This is a critical introduction from a thesis project: a creative nonfiction collection of personal essays titled The Audacity to Live*. The critical introduction is an interrogation of the student's work with a focus on creative influences, craft influences, and market considerations. The author was an English graduate student, and their faculty mentor was Professor Rob Davidson. This paper utilized the Modern Language Association (MLA) Style, which is typical for papers in this discipline and used in-text citations.*

The Audacity to Live: Critical Introduction

Alondra Adame

Introduction

The Audacity to Live is a collection of essays that interrogates larger questions and ideas about identity and culture from my queer Chicanx perspective. Most of these essays jump around chronologically but are threaded together by the character of Alondra who is always vividly recounting a memory, providing critical cultural analysis, or looking forward to future possibilities. The character of Alondra switches from essay to essay depending on the topic at hand: a young child questioning the Catholic faith; a teenager searching for a sign about her future; and a young adult with a deeper understanding of where she comes from and who she wants to be. The format of the personal essay allows different threads to emerge in each version of Alondra in order to analyze societal and cultural issues.

The personal essay form, according to leading practitioner and writer Phillip Lopate, is informal with a focus on "intimate style, some autobiographical content or interest, and an urbane conversational manner" (Harmon qtd. in Lopate *The Art of the Personal Essay* xxiv). Lopate was also a vital voice in understanding the personal essays I was writing. The tone and style of a personal essay are what initially interested me about the form. While the personal essay aims to highlight select moments in scenes and includes a narrator and reflection like a memoir would, it also asks the writer to contextualize their experiences and analytically address larger questions about culture and society. In order to do so, a writer must become a reliable voice for the reader, one that captures the intimacy that Lopate points out as "the hallmark of the personal essay" (*The Art of the Personal Essay* xxiii). My thoughts, memories, desires, and complaints from my young adulthood are tools to set up a relationship with my readers in order to bring them closer to the heart of the matter I'm trying to show them.

Creative Influences

I find myself inspired by writers like Jennine Capó Crucet and Cathy Park Hong who write about their experiences in broader societal and cultural scopes and had the most significant impact on how I view "the self" and identity in personal essays.

Jennine Capó Crucet: Identity & Resistance

Jeannine Capó Crucet's essay collection, *My Time Among the Whites: Notes from an Unfinished Education*, acknowledges the otherness that women of color feel when isolated within predominantly white communities and the struggles experienced by first-generation college students as well as children of immigrants. Crucet positions herself in her essays through the lenses of her various identities: Cuban, American, Floridian, student, professor, writer, daughter, and divorcée. Her identities are positioned in order to add meaning and perspective to certain experiences like her trip to Disney World.

Crucet carefully centers her first-person point of view as a Cuban-American Florida native to enhance the themes of fantasy and reality as she makes connections between Disney World and the American Dream in her essay, "Magic Kingdoms." Crucet's analysis of her 2017 trip to Disney World is given to the reader through her parents' teasing where they wondered "why they'd let [her] go to college in the first place if all it made was a person who who could no longer enjoy things, who could no longer easily engage in the version of fantasy Disney provides... without giving them a lecture on *consuming and being consumed*" (Crucet 46). Crucet's college education taught her to perceive oppression in its more subtle forms, even in a place she once held dear when she was a child.

Crucet claims that Disney "excludes and erases who you truly are" in order to keep guests interested in returning, creating a singular whitewashed American fantasy that is inaccurate and damaging for the guests who participate in this illusion (Crucet 50). Crucet reinforces this idea with an anecdote about a white American family, analyzing the father's failure to acknowledge "the misogyny and violence" (52) being represented in the Pirates of Caribbean ride as well as her own failure to say something about it. She is constrained by financial and societal concerns and frets over the cost of the trip as well as the time invested. Ultimately, Crucet decides to allow the misogynistic cycle to continue despite her feelings in order to maintain the Disney fantasy. The vulnerability of the children as well as the predatory nature of capitalism create a crossroads that Crucet could not navigate, and she ends the section with a helpless reflection on the unique control Disney's design has over the people who participate in their business.

