

## Introduction

### *To Shift the Structure of a Sentence*

We don't need more polemic about the superiority of the various old or new journalisms, nor more general paeans to Didion's keen eye, but a clearer and more detailed analysis of how writers like Didion incorporate the world in their texts. We need a greater appreciation for the sophisticated poetics of factual literature.

—Mark Muggli, “The Poetics of Joan Didion’s Journalism”

To be more than a casual reader of Joan Didion is to be familiar with a writer whose biography has likely commanded as much attention as her prose, if not more. Moving with ease between fiction and nonfiction, between novels, essays, reviews, and memoirs, she has been a consistently prolific writer, one who has not often been absent from the literary scene nor the public eye. Early extended critical works such as Mark Royden Winchell's 1980 *Joan Didion*, Katherine Usher Henderson's 1981 biography *Joan Didion*, and 1994's *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*, edited by Sharon Felton, as well as the far more recent *The Last Love Song: A Biography of Joan Didion* by Tracy Daugherty (2015), offer both comprehensive chronologies of her life as well as thoughtful analyses of the ways significant events in her childhood and early adulthood appear to have influenced her worldview as well as the thematic tendencies of her writing.<sup>1</sup>

The details of her life, many of them revealed in her own essays and interviews, have been extensively recorded and repeated—in these works and shorter responses—from her upbringing in Sacramento, her time at Berkeley, and her work with *Vogue* to her marriage to John Gregory Dunne

in 1964 and her adoption of daughter Quintana Roo in 1966, as well as the subsequent deaths of both in recent years. As well, her slight size, reserved manner, apparent reticence, and tendency toward ill health have been detailed and dwelled upon, as has her marriage and her relationship to her daughter. These biographical details have been fleshed out with extended commentary on her eye for detail as well as her attention to décor, dress, and designer goods. Most often, such treatment of her biographical details has been offered in service of reviewing her latest work or initiating and sustaining a scholarly response to her oeuvre, making it clear that, for most critics, *who* Didion is or was is essential to understanding how and what she writes. Daugherty's biography, which is comprehensive and richly detailed, continues this trend. And yet, as essayist Katie Roiphe writes,

even after reading every single word Didion has ever published, how much does one know about her? One knows what she packs on a trip to interview a subject, one knows about the jasmine she smells on the way home from the airport in Los Angeles, but one knows almost nothing about her family, say, or her marriage, or her daughter. The personal information she imparts is so stylized, so mannered, so controlled that it is no longer personal information. The "I" in her essays is an elegant silhouette of a woman. There is something shadowy about her, something peculiarly obscure, like the famous photograph of her hiding behind huge sunglasses. She is, in the end, a writer of enormous reserve.<sup>2</sup>

The prose of an author much admired, frequently imitated, and many times hailed as "America's greatest living writer," deserves and demands a much closer and more recent look than can be found in any extant reviews, articles, or biographies.<sup>3</sup> This is especially the case at this particular moment in history—the so-called "post-truth era." Former President Barack Obama recently bemoaned the fact that "too much of politics . . . seems to reject the very concept of objective truth."<sup>4</sup> His comments reflect a broader consensus that, with the election of President Trump in 2016, public opinion has seemed increasingly susceptible to emotional appeals, outright falsehoods, and "alternative facts."<sup>5</sup> As a recent *New York Times* article points out, "the past decade has seen a precipitous rise not just in anti-scientific thinking . . . but in all manner of reactionary obscurantism, from online conspiracy theories to the much-discussed death of expertise."<sup>6</sup>

But decades before there was collective and popular agreement that, in politics and the media, fictions and lies often trump facts and reality, Didion was writing critically (and dismissively) of the narratives spun by politicians, public figures, and cultural icons. Her critiques resonated because relatively few at the time (outside of scholars and conspiracy fans) questioned the authority and objectivity of the dominant institutions of the time: the government and the news media. Ironically, though, it is now the case that “with the rise of alternative facts . . . it has become clear that whether or not a statement is believed depends far less on its veracity than on the conditions of its “construction”—that is, who is making it, to whom it’s being addressed and from which institutions it emerges and is made visible.” French philosopher Bruno Latour believes that “a greater understanding of the circumstances out of which misinformation arises and the communities in which it takes root . . . will better equip us to combat it.”<sup>7</sup>

It is exactly this “greater understanding” that Didion’s social, cultural, and political critiques offer readers. She has, in both subject matter and approach, been amazingly prescient about the future of political and cultural discourse and the ways in which patterns of thinking and narratives of “fact” are rhetorically constructed, and grounded both in the past and in adherence to regional traditions and values. Back in the 1970s she was already perceiving, as Nathaniel Rich notes in his foreword to *South and West: From a Notebook*, that the past was not dead and that what she saw in the South—an embrace of tradition and clear divisions between races, a solidarity that grows stronger the more it faces the disapproval of the Northern elite—was the future. As he observes:

Two decades into the new millennium . . . a plurality of the population has clung defiantly to the old way of life. They still believe in the viability of armed revolt. . . . They have resisted with mockery, then rage, the collapse of the old identity categories. . . . They have resisted new technology and scientific evidence of global ecological collapse. The force of this resistance has been strong enough to elect a president.<sup>8</sup>

Didion, he argues, saw this long before anyone else, saw beyond the dreams of the urban inhabitants of coastal cities among whom she lived and worked, and with whom she socialized.

