Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory

CALIFORNIA AND THE MELANCHOLIC AMERICAN IDENTITY IN JOAN DIDION'S NOVELS

EXILED FROM EDEN

Katarzyna Nowak-McNeice

ROUTLEDGE

California and the Melancholic American Identity in Joan Didion's Novels

California and the Melancholic American Identity in Joan Didion's Novels: Exiled from Eden focuses on the concept of Californian identity in the fiction of Joan Didion. This identity is understood as melancholic, in the sense that the critics following the tradition of both Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin use the word. The book traces the progress of the way Californian identity is portrayed in Joan Didion's novels, starting with the first two in which California plays the central role, *Run River* and *Play It as It Lays*, through *A Book of Common Prayer* to *Democracy and The Last Thing He Wanted*, where California functions only as a distant point of reference, receding to the background of Didion's interests. Curiously enough, Didion presents Californian history as a history of white settlement, disregarding whole chapters of the history of the region in which the Californios and Native Americans, among other groups, played a crucial role: it is this reticence that the monograph sees as the main problem of Didion's fiction and presents it as the silent center of gravity in Didion's oeuvre. The monograph proposes to see the melancholy expressed by Didion's fiction organized into four losses of Nature, History, Ethics, and Language; around which the main analytical chapters are constructed. What remains unrepresented and silenced comes back to haunt Didion's fiction, and it results in a melancholic portrayal of California and its identity – which is the central theme this monograph addresses.

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Mamie

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Introduction

> The West, that world's frontier of Romance, where a new race, a new people – hardy, brave, and passionate – were building an empire; where the tumultuous life ran like fire from dawn to dark, and from dark to dawn again, primitive, brutal, honest, and without fear.
>
> —Frank Norris, *The Octopus*

Part One: Joan Didion, the Native Daughter

The present study focuses on Didion's novels, namely, *Run River* (1963), *Play It as It Lays* (1970), *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977), *Democracy* (1984), and *The Last Thing He Wanted* (1989). However, since Didion often assumes the position of a critic of her own work, a recourse to her essays is inevitable – she provides a wider cultural perspective for her novels in *Slouching towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979), and critiques her own prose in *Where I Was From* (2003). My choice to concentrate on Didion's novels and not on her journalism or her essays is informed by my conviction that it is fiction that provides a proper vehicle for exploring the myth of California[1]; my stance is close to that of Malcolm Bradbury, who portrays the novel as the genre most appropriate for the expression of the New World and states, paraphrasing V.S. Naipaul, that "the task of the novel has always been the making of new maps of the world".[2] It is the novel – the modern, democratic genre – that most accurately depicts America, and especially California.[3] From the very beginning till today, the writing that has come out of California has participated in the creation and sustaining of the myth that Joan Didion understands very well: in Didion's fiction, we are dealing with the culmination and the finest form of the myth that has kept writers' imaginations captive for decades.[4]

Present in numerous literary texts, from the earliest representations of California in Richard Henry Dana Jr.'s *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884), Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don* (1885); through practically all of John Steinbeck's novels and short stories, to T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995) and Karen Tei Yamashita's *The Tropic of Orange* (1997),

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as well as in countless Westerns and TV shows (such as the recent *Westworld*), California is represented as more of a myth than a reality, as it becomes a paradoxical place where anything is possible: it can become one's success and one's doom. This myth has been lived in utopian communities in California (such as Madame Modjeska's), and sung in songs and in opera, e.g., Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* (1910).[5] The myth of California as the place where rivers flow with gold (and occasionally blood), where benevolent nature blesses and provides for those who are willing to work (yet it can send upon the unexpecting victims landslides, fires, and earthquakes), where fortunes are to be made in the movie industry (and people's lives broken), where true freedom is to be found (that elusive idea), and where the land ends, so the last frontier is to be explored, and ultimately cultivated there: Didion understands well these paradoxes of California, and she portrays them with the full force of myth in her writing.

Didion locates the roots of Californian identity in the frontier and suggests that Californian identity emerged as the frontier closed. This signifies a peculiar shortening of historical perspective that characterizes Didion's prose: it is as if history commenced with the first pioneers who crossed the Great Plains; there are no Californios, no Native Americans, there is no Mexican period, no Spanish colonization. This curious and deeply troubling omission results in an exclusionist vision: those who crossed the plains with Didion's family are more entitled than others to the Eden of California. That is the blind spot in her vision. As she mourns the past, she does not acknowledge those excluded in her version of history.[6]

The shortening of perspective which results in a vision of history that starts with the white Anglo settlers can be accounted for by the peculiarities in the pattern of California migration. Carey McWilliams explains,

> Generally speaking, the first wave of American migration to the region [of southern California] was made up of the well-to-do (1870–1890), the second of people in medium circumstances (1900–1920), the third of lower middle-class elements (1920–1930), and the fourth of working-class people (1930–1945). Reversing the process of western settlement, each successive wave of migrants to Southern California has been made up, in the main, of people less important economically and socially than the one which preceded it. And the basic explanation of this curious reversal of the pattern of migration is that people have always been attracted to Southern California for other reasons than to better their economic position.[7]

Yet, even as Didion's ancestors (and the forefathers of her characters) could see themselves as "more important" in the cultural, economic, and social sense than those who followed in their footsteps, the writer's

investment is in the endeavor of portraying Californian character in the most comprehensive way, to which the whole of her career testifies. This portrayal, however, is highly exclusivist: it is a vision that silences some agents of history and sentences others to oblivion, while attaching undue importance to the pioneering endeavor; what results is a story of a past that never was, with the loss of illusion at its core, a loss that comes back hauntingly in every piece Didion writes.

As Edmundo O'Gorman argues, America was not so much discovered as invented[8]; the same can be argued for California: it had existed in the European imagination for a long time before it was put on the maps. Perhaps it is no surprise that California is the stage where many losses are performed, and that the Californian character never reaches the solidified post-melancholic state it is expected to; it may be equally unsurprising that loss, perceived on many levels, is at the core of Didion's writing. In the pages that follow, I examine the novelistic material, the language that fails to contain or to express the many losses, even as it examines the vacuity and delusions it creates (such as the American delusion regarding the United States' exclusiveness and its special role in history). What I hope to accomplish with my study is an examination of Didion's writing that exposes the unacknowledged forces that shape it; implicitly, thus, I wish to uncover the voices that are lost in Didion's fiction, those that undeniably shaped the history of California and the region, and that contributed to the emergence of the American character in such a significant way that Didion's silence on the subject is truly astounding. Why does she not acknowledge the presence of agents of history other than her own white ancestors? Why does she create a history of the frontier that privileges one strand of the narrative among many, preventing the others from emerging? Why, finally, has there been no critical attention given to this omission? These are the questions driving my examination of the novels in which California and the frontier play a crucial, if not always central, role. Thus, this monograph goes against the grain of contemporary writing about Didion's prose, as it attempts to uncover Didion's own antiquarian impulse, imminent in her oeuvre, of reaching back to the history of the frontier.

Didion the Sacramentan, Californian, Westerner

"I am at home in the West", says Joan Didion in her most recent publication to date, *South and West: From a Notebook*. She clarifies, "I am easy here in a way that I am not easy in other places".[9] Her identification with the West and California is observable in all of her prose, which covers a variety of genres. If, as Edward Albee once remarked, "fiction is fact distilled into truth",[10] it is especially true in the case of Joan Didion's prose, in which the connection between fiction and fact is explored through various genres, including novel and journalistic essay. Didion

has published five novels, *Run River* (1963), *Play It as It Lays* (1970), *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977), *Democracy* (1984), and *The Last Thing He Wanted* (1996); interweaving them with collections of essays, *Slouching towards Bethlehem* (1968), *The White Album* (1979), *After Henry* (1992), *Fixed Ideas* (2003), and recently, *South and West* (2017); reportage: *Salvador* (1983), *Miami* (1987); as well as autobiographic writing: *Where I Was From* (2003), *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), and *Blue Nights* (2011). She puts the stamp of a Westerner and a Californian on all of her writing.

Joan Didion was born in Sacramento in 1934, and her ties with California remained unbroken until, in 1956, she won a prize organized by *Vogue*, which was a job in the magazine's New York offices. The move to New York that year affected her deeply; soon after, she wrote her first novel, motivated by a nostalgic longing for the place of her origins. Didion returned to California with her husband, John Gregory Dunne, and their daughter, and even though she traveled extensively and ventured out to write about various places, California has remained the center of gravity for both her life and her writing. Their home in Malibu became the epicenter of writerly and artistic activity, in the sun-soaked California style. The writing couple befriended actors, musicians, directors, socialites: in a word, they melted easily into their Californian life, becoming a fixture of the California writing scene. Didion wrote the majority of her work in California, and California has always been the point of reference for all of her writing: journalism, reportage, reviews, screenplays, short stories, and novels. And even though Didion is primarily seen as a nonfiction writer, my claim is that it is fiction that allows the writer to represent her vision – of California, of Californian identity, of American melancholy – in an unobstructed way, which is to say, not concerned primarily with a representation of a narrative progression of facts, figures, and events, but focused on a representation of the guiding idea or myth behind California's story. Didion's making a home for her family in California, and leaving it from time to time to see it from a distance, allowed her to construct a complex, prism-like vision of the state where she was born, grew up, and later chose to live.

My aim in this study is to analyze the losses that haunt Didion's novels and the resulting melancholia pervasive in her writing; it is an attempt to dissect the feeling of "how much it hurts to want what's gone", as Lawrence Raab poetically puts it[11]; the sentiment that I consider central to Didion's prose. The decision to interpret Didion's sorrow not as nostalgia, but rather as melancholia, will be central to my argument. The concept of melancholia promises more space to discuss the issue of identity, which in nostalgia is firmly anchored to a place. Much of Didion's writing, however, carries melancholic longing for the land while locating pain elsewhere: hence my decision to focus on melancholia. It is melancholia that underlies Didion's vision of California and its character, and

the reason for it is the sense of loss, in its various configurations, that informs California's history and identity in Didion's prose.

But it is not only loss in the social and historical sense that emerges quite clearly as the core of Didion's writing; the personal dimension of loss is represented there as well. This more intimate dimension of loss is visible especially in her more recent texts, composed as a response to personal bereavement, but also, her earlier prose is permeated by a sense of demise and deficiency. She started her career as a novelist, writing about the land of her childhood that seemed lost to her when she moved to the East Coast; all of her characters experience loss and grieve others: *Run River* commences with a shot that reverberates through the narrative, a shot that kills the protagonist's husband; at the center of *Play It as It Lays*, there is a loss entailed in an abortion; both *A Book of Common Prayer* and *Democracy* mourn the loss of a child, either "to history" or in a very real sense to the cessation of biological functions; in the last novel, the protagonist of *The Last Thing He Wanted* loses her father and her own life. When Didion confesses, "I think I write romances", one cannot take it to expect happy endings; on the contrary, her novels, much like her journalism, possess a pervasive sense of loss that lies at the foundations of her melancholy landscape of California.

Critical Reception

Joan Didion is the melancholic "Girl of the Golden West"[12] and the self-proclaimed "native daughter", and her status as a canonical writer has been confirmed by the numerous awards that became her part during her long career, the most recent of them being the National Humanities Medal (2013). Yet the critical input concerning her works is surprisingly meager; critics who write about Didion notice that: "Didion's critical reception still proves to be quite below par".[13] This is particularly puzzling because Didion is acknowledged as California's and America's primary analyst: Eva-Sabine Zehelein names Didion as "America's highly personal cultural/literary historian" and calls her reflection of the representation of California and the West "incessant", which suggests the intensity of Didion's work and the challenge that it poses.[14] H. Jennifer Brady makes a similar claim, stating, "Didion's writings in particular demand an act of historical imagination on the part of the reader, an understanding of the mythic heritage of 'Points West'".[15] Didion emerges as a demanding writer, one who exerts a particular pressure on her readers; that, however, does not explain the lack of attention that her prose has suffered from. When Zehelein proposes that Didion's writing has been "pigeonholed as merely another piece of New Journalism"[16] she is pointing in the right direction: Didion has been an acclaimed journalist and her fiction might be the victim of being wrongly perceived as less serious.[17]

All analyses of Joan Didion's works commence with an expression of astonishment at the state of criticism.[18] To date, there are three books devoted exclusively to Joan Didion: Catherine Usher Henderson's (1985), Michelle Carbone Loris' (1989), and Mark Royden Winchell's (1989); two more critics deal with Didion among other authors: Janis P. Stout (1994) and Marc Weingarten (2006). There are two published collections of essays concerning Didion's prose: Sharon Felton's (1993) and Ellen G. Friedman's (1984). Considering that Joan Didion is often deemed the backbone of literary life in California, bewilderment at the lack of critical interest is indeed understandable.[19]

Joan Didion's Melancholy California

The aim of this study is to present and examine the vision of California in Joan Didion's prose. I see this vision as an anachronistic concept, reaching back to Turner's Frontier Thesis.[20] This anachronism, not recognized in any of the critical writings devoted to Didion's prose, plays an important function of informing and organizing Didion's vision of Californian history and identity. Once we see that Didion's vision of California is anchored in nineteenth-century ideals, we can recognize the main problem: its refusal to acknowledge the role played by agents of history other than white. From Didion's prose one gathers that Native Americans or Mexicans never exerted any influence on the state's history or its character; neither do the various groups – Asian Americans, Chicanos/as (the list of Didion's exclusions is long) – influence California's present. This omission, I argue, is at the center of Didion's prose, and it animates her narratives, remaining an unstated premise. It is what Didion's prose does not say that is central to the vision of California it promotes. Thus, seeing loss at the core of Didion's California, I explain its varied consequences in terms of melancholia and its own circuitous, paradoxical route.

The trajectory of my argument in the present study follows the logic of the losses that I see as the underlying causes of the melancholic vision of the Californian identity of Didion's prose: the loss of "nature", the loss of history, the loss of ethical values, and the loss of a language to contain the loss. I start with an explanation of the mechanism of melancholia in Part Two of the Introduction, while tracing the elements of the melancholic processes in Didion's prose and illustrating how exactly in Didion's prose the representation of California follows the logic of a melancholic coping with loss.

In the analysis of Didion's novels, an important distinction emerges between a primary loss and a series of secondary losses. The primary loss, quite clearly identified in Didion's first novel, is the loss of the frontier. With the second novel, the frontier emerges as the lost ideal: a realization that the frontier was never a reality, but that it was always

already gone, constitutes the secondary loss. It is analyzed in Chapter 1 under the name of the loss of nature, which signifies the loss of the ideal of California as the Garden of Eden and a promised land. Quite paradoxically, I focus on the desert landscape, not the fertile valley, while discussing Joan Didion's first two novels: this choice is dictated by the fact that it is the desert, with its symbolic and metaphoric potential, that in Didion serves to represent the barrenness of modern life (not unlike in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which Didion uses as an image of warning in her first collection of essays). Connected with the loss of nature is another secondary loss, the loss of an illusion of the past, that I call the loss of history, which is characterized in Chapter 2. Since one cannot situate the roots of identity in paradise, in other words, since nature is lost, and with it, the idea of Edenic harmony, one must look for a historical anchoring of one's identity. In Didion's prose, the defining moment of Californian identity comes with the closure of the frontier, thus, history is always already lost, as it is the end of an era, not its promising beginning.[21] Thus, we progress from the physical loss of the frontier to the loss of certain ideals connected with it: disentangling them, however, is an impossible task, since "westering"[22] combines in its fabric the concrete with the mythical; its aim, understood in geopolitical terms, is the pursuit of the freedom of movement (finding its realization in Manifest Destiny) and, on the ideal plane, the search for the Garden of Eden.

The loss of the Garden of Eden, resulting in the loss of the ideals of Manifest Destiny,[23] leads to the third of the series of secondary losses, which is the loss of ethical values. The physical and the spiritual losses of what Didion describes as the "wagon-train ethics", the loyalty to one's kin, ultimately compromise the chances of reclaiming the state of primordial innocence, which was never there in the first place. The loss of these basic ethical values is the subject of Chapter 3.