Crucet recognizes that Disney provides whitewashed American fantasies that people, especially first-generation children, can mold themselves into. The theme park's inherent whiteness erases children like herself who already felt untethered by an idealized Cuba concocted by their immigrant parents and also amplifies the reality of living in American "water, mud, and factories" (Crucet 59). Disney convinces children from a young age to believe in pure magic where everything is perfect as long as you believe in their particular version of a dream.

While Disney's magic isn't real, people will continue to pay into Disney's branded fantasies for the memories and happiness it can bring them in a capitalistic American society. This point Crucet makes is further emphasized in the final section of the essay where her niece's disgust during her first Disney visit is hilariously apparent. Despite the two-hundred-dollar photography service offered by Disney, Crucet's niece successfully ruins the make-believe spectacle in front of one of Disney's most iconic images, Cinderella's Castle, by making facial expressions that mimic "melting or actively shitting her diaper" (Crucet 67). The two-year-old's disinterest is presented by Crucet as a rebellious statement against the "branded version of generic white American happiness," offering a more hopeful tone for the next generation's relationship with the Magic Kingdom and finding their own versions of happiness in the United States (Crucet 67).

Similar to Crucet's act of positioning her identity in the heart of the situation, I position myself in "Homecoming" with my first-person point of view as an ex-resident of Sutter, tracing the colonization of the land as well as the migration and brief history of my family in Sutter. This expands further into my perspective as a resident of Chico and a citizen of the United States, actively fighting and protesting against cycles of racialized violence. This attention to the first-per-

son point of view is present in almost every essay in my collection except for "Letter to My Teenage Self." While many of my essays are centered around my perspective to give readers the "intimate voice" necessary to gain their trust and attention, "Letter to My Teenage Self" is written in the second-person point of view and recounts my awakening as a writer through an epistolary form. I was especially attached to the echoing quality of one of the final lines of the essay: "You will. You will. You will" (Adame 55). The echoing quality felt like it enhanced the meaning behind the essay, a more experienced adult Alondra who has become a writer reaching backwardin time to try and reassure a more inexperienced teenage Alondra who hadn't quite realized her potential yet.

A common theme in my work emerged around being seen as well as seeing myself which intertwines with some of the main conflicts present in the collection about expectations from different levels of society. I spent a moment in "Homecoming" examining different versions of myself, before and after moving to Chico after high school, "up to a microscope and saw the same core desire: to be accepted" (Adame 60). I wrestled with meeting expectations in a predominantly white area but moved past those expectations after high school by leaving for college, highlighting these changes through interactions with Hudson or with Timarie (Adame 61; 63-64). I also write about how at a party I felt "terrified that someone might look my way and see me for who I really was... I was from here and raised here, but has always been an outsider, even now" because I was always afraid of being perceived in multiple ways that I knew weren't acceptable in my pocket of society growing up (Adame 62). However, the mention of the satirical Swift essay from high school is meant to represent a quiet, unseen resistance while the final moment in the essay during the protest represents a shedding of that quieter self for an Alondra who can vocally and physically advocate against the racism for herself and others (Adame 65; 67).

I take on many identities in my essay collection that become starting points for social analysis and help center the focus of the work: queer, Chicanx, daughter, sister, student, protestor, writer, friend, partner. I connected the racialized tension in the United States during the 2020 election to the tension I felt in my hometown after contextualizing Sutter through my own personal experiences in order to show the deep-rooted attitudes of rural conservative Northern California. Part of my inspiration for this essay was thinking about the ways people outside of California have an expectation of it being a liberal paradise of some sort. This idea evolved into an essay that confronted colonization and racism by weaving together my personal experiences, the history of the town and its founder, and the political climate during the 2020 Election. I try to end the essay with a hopeful tone in the face of racism that exists on a local and national level by painting the scene of my partner and I protesting together in downtown Chico (Adame 67). My resistance is more overt in "Homecoming" than the other essays and reflects the main themes about independence and growth throughout the collection.