She wrote then, and writes now, to undermine the power of ideological narratives, question our reliance on abstractions, and criticize the “magical

thinking”<sup>9</sup> of politicians, the media, cultural icons, and the general public. If it can be said, as it is in *The New York Times*, that “our current post-truth moment is less a product of Latour’s ideas than a validation of them,” the same can be said Didion’s writings.

The stories we are told, the stories we tell ourselves, she dissects and deconstructs, laying bare, with remarkable concision and precision, the rhetorical maneuvering of those who control the narratives of public and private discourse. As Chris Anderson notes, “she is profoundly metadiscursive in her writing, everywhere concerned not simply with the experiences she is trying to describe but with the language of those experiences—with the jargon, the rhetoric, the diction of individuals and groups and how that language reflects a point of view.”<sup>10</sup> She has been insistent, across the decades, that we think critically and skeptically about language and its power to shape our perceptions of reality, and in this age of viral propaganda, social media memes, internet trolls, and fake news, her acute eye for rhetorical strategies is more relevant than ever.

This book analyzes her rhetorical craft, the technical ways her precise, densely packed, and exquisitely worded sentences pierce the illusory narratives dominating public discourse and establish new perspectives from which readers can understand reality. Frequently poetic in its fluidity, rhythms, and repetitions, her prose is no less powerful for being beautiful; it does not offer an escape into aesthetic experience, but instead demands that the reader see things her way, with her shrewd and incisive vision. She may be popularly viewed as shy, emotional to the point of being neurotic, and unnecessarily obsessed with the material minutiae of upper-class living, but in her prose she is, in fact, aggressively articulate, insistently rational, and concerned far less with detailing the domestic lives of the rich and famous than in dissecting the mythologies generated both by individuals and those in power.

Writing, Didion notes, is “an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want with veils of subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions—with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding, rather than stating.”<sup>11</sup> Disguise it, she frequently does, but readers should take her at her word when she claims that she is a moralist, one who tends “to perceive things as right or wrong, in a very vivid way.” Her self-described “strong West Coast ethic” may in fact dictate that she adopts a “strictly *laissez-faire* attitude”<sup>12</sup> when it comes to telling others what to do, but the result is that she persuades them with a style whose power is all the more potent for its subtlety. This is a controlled and deliberate subtlety; as she notes in

a 2005 interview, usually her writing process involves “discovering what’s on my mind and then hiding it.”<sup>13</sup>

This book traces the major features of her style as it has evolved—in step with shifts in her life, experiences, and priorities—over the last four decades of her career, beginning with *Salvador* in 1983, when she moved away from an earlier focus on domestic and cultural concerns to study public, political, and international narratives. The chapters to follow offer close rhetorical analysis of her style, revealing that this move was accompanied by a grammatical and semantic shift in her prose as well the development of a voice that grew more skeptical, ironic, analytical, and certain during the last three decades of the twentieth century. The book ends by analyzing the memoirs she composed in the wake of great personal losses in order to foreground the beautiful power of her prose to move readers and invite their identification even as she circles back to a more tentative voice and the intimately personal concerns of her own life.

“Writing is the act of saying *I*, of imposing oneself upon other people,” she notes in “Why I Write”; it is a way “of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*” [emphasis original] (5). Her wish to act rhetorically upon her readers is not just evident in her overt propositional claims or her inductive accumulating of evidence but in the very way she figures her language. Hers is a “sophisticated poetics;” she works on the level of syntax and diction to select, omit, rearrange, minimize and amplify, to persuade through style rather than merely with overt propositional claims or the laying out of detailed evidence. She does so, however, in a manner so controlled and elliptical that her irony, wit, and, often, disdain, are not apparent to the casual reader, nor, more crucially, as this book will argue, is the rhetorical potency of her style.

That she herself is, and has always been, aware of the importance of style, however, is without question. Here is a writer who, from her earliest days, revealed a keen awareness of how sentences work.<sup>14</sup> “All I know about grammar,” she writes in “Why I Write,” “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” (7). Even before the years she spent working at *Vogue* after winning its Prix de Paris in 1956 (a job where Associate Editor Allene Talmey would go over her brief captions and ruthlessly markup superfluous words and imprecise verbs) she was reflecting on the power of form over content.<sup>15</sup> In interviews and essays over the years, she has consistently emphasized her own attention to the control that sentences exert over content, spoken of the

importance of the rhythms and echoes created at the level of syntax, and reflected on her own processes of revising and editing at the sentence level.

If shy or inarticulate in person, on paper she is a woman in control of her material down to the level of punctuation, which she manipulates for emphasis not grammatical correctness. Consider, for instance, the following exchange between Didion and Dunne and long-time friend Sara Davidson during an interview conducted by the latter in 1984:

He said: Did you tell Sara the first line of *Angel Visits*? She shook her head, no. He said the line from memory: “*I have never seen Madame Bovary in the flesh but imagine my mother dancing.*”

“Fantastic,” I said. “Is there a comma after ‘flesh?’”

Joan: “Yes.”

John: “The first line, if you get it right, immediately sets the tone of the book.”

Joan said, “It might change.” After a pause, “I may take the comma out.”