The failed attempt at locating the true Californian values results in a gradual loosening of grip on the place: step by step, California loses its status as a geographical entity and becomes more and more identified with a stance Didion's characters employ, while at the same time it becomes diluted in a wider context of the West: being a Californian comes to mean being a Westerner, and later – an American; a progression that mirrors Didion's gradual loss of the ability to define Californian character and to pinpoint the pivoting points of Californian history.

Simultaneously, in Didion's prose, California is gradually relegated from the central position of both the setting for the action and a character in itself (in *Run River* and *Play It as It Lays*) to a place of childhood memories (in *A Book of Common Prayer*) and a vague point of reference for her characters who remain Californians and Westerners even as they exile themselves to other locations (in *Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted*).[24] Didion gradually loses the language in which to describe California: its identity, emerging in language, becomes more elusive with

each attempt to isolate it. I call this the loss of language, which is the central concept of Chapter 4.

Part Two: Californian Losses and Melancholia

In Joan Didion's prose, the importance of California is unquestionable: not only is it the recurrent theme of her writing, but it is also a point of reference whenever she writes about matters of national or international importance. Even though it would be unfair to see her as a glorifier of the West – she is, after all, one of the most ruthless and astute of its critics – her prose might still be put in the context of the line of writings which declare the centrality of the frontier, that "unsubtle concept in the subtle world",[25] for American identity. Yet, just as Didion's prose is nuanced and complex, so too is her use of the idea of the frontier, and ultimately, it is not the frontier itself that is of importance to Didion, but its loss: a distinction that proves vital for my subsequent analysis of Didion's historical vision.

In this part, I discuss critical terms defining melancholia in order to use them in the literary examples analyzed in the subsequent chapters. Thus, I explain how identity comes into being in melancholic (psychoanalytic) terms, which entails a crucial paradox: one must long for the place from a spatial and temporal distance in order to claim it; expulsion from the Californian paradise is the only way to see oneself as Californian. Didion loses California, but gains the status of the Native Daughter, which becomes ground zero for her writing. The coming into being of a melancholic Californian identity is accompanied by two processes: the emergence of conscience and the gaining of a voice to represent California. Nature, history, conscience and the ethical system, language and representation – these ideas discussed here lay the foundations for the textual analysis in the successive chapters. I start my discussion with an analysis of the position that the frontier occupies in Didion's prose: the loss of this idea turns into the central lack, around which the writer's authority is constructed.

The Myth of an Empty Frontier

The importance of the frontier was firmly established by Frederick Jackson Turner, who formulated his famous Frontier Thesis in 1893[26]; its preeminence, despite critical reevaluations that have been voiced since its proclamation, is felt to this day.[27] When Didion starts writing about California, Turner's Thesis is already an outdated and quite unfashionable concept, but it might be that it is precisely its conservative, antiquarian quality that she finds attractive: Turner's dated vision corresponds well with Didion's conservative politics[28] and an equally conservative need to mourn the past while denouncing the corruptness of the present.

Turner states categorically, "The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West"[29] – an opinion that for Joan Didion forms the unquestioned stance that she exhibits in many of her texts, proceeding from this unstated premise to other considerations, such as the definition of the West and of the true Westerner,[30] and even as she critically examines her own former take on the issues of the meaning of the frontier and the pioneering spirit, which she does in *Where I Was From* (2003), she still returns to these questions, unable to let go. The West and California exert a melancholic grip on her imagination, just as they did on Turner's.

Didion calls herself a "Native Daughter" of California in the first collection of essays she published in 1976, only to undermine her own sense of belonging in the last collection in which she returns to these ideas, *Where I Was From*, posing the pressing question, "where will I be from?" These two points mark the trajectory of her probing of the issue of California identity and its roots that Didion locates in the frontier. In between these extremes, Didion conducts a vigorous examination of the sense of the West: from the first novel she published, *Run River* (1963), to the last, *The Last Thing He Wanted* (1996), Didion weaves in her concern about what, in fact, it means to be Californian. The result is a melancholic examination of loss: the loss of an unshaken sense of belonging, the loss of an easily defined place to belong to, and the loss of the right to feel at home in this place.

California thus emerges in Didion's writing as the last frontier and the ultimate melancholic state, much like it did in Turner's essays. In the same seminal thesis in which he stressed the centrality of the frontier for American history and its determining role for American identity, he concludes, "never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves".[31] In other words, the frontier is closed, the pioneer has reached land's end, and progress is no longer possible in the same, linear mode,[32] even though it continues to exert its influence as an ideal.[33] Regardless of the problematic description of the "gift of free land" that from a different perspective might more appropriately be called the "spoils of conquest", the American West, despite its being included in the civilized world now, still remains the destiny, not just a destination – and this anachronistic sentiment finds itself represented extensively in Didion's prose.

For Turner, as critics note, the frontier is "migratory and abstract" and above all, it is "a process, not a place"[34] – a similar critique may be levelled against Didion. Her frontier becomes disconnected from California with each novel, even though it remains a crucial point of reference. When Didion writes about the frontier in her first novel, *Run River*, she presents it as a necessary starting point for her reevaluation of American identity. The rush that prompted the ancestors of her characters to cross the plains and come to California also motivates her protagonists in the present. This motivation, an almost organic, innate

characteristic, runs like a trait in the families of the people she represents in her prose, and it explains their identification with the land. The history of Western settlement is the story that they share; with the fact of the closing of the frontier, the tension does not find release, which explains the mistakes Didion's protagonists make: the anxiety and the pent-up energy are connected by a causal relationship with the frontier, whose loss ultimately explains the characters' neuroses, their infidelities, and their failures. In the last of her novels to date, *The Last Thing He Wanted*, being a Westerner signifies some traits of character, such as never having regrets, being remote, not belonging, and confronting "the established world"[35] – all of them negative characteristics that describe what a protagonist is not. If we take these novels as demarcating two poles of the trajectory encompassed by Didion's representation of Californian identity, then Didion starts with what she deems a solid identity, anchored in history, producing equally concrete indications in recognizably Californian traits of character, only to finish with an inability to describe Californian identity in any positive way, cautiously presenting it as a confrontational stance, going against the establishment, or its various configurations in different contexts. The Californian frontier recedes further away into the abstract with each consecutive novel. What remains is a sense of identification with the place, however fragile the grounds for such an identification might be.

In a surprising parallel to Didion's, Turner's theoretical stance evolved; Michael Steiner argues that contrary to the common conviction, Turner did not represent the frontier as a lasting phenomenon, but emphasized its temporal nature.[36] The Frontier Thesis, though popular and controversial, was rather a starting point in Turner's theoretical estimation of the impact of the frontier on American character, a point that led him to the formulation of a more mature theory of sectionalism,[37] which means turning the focus from a movement west to settlement in a region.[38]

Similarly, for Didion, it is the "small places"[39] that she looks into in her later narratives, not the greatness of America[40] that Walt Whitman advocated when he urged the poets to represent a "kosmos"[41] and who wrote of the "resistless restless race" of pioneers, whose westering is the core of their being.[42] Rather like Willa Cather writing about Nebraska, or Sarah Orne Jewett focusing on Maine, Didion writes about what she knows best: California. With each of her novels, the scale becomes smaller, the ambition more limited, and in these limitations, the writer discovers optimism otherwise lacking in the grand narrative of history: this seems to hold true of both Didion and Turner alike. That, however, does not imply that Didion could be deemed a regionalist: before she turns to the "small places", though, she presents a repertory of American themes and characters, from the hop growers of California and Hollywood actresses, to the politicians and other big players of the international market. Writing about California history, Didion reaches

back to the settlement of the pioneers who crossed the Great Plains in the mid-nineteenth century, thus clearly suggesting that the history of settlement in California is a colonial history. Her prose clearly delineates the distinction between the winners and losers of California's transformation from a frontier region to a state. Didion's understanding of the character of this transformation is dependent on the distinction between civilization and its lack, the emptiness; and what is variously defined as either civilized or barbaric – always a highly context-dependent issue – is done from the perspective Didion presents as the only valid and transparent: that of her own ancestors.

This gesture with which she legitimizes her voice as California's Native Daughter is best described as imperialistic in the sense that Edward Said assumes when discussing the colonization processes in the context of European expansion. Said points to a "transformation in perspective by which millions of acres outside Metropolitan Europe were thus declared empty [and] their people and societies decreed to be obstacles to progress and development".[43] The roots of this transformation rest on the idea, Said argues, that a crucial distinction between civilized and uncivilized communities manifests itself in their attitudes toward land: the civilized peoples in a way guarantee their right to land because land itself is of value to them. They use it to further their civilization. The uncivilized peoples, on the other hand, have an indifferent or negative attitude to land, and their farming endeavors meet with disastrous effects. Thus, the imperialist ideology dictates a fundamental distinction between empty and civilized territories. What follows is that the empty land should be civilized.[44]

Said discusses here the process that could be subsumed under the category of Manifest Destiny and used to explain American expansionism of the nineteenth century, when California becomes an American state. Some historians still use the category of emptiness to explain the result of the Mexican–American conflict of 1846–1848, uncritically dismissing the Native American and Californio inhabitants of the region.[45] These two groups, diverse in themselves, are the greatest losers in the battle for historical representation: in Didion's version of California history, they are as conveniently silenced as they would be in any imperialistic text; in other words, they are lost to her prose and constitute the silent center of Didion's narration of California history.

In order to understand Didion's melancholy representations of California, its identity and its history, I shall turn to two critics, whose theories of melancholia inform my reading of Joan Didion's fiction: Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin. Both critics inspired others who have contributed to the plethora of meanings that the term melancholy implies: Judith Butler, Anne Anlin Cheng, and Julia Kristeva have developed Freud's ideas in ways he could not have predicted, which shows their interpretive power in the humanities and social sciences, while among the

Benjaminian commentators one finds Hannah Arendt, Susan Sontag, and George Steiner, who manage to save Benjaminian reflection from self-imposed exile and ruin. Supported with the findings of these theorists, one can see how Didion's prose emerges as melancholy, both in the portrayal of her characters and the unfolding of the plots of her novels, but also, more importantly, in the presentation of California, the land she comes back to with a melancholic insistence.[46]

How Joan Didion Expelled Herself from Paradise

Didion recognizes the need for consolation as the main impulse behind the composition of her first novel, *Run River*, and claims that she was "experiencing a yearning for California so raw that night after night" she composed herself "a Californian novel".[47] The trigger for the novelistic process is homesickness, but what is also suggested is the idea that claiming the land by writing an element of landscape for herself is validated by personal nostalgia.[48] Loss in this case is the basis for and an explanation of the creative impulse, and the novel is a way of coping with the loss: as Didion states, it created "a protective distance between me and the place I came from".[49] When Didion writes about her losses and protects herself against their emotional impact, she loses the land again, this time in a self-protective gesture.

Trying to cope with the loss, Didion loses again; another way to say it is that writing about melancholia is itself a melancholy endeavor. In his 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia", Freud defines the two terms in a somewhat melancholic fashion. Even though he deems mourning a normal reaction and calls melancholia "pathological", the distinction between the two is blurry from the beginning. Freud starts by admitting insufficiency of data in the study:

> We shall, therefore, from the outset drop all claim to general validity for our conclusions, and we shall *console ourselves* by reflecting that, with the means of investigation at our disposal to-day, we could hardly discover anything that was not typical, if not a whole class of disorders, at least of a small group of them.
>
> (3041, emphasis mine)

Thus, he commences in a melancholic manner, revealing the essay as a solace, an inadequate, imperfect rendering of an ideal that has never come into being.[50] Later in his career, he comes to accept the fact that the process of mourning may never end and that melancholia is part of the process.[51]

The impossibility of drawing a clear demarcation line between mourning and melancholia is, in fact, crucial to the understanding of Joan Didion's prose.[52] She situates loss at the core of selfhood, saying

"'me' is what we think when our parents die", and she poses questions that seem to be driving her prose, "*who will look out for me now, who will remember me as I was, who will know what happens to me now, where will I be from*".[53] The parents' deaths break the link between the self and the land. The anchoring in the place of origin is lost, just as the past is lost. The curious future tense form of the last phrase ("where will I be from") suggests a radical break with the land of birth, but also a relativity of origin, if I can be from somewhere else in the future than I am now. There is no promise of the termination of melancholy; rather, it is a crucial part of the mourning process. The melancholy longing for California will be incorporated in the grieving after its loss, and the outcome of the process is the creative urge realized in the novels.

To ultimately contradict and defeat any suggestion of an optimistic finale or a possibility of a clear definition, Didion states, "A good deal about California does not (…) add up".[54] California seems discontinuous, paradoxical, and at times self-contradictory. It is, in the estimation of its Native Daughter, melancholic and worthy of unceasing, even obsessive, mourning. In a similar way, in the earlier essay, "Mourning and Melancholia", Freud attempts a clear distinction between the two states that he will defy in the later writings.[55] Failing to distinguish between the two states, Freud asserts, "people never willingly abandon a libidinal position".[56] These remarks explain Didion's recurrent, if not altogether obsessive, interest in Californian identity. After living in New York for decades, Didion never abandons her position of emotional involvement with California, even as she mourns its loss. With almost every book she publishes, she copes with the loss. The outcome is that "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again"[57]; such freedom in Didion is exhibited when she speaks of Californians and their land as separate from "the America they had left behind".[58]

The question "where will I be from" signals some confusion about Didion's own identification that surfaces occasionally in her prose.[59] Two of her recent volumes, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011), are meditations on personal losses, the former of her husband, and the latter of her daughter. Yet, however intimate such memoirs seem to be, Didion still returns to the issue of California and belonging there, asking questions that remain unanswered: "Why (…) do I say I lived much of this time in California? Why (…) did I feel so sharp a sense of betrayal when I exchanged my California driver's license for one issued by New York?"[60] These doubts imply that the basis of the feeling of belonging to a place is not necessarily the time spent there; and that the physical separation does not generate a feeling of disloyalty as much as a symbolic act confirming one's belonging. Didion's astonishment continues: "Could I seriously have construed changing my driver's license from California to New York as an experience involving 'severed emotional bonds'? Did I seriously see it as loss? Did I truly see

it as separation?"[61] She never gives answers to these queries, for there might be none. The posed problems are ones of veracity and of labeling one's experience as "serious" and "true". In other words, she might be asking herself if what she is experiencing is only an illusion, impossible to tell apart from reality, if such a notion is applicable at all.[62] The sense of a loss gains concreteness through the fact that it is the only factor of which one can be certain.

Ambivalence[63] not only describes perfectly Didion's "I" speaker in her memoirs, but it also applies to the relationship her characters have with California – and in turn the relationship that Didion's journalistic "I" exhibits in her essays. "The place is not all that hospitable to extensive settlement",[64] says Didion about California, denying the paradise status that she signals elsewhere, in a comparison between the Sacramento Valley and the Holy Land.[65]

Didion expresses her problematic relationship with California when she denies its paradisiacal status, as well as when she admits to it: "In at least one respect California (…) resembles Eden: it is assumed that those who absent themselves from its blessings have been banished, exiled by some perversity of heart".[66] The perversity she mentions suggests that leaving California is abnormal; if it is done voluntarily, then it must be succeeded by forceful removal of affection. Freud shows that such a difficult relationship with the object of affection is characteristic of melancholia. "In melancholia (…) countless separate struggles are carried on over the object, in which hate and love contend with each other", Freud asserts.[67] In melancholia, the object is devoured and thus remains there: "by taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction".[68] Only then can the process enter the conscious.