Cathy Park Hong: Exploring Lineage & Identity

Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings* focuses on larger themes of race and culture through her identity and experiences as an Asian American woman. Her work often feels like a mix of literary journalism, memoir, and theory. By pulling on so many threads, Hong's episodic storytelling structure upholds a rigorous and complex thought process to make sense of her own feelings of shame connected to race and culture. These feelings of shame are connected to the even greater themes in the

book about racialized emotions and living in a racialized America.

In her essay "Bad English," Hong rationalizes her usage of the modular essay because she is "only capable of 'speaking nearby' the Asian American condition, which is so involuted that I can't stretch myself across it… which is why I have chosen this episodic form, with its exit routes that permit me to stray. But I always return, from a different angle, which is my own way of inching closer to it" (Hong 103-04). Hong positions herself here as a reporter rather than a spokesperson for Asian Americans. She can give her own part of the experience but she aims to approach the subject from different perspectives and voices. The modular essay allows her to hop from her story about being bullied for her bad Englishto her father's borrowing of English phrases (93) to the phenomenon of "Engrishisms" (96) and more, keeping Hong from being a central authority on Asian Americans and exploring interesting threads of thought that might've been too short to include in a traditional essay structure.

Bad English was once a source of shame for Hong, but now it's part of her literary and cultural heritage. Hong not only positions herself in the essay as a child who struggled and felt ashamed about her English but also an adult who writes to expand notions of what English can look like. She writes, "I share a literary lineage with writers who make the mastering of English their rallying cry—who queer it, twerk it, hack it, Calibanize it, *other* it by hijacking English and warping it to a fugitive tongue" (Hong 97). Shame pushes writers inward but it also allows those feelings and ideas to develop further through writing and reading. However, Hong's shame is not only cultural but political. Hong's focus on bad English is part of her desire to find "a form—a way of speech—that decentered whiteness" and prioritized multiple threads of thought and voices other than her own (Hong 104). Paraphrasing the artist Gregg Bordowitz, Hong explains that this desire allowed her to bypass "social media algorithms and consumer demographics by bringing together groups who wouldn't normally be in the same room together" which would give her ideas more room to expand (Hong 104). This allows her to pursue different angles rather than appeasing the dominant culture's tendency by reducing complicated thoughts to simpler consumer-friendly ideas.

At the end of her essay, Hong does not attempt to make any conclusions about race or shame and allows the reader to join her in a full paragraph of questions that begins by asking how she could even write honestly enough about how she has been hurt and how she has hurt others when envisioning a multicultural future. Her final question is one that stems from seeking to avoid coming from a place of shame or guilt, an apology "without demanding" any forgiveness (Hong 109). By asking her final question "Where do I begin?" Hong admits that she does not know where to begin but wants to understand how (Hong 109). It's a question for readers that would hopefully spur further discussion and thinking about how to begin conversations about race in America that can move beyond guilt and shame.

By utilizing a couple of paragraphs of rhetorical questions in "The Audacity to Live," I hoped for the reader to consider and ponder their own identity framed within larger social and historical contexts (Adame 48). I want to push the reader into a moment of self-reflection before they can look more closely at the larger societal issues surrounding a daughter of immigrants who is pursuing higher education in an institution that demands so much of their mental and emotional energy. In order to frame some of these issues in these daughters' own words, I included pieces of dialogue

from conversations with my cousins as well as friends who share similar situations about hiding parts of themselves in college from their traditional immigrant parents (Adame 5-6; 9-10). I wanted to acknowledge that I am only one voice in a sea of first-generation students struggling to keep up while feeling like expectations are keeping them from fully expressing themselves.

Like Hong, my essay collection also seeks to have a discussion about my ethnic identity in the United States. Part of that is tied to a particular awakening to our own vulnerabilities and strengths in the face of this complex situation of existing as a person of color in America that becomes tied to larger histories as well as social and cultural structures associated with class, gender, and race. The only way we seem to think or theorize about the future is by asking questions and recognizing difficult truths in order to encourage further discourse because we are only one perspective rather than the spokespeople for our respective identities. Anything less would reduce our stories and our cultures to an impossible and stationary monolith that would only serve to center the dominant culture's narrative rather than our own.

