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Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream: Voice, Reality, and Imagination in Works by Joan Didion

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by

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"To covet truth is a very distinguished passion…Those who are genuinely concerned with discovering what happens to be true are…the men of science, the naturalists, the historians…the truths they find are never complete, and are not always important; but they are integral parts of the truth, facts and circumstances that help fill in the picture, and that no later interpretation can invalidate or afford to contradict" - George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy."[1]

"Had my credentials been in order I would never have become a writer. Had I been blessed with even limited access to my own mind there would have been no reason to write. I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear." –Joan Didion, "Why I Write."[2]

[1] George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," *The American Intellectual Tradition*, ed. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper (New York: Oxford UP, 2011) 113.

[2] Joan Didion, "Why I Write," *New York Times Book Review* (Dec. 1976): 2.

Introduction

Joan Didion has played a chief role in postmodern and contemporary American literature for nearly five decades. Didion was part of the New Journalism movement of the 1960s and 1970s, along with Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, and Normal Mailer.[3] The movement was concerned with editorial writing that, while grounded in fact, resembled a novel in its use of literary devices and detailed depiction of scene and character.[4] In an article for *Representations*, Michael E. Staub argues that this new approach to journalism was desperately needed during the sixties and seventies, as America's perception of itself was based more in imagination than any sense of reality. Staub blames the media for distorting the American perception, citing the coverage of the Vietnam War as a glaring example.[5] Historians have also argued that the American media did not present a complete picture of the Vietnam War. Popular criticisms have been that the reporting was biased, focused only on combat (rather than the historical, cultural and social context in which the war was going on), and often laden with inaccurate information about events.[6]

There was also a growing belief that traditional journalistic conventions were too constricting for the times. Journalist Nicolaus Mills notes, the "who, what, where, when, why

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[3] Ronald Weber, "New Journalism and Old Documentary" Rev. of *The New Journalism* by Tom Wolfe, *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Apr., 1974): 308.
[4] Weber, 306.
[5] Michael E. Staub, "Black Panthers, New Journalism, and the Rewriting of the Sixties," *Representations*, No. 57 (Winter, 1997): 55
[6] Spencer Tucker, ed. *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1998) 1099.

style of reporting could not begin to capture the anger of a black power movement or the euphoria of a Woodstock...For an audience either deeply concerned or directly involved in the changes going on in America, it was necessary to report events from the inside out…"[7] New Journalism's incorporation of novelistic devices into reportage sought to produce a more complex, and thus more real, depiction of society. As Nat Hentoff argued in 1968, this new approach also allowed journalists to seriously express their passion for their subjects. Hentoff said it was only through a dramatic "novelistic" style that journalists could demonstrate their own active involvement in what they were reporting on, and thus "help break the glass between the reader and the world he lives in."[8]

Joan Didion fully embraced this approach in her reports on American social and political phenomena, employing literary devices such as allusion, irony, metonymy, synecdoche, juxtaposition, and drama, alongside aggressive interrogation and scrupulous attention to detail. In 1968, Didion published *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and in 1979, *The White Album*. In these two essay collections, she dissects and attempts to poke holes in the cultural fantasies of her contemporary America. In 1983's *Salvador* and 1987's *Miami*, Didion ventures into political criticism, examining violence, conspiracy, and government corruption.

Didion applied this same amalgamation of literary and journalistic technique to her novels, scrutinizing culture and politics through the guise of nonfiction. In 1977 and 1984, Didion published *A Book of Common Prayer* and *Democracy*, respectively. In these two novels, Didion constructs fictional worlds that mirror our own, in which she even more boldly investigates our country's cultural and political engagements and the manner in which they are presented to us.

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[7] Nicolaus Mills, introduction to *The New Journalism: A Historical Anthology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978) 160, 187.
[8] Nat Hentoff, "Behold the New Journalism—It's Coming After You!" *Evergreen Review* 12 (July 1968): 50.

What makes Didion's writing so striking, both in her fiction and nonfiction, is her voice. Her voice is what keeps her constantly present in her writing, and because of its urgent tone and attention to language, her passion for her subject is always apparent. What Didion is most passionate about, throughout her work, is uncovering reality and ascertaining fact. Didion herself is a close reader of our world; she is highly attuned to detail and subtext. Both fascinated and terrified by fantasy or obscured reality, she is ardent about dispelling what she sees as "golden dreams," or the superficial and ultimately naïve or corrupt illusions to which we have a tendency to fall prey.

Didion is investigative and interrogative, always watching and listening, and always skeptical of what she sees and what she hears. As a result, she feels a compulsion to present her reader with the most empirical image. Whether she is writing about Bay Area hippies in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* or body dumps in *Salvador*, Didion shares every last detail she has, and details are often all she has. She is especially attentive to language, always questioning words and phrases that are all too familiar and rehearsed, and which serve as the stock vocabulary for American democracy.

At the same time, perhaps one of the most problematic aspects of Didion's narrative voice is her desire to stay removed from her subject. She often presents information and then leaves it without any further comment, explanation or reaction. She relies heavily on implication, in the form of allusion, metonymy and synecdoche. This is partially a stylistic decision, as Didion distrusts narrative convention and any type of storytelling cliché. It is also an expression of her unwavering confidence in her reader's understanding of what she is trying to say, as well as a desire to form a sort of conspiratorial intimacy with her reader. Nonetheless, this reliance on implication problematizes Didion's quest for the truth.

It is worth noting that much of Didion's voice seems to follow in the tradition of the Imagists poets of the early 20th century. In the preface to Amy Lowell's 1915 anthology, *Some Imagist Poets* (which includes works by Lowell as well as Richard Arlington, D.H. Lawrence, F.S. Flint et al.), Lowell lays out the "principals" of Imagism.

> 1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word.
>
> 2. To create new rhythms—as the expression of new moods—and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. [….] We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free-verse than in conventional forms. In poetry a new cadence means a new idea.
>
> 3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject. It is not good art to write badly of aeroplanes and automobiles, nor is it necessarily bad art to write well about the past […].
>
> 4. To present an image (hence the name: "Imagist"). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly […].
>
> 5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.
>
> 6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is of the very essence of poetry.[9]

While it is possible, and eventually necessary, to take an entirely "narratological" or otherwise theoretical approach to Joan Didion, this project is concerned more with the methods and meaning behind her voice, examined through a close analysis of her fiction and nonfiction on politics and culture. Because Didion does not approach her work with any preconceived theory, her voice demands us to take on a similar approach. She is obsessed with how our world is

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[9] Preface, *Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Amy Lowell, (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1915) vi-viii.
N.b.: I will not be comparing Didion to the Imagist poets in this project, but it is worth keeping these "principals" in mind while reading Didion. Though she has not spoken on the subject, it is likely that the Imagist poets had some influence on her.

presented to us, and how we perceive it; for us to understand Didion's compulsions and how they are manifested, attention must be paid to the habits of her voice. Focusing on the six works previously mentioned, this project will consider what type of detail Didion is drawn to, and how she perceives and then constructs that detail on the page. It will also look at what her involvement in the setting means for her reader and for the work itself, and what the implications of her desire to dissociate are. One must also consider, what does Didion's rhetoric of fact suggest for fiction and nonfiction as genres, and for her reader and the world at large?

In Didion's essay "Why I Write," published by the *New York Times Book Review* in 1976, she says,

> All I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed. Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind. The picture dictates the arrangement. The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that ends hard or a dying-fall sentence, long or short, active or passive. The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture. *Nota bene*:
>
> It tells you.
>
> You don't tell it.[10]

[10] Joan Didion, "Why I Write," *New York Times Book Review* (Dec. 1976): 7.

CHAPTER I: Time in the Golden Land

Slouching Towards Bethlehem

Joan Didion published *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, a collection of predominantly California-culture based essays, in 1968.[11] Didion borrows the title from the last line of the W.B. Yeats poem, "The Second Coming," which reads, "…what rough beast, its hour come round at last/Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"[12] The collection is broken up into three sections: "Lifestyles In the Golden Land," "Personals," and "Seven Places of the Mind." The majority of the essays were originally published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, which also published work by writers like Ray Bradbury, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Other essays from *Slouching* were seen first in *Vogue, Holiday* and *The American Scholar*. The essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* take place over the course of the 1960s, and many deal with the disjointed idea of the promises of California. In these essays, Didion pokes holes in the cultural fantasies of the time, and shapes California for her reader through dreams, stories, and memory.

Constructing a sense of place is the most crucial component to any story Didion wants to tell in *Slouching*, and in the majority of her other works. In *The White Album*, the follow-up essay collection to *Slouching*, Didion writes, "A place belongs forever to whoever claims it the hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he makes it in his image" (*WA* 146). Didion obsessively remembers, shapes,

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[11] All citations from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* are to: Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968).

[12] William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation n.d. Web 21 Jan 2014.

renders, and radically loves every place she writes about, but the place she "claims the hardest" is California. California belongs to Joan Didion. California is Didion's home, but as we see in *Slouching*, her relationship with the state goes far beyond the standard relationship between resident and residence. The place calls to her to note and to remember and to engrave in her mind what she sees, and then to construct it for her reader.

In the essay titled "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream," Didion claims California through her meticulous inventory of the landscape and examination of the power of dreams and promises. Lucille Miller and her crime, documented in this essay, represent the idea of the "New California" and the manipulative and ultimately tragic promises that surround it. In October 1964, Lucille Miller took her husband to the market to buy milk. While driving, Lucille claims, the car swerved and caught fire. Though Lucille made it out of the car, her husband, who had been sleeping, burned to death while two hours passed before she was able to get help.[13] At trial, the district attorney stated that Lucille Miller had made it look as though the car had rolled over an embankment and then caught fire.[14]

Didion begins the essay with, "This is a story about love and death in the golden land, and begins with the country" (*STB* 3). Didion is mythologizing California from the start with this sentence. The name "golden land," with its connotation of a glimmering paradise, is used ironically as Didion makes the point that the place is anything but that. She also mythologizes love and death, setting a scene that seems straight out of film noir. This story "begins with the country," because the place is of the utmost importance. She continues,

> The future always looks good in the golden land, because no one remembers the past. Here is where the hot wind blows and the old ways do not seem relevant, where the

[13] Jessie Kissinger, "The California Room," *The Paris Review* (2013): 1-2.
[14] Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Rereading the Landscape of an Essay by Joan Didion," *The New York Times*, Jan. 2005: 1.

> divorce rate is double the national average and where one person in every thirty-eight lives in a trailer. Here is the last stop for all those who come from somewhere else, for all those who drifted away from…the past and the old ways. Here is where they are trying to find a new life style, trying to find it in the only places they know to look: the movies and the newspapers. The case of Lucille Marie Maxwell Miller is a tabloid monument to that new life style (*STB* 4).

The "golden land" deceptively glimmers with the promise of an illustrious new life. It is a place where the past is no longer "relevant," and purposely forgotten. Didion calls it a "last stop," alluding to an idea that people who have been running from their pasts have finally settled here where they can forget it all. Didion's assertion that "the future always looks good" here because of this avoidance and forced obliteration of the past suggests the superficiality of the place; the "future looks good," but is it? Those who come to the "golden land" seeking new "life styles" (note that Didion refers to them not as "lives" but "styles") find these "life styles" not in themselves, as they have left their pasts behind, but in stories that have already been written—in "movies and the newspapers." The new California, as Didion sees it, is a culture full of fallacies, where real lives have been forgotten in favor of falsely glamorized "life styles." She calls Lucille Miller a "tabloid monument to that new life style," condemning this culture that is obsessed with sensational stories, and condemning Lucille, who became the celebrity face of this new style of living.

After introducing Lucille in this context, Didion does not immediately follow with any more information about her or about her case; instead, she zeros in on the place. "Imagine Banyan Street first, because Banyan is where it happened," Didion instructs her reader (*STB* 5). There is a sense of urgency to her voice as she tells her reader to first imagine this place, as

though the story could not be told otherwise. After Didion has set the reader on Banyan, "where it happened," she takes a step back and describes how one gets there:

> The way to Banyan is to drive west from San Bernardino out Foothill Boulevard, Route 66: past the Santa Fe switching yards, the Forty Winks Montel…Past Fontana Drag City and the Fontana Church of Nazarene and the Pit Stop a Go-Go; past Kaiser Steel, through Cucamonga, out to the Kapu Kai Restaurant-Bar and Coffee Shop, at the corner of Route 66 and Carnelian Avenue. Up Carnelian Avenue from the Kapu Kai, which means "Forbidden Seas," the subdivision flags whip in the harsh wind. 'HALF-ACRE RANCHES! SNACK BARS! TRAVERTINE ENTRIES! $95 Down.' It is the trail of an intention gone haywire, the flotsam of the New California…and then the hill gets steeper and the road climbs and even the bungalows are few, and here—desolate, roughly surfaced, lined with eucalyptus and lemon groves—is Banyan street (*STB* 5).

As she leads her reader to Banyan, Didion's narrative structure initially resembles directions one would give a visitor, but ends up more as something of an obsessive-compulsive inventory. The name of every street and restaurant one passes is mentioned as though just one or two would not suffice in capturing this place. The focus on naming, the repetition of "Kapu Kai" several times, and the inclusion that Kapu Kai means "Forbidden Seas," all work to reify this place for the reader as a tangible landscape. Didion presents all of this detail, shaping it ever so subtly to force the reader to look at it from this perceptive, so it can suggest a larger idea. This inventory allows her to avoid interpretation in favor of implicit meanings; she constructs it so the route exemplifies the confused landscape of the New California, of a place that tries so hard to move toward bigger houses and lush foliage, but can't quite escape its tawdrier, if not more authentic, past. Didion lends just a brief opinion on the place, remarking that this route is the manifestation

of "…an intention gone haywire, the flotsam of the New California." This route, which Lucille took the night her husband died, speaks to the failure of chasing the dream out in the New California, that embodies not only this area, but the fate of Lucille Miller herself.

Didion's use of naming to identify the place and person, and having Lucille and her externals feed off each other, are modes of this New Journalism that make the piece read more like fiction than nonfiction. These style choices are fairly nontraditional in writing about a true crime, and though they allow Didion to construct a fuller, more complex image, there remains a question about what it means for nonfiction. For a story that is entirely real, there is potential for this style choice to seem forced, if not factitious.

What lends this essay the most power is Didion's use of Lucille Miller and her story to explore the promises of the "golden land," and how they can consume and then destroy a person. She says, "What was most startling about the case that the state of California was preparing against Lucille Miller was something that had nothing to do with law at all, something that never appeared in the eight-column afternoon headlines but was always there between them: the revelation that the dream was teaching the dreamers how to live" (*STB* 17). This is really not a story about Lucille Miller's case at all. Didion does not bother with what "[appears] in the headlines" or anything "to do with the law." Instead, she is concerned with "what was always there between" the headlines: the subtext that seems to go unnoticed by traditional reporting that only focuses on the superficial layer. Lucille Miller is a dreamer; Didion notes that she was born to a strict Seventh-day Adventist family in Winnipeg, and was anxious to explore the world and ended up in the "golden land" with a shaky marriage, a high-priced mortgage, and an alleged affair with a lawyer. Didion is not interested in Miller's guilt or innocence; she is interested in the role of fantasies. Here is a woman who eradicated her past for a new life style, and in the

process let the dream dictate the way she lived. In "Joan Didion's Dreampolitics of the Self," Evan Carton writes, "So completely does the dream assume agency in Didion's representation of Lucille Miller's speech, desires, and actions that the question of her personal guilt or innocence in the matter of her husband's death is deliberately ignored and implied to be beside the point."[15]

Lucille Miller received life in prison (though she was later released on parole) for first degree-murder. Describing the California Institute for Women at Frontera, where Lucille was sentenced, Didion says, "A lot of California murderesses live here, a lot of girls who somehow misunderstood the promise" (*STB* 25). Didion's contention that these girls "misunderstood the promise" insinuates that there is a "right" way to understand or to use it—what way this is, she does not say, and it is possible she does not know. What is important is that they have all been deluded by the California dream, and now they are here.