(The next morning she indeed decided. “There shouldn’t be a comma.”)<sup>16</sup>

The placing of a comma may or may not seem important to the reader, but for Didion, control over every aspect of her sentences is paramount; she sees the arrangement of sentences as doing “work,” sees sentences themselves functioning as more than carriers of propositional meanings. Form is, for her, both separate from and complementary to (if done correctly) content. “The arrangement of words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the pictures in your mind,” she writes, in one of the most-quoted passages in “Why I Write”; “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” (7). Her ability not only to manipulate her sentences but to articulate the compositional choices she makes in order to do so reveal a writer in control of her craft at the most precise level.

This control, according to Didion, was learned at an early age, as she found herself drawn to the prose of writers like Hemingway, Conrad, and James. She found, for instance, Hemingway’s arrangement of sentences “magnetic” and the sentences themselves “deceptively simple,” “clear, clean,” and “exciting.” As she has commented on in several interviews, her response to this attraction was to start typing these sentences out herself, at which

point she “could see how they worked.”<sup>17</sup> She could, for instance, see “how a short sentence worked in a paragraph, how a long sentence worked. Where the commas worked. How every word had to matter.”<sup>18</sup> Her attraction to Conrad’s prose was similarly based on a sense of awe at his sentences, which to her “sounded wonderful.” And James’s sentences “with all those clauses” impressed upon her the importance of “keeping the options open, letting the sentence cover as much as it could.”<sup>19</sup>

Her awareness of, and appreciation for, the variety and work of sentences and the importance of form is not merely, or even primarily, aesthetic. Rather, just as her awareness of scriptwriting and filmmaking enables her to understand the power of the camera’s placement and movement in directing the audience’s attention, her familiarity with the range of compositional choices available at the level of the punctuation, diction, and syntax permits her to craft her prose to achieve rhetorical ends. No sentence is composed carelessly; rewriting is an essential part of her composing process. Each book she writes, as she reveals in a 2006 interview, is retyped and marked up, from the beginning, each day, in order for her to get into the rhythm of her writing.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, during the almost four decades of her marriage to John Dunne, they each read and edited everything the other wrote. What results from this process is sentences that are deliberately rhetorical in structure. Whether employing metaphors to make vivid and tangible what would otherwise be banal or abstract or depending on parenthetical asides to draw attention to her often-witty take on absurd situations, she maintains control over the composition of each sentence, keenly aware of the function of form.

Her awareness of the persuasive effects of her style is often evidenced in her interviews. On one occasion, justifying her use of repetition in *A Book of Common Prayer*, she remarked that “it seemed constantly necessary to remind the readers to make certain connections.” She continues, “technically it’s almost a chant. You could read it as an attempt to cast a spell or come to terms with certain contemporary demons.”<sup>21</sup> Repetition—of sounds, words, phrases, and clauses—is one of the trademarks of Didion’s style, but it is certainly not the only technique she employs to cast her spell on readers. Her familiarity with rhetorical figures enables her to craft sentences that alternately emphasize and marginalize key elements in her nonfiction. It allows her to create rapport with her readers and persuade them to accept her vision of events as fact.

All of which is to say that, for Didion and her readers, her style matters.<sup>22</sup> But this is too frequently overlooked in the many responses to

her work, which remain heavily invested in “discovering” the “real” Joan Didion behind the oversized sunglasses and impenetrable gaze. The nature of Didion’s work has been at least partially responsible for inviting this kind of attention. As one of the initial group of writers (among them Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, and Truman Capote) considered “New Journalists,” Didion has spent decades composing essays that are at once personal and political, revealing and elliptical; she has built a body of nonfiction prose that appears to tell the world as much about Didion herself as it does about the subjects she covers, even if it does so obliquely at times. This is a woman who began a piece on Hawaii, “In the Islands,” by describing an uneasy moment with her husband and daughter in the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, and writing “we are here on this island in the middle of the Pacific in lieu of filing for divorce.”<sup>23</sup>

She continues, addressing the reader directly, as she often does in her earlier writings, and explains that she wants “you to know, as you read me, precisely who I am and where I am and what is on my mind. I want you to understand exactly what you are getting: you are getting a woman who for some time now has felt radically separated from most of the ideas that seem to interest other people.”<sup>24</sup> Such personal revelations and ruminations are heavily scattered throughout her first two essay collections, 1969’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and 1979’s *The White Album*, both of which established her as a serious and critically acclaimed author and remain among her best-known work. Their presence in these earlier writings established and influenced perceptions of Didion in the decades to come, with the effect that it is difficult to find a response to her work that is not heavily invested in trying to understand the author as much as her writing.

The other tendency of reviewers, the vast majority of whom write in glowing terms about her style, is to offer aesthetic assessments of her prose. Their work tends to view style as something added to thought, as superfluous, mere dressing, however beautiful, for the more substantial content it clothes. These tend to point to a number of striking phrases or evocative words and comment on their beauty, clarity, or sophistication, while reiterating the significance of her style.<sup>25</sup> Over the decades, a handful of adjectives have come to dominate these reviews—Didion’s prose is described as “sparse,” “elliptical,” “rhythmic,” “incantatory,” “long,” and “striking.” The responses of Michiko Kakutani, well-known *New York Times* book critic, who has written reviews of Didion’s work over more than three decades as well as named her as a point of reference in dozens of other book reviews, alone demonstrate this tendency. Kakutani has closely traced the trajectory of Didion’s writing



since 1979; her reviews are always favorable and frequently use the same adjective to describe Didion's writing: "elliptical." The choice of adjective is not surprising—after all, Didion herself said of her novel *Play It as It Lays* that she "had . . . a technical intention . . . to write a novel so elliptical and fast that it would be over before you noticed it, a novel so fast that it would scarcely exist on the page at all" ("Why," 7)—but the number of times it is employed by Kakutani and others is striking.

