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## ABSTRACT

Much of contemporary theory presents the human subject as deprived of agency, a mere "product" of converging biological, social, political, semiotic and/or linguistic forces. This essay examines Gloria Anzaldúa's allegorical poem "Cervicide," about Self-murder or suicide, to argue that, indeed, the Subject—especially the border-dwelling, rejected Other—is often positioned by culture to resist, reinterpret, and recombine those same constitutive influences to, in effect, remake the Self. Louis Althusser's theories on ideology and art, Sigmund Freud's speculations on the mind of the creative writer, and Virginia Woolf's descriptions of her own creative process are brought to bear upon Anzaldúa's discussion of the artist-as-shaman and the role of art in the quest for a "complete" Self. I argue that "good art," in both the Althusserian and Anzaldúan senses, arises from the artist's (often psychologically painful) engagement with the ideology that shapes her; in addition, beyond the artist's personal creative process, art must, to be successful or "good," transform the ideology that constructs the consciousness of the viewer/participant, thereby, changing the larger culture and its influences upon the Subject.

[http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections\\_Winter\\_2009/Temperance\\_K.\\_David\\_Anzaldua\\_Solution\\_to\\_Cervicide.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections_Winter_2009/Temperance_K._David_Anzaldua_Solution_to_Cervicide.pdf)

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# Killing to Create

## Gloria Anzaldúa's Artistic Solution to "Cervicide"

By Temperance K. David

State University of New York, New Paltz

In Gloria Anzaldúa's poem "Cervicide," a young girl, named Prieta, unwillingly murders the family pet, a fawn, to prevent her father's imprisonment. The author's footnote to the title recommends reading the poem as allegory: "In archetypal symbology the Self appears as a deer for women";<sup>1</sup> by extension, the "cervicide" or killing of a deer is also a "suicide" or Self-murder. Although Prieta's hands wield the fatal hammer, circumstances undermine her culpability; she knows *la guardia*, the game warden, and his hounds are patrolling her home territory, and the "penalty for being caught in possession of a deer [is] \$250 or jail".<sup>2</sup> The threat of the warden's arrival is enough to send Prieta's family into a panic; to avoid the severely destabilizing influence of the Repressive State Apparatus (to borrow an Althusserian term) upon their economy and social unit, the family is compelled to kill their beloved *la venadita*.

The fawn's murder seems tragically inevitable: the family cannot set Venadita free because, domesticated, she will only "seconds later return"; they also cannot hide her because "*la guardia*'s hounds would sniff Venadita out."<sup>3</sup> Even the instrument and manner of her death are, in part, determined by the State; because the warden is close enough to hear gunfire, the family must choose between a knife or hammer—relatively unwieldy and likely more painful means. In a similarly reductive manner, Anzaldúa illustrates how it is, specifically, Prieta who must kill Venadita, the Self. Prieta's father is absent and her "mother couldn't do it. She, Prieta, would have to be the one."<sup>4</sup> While conveying the mother's deep attachment, her matter-of-factly stated inability to kill Venadita also narrows the logical scope of the fawn's signification: if Venadita is the Self who must be killed, and if Prieta is the only one who can kill her, then Venadita is also Prieta—the two are one. Only the Self can kill the Self, therefore, the one who kills the fawn is the fawn, i.e., Prieta.

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<sup>1</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: the new mestiza = La frontera*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1999), 127.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Color specifies both identity and association: "Prieta" is a nickname for "one who is dark skinned"<sup>5</sup> while Venadita's fur is "tawny" and "spotted," "the most beautiful thing Prieta had ever seen"<sup>6</sup>—no other characters in the poem have color. Additionally, an ambiguity produced by the close alternation of sentence subjects further aligns these figures: "The weight folded her body backwards. A thud reverberated on Venadita's skull, a wave undulated down her back. Again, a blow behind the ear. Though Venadita's long lashes quivered, her eyes never left Prieta's face."<sup>7</sup> The arching of Prieta's back as she lifts the hammer, and the undulation of Venadita's back as she experiences the first blow, suggest a shared physicality; here, Venadita gazes at and *with* the eyes of her killer.

