Kahlo's intuitive and unconscious self. The art historian, Sarah Lowe speaks to the issue when she states that "to read them aloud, in any language, is to be drawn into Kahlo's sphere" (203). On the opening page of the diary, Kahlo imposes images that do not suggest relationship, for example: the date points to when she first began painting, 1916 and on the same page appears a photograph of her supposedly taken by her contemporary Lola Alvarez-Bravo. In 1916 she was nine years old and the photograph is that of an adult. What Kahlo is designing is a distraction for those who are looking for a linear narrative following the traditional lines as we found in St. Augustine. The strategy underlines Kahlo's disinterest in a chronologically ordered narrative. She is doing what Olney calls "never is but always becoming: his [her] self... is a process rather than a settled state of being..."(6). Kahlo's Diary creates a history of her life in her last ten years and points to 1916, two years after she contracted polio, and also reminds the reader that the reason she became a communist had its roots in her family's experiences during the Mexican Revolution of 1910. In the catholic faith, this age traditionally marks the sacrament of Confirmation, making her a soldier of Christ, but instead it marks her allegiance to a new ideology, which sustains her to the end of her days.

The diary recaptures Kahlo's intimate universe through interconnected words and images. Throughout, there is an intermingling of the visual with the written.

The journal's magnetic force transports the reader to Mexico exposing fragments of the artist's solitude and pain. This record is a legacy and model of one woman's courage to be as she created her life providing a record of self-scrutiny that ventures beyond a private-centered life. As Frida Kahlo risked a new definition of herself, the diary's entries express her current state of being and speak with maximum power to its addressee: herself, and the reader. The entries are always a dialogue and a soliloquy, addressed directly to one another, but performed in solitude, which evidences a Frida without a costume. Not only is she doing the writing and the drawing of the events, she is also the viewer and scrutinizer of herself. The journal calls upon the reader by moving our empathetic and reactive responses of Kahlo's self-scrutiny of the body while conflating the private and the public spheres that result in an invasion of the self, a process which is mirrored in the act of reading. The reader violates the physical boundaries of this text with continual exploration of the secret-forbidden private life appealing to the prurient desire of the reader. Frida Kahlo advances her own future in each entry by giving testament to her physical and moral disintegration in order to record her passage into non-existence, thereby leaving her testament.

Beloff's and Kahlo's texts present perspectives, which are played against different time frames. Beloff recalls her life at age of 85, and Kahlo writes in the present state of mind projecting herself into the future. For both, the recollection of life invokes death: in Frida's Diary because of the process of disintegration and in Beloff's *Memorias* because the act of remembering involves resurrecting a past.

These self-narratives inform us of the artists' development, and assert the transcendence of the self. Beloff highlights the importance of those female artist friends, such as María Blanchard, Vita Castro and Palma Guillén among others, who supported her artistic development. Frida Kahlo devotes various entries to close female artist friends as we see in the photograph in the first page paying homage to artist Lola Alvarez-Bravo who gave Kahlo her first one-person exhibition in April

1953, shortly before the amputation of Kahlo's right leg. A look behind the public persona of these two artists reveals the close female network, which constituted the infrastructure of their public lives. We agree with Heilbrun when she declares that "if we look beyond the public face of those few notable women in the past, we may find an untold story of friendship between women" (98). The Diary and the *Memorias* are a testament to this

Another important aspect is that Beloff and Kahlo have other objectives that, in their view, allow them to distort and omit events. Memory distortion, in their cases, offers patterns and lines of interpretation, and most of all, Beloff's and Kahlo's construction of memory helps them survive and prosper in their environment.

In studying these works, as McNeil states memory becomes important since:

...literature is like memory in that, no matter how much it represents the past, in some way it reflects the present, perhaps in what we remember, perhaps in how we remember it. From the beginning, fiction has presented itself in the guise of memory, and just like memory has served to help establish identities and keep the past alive. (10)

Memory becomes a source and technique in these written and visual acts.

The representation of self gained momentum in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries so that the artist is increasingly guided more and more by his/her own person and his irritation with life and society. Kahlo zeroed in on herself as the content of art. She has freed herself from the constraints of society, while Beloff's narrative legitimizes her past voicing silenced versions in order to affect the future. It provides a venue for to those that have been silenced. On the other hand, Frida's drawings become an altarpiece/"retablo" where she is the constant protagonist who offers herself to herself: the honored saint as well as the donor. According to Lola Alvarez-Bravo, Frida "lives surrounded by mirrors and she lives two lives. The duality of mirror-image meant that in one side she felt incomplete but lived as she were complete, and on the other is, there was Diego, from whom she could not get away." (qtd, in Grimberg, n.p.) Despite this duality, Kahlo legitimizes multiple constituencies producing multiple and divergent perspective of the past.

Kahlo and Beloff open up a critical field of reflection about the physical self when they summon up the moral and political tyrannies of institutional ideological discourse underlying the canons of representation of the female body: beyond their political macrosystem. In Beloff and Kahlo is the performance, the "mise en scène" of the body itself, which stands out, making the self the simultaneous protagonist of a person-myth and a cosmic articulation. In their work, intimate reflection on the self and personal identity are enunciated, redirecting the gaze of the viewer to other fragments of memory and traces of time.

In this process, the act of remembering functions as a paradoxical element for what we remember is a combination of what we choose, what we really want, what actually happened and what we are forced to remember. The moment we transmute this into visual or written language, it becomes our personal truth without much consideration for its literal accuracy. Meaning is revealed in the reconstruction of the events memory recalls. As George Johnson comments:

...memory researches may not know what a rose looks like inside the brain, but they have an important truth: memory is a construction not an imprint. In trying to dredge up the past, we grasp at the imperfect scraps of evidence bluttering inside our heads and piece together a theory about what happened or sometimes, what we wish have happened. (n.p.) (Ideas and Trends Section)

The *Memorias* and *Diary* tell of “the necessity of assuming a self-concept which recognizes the possibility of human agency, the need for personal history, self-reflexiveness” which in effect will produce “the capacity for effective action in the world” (Waugh 210). In the works discussed, fragments of every day life function as a performance of identity and simultaneously they create a version, transforming experience into a construction of the self. The revelation of the self embraces the autobiographical “I” to tell us its story and its powerful entry into the self-identity of the subject reclaiming a life that cannot be forgotten. Writing or visualizing the self constitute an appropriation of subjectivity to give testament, whether it is true or false, to a personal version of the past where the self represents its own experience. For Paul de Man the process of creating the self in the act of representation involves the formulation that the “subject of autobiography is not an objective fact.” (qtd. in Schaefer 22). Belloff and Kahlo are artists that have challenged the complexity of our world because they yield to the uncertainties of an ex-centered voice, addressing the “small fragments of truth” creating their own identity and suggesting a re-formulation of a language and experience of inclusion of self-narratives in the literary dialogue of the twenty-first century.

\* A more detailed study of both artists appeared in the book *The female Body: Perspectives of Latin American Artists* (2001) that I co-authored with Dr. Mireya Pérez Bustillo



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