Didion presents the internalization of affection quite explicitly: her love for California escapes extinction by being incorporated into the egos of her novelistic characters and her journalistic "I", who claim possession of California and thus see it as a significant part of themselves.[69] In *Slouching towards Bethlehem* Didion's speaker pronounces: "I come from California, come from a family, or a congeries of families, that has always been in the Sacramento Valley".[70] She obviously understands the problem inherent in her odd claim: "Such a view of history casts a certain melancholia over those who participate in it",[71] but at the same time, in this pronouncement she claims California for herself, calling herself, characteristically, "a Native Daughter". The characters in *Run River* and *Play It as It Lays* hold a firm grip on California, even though their melancholia, produced by such dominion, debilitates them and weakens their grip on life. Claiming possession of California means being governed and overshadowed by it in return.

This conundrum – an inability to distinguish whether one takes possession of the place or whether the place dominates over one – is for the most part unrealized; Didion's journalistic persona may well be aware

of the problem in California's representation, but her characters in the novels never realize what ails them. However, Freud reminds us, in overcoming the melancholic condition, it is not important that consciousness be aware of the process. Every problem with the representation takes the ego closer to the end of the mourning process, as "each single struggle of ambivalence loosen[s] the fixation of the libido to the object by disparaging it, denigrating it and even as it were killing it".[72] The processes in the unconscious can come to an end "either after the fury has spent itself or after the object has been abandoned as useless".[73] *Run River*, Didion's first California novel, is devoted in its entirety to the subject of Californian melancholia; *Play It as It Lays* narrows its focus to the artificial paradise of Hollywood. No longer serving as the setting of an unfolding drama, California functions in *A Book of Common Prayer* only as a point of reference, and it is even less conspicuous in *Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted*. With each novel, the libidinal investment of the ego in the object becomes loosened.

However, such an interpretation of Didion's interest in the dismantling and understanding of Californian identity in Freudian terms must necessarily be taken with caution, as Freud himself is wary of the value of his theory of melancholia and mourning. Freud finishes the 1917 essay in a similar mode to the way he commences. The very last sentence is in a sense an admittance of a failure: "the interdependence of the complicated problems of the mind forces us to break off every enquiry before it is completed – till the outcome of some other enquiry can come to its assistance".[74] Just as the work of melancholy seems to never end, so his analysis never ceases; and just as melancholia depends on a compartmentalizing of the ego, so his theory depends on making finer distinctions between parts of the problem till the energy invested in the analysis is safely dispersed.[75]

In Didion's prose, the loss of California as a place of residence gives rise to a mythical California that exists in her novels, yet the gain of a California in the creative dimension does not alleviate the pain of losing touch with it. Thus, the process generates a sense of melancholia, which pervades all of Didion's writing, yet it also allows her to realize her sense of loyalty to the land and belonging. Having lost California, Didion emerges as the Californian. In this sense, loss triggers the process of ego formation[76] and Didion becomes the Native Daughter who speaks for California, as she mourns its loss.

For Freud, melancholia is an ego-constituting process; without melancholia and without the loss that constitutes it, there can be no identity.[77] For Didion, it is the loss of her California – her moving to the East Coast, but also the loss of what California used to be and what it used to stand for – that enables her to solidify her position as the speaker for California. Yet, while she expresses her vision of California's history and identity, she avoids addressing the question of race with an astounding effort.

Racial Melancholia and the Emergence of Conscience

The losses represented in Didion's prose are many: it is not simply the geographic distance separating her from California that motivates her and feeds her melancholy; more pertinently, it is the inability or unwillingness to represent any other Californians than those descended from the white settlers who made the crossing in the nineteenth century. Thus, all racial and ethnic others are silenced, denied the right to the land, and effectively expelled from Didion's California.

The process through which Didion's prose banishes the racial and ethnic other is melancholic dispossession; in the words of Anne Anlin Cheng, "racial melancholia is both the technology and the nightmare of the American Dream".[78] Cheng explains the role into which the racial other is put by the dominant white American identity with a reference to Freudian melancholia that operates through the processes of loss, rejection, and introjection.[79] Cheng stresses the fact that racial melancholia is an affliction that exerts its influence on both parties; that is, on the white culture and the racial other alike, and describes this complex process in terms of "mutual definition through exclusion" that connotes "racial rejection and desire (…) that expresses itself in abject and manic forms". Cheng elaborates on these melancholic processes, stating:

> On the one side, white American identity and its authority is secured through the melancholic introjection of racial others that it can neither fully relinquish nor accommodate and whose ghostly presence nonetheless guarantees its centrality. On the other side, the racial other (the so-called melancholic object) also suffers from racial melancholia whereby his or her racial identity is imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost, never-possible perfection, an inarticulable loss that comes to inform the individual's sense of his or her own subjectivity.[80]

Cheng here argues that it is both parts of the equation, that is, the dominant identity and the racial other, that are constituted through melancholic processes. In the context of Didion's prose, the unmentioned racial history of California and the glossed-over contribution of groups other than white Anglo settlers make up the "ghostly presence" in her novels, thus "guaranteeing the centrality" of the white settlers who in Didion's prose are presented as the cornerstone of Californian identity.

What is masked by silence in Didion's narratives is the history of violent subjugation; by the same token, what is masked under the sadness of melancholic detachment is violence and hostility toward the silenced, marginalized agent[81]; as Butler reminds us, "The ego not only brings the

object inside but brings aggression against the object along with it".[82] The verbal and physical aggression represented in Didion's novels testifies to this process: her characters insult each other, using such labels as "Okies" or "Mexican" as terms of abuse (*Run River*), they turn aggression against themselves (with such instances as the suicides in *Run River* and *Play It as It Lays*, substance abuse in *Play It as It Lays*, hazardous uses of sexuality in *Run River*, *Play It as It Lays*, *A Book of Common Prayer*, or traveling to places of armed conflict and war in *A Book of Common Prayer*, *Democracy*, and *The Last Thing He Wanted*). Despite material comfort and networks of support, the characters who identify themselves as Californian lead violent, destructive lives, filled with melancholy longing for the paradisiacal space of the past that never was. Their vision of California history pivots on a crucial omission – that of the marginalized agents excluded from the official narrative of history – and it has its cost, which is the many forms of violence represented in Didion's fiction.

So within the parameters of the melancholic longing for the past California, the violent expulsion of the racial and ethnic other is not without its consequences: Didion understands and documents in her prose the price that her Californians had to pay for their historical blindness. The price is a sense of dejected disillusionment with the present and the loss of democratic ideals that were abandoned together with the Western values of pioneering self-sufficiency and liberty. The refusal to represent the Californian past fully and to give voice to the nonwhite actors in history is intricately related to the melancholia Didion's characters experience. Silence is at the center of her writing.

Reticent on the issue of the racial and ethnic other, Didion assumes the role of a vocal social and cultural critic and commentator on current affairs. Her recurrent complaint on the state of politics in the United States and particularly in California is that "the centre no longer holds", in other words, conscience fades away as an obvious reference point for public life and social institutions. Yet, the very fact that Didion expresses concern over these issues suggests that her prose is triggered and incited by the impulse of conscience, which is "a form of moral reflexivity"[83] and by no means an agency that operates in a straightforward way, nor is it represented as such in California prose. It functions as a multifaceted mechanism regulating processes on the levels of both society and the individual.[84]

Psychoanalytic theory makes the link between reticence and conscience explicit: Butler links melancholia to a "failure of address, a failure to sustain the other through the voice that addresses",[85] and it is precisely this failure that I see at the core of Didion's prose. Yet what is connected to this failure of address emerges as central to my understanding of California as melancholy: the Freudian hypothesis that proposes melancholia to be a conscience-generating entity.[86] As the other

is introjected, devoured, and violently incorporated into the ego, there comes into being an agency that curbs the aggressiveness of the act: "The stronger the inhibition against expression", Butler reminds us, "the stronger the expression of conscience".[87] Thus, marginalizing the agents of history other than white results in the emergence of a sense of right and wrong; Didion's prose does not moralize, but it shows the bleak effects of the loss of democratic ideals. Her wry prose leaves it to the reader to consider the possibility of amendment.

For Freud, the emergence of conscience is, in a way, a byproduct of melancholia. Butler takes this idea to the foreground to argue that "Melancholia establishes the tenuous basis of the ego"[88] – perhaps it is the most important claim of her text, as it proposes that there is no ego without, or prior to, melancholia. What Butler does not state explicitly, yet what her discussion seems to imply, is the idea that there is no ego without conscience, and, to take the claim further, there is no ego without ambivalence, aggression, and remorse. The coming-into-being of the Californian identity, which Didion's writing documents, is the process of an emergence of conscience: a process accompanied with pangs of guilt and ideally resulting in an ultimate acceptance of culpability.[89]

The voice of the critical agency is mockingly represented in Didion's prose by a concerned TV or radio host, who asks a pertinent question, "Where are we heading?", a question that Didion's narrator suggests is unanswerable in the context of the media: "outside all these studios America lay in all its exhilaratingly volatile weather and eccentricity and specificity, but inside the studios we shed the specific and rocketed on to the general".[90] Didion refuses to speak for her nation, choosing the singular voice over the representative voice of a critic, stating, "I don't know where you're heading, (…) but I'm heading home".[91] Here and elsewhere Didion's speaker is critical of the United States and California, but insists on a return to familial loyalty as the solution of the problems of the country that seems "a projection on air".[92] It is real only when one's family validates its reality. The critical agency that Butler mentions as established in the melancholic splintering of the ego comes into being as a voice; so it does in Didion's prose, but the reproach that is articulated is additionally validated through the "wagon train morality" and family loyalty that constitutes the core of Didion's ethical system.[93]

In Didion's prose, the emergence of conscience parallels the increased interest in global political affairs. The loss of California translates into an increased global awareness. The emotional difficulties her characters experience in earlier novels mirror their irresponsibility; in later texts, they correspond to their willingness to become witnesses and caregivers. Similarly, deemed in earlier texts, a pathological process, melancholia is later accepted by Freud to be a conscience-generating, ego-constituting process.[94]

The Social Dimension of Melancholia

In the present study, though, it is not a melancholic process in an individual ego of an author or a character that is considered most productive to our understanding of Californian identity, as this would lead to a possibly falsified overgeneralization stemming from an acceptance of the role of the speaker for all of California in a singular voice. Even though Didion accepts such a role and speaks for California gladly, what is more pertinent to the comprehension of Californian identity is the social aspect of melancholia that Judith Butler proposes in "Psychic Inceptions: Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage", the part in her book *The Psychic Life of Power* in which she discusses Freud's 1917 essay.[95] The revisions in the theory of melancholia lead Freud to believe that, in Butler's words, "it would be impossible to separate the death drive from the conscience heightened through melancholia".[96] This troubled, triangular relationship between melancholia, conscience, and the death drive suggests itself in Didion's writing: when Didion states, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live",[97] she describes the impulse that is the direct opposite of the death drive. The narrativizing impulse pulls her characters away from death, but the price paid for such deferral is a blunting, or silencing, of the conscience.

Didion's prose exhibits the interconnectedness of individual critical agency and social critique; the social and personal perspectives are inextricably linked through the speaking "I" in both her journalism and her prose: her journalistic persona, that of a vertiginous neurotic, functions within the text to lend it credibility, and in turn the journalistic text assumes authority over the novelistic accounts, explaining and validating them from the position of a nonfictional account over a supposedly less straightforward – and less truthful – fiction.[98]

Memory, that imperfect, failing faculty, serves as a unifying function, when she claims for example that "an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968",[99] or when she states, "there is in Los Angeles no memory everyone shares, no monument everyone knows, no historical reference as meaningful as the long sweep of the ramps where the San Diego and Santa Monica freeways intersect",[100] a sentiment which echoes her words from thirty years before: "The future always looks good in the golden land, because no one remembers the past".[101] Memory becomes an attribute of the land itself, and historical references lose meaning as the structures of motorways gain it and become "the only secular communion Los Angeles has".[102]

Dependence on personal memory creates an ideal that cannot, by definition, be the basis of a shared sense of identity. A corresponding description of "the more ideal California as that which existed at whatever past point the speaker first saw it" deems it "a hologram that

dematerializes as I drive through it".[103] Thus, this personal ideal, imagined through reminiscence and a willed projection of some unattainable past, becomes in Didion's prose the shared, communal reference point, necessarily flawed and alienating.

The ambiguity of historical identification is clearly recognizable on the level of official narrative: after the acquisition of California by the United States, California becomes American, yet its separateness in its status as the last frontier remains evident. Its meaning retains ambiguity: it promises land for settlement, yet it signals the closure of continental expansion. It is American with Mexican customs, Mexican history and a Mexican, Spanish-speaking minority. California becomes the psychic space that demonstrates the melancholic turn in American identity; it is the object of turning back upon itself that substantiates the emergence of the United States as a unified object.

American identity is dependent on the past losses, just like Californian identity is founded upon the losses – through silencing and exclusion – of historical agents not recognized by Didion's prose. To explain the process of ego formation as consolidation of losses, Butler states that the ego is "the congealment of a history of loss, the sedimentation of relations of substitution over time, the resolution of a tropological function into the ontological effect of the self".[104] The ego is thus composed of past losses and it is forever splintered into smaller fragments, each of them a result of yet another loss. The notion of American identity as such a fragmented history of losses does not mean that it should be approached with mournful pensiveness. On the contrary, I propose to see such a vision of American identity as enabling the process of bringing out the voices of those whose stories were lost to the unified, grand idea of expansionism and Manifest Destiny. It means acknowledging those silenced by the narrative of one destiny and one direction of history, and in this sense it is a celebration of their histories.

The understanding of the ego as an amalgamation of past losses also means that a unified, complete ego is but an illusion: there has never been any prelapsarian state of unity, and the loss mourned by the ego is in fact constitutive of the ego. This insight is crucial to an understanding of the particular case of California, with the idea of paradisiacal prehistory at the core of its identity. If the loss of the Edenic past is the basis of its identity, melancholia explains and vindicates it. Butler also states that the substituting of the ego for the lost love object plays a compensatory role, yet it can never fulfill it. The failure of the ego to compensate for the lost object, as Butler has it, "exposes the faultlines in its own tenuous foundations".[105] The ego emerges as a result of its own inadequacy to counterweigh the pain of losing the object. The acquisition of California, its emergence as part of the United States and its inclusion in the dominant identity meant the loss of the idea of unstoppable expansion, which in itself was the crucial part of the dominant American

identity.[106] Manifest Destiny proves not only an inadequate basis for the American identity, but also a belated one.[107]

The tenuousness of the ego constitution is connected to the unnameability of the loss that lies at its bottom: Butler turns to Freud who stated that mourning "impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead".[108] In California, the peoples inhabiting it before the American expansion are deemed gone and relegated to the past. In this way, the declaration of the object as dead enables the emergence of the American, Californian identity. Butler appends her discussion of mourning with a view on melancholia, stating that in melancholia, in contrast to mourning, declaring the object dead is not possible.[109] The loss cannot be declared, nor can the pain be named, as they occur before speech. Butler sees it as a mark of the position Freud will come to in his later works: "A loss prior to speech and declaration, it is the limiting condition of its possibility: a withdrawal from speech that makes speech possible. In this sense, melancholia makes mourning possible".[110] It is long after the closure of the colonizing process, first carried out by the Spanish, then the Mexican, and finally by the American, that the marginalized groups in California such as the Native Americans or the Californios gain a voice.[111] Their loss, the loss of land and history, is neither acknowledged nor voiced, even though they themselves are declared dead. This paradoxical position of California's underrepresented groups accounts for California's melancholy.[112] Thus, melancholia is the process through which representation and voice become possible.

The melancholic subject becomes a representable, voiced, and social subject. Didion's melancholic protagonists are representable precisely because they are melancholic: the split in their identities that motivates them to incorporate the silenced other within their selves, which is the unacknowledged loss that is the cause of their melancholy, is simultaneously the split that enables their self-definition: it is on the unstated disparity from the pre-American California that Didion's protagonists establish their identities.[113]

In Didion's prose, the ideal of California as an earthly paradise – an ideal that is denounced as early as her first published novel and the first collection of essays, yet an ideal that continues to exert an unshakeable grip on her writing till her last volume to date – constitutes the core and the foundation of the inner world represented in all of Didion's writing. The affairs she writes about in her novels, and the current events she comments upon in her essays all refer to a primordial sense of unity, forever lost or never had; they convey the loss of the ideal that creates the silent, unacknowledged center of California identity, yet it is also this gnawing sense of "the center that does not hold" that enables Didion's critical perspective and that informs her scathing criticism of America and the West.[114]

What is often overlooked in the critical assessment of Didion's writing is her reluctance to paint California in any other color than white.

