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ZHAI YONGMING READS FRIDA KAHLO: AUTOHISTORIAS

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*Abstract*¹

This paper aims at exploring the ways in which the poet Zhai Yongming (b. 1955) revisited Frida Kahlo's works and biography. I will demonstrate how Kahlo's story is re-appropriated by Zhai into her own tale of bodily afflictions. In her quasi-autobiographical lyrics and essays Zhai refers to Kahlo's works, firstly to argue for a distinct form of female being-in-the-world that cannot be discussed when disconnected from the topic of embodiment. Secondly, the poet highlights a shared feeling of otherness, which originates from Zhai's and Kahlo's gender, ethnic and political identities. These features are the reason for choosing Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *autohistoria* as a frame of reference. While focusing on a personal life story, an *autohistoria* simultaneously aims at telling the life stories of others. In addition, the paper shows that this theoretical framing is not the only possible one, and highlights the inclusiveness and openness of biographical writing as a literary genre.

*Because it borrows from and overlaps with other genres, biography – “the history of the lives of individual men, as a branch of literature”, in the words of the Oxford English Dictionary (which notably fails to mention women!) – is a notoriously difficult form to define.*²

*For silence to transform into speech, sounds and words, it must first traverse through our female bodies.*³

This paper aims to explore the ways in which the poet Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (b. 1955) revisited Frida Kahlo's (1907–1954) works and biography. Inquiries into the historical accuracy and authenticity of Kahlo's biography as reinterpreted by Zhai are beyond the scope of this work. My sole intention is to show how Kahlo's visual story is re-appropriated by the poet and transcribed into her own life story of somatic dysfunction. In her quasi-autobiographical lyrics and

1 I would like to thank Leiden University for the access to their library resources with which I was provided while drafting this paper.

2 HOBERMAN, 2001: 109.

3 ANZALDÚA, 1990: xxii.

essays, Zhai refers to Kahlo's works primarily to enquire into the phenomenon of lived body experience. In addition, the poet highlights a feeling of shared otherness originating from the gender, ethnic and political identifications of both Zhai and Kahlo. The latter feature allows an analytical shift from a meditation on the unique experience of an embodied consciousness in Kahlo's and Zhai's works to the "structures of constraints" (FOLBRE, 1994), which define the coordinates of the situation in which the embodiment takes place. The life writings of Kahlo and Zhai reach beyond their subjective experience of being-in-the-world as they are also conceptualized as a project of social criticism. For this reason I have chosen Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *autohistoria* as a loose frame of reference (Keating, 2009: 319).

This heterogeneous form of writing provides an example of intervention by women of colour into autobiographical forms, defined as "history of the lives of individual men". Anzaldúa (1942–2004), a Chicana queer feminist poet and scholar, composed her first groundbreaking work *Borderlands / La Frontera* (1987) as a prototypical *autohistoria*. Written in both Spanish and English, as well as native Indian dialects and "Tex-Mex", it portrays a struggle for representation by the previously silenced, even unintelligible (BUTLER, 2004), Chicana, Mexican, lesbian, American, academic, working-class, writer and activist subject.

Significantly, Anzaldúa's re-writing of the history of the Texas-Mexico borderlands as her story works to break down the historical *grand narrative* into a collage of various writing practices. This blending of genres, such as cultural or personal biographies with memoirs, historical facts, storytelling or myths, is an important characteristic of an *autohistoria*. Anzaldúa claimed that Chicana and women of colour write not only about abstract ideas but primarily tend to textualize their personal history as well as the history of their community (KEATING (ed.), 2000: 242). As a consequence, while focusing on a personal life story, an *autohistoria* simultaneously aims to tell the life stories of others.

It must however be noted here that although Anzaldúa referred to the notion of *autohistoria* in numerous writings, she did not publish a comprehensive definition. This may be a consequence of her reluctance to narrow, or pin down, theoretical concepts. She would appear to have preferred for them to remain somewhat fuzzy:

Autohistoria is not carved in stone but drawn on sand and subject to shifting winds. Forced to rework your story, you invent new notions of yourself and reality – increasingly multi-dimensional versions where body, mind, and spirit interpenetrate in more complex ways.⁴

This quote already hints towards the importance of the body in Anzaldúa's creative and theoretical work. The position Anzaldúa speaks from is always structural (embedded) and material (embodied). Firstly she provokes discussion of the female common experience of pain and suffering as the result of social position. Secondly, she highlights her own body experience, marked by queer-ness and physical illness. These aspects remain as crucial inspirations of her writing and her identity project. The poem included in the *autohistoria* *Borderlands / La Frontera*, in which Anzaldúa inscribes herself into the geographical borderlands, delivers a suitable example of the somaticization omnipresent in the entire body of her creative work⁵:

1,950 mile-long open wound
 dividing a pueblo, a culture,
 running down the length of my body,
 staking fence rods in my flesh
 splits me splits me
 me raja me raja⁶

Remaining indistinct and blurred as a theoretical concept, *autohistoria* nevertheless offers an apposite frame of reference for Zhai's revisitation of Kahlo's life-story. First of all, it focuses on the unsilencing and exposing of bodies inhabiting the borderlands of the normative representational practices of femininity: non-white, queer, disabled, sick and decaying. Furthermore, the body is referred to as a site of mortality and vulnerability but also as the place from which creativity and agency originate. It serves as the personal departure point for personal autohistorical writing.

