

# LILI FABILLI AND ERIC HOFFER ESSAY PRIZE

2019-2020 TOPIC: Confidence without Attitude

Winners: Rebecca Brunner, Marcelo Garzo, Jordan Diac Depasquale, Bryan Jones (Staff), Luisa M. Giulianetti (Staff), Ryan Lackey, Isaac Engelberg, Laura Marostica (Staff)

## **Rebecca Brunner**

Narcissus was given the tools of his own destruction when evolution gave him eyes. But it was nature that really did him in, providing the water for his reflection. If he had simply looked around at the other beauty in the world, perhaps humility could have saved him.

And so it is with our species now. We hear it over and over: humans are the most intelligent species, the most resourceful. But does that make us superior to other living beings? We have let our confidence mutate into arrogance—first in the name of survival, then comfort, now convenience. As babies, we embrace the world with new and open eyes. As children, we are the center of the universe. As teens, we rebel when that title is stripped from us. As adults, we continue to live in resentment, clinging to a sense of control over anything within our reach, knowing deep down that those things are actually attached to strings far, far above our comprehension. But we tug at them, make them taut for moments that make us feel powerful, comfortable.

But we have pulled too hard. Our strings have always been intertwined with those of other creatures, and those creatures are fading from existence. Now *all* of the threads are fraying, disintegrating.

We should be confident. Our species has discovered incredible things about our world: the laws of physics, DNA, our galaxy. Our ingenuity and curiosity has even brought us closer to understanding the experiences of other creatures. Birds can see more colors

than we can. Even bees live in a different visual world—they can see ultraviolet bullseyes in the middle of flowers that look one color to us. Bats use their voices to see. There are sounds in the air right now—ringing, rumbling—that we can't hear. But there are other animals that can. Together—the ants and the whales, the frogs and the ferns—our collective experiences make us alive together. It's not just heartbeats or photosynthesis. It's so, so much more.

When I stare at my hands manipulating this pencil, I can't help but be thankful. What a rare privilege it is to be aware—not only of my own actions and abilities, but of all the ways I *cannot* understand or experience my world. Of knowing that I am just one version of living.

We cannot let our attitudes—arrogance, indifference, selfishness—continue to smother our promise. We have the potential to harness our strengths, our self-awareness, into something beautiful: a humble stewardship. Let our confidence be one of humility.

Look away from your reflection, and you may find that you can save the world.

## **Marcelo Garzo**

### **Con Confianza**

As a queer, Latinx (Chilenx) im/migrant of Indigenous (Mapuche) descent, I must approach this question, of confidence without attitude, in conversation with my ancestors. I must ask this question in many languages at one- in English, Spanish, Nahuatl and Mapudungun – and listen closely for what these interconnected ways of knowing might teach us.

In English, the word “confidence” comes from the Latin *confidere*, which means “to have full trust”. In Spanish, confidence is translated in a similar way, as *confianza* – which is another word for “trust”. This double-meaning is apt. These translations remind us that to have confidence is to have trust. Trust in one's self and trust in others. It also reminds us that confidence, like trust, must be built and maintained. It is developed over time, through friendship, sharing warm tea, and long drives.

Building trust with ourselves is no different. In fact, building trust with others, with the world around us, is only possible when we build this *confianza*, this trust, from within. In this way, having confidence is not an individual posture, nor a personal achievement. Instead it is a way of being in a relationship. Confidence is *confidence*, *con* from the Latin, meaning “with”. This suggests that confidence exists in community – it is something that is built with one's self and others. Confidence grows from interconnection.

Indigenous languages and philosophies offer some valuable teachings in this way. In Nahuatl, confidence could be translated as *tlamachtli*; meaning “that which is concrete”, “they who are without obstacles”, “they who can be trusted.” Significantly, this word is related to concepts of *tlamachiliztli* and *ixtlamachiliztli*; which are the words for “knowledge” and “education” respectively. In this way, education – in the home and at school – is precisely about cultivating the kind of knowledge that builds a trustworthy person in the community. Being a well-educated person in this context is to be an *omáxic oquichtli*, a person with “a wise face” and a “heart as solid as a rock.” These are vivid metaphors for confidence without attitude – walking with a face and heart that have been cultivated to remain clear, solid and in community.

In Mapudungun, confidence without attitude is at the center of what it means to be a human being, to be Mapuche (“person of the land”). According to the oral tradition, there are four pillars of being Mapuche: *norche* (“just person”), *kümeche* (“respectful person”), *newenche* (“strong person”), and *kimche* (“person of knowledge”). Some elders also add *lifche*, “the person with a clean heart and mind.” These teachings remind us that being human is a constant practice, that confidence must be rooted in humility. Attitude is a trickster; a test of our daily commitment to walking “in a good way.”

