

Christine Stoddard
Final Project Statement

My final project is a film essay called “Imperfect.” It lasts a little over 18 minutes and combines direct to camera and more observed performance, as well as photography. In this course, I was inspired by “Public Obscenities,” “The Moth,” and Svetlana Alexievich. Outside of this course, I was inspired by concepts introduced or affirmed in my classes Writing from Personal Archives (Lydia DeFusto), Roots & Branches (Nyssa Chow), and Oral History Workshop (Amy Starecheski).

On the surface, this piece is about diasporic yearning. I tried to convey my relationship with this term, which is complicated. On one hand, I genuinely feel a desire for connection with the Motherland. On the other hand, I feel anxiety, awkwardness, and annoyance with the term, especially when I sense pressure to express it a certain way, using academic language. Then it bothers me for being performative. I mean that in an anthropological sense, not a theatrical sense. I do not want to perform an emotion to be seen as socially “competent” and validated in that way.

“Public Obscenities” and our assignment to engage with a dream made me think of a recurring dream I have regarding a jaguar and my grandmother, who died in El Salvador before I could meet her. Much of my desire for the Motherland relates to my desire for connection to my grandmother and for a different kind of relationship with my mother, though I do not get into that in this piece.

Here is how the dream goes:

My eyes fall on the lights and shadows cutting up the Neotropical forest. Patches of gold and green collide with crevices colored deep browns and blacks. Agave and rubber trees form an army that marches on for miles. Maybe to them I am a rogue soldier, hunting for a news story to publish in the military newspaper. My camera hangs from my neck, bouncing off my chest whenever I speed up. I seek nothing new, but rather something old. This is my grandmother’s backyard. Though she has been dead 40 years, perhaps her face lives in a log or her heart lies pounding on a stump, nestled by ferns. I cannot know if I do not look.

When a hibiscus bush rustles, I freeze. More plants start to dance. Then a jaguar, ebony with the faintest smattering of spots on its forehead and sharp shoulder blades, emerges from the foliage. It might have crossed my path without acknowledging me, but I lose my balance and snap a twig under my ugly hiking boot. The jaguar shoots its big head toward me. Its amber eyes roll around, betraying their bored owner, and its massive jaw hangs open. I fear I might have angered the jaguar, but it is only annoyed. It snuffles like it’s clearing its nostrils, though I suppose that is a reluctant greeting. Without thinking, I exclaim, “Abuela!” In the same instant, I lift my camera. Too late. The jaguar has already leapt across the remainder of the path and into the brush. The movement is so swift and clean that the plants it pushes past only tremble for a moment after the beast has gone. Meanwhile, I cannot move so swiftly, or at all. When I finally do, I turn around and head back toward camp, not a single photograph saved to my SD card.

One of “The Moth” stories we listened to, the one from a jaguar scientist, had an eerie connection to this dream in a very literal way. Obviously, the narrator mentioned jaguars. But also, like that narrator, I had a speech impediment and underwent speech therapy as a child. That is one of the reasons I perform now: to celebrate what I have overcome and to find dignity and pride in my ability to speak and be heard.

In Oral History Workshop, one of my classmates did an oral history with herself. She recorded it and then shared her experience with the class about what that was like. I sort of see this video as something akin to that. There is a performative aspect but also something private. The tension lies in the back and forth.

In *Roots & Branches*, Nyssa reminded us that not every story is for every audience. We have a right to guard our oral histories and decide which community may hear what we have to say. We should respect that impulse for gatekeeping in our narrators when we are interviewers. Some people do not wish to share an oral history of any kind. When I attended the Oral History Association conference in Baltimore last fall, there was a panel for Central Americans. It turned out to be solely Salvadorans and Salvadoran-Americans, but the panelists said they feared pitching a Salvadoran panel specifically because the association might see it as too niche. On the panel, every single speaker spoke about the reticence in our community to share personal stories of any kind because of trauma. So many people had survived war or been raised by parents and other relatives who survived it. At Easter, my mother explained to my partner that repeatedly one of the first questions people ask her when they find out she's Salvadoran is, "What was the war like?" She said, "I don't want to remember the war. I've been in this country 41 years. I don't want to remember that place." Last fall, I conducted four oral history experiments with a Salvadoran-American peer who I met through my theatre production "Mi Abuela, Queen of Nightmares." She shared many things that resonated with me, but one was how much her parents also did not want to share memories from the war. There is silence around the subject that feels like rejection.

This rejection has defined such a large part of my relationship to my mother's country and heritage, which is something I try to express in the film essay. I save the photos that reference for nearly the end of the video because I want the audience to wonder about them. I want them to develop curiosity and yearning, much in the way I did about El Salvador growing up. Speaking of photography, the very first picture that appears in the video is a self-portrait I took in 2017. It shows me facing away from the camera, head down, back and spine prominently in the foreground, the word "Imperfect" scrawled on my flesh. I pulled from my personal archive of creations to kick off the film essay because something relatively old and vulnerable seemed to set the tone. It also has a Biblical quality, alluding to repentance and the crucifixion. This is relevant because of some of the shame I have surrounding this topic, as well as the cultural Catholicism mentioned. This is also my meatball, though I don't admit it. My ex-husband helped me stage the image in our bathtub at the time. There is a lot from this period of my life that is very precious but also painful. I am just starting to reveal these complex emotions and work from that time through my art-making (but reimagining the archival.)

My on-screen persona sings/hums Jefferson Starship's "Miracles" because of how I explain I believe my parents' relationship is something of a miracle. I wanted to choose a song that was popular during the time they met: 1981. Because I reference my parents' relationship, I wanted to show my relationship on-screen with my boyfriend Aaron at the end. I consider our relationship something of a miracle because of the timing with my divorce and how our connection was strong from the start. He is always willing to collaborate on anything I make, but also asks about exactly how I want him to participate. This is a form of respecting boundaries.

I edited the piece using Adobe Premiere Rush, which was a new experience for me. Trying this software was a personal challenge set for myself. I am used to using Adobe Premiere, but not the Rush version, and wanted to see how the two compared.