4 ANZALDÚA, 2000: 540.

5 On the importance of the body for Anzaldúa's creative work see: KEATING, 1996: 118–145; KEATING (ed.), 2000: 288–291.

6 ANZALDÚA, 1987: 2.

1

Zhai Yongming belongs to the generation of Mainland Chinese poets that came of age during the twilight years of the Cultural Revolution. She completed her first cycle of poems, entitled *Women* (Nüren 女人), in 1984.⁷ In this cycle and other of her early works she exploited and rewrote traditional Chinese *yin-and-yang* cosmology along feminist lines (LINGENFELTER, 2011: xii). Speaking from the feminine margins of the patriarchal tradition, Zhai has since engaged in an ongoing discussion with various cultural myths, traditions and life-stories of women. Her poetry has repeatedly expressed a distinct sense of transcultural interconnectedness, exemplified here by her preoccupation with Kahlo's paintings.

Additionally, Zhai's early poetry may be seen as part of literary struggles of a larger group of women writers, who gained critical attention in China in the late 1980s. They frequently re-appropriated quasi-autobiographical modes of writing to introduce the previously silenced female bodily experience into literature. With the cultural reorientation that followed the Mao era, femininity became once more a site of resignification and negotiations. Zhai's contribution to this discussion may already be seen as being in an autohistorical mode. Apart from committing the body into writing in her poetry she explores various possible historical and cultural locations of women. In contrast to the majority of women writers who have rather leaned towards a focus on the topics of female identity and consciousness, Zhai may be seen as somebody involved in a lyrical and cultural translation.

In 1992, Zhai Yongming left China for the first time and followed her husband, the painter He Duoling 何多苓 (b. 1948), to New York. The experience of migration resulted in an "aphasic" (Zhai, 1995b) period in which she almost entirely ceased writing. Furthermore, the consequences of the voluntary displacement literally inscribed themselves on Zhai's body:

She was even quieter at these events, as she didn't speak much English, and most of the conversation rattled along in English. [...] She grew slightly more pale and reticent each

7 Six poems of this cycle of twenty were first published in the poetry journal *Shikan* 诗刊 in 1986 (ZHAI, 1996: 13–16). Zhai's early lyrical creations strongly influenced and inspired a whole group of poets during the late 1980s. To date they serve as the quintessential example of post-Maoist Chinese women's poetry. For a detailed discussion and translations of Zhai's early works see: ZHANG, 2004.

time I saw her, until one day she told me that she would be taking a trip through America's West, then going home.⁸

This near two-year long migration experience has continued to influence Zhai's body of writing. As a consequence her later works, penned in China, are marked by significant linguistic and thematic transitions. She abandoned the dark confessional tone of her earlier works and has become increasingly interested in real-life objects and figures:

1990 年底至 1992 年我在纽约旅居了近两年的时间, 这是自 1980 年开始写作后产量最少的两年。其间除了写过两首很不成功的《西部的太阳》和《孤独的马》之外, 几乎全部时间都用于和国内的朋友写信 [...].⁹

The period of nearly two years between 1990 and 1992, during which I resided in New York, was the time in which I managed to accomplish the least number of works since I began to write in 1980. Apart from the composition of two very fault filled [poems], "Western Sun" and "Lonely Horse", I spent almost all the time exchanging letters with my friends back in China [...].¹⁰

In the collection of essays titled *Zhishang jianzhu* 纸上建筑 (Edifices on paper, 1995), Zhai reflects on her New York episode as being defined by a series of encounters with friends and strangers that would inspire her later work.¹¹ One of the most important encounters was that with Frida Kahlo's paintings. One day, while strolling aimlessly through Manhattan she found herself in a gallery bookshop, skimming the pages of an album from a Mexican painter. The artist, who was at the time unknown to her, was Frida Kahlo. That was to be the beginning of Zhai's long lasting fascination with her work and biography:

8 WANG, 2011: viii–ix. One of her targets during this journey was Frida Kahlo's birthplace and her former residence in Mexico.

9 ZHAI, 1995b: 202.

10 Translations from Chinese are my own, unless otherwise stated.

11 Similarly, many of Zhai's later poems were inspired by the New York episode, and remained in an intertextual relation with the essays collected in *Zhishang jianzhu* see for example "Wode Indu Linju 我的印度邻居 (My Indian neighbour)", "Lili he Qiong 莉莉和琼 (Lili and Qiong)" or "Xingqitian qu kan Bei Ling 星期天去看贝岭 (Meeting up with Bei Ling on Sunday)", ZHAI, 1997: 10, 20, 47. These poems represent the "second stage" in Zhai's writing career (for an outline of the "three stages" in Zhai Yongming's writing consult Zhou, 2002: 17–18), in which she turned from "confessional" voice towards a plain narrative lyrical form (*xushi zushi* 叙事组诗). In 2003 she published her North American travel memoirs, enriched with colorful photographs, under the title *Niuyue, Niuyue yi xi* 纽约, 纽约以西 (New York, New York to the West).