Didion closes her essay with a reflection on the way time works in the golden land. She says, "…Time past is not believed to have any bearing upon time present or future, out in the golden land where every day the world is born anew" (*STB* 28). The irrelevance of the past in the "golden land" is a notion that Didion's voice tells us is the major fallacy within this culture. Her musings on time here seem to recall lines from T.S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton." Eliot writes, "Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future/And time future contained in time past/If all time is eternally present/All time is unredeemable."[16] Didion knows, like Eliot, that "time past" does indeed play a part in "time present" and "future," but the dreamers do not. The dream teaches the dreamers how to live, and the past has no part in this world. It is only about

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[15] Evan Carton, "Joan Didion's Dreampolitics of the Self." *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*, ed. Sharon Felton (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 33.
[16] T.S. Eliot, "TS Eliot - Burnt Norton." *Art of Europe*. N.p., n.d. Web. 5 Mar. 2014.

the promises—promises of a glamorous, enviable and entirely new life, promises that end up consuming and destroying people like Lucille Miller.

In "Notes From A Native Daughter," Didion delves deeper into the notion of a forgotten past that embodies California. She writes, "It is hard to *find* California now, unsettling to wonder how much of it was merely imagined or improvised; melancholy to realize how much of anyone's memory is no true memory at all but only the traces of someone else's memory, stories handed down on the family network" (*STB* 177). Place consumes Didion, and the fact that California as it is now seems grounded more in imagination and "traces of someone else's memory" than in any real, concrete past, unnerves her. She goes on to relay an "indelibly vivid 'memory'" she has of the effect of Prohibition on Sacramento hop growers. A sister of a grower Didion's family knew went to San Francisco and brought home a mink coat, which she was then told to take back. The girl "sat on the floor of the parlor cradling that coat and crying" Didion recalls, and then reflects, "Although I was not born until a year after Repeal, that scene is more 'real' to me than many I have played myself" (*STB* 177). Not only is this someone else's memory, and one quite far removed from Didion herself, she also feels that it is "more 'real'" to her than many of her own personal memories.

There is irony in Didion's use of the world "real" here; as she has just said there is "no true memory at all"—nothing is real. A point in time that is central to Sacramento's history is defined for Didion by a false memory, by "traces of someone else's memory." The truth about California is what Didion seeks, but California makes it impossible for that to happen. "It should be clear by now that the truth about the place is elusive" she writes (*STB* 178). Didion is assuming a certain understanding of her reader, expecting that this ineffability is "clear by now," and it is, largely due to her repeated insistence that this is how things are. Didion is also

admitting that she may never be able to fully explain the "truth" about the place. What she means by "truth" here is uncertain; truth seems to mean history to Didion, but what specific history she is looking for in California in not made clear.

In addition to being unsettled by her own inability to "find California now," Didion is also worried about later generations. The old farm town she once knew has been pushed aside by the influx of the aerospace industry. Of the next generation, Didion writes, "Old Sacramento to them will be something colorful, something they read about in *Sunset*…They will have lost the real past and gained a manufactured one" (*STB* 185-186). Didion's use of the word "colorful" implies a lack of reality—that the image of old Sacramento will be something based more in imagination and fantasy than truth and fact. This next generation will only know a "manufactured past," taken from and magazines and misshapen stories. "But," she counters, "Perhaps it is presumptuous of me to assume that they will be missing something. Perhaps in retrospect this has been a story not about Sacramento at all, but about the things we lose and the promises we break as we grow older…" (*STB* 186).

Just as the essay on Lucille Miller was not really about Lucille Miller, this essay is not really "about Sacramento at all." While the essays included in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* are investigative and journalistic, there is also an autobiographical quality to them, as Didion works out her own internal conflicts about where she came from and who she is now. Evan Carton writes, "In theme and structure…the seemingly disparate and documentary essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* comprise an attempt at autobiography in a world where…the self can be approached only indirectly through and in material facts, external landscapes, public discourse, the stories of others, and where the text gives rise to the life."[17] Didion relies on all of these

[17] Carton, 37.

elements to indirectly tackle her own life in "Notes from A Native Daughter." She realizes "in retrospect" instead of being about Sacramento, this essay is it is actually about her fears of getting older and losing the past. One must wonder if Didion has consciously forgotten things, as the dreamers she so condemns do.

The essay titled "Los Angeles Notebook" contains vignettes, each one a quick but profound glance into an element that Didion feels appropriately defines the city. In one vignette, she places her reader in the afternoon prior to the start of the Santa Ana winds. "There is something uneasy in the Los Angeles air this afternoon, some unnatural stillness, some tension" (*STB* 217), she says. This feeling in the "Los Angeles air" is a collective feeling, and it is both physical and emotional. Didion sets this up as though it is a scene in a horror film; everything is eerily still and one can feel that something violent and dramatic is about to take over Los Angeles. She writes,

> Los Angles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse, and, just as the reliably long and bitter winters of New England determine the way life is lived there, so the violence and the unpredictability of the Santa Ana affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability. The wind shows us how close to the edge we are (*STB* 221).

The violent weather of Los Angeles is indicative of the end. There is an absoluteness to Didion's language as she says it is "apocalyp[tic]" and "catastroph[ic]" in its nature. She also notes the sometimes 100 miles an hour gusts have, in the past, led to mountains burning, injuries from flying objects, death caused by the wind's affects on cars, as well as death caused by wind's effects on mental health. This weather condition disturbs the "entire quality of life in Los Angeles," it takes control of the city and its inhabitants, and shows just how fragile and

"imperman[ent]" the city is. The power Didion gives to the Santa Ana winds allows the reader to share the collective feeling of the people of Los Angeles. The horrific uncertainty and violent weight Didion suspends above the reader leaves us feeling as though we too are waiting for the Santa Ana winds to start tonight, waiting for the end to come. Of course, Didion is projecting a bit here, to an extent that may seem overly dramatic. Her language of absoluteness overreaches at times, but there is something that is still very persuasive here. This persuasiveness comes from her cinematic-like structure; she zooms in in a way that engulfs the audience entirely, allowing the reader to go along with her and imagine the weight of this defining character of Los Angeles.

In "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," the title essay of this collection, Didion acts as an ethnographer of the Haight-Ashbury hippie culture, relying heavily on collected data that shows the grim reality of another cultural fantasy that is sentimentalized by the American public. Didion presents a culture of young drug addicts, missing children, and crime. She opens the essay with, "The center was not holding" (*STB* 84), referencing antother line from the Yeats poem she borrows the book's title from. Didion feels that this lack of cohesion is present throughout the entire country, which is why she is compelled to go to San Francisco, where, she says, "social hemorrhaging was showing up" (*STB* 85).

The glimpses Didion gives into the reality of the hippie culture are powerful, and her presumed project to puncture cultural fantasies is perhaps achieved to the fullest extent here. She relays images that dispel the romanticized illusion of hippie culture being all about peace, love and flower children; at one point, she is handed a flier for class on "How to Avoid Getting Busted, Gangbangs, VD, Rape, Pregnancy, Beatings, and Starvation" and is told, "You oughta come…you'll need it" (*STB* 114). Later on, she meets a five year old named Susan whose mother "has given her both acid and peyote" for a year now (*STB* 128).

And yet, the "center" does not "hold" in this essay. What is missing from this essay is Didion herself. She appears so far removed from the people she meets and the things she sees that it is if she is not there at all. Didion relies heavily on dialogue she gathers from the hippies, and while it gives an honest picture of the time and place, it all feels lackluster without her usual passion and urgency. The reader can feel Didion's nerves, those nerves that drive her to chase what she writes about, in "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream," and "Los Angeles Notebook," as well as in nearly every other essay in this collection. But as grim as the subject matter is in this title essay, it is hard to hear Didion's nerves.

In *The Art of Fact*, Barbara Lounsberry aptly notes that in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* Didion establishes the idea of "glittering mirages" that exist in our world. Lounsberry says, "It is the lack of self-knowledge, as well as ignorance of the historical past, that makes one susceptible to mirage, Didion seems to imply."[18] In *Slouching Towards Bethlehem,* Didion begins a project that is carried on through her voice in all of work: an investigation into our culture's relationship with reality and imagination, in which all perceived fact is questioned in an attempt to save us from these "glittering mirages."

[18] Barbara Lounsberry, *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction*, (New York: Greenwood, 1990) 111.

The White Album

In 1979, eleven years after *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* was released, Didion published another collection of essays, titled *The White Album*.[19] The title likely comes from the Beatles album of the same name, released during the time Didion writes about. *The White Album* is broken up into five sections: "The White Album," "California Republic," "Women," "Sojourns," and "On the Morning After the Sixties." In *The White Album*, Didion's writing is far more autobiographical than in *Slouching*, as she attempts to work out for herself, and in turn for her reader, what made certain images from the end of the 1960s stick with her. In "Why I Write," Didion says, "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear...What is going on in these pictures in my mind?"[20]

In the title essay of *The White Album*, Didion reflects on and attempts to work though different "pictures" that felt irrevocably stuck in her mind during the 1960s. She talks about sitting in on The Doors in a recording session, meeting with the Black Panthers, and visiting former Manson family member Linda Kasabian. When discussing where her mind was during this period, Didion writes, "I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no 'meaning' beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience" (*WA* 13). Didion is using the word "plot" as metonymy for the structured, consequential life that she is supposed to have but does not. Instead, she sees "flash pictures" that seem to connect in some untraceable way. She cannot find the meaning behind these images that stick with her, or why they even go together; a "cutting-

[19] All citations from *The White Album* are to: Joan Didion, *The White Album*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).
[20] Joan Didion, "Why I Write," *New York Times Book Review* (Dec. 1976): 6.

room experience," she calls these spliced pictures. These "flash pictures," which become a frequent theme in the Didion's writing, are what Mark Z. Muggli, in "The Poetics of Joan Didion's Journalism," refers to as "Didion's emblems."[21]

Didion gives a series of "flash pictures," or emblems, from her time in Hawaii, both in the title essay that opens the collection, and in the essay titled "In the Islands." For her, the "pictures" are all associated with Hawaii, but none of them have anything to do with the place itself; they all have to do with news from home, or people from home. She recalls reading news from California and running into famous Los Angeles drag queens, and she gives us these "flash pictures" without any further elaboration.

"Another flash cut:" Didion writes, and then proceeds to copy over a page long psychiatric report about an unnamed patient. It is only after the report is presented that Didion writes, "The patient to whom this psychiatric report refers is me" (*WA* 14-15). It appears that Didion feels more comfortable giving her reader "flash cuts," or flash pictures, rather than giving images with full backgrounds and meanings clearly laid out. This technique of omission, or a reliance on implication rather than stated fact, is seen in many of Didion's works, including *Salvador* and *Miami*. This method allows Didion to avoid rhetorical cliché, and to stay somewhat removed from her subject (especially since she has already stated that these images that stick with her are things she fears). Having the revelation that the report belongs to Didion come after the fact also allows the reader to examine it as its own entity; it can be read the way Didion sees it, as a "flash cut" without meaning. However, whether or not we know this is her own report from the start, it is still a psychiatric report, and still evokes certain feelings and opinions—meaning can hardly be ignored. Does Didion's structure imply that we are meant to read this

[21] Mark Z. Muggli, "The Poetics of Joan Didion's Journalism," *American Literature* 59.3 (1987): 402.

report for what it is and nothing more? It appears that she is assuming something of her reader here, but what that is, she does not make clear.

Didion recalls having a line from Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" stuck in her head in 1968, the words being "Petals on a wet black bough." She says they were "…six words which had no significance for me but which seemed that year to signal the onset of anxiety or fright" (*WA* 36). Didion has no explanation for why this specific line was so engraved in her mind at this time, nor does she know why it incited feelings of "anxiety" and "fright." She does not expand much upon this; she briefly talks about hearing "too many people who spoke favorably about bombing power stations" (WA 36) at that time, but does not relate the two sentiments. By refusing to consider what relevance this has to her, and then moving away from the idea so quickly, Didion again gives her reader a glimpse into her mind filled with flash cuts. The specific line that was stuck in Didion's head is almost beside the fact, as the notion that any line of words could somehow rouse such feelings of fear and worry within her speaks to what was going on in her mind at this time.

As Didion attempts to reason with herself about these images she comes to a realization about herself as an observer of the world. She writes,

> During the years when I found it necessary to revise the circuitry of my mind I discovered that I was no longer interested in whether the woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor jumped or did not jump, or in why. I was interested only in the picture of her in my mind: her hair incandescent in the flood-lights, her bare toes curled inward on the stone ledge (*WA* 44).

In these years, these "flash cuts," "emblems," or "shimmering images," (as she refers to them in "Why I Write") are the only thing Didion really trusts. She is not interested in the meaning

behind what she sees; she is interested only in the picture that sticks with her in her mind. So this woman, standing on the sixteenth floor, who may or may not end her life, is just a picture, not a story.

Didion's lack of interest in the "story," her trust in the fragment over the whole, is something she believes to be an issue in these years. At the start of the essay Didion says, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live…we live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ideas with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience" (*WA* 11). Didion believes that writers live with a constant burden of a forced narrative line connecting various images. The "shifting phantasmagoria," images that make up the writer's real life, must be frozen over and over again by the writer; he or she subsists on these stories alone. However, she notes, "or at least we do for a while. I am talking here about a time when I started to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself" (*WA* 11). In "The White Album," it appears that Didion is trying to reconcile this issue of her interest in "flash cut" over story, and her doubt in the validity of any freezing. Strangely, she does this by presenting them as flash cuts to her reader, but perhaps this is in an effort to clear her mind of them. As we will see later, this is also the result of Didion's distrust of the forced narrative line, and of narrative convention in general.

Muggli argues that Didion is at times guilty of inventing details in *The White Album*, a common critique of New Journalism.[22] He references the essay titled "Many Mansions," in which Didion writes about the new California governor's mansion that has not been lived in since construction ended in 1975. The mansion, built by Ronald and Nancy Regan, is "unlandscaped, unfurnished and unoccupied" (*WA* 67). However, in describing the interiors of

[22] Muggli, 405.

the house, Didion writes, "In the entire house there are only enough bookshelves for a set of the World Book and some Books of the Month, plus maybe three Royal Doulton figurines and a back file of *Connoisseur*" (*WA* 69). Muggi says, "Didion has not seen these books and knick-knacks; she has hypothesized them as the possessions typical of people like the Reagans."[23] Didion is indeed conjecturing here; she is going beyond the facts for illustrative purposes. This does create a more expressive image of the mansion, and it also serves as commentary on American society—these are generalized possessions of the wealthy American intellectual. But this also problematizes Didion's quest to penetrate illusion and imagination to get at reality and truth. However, does Didion's language really make her less truthful? Her pointed diction and mocking tone, particularly when she says, "plus maybe three Royal Doulton figurines," seems to imply that this is all conjecture and that she is not trying to deceive anyone. Her voice seems to imply an assumption (perhaps unfairly) that the reader knows she is merely hypothesizing.

In the essay titled "In the Islands," Didion, on a flight from Los Angeles to Honolulu, realizes what type of story she is looking to find in the life going on around her. She notices a man on the airplane say to his wife, "you are driving me to murder," and then rushing off before takeoff (*WA* 144). Didion then notes, "I do not know whether the man reboarded the plane before takeoff or whether the woman came on to Honolulu alone, but I thought about it all the way across the Pacific" (*WA* 144). She continues to think about this, and then finally realizes what irks her so much about the scene,

> I disliked it because it had the aspect of a short story, one of those "little epiphany" stories in which the main character glimpses a crisis in a stranger's life…and is moved to see his or her own life in a new light. I was not going to Honolulu because I wanted to

[23] Muggli, 405.

> see life reduced to a short story. I was going to Honolulu because I wanted to see life expanded to a novel, and I still do. I wanted room for flowers, and reef fish, and people who may or may not be driving one another to murder but in any case are not impelled, by the demands of narrative convention, to say so out loud on the 8:45 A.M Pan American to Honolulu (WA 145).

For Didion, a person declaring "you are driving me to murder" is interesting material, but not in the circumstances in which she sees it here. She wants the comment to be one detail of a larger story, "life expanded to a novel" rather than "life reduced to a short story." In a short story, this comment would serve as a cliché "little epiphany" for the main character who hears it to look at her life in a new way. In a novel (at least one written by Didion), this would be a detail on the same level as "flowers" and "fish"—a part of nature, a fact of life. Here we get a glimpse at an answer to why Didion favors the fragment over the whole. She distrusts "narrative convention," because it seems to deny the reality of the world we live in. This is one of the main reasons why Didion's voice is so compelling, and at the same time, so limited. Didion, in both her nonfiction and fiction, favors a reliance on implication or omission over any sort of explicit content or structure that may seem to follow a generic literary formula. When she talks about the Pound line that was so stuck in her mind, she does not try to come up with reasons for why it stuck with her, she does not state when she first heard it, and she does not say when the line stopped inciting anxiety within her. She omits these elements and thus avoids the narrative convention of a cohesive story with a beginning, middle and end. This voice and style choice takes on an important meaning in *Salvador* and *Miami*, as Didion uses the unsaid and the hinted at to form a kind of conspiracy with her reader.