The female gender also marks the Self's powerlessness. Anzaldúa describes both Prieta and the fawn as daughters of, essentially, ineffectual mothers: Prieta's mother "couldn't do it"—could neither protect nor kill the Self for Prieta—while a "hunter had shot [Venadita's] mother," greatly decreasing the fawn's chances for survival.<sup>8</sup> To live, these daughters must rely upon a patriarchal economy: while Prieta's father is too financially important to be sent to jail for the sake of the fawn/girl, Venadita is "bottle-fed," that is, made physically dependent upon a culture that both creates and prohibits her dependency. Here, culture constructs the individual "first as kin—as sister, as father, as *padrino*—and last as self"—the family unit is more important than the female child.<sup>9</sup> Circumstances *call for* Prieta's suicide, she "would *have to be* the one"<sup>10</sup> to kill the fawn; interpellated by ideology, Prieta recognizes and performs her clear function or role, within this situation, to kill her Self:

It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are 'obviousnesses') obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying (aloud or in the 'still, small voice of conscience'): 'That's obvious! That's right! That's true!'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 126. Emphasis mine.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 172.

In “Cervicide,” the Self belongs to the State. The family, particularly Prieta, is not permitted to nurture or possess a Self that is not “always-already” owned by the State. Although the domesticated fawn, when released back into the wild, returns to the family, the fawn’s “choice” is irrelevant—its presence constructs the family as thieves of State property. Although they possess firearms, a .22 and 40-40, there is no discussion of using these to defend Venadita against the unquestionably more powerful State. State violence and ideology (evident in familial relations and priorities), then, move the Subject to self-destruct: “Prieta found the hammer. She had to grasp it with both hands”;<sup>12</sup> it is always-already “obvious” that a Self cannot be permitted to live and develop outside the domain of the State. The State’s authority is so perfectly absolute that, not only does the situation demand Venadita’s murder, it also becomes necessary to hide and bury any sign of her former existence.

In its particular relation to Prieta, the fawn’s narrower scope of signification describes the “intimate terrorism” experienced by the woman of color living in a borderland culture.<sup>13</sup> Prieta, as also-Venadita, is given no choice but to be motherless, dependent, domesticated, and suicidal: “Alienated from her mother culture, ‘alien’ in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.”<sup>14</sup> Like Althusser’s Subject that is always-already interpellated by ideology, Anzaldúa’s identity is constructed by culture:

Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the laws; women transmit them.<sup>15</sup>

The dominant culture constructs the border-dweller as a negation, in the author’s case: not-white, but also not-Mexican, not-Indian; not-male, but also not fully-female either. The border-dweller’s several categories of identity are constructed oppositionally, canceling each other out, so she cannot “legitimately” or “authentically” participate in (i.e., share power with) any one identity.

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<sup>12</sup> Anzaldúa, 126.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 38.

Anzaldúa suggests that the dominant culture prevents the educated, lesbian woman of mixed ethnicity from being at peace with herself; she is unceasingly harassed and invalidated.

Growing up in a male-dominated, working-class Mexican culture (itself dominated by a male-dominated Anglo culture), Anzaldúa was discouraged from education, reading, and art-making, since these were neither practical nor feminine enough:

I would pass many hours studying, reading, painting, writing. Every bit of self-faith I'd painstakingly gathered took a beating daily. Nothing in my culture approved of me. *Habia agarrado malos pasos*. Something was 'wrong' with me. *Estaba mas alla de la tradicion*.<sup>16</sup>

Educated, nevertheless, at an Anglo school, Anzaldúa similarly learned to deny those 'psychic experiences' and 'spirit world' beliefs recognized within her Mexican and Indian cultures: "I accepted their [Anglo] reality, the 'official' reality of the rational, reasoning mode which is connected with external reality, the upper world, and is considered the most developed consciousness—the consciousness of duality."<sup>17</sup> As a border-dweller, Anzaldúa's Subject is doubly-denied her experience of reality by these conflicting, competing, and occasionally overlapping ideologies. When the ideologies overlap, she will be unaware that she is "inside ideology" (Althusser would suggest that we, as subjects, are always inside ideology) until (if ever) that part of her ideologically-constructed identity is denied by an incongruous experience or competing ideology. When the Subject is formed by opposing ideologies, she is a house divided against itself; neither "us" nor "them," she is in ideology's border-territory, the dominant culture's collective unconscious, a "vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary."<sup>18</sup> The Subject cannot develop a locus from which to act, so her subject-formation is in stasis, paralyzed.