我相信这是一本非常有趣的书, 我为自己不能读懂它的文字而懊恼, 我相信那里面有关于这个墨西哥女人的许多逸事, 而我却只有通过那些图片和画来进行一半研究一半猜测, 让她在我的心中和笔下凸现出来。¹²

I believed that it was a highly interesting book and was upset by [the fact] that I was unable to understand the words. I believed that the inside was filled with numerous anecdotes about this Mexican woman, but I only could follow the photographs and pictures, and half researching and half speculating, allow her to emerge in my mind and in my writing.

2

My analysis of Zhai Yongming's engagement with Frida Kahlo's paintings is based on texts that appeared in Zhai's first work, which was dedicated entirely to women's art and entitled *Jianren de posui zhi hua* 坚韧的破碎之花 (Endurable blossoms of destruction, 2000).¹³ I will subsequently refer to the following three essays: "Yige Moxige de nüren" 一个墨西哥的女人¹⁴ (A Mexican woman), "Jianren de posui zhi hua" 坚韧的破碎之花¹⁵ (Endurable blossoms of destruction), "Shui geile wo shenme" 水给了我什么¹⁶ (What the water gave me) and one longer poem "Jiandao shou de duihua. Xiangei Fulida Kaluo" 剪刀手的对话. 献给弗里达·卡洛¹⁷ (Scissorhands' dialogue. For Frida Kahlo), which are all included in the aforementioned publication. The latest essay "Xiwang zhi shu, jianqiang" 希望之树, 坚强¹⁸ (The tree of hope, strengthen) originates from the latter *Tianfu ruci* 天赋如此 (Born in this way).

My main aim is to trace Zhai's narrative as it alternates between Kahlo's visual works and her own writing, finally resulting in a novel and original form

12 ZHAI, 2000f: 2.

13 Zhai Yongming has remained deeply interested in contemporary art and art criticism (with a strong focus on gender related and feminist reflection) since the 1980s. Her second collection of essays entirely dedicated to the topic of women's visual culture titled *Tianfu ruci* was published in 2008. In addition, Zhai's critical preoccupation with art goes beyond her writing activities and she also exhibits works of young artist in her art café "Baiye 白夜 (White nights)" in the city of Chengdu.

14 ZHAI, 2000f: 1–12.

15 ZHAI, 2000c: 12–20.

16 ZHAI, 2000e: 20–24.

17 ZHAI, 2000b: 24–30. For the translation of the entire poem see: LINGENFELTER, 2011: 68–75. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from the poem exactly follow Andrea Lingefelter's translation.

18 ZHAI, 2006: 95–98.

of (auto)biographical text. Prior to the detailed discussion of Zhai's work I will however briefly introduce several preliminary considerations and claims connected to the not unproblematic topic of the genre of (auto)biography, on which the following analysis is based.

Firstly, it is important to mention in the foreground that Zhai Yongming undoubtedly regards Kahlo's visual self-representations as autobiographical (*zizhuan shide* 自传式的) works. Even if this mode of interpreting Frida Kahlo's portraits may be considered as hegemonic in expert circles¹⁹, as well as in mass cultural perception²⁰, and as such beyond discussion, it must nevertheless be highlighted that the autobiographical reading of visual works is neither self-evident nor the only possible reading. Here Zhai constructs the autobiographical interpretation of Kahlo's portraits in the course of her preoccupation with writing in accompaniment to the painter's works. This interpretation was not previously established by the artist or by art critics, nor was it a common perception²¹. The decoding of Kahlo's paintings by the poet is in tune with Mieke Bal's remarks on the troubled nature of biographical, or biographically read art works (BAL, 2002: 182–185). She implies that these are not necessarily built from self-aware “narratives” and “memories”, but of “memory traps” and “dreams” alike. Notably, in the essay “Shui geile wo shenme” Zhai discusses the Kahlo painting entitled “What the water gave me” (1938) with a focus on the dreamlike and surreal features that had arisen from the nightmarish life experience of a suffering artist. Such works of Kahlo emerge in Zhai's discussion as being not simply creations of an artist-subject with a self-knowledge that is more or less complete, but as being resultant from exposure to unconscious impulses. These include the emergence from daydreaming and pain and as a consequence they inhabit a space that remains, if only partially, outside the realms or influence of intellectual discourse.

