

## **Breaking Down the “Coatlicue State” to See a Self: Queer Voices Within a Circle**

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### ***Summary***

Marginalized queers have experienced the “Coatlicue State” (Anzaldúa, 2012). Seeing and being seen in front of the public are painful to us. We feel ashamed due to stereotypes placed by heteronormativity and heterosexism. In this small space, I hope to accomplish one simple thing: break down different layers of shame to ask for understanding and empathy. I write this piece to embrace us—queer marginalized voices—in schools and in academia. This dialogue will thus open doors to discussions inside and outside of a “circle”. The suggestion at the end of this article hopes to touch on insiders and outsiders of this circle.

**Keywords:** queer, Latinx, Anzaldúa, Vietnamese, stereotype, empathy, dialogues, shame



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*“Shame is a wound felt from the inside, dividing us both from ourselves and from one another.”*

-Gershen Kaufman-

We are sitting in a circle for a closing activity. This will be another boring activity. Anyway, it does not matter anymore because I already told Ms. Nelson and Mr. Gucci that I will quit the program next week. This is *just* another *aburrido*, boring after-school program. Who thinks girls can learn coding with all computational thinking skills? *¡Qué broma!* What a joke!

“Why don’t we start drawing a picture of you when you were a child?” Mr. Gucci asked. “Ms. Nelson and I will draw ours, too. You have 5 minutes and then we share in class.”

Mr. Gucci is awesome and funny. We have loved him since last summer when he worked with us. He always wears a brown leather Gucci belt, which we think is fake, but he insisted it was a real one. *No me importa*. I do not care much about him, but I love Ms. Nelson. She is a wonderful teacher. I usually tell her everything, like everything about my life, *todo sobre mi vida*. I trust her. That is why I told her about my secret yesterday. Not really a big secret but it is kind of a big deal. I told her that boys in my class talked something behind my back. They were spreading the rumor that I have a girlfriend. I don’t, but yeah I do, but maybe not. But is that important? Does that matter to them if I am different? Am I different? Okay, I think I am different. But why is it a big deal if I am different. Nobody cares. Wait a second, focus, what should I draw? I don’t know what I should draw in this activity. Why is this drawing relevant to a computational thinking class that we have? It is definitely irrelevant.

“Time’s up. Who wants to share your picture?” Mr. Gucci suddenly cut my line of thinking. I did not even start drawing anything. Okay, boys will continue to share their pictures. I get it. I am curious what Mr. Gucci and Ms. Nelson are going to share. Ms. Nelson shared with a group that she has grown up as a Black girl and how she has taken pride in herself for who she is, even though she has been being misrepresented and stereotyped due to her skin color. I feel you, Ms. Nelson. I have been there. I am a Mexican girl, but I was raised in America. I am brown outside, but I have American and Mexican thoughts at the same time. I speak two languages, like all of the students in this class. We are all Mexican-Americans. You call us Latinx, sometimes. *No me importa*. Mr. Gucci is about to share his. I can’t wait!!!

Mr. Gucci shows a picture of a girl character, the class is excited now, we are curious and laughing. “No way, Mr. Gucci! It is not you, right?” “No, it is me.” He replied without any seconds of hesitation. “You would see I was wearing a skirt, and my hair was curly, right? It was

me when I was a kid. I was wearing a skirt to school, and my friends could not recognize if I was a boy or a girl. My mom always wanted me to be a girl.” He paused for a second, then continued, “But that wasn’t the worst part. I was being bullied because of my appearance. You know, in Vietnam, you have to show your masculinity, your manhood, and if you were different, you would be alienated, isolated and people would start questioning you, and it would be a sin if you were someone different. I was *that* different. But my mom loved me for who I was, and I love me for who I was and for who I am.”