Anzaldúa describes this painful paralysis as *la Coatlicue*: "the symbol of the underground aspects of the psyche. *Coatlicue* is the mountain, the Earth Mother who conceived all celestial being out of her cavernous womb."<sup>19</sup> After she is killed, Venadita is buried in the earth, safely (for Prieta and her family) hidden from the awareness of the State in the individual and/or collective unconscious;

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 68.

yet, Venadita's scent influences the behavior of the hounds, and her absence is present for the mourning Prieta. Through Venadita's death, then, the State effectively defines Prieta as painfully lacking and incomplete—a border-dweller who fails to be defined by the dominant values. For Prieta, her Venadita-self is repressed in the unconscious, albeit, in *Coatlicue*, “Frozen in stasis, she perceives a slight / movement—a thousand slithering serpent hairs, / *Coatlicue*”.<sup>20</sup> Although Prieta kills and buries Venadita, her sorrow signifies a Self at ideologically odds with the State: “Wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman's feeble protest when she has no other recourse.”<sup>21</sup> The perceived loss of Venadita causes Prieta to develop *la facultad*: “anything that takes one from one's habitual grounding, causes the depths to open up, causes a shift in perception”; this painful shift, Anzaldúa explains, “makes us pay attention to the soul, and we are thus carried into an awareness—an experiencing of soul (Self).”<sup>22</sup>

In his essay “Creative Writers and Daydreaming,” Freud suggests that inappropriate wishes become repressed by the conscious mind to avoid violent conflict with the Subject's environment. The unconscious mind, so theorized, allows these submerged wishes to be acted upon only in dreams and fantasies, that is, in the liminal, border territory between the unconscious and conscious mind. Because the dominant culture constructs Prieta as painfully lacking a Venadita-self, it (presumably) also constructs a desire within the Subject to find a solution to her pain, to act. Until (if ever) full self-expression is possible, Prieta's Venadita-self will be dreamed or fantasized. As Freud suggests,

Actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate. In the same way, the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead of playing, he now *fantasies*. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called *daydreams*.<sup>23</sup>

Prieta does not bury Venadita without burying some aspect of herself; that is, Venadita's condition is always—also Prieta's: both are covered in dust. Burying her Venadita-self and all of its attached desires, i.e. her psychological repression, obstructs her from creating a fully-formed identity: “My resistance, my refusal to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud and Peter Gay, *The Freud reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 438.

know some truth about myself brings on that paralysis, depression—brings on the *Coatlicue* state."<sup>24</sup> When the object of repression is so entirely unacceptable to the ideologically-constructed consciousness of the Subject, when fantasies and daydreams fail to provide a necessary or satisfactory "outlet" for this repressed object to emerge, the Subject is forced to act. As long as the Venadita-self is repressed, Prieta will be in pain; she must find a way to return Venadita to the world:

When I don't write the images down for several days or weeks or months, I get physically ill. Because writing invokes from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I *do* write. I can't stomach it, become nauseous, or burn with fever, worsen. But, in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make 'sense' of them, and once they have 'meaning' they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy.<sup>25</sup>

Making meaning from trauma, Prieta can change the dominant ideology that constructs her as incomplete and lacking.

"Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland," Anzaldúa writes, "is what makes poets write and artists create";<sup>26</sup> *la frontera* is a state of mind. The writing process, for Anzaldúa, produces an anxiety similar to that experienced by the in-between identity of Chicana or queer: there is "a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo where I kick my heels, brood, percolate, hibernate and wait for something to happen."<sup>27</sup> The anxiety is similar because, for the creative writer, the writing process engages and/or creates a psychological border territory, a liminal space for the passage of repressed or stored images and wishes to present themselves to the conscious mind; inasmuch as the creative process is, in this way, a negotiation of ideology, the writer/artist necessarily must negotiate her identity.