Craft Influences

I've learned that reading about writing is a vital practice for developing a sense of the craft in order to enhance my understanding of my own work. Writers Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola as well as Phillip Lopate served as ideal models for learning and thinking about the craft of creative nonfiction.

Tell It Slant

Reading discussions on craft from writers like Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola in their book *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* helped me shape my understanding of the craft of creative non-fiction. They discuss how photography and creative writing hold similarities in the ways the personal "eye" (or I) is the "mechanism for observation, and the inner 'I' is the medium" through which our observations are filtered (Miller & Paola 106). I believe this calls to attention the importance of a strong "I" or first-person perspective in personal essays.

In a personal essay, one can get lost in the various strands of thought and associations that a writer can connect their personal experiences to. Miller and Paola call this "a technical dilemma: How do you effectively frame this experience? What gets left outside the confines of this frame? Are some frames more 'truthful' than others?" They ultimately decide that "the way you decide to frame the world directly reflects the 'I' and the 'eye' that perform this act of construction," which signals to me that it is up to the writer to determine the framing of their essay in order to reflect the voice and concerns of the narrator, whoever that constructed voice in the essay happens to be (Miller & Paola 106). Like a photograph, a personal essay can only fit so much into its frame, so those strands of thought must find their proper place to create a highly manipulated view of reality.

Another key idea presented by Miller and Paola early in their first chapter, "The Body of Memory," that captured my attention was the concept of "imagistic endurance" coined by poet Jenny Johnson (Miller & Paola 5). Johnson described imagistic endurance as "the act of sustaining our attention on images" like the way athletes must build up their stamina through conditioning (Miller & Paola 5). Writers can develop this skill by focusing on a specific memory and keeping an inquisitive eye on the key details for as long as possible to allow the scene to "unfold more deeply" (Miller & Paola 5).

I use my first-person point of view and imbue scenes with the same gravity I experienced them by utilizing sensory details to draw a reader's eye closer, but there is a particular exception for the second-person point of view utilized in "Letter to My Teenage Self," where the details intensify the moment when the psychic's smoke machine "makes you want to gag. Her neon blue lighting will illuminate the slim white slips of paper you and your cousin place on the table. She'll wave her hand over your cousin's paper and pause for a few moments, swirling her fingers covered in shiny silver rings" (Adame 53). I want the reader to feel like their future is in the balance here just like it felt for Alondra at the time. This is the turning point that should slow a reader's breath down as they await the psychic's answer.

Show and Tell

I would like my work to always be as accessible as possible while still providing avenues for people to research and look further. The old rule of "show, don't tell" was something that rang in my ears whenever I was writing my personal essays and deciding what scenes to include from my personal experiences, but Phillip Lopate's *To Show and To Tell* reassured me that I was well within my right to "tell." "I would argue that literary nonfiction is surely the one arena in which it *is* permissible to 'tell,'" Lopate writes. "In personal essays and memoirs, we must rely on the subjective voice of the first-person narrator to guide us, and if that voice never explains, summarizes, interprets, or provides a larger sociological or historical context for the material, we are in big trouble" (*To Show* 29). I believe personal essays provide an ideal framework for making meaning out of my personal experiences through analysis and reflection since I am just as invested in the *why* of a situation as a reader might be. In most of the essays in the collection, there is a line of history attached to my identities and experiences which sometimes interact or overlap. I don't want a reader to understand the situation as it was but how and why it impacted my perception of myself or society. Part of this reflection is in order to create meaning and also as a way to educate a reader about multi-faceted social issues or perspectives they might not have encountered before.