In "Why I Write," Didion says the "pictures in [her] mind" are the "images that

"shimmer" for her. She writes,

> There used to be an illustration in every elementary psychology book showing a cat drawn by a patient in varying stages of schizophrenia. This cat had a shimmer around it. You could see the molecular structure breaking down at the very edges of the cat: the cat became the background and the background the cat, everything interacting, exchanging ions. People on hallucinogens describe the same perception of objects. I'm not a schizophrenic, nor do I take hallucinogens, but certain images do shimmer for me. Look hard enough, and you can't miss the shimmer. It's there. You can't think too much about these pictures that shimmer. You just lie low and let them develop. You stay quiet. You don't talk to many people and you keep your nervous system from shorting out and you try to locate the cat in the shimmer, the grammar in the picture.[24]

[24] Joan Didion, "Why I Write," *New York Times Book Review* (Dec. 1976): 7.

CHAPTER II: Romance of the Political Tropics

Salvador

In June of 1982, Didion spent two weeks in El Salvador recording what she saw. Present for the peak of the civil war, Didion witnessed body dumps, death squads, severe political repression, corrupt and distrustful government, and the pervasive feeling of terror that seemed at that time to define the place. The Salvadoran Civil War, which spanned 1979-1992, saw the Salvadoran government and it's appointed military going against leftist revolutionaries and guerrilla armies. Military death squads—right-wing groups spearheaded by the Salvadoran government, the United States government and the CIA—killed anyone assumed to be even tangentially involved in guerrilla efforts. Numerous civilian causalities came out of this conflict, most notably, the assassination of Archbishop Óscar Romero, shot while saying mass in church. Romero had been openly against death squads, and had even reached out to President Carter begging him to stop providing U.S. military aid to El Salvador.[25]

Under President Reagan, the U.S. government's fear of Communist growth in Central America, and their belief that the Salvadoran military could prevent it, led to an even greater surge in U.S. financial and military aid to El Salvador.[26] On December 11th 1981, the Salvadorian Army killed between 700 and 1,000 people in the village of El Mozote, many of them women, children and the elderly. The United States' financial and military aid to the Salvadoran government during this time was publically known, but both countries initially

[25] William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*, (Monroe, Me.: Common Courage, 1995) 356.
[26] "El Salvador: Civil War." *PBS*. PBS, n.d. Web. 31 Mar. 2014.

denied and attempted to cover up the killings.[27] Didion's report first appeared in parts, under the title "In El Salvador," in the November 1982 issue of the *New York Review of Books*; a year later, it was published in book form as *Salvador.*

In *Salvador*, Didion's reporting style is tightly constructed and her language and structure wholly capture the disturbing nature of the place.[28] El Salvador is at once meticulously observed and kept at a distance by Didion; she uses facts to imply judgments, careful not to voice her opinion or get too emotionally involved in her report. While she keeps herself distanced from her subject, she does have multiple self-realizations about herself as a journalist and as an American in El Salvador. Didion attempts to penetrate the illusions surrounding the political atrocities at hand through the study of language, specifically how those in power use certain words and phrases as tools for manipulation.

Didion constructs the physical and theoretical landscape of El Salvador in terms of terror, which she sees as being the country's defining characteristic. She does this through an evocative tone and cautious, allusion-driven language. "Terror is the given of the place" (*Salvador* 14), she states early on. Didion's declaration is absolute and establishes the state of affairs in El Salvador, but it is also pointedly withholding, in a familiar Didion mode. She follows this with images of police cars and "fingers always on triggers, safeties clicking on and off. Aim…taken as if to pass the time" (*Salvador* 15). Didion begins to shape this reality, allowing the images to imply that terror is not just a fleeting phenomenon, but a permanent fact of life in El Salvador—fingers are "always" on the triggers. This sense of violence as the norm is furthered by "safeties clicking on and off" and "aim…taken as if to pass the time," as though the handing of a gun is a mindless act. Didion's close up on the detail is done in a cinematic way, like when she writes about the

[27] Blum 359.
[28] All citations from *Salvador* are to: Joan Didion, *Salvador*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

Santa Anas in *The White Album*. Here, this method works to heighten the drama of the situation and convey the abstract issues of who has the power and how it is used, without explicitly saying it. Didion uses the "fingers on triggers," as synecdoche for hands on guns, ready to shoot, ultimately signifying a murderous power.

Didion draws on her own personal anxieties that result from encounters with terror in El Salvador, constructing reality for her reader in an even more palpable, truthful way. In a parking lot after a meeting, Didion and a few other reporters find themselves facing two young boys on motorcycles, one with a "G-3 propped between his thighs" (*Salvador* 104). She notes a conundrum: if she and the reporters try to leave, the situation will get worse, but the same will happen if they stay. The driver eventually pulls out quickly and takes them away from the scene. "Nothing more happened," Didion reflects, "and what did happen had been a common enough kind of incident in El Salvador, a pointless confrontation with aimless authority, but I have heard of no *solución* that precisely addresses this local vocation for terror" (*Salvador* 104). Didion's language appears nonchalant, calling what happened a "pointless confrontation with aimless authority," but her tone is loaded with tension. Even though nothing happens to her and the other reporters, the larger point is about the reality that danger can be found anywhere, even when doing something as seemingly benign as leaving a parking lot. Didion ironically says there is "local vocation for terror," illuminating once again what a natural occurrence this is, that inciting fear has become a honed skill in El Salvador. Didion says she has heard of no "*solución*" for the prevalence of this terror, using the Spanish word for solution for a pointed reason; this is the vocabulary of Salvadoran bureaucratic impotence—"*solución*" means no solution at all.

Didion's highly stylized writing—her conscious diction, emphasis on details, and close ups on action—show that she is especially aware how place functions in the world she is

constructing for her reader on the page. Instead of explicitly stating the nature of the political atmosphere in El Salvador, she turns to the landscape itself. The Metropolitan Cathedral is in excessively poor condition; Didion notes exposed wiring and "fluorescent tubes hang[ing] askew" (*Salvador* 79). She writes, "In this vast brutalist space that was the cathedral, the unlit altar seemed to offer a single ineluctable message: at this time and in this place the light of the world could be constructed as out, off, extinguished" (*Salvador* 79).

Didion uses the lack of light in the cathedral as a fathomable example of the political disorder in El Salvador. The light of the world can be cut off just as easily as it is in the cathedral—"out, off, extinguished." Didion accepts the symbolic value of the cathedral's condition, and then uses the details as metonymy for the dismal nature of the country. She goes on to develop her metaphor for the cathedral, saying, "Many Salvadorans are offended by the Metropolitan Cathedral which is as it should be, because the place remains perhaps the only ambiguous political statement in El Salvador, a metaphorical bomb in the ultimate power station" (*Salvador* 80). Didion bluntly states that the Salvadorans are right to be offended by the cathedral, as she believes that it is, among the bounty of loud and clear political statements in El Salvador, the only one that is "ambiguous." What exactly Didion means by "ambiguous" is somewhat unclear. She states later that she knows this is the cathedral where Archbishop Romero's funeral was held, during which numerous people were killed, so it appears she is being coy by using the word "ambiguous." The cathedral is a "bomb in the ultimate power station" because its condition reveals the impotence of the Salvadoran government, and illuminates the fact that there is no safe haven in El Salvador, not even in the church.

Didion further shapes this landscape by ironically showing how information received by a visitor in El Salvador is different from the typical tourist information. She says,

> There is a special kind of practical information that the visitor to El Salvador acquires immediately, the way visitors to other places acquire information about the "currency rates," the hours for the museums. In El Salvador one learns that vultures go first for the soft tissue, for the eyes, the exposed genitalia, the open mouth. One learns that an open mouth can be used to make a specific point, can be stuffed with something emblematic; stuffed, say, with a penis, or if the point had to do with land title, stuffed with some of the dirt in question. One learns that hair deteriorates less rapidly than flesh, and that a skull surrounded by a perfect corona of hair is a not uncommon sight in the body dumps (*Salvador* 17).

Didion's words are laced with both irony and dismay. This "practical information," is of course not practical at all, least of all to a visitor. This information, which she details graphically, is what the visitor learns in lieu of museum times and currency rates. It is what is spoken about (or even seen), what visitors (one would assume unwittingly) start to pick up; it is the information that consumes the place defined by terror. Didion employs repetition, saying "one learns" over and over, as a way to emphasize the point, to reify this truth as she sees it and to make it a truth for her reader. Didion uses this blunt and literal language to show how bodies are used as statements in El Salvador; she sees what happens to them as a political rhetoric of the military and the government.

However, as convincing as Didion's language is, one must question if what she is presenting is really a collectively agreed upon reality, whether this is actually the "information" that visitors receive. Didion is not just a visitor in El Salvador; she is a journalist, and one that is pointedly looking for something. It is absolutely possible that Didion is generalizing this idea that the visitor to El Salvador learns this "special kind of practical information…immediately."

While it is without debate that the terror in El Salvador is widespread and visible, this information about the treatment of bodies and the body dumps as a whole seems like information Didion may have sought out herself, or listened a little closer than the average visitor to find. And yet, this rhetorical effect works to Didion's advantage. Even if this information is not something every visitor learns immediately, it is something Didion feels is too normal, too spoken about, and too widespread as it is. Her tone and her reification through repetition, as well as her mission to not spare any detail, no matter how graphic it may be, lets the reader see what Didion sees. Not only that, but the reader is now made aptly aware of what Didion fears; she must construct, solidify and examine this truth for her reader because she is afraid of it.

Throughout most of *Salvador*, Didion lets suggestive images imply her judgments, maintaining a distance from the politics at hand by not directly commenting on them. Even when she does speak from personal experience, as with her own encounters with the terror, she avoids stating her opinion directly. When Didion speaks of body dumps in El Salvador she begins with a description full of horrific detail, aptly illuminating their brutal nature. Again, her tone implies their normalcy, as she tries to make the larger point that these body dumps are far too easily taken as the norm. Didion refers to one specific body dump as a "lunar lava field of rotting human flesh" (*Salvador* 19). She says this matter-of-factly, but her language conveys the horrific nature of the scene. The words "lunar" and "lava" bring to mind not only something eruptive, but otherworldly, making the image of rotting flesh all the more intense and unnatural. Didion goes on to mention another body dump, one in Puerta del Diablo that is "…described as recently as the April-July 1982 issue of *Aboard TACA*, the magazine provided passengers on the national airline of El Salvador, as 'offering excellent subjects for color photography'" (*Salvador* 19).

By juxtaposing the "lunar lava field of rotting human flesh" with this quote from *Aboard*, Didion presents this great irony, allowing the reader to see how ludicrously El Salvador tries to deny its atrocities, especially to its visitors. Her presentation of this irony also lets the reader gather her personal opinion; from the structure of this passage it is clear that she is appalled by this denial of body dumps, but as a journalist she stays removed by not having to come out and say so point blank. It does not seem that Didion fears stating her own opinion, but rather that she finds greater poignancy in letting these truths speak for themselves. Didion, always trusting of her reading and forever in avoidance of the narrative cliché, seems to assume that her reader will glean from her irony the horrific reality of El Salvador and her feelings about it.

Didion employs this method again when reporting on a meeting of Salvadoran writers that she is invited to at the American embassy. In relaying what was said during the gathering, rather than summarizing the conversation or repeating quotes and attributing them to specific people, she says, "These are some of the sentences spoken to me that morning…" and proceeds to list them (*Salvador* 83). "Sentences" is the most neutral word Didion could possibly use to describe the conversation. In this way, she is able to subtly show her skepticism towards these people and their thoughts about the state of El Salvador, without having to specifically state it.

The bulk of the "sentences" that Didion records from that meeting are about how "intellectual life is drying up," with almost no mention of the actual horrors going on (*Salvador* 83). At the end of the list of "sentences," Didion notes, "The cultural attaché from the embassy said that she, for one, would like to see this *café literario* close on a hopeful note, and someone provided one: it was a hopeful note that *norteamericanos* and *centroamericanos* could have such a meeting. This is what passed for a hopeful note in San Salvador in the summer of 1982."

(*Salvador* 84). Again Didion lets the facts speak for themselves. She repeats the phrase "hopeful note" three times, each instance conveying more irony than the last. This repetition works to show her own opinion; she seems to find irony in the idea that this could constitute a "hopeful note," and in the idea of any hopeful note existing for El Salvador at this time.

El Salvador is a place where Didion experiences many self-realizations, some that occur at the scene, and some that occur retrospectively as she records her findings. These self-realizations show what a large impact El Salvador has on Didion, and speak to her epistemic insecurities. At one point during her visit, Didion meets with Victor Barriere, the grandson of a notoriously cruel former Salvadoran dictator, General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez. She reports that Barriere has enormous respect for his grandfather, a man who ruthlessly killed thousands of citizens in 1932. Barriere also tells her about a young foreign boy whom he lets hang around his studio in order to "keep him from getting killed" (*Salvador* 56). Barriere's desire to protect this boy from being killed is outstandingly ironic given his blithe spirit in regard to his grandfather's senseless massacres.

However, Didion does not explicitly call this out. Instead, she notes, "It occurred to me that this was the first time in my life that I had been in the presence of obvious 'material' and felt no professional exhilaration at all, only personal dread" (*Salvador* 56). Something so mind-blowingly ironic would typically make for great writing, what Didion calls "obvious material," but instead she is so completely dumbfounded by Barriere's contradictions that she feels only "personal dread." It is apparent that this place, and the people who perpetuate the terror within it are taking a toll on Didion, and making her reconsider who she is as a journalist; an element that would typically make for great journalism elsewhere is, in El Salvador, a mark of the violence that Didion fears.

Didion comes to a similar realization about her writing while taking notes at the main shopping mall in El Salvador. She first relays a copious inventory (similar to the one she gives in *Slouching*) of everything she sees and hears at the mall. She then says,

> This was a shopping center that embodied the future for which El Salvador was presumably being saved, and I wrote it down dutifully, this being the kind of 'color' I knew how to interpret, the kind of inductive irony, the detail that was supposed to illuminate the story. As I wrote it down I realized that I was no longer much interested in this kind of irony, that this was a story that would not be illuminated by such details, that this was a story that would perhaps not be illuminated at all, that this was perhaps even less a 'story' than a true *noche oscura* (*Salvador* 36).

The mall is supposed to stand for the promising capitalist and consumer future of El Salvador, and just as she does when speaking to Barriere, Didion notices that this irony is "the detail that was supposed to illuminate the story," and make for great journalism. However, as she experiences with Barriere as well, the irony that she normally embraces seems unusable to her. Didion has proven herself successful at constructing El Salvador through vibrant irony, but in these cases, it appears that the situation in El Salvador has become too raw and too real to her to be treated as a fluffy piece layered with these ironic details. Didion seems to be fighting against this personal emotional attachment she is starting to develop towards El Salvador. She refers to her report on El Salvador as, more than anything else, a "*noche oscura*,*"* a dark night, that invokes something within her that seems dark as well. Her reporting alludes to this tortured state, to some inner-doubt and turmoil. This personal darkness, and Didion's awareness of it, is what drives (or perhaps inhibits) her writing in *Salvador*, and makes it different than something like her less impassioned exploration of the hippies in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem.*

Didion comes to another important self-realization when considering words of advice given to her before leaving for El Salvador. The advice comes from a Salvadoran woman who works for her in Los Angeles. The woman, who has had family members killed in their beds, tells Didion exactly what to avoid, to which Didion says, "I assured her that we would remember, we would be careful, we would in fact be so careful that we would probably (trying for a light touch) spend all our time in church" (*Salvador* 78). Didion hopes that this comment about the church will put her employee at ease, thinking of the church as a universally safe place. However, she recalls that her employee became "agitated…and I realized that I had spoken as a *norteamericana*: churches had not been to this woman the neutral ground they had been to me" (*Salvador* 78**)**. Here we return to Didion's knowledge of the Metropolitan Cathedral and the way it reflects the complete lack of safe spaces in El Salvador. Churches are not a "neutral ground" to a Salvadoran as they are to a "*norteamericana*."