In order to create (to put images and ideas together in new ways, in combinations that would be considered "new" or original in the dominant culture), the writer/artist enters a "trance" state as she engages, sifts, sorts, and permits particular wishes/images to emerge and be manipulated by her conscious

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<sup>24</sup> Anzaldúa, 70.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

mind. Virginia Woolf, in her 1931 speech addressed to The Women's Service League posthumously titled "Professions for Women," describes the necessity of killing the ideologically-constructed "selfless" feminine identity, or "Angel of the House," before a woman can even begin to write: "Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing."<sup>28</sup> The Subject who is not fully defined by the dominant culture, whose voice is Other, must confront and invalidate an ideology that denies the full expression of her experience: "you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex."<sup>29</sup> In the same vein, Anzaldúa writes, "To write, to be a writer, I have to trust and believe in myself as a speaker, as a voice for the images...I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one."<sup>30</sup> To kill her "Angel of the House," Anzaldúa must "reprogram" her consciousness: "This involves looking my inner demons in the face, then deciding which I want in my psyche. Those I don't want, I starve...Neglected, they leave. This is harder to do than to merely generate 'stories'."<sup>31</sup>

Once the writer overcomes her initial self-doubt, she can begin to engage her unconscious mind; Woolf writes, "a novelist's chief desire is to be as unconscious as possible."<sup>32</sup> The writer must make her conscious mind passive, somehow receptive, to allow her unconscious to deliver what it will; the conscious mind cannot know ahead of time what it needs from the unconscious. Woolf uses a fishing metaphor:

I want you to imagine me writing a novel in a state of trance. I want you to figure to yourselves a girl sitting with a pen in her hand, which for minutes, and indeed for hours, she never dips into the inkpot. The image that comes to my mind when I think of this girl is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water.<sup>33</sup>

Like Woolf, Anzaldúa discusses trance as an essential part of her creative process. If, however, the writer/artist cannot make "sense" of the wishes and images presented by her unconscious, that is, if she cannot find a way to represent and negotiate these repressed ideas with the dominant ideology, she will remain with

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<sup>28</sup> Virginia Woolf and Mitchell Alexander Leaska, *The Virginia Woolf reader* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 279.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Anzaldúa, 95.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

<sup>32</sup> Woolf and Leaska, 280.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

*Coatlicue*: "It is her reluctance to cross over, to make a hole in the fence and walk across, to cross the river, to take that flying leap into the dark, that drives her to escape, that forces her into the fecund cave of her imagination where she is cradled in the arms of *Coatlicue*."<sup>34</sup> This painful stasis, if allowed to last, can lead to a self-annihilating fragmentation, unless the writer/artist uses the creative process to create a more expansive and resilient identity: "I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer," Woolf writes in "A Sketch of the Past," "[writing] gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together."<sup>35</sup> When the writer/artist succeeds, "the repressed energy rises, makes decisions, connects with conscious energy and a new life begins";<sup>36</sup> not only does negotiation between the conscious and unconscious minds produce images that are "new" within the dominant ideology, but it allows the artist to re-create her Self.

Althusser suggests a special relationship between "real art, not works of an average or mediocre level" and ideology: "What art makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of 'seeing,' 'perceiving,' and 'feeling,' (which is not the form of knowing), is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*."<sup>37</sup> What Althusser describes as the "internal distancing" produced by "real art" (Balzac and Solzhenitsyn are his examples) may be the result of this intermixing, synthesizing, and juxtaposing of conscious and unconscious elements; in other words, this effect may be a byproduct of the artist's simultaneous engagement, in "trance," with both her ideologically-formed consciousness and what is rejected by ideology and repressed in the unconscious. Bad art would merely reproduce ideology; it would be either perfectly acceptable (and, therefore, unremarkable and unmemorable) or wholly rejected (it would fail to be effective in its challenge to ideology).