These translations converse, intersecting at the intercultural crossroads of respect and understanding. Each of these languages teach us about confidence, not as a form of domination, but of mutuality. Confidence is not a power over others, it is a way of seeking power with, *con confianza*.

## **Jordan Diac Depasquale**

### **Short Essay on the Nature of Confidence**

The question: Can you embody confidence without attitude? As if the presence of one is not essentially the absence of the other. Bravado, or attitude, is that shaky foundation that breaks under the weight of an anguished breath. When it drops you, or you drop it, you crash and the dust that settles around you becomes the fertilizer that feeds your construction of confidence. Breaking through that barrier of instinctual fear and helplessness: it’s the kind of Dream that Ta-Nehisi wrote to his son about, and what X and King and Chavez dreamed for him in turn—the Dream that breaks all illusions we have about ourselves.

The THC punching open your airways, the shrinking size of the waist of your jeans, the money in your pocket, the metal in your mouth, the silicone in your breasts, the cross at your heart—these seeds of attitude are not the agents of confidence; they cannot save you from the suffocating weight of time, just as they cannot cure the blindness inherent

in our condition. We remain with eyes wide open in the dark, trying to catch the faintest glint of light.

If, as you look into the face of another there on the page in between the black letters and the white edges and see yourself being endlessly divided and repeated over human history, you can feel the simultaneous sense of loneliness and community that is Sonder; then you've dyed yourself with the pigment of Confidence's inky kiss.

Terrance Hayes says, 'to be divided is to be multiplied and you rise up'  
Amira Baraka says, "Those who realize how fitful and indecent  
consciousness is stare solemnly out on the emptying street"

Buddha and the bodhisattvas say break yourself down,  
Simultaneously a drop and the whole ocean

Confidence requires no attitude, all it requires is a spiritual core of timelessness. Let yourself be broken down, recognize yourself in every passing face. Familiarize yourself with your own immortality and confidence descends as the veil is lifted from your eyes.

As I speak to you about confidence I can only speak from experience. But these experiences tells me my struggle isn't novel—not even my own—it's been played out in countless bodies before mine. I know it's been whispered into your ears that you're destined for greatness just as the same message has been breathed into mine. Even now I'm struggling to obtain confidence, unable to recognize my own bravado. I wake in the morning and the veil is in front of my eyes, clinging to my sweaty cheeks, tunneling into my nose and mouth, arresting the pulse at my neck. Even now I struggle to see, to catch another glimpse of that serenity that is confidence. As bright flowers blooming darkly—the bravado of the seed which reaches forth and attempts its own creation. I know you feel this, because I'm confident you know what I mean.

## **Bryan Jones**

### **To Whom It May Concern: Annie Watson Last Wishes**

Since you are reading this letter, written in my best hand, you have found the garment bag we always talked about at the back of my closet. Please honor my last wishes, as I want to leave this world with my head held high.

This bag contains my nice clothes. I trust that you will do me right, as my dear husband and all my children are no longer here. As I come to 100, those folks I knew and loved are already gone. How long will I be remembered?

I have chosen this outfit because I know it will look good. Dress me in my best silk underwear and the fine pink silk stockings. Please do not put rings on my fingers. Put my hands in white gloves to hide my worn skin. The simple brooch goes on the left side of my blouse. Wrap the scarf loosely around my shoulders, please. I do not want red lipstick. I want to look natural. You choose my shoes.

Please, I ask that you put these things on me. Remember me during the quiet hour. In my death there is dignity. In death I lay before you one last time, confidence without attitude.

Signed,

Annie

## **Luisa M. Giulianetti**

### **Beyond the Gap**

What engenders confidence in women? In my classes, bright, prepared women sometimes sit silently, and, when they do speak, begin with qualifying phrases: “I’m not sure this is right but,” “This may sound stupid but...” Hesitant to assert their knowledge confidently, they credit others, or an alignment of planets, for their success.

Ample evidence exists of what researchers term the “confidence gap.” Studies affirm that men are often over-confident about their skills and performance, while women remain under-confident. Social Psychologist Brenda Major has long studied this phenomenon and *confidently* presents it as a “study whose results are utterly predictable.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, when the road to success gets rocky, men ascribe external attribution, while women often blame themselves—internal attribution.

I helped a straight-A student craft her cover letter for an internship. Despite returning to Cal after a successful career engaged in the work for which she was applying, her letter was hesitant and doubtful. She downplayed her skills and credited others for her achievements. I asked her to re-write the draft, assuming a persona: “Write it as if you were a while man colleague applying.” Her revision was self-assured, showcasing her accomplishments.