Didion then reflects on what a church means to someone from El Salvador. She says, "I must remember: Archbishop Romero killed saying mass in the chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital in San Salvador. I must remember: more than thirty people killed at Archbishop Romero's funeral in the Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador" (*Salvador* 78). Twice more she repeats this phrase, "I must remember," followed by more evidence of the lack of neutrality or safety in Salvadoran churches. Finally she says, "I must understand: the Church was dangerous." This is an interesting technique, as she is repeating something the Salvadoran woman said to her (she is the one telling Didion what she must "remember" and "understand") but in structuring it this way, Didion makes it into a chant, as though she is trying to condition herself to "remember," to "understand," and to get rid of the limited and deluded *norteamericana* outlook

on how things are. To understand El Salvador, Didion must forget what she already thinks she knows.

At lunch at the American ambassador's house, Didion again feels herself fall prey to American illusion about El Salvador. She recalls,

> I have thought since about this lunch a great deal. The wine was chilled and poured into crystal glasses. The fish was served on porcelain plates that bore the American eagle. The sheep dog and the crystal and the American eagle together had on me a certain anesthetic effect, temporarily deadening that receptivity to the sinister that afflicts everyone in Salvador, and I experienced for a moment the official American delusion, the illusion of plausibility, the sense that the American undertaking in El Salvador might turn out to be, from the right angle, in the right light, just another difficult but possible mission in another troubled but possible country (*Salvador* 88).

Everything present at this lunch—"the sheep dog and the crystal and the American eagle"—is emblematic of American material wealth, and to witness it in a place that is the very antithesis of that is a shock to the system for Didion. It all temporarily numbs her, inviting her into what she is familiar with, and momentarily forcing her to forget the horrific reality of life in El Salvador. Among these safe emblems of Americana, Didion experiences the "illusion of plausibility." From this lofty and delusional perch (or what Didion refers to as "from the right angle, in the right light") she is tricked into believing that things aren't *really* as bad as they seem, that the problems within El Salvador will eventually be solved by the U.S. government. This is, of course, the reality of the American perception of El Salvador. By admitting that she too can easily fall into this delusion, Didion is able to make the point that change is needed, and that the American government must stop shrouding reality in illusion.

This passage also raises the question of what Didion does and does not know about the United States effort in El Salvador. She never explicitly states what the United States' foreign policy in El Salvador is, nor does she directly address the manner of the CIA intervention, but her perpetually ironic and skeptical tone makes it hard to believe that she is unaware. It may be that Didion does not feel that she can confidentially make these claims, or that she is unfairly assuming that information about the U.S. foreign policy and the CIA intervention is a given. However, it seems more likely that she does not lay these things out because she is more interested in the "shimmering images." She is concerned with illuminating the micro moments; she close reads to show that something is happening. But her lack of clarity does continue to complicate the truth she seems so desperate to impart.

In *The Art of Fact,* Barbara Lounsberry says that "…in *Salvador* Didion is more explicit than in any of her other nonfiction in criticizing America's misperception."[29] The word "explicit" is a curious choice, as almost all of Didion's criticism is implicit. However, Lounsberry does point to passage in which Didion's voice is uncharacteristically direct. Didion writes,

> That we had been drawn, both by a misapprehension of the local rhetoric and by the manipulation of our own rhetorical weakness, into a game we did not understand, a play of power in a political topic alien to us, seemed apparent, and yet there we remained…At the heart of the American effort there was something of the familiar ineffable, as if it were taking place not in El Salvador but in a mirage of El Salvador, the mirage of a society not unlike our own but "sick," a temporarily fevered republic in which the antibodies of democracy needed only to be encouraged…and in which there existed, waiting to be tapped by our support, some latent good will (*Salvador* 96).

[29] Lounsberry 134.

Rhetoric, and our "misapprehension" and "manipulation" of it, is what Didion believes propelled us (meaning the United States government) into "a game we did not understand," a game that is all about playing with power. Didion says that this cause and effect "seemed apparent, and yet there we remained." It seems that she means this is both "apparent" to her, and to the people in charge who perpetuate the game; it is though she is asking "how have we not changed our ways if the problems are so obvious?" Didion's most explicit critique of the American effort in El Salvador is that it does not even feel like it is taking place in El Salvador, but rather, in a "mirage of a society not unlike our own but 'sick,'" that we so naïvely believe just needs a little bit of our ideological input to churn out "some latent good will." Didion is not only critiquing the foolishness of the American government's outlook, she is also making the point, once again, that there is at this time no viable solution for the situation in El Salvador. El Salvador is not just battling a quick bout of sickness that we can cure; the darkness that exists there may be too potent to be cured at all. It seems to Didion that the United States as it is currently operating is in no position to change things in El Salvador, and that change in general may be just a fantasy.

In *Salvador*, and later in *Miami*, Didion is intrigued by how language works, specifically, how those in power use certain words and phrases to manipulate situations for their own benefit. Didion frequently quotes words she hears, rarely attributing them to any particular person, to make the point that these are words heard often, and words that should be paid more attention to. "Disappear," in its unusual transitive form as "to disappear," is one of these frequently used words that sticks with Didion. "Desaparecer," as it is said in El Salvador, is used to denote when the government has killed someone, for reasons left unidentified. Didion mentions a student protest that was held in response to outrageous amounts of government spending on a "Señorita Universo" contest. Didion reports that the government responded to the protest by

"disappearing" many of the protestors. She then notes, parenthetically, "'*Desaparecer*', or 'disappear,' is in Spanish both an intransitive and a transitive verb, and this flexibility has been adopted by those speaking English in El Salvador, as in *John Sullivan was disappeared from the Sheraton; the government disappeared the students*, there being no equivalent situation, and so no equivalent word, in English-speaking cultures" (*Salvador* 57).

Didion is intrigued by the flexibility of this verb because it speaks so directly to the culture and state of affairs in El Salvador. To speak of "disappearing" people is not part of the language in English-speaking cultures, nor, as far as Didion is concerned, is the act itself. This is a word that is unique to El Salvador and used by its government; it has become a colloquial idiom. She says that the word has been "adopted by those speaking English in El Salvador," implying it's increased use, and perhaps that U.S. citizens are also being "disappeared." That this word is spoken so casually by anyone is something Didion believes is worth attention. It is made clear by the urgency in her tone that she fears the power false language has to obscure reality.

Didion calls into question other words used by the Salvadoran government that are rarely looked at critically, specifically the words the government uses when talking about solutions that do not actually exist. These words are "reorganization," or "improvement," or "perfection," words Didion believes "tend to signal the presence of the ineffable" (*Salvador* 64). By using this flat vocabulary, the government is able to suggest what it does not have the ability or the will to speak towards, for instance, solutions for the violence in El Salvador. Didion goes on to say, "Language as it is now used in El Salvador is the language of advertising, of persuasion, of the product being one or another of the *soluciones* crafted in Washington or Panama or Mexico, which is part of the place's pervasive obscenity…this language is shared by Salvadorans and Americans, as if a linguistic deal had been cut" (*Salvador* 65). In El Salvador, language is used

to promote the "product," that being the *"soluciones,"* the government itself does not have. Rather than trying to end the violence in El Salvador, these officials use language to manipulate the public into believing that change is coming. Didion says these false "*soluciones*" are "crafted" outside of El Salvador, implying that other administrations help the Salvadoran government mask reality from its citizens with this false language. For her, this collective construction of illusion is part of the "pervasive obscenity" of the place.

That Didion implicates the American government in this, saying the Salvadoran and American governments treat this language as though it is a "deal" that "had been cut," seems to imply that she is indeed aware, in some capacity, of the nature of the United States' aid in El Salvador. By illuminating this mutual use of language as a veil for corruption and impotence, Didion is able to hint at the nefarious relations between the two governments, and impart her belief that false language breeds a false sense of reality.

Many critics have censured the length of Didion's stay in El Salvador, believing two weeks to be too short a time. To these critics, Sharon Felton, editor of *The Critical Response to Joan Didion* counters, "One wonders exactly how many mutilated corpses, exactly how many trips to the body dumps one needs to see in order to be convinced of the abuse—*three* weeks' worth, *four*?"[30] It is actually a testament to the state of affairs in El Salvador that Didion was able to see such profound darkness in just two weeks. Perhaps a more extended stay would have given her more material, or a grander perspective, but *Salvador* is hardly lacking in either.

Other critics have accused Didion of using *Salvador* as a platform to promote her own political standpoint. Mark Falcoff, in an article for *Commentary*, writes that Didion "makes the tiny republic of El Salvador into a mirror reflecting her own basic contempt for liberal

[30] Sharon Felton, Introdution to *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994) 8.

democracy and—why not say it?—the American way of life."[31] It is undeniable that Didion implies a distaste for the American government, and perhaps "the American way of life," in *Salvador*, but this "contempt" is not at the forefront of her report—in fact, as we have seen, it appears only implicitly. Conversely, other critics have argued that Didion is too detached from her subject because she does not offer any solutions to the problematic relations between the United States and El Salvador. In her review of *Salvador*, Martina Ebert says, "This avoidance of formulating a definitive answer constitutes *Salvador*'s major shortcoming."[32] Ebert is correct; that Didion does not propose any solutions is a genuine problem with *Salvador* as a piece of political criticism. However, theorizing is also not part of Didion's project; in fact, it is the very antithesis of it. Didion's project in *Salvador* is to closely analyze everything we assume to be "fact," to break through the barrier of how things are presented by the U.S. and Salvadoran governments, and to expose the reality of this horrific violence.

[31] Felton 8
[32] Martina Ebert, rev. of *Salvador*, by Joan Didion, *Ohio Journal* 8.3 (Fall/Winter 1984-1985): 31-32.

Miami

Five years after she went to El Salvador, Didion published another work exposing a similar kind of dark violence and political turmoil, this time set in Miami. Didion's report on Miami was originally published in four parts in the May 1987 issue of *New York Review of Books*, and then in book form later that year. *Miami* focuses on the Cuban exiles that arrived in the city after the 1959 overthrow of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista by Communist leader Fidel Castro.[33] The Cubans who came to Miami expected a short-term exile, and were optimistic that Cuba would be liberated, however, neither hope materialized. Didion looks at the simultaneously American and non-American city that these exiles found themselves a part of, examining the lasting affect of the turbulent relationship between Cubans and the U.S. government post-Bay of Pigs, as well as the cultural tensions between the "Miami Cubans" and the "Miami Anglos." In *Miami,* as in *Salvador*, Didion shapes the world she sees with her distinct language and style, relying on repetition and reification, as well as a tone and structure that assumes an understanding of her reader. She deals heavily with paranoia, subtext, conspiracy, and what she calls the "underwater narrative" so present in the city of Miami.

Didion's first attempt at shaping the city of Miami comes before she even arrives. Speaking of a ritual internal experience, she says,

> I never passed through security for a flight to Miami without experiencing a certain weightlessness, a heightened wariness of having left the developed world for a more fluid atmosphere, one in which the native distrust of extreme possibilities that tended to ground

[33] All citations from *Miami* are to: Joan Didion, *Miami*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

> the temperate United States in an obeisance to democratic institutions seemed rooted, if at all, only shallowly (*Miami* 23).

Didion juxtaposes the "developed world," the world that presumably includes everything that is not Miami, with the "fluid atmosphere" of Miami. It does not seem that Didion means to say Miami is "undeveloped," but that it lacks an element found in the "developed world"—solidity. In Miami, the "native distrust of extreme possibilities" that exists elsewhere in the U.S. barely exists, and when it does, it exists "only shallowly." From this it is clear that the "developed world," to Didion, is developed in terms of its democratic institutions. Didion shares with the reader the anxiety she experiences when moving from one "world" into the other, an anxiety heightened by the fact that she says this happens every time she flies to Miami. She feels "a certain weightlessness, a heightened wariness," a pervasive feeling in her prose throughout *Miami*. Establishing this anxiety from the start tells the reader about Didion's interest in this project to begin with; as we see in *Salvador*, Didion likes to chase what she fears.

Didion continues to construct Miami for her reader in terms of its instability. She says, "…Miami seemed not a city at all but a tale, a romance of the tropics, a kind of waking dream in which any possibility could and would be accommodated" (*Miami* 33). It is always Didion's aim to construct place in a fathomable way; we often see her attempting to reify a given landscape through the presentation of names and emblematic images, so it can then be properly examined. In *Miami*, Didion complicates this, as she seems to struggle to find any material with which to shape the city for her reader. Her structure shows her uneasiness; as she develops her thoughts about Miami, she improves upon her word choice (going from "a tale," to "a romance of the tropics" to "a kind of waking dream"), each term representing something less stable than the last.

While El Salvador was defined by terror for Didion, in Miami she finds the defining factor to stem from its dissonant culture. Sharon Felton notes, "*Miami* embodies a different variety of the chasm, the rifts born from cultural clash that defines the city. The…major ethnic groups…exist in uneasy harmony, in a precarious chorus that threatens to turn discordant at the merest infringement."[34]

To really capture the culture of Miami, Didion first deals with the tensions that arise from the reality of an overwhelming Cuban presence existing in an American city. She speaks of the members of Brigade 2506, the group of Cuban exiles formed by the CIA in 1960 to overthrow Fidel Castro's Cuban government in the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Of the members, Didion writes, "Some were American citizens and some never would be, but they were all Cuban first, and they proceeded equally from a kind of collective spell, an occult enchantment, from that febrile complex of resentments and revenges and idealizations and taboos which renders exile so potent an organizing principal" (*Miami* 17).

The fact that these individuals "were all Cuban first" is a crucial point that applies to all Cuban exiles in Miami. Even though they are living in an American city, and some are American citizens, their Cuban heritage is what defines them and continues to keep them under what Didion calls a "collective spell" that then shapes the city of Miami. Didion again develops and solidifies her ideas on the page through her advancing diction. She goes from a "collective spell" to an "occult enchantment" to "that febrile complex." This final phrase uses the demonstrative pronoun "that," assuming an intimate understanding between her and her reader. In this last part of the sentence, "…that febrile complex of resentments and revenges and idealizations and taboos," Didion's cadence picks up as her voice edges into the conspiratorial form that

[34] Felton, 8.

dominates so much of *Miami*. Her diction and lack of punctuation work on two levels: on one level, they show that she believes her reader is with her, understanding what she is thinking; on another level, her syntax speaks to the feverishness of the Cubans she is describing and the antagonism that absorbs them. Didion is illuminating the tension that continues to exist among Cubans in Miami, whose resentment toward Cuba and the United States has left them to seek vengeance for their lost identity.

Didion finds that even though there are plenty of non-Cubans in Miami, the whole place is dominated by Cuban identity. She says, **"**The entire tone of the city, the way people looked and talked and met one another, was Cuban. The very image the city had begun presenting of itself, what was then its newfound glamour, its "hotness" (hot colors, hot vice, shady dealings under palm trees), was that of prerevolutionary Havana, as perceived by Americans" (52). The entire "tone" of Miami is Cuban, and to Didion that is something involving "glamour" and "hotness." The image of Miami is that of "prerevolutionary Havana," but a "prerevolutionary Havana," Didion notes, "as perceived by Americans," as though to say it is not authentically Havana-like at all. Didion goes on to say, "This was not, in other words, an invisible 56 percent of the population" (*Miami* 53).

The very Cuban "tone" of Miami is all the evidence needed to show that these people are an active and influential part of the population of the city. With her explication ("this was not, in other words…") and use of the population percentage, Didion appears to be mocking someone, perhaps whoever believes the Cuban population to be "invisible." Though she does not explicitly state who this is, it can be inferred that she means to mock the Miami Anglos, as she says prior to this passage,

> This set of mind, in which the local Cuban community was seen as a civic challenge determinedly met, was not uncommon among Anglos to whom I talked in Miami, many of whom persisted in the related illusions that the city was small, manageable, prosperous in a predictable broad-based way, southern in a progressive sunbelt way, American, and belonged to them (*Miami* 51).

Didion not only shapes Miami for her reader by describing the vast Cuban influence, she also uses the image of this influence to prove wrong the Miami Anglos with whom she has spoken. She appears to look down upon the Miami Anglos for their ignorance, and implies with her illustration of Cuban culture that the city does not belong to the Miami Anglos, even though they continue to carry on with their "illusions" that it does.