I never expect anyone to read my work with a full understanding of the situation. Sometimes I prefer to show what's happening, like in the opening of "I'm (Not) Sorry for Yelling" where I focus on the image of the young white man balancing his disgusting shoes on the shared desk without any regard for the women seated around him. There is a good amount of discomfort and tension in the opening scene where a woman is visibly making herself smaller due to a man's inconsideration which functions as a quiet display of gender dynamics through their movements (Adame 79). Similarly, in "My Brothers' Sister," I choose to open with an explanation of why I threatened to behead a girl "in my younger brother's honor," the beginning of many instances of where I felt responsible for protecting my brother from other people and on a larger scale, one of my first experiences with ableism and the ignorance that accompanies it (Adame *Palabritas* 68).

In my personal essay, "The Audacity to Live," the subjective voice of the first-person narrator successfully provides a larger historical and sociological context for the material through reflection and retrospection on the sociocultural layers that intersect in the essay. There is intersectionality in the issues present in "The Audacity to Live" that center around not only the familial pressures faced by first-generation daughters of immigrants but the sexism and homophobia in Latinx families as well as the classism and elitism that permeates academia. The section which

might be most relevant to "The Audacity to Live" is when Lopate begins examining the way emerging writers are drawn to recite stories of abuse in its multiple forms, arguably similar to my essay's main concerns (Lopate *To Show* 35). He notes that these novice writers (like me) often think they must speak with "the authority of the victimized outsider" but believes these stories tend to lack "a satisfyingly self-aware narrator" (Lopate *To Show* 35-36). However, the essay acknowledges the privileges of the position the character of Alondra is centered within. For example, the second and third paragraphs of the essay begin with a confrontational tone which slowly unravels into a reflective series of rhetorical questions (Adame 1). The switch to "we" in the final question of the third paragraph "We all have our reasons now, don't we?" holds the reader and the narrator accountable from the very beginning and narrowly avoids Lopate's unwanted "self-righteous protagonist" (Adame 1; Lopate *To Show* 36). While revising the essay, I considered removing this particular section of the piece. It felt too aware of itself, but it represented the strings of thinking which I hold myself and others accountable to. However, unlike the example of the student creating an unreliable narrator of himself that Lopate uses as an example, the narrator portrayed in "The Audacity to Live" is hyper-aware of the various strands of thought supported by the critical voice in the piece which aims to gain the trust of the reader.

My own experiences as a queer woman of color are brought to the forefront because of the cultural milestone that I reflected on in "The Audacity to Live." The context does not disappear amongst the feelings of guilt and resentment in the essay which gives truth to Lopate's statement that students' resistance to "relinquish their rage" but the emotion becomes focused as the essay progresses through the narrator's journey to claim their independence (Lopate *To Show* 36). The narrator is able to recognize the guilt felt by first-generation women of color while also being aware of the privileged opportunities higher education provides her like jobs with "air conditioning and a decent wage" or spending money at expensive restaurants (Adame 4). These struggles, as the essay concludes, are ongoing, which supports Lopate's claim about how the "victim narrative" will continue to surface in creative nonfiction courses after taking on a significant place in our cultural grand narrative (Lopate *To Show* 36). The American cultural and political climate does center and exploit the experiences of victims in multiple ways, experiences that have occurred over and over again throughout the country's history. Victimization is a cyclical process, one which the first-person narrator of "The Audacity to Live" continues to fight against at the end of the essay. It is the most honest conclusion to come to but only after following the first-person narrator through what Lopate calls "a live, candid mind thinking on the page, exploring uncharted waters" in order to portray a reliable and complex narrator (Lopate *To Show* 43).

I would argue that ambivalence is a requirement of survival for a character such as the first-person narrator of Alondra in "The Audacity to Live." This ambivalence is present at the very beginning of the essay when the narrator discusses the way "daughters of immigrants born in the United States, particularly women of color" are required to suffer emotionally and mentally while succeeding academically and beginning to recognize the privileges accumulated through this act of selfishness and sacrifice (Adame 1). Many of the experiences in "The Audacity to Live" are ones where the protagonist has been the victim, but the essay provides a complex first-person narrator who is aware of the over-

lapping layers of privilege and oppression through critical reflection and retrospection in order to give the reader a larger historical and sociological context.