Kakutani first writes about Didion in 1979's "Joan Didion: Staking Out California," her longest piece on Didion, a combination of profile, biography, and review in which she interviews Didion and assesses her body of work (both fiction and nonfiction) up until that point. This piece offers an example of both of the tendencies noted earlier—Kakutani focuses in great detail on the personal details of Didion's life before noting the aesthetic qualities of her prose. Within the first page of the article, after describing a visit with Didion in her Brentwood home, Kakutani notes that "novelist and poet James Dickey has called Didion the finest woman prose stylist writing in English today."<sup>26</sup> She continues with "and she has created, in her books one of the most devastating and distinctive portraits of modern America in be found in fiction and nonfiction." Kakutani then devotes a substantial portion of the rest of the article to noting such things as Didion's height and weight, the "carnation pink" of her girlhood bedroom, and her delight in domestic routines.

It is not until the penultimate page that she returns to Didion's prose, noting of *Play It as It Lays* that it is: "arranged in 84 staccato-paced takes" and "the elliptical prose is pared down, perfectly clean"<sup>27</sup> (after which she begins to summarize the novel's setting and plot). She mentions Didion's style once more near the end, observing that both *Play It as It Lays* and *A Book of Common Prayer* evidence Didion's reporter's eye, her ability to ground "the melodramatics of the plot in a precision of detail."<sup>28</sup> The reader of this article is never offered an explanation of how or where the prose is elliptical nor what is meant by "perfectly clean," and though it is implied that these are in fact positive qualities, Kakutani does not move beyond aesthetic assessment to analysis.

Such omissions are understandable, given the hybrid nature and purpose of the piece—but Kakutani's reliance on these same stock phrases across her handful of other Didion reviews, despite what one must assume is her growing familiarity with the writer over the decades, means the specifics of Didion's style remain opaque. For instance, her 1996 review of Didion's novel *The Last Thing He Wanted*, describes the work as a "dark, willfully

elliptical novel that often reads like a thematic and stylistic distillation of Didion's work to date," an evaluation she does nothing to unpack, so that the reader is left unclear both as to what Didion's previous style was like and how it appears now that it is "distilled."<sup>29</sup> In 2005, more than twenty-five years since she first reviewed Didion's work, she composes a sympathetic and admiring review of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, within which she concludes that "the elliptical constructions and sometimes mannered prose of the author's recent fiction give way to the stunning candor and piercing details that distinguished her groundbreaking early books of essays."<sup>30</sup> This rather backhanded compliment fails to clarify in what ways Didion's previous prose was elliptical or mannered, and her next article, a 2011 review of *Blue Nights*, offers a similarly imprecise evaluation of *Blue Nights*. She writes that "whereas *Magical Thinking* was raw and jagged and immediate—the work of someone who prized order and control and found herself suddenly spinning into madness—'Blue Nights' is a more elliptical book."<sup>31</sup>

Other frequent reviewers of Didion's work display the same habits of praising Didion's style while remaining rather vague when it comes to analysis, in part because book reviews are obviously intended more to indicate, in a rather concise fashion, the reviewer's attitude toward the work reviewed than to parse in great detail the elements of writing responsible for this attitude. Thus, while many of the major reviews of her work contain high praise for her style, offering words and phrases the critics find especially enchanting, it is hard to get a sense from these reviews exactly why Didion's style is so distinctive or striking. For instance, fairly early on in 1979, well-known *New York Times* book critic John Leonard wrote of Didion's prose in *The White Album*, "[L]anguage is her seismograph and style her sanity. Nobody writes better English prose than Joan Didion. Try to rearrange one of her sentences, and you've realized that the sentence was inevitable, a hologram."<sup>32</sup>

Twenty-six years later, in reviewing *The Year of Magical Thinking* and noting that he's been "reading Didion ever since she started doing it for money . . . have reviewed most of her books since *Play It as It Lays*, and cannot pretend to objectivity," he notes that

I've been trying for four decades to figure out why her sentences are better than mine or yours . . . something about cadence. They come at you, if not from ambush, then in gnomic haikus, icepick laser beams, or waves. Even the space on the page around these sentences is more interesting than could be expected, as if to square a sandbox for the Sphinx.<sup>33</sup>

A more recent piece, by Roiphe, comments on Didion's "use of *kind of* lulling, incantatory repetition," and her "long, oddly constructed sentences, with ridiculously complicated syntax . . . that are *weirdly beautiful, like tall and awkward teenagers*" [emphasis mine].<sup>34</sup> Roiphe's comments, like Leonard's and Kakutani's and so much of the popular response to Didion, are evaluative in nature rather than analytical—they praise aspects of her prose style or (less commonly) condemn others without articulating the stylistic choices she makes to produce such effects or analyzing the impact of those choices, with the result that for all the attention her style has received, there has been relatively little unpacking of her prose.