Not only do Miami Anglos refuse to acknowledge the influence of the Cubans, Didion explains that they also have a perpetually haughty attitude towards Cuban culture in general. She says, "There was in any such view of Miami Cubans an extraordinary element of condescension…shared by Miami Anglos, who were inclined to reduce the particular liveliness and sophistication of Cuban life to a matter of shrines on the lawn and love potions in the *botánicas,* the primitive exotica of the tourist's Caribbean" (*Miami* 61). The snobbery present in Miami Anglos' views of Miami Cubans is apparent in their inability to see that the Cuban culture that surrounds them is worldly and energetic. They "reduce" the culture to these ornaments that are in no way emblematic of authentic Cuban culture; they are, rather, the "primitive exotica of the tourist's Caribbean." This is a powerful distinction, as the Miami Anglos are by no means tourists in this culture. Though it may not be their own culture in terms of race, it is the culture that is dominant in the city they live in, and yet they refuse to see it for what it really is.

Further exploring this cultural tension, Didion examines the Miami Cubans' feelings towards the United States government. She writes,

> Here between the mangrove swamp and the barrier reef was an American city largely populated by people who believed that the United States had walked away before, had betrayed them at the Bay of Pigs and later, with consequences we have seen. Here between the swamp and the reef was an American city populated by people who also believed that the United States would betray them again…betray them at all the barricades of a phantom war they had once again taken not as the projection of another Washington abstraction but as their own struggle, *la lucha, la causa*, with consequences we have not yet seen (*Miami* 80).

It is important for Didion to situate the Miami Cubans and their ideas in the place where they are. She notes that these ideas exist here, "between the mangrove swamp and the barrier reef" to show the expanse of the area in which these views exist. Miami is a large city, an "American city," dominated by a population that feels betrayed by the U.S. government. Didion's repetition is almost menacing as she works to solidify this notion that people so distrustful of the American government dominate an entire city in America. She assumes that her reader is aware of what she means when she mentions the "consequences we have seen" as the result of the U.S. betraying the Cubans at the Bay of Pigs. Though she does not state it, it seems that these "consequences" are the Cuban retaliation. She makes an important distinction about the betrayal the Cubans feel; they did not take the "phantom war," The Bay of Pigs, as "another Washington abstraction." They took it as "their own struggle, *la lucha, la causa*" against Castro, and they were abandoned by the United States. Didion's tone again implies a looming menace when she warns against the "consequences we have not yet seen."

In "Didion's Political Tropics: *Miami* and the Basis for Community," Sandra K. Hinchman speaks about the "underwater narrative" Didion finds in Miami. Hinchman says, "The only public narrative that Didion detects here is an 'underwater narrative' of intrigue and deception, spawned when the desperate hopes of exiles meet the extraconstitutional ambitions of government officials."[35] Didion is perpetually interested in subtext and finds that Miami is full of it. She finds the "intrigue and deception" primarily in bureaucratic, rehearsed language, in which people never say what they mean and words are used as both protective shields and ammunition.

Didion recalls that the first time she went to Miami, she was repeatedly told where she should not go and what she should not do. This recalls *Salvador*, when Didion's Salvadoran employee tells her what to avoid there, and here Didion again ignores what she is told. She says, "In the end I went without incident to all of the places I had been told not to go, and did not or did do most of the things I had been told to do or not to do, but the subtext of what I had been told, that this was a city in which black people and white people viewed each other with some discontent, stayed with me…" (*Miami* 39). Didion does not abide by the safety guidelines given to her, but keeps in mind the "subtext," of these guidelines, the issues of race that are not directly spoken to her but implied in where "not to go" and what "not to do." However, this calls into question something Didion does not address, that is, how does keeping this subtext in mind affect what she is doing when she goes to these places and does these things she is told not to? Surely keeping this subtext in mind affects her perception of these places and her actions when she is in them. While withholding information often benefits Didion's writing, here it mystifies what is going on to no purpose.

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[35] Sandra K. Hinchman, "Didion's Political Tropics: *Miami* and the Basis for Community," *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*, ed. Sharon Felton (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 237.

Didion is skeptical throughout much of *Miami*, putting forth suspicions about Kennedy's assassination and the Iran-Contra affair, but this underwater narrative she deals with is most effectively uncovered when she looks at language. Didion examines the relationship between false language and reality in *Salvador*, but in *Miami*, she looks at it with an even more skeptical and critical eye. In *Miami*, Didion is particularly interested in "Washington Language"—the flighty words and phrases used by United States bureaucrats to deny or to deter. She says,

> "Track two" and "autonomous operations" were of course Washington phrases, phrases from the special vocabulary of Special Groups and Standing Groups and "guidelines" and "approaches," words from a language in which deniability was built into the grammar, and as such may or may not have had a different meaning, or any meaning, in 1963 in Miami where deniability had become in many ways the very opposite of the point (*Miami* 94).

Playing on the name of "Special Groups," Didion derides these Washington phrases, saying they are part of a "special vocabulary." Calling out phrases like "track two" and words like "guidelines," Didion is breaking this Washington code and revealing the problems of the United States government that is forever maintaining plausible deniability. Didion says, in an almost playful way, that these code words and phrases "may or may not have had a different meaning, or any meaning" at this time in Miami, illuminating how unproductive this language of deflection was at a time when the real "point" was to be transparent.

Didion refers to all of President Reagan's public speeches, told in front of groups or on the radio, as "stories," told always for specific, pointed reasons. What troubles Didion the most about these "stories" is the language used in them. She says, "The language in which the stories were told was not that of political argument but of advertising ('New intelligence shows…' and

'Now it has been learned…') of the sales pitch" (*Miami* 159). Referring to Reagan's speeches as "stories" speaks volumes. To Didion, these are not speeches or arguments in any way, they are simply tales told in a fantasy language where nothing is actually as it is spoken of. She notes that the language of these stories is that of "advertising," implying a dodgy, superficial way of speaking. The phrases she quotes from Reagan are overly optimistic and all about selling something, instead of being in the language of "political argument."

Didion recalls a conversation she had with Reagan's Director of Communications, David Gergen, in which she notices this type of language again. She says, "I recall talking about the administration's Central American policy…and being struck not exactly by what he said but by the way in which he said it…The terms David Gergen used that afternoon were exclusively those of presentation" (*Miami* 178). Gergen's language of "presentation" is like Reagan's language of advertising; the word "presentation" implies something rehearsed and somewhat artificial. Didion goes on to talk about the subtext of David Gergen's language, saying,

> [He] had worked in the White House during three administrations, and acquired during the course of them an entire vocabulary of attributable nods and acquiescent silences, a diction that tended to evaporate like smoke, but the subtext of what he was saying…seemed clear, and to suggest a view of the government of the United States…not substantively different from the view of the government of the United States held by those Cubans to whom I later talked in Miami: the government of the United States was in this view one for which other parts of the world, in this instance Central America, existed only as "issues" (*Miami* 179).

Didion speaks of David Gergen's language as though it is something he has been trained in, having "acquired" it during his years in the White House. Didion lets her feelings show here, as

her tone is especially sardonic when she says he has an "entire vocabulary" of agreeable nods and silences. This also speaks to how little words mean to the people of the U.S. government; Gergen's vocabulary contains meek gestures of agreement to protect him from having to deal with actually speaking about the government's Central American policy. Didion says it is "a diction that tended to evaporate like smoke," strongly illustrating the transient nature of his language. What is perhaps most interesting is Didion's claim that in the subtext of Gergen's language lies an opinion of the U.S. government not unlike the one held by the Miami Cubans. Didion seems to be saying that she can read in Gergen's language that he, like the Miami Cubans, knows that the U.S. views Central America as an "issue" to be fixed and nothing more. This calls back to the realization Didion has about the American perception in El Salvador.

As seen earlier in *Miami*, Didion is deeply interested in these "consequences," that are the result of the United States government's continuous betrayal of the Cuban exiles. Didion is able to argue her own feelings about this through her exploration of language. She talks about the "…distance between what is said in the high ether of Washington, which is about the making of those gestures and the sending of those messages and the drafting of those positions that will serve to maintain that imaginary world" (*Miami* 159). She goes on, "In many ways Miami remains our most graphic lesson in consequences. 'I can assure you that this flag will be returned to this brigade in a free Havana,' John F. Kennedy said at the Orange Bowl in 1962…meaning it as an abstraction, the rhetorical expression of a collective wish; a kind of poetry, which of course makes nothing happen (*Miami* 160).

Didion ironically uses this allusion to W. H. Auden's line, "For poetry makes nothing happen,"[36] to berate Kennedy for his words at the Orange Bowl. To Didion, Kennedy's speech is

[36] W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats." *Poets.org.* Academy of American Poets, 1997. Accessed Jan. 2014.

nothing more than "a kind of poetry" that reflects a broad, hopeful idea that is never actually put into action. She calls it a "rhetorical expression of a collective wish," again harking back to the idea that this type of language is used for optimistic presentation in order to appease people (in this case, the Miami Cubans). Didion does not explicitly say what the "consequences" of this are, but one can assume the greatest consequence of this "poetry" that "makes nothing happen" is that this "imaginary world" is maintained. However, Didion is careful to point out that this fantasy language does not dupe the Cuban exiles; it just further grounds them in their belief that the government will keep trying to use and deceive them.

One must consider though, does Didion's language make anything happen? Indeed, it appears to do more than the United States government's language, as Didion's language is not about selling an illusion, and it does not perpetuate an imaginary world. However, in can be argued that in *Miami*, as in *Salvador*, Didion does not put forth any solutions to the problems she points to. At the same time, what she is doing is crucial if any change is to eventually come about; her attention to detail takes the first step by bringing reality to the forefront.

For Didion, the underwater narrative in Miami is something unexplored by many, and is found most prominently in what she calls "Miami stories." She talks briefly about Steven Carr and Jesus Garcia, two exiles who were employed by the CIA and allegedly shipped guns to Central American rebels. She presents the information about both men in terms of their own personal accounts, which she points out, are full of inconsistencies but also share many strange connections. However, Didion writes, "There were no particularly novel elements" in the stories told by either man. "They were Miami stories, fragments of the underwater narrative, and as such they were of a genre familiar in this country since at least the Bay of Pigs. Any single Miami story…was hard to follow, and typically required a more extensive recall of other Miami stories

than most people outside Miami could offer" (*Miami* 202). Didion's voice is conspiratorial as ever. She does not fully identify what a "Miami story" is, precisely because one cannot. The "Miami stories" are "fragments of the underwater narrative," meaning, however vaguely, that they are full of inconsistencies and mystery, but have a striking subtext and subtle connections. A single "Miami story" often needs to be backed up by a "recall" of other ones, which is something "most people outside Miami," meaning those in Washington, cannot do. This notion illustrates the problematic relationship between the Cubans and the U.S. government. And, as much as Didion tries (as with Carr and Garcia), it is difficult to confirm the validity of these stories; because of this, Didion realizes, people do not see any value in studying the "underwater narrative." She says,

> Particularly in Washington, where the logical consequences of any administration's imperial yearnings were thought to be voided when the voting levels were next pulled, the study of the underwater narrative, these stories about what people in Miami may or may not have done on the basis of what people in Washington had or had not said, was believed to serve no useful purpose (*Miami* 203).

Didion does not ascribe the faults in the government's approaches towards Miami and the Cuban exiles to just one president. It is the case of "any administration," she says, boldly arguing that once a president's term is up, all of the "consequences" of his administration's "imperial yearnings," or the poetry that makes nothing happen, become irrelevant. It is clear that Didion believes the underwater narrative needs to be studied, specifically by those in Washington, because the "consequences" can no longer be ignored.

The underwater narrative of Miami is hard to find; it is largely made up of rumors and these "Miami stories," that often cannot be confirmed. But Didion is attracted to them, much like

the "shimmering images," because they are so commonplace, and yet it is hard to find meaning in them. However, while Didion does not want to look too much into the "shimmering images," that call to her in *The White Album*, in *Miami*, she is compelled to look closely at all conspiracy theories—perhaps because everyone else refuses to.

Didion quotes a *New York Times* article from 1975, in which Anthony Lewis writes, "'The search for conspiracy…only increases the elements of morbidity and paranoia and fantasy in this country. It romanticizes crimes that are terrible because of their lack of purpose. It obscures our necessary understanding, all of us, that in this life there is often tragedy without reason'" (*Miami* 203). Didion uses this quote ironically, because she believes "the search for conspiracy," is actually important, and that ignoring them is what actually "romanticizes," and "obscures our understanding." This is somewhat problematic, as conspiracies are not proven fact, but Didion is also careful not to present them as such. She goes on to say,

> That the assassination of John F. Kennedy might or might not have been the specific consequence of his administration's own incursions into the tropic of morbidity and paranoia and fantasy (as early as 1964, two staff attorneys for the Warren Commission, W. David Slawson and William Coleman, had prepared a memorandum urging the commission to investigate the possibility that Lee Harvey Oswald had been acting for, or had been set up by, anti-Castro Cuban exiles) did not recommend, in this view, a closer study of the tropic (*Miami* 203).

Didion does not claim that Kennedy's assassination was absolutely the "consequence" of the U.S. government's betrayal of the Cuban exiles, but rather, it "might or might not have been." She is entertaining the idea, not purporting fact. She uses Lewis' phrase, "the tropic of morbidity and paranoia and fantasy" to imply that these elements were actually the result of the

government's lack of transparency and enabling of false hope, beginning with the Bay of Pigs. But the government does not consider the "consequences," the connections, the cause and effect. "A closer study of the tropic," of its own perpetuation of fantasy, is of no interest to the U.S. government.

Didion does not necessarily believe all of these conspiracy theories, these "Miami Stories." Rather, she sees their growing prevalence as a sign of the ceaseless tension in Miami, a tension that is the result of the Cuban exiles' resentment, coupled with the U.S. government's total lack of transparency and inability to follow through on any promise. That there is no interest in studying the "underwater narrative," tells Didion what she fears the most: this will only continue, and these "consequences" that she is so terrified of will only grow worse.

CHAPTER III: Political Fictions

A Book of Common Prayer

A Book of Common Prayer was published in 1977, six years before *Salvador* and ten before *Miami*. Though it is a work of fiction, the theme of political and social unrest, and the way Didion channels it through her narrator's voice, aligns it directly with *Salvador* and *Miami*. *A Book of Common Prayer*, its title borrowed from the Anglican Church prayer books, takes place in the fictional Latin American country of Boca Grande, full of corrupt government agents and revolutionaries.[37] Grace Strasser-Mendana, the widow of a wealthy Boca Grande planter, is a retired scientist who is dying of cancer. Grace is the narrator, and takes it upon herself to be the "witness" to a woman named Charlotte Douglas. Charlotte is an idealist, upper-middle class Californian who flees to Boca Grande after her revolutionist daughter, Marin, bombs the Transamerica building. Both Grace and Charlotte are American women living in Central America, and although each has a different footing in the country, both are situated as outsiders. In Didion's depiction of Boca Grande and the people who live there, there comes through a perhaps bolder voice than exists in her nonfiction. While she still relies heavily on implication, she seems less restricted with voice in this fictional world and through this fictional gaze.

After her husband's death, Grace is left in charge of their estate, and remains a member of an extended family of wealthy and corrupt government officials. Because Grace is part of this family, she is never treated as "*la norteamericana*," the primary name used by the people of Boca Grande to condescendingly describe Charlotte. And yet, in Grace's profound interest in

[37] All citations from *A Book Of Common Prayer* are to: Joan Didion, *A Book Of Common Prayer*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977).

Charlotte and her feelings towards Boca Grande in general, it becomes clear that she sees herself as an outsider and as "*la norteamericana"* as well.

As we have seen before, Didion often relies on nicknames and epithets as metonymic identifiers for people, leaving them as implications of larger problems for her reader to sift out. Grace says, "When Charlotte first came to Boca Grande she was referred to always as *la norteamericana. La norteamericana* had been heard typing in her room at the Caribe all night, *la norteamericana* had woken a doctor at two in the morning to ask the symptoms of infant framboesia. *La norteamericana* had advised the manager of the Caribe that he was derelict in allowing the maids to fill the water carafes from the tap…." (*BCP* 24).

Didion uses repetition to affirm and reaffirm the nature of gossip in Boca Grande and show how prevalent it is. The situations in which Grace is referred to by this name are also pointed; people speak of Charlotte as "*la norteamericana*" when criticizing her for her loud typing, for waking a doctor to ask about something seemingly irrelevant, and for complaining about the way the maids handle the hotel water. Didion chooses these situations for a reason, to make a point about the relations between North and Central Americans. The people of Boca Grande criticize Charlotte's white, upper class American behavior, and refer to her by this condescending name as if to say this is the behavior of all North Americans, and all that Charlotte can be defined by.