Critics praise her skills as a journalist, writing with sensitivity and perceptiveness, and as a novelist who draws with fine lines an arcane and subtle portrayal of American character. Yet for Didion, the history of California begins with her family crossing the Great Plains, the implication being that the land was empty and full of promise. When she comments on the failure of the American Dream, she never mentions the fact that it was always a mirage and that the paradise was never to be.

This silencing of a heterogeneous history of California and the polyphony of voices that it should be, if it aspires to an accurate presentation, may be assessed as a melancholy characteristic.[115] In Didion, her distorted representation of California or, to paraphrase Sontag, her faithfulness to objects at the expense of people, is combined with her faithfulness to things, the core object of her affection being the land of California itself. Such faithfulness to the world of objects comes at a price. The disillusionment, which becomes the melancholy writer's curse, may be countered in one way: as Benjamin argues, "The only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory".[116] Commenting on this fragment, Sontag asserts, "indeed, (...) allegory is the way of reading the world typical of melancholics".[117] As they see the world crumbling apart, the melancholics such as Didion (or Benjamin) allow themselves the pleasure of interpreting the world allegorically, thus coping with their own bleak perception of the surrounding ruins.[118] For Didion, the apathy that followed the social and cultural revolt of the 1960s is a clear sign that "the center" no longer "holds"[119]; to quote Baudrillard, "There is no centre anymore"[120]: equipped with such a diagnosis of society, in her novels she presents a vision of California – and America – that is an allegory of the ideals of Manifest Destiny and the energy that went into settling the West.

Notes

1 California is not the only region that lends itself to analysis in the light of its mythic construction. In her insightful analysis of Southern exceptionalism, Leigh Anne Duck comments on the regional preoccupations of writers and points out their double function. She writes,

> The concentration of racial or ethnic groups in certain regions – such as Mexican Americans in the Southwest or Asian Americans along the West Coast – suggests that regionalism, in its prioritization of local experience, could serve as a vehicle to promote broader recognition of the nation's diversity. But while progressive writers may use regionalist representations to expand and enrich democratic and critical discourse, regionalism may also be used to support or to mask particularist currents within U.S. nationalism.
>
> (Duck, *Nation's Region*, 31–2)

I thank Dominika Ferens for this reference.

2 Malcolm Bradbury, *Dangerous Pilgrimages*, 484.

3 Usher Henderson observes, in a comment relating to *Play It as It Lays* and its cinematographic technique, "Didion may be saying that in certain cases the novel can explain and penetrate character more fully than the film can" ("Edenic Vision", 36); to add to Henderson's observation, one may be tempted to say that the fact that Didion explores the themes of California history and identity with equal focus in her journalism and in her novels might suggest that the novel can, and indeed does, explicate character more fully than any other medium.

One critic who pays great attention to Didion's flirt with Hollywood is Chip Rhodes, who in his study *Politics, Desire, and the Hollywood Novel* explores many facets of Didion's engagement with the movie industry in a chapter devoted to the author.

4 To praise Didion's third work of fiction, John Romano repeats the overused argument against Didion's novels: "something that is often said about Joan Didion [is] that her essays are excellent, whereas her fiction is only just good". Romano, "Joan Didion and Her Characters", 142.

5 For more on some of the authors mentioned here, see, e.g., my "Utopian Project of Identity: The Case of Helena Modrzejewska" in *Anglica Wratislaviensia*, vol. 46; "Melancholic Opera: Representation of Emigrants in Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* and *Manon Lescaut*" in *Words and Music*, ed. Victor Kennedy; "California after the U.S. Conquest and the Status Anxiety: Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don*" in *Narrating American Gender and Ethnic Identities*, eds. Aleksandra Różalska and Grażyna Zygadło; "Remembering the Loss, Constructing the Future: Time and Memory in Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona*" in "*Hours Like Bright Sweets in a Jar" – Time and Temporality in Literature and Culture*, ed. Alicja Bemben and Sonia Front.

6 The importance of the frontier as an idea, in relation to Turner's Frontier Thesis, will be the subject of my analysis below, in the second part of the Introduction.

7 Carey McWilliams, *Southern California Country*, 150–1.

8 Edmundo O'Gorman, *Invention of America*, 2.

9 Joan Didion, *South and West*, 126.

10 Edward Albee, untitled, *The New York Times*, 18 September 1966.

11 Raab writes about this pain in his poem, "The Invention of Nostalgia". Lawrence Raab, *The History of Forgetting*. For various understandings of nostalgia, see, e.g., Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*; Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*; Frederick Jameson, "Nostalgia for the Present", *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (1989); or Dylan Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay*.

12 Jan Zita Grover, "Girl of the Golden West", 8–9.

13 Eva-Sabine Zehelein, "'A good deal about California'", 2. Even President Barack Obama, who presented her with the medal, expressed a similar sentiment: "I'm surprised she hasn't already gotten this award" (John Arit, "What It Looks Like", n.p.). *The Atlantic Wire* article concerning the event has a slightly ambiguous title "What It Looks Like When Joan Didion Accepts an Award as Big as She Is", which hints at Didion's stature as an American novelist, but perhaps also at her notoriously frail figure. This preoccupation with the novelist's body prevails: "The crowd in the East Room erupted for Ms. Didion, the novelist and essayist, who needed assistance in getting to the stage" (Erin Banco, n.p.), which is also a testimony to how difficult it is to categorize and dissect her writing.

14 Zehelein, "'A good deal about California'", 3.

15 H. Jennifer Brady, "Points West", 452–3.

16 Zehelein, "'A good deal about California'", 4.
17 John Hollowell states, "Didion's novels (…) are only superficially about the women or about the trouble; on a deeper level, they are about the making of meaning, and the writer's inability or unwillingness to do just that". Hollowell, "Against Interpretation", 164.
18 Zehelein's essay starts with an expression of astonishment at how the critical reception of Didion's oeuvre falls below the standards expected of a writer of Didion's stature ("'A good deal about California'", 1). Her essay proposes an understanding of Didion's work stretched along a trajectory between "Apocalypse" and "Utopia".
19 Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes insightfully about the dismissal of Didion's prose by her detractors:

> Didion is a talented woman writing a nicely turned prose style; her subject is really an up-dated version of the passive heroine of the sentimental novel, interesting because of the tenderness of her sensibilities, but doomed to destruction because of her inability to translate these feelings into meaningful action. Such a reading of Didion's fiction comes dangerously close to applauding the author for having produced an aesthetic/emotional 'set piece,' artistically effective, perhaps, but not 'significant'.
>
> ("New American Heroine", 124)

Needless to say, Griffin Wolff's essay is an intervention aimed at such a dismissal of Didion's writing.
20 Although the sources are numerous, one should note two critics writing about Turner before the New Western Historians: Ray Allen Billington in his 1958 study of the American frontier discusses the importance of Turner's thesis with attention to subtleties comparable to that of Michael Steiner, who discusses Turner's thesis in a number of publications, most notably in "The Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis", where he points to the shift in focus of Turner's thinking, from frontier to region.
21 On the other hand, mourning the past while announcing the arrival of the future is a peculiarly Californian predilection. In his thought-provoking study of promotional literature and pioneer memoirs, David M. Wrobel hints at that tendency when he states,

> in the midst of the shift from the agrarian and small town to the industrial and urban, western promoters hurriedly raced toward the future, often announcing its presence before it had actually arrived, while old settlers lamented that arrival and expressed their reverence for past times.
>
> (Wrobel, Promised Lands, 2)

22 David Wyatt writes comprehensively about westering in his 1986 study *The Fall into Eden*.
23 William Irwin Thompson writes poignantly about the relationship between the European and American versions of history, stating: "the search for history shifted from Europe to L.A." (*Edge of History*, 8). As he situates Los Angeles as the city of the future, he claims, "the Los Angelization of the planet becomes quite possible" (*Edge of History*, 14).
24 Concentrating on Didion's use of the autobiographical genre, Gerri Reaves writes about Didion's interventions, stating, Didion

> maps a new intersection between genre, self, and place in her work: the nexus of disassembling genre, the poststructuralist concept of self, and a consciousness of the roles geography and mapping play in writing the

> self and nation. Didion's paradigms are the reality that belies the enticing fictions of traditional autobiography.
>
> (119)

25 Patricia Limerick, *Legacy*, 25.
26 Turner's Thesis obviously did not come into being in isolation from various sources of inspiration; explaining the foundations of Turner's idea, Michael Steiner quotes nineteenth-century writer Friedrich Ratzel, who claimed, "the breadth of land has furnished to the American spirit something of its own largeness" ("Significance", 449). Steiner also stresses the fact that Turner "credited Ralph Waldo Emerson for drawing his attention to the effects of vast geographical space upon American activity and character". Turner, "Frontier", 452–3.
27 John Tirman writes about the enduring myth of the frontier in the context of the presidential campaign of 2008 and states, "the run for the White House recycled the frontier myth with scarcely a nod to its growing irrelevance" ("Future", n.p.).
28 Tracy Daugherty writes about Didion's conservative political stance in an eloquent manner, mentioning her "archconservative values" (*Last Love Song*, 170), and describing her as being at odds with her liberal social circles (*Last Love Song*, 170–4, 242–50). Charles L. Crow points out that Didion writes "from what is essentially a California version of a Tory sensibility" (*Regional Literatures*, 388).
29 Turner, "Frontier", 2.
30 This issue is undertaken in the present study in Chapter 4.
31 Turner, "Frontier", 15.
32 To mention but a few of the numerous ways in which the topos of the American frontier is utilized, one may refer to the classic use of the frontier myth in relation to the exploration of space (cf. Wernher von Braun, *Space Frontier*). More recently, for instance, Rosa Ainley discusses new frontiers from the perspective of gay and lesbian studies and cultural studies (*Bodies and Gender*), while Helen McLure writes about the image of the frontier in the context of electronic space ("Wild, Wild Web").
33 Patricia Limerick writes eloquently about the mythical appeal of the frontier in *The Legacy of Conquest*: see esp. 323–4. Writing about representations of the US–Mexican border in cinema, Camilla Fojas states that it has always been depicted as "a lawless place ruled by a dark mythology, and home to every illicit activity and industry". Fojas states, "The cultural connotations of the borderlands are endless", and she enumerates them as including "lacuna, fringe, outskirts, aporia, abyss, gap, or (…) horizon, threshold, and boundary". Fojas claims that ultimately, the meaning of a border is indeed wide: "borders suggest limits—the end and beginning of things or the edge to which you take things before the risk turns to crisis or sanity to madness" (*Border Bandits*, 183). Thus, cinematic representations of the frontier suggest an almost unlimited repertory of images, testifying to the frontier's allure and its mythical character.
34 Limerick, *Legacy*, 26.
35 Joan Didion, *Last Thing*, 135–56.
36 Steiner points out: "He came to see the frontier as a fleeting process, the section as an enduring fact of American history" ("Significance", 448).
37 New Western Historians have been particularly fastidious in their reassessment of the Frontier Thesis. For a thorough analysis, see e.g., William Cronon (*Uncommon Ground*), Richard White and Patricia Limerick (*The Frontier*), or Donald Worster (*Under Western Skies*). And yet, they focus

on Turner's Frontier Thesis without considering his more mature preoccupation with the region. I am grateful to Michael Steiner for directing my attention to this issue. For more, see Michael C. Steiner's article "Regions, Regionalism, and Place" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*, as well as his essay "From Frontier to Region: Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Western History".

38 Steiner is not uncritical of Turner's theories as he states, "Much of his sectional theorizing is misguided, wishful thinking" (1979: 464), but he stresses nevertheless the importance of Turner's sectional theory:

> Sectionalism (…) answered many psychological and social needs: it provided a resting place and a sense of community after so many centuries of westward migration; it nurtured an awareness of the environment that broke the pioneer pattern of mining the land and moving on; it implied a healthy cultural diversity that diverted the urban-industrial glacier; it encouraged the sense of American uniqueness; and it offered an alternative to 'toxic' European nationalism.
>
> ("Significance", 458)

Thus, Steiner illustrates how for Turner finding a local point of reference becomes more crucial than the grand narrative of the push westwards and the myth of the frontier: it is more productive, as it offers a model of sustainable existence, and it is less melancholic and more optimistic, as it allows for a celebration of American diversity while at the same time presenting it as the source of American distinctiveness. It is Turner's Sectional Thesis, not his Frontier Thesis, that represents a viable alternative to the homogeneous, rigid basis of American and Californian identity found in the pioneering endeavor.

39 I use the phrase after Dominika Ferens who writes about the insular and the marginal spaces of anthropology and literature in her 2010 study (*Small Places*).

40 More often than not, critics see in Didion's writing a reflection of and on American character. My argument would be that it is only when Didion gives up the grand scale that her writing becomes less melancholic and devoid of the air of tragic loss that permeates her texts.

41 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself", 952.

42 Walt Whitman, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" 327–32.

43 Edward Said, "Zionism", 27.

44 Said, "Zionism", 26–7.

45 Writing as recently as 2005, Douglas V. Meed states, "Including Texas, the Mexicans had surrendered more than 1,200,000 square miles to the United States. Within a few decades, the vast empty spaces of these rich lands would swarm with peoples from all over the globe". Meed, *The Mexican War*, 78.

46 The term "melancholia" obviously has a rich history; my aim in this study is to present melancholia in a Freudian and Benjaminian perspective, without referencing such authors as Robert Burton, whose *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) readily comes to mind when one mentions melancholia. My use of the term is limited to a modern understanding of the phenomenon. For a discussion of Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* and a thorough analysis of the historical development of the concept, see *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art*, Raymond Klinbansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl (1964) or *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva*, ed. Jennifer Radden (2000). Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* has been analyzed in

numerous books, articles, and essays covering a multitude of disciplines, and a thorough examination of this reference in Didion is beyond the scope of the present study. It is, however, worth mentioning that an understanding of Burton's text would be greatly aided by such analyses as Lawrence Babb's (1959), Mark Breitenberg's (1996), Ruth A. Fox's (1976), or Devon Hodges's (1985).

47 Joan Didion, *Where I Was From*, 157.

48 One is tempted to quote T.J. Clark here, "Ah, nostalgia, nostalgia – that most realistic of interpretative tropes". Clark, "Benjamin", 32.

49 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 169. I argue here for an implicit connection between psychoanalysis and literary and cultural studies. Esther Rashkin writes insightfully on this matter, claiming that the relationship between psychoanalysis and the cultural studies need not be "vexed". She stresses, "psychoanalysis galvanizes – in a way that no other discipline can – the contact between texts and social, historical, and political contexts. It illuminates obscured ideology and exposes cultural connections that would otherwise remain unseen" (*Unspeakable Secrets*, 1–2). For a more extensive discussion, see Rashkin (2008).

50 Freud draws a comparison rather than a contrast between melancholia and mourning, pointing out that they are both reactions to the same factors. The trigger in both cases is loss, most often of a significant person, sometimes of an abstract idea, and even though he suggests that in melancholia the loss is more likely to be of an ideal kind, he dismisses any clear differentiation. With mourning, he states in the opening passages of the essay, any interference into the process would be "useless or even harmful", and what is in fact needed is time; to deal with the termination of melancholy he requires more time and comes to a tentative proposition at the end of his rumination: it might be that either "the fury has spent itself" or that "the object has been abandoned as valueless" (3053). In either case, Freud admits it is impossible to determine what brings melancholia to an end. Such helplessness is rather characteristic of his approach to melancholia. For instance, later in the same essay, Freud discusses the detachment of libido from the love-object. He calls the process "long drawn-out and gradual" (3052) and admits a certain helplessness again when saying that the "sequence is not easy to decide" (3052).