Furthermore, in light of her tendency to revisit a visual text and to inscribe it into her own poetic and essayistic writing, Zhai's reading of Kahlo's portraits may be understood as translation, or perhaps decoding. Zhai confidently performs this decoding of the works of Kahlo into text, to an extent that sometimes

19 See COUSER in: JOLLY, 2001: 122.

20 As the example of the acclaimed movie production *Frida* (2002) showed.

21 These preliminary remarks are based on Bal, 2002. In this contribution Bal problematizes autobiographical readings of visual art, for their “intellectual laziness” and the inclination to ignore the “visual nature” and to miss “positioning it culturally”. In her opinion the “narrative” character of a work of art cannot exist without a viewer's gaze, response and (bodily) reaction to it.

verges on being erotically charged. In this “intimate act of reading” (SPIVAK, 1993: 201) a “transformation of subjectivity into thought takes place” (BAL, 2002: 186).²² Zhai believes that with the help of a textual reconfiguration of Kahlo’s paintings she may come to terms with her own embodied experience. In that aspect, Zhai’s literary imagination of the female body shows affinity to phenomenological inspired feminist thought:

Descriptions of lived female and feminine experience can reveal reasons that differently situated women may have to sympathize with one’s another embodied situation, while at the same time remaining sufficiently vague to allow for concrete variation.²³

3

In the essay “Yige Moxige de nüren” Zhai documents her first encounter with Kahlo’s self-portrait, which she found on the front cover of a book. The poet places this meeting in the larger context of her first migration experience. We may assume that in a foreign land in which she cannot speak the native language, the newcomer learns to pay special attention to other means of expression, such as facial, corporeal or even perhaps through that of specific styling. Zhai’s fascination started with Frida Kahlo’s face, which mesmerized the poet in such an intense way that she believed that she could hear Kahlo’s soliloquy. Afterwards Zhai discovered their second common biographical feature: they were both married to more established painter-husbands.

Zhai’s narrative strategy in this essay is based on the subsequent invocation of titles from Kahlo’s self-portraits, the naming of which denotes the opening of a new section of her text. These titles deliver a triggering impulse, from which the discussion of the individual paintings inevitably leads Zhai to her own biography. She regards these portraits as a form of Kahlo’s autobiographical life writing:

[...]翻开这本书, 就像翻开这个女人的生命史.²⁴

[...] skimming through this book was like skimming this woman’s life history.

22 “This idea – that subjectivity is transformed but not eliminated, and that thought, not just form or fun, is the result – is important to the feminist conception of art” (BAL, 2002: 186).

23 YOUNG, 2005: 9.

24 ZHAI, 2000f: 2.

“... this woman’s life history” marks the departure point towards Zhai’s own tale of shared feminine experience. It can furthermore be seen that Zhai’s reading of Kahlo’s self-portraits is inextricably linked to the issue of ethnicity. In Zhai’s understanding ethnicity may perhaps be summarized as a sense of belonging to a local culture and a deep connection to the process of language acquisition as experienced by individual members of a community. Zhai refers to these different communities in her texts by way of a direct allusion to the proper names of nation-states or ethnical groups. Consequently, she discusses Kahlo’s staging of “a Mexican woman” as being the result of culture, tradition and history combined with individual talent.²⁵

她笔下那些始终出现在她的各种画面上的花卉, 植物, 猩猩和各类软体动物就像来自一个精灵的梦幻世界, 卡洛在她的画中, 把印第安神话与她个人神话, 墨西哥民族的历史和她个人的现实全部都融进她那色彩斑斓的颜料中, [...].²⁶

Her brush allowed them to emerge completely onto the surface of the canvas: These floral ornaments, plants, chimpanzees and a variety of mollusks, all as if they came from a spiritual world of illusion. In Kahlo’s paintings, native American mythology, her personal mythology, the history of the Mexican nation and her own actuality all merge and blend with her colourful pigments, [...].

Zhai opens the essay “A Mexican woman” with a discussion of Kahlo’s painting, entitled “My nurse and I” (1937). Kahlo was a *mestiza* of mixed European and Mexican heritage who remained strongly influenced by indigenous Mexican culture throughout her whole life. Zhai repeatedly brings Kahlo’s links to her local culture to the foreground, starting her essay with a reference to a painting that in her interpretation shows Kahlo being nurtured by a wet-nurse of Amerindian origin. The stress put by Zhai on Kahlo’s *mestiza* consciousness is not surprising in the light of the poet’s vivid interest in borderland cultures. Belonging to the major ethnical group, the Han Chinese, Zhai appears to be resolutely attracted to what may be called the feminine margins and extremities of official cultural production. Before settling down in her hometown Chengdu in the second half of the 1990’s, Zhai spent several years travelling to remote regions of China (ZHAI, 2000a: 23). From her very beginnings as a writer and cultural activist she has remained indebted to distinctly feminine cultures of rural, ethnical and historical others.

25 Compare CHOW, 2002: 24–33.

26 ZHAI, 2000f: 3.

The concept of a *mestiza* identity was reappropriated by postcolonial studies as a tool of critique for the hegemonic and masculinised concept of national identity. It originates from the aforementioned *autohistoria* from Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*²⁷. A *mestiza* may be understood as a complex notion of multiple identities:

Turning away from the modern transcendental and unitary self, the *mestiza* consciousness exposes and celebrates hybridity and plurality. It is the expression of the postmodern plural, fluid, non-fixed and nonessential identity. And the *mestiza* expresses these properties of the self within a broader societal and historical frame.²⁸

Anzaldúa further developed her own concept in order to avoid it turning into a rigid and essentialized attribution of identity and in doing so repeatedly and playfully foregrounded the conceptual inclusiveness. This was, for example, achieved by highlighting the possibility of an emergence of *mestiza* forms of consciousness within members of white and intellectual communities. As a direct consequence, Zhai Yongming could be called, in Gloria Anzaldúa's own terminology, a "cultural" or "psychological *mestiza*":