There is one occurrence wherein Grace is referred to as *norteamericana*, but it is only in reference to Charlotte. Grace's brother-in-law Victor says to her, "'as another *norteamericana* you could meet her'" (*BCP* 33). This is the first and only time Grace is referred to by this name that is used so liberally with someone who is from the same place as she is. The line reads almost jarringly, because we have been conditioned to only associate it with Charlotte. It serves as a

marker for the reader to recognize that Grace is both inside and outside. Grace's nurse is the only person, other than herself, who actually refers to her as an outsider. Grace says, "When I interrupt her accounts of local miracles on the third telling she consoles herself by dismissing me as '*de afuera,*' an outsider. I am *de afuera.* I have been *de afuera* all my life" (*BCP* 56). The nurse's name for Grace, "*de afuera*" has a different connotation than *norteamericana*; she is one of them, and yet she is still an outsider. Grace believes she is an outsider, as she confirms the nurses' title, but an outsider is something she feels she has been "all [her] life," not just in Boca Grande. Even though Grace is the narrator, *A Book of Common Prayer* is largely about Charlotte, and Didion gives us much more of her backstory than she does of Grace's. Because of this, it is hard to really discern how Grace has been an outsider all of her life. This interaction between Grace and her nurse also speaks to cultural and class tensions in Boca Grande. It is when Grace does not let the nurse speak about local miracles that she "dismiss[es]" her as "*de afuera*." This implies that the nurse believes there is, among the native of Boca Grande, a collective interest in things like local miracles.

When Grace first introduces Charlotte at the start of the novel she says, "Charlotte would call her story one of passion. I believe I would call it one of delusion" (*BCP* 1). Later on Grace says,

> As a child of the western United States [Charlotte] had been provided…with faith in the value of certain frontiers on which her family had lived, in the virtues of cleared and irrigated land, of high-yield crops, of thrift, of industry and the judicial system, of progress and education, and in the generally upward spiral of history. She was a *norteamericana*" (*BCP* 60).

Here we see the difference between Grace's *de afuera* nature and Charlotte's *norteamericana* nature. As Grace sees her, Charlotte believes in the "generally upward spiral of history;" she believes in commerce and industry and progress and laws and regulations, and is hopeful that they can exist everywhere, even in Boca Grande. Charlotte's attitude seems to echo the rhetoric of the United States government in places like El Salvador and Miami, about whose motives Didion appears to be skeptical in her nonfiction. While Grace recognizes that she is an outsider, Charlotte is too deluded with her hopeful ideals to realize that she is one too. Grace is realistic; she knows there is no place for these hopeful and progressive Western conventions in Boca Grande. In this, we see some of the realist and skeptical attitudes expressed (or rather, implied) by Didion in her nonfiction.

Charlotte writes "Letters from Central America," which Grace notes, she "tried unsuccessfully to sell to *The New Yorker*" (*BCP* 13). Charlotte writes these letters in the hope that they will illuminate positive things about the country, but they actually end up reinforcing her *norteamericana* nature and how clueless she is about the place. Charlotte's letters about Boca Grande are all based in fantasy; she sees it as a place with color, character, and economic promise, and Grace discredits these even more boldly than Didion herself might in a work of nonfiction. She says, "[Charlotte] characterized Boca Grande as a 'land of contrasts.'" Grace then counters,

> Boca Grande is not a land of contrasts. On the contrary Boca Grande is relentlessly "the same": The cathedral is not Spanish Colonial but corrugated aluminum. There is a local currency but the American dollar is legal tender. The politics of the country at first appear to offer contrast, involving as they do the "colorful" Latin juxtaposition of guerrilleros

> and colonels, but when the tanks are put away and the airport reopens nothing has actually changed in Boca Grande (*BCP* 13).

Charlotte's depiction of Boca Grande is all her own illusion; Boca Grande is not a place with the cultural flair and hopeful prosperity that she erroneously believes it is. Grace calls it "relentlessly 'the same'" and the examples she gives seem to imply that being "the same" means being stuck in profound, stagnating corruption. The only thing Grace can see one finding "contrast" in (and, she says, "only at first"), is the politics of the place. The "'colorful' Latin juxtaposition" is one of warfare—the guerrillas vs. the military—and even so, once "the tanks are put away and the airport reopens" everything seems to go back to "normal." In Grace's voice we hear the Didion we heard in *Salvador*; there is a fear that does not come through any particular words, but rather the way she presents this information to us, particularly with her ironic tone. The idea that warfare could be considered "colorful," and the fact that the country quickly goes back to normal after it, are fearful notions, and this quality is heightened by Grace's choice to leave this information to imply the larger issue here.

Charlotte plans to open a boutique in Boca Grande, another illusory concept. When she shows the storefront to Grace, Charlotte wistfully comments, "'the illusion of the tropics. That's the effect to strive for.'" To this, Grace counters to the reader, "As a matter of fact the illusion of the tropics seemed to me an odd effect to strive for in a city rotting on the equator…" (*BCP* 219). Charlotte's use of the word "illusion" in this blissful manner is completely ironic given the state of Boca Grande, and Grace mocks this American naïveté immediately. Direct commentary is something Didion shies away from in her nonfiction, but in *A Book of Common Prayer* she allows a fictitious person to do it readily. One must wonder if Didion is fearful that in this novel, implication alone may not make the point that it does in her nonfiction. It is also worth noting

that *A Book Of Common Prayer* was written ten years before *Miami*, and this "illusion of the tropics" is something Didion seems to have carried into that book as well, as she writes about the Miami Anglos sharing that same idea about Cuban culture. The "illusion of the tropics" is the fantasy of dreamers who refuse to see the reality of the political turmoil in these countries.

The undercurrent of violence and political unrest in Boca Grande is brought to life largely through allusion and implication, recalling Didion's voice in her nonfiction. For the greater part of the novel, Grace's voice remains as vague and suggestive as Didion's in *Salvador* and *Miami*. Grace says,

> The *guerrilleros* here spend their time theorizing in the interior, and are covertly encouraged to emerge from time to time as foils to the actual politics of the country. Our notoriously frequent revolutions are made not by the *guerrilleros* but entirely by the people we know. This is a hard point for the outsider of romantic sensibility to grasp (*BCP* 29).

We are not told what type of "theorizing" the *guerrilleros* do, but perhaps the point is moot. The real claim Grace is getting at here is that even though these *guerrilleros* have the revolutionary ideas, they are not the ones who start the revolutions. Grace is acting coy when she says that they are "covertly encouraged to emerge from time to time as foils" to the "actual politics" of Boca Grande. She does not say who covertly encourages them, but her language and tone imply that she knows. We also are not told what these "actual politics" are, but can only assume that they are corrupt. Perhaps the most blatant use of vagueness and omission of knowledge is seen in Grace's claim that these revolutions are made "by the people we know." This phrase implies a conspiratorial, intimate understanding, and it also serves as an indication of Grace's insider position. The people who start these false revolutions are not only the elite of Boca Grande, they

are also are the people closest to Grace. This is perhaps the reason why Grace takes an interest in Charlotte, if only to feel closer to someone who is incorruptible.

At various points throughout the novel it becomes clear that Grace's in-laws, who control the politics of the country, have "connections" to the *guerrilleros*. Recording brunches and other family gatherings, Grace reports brief but frequent mentions of revolutionaries' names, but does not examine her family's connections to them any further. It is clear that Grace is holding back from explicitly stating something about them. She evidently wants to remove herself from any connection to the violence, and her insistence that she is an outsider is her way of doing this—she claims no responsibility.

Grace equates the feeling just before a "transition," or a false revolution, to the "harmonic tremor" of a volcano nearing eruption:

> Oil wells about to come in have a sound the attentive ear can detect.
>
> As do earthquakes.
>
> Volcanoes about to erupt transmit for days or weeks before their convulsion in a signal called "the harmonic tremor."
>
> Similarly I know for months before the fact when there is about to be a "transition" in Boca Grande… (*BCP* 193).

Didion structures many parts of *A Book of Common Prayer* and *Democracy* in this staccato-form. Peter S. Prescott, in "Didion's Grace," rightly notes that this form "allows for occasional repetitions that lend a liturgical echo to her tale. Her exposition of situations and details adroitly conceals their significance—until much later their meaning flares before our eyes."[38] That Didion puts the word "transition" in quotes is also important and ironic; its as though Grace is

[38] Peter S. Prescott, "Didion's Grace," *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*, ed. Sharon Felton (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 98.

analyzing a word used as metonymy by someone (perhaps the local government) to deflect from the impending violence and what it really means. The greater irony is of course that Didion does not have Grace explicitly state what the "transition" is, she lets the images of "earthquakes" and "volcanoes" erupting tell us that Grace is speaking of one of these false "revolutions" after which everything is the same.

Grace goes on to list the elements that let her know this "transition" is about to occur: "There is the occasional tank on the Avenida Central. Sentries with carbines appear on the roof of the presidential palace. For reasons I have never understood the postal rates begin to fluctuate mysteriously" (*BCP* 193). These ominous images—the "occasional tank" and "carbines" on the roof—recall those from *Salvador.* They are threatening images, made all the more threatening by Grace's presentation of them in this short, matter-of-fact manner. Grace describes the real prelude to the violence as though it were a game, and in doing so, begins to narrow down what the violence really is and who is involved. She says,

> A game is underway, the "winner" being the player who lands his marker in the Ministry of Defense, and the play has certain ritual moves: whoever wants the Ministry that year must first get the *guerrilleros* into the game. The *guerrilleros* seem always to believe that they are playing on their own, but they are actually a diversion, a disruptive element placed on the board only to be "quelled" by "stronger leadership" (*BCP* 193).

This game metaphor, (which Didion also uses in *Salvador*), works perfectly to show how government plays the *guerrilleros*, once again to create "a diversion" from what it is doing. Grace suggests once more the existence of this language of euphemism and deflection, presumably used by the government, with words like "quelled" and "stronger leadership." This language resembles the persuasive and corrupt "Washington Language" Didion speaks at length

about in *Miami*. Again, because of her familial ties we see why Grace is not explicitly implicating the Boca Grande government here. One might then consider, is there a similar reason (some fear of some repercussion) that causes Didion to shy away from directly calling out the U.S. government's involvement in violence in places like El Salvador and Miami? It is unlikely that this is the case, but being able to detect a reason for Grace's reliance on allusion and implication, coupled with the fact that it is never clear just how much Didion knows, makes it impossible to ignore this consideration of her.

Towards the end of the novel, Grace confronts her brother-in-law Victor about the way the government takes advantage of the *guerrilleros*. Victor tells her that a "West Indian is financing the *guerrilleros*," which she says he had already told her. Grace asks Victor why he does not arrest him, and Victor says, "You tell me…" Grace then says, "You don't arrest him because you want to know who's financing *him"* (*BCP* 211). Victor does not respond to this and Grace says to the reader,

> There you had it. The *guerrilleros* would stage their "expropriations" and leave their communiqués about the "People's Revolution" and everyone would know who was financing the *guerrilleros* but for a while no one would know for whose benefit the *guerrilleros* were being financed. In the end the *guerrilleros* would all be shot and the true players would be revealed.
>
> *Mirabile dictu*.
>
> People we know (*BCP* 211).

Here we have Grace at her most transparent, as she reveals the true nature of war in Boca Grande—"there you had it" she declares, however cynically. She puts "expropriations" and "People's Revolution" in quotes, a familiar Didion mode, to reiterate the corruption of language

by the government and also by the revolutionaries, who have no power and cling to their rhetoric. Grace's own language is still slightly vague, especially with the term "true players," but by the last two lines it is clear what she is trying to impart. "*Mirabile dictu"* ("wonderful to relate") she says sarcastically, and then repeats this line she uses earlier—"People we know." The "true players," the people perpetuating the violence and the corruption are not unknown revolutionaries; in fact, they are the "people we know," the people Grace knows. Again, in her tone and cadence we get a sense of the real fear that Grace feels. There is also a sense of Grace conceding, of her exhaustion from holding back the truth.

The culmination of Charlotte's presence as *la norteamericana* comes at the end of the novel. Against the wishes of Grace and Charlotte's ex husband Warren, Charlotte decides to stay in Boca Grande during the coup d'état. Just before Charlotte is taken away and eventually killed, she shows her passport at a sidewalk barricade and says, "'*Soy norteamericana…Soy una turista*.'" After this, Grace notes, "The passport was knocked from her hand by the butt of a carbine" (*BCP* 267). This is the first time Charlotte ever admits to being a "*norteamericana"* and "*una turista,"* and the passport being knocked from her hand by the butt of the gun seems to perfectly conclude the reality of *la norteamericana* in Boca Grande. It is as though Didion is trying to impart the harsh truth that with the conditions as they are in the country, there is no hope for a *norteamericana* like Charlotte to ever survive.

In the wake of Charlotte's death, the reader can glean one final distinction between Grace and Charlotte's positions in the country. The day after the funeral Grace reflects,

> Today we are clearing some coastal groves by slash-and-burn and a pall of smoke hangs over Boca Grande…You will notice my use of the colonial pronoun, the overseer's 'we.'

> I mean it. I see now that I have no business in this place but I have been here too long to change it (*BCP* 270).

Didion always appears to favor and commend realism over fantasy, and yet here she appears to recognize a flaw: in realism comes pessimism and passivity. Grace has clarified for herself and now us her position in Boca Grande—she is an "overseer," a member of the ruling class and part of the "we." Grace is all too inside this world, and can no longer pretend to be an outsider; that Charlotte's death signifies this change speaks to what a great effect being her "witness" has had on Grace. It is clear when she says, "I have no business in this place" that Grace has disgust and contempt for her position. However, she seems to believe that the amount of time she has spent in Boca Grande inhibits any ability she may have to "change" things, even though she is well aware of the problems in the country. While Charlotte is presented all along as naïvely optimistic and unaware of the reality of the conditions in Boca Grande, she is the only one who actually attempts to change things. Before she is killed, Charlotte gets a job in a doctor's office, giving inoculations during the cholera epidemic. Though her decision to stay in Boca Grande during the coup ends in her death, she still makes an effort to improve the situation in the country. Didion appears to put blame on the realist by having Grace remain ultimately passive, steadfast in her belief that things will always be "the same," and feeling unable to make any sort of change, even if just for herself. Having the hopeful dreamer be the only one to take any sort of positive action seems unlike Didion, but is also a logical concession to make, for a total lack of hope can make nothing happen. Yet, it is important to note that this is one of the few times Didion seems accepting of a positive quality in the dreamer. One must consider if Didion is perhaps critiquing herself in this critique of Grace, in whose realism so much of Didion can be seen. This also

seems to partially explain Grace's interest in Charlotte; in Charlotte, Grace sees something that she herself cannot be.

Grace becomes even more transparent towards the end of the novel, specifically when she reflects on Charlotte's death. Grace admits, "The moment and circumstances of her arrest are matters of record but the moment and circumstance of her death remain obscure. I do not even know which side killed her…I know that fire from either an AT-15 or an AR-16 entered her body just below the left shoulderblade but I also know that all sides had both weapons" (*BCP* 268). Although we have no way of knowing if Grace is telling the truth about what she claims to not know, we are inclined to believe her, because of her confrontation with Victor and because her language here seems to show that she is trying to give us as much information as she can. That the details of Charlotte's death remain "obscure," even to someone who is for all intents and purposes an insider, speaks to how impenetrable reality is in Boca Grande—Grace doesn't even know "which side killed her."

Grace begins the novel saying, "I will be her witness," referring to Charlotte. The last lines of the novel are as follows:

> The wind is up and I will die and rather soon and all I know empirically is *I am told.*
>
> I am told, and so she said.
>
> I heard later.
>
> According to her passport. It was reported.
>
> Apparently.
>
> I have not been the witness I wanted to be (*BCP* 272).

Again we get this liturgical echo that Prescott speaks about, and here it works to emphasize Grace's act of giving up. She has lost faith in her ability to be Charlotte's "witness," for she

realizes that all she has is what she has been "told," and what has been "reported...apparently." The issue of reliable narrator here is a truly Didion conflict; Grace clearly wants to be a reliable narrator, but she cannot declare her story as definitive or truthful. Like Didion, Grace only believes in empirical evidence and has to present things as she sees them, whether or not she believes them to be factual. What she ends up with is something we will see again in *Democracy*—a story of fragments and pieces from dispersed sources sewn together. The story Grace tells about Charlotte ends up as a lot of hypotheses, and what ties it all together is less Grace's truthfulness, and more her interest in Charlotte. It is possible that this is why she becomes more transparent at the end of the novel; she has realized she has not been a good "witness," be it to Charlotte or to anyone. Grace is not solely to blame for her inability to be a better "witness." Boca Grande, with its esoteric war that makes even the details of Charlotte's death indeterminable, denies her the power.