I begin this book by sifting through these responses, as well as her essays and interviews, in order to establish a background against which a new perspective on Didion's work may be added, a perspective possible only now that Didion, aged eighty-five at the time of this writing, has had the time to trace a substantial trajectory from the days of Haight-Ashbury to a post-9/11 world, from her own days as a young California writer just starting out, to an experienced critic who has honed her craft. With this book, I wish to argue that looking back over her career from this vantage point reveals the insistently and inherently rhetorical nature of her style. Her essays are not written as mere expressions of her own dissatisfaction with or distrust of the current culture or political situation, but are rather what she deems "calls to action." These calls become increasingly political in her later years, particularly in the time after she began writing under editor Bob Silvers in the early '80s, years that taught her that writing about politics had a "certain Sisyphean aspect," insofar as all efforts to define patterns or document inconsistencies seemed insufficient "to stop the stone that was our apprehension of politics from hurtling back downhill."<sup>35</sup>

Like Lily McClellan in *Run River*, she is "strikingly frail" (Didion is 5 feet 2, and weighs 95 pounds); like Maria in *Play It as It Lays*, she used to chain-smoke and wear chiffon scarves over her red hair; and like Charlotte in *A Book of Common Prayer*, she possesses "an extreme and volatile thinness . . . she was a woman . . . with a body that masqueraded as that of a young girl. There is a certain sadness in the face that indicates a susceptibility to what she calls "early morning dread"; even indoors, she wears oversized sunglasses to protect her light-sensitive eyes."<sup>36</sup>

Kakutani's characterization of Didion during a 1979 visit both mirrors Didion's own frequent comments about her physical stature and sensitivities

and anticipates decades' worth of commentary on these qualities. The secondary literature on Didion is replete with comments about her slight size, her reserve, her ill health, her at-times inarticulate conversational style. Consider Caitlin Flanagan's recollection of Didion's visit to her house in the early 1970s—only fourteen at the time, Flanagan recalls being struck by Didion's discomfort. She recently wrote of that evening:

I can tell you this for certain: anything you have ever read by Didion about the shyness that plagued her in her youth, and about her inarticulateness in those days, in the face of even the most banal questions, was not a writer's exaggeration of a minor character trait for literary effect. The contemporary diagnosis for the young woman at our dinner table would be profound—crippling—social-anxiety disorder.<sup>37</sup>

Leonard, who provided the introduction for the 2006 Everyman Collection *Stories We Tell Ourselves in Order to Live*, observes of Didion that, over the years “she seemed sometimes so sensitive that whole decades hurt her feelings, and the prose on the page suggested Valéry's ‘shiverings of an effaced leaf,’ as if her next trick might be evaporation.”<sup>38</sup> Having seen Didion speak in person once, on a book tour for *Political Fictions*, I too was struck by her size and fragility, which, while apparent in photos and television interviews, is quite a bit more obvious in person. What I am suggesting, however, is that her looks and frequent commentary on her health are too frequently seen as emblematic of her approach to life and writing, with the result that readers mistake her tentative social interactions as indicative of a similar uncertainty in her perspective or her prose. The fact that her nonfiction is largely to be found in the form of essays, a genre that embraces hesitance and ambiguity, has only added to the perception that Didion writes from the heart rather than the head, her work more personal than political.

Didion is quite open about her shyness, her tendency to be “neurotically inarticulate,”<sup>39</sup> noting in one interview that though she likes a lot of people, she doesn't “give the impression of being there” due to being “terribly inarticulate.” “A sentence,” she says, “doesn't occur to me as a whole thing unless I'm working.”<sup>40</sup> In another interview, in response to the interviewer asking about “all this business of fragility,” Didion concedes “I am not only small, I am too thin, I am pale, I do not look like a California person. It generally makes people think that I must be frail.” But she then

concludes "I'm not actually very frail. I'm very healthy. I eat a lot. I don't cry a lot."<sup>41</sup> For all her mention of migraines ("I was in fact as sick as I have ever been when I was writing 'Slouching Towards Bethlehem'; the pain kept me awake at night and so for twenty and twenty-one hours a day I drank gin-and-hot-water to blunt the aspirin and took Dexedrine to blunt the gin"<sup>42</sup>); depressions ("I cried until I was not even aware when I was crying and when I was not, cried in elevators and in taxis and in Chinese laundries, and when I went to the doctor he said only that I seemed to be depressed, and should see a 'specialist'");<sup>43</sup> and psychiatric reports (one of her own is famously offered in "The White Album" as evidence of a moderately disabling period of doubt in the late sixties), Didion is neither tentative nor inarticulate in her essays. There is nothing uncertain and little emotional about her prose—these are not the incoherent and self-indulgent ramblings of an unstable woman. She is, in fact, on evidence, much as she observes admiringly of Georgia O'Keeffe, "simply hard, a straight shooter, a woman clean of received wisdom and open to what she sees."<sup>44</sup>

What Didion sees, appears, at a glance, to be inconsequential, tangential, even trivial. But such appearances are, like her assessment of Hemingway's sentences, "deceptively simple."<sup>45</sup> Her meticulous eye for detail, her insistence on juxtaposing the material with the abstract, is neither superficial nor merely poetic, but instead intensely rhetorical. For example, note the following description of a few events from the '60s:

On the morning of John Kennedy's death in 1963 I was buying, at Ransohoff's in San Francisco, a short silk dress in which to be married. A few years later this dress of mine was ruined when, at a dinner party in Bel-Air, Roman Polanski accidentally spilled a glass of red wine on it. Sharon Tate was also a guest at this party, although she and Roman Polanski were not yet married. On July 27, 1970, I went to the Magnin-Hi Shop on the third floor of I. Magnin in Beverly Hills and picked out, at Linda Kasabian's request, the dress in which she began her testimony about the murders at Sharon Tate Polanski's house on Cielo Drive.<sup>46</sup>

One might be tempted to be struck, as many reviewers have been, by the ease with which she name drops, the dexterity with which she intertwines her shopping trips at luxury stores with some of the most significant events of that decade. Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, for example, writes of Didion's

use of details and the specific passage above “these, and other assorted facts—such as the fact that Didion chose to buy the dress Linda Kasabian wore at the Manson trial at I. Magnin in Beverly Hills—put me more in mind of a neurasthenic Cher than of a writer who has been called America’s finest woman prose stylist.”<sup>47</sup> But the sentences preceding Didion’s passage are crucial. In light of the tumultuous events of the ’60s, and particularly the Manson murders, she writes, “all narrative was sentimental . . . all connections were equally meaningful, and equally senseless. Try these:” The readers are then invited to make the connections between the events presented, and experience for themselves the unnerving, sometimes awful, incoherence of those times.

The absence of transitional words suggesting causality as well as her reliance on declarative sentences create the impression that she is merely recording a series of events rather than attempting to impose her own interpretation of events on readers, but the intent is clearly rhetorical. At the end of the piece, she confesses that the events described and the fact that she and Polanski are godparents to the same child have not been made any more coherent to her through the process of writing. This is not offered as an expression of her personal inability to cope with the decade and is not to be understood as her recognition of her failure as a writer—it is offered, rather, as proof of the failure of narratives to resolve certain ambiguities inherent to reality.

The presence of celebrity names as well as the attention to luxury goods and references to a life lived among the rich and the famous, however, have proved a distraction to many of her reviewers, with the result that their focus turns either to imitating her attention to detail or ascribing to it a potency having nothing to do with persuasion. As an example of the first, one can consider the opening to Kakutani’s “Joan Didion: Staking out California,” which begins: “Didion is sitting in the den. The rooms of her house possess all the soothing order and elegance of a *Vogue* photo spread: sofas covered in floral chintz, lavender love seats the exact color of the potted orchids on the mantelpiece, porcelain elephant end tables, and dozens of framed pictures of family and friends.”<sup>48</sup> As an example of the latter, there is Caitlin Flanagan’s assertion that Didion’s “attention—serious, thoughtful, and audaciously self-assured—to clothes and houses and flatware . . . accounts in large measure for the rapt interest women have always paid her work.”<sup>49</sup> Flanagan may well be right about women being invested in such details, but this speaks more to the concerns of Didion’s readers than to Didion’s intent.

According to Didion, “we tell ourselves stories in order to live,” and it was only during the turbulent years of the 1960s that she “began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself.”<sup>50</sup> She was, she explains in an interview with the *Paris Review*, a child “who tended to perceive the world in terms of things read about it.” She began, she says, “with a literary idea of experience,” and reflects that she still doesn’t know “where all the lies are.”<sup>51</sup> It is the “doubt,” this suspicion of narratives that she begins to feel in the 1960s, that drives Didion’s nonfiction, from her earliest more “personal” and cultural pieces to her later overtly political writing and her latest memoirs. In essay after essay, she questions abstractions, mocks attachment to transcendent ideals, and criticizes those, including herself, who use language as a form of “magical thinking.” Frequently drawing on allusions to the world of script writing, movie production, and acting—a world familiar to her both through her personal connections to Hollywood “players” and her professional work with Dunne as a screenwriter on several pictures—she throws into relief the vast chasms between rhetoric and reality.

While it is not possible to locate the origins of her skepticism in any one biographical detail or any one essay, there is a good deal to suggest that her upbringing in the Sacramento Valley as a fifth-generation Californian played a large part in her initial interest in the gaps between reality and mythology. This was a childhood spent as a descendent of “a congeries of families, that has always been in the Sacramento Valley,”<sup>52</sup> families that not only passed down quilts, photographs, and flatware, but also stories, narratives about “crossings,” abandonment, survival, resilience, and the frontier mentality. What has remained of all these for Didion, and in fact, grown stronger across the years, is not only the physical objects and their symbolic meanings, but a distrust in mythologies generated by those invested—historically, personally, financially, and politically—in a certain idea of California as a western Eden.

Relatively early on in her career, she remarks on her doubts regarding this vision, reflecting as a thirty-one-year-old that “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.”<sup>53</sup> This distrust in memory and mythology, especially insofar as it related to her own understanding of the land of her childhood, only grows as she gets older and is able to see that land from a distance, both figuratively and literally. In *Where I Was From*, her 2003

collection of essays on her childhood and California, she reflects on a speech (entitled "Our California Heritage") she delivered at her eighth-grade graduation, noting that "such was the blinkering effects of the local dreamtime that it would be some years before I recognized that certain aspects of 'Our California Heritage' did not add up. . . . It was after this realization that I began trying to find the 'point' of California, to locate some message in its history."<sup>54</sup> As many critics have commented, so much of what she writes about California signifies change, loss, and disillusionment, and these are themes she returns to repeatedly across the trajectory of her nonfiction writing.