Looking Forward

After publishing "The Audacity to Live" in *The Nasiona* and "My Brothers' Sister" in *PALABRITAS*, I've given further thought to how I'd like to present myself as a writer in the future. I don't think I'd like to be seen solely as a queer Chicanx writer although, obviously, my identities inform my writing and ways of thinking. I hold strong positions in my writing through these lenses, but I want readers to recognize that my writing aims to reveal something about the interconnectedness of the world through my personal experiences. This interconnectedness is something that I don't want to be mistaken for "universality," a term that I feel is over utilized in conversations about personal essays and suggests that we all fall under some cosmic umbrella where we are all inevitably the same inside. I might even argue that universality is inadequate to function this way in regard to creative nonfiction. I see these experiences as threads of a larger web, always growing in size or connecting to other ideas and concepts that are seemingly unrelated until they're rendered in someone's personal experiences and ways of thinking to tie them all together. This is how colonization can be related to a party, how a man's dirty shoes represent the patriarchy, and how an argument on the playground can lead into a larger conversation about ableism in *The Audacity to Live*.

I don't quite believe in the universality that writers such as Lopate might aim for, a universality that might only exist for privileged cis straight white people who have found themselves the default for their experiences. Last fall, I came across poet and writer Chen Chen's craft essay "Craft Capsule: Against Universality, in Praise of Anger" where he writes "If the particular is a doorway to the universal, who maintains the door? Who made it? Do I want to travel to that universe anyway? If the particulars must be understandable, palatable to a white audience, is that a universe or is that the white gaze?" (Chen). I believe more in the interconnectedness of human emotion since shared experiences are only a small facet of what my writing attempts to demonstrate. Not everyone can share my experiences, but they can share my emotions or my reactions to certain events and look to understand the experience as part of a smaller whole. I think part of that is bringing readers into my universe while simultaneously recognizing that I'm inviting in strangers and friends alike. I do have an interest in the white gaze, but only as the backboard where criticisms can be made about the issues or topics it doesn't wish to acknowledge. I think pointing out the avoidance of a conversation is usually a good way to get a conversation going within a personal essay. While I have no intention of making my writing more palatable to a white audience, I have a good understanding of what might be necessary for a reader to understand in an essay and what they might actually be able to look up on their own.

Taking Sarah Pape's class Editing Literary Magazines taught me that I should be more selective about where I should publish my work, not in terms of the capitalist lens that often shapes publication and genre restraints, but in terms of who I want to be "related to" in a literary sense. So far, I've been interested in smaller indie magazines and journals because I relate to people in those spaces. I love that I've found queer, Chicanx, and Latinx poets and writers who understand what it's like to be a writer and a student, a writer and a teacher, and a writer who works with what little time we have. I look up to the writers I inter-

act with like Lupe Mendez, Alan Charazo, Kim Sousa, and Venus Davis who have given me advice and opportunities to interact in the lit community online when I cannot travel or attend events like AWP. Even the writers I've decided to teach my own students this semester are predominantly queer writers or BIPOC writers, like Sandra Cisneros, Ryan Van Meter, Ross Gay, Ada Limón, Chen Chen, Terrence Hayes, and Juan Alvarado Valdivia, who have had an impact on how I view my writing process through discussions with my students.

In terms of presses, I am interested in FlowerSong Press for the future. You could say that they are my dream press since their editor-in-chief is Edward Vidaurre and their founder is David Bowles, both Latinx writers I admire. They will be publishing other Chicanx and Latinx writers I look up to such as Juan Felipe Herrera, Carmen Tafolla, and Ariel Francisco. It'd be fantastic to publish a manuscript that is even a little bit connected to such amazing writers.

Beyond publishing, I'd like to continue teaching creative writing and find other opportunities to support writers. For now, I am happy with writing my own work and helping others find their writing voice. This collection of essays represents part of my growing awareness and journey as a writer as well as a call to action for readers: May you have the audacity to live your life for yourself and hold that courage within you, always.

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