The title "A Book of Common Prayer," seems to call to the bond between Grace and Charlotte. Though she never directly addresses it, it is very likely that Grace sees a version of herself that never materialized in Charlotte. Charlotte and Grace were both married to wealthy men, and both have estranged relationships with their children. There is certainly empathy in Grace's interest in Charlotte, and a longing for the ability to be an outsider like her; this is what drives Grace to spend her last days being Charlotte's "witness."

At the beginning of the novel, Grace (for the first and only time) gives us some of her own background, about her scientific studies and her late husband. She then says, "I tell you these things about myself only to legitimize my voice. We are uneasy about a story until we know who is telling it. In no other sense does it matter who 'I' am: 'the narrator' plays no motive role in this narrative, nor would I want to" (*BCP* 21). Didion often includes personal anecdotes in

her nonfiction, perhaps with this intention to "legitimize [her] voice." Grace says the narrator "plays no motive role," and that it does not matter who the "I" is. This is simply untrue; if the "I" did not matter, then Didion's voice (albeit via Grace in this novel) would not be what it is. It is true that Didion does not like to play a "motive role" in the narrative she is telling, but it is unavoidable—her voice plays the motive role for her.

In "To El Salvador," Lynn T. Hanley argues why it was necessary for Didion to write *A Book of Common Prayer* before *Salvador*. She says,

> [Didion's] experience of war has been literary and imaginary, her inclination has been to improve upon these accounts…To get at the facts…Didion had to penetrate both the fictions about El Salvador and her own desire to disassociate, to fictionalize. With [*Salvador*] Didion completes the passage she began in *A Book of Common Prayer*; she crosses the line between *la norteamericana* and war to report from inside the war zone…[39]

Didion does indeed penetrate the truth more than Grace, giving us a clearer look into "war zone," in *Salvador* than in *A Book of Common Prayer*. Perhaps this is, as Hanley suggests, because she used the novel to get out all of her urges to invent and to distance herself before she actually went to El Salvador. However, Didion's "desire to disassociate" is certainly not absent from *Salvador*, as it is never absent from her work. The inverse of Hanley's argument is worth considering: what would it mean for Didion's fictional account of war, had she written the nonfiction first? Would Grace be a better "witness"? Would Didion have even been compelled to write this novel?

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[39] Lynn T. Hanley, "To El Salvador," *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*, ed. Sharon Felton (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 181.

Democracy

Didion implicates herself, as a journalist named "Joan Didion," in her 1984 novel *Democracy*.[40] *Democracy*, likely named after Henry Adams' novel *Democracy*,[41] takes place primarily in Hawaii and Southeast Asia at the Vietnam War's close. The novel follows Inez Victor (neé Christian), wife of Democratic Senator Harry Victor, and girlfriend of CIA agent Jack Lovett. The Christians are the quintessential upper class American family and resemble the naïve Americans depicted in *Salvador* and *Miami* (as well as in Didion's essay collections) who insist on a golden dream and a forgotten past, and do not bother with consequences or reality. In *Democracy*, as in *A Book of Common Prayer*, Didion brings her real-world observations about the misuse of language to a fictional world. We once again see people in positions of power using the language of advertising to obscure corrupt realities. Billy Dillon, Harry Victor's aide, is constantly molding situations, trying to come up with the best way to "spin" things. Similarly, Jack Lovett tries to shroud the undertakings of the CIA in euphemisms. But, as Samuel Chase Coale writes in "Joan Didion: Witnessing the Abyss,"

> ...Corruption confounds such disguise. Slowly, carefully Didion peels away the American rhetoric and exposes the rot beneath…Democracy is exposed, at least in its American guise, as riddled with corruption, international commerce, shadowy agencies…media celebrity, the inherent apocalypse of the nuclear age, the thin layer of American belief in

[40] All citations from *Democracy* are to: Joan Didion, *Democracy*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

[41] Mary McCarthy, "Love and Death in the Pacific," *The New York Times Book Review* (1984): 3, *The New York Times*, 27 March 2014.

> its own 'innocence' and 'can-do' faith. Didion applies her moral scalpel to such hideously diseased flesh.[42]

In *Democracy*, as in *A Book of Common Prayer*, Didion relies on a first-person narrator that bears striking resemblance to herself. However, in *Democracy* this resemblance is even more pronounced, as the narrator is a very thinly fictionalized Joan Didion, bearing the author's name and history. "Call me the author," the narrator instructs, "*Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion"* (*Democracy* 16). Didion is establishing a hybrid world, partly fictitious, and partly real. This is a very modernist approach, a problematizing of narrative convention that has been seen in works by Daniel Dafoe, Samuel Richardson, and Washington Irving.

In *Democracy*, "Joan Didion" lays out her relationships with the novel's characters, having met Inez Victor and Jacket Lovett when she and Inez were working at *Vogue* in 1960, a time when Didion the author was indeed working there.[43] In *A Book of Common Prayer*, Grace gives some of her own background to "legitimize [her] voice" (*BCP* 21); though at the end of the novel she feels she has failed at being a good witness. Didion's choice to make the narrator in *Democracy* even closer to her own self is perhaps a way of building a stronger trust; it makes the fiction that much closer to nonfiction, that much closer to reality. However, she never claims to be writing nonfiction. From the start she refers to what she is writing about Inez and her family as a "novel," referencing how "…Trollope might begin this novel" (*Democracy* 16) and saying things like, "the setting is for another novel" (*Democracy* 20). By giving this fictional illusion of nonfiction, and then stating that the work is a piece of fiction, Didion appears to be playing with the concept of mimesis. Michael Davis, translator and commentator of Aristotle says, "Mimesis

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[42] Samuel Chase Coale, "Joan Didion: Witnessing the Abyss," *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*, ed. Sharon Felton (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 123.
[43] National Book Award, "Interview: Joan Didion," *The Academy of Achievement*, (Washington, D.C., 2006).

involves a framing of reality that announces that what is contained within the frame is not simply real."[44]

"Joan Didion" is extra attentive to establishing fact for the reader in *Democracy.* She will say things like, "Let me establish Inez Victor" (*Democracy* 44) or "I am resisting narrative here" (*Democracy* 133). This need to "resist narrative" is something that the narrator points out frequently in the novel. Beyond proving her intimate relationships with the characters, what makes "Joan Didion" the narrator so trustworthy is her apparent transparency about her conflicts with narrative structure. The narrator in *Democracy* is not a scientist like Grace; she is a writer, and by making visible her writing process, this idea of a work of fiction reading like nonfiction becomes even sounder. *Democracy* begins with,

> The light at dawn during those Pacific tests was something to see.
>
> Something to behold.
>
> Something that could almost make you think you saw God, he said.
>
> He said to her.
>
> Jack Lovett said to Inez Victor.
>
> Inez Victor who was born Inez Christian (*Democracy* 11).

We have seen Didion revising on the page before; it often occurs when she is describing a landscape or an image, in a method that resembles a lens zooming in, getting closer and closer to the detail so that the image can be fully realized to the reader. What is presented here is a different type of revision; in it we can see her struggle over narrative structure: "…he said" becomes "He said to her" becomes "Jack Lovett said to Inez Victor." In "An American Education," Thomas R. Edwards writes, "This self-revising fumbling with the identity cards that

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[44] Pierre-Alexis Mevel, and Helen Tattam. *Language and Its Contexts: Transposition and Transformation of Meaning?* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010) 213.

novels are supposed to slip quietly under the door seems a little like having a magician confess that the rabbit came not from the empty hat but from inside his vest."[45]

The narrator also gives us glimpses at the different ways she could have written the novel. One approach she considered was to start the novel with Inez saying in the first person, "'Imagine my mother dancing,'" and then later abandon the first person "in favor of the third" (*Democracy* 21). "Joan Didion" gives nearly two full pages of detailed questions that could be asked about the Christian family's complex and suspect history. She concludes the list with "These are all important questions down there, suggestive details in the setting, but the setting is for another novel" (*Democracy* 20). What novel that would be is not made clear, but she seems to imply that setting will not play a part in this one. "This is a hard story to tell" (*Democracy* 15) the narrator says. She seems overwhelmed by the variety of directions she could go in, with the number of "important questions" at her fingertips. In a work of nonfiction, this would be a logical conflict: the problem of what should be weeded out from the bounty of history. But this is still a work of fiction; she has created all of the questions and ideas that seem to overwhelm her.

Democracy is the perhaps the ultimate work that combines all of Didion's concerns about the politics and culture of the time she has written about, and it seems as though she is trying to figure out the "right" way to capture the essence of these themes, both in fiction and nonfiction. In doing this, "Joan Didion" lays everything out. She establishes exactly what she has chosen to leave out—these important questions for a different novel, and lots of stories, for instance, "stories that still dominate table talk down in that part of the world where Inez Victor was born and to which she returned in 1975" (*Democracy* 19). Didion has always been inclusive, even conspiratorial, with her reader, but this transparency about her writing in *Democracy* makes her

[45] Thomas R. Edwards, "An American Education," *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*, ed. Sharon Felton (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 190.

connection to the reader stronger than ever. She is not only addressing, but showing the inner workings of this method of omission she has used for so long.

Images, or emblems, are as important to Didion in *Democracy* as they are in the rest of her works. Early on in the novel, when "Joan Didion" is trying to figure out the way to begin her story she says, "I have no unequivocal way of beginning it, although I do have certain things in my mind" She continues with the first six lines of Wallace Stevens' "Of Mere Being"[46] and says "Consider that" (*Democracy* 16). She then goes on,

> I have: 'Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air' Inez Victor's fullest explanation of why she stayed on in Kuala Lumpur. Consider that too. I have those pink dawns of which Jack Lovett spoke. I have the dream, recurrent, in which my entire field of vision fills with rainbow...Consider any of these things long enough and you will see that they tend to deny the relevance not only of personality but of narrative, which makes them less than ideal images with which to begin a novel, but we go with what we have (*Democracy* 17).

The Wallace Stevens lines and the colors and the dream and the "pink dawns" may mean nothing or they may mean everything, as we have come to be aware of with Didion. These are images the narrator has collected to write this story. She first tells the reader to "consider" them, but then warns against the dangers of considering them for too long, for they could "deny the relevance of…personality" and "narrative." We see Didion confronting this issue in *The White Album*; emblems, or shimmering images like these are impossible not to include because they are facets of human nature (which Didion so aptly understands), but they are often unexplainable and thus go against traditional narrative. They need to be looked at, but, as Didion says in "Why I Write,"

[46] The palm at the end of the mind/Beyond the last thought, rises/In the bronze distance/A gold-feathered bird/Sings in the palm, without human meaning/Without human feeling, a foreign song (Democracy 16).

"you can't think too much about them."[47] If thought about for too long they may start to mean too much, or conversely, they may start to mean nothing at all. Still, the narrator is compelled to share these images as Didion is in *The White Album*. In these images we also see fragmented pieces of story that Grace similarly deals with in *A Book of Common Prayer*.

Perhaps the most revealing Didion gets is when "Joan Didion" talks about teaching a class at Berkeley on ideas of democracy in post-industrial writing. She says, "I spent my classroom time pointing out similarities in style, and presumably in ideas of democracy (the hypothesis being that the way a writer constructed a sentence reflected the way that writer thought)" (*Democracy* 71). She points her students towards writers like Orwell, Hemingway, Adams and Mailer, all of whom are suspicious of government and war, and acutely aware of how language can be misused and misunderstood. "Consider the role of the writer in a post-industrial society" she states next, either restating something she said to her class or speaking directly to the reader, and then,

> Consider the political implications of both the reliance on and the distrust of abstract words, consider the social organization implicit in the use of the autobiographical third person.
>
> *Consider, too, Didion's own involvement in the setting: an atmosphere results. How?* (*Democracy* 72).

This final line comes from a textbook assignment the narrator comes upon earlier in the novel. Again Didion is guiding our reading, telling us what we must "consider." What she is presenting here is fascinating—these are of course the questions at the foundation of this entire project. She presents these questions, and directly involves herself in the consideration of them, seventy-two

[47] Joan Didion, "Why I Write," *New York Times Book Review* (Dec. 1976): 7

pages into a novel where all of this is currently going on. Didion is not coddling her reader, for we already know well that she assumes a certain understanding of her audience; instead she seems to be rewarding her reader with this great transparency. These lines almost seem like a nod and a wink on Didion's part.

The narrator goes on to say that when she was a student at Berkeley (where Didion the author did indeed attend) she had "considered the same questions or ones like them" (*Democracy* 72).[48] She moves on to talk about her newspaper reading as a student, saying she only cared about news from Southeast Asia, and only about "the details." This piece of information is what brings her back to the world of Inez and her family, but she does not abandon her consideration of the writer's role. She says the only reason she knew that Inez's father, Paul Christian, had killed Hawaiian Congressman Wendell Omura was because it was "headlined CONGRESSIONAL FOE OF VIET CONFLICT SHOT IN HONOLULU" (*Democracy* 74). Her attention only to the details in her newspapers is indicative of her role as a writer, and although she does not tell us to "consider" it, she includes it so that we can.

One detail the narrator brings up numerous times throughout the novel is a portion of WNBC footage of a party on the St. Regis Roof, in which Inez is seen dancing with Harry Victor and saying the word "marvelous" over and over, as in, "Marvelous day," "You look marvelous," and "Marvelous to be here" (*Democracy* 42). The narrator says that this is the "context" in which she always sees Inez Victor (*Democracy* 42). Inez, unhappy with political life and her marriage dancing around and saying everything is "marvelous" is a testament to the falsities of that type of public life. Didion is again puncturing myths about fantasy worlds. The narrator notes that this

[48] Linda Kuehl, "Joan Didion, The Art of Fiction No. 71," *Paris Review*, n.d. Web 15 Apr. 2014.

footage played repeatedly on the news, making it the main figure in the public's perception of Inez. Again Didion is trying to unveil these fabrications of the golden dream. The narrator later says, "…Inez Victor had lost certain details" (*Democracy* 50). She refers to an Associated Press interview in which Inez was asked "what she believed to be the 'major cost' of public life.' 'Memory, mainly,' Inez said." (*Democracy* 51). Loss of memory is a familiar theme in Didion's work, particularly in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* wherein Didion expresses her great concern about people forgetting their pasts in order to chase the "golden dream." Here she makes an important point about the superficiality and lack of reality that comes with a "public life;" everything is scripted and molded for Inez, and her only true reality—her memory—is a casualty of that.

Billy Dillon, who controls nearly every aspect of Harry and Inez's lives, illuminates the way political figures use language for manipulative purposes. The Victors and the Christians face numerous disgraces throughout the novel, and Billy has a spin for every one. During Harry's campaign, Billy describes Inez's parents, who had a very uncivil marriage, as "parents in a surprisingly contemporary marriage in which each granted the other freedom to pursue wide-ranging interests" (*Democracy* 155). When Paul Christian kills Wendell Omura and Inez's sister Janet, Billy writes Harry a speech that ends with, "This occasion of sadness for all Americans could be an occasion of resolve as well…to overcome the division and differences tragically brought to mind today by this incident in the distant Pacific" (*Democracy* 157). Billy takes a corrupt situation and, through this language of persuasion, finds a way to make it about hope for American progress. With Billy's constant spinning of situations and the image of Inez dancing, Didion shows concern for the way the media can be fed false information that subsequently misinforms the public.

Timothy Parrish addresses this in his book *From Civil War to the Apocalypse.* He says that *Democracy* shows "what drives history's machinery in the postmodern age is not just power, privilege and the need to maintain the status quo but also the collective loss of memory that makes something that you see happen on television—whether live or replayed six hours later—come to have the narrative weight that is traditionally associated with the word or form *history*."[49] This is precisely what Didion is trying to showcase in this novel: her fear that history is no longer based in truth. A clip of Inez saying "marvelous" and dancing with a husband she does not love, or an appropriately worded statement manufactured by Billy Dillon are truly dangerous in that they are fantasies masquerading as facts that eventually become the accepted history. In *Slouching*, Didion shares her fears about this happening to the next generation in Sacramento; she is supremely concerned that our acceptance of fantasy will distort the past for people in the future.