51 The blurriness of this distinction is finally resolved in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). This evolution of his views is widely noted by critics (among them Judith Butler). What in "Mourning and Melancholia" he finds puzzling, he later incorporates in his revised theory. Instances of his sense of astonishment abound. Discussing the melancholic disposition, he writes, "the inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely" (3043); and later on the same page: "This picture of a delusion of (mainly moral) inferiority is completed by (…) – what is psychologically very remarkable – by an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life" (3043). Here, Freud hints at what he later develops into the idea of the death drive, but for now, he seems unable to resolve the quandary of setting a clear-cut division between mourning and melancholia.

52 For more on the issue of impossibility in psychoanalysis, see Andrea Hurst's study, esp. pages 146–83.

53 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 204, emphasis in the original.

54 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 19.

55 For an essay defining melancholia, see Alban Jeanneu in Alain de Mijolla, 1037–8. For Freud, the first distinguishing factor between mourning and

melancholia is that "the disturbance of self-regard is absent in mourning" (Sigmund Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3042) – he elaborates on this feature later, when he states that in melancholia we are dealing with "an impoverishment of [the] ego on a grand scale" (Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3043). He proceeds to explain what the "work of mourning" consists of: the loss of an object of love is followed by a demand that libido be "withdrawn from its attachments to that object" (Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3042), which, however, is met with opposition. The process of mourning, Freud states, is gradual, and necessarily takes time, during which "the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged" (Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3042).

56 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3042.

57 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3042.

58 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 129. For a discussion of "the fantasmatic nature" of one's identification as e.g., American or Californian, see Žižek (1998) 190–218.

59 A similar frustration is felt in Freud, too. Attempting to explain the difference between the work of mourning and melancholia, Freud states that the distinguishing factor lies in the awareness of the process: "melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious" (*Complete Psychological Works*, 3043). This statement, however definite it sounds, follows his earlier unclear distinction between the lost object's character: in melancholia, he suggests, the loss is "of a more ideal kind" though it can also be, like mourning, a reaction to a loss of a beloved person. A final distinction between the two states is that "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (*Complete Psychological Works*, 3043). As much as Freud struggles with establishing a clear-cut delineation between the two states, he insists on it only to abandon it later. In *The Ego and the Id* his discussion of mourning and melancholia is distinctly marked with hesitation and cautiousness.

60 Joan Didion, *Blue Nights*, 9.

61 Didion, *Blue Nights*, 11.

62 Paul Verhaege writes about "a central loss around which the ego is constituted" ("Causation and Destitution", 166–7) within the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis. For more on this issue, see Verhaege, 1998.

63 The work of mourning, like melancholia, depends on an initial great significance of the object for the ego, and like melancholia it depends on a gradual detachment of libido from the love object, confirmed by a reality check that the object no longer exists. The attachment is severed with a narcissistic satisfaction about being alive. The difference is, however, that for the melancholic, the relation to the object is "complicated by conflict due to ambivalence" (3052).

64 Joan Didion, *The White Album*, 64.

65 Joan Didion, *Slouching*, 174.

66 Didion, *Slouching*, 176.

67 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3052.

68 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3052.

69 Ellie Ragland-Sullivan provides an insightful analysis of the topos of the psyche and the differences between Lacan and Freud on the subject in her essay. For more on this issue, see Ragland-Sullivan, "What Is 'I'?", 1–67.

70 Didion, *Slouching*, 171–2.

71 Didion, *Slouching*, 172.

72 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3053.
73 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3053.
74 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3053.
75 On the issue of endings in psychoanalysis see Fausta Ferraro and Alessandro Garella's study (*Endings*, 2009).
76 The most important implication of Freud's theory of melancholia is that he presents melancholia as an ego-constituting process. He introduces the category of "conscience" that he describes as a critical agency that splinters off from the ego and contends that: "in the clinical picture of melancholia, dissatisfaction with the ego on moral grounds is the most outstanding feature" (Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3045).
77 Apart from the moral category, curiously enough it is poverty or the fear thereof that the patient preoccupies him/herself with. Later on, Freud comments on it and says that this fear probably derives from "anal eroticism which has been torn out of its context and altered in a regressive sense" (Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3049). Didion tackles this fear when she writes about an illusion that she designates typically Californian:

> Good times today and better times tomorrow were supposed to come with the territory, roll in with the regularity of the breakers (…). Good times were the core conviction of the place, and it was their only gradually apparent absence, in the early 1990s, that began to unsettle California in ways that no one exactly wanted to plumb.
>
> (Where I Was From, 129)

78 Anne Anlin Cheng, *Melancholy*, xi.
79 Racial melancholia, an inspired concept, is beyond the scope of my discussion here. Cheng develops this concept in her study of Asian American literature in *The Melancholy of Race* (2001) and proposes that the dominant American identity operates melancholically. David L. Eng and Shinhee Han undertake a similar theme in their "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia" (2000); it is also a guiding notion in Eng's *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (2001). I refer to Cheng's theory of melancholia in Chapter 4 of the present study.
80 Cheng, *Melancholy*, xi.
81 For more on the issue of voice and attachment, see Renata Salecl, "I Can't Love You", 179–207.
82 Judith Butler, *Psychic Life*, 186.
83 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 181. The initial loss, however, is that of an object, and this loss alters both the ego – as it splits into conscience and the ego, subjected to the judgment of the critical agency – and the object – it becomes "magical, a trace of some kind". Butler notes the shift in the stance of the ego: "The ego now stands for the object, and the critical agency comes to represent the ego's disowned rage, reified as a psychic agency separate from the ego itself". Not only does the ego gain conscience, but also a voice, as the melancholic is said to require the presence of others to berate him-/herself. Butler explains that the criticisms voiced against oneself are not a reflection of those that the lost object once voiced against the ego; instead, "they are reproaches leveled against the other that now turn back upon the ego". Butler, *Psychic Life*, 180–1.
84 Butler comments on this parallelism, stating:

> The 'critical agency' of the melancholic is at once a social and psychic instrument. This super-egoic conscience is not simply analogous to the state's military power over its citizenry; the state cultivates melancholia

> among its citizenry precisely as a way of dissimulating and displacing its own ideal authority. This is not to suggest that conscience is a simple instantiation of the state; on the contrary, it is the vanishing point of the state's authority, its psychic idealization, and, in that sense, its disappearance as an external object.
>
> (Butler, *Psychic Life*, 190–1)

85 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 182.
86 For a detailed discussion of conscience in Freud, see Paul Ricoeur (1970), esp. pages 182–215.
87 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 183.
88 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 190.
89 Because of the social angle from which Butler analyzes Freud's essay on melancholia, she pays particular attention to the idea of conscience both as a psychic and as a social mechanism; as she says, "the account of melancholy is an account of how psychic and social domains are produced in relation to one another" (1997: 167). Butler's perspective is central to my understanding of Californian identity, as it brings together the psychic dimension of melancholia and its expression in the social sphere. In this view, as the by-product of melancholia, conscience becomes a social phenomenon as well. Butler explains the process through which conscience comes into being, stressing "ambivalence" and "aggression" in the ego, which she then transposes onto the social sphere; her insistence on the social facet of melancholia and identity mean, however, a crucial deviation from the classic Freudian understanding of the concept.
90 Didion, *White Album*, 174.
91 Didion, *White Album*, 179.
92 Didion, *White Album*, 178.
93 "Wagon train morality" is discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.
94 A melancholy person, Freud posits, complains, and voices self-derogatory remarks. Freud explains that "the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it to the patient's own ego" (3046); and proposes that such a tiresome behavior ensues from "a mental constellation of revolt" which later develops into "the crushed state of melancholia" (3046). This remark is taken by Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha independently to elaborate on the social aspect of the psychic processes, through which the melancholic revolt becomes productive of authority's undermining.
95 What seems to interest Butler most is the social dimension of melancholia, despite that, as she states at the beginning, "it is not immediately clear how melancholy might be read (…) in terms of social life" (167). For an epigraph of the chapter she chooses a quote from The Ego and the Id, and, to be sure, she refers to this text often enough, to show how Freud's vision of the death drive evolved; as she remarks, in the later work Freud "comes to recognize that the work of melancholia may well be in the service of the death drive" (188).
96 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 188.
97 Didion, *White Album*, 11.
98 Butler's critique of the Freudian theory of melancholia and her commentary allow for an assumption of melancholia as a social affliction, not a personal predicament. She traces Freud's development of the idea of the melancholic ego, exposing its logical fissures, taking on the idea that when the object of love is no longer to be found, the ego "turns back upon itself" and it becomes simultaneously its own object of love and aggression. Hence

Butler's question: "what is this 'self' that takes itself as its own object?" (1997: 168), and her indirect response, "it is unclear that this ego can exist prior to its melancholia" (1997: 168). She gives a more categorical answer when she states, "only by turning back on itself does the ego acquire the status of a perceptual object" (1997: 168), and adds, "in fact, the very articulation of this psychic space, sometimes figured as 'internal,' depends on this melancholic turn" (1997: 168).

99 Didion, *White Album*, 15.

100 Joan Didion, *After Henry*, 230.

101 Didion, *Slouching*, 4.

102 Didion, *White Album*, 83.

103 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 174–5. In a melancholic ego formation the critical agency levels accusations against the ego: the melancholic's low self-esteem is one of the characteristic features of melancholia. As Butler notes, Freud makes clear that they are, in fact, charges that the ego would have directed against the object. The ego incorporates both love and anger towards the object, which leads Butler to state that melancholia can be understood as an internalizing procedure. It is "a psychic state that has effectively substituted itself for the world in which it dwells" (1997: 179). For Butler, the ultimate consequence of melancholia seems to be "the loss of the social world" (1997: 179). Here, Butler seems to disregard Freud's distinction between the processes of mourning and melancholia: "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (3043).

104 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 169.

105 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 169.

106 As a result of the melancholic rift the psychic life yields to representation; an effect of the same process is a depiction of social sphere, too. Yet a consequence that is impossible to underestimate is the representation of the subject. It is ultimately melancholia that enables the subject's articulation and becomes a prerequisite for speech itself: "Only upon such withdrawal", writes Butler about the melancholic incorporation of libido in the ego, "can the ego emerge as (…) something that might be represented at all" (Butler, *Psychic Life*, 177).

107 I am indebted here to Ali Behdad's idea of "belatedness" which he develops in *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*. Behdad explains: "Postcolonial practices are the belated return of the repressed histories of resistance" (6), and it is this ideological resistance and revolt that is hinted at in the reference to belatedness.

108 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3053.

109 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 170.

110 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 170.

111 Numerous historians write about California Indian groups, now with more sympathy than ever before. Among them are, for instance, Cristina M. Hebebrand, Albert Hurtado, Arthur F. McEvoy, Clare V. McKanna, Jr., Martha Menchaca, Barry M. Pritzker, to name but a few.

112 The very idea of representation is strictly interconnected to melancholia: as Butler points out, "the prefiguration of the topographical distinction between ego and super-ego is itself dependent upon melancholia. Melancholia produces the possibility for the representation of psychic life" (1997: 177). Melancholia then informs the split between the two structures within the psychic landscape; the spatial metaphor for this rift is important in itself, as it enables the portrayal of these two categories in terms of spheres of mutual impact.

113 It is the same split that brings about the existence of the psychic critical institution of conscience. Butler stresses that it is an integral part of the melancholic process; she proposes a definition of melancholia that describes it as

> a process by which an originally external object is lost, or an ideal is lost, and the refusal to break the attachment to such an object or ideal leads to the withdrawal of the object into the ego, the replacement of the object by the ego, and the setting up of an inner world in which a critical agency is split off from the ego and proceeds to take the ego as its object.
> (Butler, *Psychic Life*, 179)

114 The critical agency, the conscience, is described by Freud as an institution: Butler comments on this formulation, claiming that "the ego and its various parts are accessible through a metaphorical language that attributes social content and structure to these presumably psychic phenomena" (Butler, *Psychic Life*, 178). Conscience, the ego and the melancholic processes are all depicted in a language that also illustrates social processes: the parallel between the social and the psychic is strongly exhibited in Butler's commentary.

115 Analogically, Sontag proposes Benjamin's detachment to be the result of his saturnine character: "If this melancholy temperament is faithless to people, it has good reason to be faithful to things" (*Saturn*, 120), and she explains such a disposition further: "The melancholic sees the world itself become a thing: refuge, solace, enchantment" (*Saturn*, 125).

116 Walter Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 185.

117 Susan Sontag, *Saturn*, 124. Similarly, Julia Kristeva asserts, "According to Walter Benjamin, it is allegory (…) that best achieves melancholy tension". Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 101. For an extensive discussion of Benjamin and Kristeva, see Marcus Bullock, "Bad Company", Dan Cohn-Sherbrook, *Fifty Key Jewish Thinkers*, Alexander Mette, "Review of Walter Benjamin", Daniel Purdy, *On the Ruins of Babel*, and Sarah Ley Roff, "Benjamin and Psychoanalysis".

118 Rainer Naegele comments on the convergences between Benjamin and Freud in their writing about allegory and states that "The tradition of allegorization is also a work of repression in the guise of a 'higher' preservation" (*Beyond Psychology*, 467); allegory in this perspective is revealed as a process of suppressing the undesired elements. One can clearly see such an impulse behind Didion's work: California's status as an earthly paradise is preserved in its allegorical presentation; yet, this work of preservation can only be performed at the expense of an expurgation of the heterogeneity of histories.

119 Didion, *Slouching*, 84.

120 Jean Baudrillard, *America*, 107.

1 The Loss of Nature

> The whole gigantic sweep of the San Joaquin expanded, Titanic, before the eye of the mind, flagellated with heat, quivering and shimmering under the sun's red eye. At long intervals, a faint breath of wind out of the south passed slowly over the levels of the baked and empty earth, accentuating the silence, marking off the stillness. It seemed to exhale from the land itself, a prolonged sigh as of deep fatigue. It was the season after the harvest, and the great earth, the mother, after its period of reproduction, its pains of labour, delivered of the fruit of its loins, slept the sleep of exhaustion, the infinite repose of the colossus, benignant, eternal, strong, the nourisher of nations, the feeder of an entire world.
>
> —Frank Norris, *The Octopus*

The relationship between Californians and the natural world in Joan Didion's novels can best be described as problematic: it vacillates between the conquering spirit of the nineteenth-century settlers and what comes close to a modern-day ecological awareness, becoming an anachronistic monument, written by the emigrants' daughter to commemorate a past that is lost forever: the lost natural paradise that has never been anything more than an ideal. Didion's writing celebrates the ethical code, found in the idealized, imagined natural world (which is related to the idea discussed further on in this chapter, namely, that California existed first as an ideal before it was put on the map and represented in literature), to which the emigrants were faithful and which was abandoned by their heirs.

In this chapter, I start by sketching out the main paradox underlying the traditional representation of nature in California, linking it to the particular brand that Didion's prose represents. Nature, obviously a complicated and contested concept, will be understood here to encompass the elements of animate and inanimate landscape, together with the complex, dynamic dependencies that exist between these elements; it is thus a changeable system in which humans are one of the many coexisting parts. This definition of nature is inspired by Aldo Leopold's land ethic, which he describes as an enlargement of the circle of the community "to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land".[1] Understanding nature in light of the land ethic means recognizing the

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call that comes from the land: the land itself issues an ethical demand on people. Rather than drawing on the concept of a higher being as a source of ethics, a more productive framework can be found within what Joanna Żylinska calls "a nonsystemic ethics",[2] inspired by Emmanuel Levinas, which recognizes the ethical call of the Levinasian "otherwise than being": as Żylinska explains, it is "a place of absolute alterity that cannot be subsumed by the conceptual categories at our disposal".[3] The ethical demand to respond to the other is thus placed outside the system of validation provided by the divine figure; instead, its source is one's environs. Even though in Didion's prose, the references to Christianity are clear (and they provide an additional dimension of the ambiguity with which California is represented, as the land is heavenly and hellish at the same time), the ethical demand comes from the land itself. Didion is not the only one to recognize such an injunction: Gary Snyder warns against a situation in which there are "just 'rights' and no land ethic".[4] Snyder anchors the ethical call in the Californian context, hinting at Leopold's classic, "The Land Ethic", which Carolyn Merchant calls "the modern form of ecocentric ethics".[5] Didion's characters in *Run River* and *Play It as It Lays* try – and fail – to do precisely that: to go beyond their personal, human limitations and enlarge the bounds of community to embrace the land. Thus, the question that Didion poses about the reason and the end of redemption of the overland crossing, and, consequently, the question about human place within nature, must be placed in the context of nonsystemic, ecocentric ethics.