The California imagination, Didion comes to realize, is derived from the claiming of the landscape and "the romance of emigration, the radical abandonment of established attachments," and remains insistently invested in the symbolic to the exclusion of the merely literal.<sup>55</sup> Didion's repeated description of her attempts to penetrate the myth of California is offered less to highlight her own personal failure to decipher the California code than to exemplify the ultimate opacity of any mythology and to undermine attempts to turn the literal into the symbolic. Her gradual disillusionment with the mythology of California reflects a larger disenchantment with mythologies of any type. While her initial writings mostly concern mythologies related to place (California and New York for the most part, though also Hawaii, and, later, Miami and Central America), she later widens her focus to include political, public, and personal mythologies.

According to Didion, these mythologies, with their attendant abstractions, ideologies, and platitudes, became impossible for her to ignore or accept at some point in her early thirties. At that time, she writes, she began to feel like she had lost the plot, missed her cues, and mislaid the script. "In what would probably be the middle of my life," she reflects, "I wanted still to believe in the narrative and in the narrative's intelligibility, but to know that one could change the scene with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical."<sup>56</sup> Her distrust in narrative and rejection of her previous "essentially romantic ethic"<sup>57</sup> came about in large part due to her self-described "outsider" status—a status that permitted her to turn her critical gaze on the mythologies constructed by others "to fill the void."<sup>58</sup> As she writes in her essay about Michael Laski, "General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party U.S.A.": "I am comfortable with the Michael Laskis of this world, with those who live outside rather than in, those in whom the sense of dread is so acute that they turn to extreme and doomed commitments."<sup>59</sup>



She continues to emphasize her outsider status throughout her body of work, repeatedly highlighting—ironically, dismissively, condescendingly—the means by which others simplistically resort to narratives to confront and resolve their dread. She describes, for instance, the way Hollywood insiders, in confronting serious social issues such as racism, turn to the conventions of film to cope with disturbing ambiguities: “[W]hat we are talking about here,” she remarks, “is faith in a dramatic convention. Things ‘happen’ in motion pictures. There is always a resolution, always a strong cause-effect dramatic line, and to perceive the world in those terms is to assume an ending for every social scenario.”<sup>60</sup>

Narratives are often heavily dependent on abstractions and ideals, and these too she dismantles coolly, as she does the language used to communicate them. Her ironic use of quotation marks has been much noted; these are frequently employed in service of undermining the rhetoric she observes being used by individuals and groups committed to one or another dream or ideology.<sup>61</sup> In describing her trip to cover the national congress of the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce in Santa Monica, for instance, she writes that she supposes she went out there “in search of the abstraction lately called ‘Middle America,’” and ends up describing people who exemplify the beliefs of many in small cities and towns across America insofar as they embrace business success as a “transcendent ideal.” Ultimately, the abstractions and ideals she analyzes are upheld in language parroted and unexamined, often to the great detriment of those who employ it.

There is, for instance, the Haight-Ashbury movement, which she refuses to idealize or romanticize, seeing it as composed of “children” who are “less in rebellion against the society than ignorant of it, able only to feed back certain of its most publicized self-doubts, *Vietnam, Saran-Wrap, diet pills, the Bomb.*” These children are avidly anti-intellectual, she says, “their only proficient vocabulary is in the society’s platitudes,” and this disturbs her, committed, as she is “to the idea that the ability to think for one’s self depends upon one’s mastery of the language.”<sup>62</sup> Feminists come in for the same kind of scorn; she describes the literature of the movement as beginning to “reflect the thinking of women who did not really understand the movement’s ideological base.” From her perspective, these women are therefore all too ready to be moved by “half-truths” that, when repeated “authenticated themselves,” preventing women from asking what she sees as obvious and yet essential questions regarding their own autonomy. Failure to ask these questions, on either their part or on the part of those observing the

movement, means being complicit with these arguments, arguments she sees as existing at a “spooky level” insofar as they “had only the most tenuous and unfortunate relationship to the actual condition of being a woman.”<sup>63</sup> It is these “tenuous and unfortunate relationships” between rhetoric and reality that increasingly became the focus of Didion’s writing, even as she continued to write novels throughout the seventies and eighties.

While the political strains of Didion’s writings were apparent even in these early essays, she did not see herself as primarily a political writer until much later in her career, when she began, in the 1980s and ’90s, turning her attention almost exclusively toward various forms of nonfiction, including not only reportage but critical essays and memoirs. *Salvador* (1983), *Miami* (1987), *After Henry* (2001), *Political Fictions* (2001), and *Where I Was From* (2003) followed years of writing novels and reviews (primarily for *The New York Review of Books*, for which she began writing in 1973), and have not yet received the amount of scholarly attention that her two earliest collections of essays as well as her fiction had, though certainly many of them have been extensively reviewed by the popular press. In 2006, Didion, raised in a family of Republican conservatives, and later registered as a Democrat<sup>64</sup> (though far from a passionate one—she votes sporadically), described her shift to reporting on political subjects in an interview for the *Paris Review*.