Yet, the “confidence gap” is problematic: it located blame on women for social and structural realities. Remedies focus on women changing their behaviors, fixing the “problem” within. Caught in a bind, women pay a price, either way. On the one hand, socially constructed and internalized notions of “appropriate” behavior result in women’s reluctance to claim expertise, to confidently apply for positions. Statistically,

women feel they need to meet 100% of job criteria to apply, while men land at about 60%. Equally insidious is the fact that women who claim their expertise, correct a colleague, share news of landing a reverse 1 ½ somersault, are often labeled aggressive, arrogant—or worse. This reality is exacerbated for women of color. A Latina professor friend often has her disciplinary knowledge questioned by men—outside her field. Nonetheless, she confidently asserts her expertise. But, at what cost?

Where do solutions lie?? Psychology Professor Richard Petty defines confidence as “the stuff that turns thoughts into actions.”<sup>2</sup> Like a muscle, confidence is built through practice and intention. Engaging in the process is valuable, especially with support, mentorship, and encouragement from others. A splash-less pool entry—let alone the confidence to proclaim it—doesn’t happen overnight. “I landed the perfect dive. Just perfect. I knew the minute I left the board. I’ve been practicing it for ages. I nailed it,” declared a diver, who took up the sport 15 years ago in her mid- 70’s. Neither arrogant nor self-effacing, she proudly claims and affirms her accomplishments.

Such displays of confidence inspire, motivate, and remind us that we have agency over the processes in which we engage, how we move through the world and express ourselves. Simultaneously, however, structures and attitudes—often invisible—conspire to limit and undermine us. These are the unsettled seas in which we dive, swim, and tread water.

## **Ryan Lackey**

### **Towards Millennial Knowledge: Confidence without Attitude?**

To the young American, confidence seems to be expanding and contracting at once. On one hand, sheer confidence is the rhetorical style of the social internet, where someone’s confidence often seems entirely disproportionate to the thing they are asserting. Every statement on a Twitter feed—whether urgent or ridiculous—looks and sounds equally incontrovertible. On the other hand, so much of social and political discourse authorizes confidence in only a specific sort of knowledge: the quantifiable, the coldly rational.

This is confidence without attitude. The unpleasant pundits of W.B. Yeats’ time were “full of passionate intensity.” Ours, meanwhile, cultivate a blanched and boiled confidence in reason, debate, civility: an anemic centrism beyond the body, beyond emotion, beyond attitude.

When we claim that every issue has exactly two positions, when we claim that “both sides” have done this or that, we reduce thought to a depthless plane. Our discourse becomes paper-thin. Whatever happened to the multifaceted, the

three-dimensional? I agree with Maggie Nelson, who prefers “that which is more than one, and more than two, but less than infinity.” I am for polyhedral thinking, I am for a thinking with attitude.

After all, to be young in America is to be attitudinal, Michael Foucault calls modernity an attitude, “a way of thinking and feeling.” The contemporary moment is also an attitude, and its dominant principle is *anxiety*, a way of thinking and feeling bound up in apprehension precisely because the signs we can read don’t point to anything we can have confidence in. Ours is an age of precarious anxiety. The climate is a burgeoning maelstrom; the economy is the comings and goings of those who could feed whole countries with their personal wealth’ far-right politics are resurgent. The only relevant sense of *confidence* is the confidence man, who promised we could pay installments on a sold-out American Dream.

Our situation, therefore, is one of *attitude without confidence*. And so we require an attitudinal knowledge that, in Foucault’s words, includes thinking *and* feeling. This attitudinal knowledge isn’t interested in the confidence of dispassionate reason. Instead, it asks the question posed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who asks not what a piece of knowledge is, but rather what it *does*.

The convergence of the movie screen and the confessional screen offers an example. Great Gerwig’s 2017 film *Lady Bird* concludes with a religious turn with more attitude than confidence. At the film’s end, protagonist Christine, after twisting between teenage independence and an ambivalent relationship with her complex mother, goes to college, gets drunk, and wanders the next morning into a church. After listening to the choir, she leaves her mother a reconciliatory voicemail.

*Lady Bird* isn’t interested in whether religion is true. Instead, it wonders what a religious place might do. In Christine’s case, the fact of being in a church is sonic, not doctrinal. For a moment, her knowledge of religion is attitudinal: she stands in a sacred space, listens to the music, and performs an act of love and care.

## **Isaac Engelberg**

### **Between *The Nanny* and Me**

There is nothing practical about Fran Fine, the thick-accented lead of the 90s sitcom *The Nanny*. Fran was an evolutionary vestige; a mule. She was an amalgam of salvaged sitcom scraps: her physical comedy like Lucille Ball, her lovable idiocy a la Mary Tyler Moore. She waddled more than she walked, her skin tight skirts turning every step into a bedazzled sack hop. She croaked in a vocal-fried Queens dialect, a creaky door personified. It was theatrical. It was camp. It was undeniably Jewish.