Using the concept of the *mestiza*, I talk about people like us who are biological *mestizas*, and cultural, and intellectual, and psychological *mestizas* – that's us colored folk.²⁹

It may be assumed, that substantial changes, which Zhai's lyrical language has undergone at least partially originate from the experience of leaving her homeland for the United States. Zhai, who was a recognised poet in China and a member of the ethnic majority, found herself in the language borderlands inhabited by those members of ethnic minorities with poor English skills. We may subsequently assume that this experience of displacement influenced the radical linguistic and stylistic shift which marked Zhai's re-emergence into the writing scene. Following her homecoming, her creative work has become more inclusive. This perhaps as a result of her engagement with novel genres, such as

27 "Addressing identity issues for Mexican Americans along the Texas-Mexico border, she [Anzaldúa] writes in Spanish, English, and what she calls Tex-Mex. She [...] uses the borderland as a metaphor to explore hybrid and multiple identities. Claiming indigenous and Spanish ancestry, Texan and Mexican cultural patterns, masculine and feminine dimensions, Anzaldúa posits multiple identities that generate a new consciousness, what she calls 'a new *mestiza*'" (BERGLAND, 2001: 636).

28 BARCINSKI, 2005: 103.

29 ANZALDÚA, 2009: 191.

essays or art reviews. Furthermore, she has developed an interest in photography and since then, pictures have become an indispensable part of her collage-like essays. Also noteworthy is that Zhai, who initially had rewritten themes inherent to Chinese tradition and mythology, gradually ventured beyond her own cultural specificity. She has increasingly explored voices of other women and searched for transcultural connections. This *dialogical turn* in her lyrical imagination recalls Anzaldúa's understanding of her own writing process as a "constant dialogue" (ANZALDÚA (ed.), 1990: xxiv). Such capacity for mediation between different cultures and shifting identities is crucial in Anzaldúa's understanding of a cultural *mestiza*, one who is capable of engendering social transformation.

4

With her discussion of Kahlo's "My Birth" (1932), Zhai moves to the main topic of her revisitation of Kahlo's biography, namely that of the shared female body experience. Again in this instance she first highlights the parallel moments between Kahlo's biography and her own personal history. Additionally, Zhai refers to what she believes all women have in common, namely a corporeality that may turn into destiny.

Kahlo completed the work on "My birth" after her mother's untimely death. In Zhai's own words the painting represents the *consanguinity between life and death* (生与死的血缘关系 *sheng yu si de xueyuan guanxi*). Zhai's perception of femininity, as it may be interpreted from her works, is grounded in a biological difference that is understood as a concrete materiality of female bodies which produces "distinctive feelings and modalities of being-in-the-world" (YOUNG, 2005: 6). This difference means for Zhai a sometimes unbearable destiny, produced by embodiments, and lived in the flesh. She would appear, therefore, to feel captured by Kahlo's vision of an embodied female subjectivity. This facet is situated in the lived body and as such beyond the body-mind division. As in her own poetry, the embodied consciousness and subjectivity cannot be erased or silenced; the body is a significant source of creativity.

In the next narrative step Zhai turns away from Kahlo's visual text to her own early autobiographically inspired lyrical creations. Those which were influenced by her grandmother's and mother's illness and their respective deaths. While wondering about the nature of the coincidences in her and Kahlo's works she quotes from her own debut verses:

我甚至是你的血液在黎明流出的血泊中
使你惊讶地看到你自己³⁰

[you are my mother], I am even your blood bleeding out at daybreak
a pool of blood forces you, astonished, to see yourself [...] ³¹

She cannot but help ask what stupefies her more, Kahlo's painting or her own poem, which in her opinion encapsulates the distinct female body experience. Zhai believes that all women's relation to life and death is marked by a unique intimacy, regardless of ethnical heritage and in some form ahistorical. This emerges from the experiences of childbirth, miscarriages, caring for others, and mourning for lost loved ones. These are the distinct units by which "women's time"³² is measured. What she discovers in paintings and poems are not only personal histories, but histories of others, bound by genealogy:

我们这些女人, 分娩中的母亲
在生与死的脐带上受难
孪生两种命运 —
过去和未来³³

We, these women, mothers in childbirth
are bound by umbilical cord to life and death, and suffer hardship
of the twin destiny —
past and future

In the following passage of her essay, which opens with a brief introduction to the next two paintings, "The bed" (1940) and "The wounded deer" (1946), Zhai moves to the theme which represents the most meaningful part of her encounter with Kahlo, namely that of the body in pain. Through her whole life Kahlo suffered from the severe consequences of a traffic accident she experienced at the age of nineteen. Zhai describes Kahlo's self-portrait "The broken column" (1944) as:

30 ZHAI, 2000f: 4. From "Muqin 母亲 (Mother)", originally in ZHAI, 1997: 11.

31 Translation by Simon Patton:

<<http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poem/item/1212>> [last visited 2013.1.13]

32 KRISTEVA, 1981: 862.

33 ZHAI, 2000f: 6. From "Patterns of death", originally in ZHAI, 1995.

[...] 是一幅最能表现卡洛自传式图像的画 [...].³⁴

[...] the picture that at best represents Kahlo's autobiographical mode of painting [...].