She was, as she explains, already planning on a trip to El Salvador with Dunne in 1982 when her editor at *The New York Review of Books*, Bob Silvers, indicated he’d be interested in having one of them write something about their journey. As Dunne was at work on a novel, Didion started writing a piece, one that ended up being very long and very much a travel piece. Silvers guided Didion’s editing of the piece, and especially its resolution, until it evolved into a commentary on the fluid and violent political situation in El Salvador. While the evolution of this one work was guided by an editor, Didion is quick to note, in the same interview, that the end result represents her point of view, her “taking of sides” in regard to the political situation. More importantly, she explains that her movement from more personal writing to political writing was a deliberate one, prompted both by boredom and by her feeling that she had no way to deal with the increasingly strong and emotional responses generated by her more personal pieces. *Salvador* was received with both great praise and no small share of criticism, most of the latter generated by the fact that many thought she had no place weighing in on a subject so far outside of her expertise. The fact that she was in El Salvador for only two weeks only heightened this criticism.

For Didion, though, it was precisely because she was an outsider, and therefore not party to the “American effort,” which seemed to her to be a “dreamwork devised to obscure any intelligence that might trouble the dreamer”<sup>65</sup> that what she had to write about El Salvador was of value. Such outsider status allowed her to realize that the rhetoric generated by political processes was mere surface, that “words didn’t have any actual meaning, that they described a negotiation more than they described an idea,” and that the subsequent “lack of specificity” is “an obscuring device.”<sup>66</sup> For her, her outsider status is essential to her perspective as a critic, for both ideological and practical purposes. In terms of the latter, for instance, she observes that part of what made her coverage of the Central Park Jogger case unique is that she was often unable to obtain press and police passes, which led her to other approaches, primarily ones that emphasized her critical distance from the popular coverage. Much of her writing for *Political Fictions* was done without traveling to Washington or interviewing her subjects, as other reporters did.

As she notes in “A Foreword,” in *Political Fictions*, when Silvers asked her to write some pieces about the 1988 presidential campaign, rather than file for press passes and hit the campaign trail immediately, she procrastinated before finally showing up without Secret Service clearance or any firm sense of what it was she was going to cover or write.<sup>67</sup> Watching the politicians and the reporters covering them without the pressure of having to file a story herself every day allowed Didion the opportunity, as she says, “to realize that there was actually less there than met the eye . . . I had no idea that these things [rallies, speeches, “candid” shots of the candidates] were as Kabuki-like as they were. They just went through these motions—this was a set that kept getting struck three or four times a day. The difference between the way things looked standing there and the way they looked on television the next night . . . it was instructive.”<sup>68</sup> More and more, as she continued to write about politics, she focused on the use of language as “an obscuring device,”<sup>69</sup> on the construction of political narratives as little more than stagecraft for elaborately plotted “films” dutifully captured by the complicit media and consumed uncritically by a public eager to take comfort in the rationalizations offered by familiar narrative tropes.

While Didion herself points to these moments as revelations, it is clear, in looking over her previous body of nonfiction work, as I have done very briefly above, that her suspicion of narrative, her understanding of the artificial construction of most public discourse, and her refusal to embrace the magical thinking of those around her was apparent in her very earliest

essays and remained consistent features in her work across the decades. One need only look at her essay “Good Citizens,” from *The White Album* to observe her early efforts to pull back the curtain on the theatrics of politics. Employing understatement and dry wit, she describes a news crew directing Nancy Reagan to do “precisely what she would ordinarily be doing on a Tuesday morning at home,” which in this case, as suggested by the news crew, might involve picking flowers in the garden. Recording the dialogue that follows this prompt without inserting her own commentary, she allows the absurdity of the situation to reveal itself:

“Fine,” the newsman said. “Just fine. Now I’ll ask a question, and if you could just be nipping a bud as you answer it . . .”  
 “Nipping a bud,” Nancy Reagan repeated, taking her place in front of the rhododendron bush. “Let’s have a dry run,” the cameraman said. The newsman looked at him. “In other words, by a dry run you mean you want her to fake nipping the bud.”  
 “Fake the nip, yeah,” the cameraman said. “Fake the nip.”<sup>70</sup>

Didion is a skilled and powerful rhetorician, and the scholarly response to her writing does evidence awareness of the rhetorical potency of her prose. It is in this body of work that one finds the most extensive analysis of her style, with scholars from a multitude of disciplines (Literature, Composition, Trauma Studies, Women’s Studies, and Communications among them) attending to how her sentences work to, among other things, invite identification, induce cooperation, and amplify her concerns. While it is a small body of work, it suggests a strong starting point for productive further analysis of Didion’s style.<sup>71</sup>

One of the earliest scholarly publications on Didion’s work is Katherine Usher Henderson’s 1981 *Joan Didion*, a monograph that offers a biography of Didion as well as commentary on three of her novels (*Play It as It Lays*, *Run River*, and *A Book of Common Prayer*) as well as *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album*. In this work, Henderson devotes four pages to analysis of Didion’s style; while this treatment is brief, it is illuminating. She herself notes that Didion’s style has been much acclaimed but little analyzed before beginning a precise listing of some of Didion’s more frequent rhetorical techniques, including parallelism (sometimes with antithesis) and the combining of long sentences with short. Henderson employs short excerpts from Didion’s essays to demonstrate how the first of these techniques, parallelism, allows her to organize ideas, while her deliberate omission of it