Even though the main landscapes represented in Didion's first two novels that I analyze in this chapter are the river delta of the San Joaquin Valley and the cityscape of Hollywood, I focus on the representations of a much more sparse and unforgiving landscape, that of the desert.[6] For Didion, the desert signals the impossibility of possession of the land and a denial of human ingenuity and power; thus, it becomes a complex symbol of unconquerable nature itself, standing in stark contrast to the supposedly tamed "gardens" of the West. Yet this impossibility of conquering the land goes against one of the main ideas of Didion's fiction: that of the frontier. As its underlying assumption is an anachronistic one, Didion's prose proposes to undertake an impossible task: that of presenting California as both a mythical and a historical reality.

Problems with American Nature

The paradox of deified nature can be traced back to the philosopher and poet who influenced American nature writing to an unprecedented degree: Ralph Waldo Emerson; Lawrence Buell calls his *Nature* "the American locus classicus".[7] Nature, itself divine, bestowing divinity upon humankind which is found in Emerson's writing, parallels the presentation of a redeeming and redeemed landscape which preoccupies

Didion. As he recognizes the importance of Emerson's writing, Buell also draws attention to its more problematic aspect: "Emerson's vision of man coming into his godship through the conquest of nature reads suspiciously like an apology for westward expansion".[8] Justification of the push of the frontier would be one of the answers to Didion's pressing question of the reason of redemption that emigration to the West was supposed to provide. "Know, then, that the world exists for you", urges Emerson of his fellow Americans, prophesying "the kingdom of man over nature"[9] – these are the sentiments that Didion finds challenging in her writing, advocating an examination of the reasons behind Emerson's confidence, beyond the obvious theological prescriptiveness of Emerson's brand of Transcendentalism, and beyond the false recognition of Californian nature in terms of a paradisiacal space offering itself to the explorer and the settler.

Problems with the Garden of Eden

Imagining California as the Garden of Eden has a long tradition[10]; Bernard DeVoto states, "There are two visions of the West which can be neither fused nor fully differentiated. Both are creations of longing and desire",[11] and he notes that one of them is the "everlasting Eden", or, to evoke Henry Nash Smith's formulation, "the Garden of the World".[12] Michael Steiner tells us that this vision is universal: "Dreams of promised lands to the West – of new Edens or Elysian Fields shimmering on the horizon – have captivated many cultures across time".[13] Mark Royden Winchell states decisively, "throughout much of American history, the image of California (…) has had a fixed *mythic* identity".[14] Kevin Starr reminds us of the mythic beginnings of California's literary existence when he states, "California entered history as a myth".[15] James E. Vance, Jr. makes a similar observation, noting that "the beginning of California, and its pubescence, were both creations of idealization rather than organic life".[16] Starr relates the story of the first mention of California in literature and points to a romance by García Rodríguez de Montalvo, published in 1510 in Seville, entitled *Las Sergas de Esplandián*. In Montalvo's novel, California is described as an island – a geographical mistake that persisted for centuries[17] – in close proximity to the Earthly Paradise.[18] Ruth Putnam, who discusses extensively the etymology of the name, notes that even the first mention of the name carries a certain ambiguity about its meaning. She remarks, "It is just possible that the name 'California' may owe its existence to a union of high hopes and deep disappointment",[19] which suggests that exuberant expectations on the one hand and bitter disillusionment on the other are as much distinctive traits of the place as they are characteristics of its name. David Wyatt points to a similar vagueness attributed to California when he states that "California has always been a place no sooner

had than lost".[20] He remarks on California's status as the last frontier and comments on the ambiguity inherent in its being the end point of westward exploration, stating:

> So great was the beauty of the land that it conferred on the completion of the quest the illusion of a return to a privileged source. As the sense of an ending merged with the wonder of beginnings, California as last chance merged with California as Eden.[21]

In a similar vein, H.H. Bancroft describes California as "a winterless earth's end perpetually refreshed by ocean", unsurpassed by any mythical land.[22] Yet an inherent ambiguity of California as a paradisiacal land is that it is never free from the pressure exerted by economy; Douglas Cazaux Sackman[23] suggests that the mythical California "was cultivated by boosters who put their distinctive stamp on nature and used it to advertise California's attractions and imperial potential".[24] It reveals that the tension between "cultivation" and "nature" is what creates so much trouble: it parallels the need to impose epistemological boundaries combined with an insistence that it simultaneously remain illimitable.[25]

To perceive California as a Garden of Eden before putting it on the map means to attribute it with distinctive traits which mark it as different from the ordinary human sphere before it is allowed to function as the same. It is reminiscent of what Louis Althusser describes as "space without places, time without duration"[26]; in other words, it can never be what it promises to be, yet it can never cease promising to be what it cannot be.[27]

Such ambiguity or even falseness of meaning attached to California is revealed in the text that proved disastrous in a very real, physical sense. In *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*, Lansford Warren Hastings describes California in the following manner:

> In a word, I will remark that in my opinion, there is no country, in the known world, possessing a soil so fertile and productive, with such varied and inexhaustible resources, and a climate of such mildness, uniformity and salubrity; nor is there a country, in my opinion, now known which is so eminently calculated, by nature herself, in all respects, to promote the unbound happiness and prosperity, of civilized and enlightened men.[28]

Hastings' account enticed emigrants to travel to the brink of the frontier to seek a better future just as it was designed to. In the subtle link that it makes between nature in California and the Declaration of Independence (nature promotes limitless happiness, whose pursuit is guaranteed by the Preamble as one of the "inalienable rights"), Hastings seems to be suggesting that California is the ultimate stage of American development

as the earthly paradise for the nations of the world. The problem with his text is that Hastings did not test the route to California, and in particular, he did not survey the cutoff he promoted as the safest and fastest, which contributed to the demise of about forty emigrants from the group known as the Donner Party. To some, California's paradise proved deadly.[29]

Joan Didion refers to the stories of the overland pass, including her ancestors', to call the place where the Donner Party members met their demise "the locale that most clearly embodied the moral ambiguity of the California settlement".[30] Didion upholds this ambiguity; the questions about the meaning of emigration remain unanswered directly, yet they form the core of the problems that interest Didion in her California novels, most importantly in *Run River*; the novels which suggest that spiritual survival is indeed possible. The question of a possibility of spiritual survival requires of us that we consider those who did not make it. It requires of us that we remember those who perished. Yet it also demands of us that we live on, despite all.

The Paradoxes of Nature

Karl Kroeber distinguishes two strands in American nature writing, one deriving from Thoreau, and the other, un-Thoreauvian. Identifying the latter[31] as a source of inspiration for modern nature writing, Kroeber describes the natural world as a set of "fantastically complicated interrelations" within all "ecosystems" guided by "the multiplicity of evanescent processes within a totality continuously reconstituting itself in response to a unique play of internal and external pressures – to no transcendental purpose".[32] These dynamic systems stand in stark contrast to the understanding of a place as a mythical land; the Garden of Eden can never "continuously reconstitute itself", as there is no need for such a process in an ideal place. The rigidity of the myth stands in clear opposition to the dynamism of nature.

Didion explores these two poles of California's image, and at times comes quite close to a deep ecological approach. She expresses her awareness of the water cycle saying, "The water I will drink tonight in a restaurant in Hollywood is by now well down the Los Angeles Aqueduct from the Owens River"; in fact, she describes her interest in water as "obsessive".[33] Didion explains her interest in one particular element of the natural, that is water, by its delineating aspect: "The West begins where the average annual rainfall drops below twenty inches", she says, quoting DeVoto.[34] She finds this definition to be particularly useful, yet she admits, "A certain external reality remains, and resists interpretation".[35] As she struggles to describe the subject of her musings, she exposes the fluidity and complexity that make her endeavor difficult, if not impossible: in this, her thinking approximates deep ecology.

DeVoto encapsulates the relationship between the emigrants and the vision they followed in words that also suggest the duality of this vision:

> If the American West was to be an agrarian Utopia, it was also the earthly paradise. It made those who reached it larger than life size. Nature was pure and those who sought it virtuous. In one light they were Natural Man, uncorrupted and incorruptible, noble beyond our petty selves. But in another light, the virtue that was native to the wild lands was redemptive and regenerative. Wilderness would wash man's vileness clean.[36]

Those who pursued the Edenic dream were transformed into mythical heroes; crossing the continent to reach the earthly utopia on the coast of the Pacific amounted to a mythical deed worthy of commemoration in the nation's memory. DeVoto points to a paradox inherent in the presentation of the West as a paradisiacal fulfillment of Nature's promise when he comments on both purity and purification as mutually exclusive attributes of the West: those who enter it are to be at the same time already perfect, but also need to have their imperfections removed, which suggests a corruption that obviously rules out perfection.

Didion understands this paradox well. Redemption, and the price it comes at, remains the central concern of her writing. In *Where I Was From*, a collection of essays reviewing Didion's lifetime probing of Californian identity, she asks, "The redemptive power of the crossing was, nonetheless, the fixed idea of the California settlement, and one that raised a further question: for what exactly, and at what cost, had one been redeemed?"[37] This question makes her a disobedient daughter of the Puritans[38]: she is concerned with the idea of redemption as she simultaneously casts doubt on its aim.

Writing to Remember and to Redeem

In *Run River*, California is represented as always coming into being: the necessity of forgetting and starting anew is stressed in the characterization of California as "God's own orchard"[39] in which "everything had gone all wrong".[40] Each wasted promise of Eden necessitates movement onward: that is how the history of settlement in the West turns into mythology; in Brady's words, *Run River* "charts the history of a lost world".[41] The movement transforms history into land and lived experience inscribed into the land; the past becomes what is left behind with the advance onward.

California's history in *Run River* takes a very concrete shape of the land and nature.[42] In Brady's words, "the land is the literal symbol of their destiny, the vital and real sign of the continuity between then and now".[43] In view of Żylinska's nonsystemic ethics, the ethical demand in

Didion comes from the land itself; it is the land that must be recognized as the other who places the demand on us. The denial of this ethical call coming from the land, the inability to respond to this demand, is the central problem in *Run River*.

The characters in the novel understand the vital connection between the land and history quite clearly:

> When it came down to it, (…) he [Everett] had little interest himself in using the land. Like his father, he wanted only to have it. (…) he wanted, all of his life, (…) to be standing on his own land. It had nothing to do with crops, development, profit.[44]

To take possession of the land, without considering its potential benefits, means to take control of the dominant narrative. It is not the use of land in the material way, but rather, dominating its history, that the characters in *Run River* are interested in. The vision of the past that emerges, then, is their vision: of the Donner Party, of overland travel, of pushing the frontier. It is ultimately limited to those who see themselves as coming here first. Those who control the narrative of history do not answer the ethical call of the land.

The truthfulness of Didion's vision is belied by historical reality: obviously, before the McClellans and the Knights of *Run River*, there were the Native American tribes, the Spanish colonizers, the Mexican ranchers, and other groups whose claims to the land as the first settlers would have greater validity, yet they remain in the blind spot of the novel. By removing from focus the historically underprivileged, Didion's novel at the same time presents a claim to California that is in itself melancholic: it is the dead buried in the land that legitimize the presence of the living there, and it is the response to their demand that Didion's Californian characters recognize as their ethical responsibility, failing to answer the more pressing call of the land.

The inability or unwillingness to respond to the ethical demand transforms into a misinterpretation of this call as an act of possession. Lily, *Run River*'s protagonist, misunderstands her status as Californian and equates it with possession, unable to see herself instead as a responder to the ethical call. The belief in an identity understood as possession is stated explicitly by Lily's father, who says to her, "I think nobody owns land until their dead are in it".[45] This statement is shortly followed by a declaration of possession in a conversation between Lily and her father: "'Sometimes I think this whole valley belongs to me.' 'It does, you hear me?'"[46] The symbolic bestowal of California's San Joaquin Valley upon Lily, significantly named by her father as "Lily-of-the-valley",[47] takes place after the validation of land ownership is given through a reference to the deceased.

The reference itself is fraught with ambiguities: the first and oldest grave belongs to "*Matthew Broderick Knight, January 2, 1847, until December 6, 1848*. The baby had been the first of them to die in California"

and the tomb bears the inscription, "*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down*", which is said to be ordered by the child's mother "when she was ill",[48] that is, bereaved after the loss of her child and the strenuous route to California. The first death, then, is an infantile death, marked with melancholy and bearing upon it a stamp of exile, suggested by the tombstone's inscription. For the first to make the passage to California, it was not the land of plenty, but the land of suffering and loss,[49] which replicates the experience of the first European settlers in North America (evidenced, e.g., in what is known as the Starving Time in the history of Jamestown settlement), the original "city upon a hill" and a garden of paradise to disappoint and disenchant the seekers.

In *Run River*, the deaths of characters during the course of the narrative that serve to confirm land ownership are presented as problematic. Such is the case with Ryder Channing, whose murder opens the novel: Channing is the outsider and the latecomer to the Garden of the World, and his death, like Matthew Broderick Knight's, is the culmination of a long journey to California, which is the destination in both a literal and a symbolic sense. Even more so, the uneasy validation of land possession through death is illustrated on Martha's demise, as Martha is the descendant of the pioneers and a self-proclaimed heir to their ethical system. An inability to respond to the ethical demand of the land and a simultaneous erroneous understanding of one's identity equaling possession results in the radical dissolution of the relationship of possession in death.

The characterization of Martha as the true daughter of the pioneers is ironic: her suicidal death by drowning is a gesture of the radical claim of the land, hinting at a sacrifice to the river, the dangerous entity providing the land with abundance, on whose capriciousness the farmers must rely. Yet the claim through death is undermined by the circumstances of Martha's suicide: she drowns in the Sacramento River, whose meaning changes from the central symbol of life-giving power in the novel, to a life-taking, untamed force. The use of an unstable, changeable element of water suggests that taking possession of the land itself is questioned, together with the anchoring of identity in the act of possession.[50]

Not only Martha's death, but also her burial is connected with the river: her sister-in-law Lily listens for the sounds of flood:

> Every hour now, the river ran faster and higher with the melting mountain snow (…). [I]t occurred to her that Martha's body could well be washed out by evening, the unnailed lid of the sea chest ripped open and Martha free again in the water.[51]

The river now poses a danger, yet it also soothes the mourners. Lily thinks, "It would be all right, these next few hours, if she could keep her mind on the water", and she understands the river as a power to be

reckoned with: "Somewhere in her mind there was a file of information, gathered and classified every year there was high water".[52] Martha is "returned" to the river in the sense of a Christian burial, but what is also stressed in the gesture is the impossibility of taming the elements and – in consequence – of claiming the land as one's own, as Lily's father suggests.

The belief, then, that California belongs to Lily, Martha, and Everett, the descendants of the pioneers, is rendered problematic. Ryder Channing claims the land for himself and for the new class of entrepreneurs who want to "develop" California, thus challenging Martha's and Everett's claims to the land. The previous generation's claim of ownership does not endure unquestioned, either. Lily's father hopes to become the Governor of California, yet he loses in the elections to the man who cynically uses the discourse of Manifest Destiny, perhaps the most blatant denial of the ethical demand placed by the land on the settlers.