From here the aforementioned alternation within the narrative resumes its back and forth movement, grasping the visual and transliterating it into text. Consequently, Zhai once more “translates” Kahlo's life experiences into her own life story.

Zhai recalls that as she occupied herself with Kahlo's work her own spinal illness worsened and would later require surgery. She thematizes her own sufferings in a long poem, entitled “Mangren anmoshi de jizhong fangshi” 盲人按摩师的机种方式³⁵ (The blind masseur and some of his methods, 1995). In this poem Zhai portrays herself by focussing on the embodiment of subjectivity in an attempt to represent the suffering body, which cannot be saved from pain by the touch a blind therapist. Despite the treatment, the pain remains intangible:

如果能把痛变化成
有形的东西, 类似
抓住一把盐, 洒在地上³⁶

If pain could be transformed
Into something that had a shape, like
Grabbing a handful of salt, scattering it on the ground

One verse in which the poets describes herself with an acupuncture needle in her head shows affinity with Kahlo's depiction of her own face tortured by piercing nails:

生命, 是易碎的事物
还是骨头, 骨节, 骨密度
梅花针扎在我的头部³⁷

Is it life that's fragile
Or is it bones, joints, and bone density?
An acupuncture needle stab my head³⁸

34 ZHAI, 2000c: 15.

35 ZHAI, 1995. Translated in LINGENFELTER, 2011: 77–85. All following quotes from the poem in Lingenfelter's rendition.

36 ZHAI, 1995:

37 ZHAI, 1995:

38 Translation modified, JJ.

There are no signs of objectification or estrangement of the suffering body as Zhai approaches it. Neither does the intangible pain turn the body into a prison from which the writing subject seeks a means of escape. Zhai sees the pain as an agent of transformation. Accordingly, she pays meticulous, endlessly patient interest to the body's sensations and limitations for their own sake. She experiences them as fullness rather than lack.³⁹ The blind masseur is the one who treats the body as an object, which may be acted upon and "kneaded like a stone" or "played like a piano's keys" (Zhai, 1995). This may be the reason behind his failure to relieve her suffering from pain she feels.

The lengthy poem, dedicated to Kahlo, "Jiandaoshou de duihua," is entirely based around the hospital experience of anaesthetics, surgery and helplessness. In this work, Zhai seems identify strongly with Kahlo. The aforementioned narrative alternation becomes a barely perceptible movement over a much closer distance, a blurring of inside and outside, in which the "I" becomes almost inseparable from the "her". Zhai, in justification, reflects on this merging with the following words:

[...] 我用那些分行的诗句分析着, 拆卸我们共同的经验。那经验与她, 已成为面向全世界的神话隐语, 于我, 却是每天必须面对的日常的, 世俗的, 令人畏惧的事物。⁴⁰

[...], I used these poetical verses to analyse and to dismantle our [Zhai's and Kahlo's] common experiences. In her case her experience had turned already into a mythical metaphor expressive of the whole world. In my case however, it is the dreadfully ordinary, day-to-day matters with which I am confronted every single day.

Intentionally, it would seem, the first part of the poem is highly ambiguous, which makes it difficult to decide who the body described as lying on the operating table belongs to: Zhai or Kahlo. The indeterminate "I" of the poem (who could again be either Zhai or Kahlo) is exposed to the surgeon's gaze. The speaker in this poem makes the scissor-holding hand (which could be that of death or the doctor) the addressee of her invocation:

对我说吧, 僵硬的剪刀手
我不会躺在七零八落的敲打中
让那年迈医生的钢针

39 GADOW, 1980: 172–185.

40 ZHAI, 2000c: 16.

和他考察病理的目光
为我如此妆扮⁴¹

*Tell me, rigid scissor hands
I can't lie down in the middle of this random pounding
To let that elderly doctor's steel needle
And his diagnostic gaze
Primp and dress me up like that*

In the second part of the poem a clear separation of the personal pronouns takes place. The “I” in pain is that of the recovering poet, who wonders about “her” (Kahlo’s) ability to transform acute pain into gorgeous pictures:

请看体内的铁钉
在一朵忧郁烈焰的炙烤下
斑斓 怎样变成她胸前的雕花图案⁴²

*Look at the iron rod inside my body
Beneath a bloom of sad and angry flames
How were those rainbow hues transformed* *into the patterns
carved on her breast*

In the third and last part of the poem, Zhai introduces an intimate scene in which she asks Kahlo to dance with her. The “I” and “her” merge into “we.” A reflection on the multifaceted and (once more) impalpable nature of suffering ends the poem:

要对付我们共同的腰病
卡洛 - 我们怎样区分来自剪刀刀锋
或是来自骨髓深处的痛?⁴³

*To tackle our common spinal malady
Kahlo – how can we know if the source of our pain is the scissors' tip
Or the depths of our own marrow?*⁴⁴