The show's premise is rather simple. The Sound of Music without the music. Successful Broadway producer Maxwell Sheffield hires Flushing, Queens-native Fran Fine off the street to watch after his three dysfunctional children. The crux of its humor was the upstairs-downstairs friction between the classless Fine family and the hoity-toity Sheffield clan.

*The Nanny*, though, was two shows in one. The first, a prototypical 90s CBS sitcom that followed the rules of primetime TV: a laugh track, a series-defining relationship, and a gee-I-learned-something-today lesson. Week to week, Fran would pose as an heiress to impress single guys, or lie to Mr. Sheffield so his daughter Maggie could sneak out. In this viewing, Fran was the *gefilte* fish out of water, stepping into the gentile universe of the Upper East Side.

But then there was *The Nanny* as the whacky, borscht belt comedy revue. Fran's family was loud, their hair the only thing larger than their personalities. A fish completely submerged in water. This was my *Nanny*.

As a nascent gay child growing up in mid-city LA, where broad Jewishness felt out of vogue and was replaced with a sense of "spirituality," this type of Jewishness felt illicit. Fran was exposing our flamboyance to a national audience. Weren't we trying to escape all that?

But the Fines has unapologetically come out as Jewish. Watching this show—and watching her confidence—it felt okay to do the same.

I was raised by a bunch of Fran Fines: my mother, my aunt, my grandmother were all variations of the theme. Barbra Streisand was the white noise in our household. The words "50 percent off" does something primal inside of me. We ordered the chopped liver.

As I grew accustomed to society's norms for boys, re-runs of *The Nanny* was how I interacted with my real sense of self. The way Fran and her mother looked at each other *The Way We Were* was the way I dreamed my mother and I would look at each other after *The Way We Were*. I pictured my dates with Fran: we'd talk fashion, Broadway, our favorite Jewish delis. She would laugh at my impressions of Barbra Streisand singing "Second Hand Rose," or the perfect dictation I had of Carol Channing's "Little Girl from Little Rock."

In *The Nanny*, I saw a flamboyant Jewishness I could relate to. I didn't want to marry Fran Fine. I *was* Fran Fine.



## Laura Marostica

My daughter Nadia is 14 months old. The question of her confidence--and, actually, attitude-- is cropping up a lot right now, because she can't figure out what to do about stairs.

When it comes to stairs, Nadia is simultaneously insufficiently confident and dangerously overconfident. She has been climbing stairs on her hands and knees for months now--at the playground on her way to the twisty slide, up the short flight to our front door. Carpeted stairs have been especially delightful. But now that she walks, the old way of getting upstairs is somehow gone from her memory. "Hands and knees!" I remind her in my singsong mom voice.

Instead she reaches up for *our* hands and relinquishes her body weight, lifting one thick little foot, demanding we carry her while she mimes walking-- like a grownup, or a clown. I don't want to do this. I want her to crawl up the stairs, confidently, relying on us for spotting but not for deadlifts.

And yet when it comes to going downstairs--by far the most precarious enterprise--she behaves as though she has no need for us at all. Her bedroom is at the top of the stairs in our little duplex. She has come so close, many times, to simply walking off the top stair. It gives me a stab of adrenaline every time. She has no interest in learning to go down slowly, on her belly, feet first.

I can't decide if this betrays overconfidence in herself, or in us: that her parents will be there instantly, preempting every fall.

When we do stop her, her attitude kicks in. Just a fledgling toddler, and already an attitude! She glowers at strangers now. She cries when we interrupt her play to put on her pants. I worry about what lies ahead for us when she's two, and three, and nine, and fourteen.

Do I want her to have confidence without attitude, when she's grown? I certainly want her to have the thoughtful composure that accompanies it; I certainly don't want her to behave with arrogance or dismissiveness or rage. I think the *occasional* spark of attitude could have some utility, if deployed in defense of others.

When Nadia was just a few weeks old, my husband bought some glow-in-the-dark stars for her ceiling. He read reviews on Amazon before deciding which pack to order. I made fun of him for this, but they really are good, little dots that look a lot more like the night sky than cartoon star shapes. They stick really well, and he's arranged them in plausible, lovely little cosmic patterns. I like the idea of her seeing them from her crib at night--the whole heavens available to her, but grounded by the blanket made by a family friend,

the hand-me-down pajamas from her cousin, the little bedroom in the little duplex.  
Possibility and permanence. Confidence without (too much) attitude. Stars and stairs.