Henry Catlin, Knight's competitor for the seat of the Governor of California, characterizes the land in his speech as "The California of jobs and benefits and milk and honey and 160 acres for everybody equally distributed, the California that was promised us yessir I mean in Scripture".[53] Populist as the characterization may be, it refers to the Bible as the final authority on the meaning of California as the mythical land of plenty given by God to the chosen people. Those who were promised the land are themselves an awkward category, a floating signifier that is claimed by various groups, who validate their claim in various ways: either through the deaths of their ancestors or through the work of their own hands. Both these ways of validating one's claim to the land are of Puritan provenience. They testify to the paradox underlying the belief in the divine authority granting one group of settlers the right to subjugate the land and use the fruit of its soil.

Walter Knight understands that his opponent refers to the Bible to evoke divine power as the one granting him the position of the governor. He describes Henry Catlin mockingly as "an agent of Divine Will, placed on earth expressly to deliver California from her native sons",[54] thus exposing himself as California's native son. The exclusivist violence inherent in this formulation, in which the term "native" is appropriated for a narrow group of settlers who appeared in California at a particular historical moment, informs the melancholic stance, exhibited both by Walter Knight's generation and by his descendants' generation, Lily, Martha, and Everett.

Reaching to the Puritan beliefs as the foundation of one's sense of belonging to a place, Didion refers to a rich tradition. The struggle to see the earthly life from the perspective of eternity has characterized American writing from the very beginning: it is the conundrum that Edmund Morgan describes as "the Puritan dilemma", that is, "the paradox that required a man to live in the world without being of it".[55]

The reference to Puritanism in the case of Joan Didion is not accidental: if we think of the message of *Run River*, made clear in the last fragments of the novel, in which the protagonist realizes she cannot save her husband in this life, and she attempts to see his and her own existence in a longer perspective of eternal life, then perhaps the link with Puritan beliefs becomes more obvious.

Lily expresses a wish for the marital affection to have attributes of eternal, or divine, grace: "She hoped that although he could not hear her she could somehow imprint her ordinary love upon his memory through all eternity, hoped he would rise thinking of her, *we were each other, we were each other*".[56] Resurrection to the Final Judgment with the thought of conjugal love expressed here is reminiscent of Anne Bradstreet's 1678 poem "If Ever Two Were One" (echoed in the phrase "*we were each other*"), whose closing lines argue for a recognition of the value of earthly love in the spiritual perspective: "Then while we live, in love let's so persever, / That when we live no more, we may live ever".[57] Conjugal love is effectively presented as a saving grace; similarly, in *Run River*, marital love's redemptive power provides the hopeful ending.

Ultimately, human life is measured on a much longer scale than that afforded by a single lifetime. Even though the two works are divided by over three centuries, the same pioneering, Puritan spirit rings in both, just as both are characterized by the hope of redemption. When Zehelein claims that Didion "reveals the dark, harsh, and morally ambiguous elements of the so-called crossing stories, and questions the concept of rebirth and redemption",[58] she refers to *Where I Was From*, yet to a large degree the same preoccupations are central to *Run River.*

For Didion, redemption is not a personal matter: it is, or should be, a communal preoccupation, since it is connected to the loss of paradise accrued with the passage to California. Quite paradoxically, with the entry into what was anticipated to be the fulfillment of American destiny, it was lost. Didion asks questions about the veracity of the dream, and the answer that she suggests is dubious.

Judith Butler discusses the issue of redemption and points to its ambiguity: "The loss of redemptive narrative (…) takes shape as figurative and as spatial and as simultaneous. So, the collapse of sequence into simultaneity seems to imply both spatiality and figuration".[59] The situation presented in *Run River* is one in which all redemptive narrative is spent: the future is now; there is no "sequence", in the sense of then and now happening simultaneously. The necessity of redemption is fundamentally a necessity of behaving in an ethical way, which means that the others mistreated on the way to the earthly paradise remain in the subconscious as the debt of guilt to be paid off, with interest.

Butler explains the reasons for the loss of the credibility of redemption stories: "this happens not only because a religious narrative of redemption has collapsed but also because other narratives

of progress and development have proven to be contingent, have produced through their own excess, sites of exclusion as sites of resistance".[60] The sites of exclusion are inhabited by those who are marginalized by the dominant narrative of historical necessity, just as in the case of California, the groups whose rights remain unrecognized by the official ideology of "Manifest Destiny" occupy the subterranean regions and are never acknowledged by Didion's characters. Hopefully, as Butler suggests, the sites of exclusion are at the same time sites of resistance – the melancholy inherent in the presentation of the Californian character in Didion is one way of expressing resistance to the dominant narrative of history.

Didion's prose testifies to the emergence of these sites of resistance in at least two ways: one of them is the simultaneous granting of the authority to claim the land for the descendants of the pioneers, and its undermining through presenting them as failed characters for whom it is impossible to fulfill the destiny whose burden they themselves assume. The second way of representing the sites of resistance is in the depiction of the desert, the place that functions at the margins, or outside civilization. The dream of an earthly paradise is negated by the desert: whatever desire the pioneers saw to be fulfilled in California, the desert proves it to be a sheer impossibility. California resists being a blank screen onto which desires are projected. It exists outside of the sphere of desire, at least in its arid incarnation, and its ethical demand is thus obliterated. *Run River* is an expression of the same sentiment: it proposes that California has always already been there. The question of wanting and needing is represented in contrast to the feeling of entitlement to the object of desire, with the former being the proper, morally defensible cause for one's actions. In the novel, however, the characters are incapable of understanding or articulating their own needs,[61] which is the primary source for their ultimate, melancholic sense of loss and failure.

California is presented as an earthly paradise[62] through a variety of means: the imagery and the metaphorical language express such a connection, and this presentation is strengthened through the fact that the opinion is voiced by many characters at various times. This biblical reference, however, is problematic: the loss of paradise in the Bible is a direct consequence of wanting; it is the desire for eating from the tree of knowledge – which on one level represents the drive for independence – that results in the expulsion from paradise. Yet in *Run River*, the characters do not know what they want, and that is the paramount reason for their loss.[63] The idea that cancels an understanding of California as paradise is belatedness: for the children and grandchildren of the pioneers, it is too late to choose. They are left with no options, which in turn suggests that their choices are predetermined; if we look at the paradise of California from the Calvinist angle, the text seems to suggest, then the story of salvation in *Run River* becomes fraught with questions about its

meaning. The fundamental issue becomes one of interpretation: if one is in paradise, then one should know what one wants, or, alternately, one should not have any desires at all; if one does have desires or if one does not know what they are, then perhaps it is not paradise, after all.

Taken to its logical extreme, this line of reasoning not only puts under scrutiny the idea of paradise, but it also casts doubt on the idea of salvation; in the question about survival at the cost of those abandoned and betrayed on the trail, Didion suggests that the very conditions intricately linked with the ideal of an earthly paradise, such as individualism and personal liberty valued higher than a communal sense of responsibility and empathy, preclude the fulfillment of a promise of heaven on earth.

Lily understands belatedness as a characteristic Californian feature: "*A little late for choosing, she had said to Everett, quite as if it hadn't always been*".[64] The very endeavor of the first pioneers is questioned in this formulation, and through that, the basis of the Californian identity as it is represented in the novel. One might imagine alternative identity foundations, equally well connected to the idea of an earthly paradise, such as immigrant multiplicity and multivocality, that would result in a heterogeneous vision of California's character. Yet for the characters of *Run River*, the choices are closed: if they see their identity in relation to the pioneering enterprise of those who crossed the Great Plains in wagon trains, and, most importantly, if their concept of identity is based on the idea of possession, then their viewpoint excludes those who had been there before them as well as those who came after them.[65]

Such an exclusivist stance is expressed, for instance, in a song that voices a sentimental longing for a perfect, heavenly union: "*we will thrive on keep alive on / just nothing but kisses*".[66] Bing Crosby's song referenced here is a description of marriage happiness. Innocuous as it may seem, the wish expressed here masks the very physical condition for survival, thus removing the necessity of labor from the picture of the earthly paradise. In the same way, the vision of California whose history extends to the white settlers driven by the ideology of Manifest Destiny but not any further is a falsified vision, and one impossible to sustain.

Even if it is impossible to survive on "kisses", such a sentimental vision still testifies to the attachment to the land that is central to the descendants of the pioneers. The idea that place is the mortar of vital relations between people is evident in Everett and Lily's marriage. It is essentially a union based on a bond with the land. Randisi describes it crisply, "Lily's marriage to Everett is (…) a marriage to place",[67] and it is evidenced in passages in which their marriage is described as an inevitable course of events. For Everett, their marriage is a foregone conclusion: "Everett knew without thinking that what he would do was live on the

ranch with Lily Knight", and the idea that such a finale to their relationship does not require deliberation, is stressed further:

> If he had heard (…) that she had married someone else he would have wished her well (…) and only somewhere in the unused part of his mind would he have begun wondering, with an urgency he would not have understood, what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

Thus, inevitability replaces any conscious effort at finding a reason: "Lily required no commitment: Lily was already there".[68] Her "being there" stresses her connection to the place and consequently indicates that their marriage is a marriage conditioned on their roles in relation to the land.

Both characters consider their union "natural", that is, reflected in nature and sanctified by it. For Everett, the role Lily is to play is not only the role of a spouse and a mother, but also the preserver of memory, or time itself: "It had seemed to him then that to risk losing her would be to risk losing Martha and Sarah and himself as well, that she alone could retrieve and keep for him the twenty-one years he had already spent".[69] Lily is expected to safeguard the memory of the place frozen in an idealized time of a childhood reverie, but she is also presumed to give meaning to this dream. Marriage to her means, for Everett, sustaining the fantasy and the myth of California. Similarly, for Lily, marrying Everett "seemed as inescapable as the ripening of the pears, as fated as the exile from Eden".[70] Characteristically, marriage is at the same time inevitable and fated: time itself, suggested through the ripening of the fruit, works against the fulfillment of the fantasy of paradise.

The organic time metaphor is reiterated in Lily and Everett's conversation about announcing their marriage to their families. Lily asks her fiancé, "Wait until the hops are down"[71] and then she reasons, "There's no use talking to Daddy until he gets the fruit out of the way".[72] Time on the farm is measured in seasonal changes of the growth and collection of the crops, and the produce takes precedence – or at least provides Lily with an excuse not to announce their engagement. Even though for both, marriage seems unavoidable, Lily delays the moment when she would have to tell her father about it, which suggests that her primary love interest is her father. This assumption is supported by a sentiment Lily expresses later: "She had accused him of not loving her as her father had loved her".[73]

The idealized paternal love is tantamount to paternal authority; affection is equivocal with the set of laws Lily inherits and follows. They are the regulations pertaining to the Californian identity, and they regulate who is and who is not entitled to the title of a true Californian. This identity acquires a biblical tone to it when the cause of Lily's marriage

to Everett is depicted: Lily feels obliged to marry Everett after their relationship becomes corporeal. Their physical contact, having grave consequences for the characters, is characterized in terms of original sin, and the father seems like the Old Testament God:

> All around them were her father's orchards: the pears hanging warm and heavy, dropping to rot on the ground beneath the trees, going brown and bruised and drawing flies, going to waste in that endless summer as she, *thank God and Everett*, was not.[74]

Lily's youth and fertility, unlike other elements of the cornucopia, is not squandered, and it is, in Lily's phrase, owing to divine and human intervention. Original sin is the result of both God's and humankind's design; the expulsion from paradise is in this configuration inevitable.

The image of the decaying pears suggests wastefulness, itself a sin in this paradise. Lily tries to preserve what seemed like a brief moment of perfect equilibrium after her father's death, which is depicted metaphorically in her making pear marmalade. She says, "The marmalade would have shown him",[75] but is unable to answer her mother's question of what it would show. The paradise cannot be sustained; neither can the effects of their efforts at preservation be enjoyed. Lily also intends to preserve her own innocence: another futile attempt.

Conservation of memory is a challenge that can never be mastered; even though it is the foundation upon which Californian identity rests, it is always distorted by the very passage of time that generates memory. In Lily's estimation, the moment just after her marriage in Nevada requires such an effort at safeguarding the memory that

> Whenever she thought later of that week in Reno (…) it was with a longing she could never quite place, a nostalgia neither entirely truthful nor entirely imagined. It was as if the week had existed out of time, as if they might happen upon it again one day by accident and find (…) everything untouched, impervious to erosion, not exactly shining and not exactly innocent but preserved exactly as it had been, absolute proof against further corruption.[76]

The effort to preserve memory is tainted with melancholia; it represents the futile attempt to see the past as a series of moments of perfection. Yet it is never truthful; it is a constant idealization that, because it is based on false premises, produces a feeling of guilt, or aversion. The memory of innocence, after all, is in reality the memory of carnal corruption. It exists outside of time, and outside of California. The desert of Nevada preserves the perfection of memory. Crucial here is the idea of time intricately linked with California, as it testifies to the ambiguity of the paradisiacal vision: if the moment in the desert exists outside of time,

then time itself is an attribute characteristic of California – yet paradise must be timeless if it is to remain paradise. It cannot be subject to the processes that result from the passage of time and ultimately mean death. Lily's memory shows the vagueness of the idea that the Garden of Eden is California.

The sinners, enjoying carnality, must be expelled from paradise, but paradise remains what defines them. Lily understands that her own identity is created on her father's laws, and she expresses it, thinking, "*I'm not myself if my father's dead*".[77] The paternal influence and the paternal law define the Californian Eden; it is the law of possession and exclusion, it corrupts and expels, and it generates a melancholic longing for a past that never was.

Biblical imagery permeates the depictions of physical intercourse: "when she screamed beneath him, remembering that snakes infested the ditches, he neither told her that there was no snake nor told her that the snake (if there was one) was harmless".[78] Everett has a realistic overview of the situation: the snake is there, and it is dangerous; sexual activity, like in so many of Didion's novels, means peril. Everett's understanding of the danger implicit in sex translates into his willful monogamy; Lily commits marital indiscretions without fully realizing their dangerous implications. With her father's death, she realizes that she is no longer in her father's orchard or in paradise, but she understands this expulsion not as requiring more responsibility and control over her sexuality, but rather, as lifting off any limitations that the Law of the Father imposed on it.

Promiscuity is never treated lightly in Didion's novels: it is rather a sign of a deeper problem of the disconnection of one's body from the spiritual dimension, which very often is represented through the disturbed relationship one has with the land. If the connection between the land and the character is broken, then a clear sign of the trouble is, much like in T.S. Elliot's *The Waste Land*, barrenness and promiscuity. The relationship between the two aspects of sexuality is causal: barrenness is exorcised with promiscuity and the result is supposed to be redemption, but because promiscuity is not a legitimate form of sensuality, redemption is not achieved.

Lily is the case in point: she is described by a stranger at a party as "*the easiest lay in the room*"; he explains the marker by which he identifies her: "*I can always spot them, something scared in their eyes*",[79] thus pointing to a connection between promiscuity and fear, with fear as the underlying cause. Lily's main driving force in life seems to be a fear of losing herself, of not being, that is, of not having any clear identity. When defining herself, she thinks of "the roles she should be playing" which are "young married, river matron, mother of two"[80]; the fact that the designations remain roles that are expected from her, and not the labels she would willingly confer on herself, signals a detachment between

what she knows are outward indicators of her identity and what she suspects should be an identity that is not imposed on her, but inner and self-designated.[81]

The fear that she does not perform her identity in the way that is expected from her is amplified and becomes "the uneasy certainty" that she lives "some intricate deception, that her entire life with Everett was an improvisation dependent upon cues she might one day fail to hear, characterizations she might at any time forget".[82] Her fear is not connected to her social self, but it emerges in intimate situations as well: "Usually in bed she pretended (…) that it had never happened before".[83] The feeling that she is an impostor is not restricted to her marital relation, but extends to other interactions as well: "there existed between her and other women a vacuum"[84]; a vacuum that Lily fills in with men, yet even those contacts remain ambiguous: "She was never certain that either derived from the other much pleasure".[85] The expulsion from paradise is evidenced by a detachment from identity that is understood in paternal and masculine terms.