In his review of *Miami*, which was published three years after *Democracy*, James Chace notes the two works have a "familiar landscape" crafted by Didion's "evocative prose." He says it is "a world of menace and elliptical connections, a world 'where stories have tended to have endings.' It is a world peopled by antiheroes like Jack Lovett in…*Democracy*."[50] There is never any explicit mention of Jacket Lovett being a CIA agent, but over the course of the novel it is implied by fragmented details, like his presence in Saigon and Jakarta, and the mention of him taking "unusual posts at unusual times" (*Democracy* 40). "Exactly what Jack Lovett did was tacitly understood by most people who knew him, but not discussed," the narrator says (*Democracy* 40). At one point we get a glimpse at Jack in his own words,

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[49] Timothy Parrish, *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction,* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2008) 205.
[50] James Chace, "Betrayals and Obsessions" *The New York Times Book Review* (1987): 3, *The New York Times*, 26 March 2014.

> According to Jack Lovett himself he was someone who had "various irons in the fire."
>
> Someone who kept "the usual balls in the air."
>
> Someone who did "a little business here and there."
>
> Someone who did what he could (*Democracy* 39).

These quotes from Jack Lovett are almost humorous in their vagueness; he uses idiomatic expressions to deflect from what he is actually doing for a living. We can feel in this passage's structure, particularly in the cadence, the "menace" and "elliptical connections" Chace speaks of. The final line, "Someone who did what he could," is not quoted, and seems like sarcasm from the narrator, as though she is sardonically assuming the next thing Jack might say. This line also strangely calls back to an earlier moment in the novel, when the narrator is talking about the different emblems that the reader should consider; she says they aren't ideal to start a novel with, "but we go with what we have" (*Democracy* 17). Might this line and "Someone who did what he could" be a sign of some sort of defeat, a rhetorical sigh from the narrator? It seems she is saying, "this is the way things are, this is the reality we must go with." There is again this sense of the limited, fragmented materials that Grace is left with in *A Book of Common Prayer*.

On the very first page of *Democracy*, when "Joan Didion" is struggling with narrative structure, she is relaying something Jack Lovett said to Inez—"The light at dawn during those Pacific tests was something to see" (*Democracy* 11). By "Pacific tests," Jack means the nuclear bombs tested by the United States on small islands in the Pacific. Michael Tager, in "The Political Vision of Joan Didion's *Democracy*," says,

> The novel's opening…establishes an arm of the government clandestinely exploding a tremendously destructive weapon designed to enhance American security against unseen communist adversaries. This distant activity…described with euphemisms, has profound

> implications for the country's fate. Lovett's attitude of cool, amoral detachment reflects an acceptance of the national security state and its premises…[51]

Tager is correct that there are serious implications when language is used to obscure an act as severe as this, and that is what Didion, throughout so much of her work, seems to be conveying. Jack manipulates language just as Billy does. Tager notes, "...[he] routinely says 'assets' when he means money and airplanes, or 'assistance effort' when he means financing a foreign war."[52] But it is this "detachment" that Tager speaks of, this deniability when using words or phrases that hide the truth behind the actions of the government, that is of greatest concern to Didion.

Critics who have written about *Democracy* see Jack Lovett as a sympathetic character, and on the surface he is. Jack and Inez have a true literary romance—albeit unique, as he is a CIA agent and she is married to a senator. Jack and Inez spend years apart but are always on each other's minds and always seem to find a way back to one another. Then there are other sympathetic elements: Jack does what he does because of an "emotional solitude," the narrator says, and, "it would be inaccurate to call [him] disloyal," and what he does is "never black or white" (*Democracy* 219). Jack rescues Inez's daughter. Jack drowns in a hotel swimming pool. Didion certainly lays out the work for him to be a sympathetic character.

In her review of *Democracy*, Mary McCarthy argues, "That Inez Victor (and her creator) clearly prefer a C.I.A. agent to a famous liberal senator may indicate a preference for action over talk or just a distaste for United States hypocrisy."[53] Inez certainly prefers Jack to Harry, but the issue to consider here is whether or not "her creator" (Didion) is doing what McCarthy says she is. Certainly Didion prefers "action over talk," and has "a distaste for United States hypocrisy,"

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[51] Michael Tager, "The Political Vision of Joan Didion's *Democracy*," *The Critical Response to Joan Didion,* ed. Sharon Felton (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 202.
[52] Tager, 209.
[53] McCarthy, 3.

but is Jack Lovett not also part of that hypocrisy? Jack is all about deniability and obscuring reality. And yet as much as Jack's corruption has been exposed (through implication) throughout *Democracy*, the narrator does also defend him to an extent, she does show a sympathetic side to him. Is Didion trying to say that there are some people who take part in the corruption but who are ultimately excusable? We return to the phrase "someone who did what he could"—Is this Didion excusing Jack?

At the end of *Democracy*, Inez decides to move away from the political life to help refugees in Southeast Asia, a move that bears resemblance to Charlotte Douglas giving vaccinations in the doctor's office in Boca Grande. Tager says, "[Inez's] decision…responds to the legacy of American intervention in Southeast Asia, which has helped to cause the refugee problem…Her act implies that people who are willing to accept the past can make decisions that promote some higher end, despite receiving no publicity." This is perhaps one of the greatest points Didion seems to be getting at throughout all of her work—we must accept our past in order to make something better for ourselves in the future. As it stands now for Didion, our ignorance and obliteration of our past is part of what keeps us living in fantasy. Tager says that in the end Inez remains "…the novel's truest democrat by trying to effect change at the local level. Yet her isolated self-effacing action does not negate the more powerful anti-democratic forces elaborated upon throughout the novel."[54]

What seems strangely absent from *Democracy* is an element that runs rampant through the rest of Didion's political fiction and nonfiction—a sense of fear. Yes, there is the mention of nuclear weapons, there is Wendell and Janet's murder, and there are other ominous mentions of the war, such as "one night in the spring of 1975 when the C-130s and the C-141s were already

[54] Tager, 208.

shuttling between Honolulu and Anderson and Clark and Saigon…" (*Democracy* 14). But even these incidents feel too impersonal, never intimately touched upon by the narrator or felt by anyone in the novel. There is nothing that resembles the terror that Didion feels facing the men with G-3s in the parking lot in *Salvador*, or the way Grace describes the impending coup in *A Book of Common Prayer*. For a novel that deals with the Vietnam War, albeit at its end, it seems surprising that any true image of terror is completely lacking. Didion says from the beginning that setting is not going to play a part in this novel. Setting and place have been central to all of her works on culture and politics, but *Democracy* is just about the facts; in this light it seems more like nonfiction than any of Didion's actual nonfiction. Without the sense of place we lose the fear, we lose the intimate connection to the story.

In the last few pages of the novel, "Joan Didion" renounces the story she has written, just like Grace does in *A Book of Common Prayer*. "Joan Didion" mentions again "Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air," stating now that she got these words from Billy Dillon—they were Inez's answer to his question of why she was staying in Kuala Lumpur. The narrator continues,

> Colors, moisture, heat.
>
> Enough Blue air.
>
> I told you the essence of that early on but not the context, which has been, you will note, the way I tried to stay on the wire in this novel of fitful glimpses. It has not been the novel I set out to write, nor am I exactly the person who set out to write it. Nor have I experienced the rush of narrative inevitability that usually propels a novel toward its end, the momentum that sets in as events overtake their shadows and the cards all fall in on one another and the options decrease to zero.

> Perhaps because nothing in this situation encourages the basic narrative assumption, which is that the past is prologue to the present, the options remain open here. Anything could happen (*Democracy* 232-233).

Democracy is the platform upon which Didion seems to be laying out all her of cards. Here is the ultimate nod and wink: "you will note" that giving the "essence" but not "the context" has been "the way I tried to stay on the wire." Didion has unwavering confidence that her reader not only understands what she means at all times, but also *why* she is telling the story this way. She is sure that we have seen all along that she has been giving just the "essence" so that she can remain detached. "Joan Didion" forfeits like Grace, admitting that this novel of "fitful glimpses" is not what she indented to write. But, again because our narrator is a writer, she takes it further than Grace does. She also concedes that she has not had "the rush of narrative inevitability that…propels a novel towards its end," she has not experienced the "momentum" that comes when "events overtake their shadows." But has Didion the author *ever* experienced this? Isn't this the narrative convention that she is so distrusts? It is indeed, which is why "Joan Didion" concludes that the reason it is impossible to follow any narrative convention is because nothing she is dealing with encourages the "basic narrative assumption" that "the past is prologue to the present." The past has never remained just the "prologue;" we see this throughout all of Didion's work. The past cannot just be the opening act; it must be carried throughout the entire play, because acceptance of the past is what allows us to understand reality. Didion will not tell a conventional story, and she shouldn't. Narrative convention constricts and denies the reality of the world Didion so closely analyzes in both her fiction and nonfiction. "Anything could happen," she says.

Conclusion

Didion's novels *Run River* (1963) and *Play It As It Lays* (1970), and three of her nonfiction works, *After Henry* (1992), *Political Fictions* (2001), and *Where I Was From* (2003), could have also been examined in this project, though they embody the issue of her voice less than the ones used here. The same is true of Didion's two most recent autobiographical works, which have won great critical acclaim. In 2005, Didion released *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a reexamination of her grief in the year after her husband, John Gregory Dunne, died. 2011's *Blue Nights* is an equally candid reflection on the loss of her daughter, Quintana Roo. In both works, Didion maintains her investigative eye, even citing reports from medical journals. Although these are her most intimately personal works, Didion maintains her stance "on the wire," rarely getting explicitly emotional.

While Didion's voice is her most distinctive feature, there is a noticeable lack of analysis of it. Mark Z. Muggli writes,

> Didion's reviewers and readers have always been conscious of her detail, but what one calls 'vivid' another calls 'symbolic.' Journalism textbooks cannot help define Didion's effects more precisely, since these textbooks emphasize the importance of detail without distinguishing kinds of detail…At least for present, Didion's rhetoric of fact is best approached through the close analysis practiced by critics interpreting individual literary texts."[55]

I chose to begin this project with *The White Album* and *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* because these collections show Didion observing her most intimate landscape, where her curiosities and

[55]Muggli 403

insecurities about what we think we know begin. In *Salvador* and *Miami*, Didion's aggressive excavation truly picks up traction, as she moves outside of her comfort zone. *A Book of Common Prayer* and *Democracy* then show us what Didion makes of our world in her fiction.

In all of her work, Didion is an epistemologist. She is perpetually concerned with how we perceive and interpret fact, and is always asking: how do we know what we know? Why do we accept certain words and phrases when they obscure what could be fact? Why do we take our culture's presentation of itself at face value? This is why the study of language is so important to Didion; she and her narrators scrutinize every word, because Didion herself is terrified of falsely "knowing." It is important to recognize that Didion does not claim to be an expert, nor does she presume to have answers to all the questions she raises. We see her epistemic investigation of herself in her confusion over what California means to her and in her inability to "find," or understand it, as well as in her concerns about only seeing "flash pictures," and in her various realizations about which "stories" call to her as a writer, and which do not.

Critics enjoy arguing that the constant presence of Didion's "I" (whether explicitly on the page or implicitly in her language and tone) makes for excessively self-absorbed writing. What these critics seem to ignore is that Didion's inclusion of the "I" is part of what Muggli calls her "rhetoric of fact." Even in the moments when she clearly uses the act of writing to work though her own preoccupations with illusion and reality, her true objective is still to interrogate everything she can. In writing about personal experiences, Didion is also able to present fact in a more real and intimate way that goes against the manufactured and rehearsed facts that come from the government and the media.

Didion addresses the issue of the "I" in "Why I Write," in which she says the exercise of writing in itself is "the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind." She goes on to say,

> It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions — with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating — but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space.[56]

These "disguises" are of course Didion's own; she relies on "intimating rather than claiming" throughout all of her work, perhaps ultimately so that she does not force her own "sentiments" upon her reader. Didion contends that these "disguises" mean nothing in the end because all words put on a page serve as "an imposition" of the writer's feelings on the reader. But is this not what compels us to read in the first place? I think readers, especially those of us who read Didion, enjoy having her voice invade our heads; it is what allows us to also start thinking about the world in this critical and enquiring manner.

The examination of Didion's writing on politics and culture in the context of her voice is crucial not only to the study of American literature, but to the study of American society in general. In *The Art of Fact*, Barbara Lounsberry writes,

> [Didion] uses herself as both a probe and a model of American society. Her confessions of personal illusions both encourage reader sympathy and identification with her views, and demonstrate how prone Americans are to illusion. Her effort to discipline her illusions likewise becomes a model for reader behavior. Most cleverly, her assertions that

[56] Joan Didion, "Why I Write," *New York Times Book Review* (Dec. 1976): 1.

> she can find no meaning have the effect of spurring readers to moral understandings she herself refuses overtly to claim.[57]

Even though Didion herself believes that writing is a way of imposing one's "sensibility" on the reader, I am skeptical of this first part of Lounsberry's claim. It can certainly be argued from a more distanced, theoretical approach that Didion's inclusion of her own illusions forces the reader to "[identify] with her views," which ultimately shows how "prone Americans are to illusion." However, I do not believe that this is Didion's actual intent, especially since she tries so hard to not manipulate the reader by imparting her own "sensibility." It seems rather, that Didion's use of herself as a "probe and a model of American society" is far simpler; she shares her own personal illusions to show that even she, who is so critical of illusions, is susceptible to them. Lounsberry is absolutely correct, though, when she says Didion sets up "a model for reader behavior," by observing and trying to correct her own illusions. It could be argued that this is an ethical issue, but it also seems to be Didion's way of opening our eyes and having us question how things are presented to us.

Didion's claim to "find no meaning" in certain things can be exasperating, but ultimately it forces us as readers to search harder and to consider what we too can "find no meaning in," and why it happens. We can fault Didion for her decision to stay on the wire and for her lack of transparency at times; it can even be argued that she verges on obscuring reality herself when she remains so vague. But Didion is not interested in over-explaining; she is interested in how reality is constructed in America and whether or not we can see through it.

Muggli writes, "We need…a clearer and more detailed analysis of how writers like Didion incorporate the world into their texts. We need a greater appreciation for the sophisticated

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[57] Lounsberry, 136

poetics of factual literature."[58] While Didion's great devotion to detail (eg. her inventory taking, her focus on names) is a large part of what brings "the world" into anything she writes, this is problematized by her lack of exposition of the details, as well as her great trust in her reader. In her review of *Democracy*, Mary McCarthy argues that Didion's writing requires her readers to "be knowing." She says,

> …the St. Regis Roof, the Dalton School, Grant Park in Chicago at the '68 convention…to appreciate that detail, you have to know about Grant Park, and not everybody does. To be knowing about the right names implies, moreover, being knowing about the wrong names - Dow Chemical, Air Asia, Air America. That is very important too. The names of airports can be spent like coin: Anderson, Clark, Travis, Johnston, besides the old penny-ante ones like Tan Son Nhut. I am not sure where some of these airports are…But I know that I ought to know. That is the special kind of insecurity - fear of not belonging to a club - that Hemingway had a genius for producing in his readers...[59]

That Didion presents names like these without further explanation does imply that we should be familiar with them, that we should be "in the know." This tactic unfairly assumes a certain intellectual or worldly awareness on the part of the reader (if the reader doesn't have this assumed knowledge, it has an excluding effect). Yet, this is also Didion's way of presenting fact. She wants us to read her work and feel that it is true to the world that we live in, even if it is a work of fiction. In order to make the world she constructs feel authentic, her narrator needs to seem part of that world. Otherwise, how can the narrator be trusted at all? It is this realist, New Journalistic, nonfiction-influenced approach to fiction; it is Didion being obsessed with fact and a viable presentation of reality, which marks her style. It does not seem that she is trying to make

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[58] Muggli, 57
[59] McCarthy, 3

her reader feel"[insecure]," but rather that she desires to present things as they are. Of course, the cost is that readers may believe she is snobbish or elitist, but it seems clear by now that Didion has faith that her reader is aware of her methods and the reasons behind them.

Joan Didion has played an enormous part in reshaping American nonfiction and fiction. It has now been forty-six years since *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* was released, and her voice is still so distinctive. What distinguishes Didion from other New Journalists and from other contemporary writers is her particular understanding of the weight of grammar. Her attention to the arrangement of words, and to the construction of reason and meaning through one's style, is why Didion's voice still demands to be studied.

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