This lyrical creation bears resemblance to Zhai’s essayistic writing, as it too thematizes a female experience of pain aside from the poet’s and Kahlo’s own personal histories. A broader, gendered perspective invoking the situation in

41 ZHAI, 2000b: 24.

42 ZHAI, 2000b: 25.

43 ZHAI, 2000b: 29.

44 Translation modified, JJ.

which the suffering body exists is introduced within the poem by means of short, irregular remarks. They seem to play the role of a supplementary, ironic voice-over to the main text of the poem:

为了美, 女人永远忙着 [...]
为了美, 女人暗暗淌血 [...]
为了美, 女人痛断肝肠⁴⁵

For beauty, women will always go to great lengths [...]
For beauty, women bleed in secret [...]
For beauty's sake, women will suffer heartbreak⁴⁶

These remarks on hegemonic beauty regimes in which feminine beauty is partially defined by the willingness to endure bodily pain contrast sharply with the poem's focus on Zhai's and Kahlo's sufferings. They suffer for the sake of survival and not beauty.

Kahlo's painting and Zhai's texts, as discussed above, may be regarded as examples of distinct forms of life writing, namely that of an (auto)pathography. This genre is no longer confined to the strictly dry form of medical documentaries. It has been recognized as an disciplinary research field, situated on the crossroads of medicine, psychology and literature. Furthermore, it has recently gained in significance as the following passage illustrates.

In the last several decades, however, illness narratives have been written and published in unprecedented numbers in North America and Europe. [...] Several related phenomena seem to be coinciding in the upsurge in personal narratives of the body. Writers already established in other more "literary" genres, like poetry and fiction, have been turning to autopathography; for them, bodily dysfunction has provided an occasion for an experiment with life writing.⁴⁷

What seems at the first glance to be an appropriate genre assignment, in light of Kahlo's and Zhai's focus on the body in pain the assignation becomes problematic when examined in depth. The interdisciplinary discussion relating to the pathographic form remains visibly indebted to the medical view of the ill body as an object captured by an enemy, as territory which has to be reconquered by way of reestablishing the conventional form of the healthy body proper:

45 ZHAI, 2000b: 25, 27, 29.

46 Translation modified, JJ.

47 COUSER, 2001: 121.

[...] that has come to be understood as foundational in pain narratives: a body turned on itself and figured as an external enemy, and the absolute power of pain to silence the sufferer.⁴⁸

The vision of Kahlo and Zhai is not conducive to the claim that in order to successfully enable relationships with the outer world one must turn one's body into a transparent medium, a nonresistant object of the subject's will. They both experience their bodies in an aesthetic mode, which neither excludes nor combats illness or aging.⁴⁹ Kahlo and Zhai aestheticize pain and suffering; they would appear to regard it as only one possibility among many. They seem to regard afflictions which plague them as only another transforming forces that shape the flesh subjectivity is made of, along with the experiences of birth, pregnancy or death to name but a few. As neither of them focuses their artistic undertakings on mere pathologization of pain, rather they both foreground the experiencing of misery:

Pain is not simply a private, interior ontology, but rather a mode of knowing (in) the world – of knowing and making known, which is contextual, contingent, specific and often fleeting. Recognizing this, we can begin to explore how pain already circulates within the contours of our relationality with others; here, pain is not relegated to the realm of immediate physical hurt, but also includes the emotional trauma, psychological distress, grief and mourning that pain often entails.⁵⁰

As a consequence I regard Kahlo's and Zhai's texts as being more than mere pathographies. In my understanding their pain narratives belong to a broader genre, for which I find the term (auto)somatography suitable. This form of writing seeks to escape the objectifying gaze "from above" on the body in pain. The gaze that in their works is perceived as coming from surgeons, masseurs and doctors, who by means of their tools sometimes inscribe the body in a no less painful way. Zhai (and Kahlo) propose their own aesthetic counter-narrative of ongoing transformations in the flesh.

48 McKIM, 2005: 93.

49 GADOW, 1980.

50 DAUPHINÉE, 2007: 150.

5

In keeping with my initial aim of introducing the literary works Zhai Yongming dedicated to Frida Kahlo, I wish to turn briefly to her most recent essay titled “Xiwang zhi shu, jianqiang”. In this short text, Zhai reviews the successful biographical movie *Frida* (2002). In her discussion of the picture she turns to political aspects of the painter’s work and biography. Zhai accuses the U.S. film industry of downplaying Kahlo’s political engagement in the Communist Party and Mexican politics. Furthermore, she criticises Hollywood for replacing Kahlo’s *romantic nationalism* (*langman minzuzhuyi* 浪漫民族主义) with the sentimentalism of Riviera and Kahlo’s love story.⁵¹

Here Zhai’s uneasiness with the movie is very much in tune with Anzaldúa’s concerns about the ongoing “multicultural misappropriation” of the ethnic, third-world other:

A radical political agenda is often reduced to superficial efforts to serve international foods, wear ethnic clothes, and decorate corporate complexes and airports with native colors and art. This multicultural appropriation/misappropriation is an attempt to control difference by allocating it to bordered-off sections in the curriculum. Diversity is then treated as a superficial overlay that does not disrupt any comfort zones. [...] Our cultures, languages, thinking, and art are color-coded, made into commercial products, and reified as exotic cultural tales devoid of human agency.⁵²

The last of Kahlo’s paintings referred to by Zhai in this essay, directly following her critique of the movie, is “My dress hangs there” (1933). In the 1930s Kahlo followed her husband, the painter Diego Riviera (1886–1957) to the United States, where he was attracted by the patronage opportunities in the United States. She, however, never shared his fascination with the country. This painting is her ironic comment on the society of the United States during the Great Depression, torn between middle class lifestyle and social decay. This is the only picture in Zhai’s discussion in which Kahlo is not present. The dress hanging in the central part of the painting makes this absence all the more striking. It may furthermore be interpreted as the artist’s ironical comment on the ethnically-

51 Zhai’s uneasiness with the biographical movie production echoes Bal’s critique on biographical readings of works of visual art, which she regards as a “more idyllic, sentimentalizing view than the work deserves” (BAL, 2002: 183).

52 ANZALDÚA, 2001: 205.

oriented coding of art, a statement in accordance with the last quote from Anzaldúa.

The narrative circle closes here with the American sojourn, another biographical feature the women have in common. Zhai discovered Kahlo during the transitional, aphasic stage of her artistic career. Her New York experience may be seen as one of a temporal personal crisis, with a symptomatic falling into silence and absence of creativity. Only later did Kahlo's portraits trigger Zhai's biographical narrative, one not entirely dedicated to suffering but also to fragments of her American experience which had previously remained untold.

6

There seems to be nothing self-evident about the notion of biography or autobiography today, furthermore no aspect of the concepts may be taken for granted. What remains relatively undisturbed after authorship and authenticity have been critically questioned and deconstructed to the point of negation is the notion of (auto)biographical writing as a textual strategy. Throughout history this literary form has remained open to stylistic experimentation, it has appeared in multiple genres and demonstrates an openly inclusive, democratic character. I see the value of the (auto)biographical form primarily in its incessant raising of "questions about memory, identity and truth"⁵³. Additionally, I hold its playfulness and openness to formal and linguistic experiments in high regard. This latter feature has allowed me, in this brief contribution, to recall several forms of (auto)biographical narratives. In their nonexclusive nature they foreground different aspects of discussed texts by Frida Kahlo and Zhai Yongming, but neither of them appear to need to be seen as revealing "the truth" about their creative works and lives. Their works may be discussed as instances of a biography, autobiography, *autohistoria*, autotopography (BAL, 2002), pathography or somatography. All of these labels simultaneously reveal and obstruct the "truth".

In my closing passage I have chosen to focus on the conceptual frame of the *autohistoria*, due to its marked inclination towards making a biography public and political. I regard this gesture as one that does justice to Kahlo's and Zhai's social and political engagement, without losing the focus on the aesthetic nature

53 GUNZENHAUSER, 2001: 77.

of their works. *Autohistoria* is closely related to what Anzaldúa called “border art”:

Border art is an art that supersedes the pictorial. It depicts both the soul of the artist and the soul of the pueblo. It deals with those who tell the stories and with what stories and histories are told. I call this visual narrative autohistorias (sic!). This form goes beyond the traditional self-portrait or autobiography; in telling the writer / artist’s personal story, it also includes the artist’s cultural history.⁵⁴

In this paper I have argued for the possibility of bringing together the (auto)biographical representations of three women artists within the frame of auto-historical writing. As I have shown that the intense preoccupation of Kahlo, Zhai and, finally, Anzaldúa with their bodily torments allow us to assume that non-normative feminine corporeality serves as an important source of their individual creativity. They believe that act of women reclaiming their carnal bodies may be the beginning of a self-affirming, empowering female discourse.

Kahlo, Zhai and Anzaldúa valorise bodily experience and the shapeshifting nature of the body as important sources of identity formation. The mere materiality of the bodies in their works is nonetheless never separated from their social embeddedness. Aside from being personal, their “body writing” frequently addresses the oppressive representational matrix and overwrites it according to new metaphors of transformative pain. They thematize the cultural, ethnic and sometimes economic alienation suffered by themselves and others who are negatively marked by gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality. In their creative works and in their life-stories they have crossed various geographical and metaphorical borders.

In the light of the assumed inherent political and collective nature of the genre of *autohistoria*, one more feature gains importance. Zhai’s intense pre-occupation with Kahlo’s art, and later by extension, with the lives of other women artists, contributed to her maturing as a feminist who is not afraid to address various forms of gendered oppression:

In an interview she granted me a few years back, she told me she rejected the “taboo” against feminism (nǚxingzhuyì) in contemporary China and had no difficulty calling herself a feminist.⁵⁵

54 ANZALDÚA, 1993:183.

55 LINGENFELTER, 2011: xiv.

In doing so, Zhai seems to mirror Anzaldúa's autohistorical posit, that the source of our capacity for social transformation may be found in the capability to mediate between different worlds and to engage in constant cultural translation.

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