The Subject's experience of rejection from the dominant culture, allows (forces) her to perceive, at least unconsciously, those repressive and ideological State apparatuses that create her as Other. Anzaldúa describes *la facultad* as "the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the

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<sup>34</sup> Anzaldúa, 71.

<sup>35</sup> Virginia Woolf and Jeanne Schulkind, *Moments of being* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 72.

<sup>36</sup> Anzaldúa, 71.

<sup>37</sup> Louis Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to Andre Daspre," In *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism*, Ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), 1482.

deep structure below the surface,” suggesting that those who are rejected by the dominant culture can better perceive its multiple faces.<sup>38</sup> As the rejected subject is interfaced by ideology and what ideology rejects, she develops “an instant ‘sensing,’ a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide.”<sup>39</sup> The artist’s particular sensitivity to the connection between the repressed, unconscious self and the ideologically-formed conscious self is, perhaps, what allows her work to be aesthetically pleasing to others; that is, the artist communicates what everyone intersected by ideology experiences and, so, her audience recognizes something “true” in her work.

Freud suggests, “our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds”; by negotiating formally repressed images or ideas with the conscious mind, formally re-presenting them in a “disguise” or through symbols, etc., the artist/writer enables “us thenceforward to enjoy our own daydreams without self-reproach or shame.”<sup>40</sup> In order to make sense of and evaluate this imagery, to accept it or reject it, the audience will necessarily engage with the ideology that shapes them. For Anzaldúa, Western European culture produces art “dedicated to the validation of itself,” to reproducing the State; tribal art, she suggests, performs a different cultural function: “The works are treated not just as objects, but also as persons. The ‘witness’ is a participant in the enactment of the work in a ritual, and not a member of the privileged classes.”<sup>41</sup> In this way, the “participant,” it would appear, is encouraged to become co-creator of both Self/ideology/culture through art: “When invoked in rite, the object/event is ‘present’; that is, ‘enacted,’ it is both a physical thing and the power that infuses it.”<sup>42</sup> The ideologically-constructed Self becomes, through ritual, an idea interacting with other ideas, transforming herself on the level of ideas: “The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman.”<sup>43</sup> The artist’s role is to lead the audience-participant into the dark, forbidden, repressed, rejected, Other, liminal aspects of the Self—into the border-territory—where they can actively contribute to the process of forming a whole Self and borderless culture:

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<sup>38</sup> Anzaldúa, 60.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Freud and Gay, 443.

<sup>41</sup> Anzaldúa, 90.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

My "awakened dreams" are about shifts. Thought shifts, reality shifts, gender shifts: one person metamorphoses into another in a world where people fly through the air, heal from mortal wounds. I am playing with my Self, I am playing with the world's soul, I am the dialogue between my Self and *el espíritu del mundo*. I change myself, I change the world.<sup>44</sup>

Making meaning from pain, and offering an opportunity, through art, for others to similarly "negotiate" meaning, Anzaldúa's artist-shaman changes culture and ideology; if she is constructed by ideology, as Althusser would suggest, then, she is also constructed by ideology to change ideology—her pain forces her to act. "My soul makes itself through the creative act," Anzaldúa writes, "It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this learning to live with *la Coatlique* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else."<sup>45</sup> As long as there are borders defining a culture, there will be those who are outside, Other, who are positioned by the culture to challenge its definition of itself. Prieta-Venadita is positioned by the dominant culture to mourn her Self and, thereby, to protest or resist the values of the State and family. If the artist/writer is the culture's mechanism for transforming itself, it appears she also has some say in the ideology that forms her. Venadita's murder becomes, eventually, the impetus for change, renewal, rebirth.

Temperance David received a Bachelor's degree in both Creative Writing and Literature from SUNY Purchase College in 2005, and is currently in her final semester of graduate studies in English at SUNY New Paltz. Her literary and scholarly interests include creativity theory, comic books, postcolonial literature, and creative nonfiction.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 95.