Wow, Mr. Gucci. It is A-MAZE-INGGG! I cannot believe you have such history. I am like you. I am curious, questioning and doubting, too. It has been happening to me, Mr. Gucci. I try to skim my eyes around the circle. Well, boys, why do you keep silent? Did you hear Mr. Gucci? Are you in shame now? No worries, I feel ashamed all the time. It is not the first time. I feel connected with you, Mr. Gucci. Wait, oh now I get it, I get why we have this activity today. I told Ms. Nelson about my issue yesterday before we left the class. I told her about my bullying issue. Is it because of me that we have this activity today? No, maybe not, maybe there’s another friend of mine who has the same situation. I am not the only one person who feels different. But, what’s wrong with being different?



### Break a circle

You know where I am going with this. I was in Luna’s train of thought to tell a story on her behalf. It is not unique, but it does not mean it is not important to listen to. Thank you for sitting in a circle with us to listen to both of our stories. My imagination about her thoughts may not hold true, but her situation was real. She was in my class two years ago in an afterschool program for middle schoolers. She intended to quit the program after she had been bullied by her friends due to her gender identity. There are a lot of “Lunas” out there who share similar experiences. They are struggling, feeling anxious and isolated with their gender identities due to the power of heterosexism and heteronormativity. In this small space, I thus hope to accomplish one simple thing: break down different layers of shame to ask for your understanding and empathy. I write this piece to embrace both of us—queer marginalized voices—in schools and in academia.

According to Anzaldúa (2012), both of us have experienced the “[Coatlicue State](#)”, a contradictory process. Anzaldúa excruciatingly describes the process to help us expand our understanding of shamefulness, opposition and duality as dealing with identity and differences:

I don’t want to know, I don’t want to be seen. My resistance, my refusal to know some truth about myself brings on that paralysis, depression – brings on the Coatlicue state. At first I feel exposed and opened to the depth of my dissatisfaction. Then I feel myself

closing, hiding, holding myself together rather than allowing myself to fall apart (p. 70).

Seeing and being seen in front of the public are painful to us, metaphorically and literally. We do not belong to a society constructed by the hierarchical, patriarchal, heteronormative system. We are outsiders. As outsiders, we do not belong to a circle of “normality”. The normality is paralyzing our moves, our bodies, our lines of thoughts. Gradually, our emotions are becoming numb, frozen and dead. The regime, wherein the ignorance of a self, the unacceptance of others, the heterosexism hold utmost power, is distancing us instead of allowing us to come closer to your circle; we are unable to sit down and share our thoughts with others. We are alone here.

Do you mind sparing your time, coming closer and listening to our stories—the old-motif story that you may already know, but it was such a process for us to come out of the closet, to be joyful in the light, to be out in the public, to overcome the Coatlicue state? This state is an open door but needs a key of empathy and understanding to unlock it.

Our tongues are cut, frozen and replaced to fit in the crowd. We are sweating; we are doubting; we are afraid of judging eyes; we are hating ourselves; we are hating others for hating us; we are rolling back to our regime; we are continuing to hide; we are seizing ourselves in a closet again. We are handcuffing the whole body—to harm ourselves, to cut ourselves, to disappear. Because we are ashamed.

Are you still listening to us? Are you still there in your own circle?

### **Circling back**

I am sorry that I do not offer a better solution to advocate for people like us. But I am glad you are going this far to listen to our stories. Can I ask you a favor instead? We would like you not to be a stranger, a heartless passer-by. If you ever see us, could you please give us a moment to talk, to share, to laugh with us, or at least to give us a hug? You will see how powerful a hug can be. Hugging is an act of loving, of endurance, of resistance, of forgiveness, of (re)humanization and of being (Trinh, 2018). Through the act of hugging, I told a story of how a Vietnamese son learns how to heal himself and his mom from the wounds of domestic family abuse and how he is awakened to forgive his dad for what he has done to the family. By giving a hug to others, especially to those who lived a life of marginality, you will be able to see a deeper layer of a person’s life and teach you how to share empathy with people around you. The hug is the key that I talked about—the key to unlock the regime where you could see all of us, me, “Luna” and you, in there.

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