The expected result of sexuality is not pleasure, but rather a deeper attachment to the land. The relation Lily has with Everett is depicted as following the prescribed course of action; their sexual relation is the fall from grace, a sin that results in expulsion from paradise. Their attachment to the land is a consequence of the fall: California proves not so much a paradise as the earth that humans inherited after being removed from paradise. The land is all they have, and it is the end of their desires. Their identity as Californians is wrongly attached to the idea of land possession; their incessant return to the innocence of paradise proves futile, because it is predicated on a false premise: that of violent possession.

The idea that sexual desire is a form of a desire for land is suggested several times, most pertinently in a comparison of sexual experience to crossing the Great Plains. Lily feels her disappointing performance as a lover is connected to the prevalent postlapsarian necessity of procreation and desire: "The hearsay knowledge that not just anyone but almost everyone had done it remained a persistent flaw in her satisfaction with her own performance". In other words, Lily's disappointment with sexual activity derives from the fact that she is not an Eve and Everett is not, in fact, an Adam, and, what logically follows, the intimation is that California might not be the Eden they want it to be. The sense of belatedness is stressed in this image of earthly, non-paradisiacal land that breeds disappointment: "It was as if she had stumbled alone across the plains and found that everyone else had already arrived, by TWA".[86] Being late as a pioneer, and finding that others are already there, ruins the experience. The illusion, then, that Lily's and Everett's ancestors were the first to penetrate California, is necessary for their sense of identity; an identity that is founded upon falsity.

Martha, Lily, and Everett want to believe that their ancestors crossed the Great Plains and entered the earthly paradise of California as the first people. Historical records belie this belief: Native Americans and Californios, as well as occasional explorers and trappers, had already penetrated and inhabited the place Didion's characters want to claim for themselves. They see the land as belonging to them, but the belief in the possession does not grant them peace of mind, as their claim is unsubstantiated.

The disaster that is the manifestation of the tenuous foundations of the Californian identity is expressed in the fear of the kiln burning: Everett's dread is a recurring motif throughout the novel,[87] and it serves to stress the cycle of the farming life. Critics have noted the agrarian calendar providing the structure for the narrative, and, indeed, there is an emotional investment in such a presentation: "This was the day he had liked least all of his life: the day the last hops came down, the day summer ended"; the end of the cycle of vegetation marks the lowest point in the character's affective life. Starting the kiln and drying the hops carries the danger of fire: "the whole year could go to waste. The kiln and the crop with it could go up in a flash of dry flame". The hellish, all-consuming element threatens to destroy not so much property, but "the whole year", which suggests the destruction of time itself. Cyclic time, reminiscent of the sacred time of religious rituals,[88] expresses the completeness of the agrarian life enjoyed in California. The ritual aspect of such a presentation of time is further emphasized by the sense of helplessness experienced and the reality and universality of the threat: "beyond taking the most elementary precautions there was nothing he could do about it. (…) almost every August a kiln burned somewhere in the Valley".[89] The characters in this earthly paradise are exposed to elements they cannot control; their very existence is precarious. Fire would revert the fertile valley cultivated by man into a nonentity: the destruction would not only mean barrenness and infertility, but it would also mean the obliteration of the sacred, cyclic time itself.

In such a suggested link between an agrarian existence structured around cyclicality and sacred time, California emerges as the Garden of Eden, but one that is not, and cannot be, possessed by anyone: it is natural phenomena, the heat of the summer or the earthquakes, that paradoxically signify its paradisiacal status. It is nature in California, then, that testifies to its otherworldly status. Only by answering its ethical demand to recognize its otherness can one claim it in any way, but possession, the violent, Christian concept, is denied.

Pioneers and Ancestors

California is represented as a paradise that does not fulfill its promise, not because it is not what it seems to be, but because the people populating it are always already too late for paradise, as the legitimacy of

their claim to the land comes as a belated validation of their existence, undermined by the impostors, such as Ryder. Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative* proposes that "If, in fact, human action can be narrated, it is because it is always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms. It is always already symbolically mediated".[90] If we accept that there is no narrating of human actions, which obviously includes the crossing of the Great Plains into California, without codification and signification, then the gravest consequence is the impossibility of a paradise narrative of genesis (to use Benjamin's phrase) that Didion's books seem to propose. In Benjaminian terms, the story of origin (in contrast to genesis)[91] is a story always already contained within certain rules of conduct; not a story of a lawless and chaotic empty space.

The melancholy of Didion's books derives precisely from a reluctance to accept the impossibility of California's history to be presented as a genesis story and from masking it as such, instead of presenting it as a story of origin. The unacknowledged elements of history and its silenced agents come back, as they must, to haunt the narrative. In this vision, there is no violence in the story of settlement in California, and there are no other characters than white Protestants; yet even though others are banished from the account, the death and desolation that are the fate of Didion's characters suggest that the exiled elements reemerge and the violence resurfaces in a different form, as suicide, abortion, and finally murder.[92]

Before the narrative of California's history (and with it, the story of the McClellan family) disintegrates into violent chaos, though, it is presented as full of potential in the same way that California has always been the quintessence of possibility: the postwar years are described as "a season of promise for anyone with a little land or a little money or even nothing more than an eye on the main chance", and then the description becomes more specified: "it was a season of promise for Ryder Channing", which suggests that it is the newcomers with the new energy they are bringing with them that truly benefit from California's potential. The children of pioneers are hopeful, too: "it should be, Martha thought (…) a season of promise for her".[93] Martha partakes in the season of youthful, pioneering energy in the way that her brother and his wife are not capable of: "She met builders, promoters, (…) people neither Everett nor Lily would have known existed had she not told them",[94] but because her thinking is as informed by the distinctions between the legitimate Californians who are the descendants of the pioneers who crossed the Great Plains and the rest, she never realizes the potential. For her, it is already too late.

The chasm between the second generation described in *Run River*, i.e., those who consider themselves true heirs to the pioneers and the newcomers such as Ryder, seems unbridgeable, which illustrates the idea that the new Californians resemble the first pioneers more than the descendants of the pioneers who grant themselves the right to the land on

the virtue of their origins rather than the intrinsic characteristics that the newcomers display. When Everett muses about Channing, he puts him in the category of people who are "free agents, adventurers who turned whatever came their way to some advantage; (…) pleasant, knowledgeable, and in some final way incomprehensible to Everett",[95] thus portraying Ryder Channing in terms of a pioneer.

Channing's approach to the land is characterized by a pioneering spirit which he voices when he says: "The future was being made (…) right here in California. Starting now".[96] As much as the old Californians look back melancholically and are preoccupied with the past, Channing and people like him focus on the future, whose starting point is designated as the present, an approach closely resembling the mindset of the adventurers who settled California. Just like the pioneer's mindset is an exception in society, with the majority following the lead of the adventurous types, Channing does not find it easy to convince others; when he explains, "The point is we're sitting right here on the ground floor with the button pushed go", he stresses his point further: "The point is we need everything out here. Absolutely *tabula rasa*".[97] For a newcomer like Channing, California is still the West, the territory where men go to prove themselves. Everett seemingly agrees with this vision, encouraging him: "Cut yourself in, Channing, it's a free country, plenty of room for everybody",[98] but in his understanding, California is an established farming country, and where Ryder Channing sees an opportunity of monetary gain, namely in advertising, for Everett the idea is unthinkable: "The falling snow was for some reason an integral part of the picture, and Everett had never considered it happening in California. Albert Lasker and Irium belonged to another world, a world teeming with immigrants and women".[99] California, the agrarian paradise, is a man's world; the masculinity is defined here along patriarchal, conservative lines.

California itself is defined in masculine terms, and it is an approach that characterizes all the members of the second generation depicted in *Run River*. For Lily, the masculine line is the dominant form of identification; her relationship with her father defines her relationship with the land, thus designating her identity. With her father's death, the connection is broken and only a catastrophe is expected:

> Because she could not put her finger on what was wrong it would only go wrong a second time. She wanted now only to see her father, to go back to that country in time where no one made mistakes.[100]

The masculine identification is a belated form of understanding one's self and an idealized one. The flawless "country" in the past has never existed; the fact that it constitutes the main reference point for the descendants of the Californian pioneers is the main reason for their demise.

Purification through Fire

The flipside of the Californian paradise is the desert. In both *Run River* and *Play It as It Lays*, the desert provides a vital point of reference, as the negative of the lush vegetation of the environment tamed by the human, and it serves the function of a reminder that however persistent we are in our belief that we rule the earth as a species, there are always places that can never be subjugated. The desert is a humbling message, if not a warning, yet it is not the only element that performs this function: the yearly cycle provides people with a recurring reminder of nature's power and of human vulnerability.

In *Run River*, the summer heat becomes immobilizing and the characters comment on its debilitating propensity quite often; it is one of California's characteristics that must be taken into consideration as part of daily life, but it is also endowed with qualities transcending the physical: the heat immobilizes and drains the characters' energy, and ultimately it is connected with the hellish counterpart to the Eden of California.

The heat of the summer serves to emphasize the cyclical nature of time: the novel commences with the height of summer, and Lily's unwillingness to act is explained by the fact that "It's too hot".[101] When she reminisces about the beginnings of her relationship with Everett, she remembers "Lying almost motionless in the still morning heat"[102]; the weather of this summer is described as unchanging throughout the day and night, in a paradisiacal state of stasis: "the heat had stayed all night. (…) By six o'clock the sun had been high enough to make the heat shimmer in the air again".[103] But the heat suggests the dark underside of paradise: when Lily mourns after her father's death, her dismal state, "like a stray from *The Grapes of Wrath*", is amplified by the temperature: "It was another bad day, close to 108°".[104] The reference to John Steinbeck's 1939 classic is ambiguous: on the one hand, it marks a connection between Didion's characters and California's iconic literary personages; on the other, a comparison with migrants from *The Grapes of Wrath* is a class-conscious remark, whose aim is to demean Lily's upper-class standing by linking her to the destitute migrants who do not belong in California. When she tells Everett she is pregnant with another man's child, she mentions the weather: "she could not remember, she told him, a summer so hot: she had not been able to breathe for months".[105] Very much in keeping with Steinbeck's novel, what seemed like paradise now starts to resemble hell.

Yet another explanation of the blistering California weather links it to the purifying ordeal, in which fire is seen as an element of the rite of passage.[106] The winter rains provide respite from the summer heat, and they are the revitalizing force in Didion's California novels, both in the

plainly physical as well as in the moral sense. Symbolically, this life-giving quality is represented through a link between rains and Lily's labor:

> The rain had begun the night before she started labor and was still falling (…). When she closed her eyes she saw rain beating the leaves from the camellias around the house. It must be raining in every part of the world, flooding all the valleys.[107]

The portrayal of winter rains here hints at biblical floods; the Sacramento Valley *is* the whole world.[108]

This presentation of the rainy season, even though it is connected to fertility and rejuvenation, also has its negative side: the boredom and apathy connected with winter, "when the rain fell for what seemed weeks on end",[109] are a reminder for Lily of her inadequacy as a young wife. Lily's mother also expresses a similar feeling of loneliness: "Some nights when the wind comes up I think I'm the only person alive on the river".[110] This solitude is reminiscent of the early presentation of the colonial possessions as empty; those taking dominion over the land are thus exonerated of any possible ethical questions. It also stresses the moral vacuity of the lives of Didion's Californian characters, whose ancestors did take possession of the land they had perceived as empty and ripe for seizing.

Didion's presentation of California's seasons is not devoid of ambiguity, then, and their representation tends toward having biblical or mythological overtones: winter rain suggests fertility and renewal, but it is simultaneously comparable to the floods cleansing the whole earth of sinners; while summer heat is reminiscent of the hellish fire, it also purges and cleanses one's transgressions. This ambiguity simplifies the image of the world: "The heat drained the distinction from things – marriage and divorce and new curtains and overdrafts at the bank, all the same".[111] There is a suggestion of an absolute fuzziness of any moral distinctions; Mircea Eliade points to the biblical origin of such a presentation, stating that "A magnificent apocalyptic vision, in which summer, with its scorching heat, is conceived as a return to chaos".[112] California as a paradise proves once again a vague and elusive concept.

Not only is California's presentation suggestive of an impossibility of distinguishing between an earthly paradise and hell on earth; in *Run River*, Didion also implies that this land, be it the Garden of Eden or its nightmarish opposite, can never be subjugated, and the characters' hold on it is tenuous at best. Again, it is the pitiless sun that exposes California's unconquerable character:

> The afternoon heat could bleach those towns so clean that the houses and the buildings seemed always on the verge of dematerializing;

> there was the sense that to close one's eyes on a Valley town was to risk opening them a moment later on dry fields, the sun bleaching out the last traces of habitation.[113]

The fearful intimation is that the pioneering endeavor and the settlement of the West, the grand American projects on which the national identity rests, might be undone in no time at all. In the blink of an eye, all traces of human occupancy may disappear: the land seems like a nightmarish vision. For all the biblical references in Didion's prose, the dominion over land cannot be established, and its divine provenience is not unquestioned. It is a humbling environment that exposes human vulnerability and imperfection. The conclusion one may come to, observing the world in the harsh summer sun, is that the settlement of the land was not sanctioned by a higher agency, nor was it part of the fate of a nation preordained by God.[114]

The Howling Wilderness: The California Desert

Just as for Didion's characters an understanding of the essentials of ethical conduct comes too late, the same is true of their perception of the arid regions. Yet the cognitive processes and the gaining of insight are not easy and require a reconstruction of the very apparatus of knowledge. Corey Lee Lewis comments, "knowing in the desert entails relearning what our culture has let us forget and finding mentors in the movements of animals and teachers in the habits of trees".[115] Clearly, those forgotten faculties are irrecoverable for many and extremely difficult for some. Didion's characters demonstrate these problems lucidly: they are the sojourners in the dry lands, shaped by the heat of the height of summer and changed by the desert, whose influence is permanent. When they can no longer cope with social expectations piled against them, with the mythical past and the unlivable present, they retreat to the desert. Lily and Maria do so with varying results; nevertheless, even though the ex-stasis might not be achieved, the desert provides one with the possibility of displacement: it is the place beyond oneself and it affords a space to purify the character and to purge the relationship she has with her environs of unnecessary ballast.

The wish to go beyond oneself (ex-stasis) is a wish to exist outside of time, not to be burdened by its incessant flow. In *Run River*, it is a melancholic desire to go back to the prelapsarian innocence and a sentimental longing for the time before sexual experience. Linear time is contrasted with the cyclic time of the agrarian cycle: Didion's characters' lives are dictated by the rhythm of nature. In *Play It as It Lays*, in a Hollywood that is much further from paradise than the fertile San Joaquin Valley, this cyclicality is represented by the incessant driving along the highways,[116] which shows the senselessness of movement[117] and symbolizes the corresponding absurdity of the characters' existence.

These futile lives might be saved only with a discovery of rules to follow, which must be based on a reevaluation of the old ethical system that no longer applies. Some critics mistakenly believe that a return to the old system is possible and is in fact advocated: in Brady's assessment, "*Play It as It Lays* ironically supports conservative values by showing their utter absence in the characters' lives. (…) Tradition functions as an unstated positive in *Play It as It Lays*".[118] Other critics focus on the dire present portrayed in Didion's fiction: Peter Dollard notes that "Hollywood serves as Didion's microcosm of contemporary American society",[119] whereas Mark Schorer notes the landscape Didion portrays: "Many parties. Much hard driving on freeways. Pills, drugs, cokes, dildos, Ferraris, the works",[120] which corresponds to what Rodney Simard calls Maria's "accelerating disillusionment".[121] The vacuity of the moral landscape is matched by the characters: Chip Rhodes calls Maria "an absence".[122] The dominant suggestion is that moral disintegration cannot be reversed unless some order is established; none, however, is in sight.

As much as Didion is critical of the communally constructed, mythical past of California, which finds perhaps its fullest expression in *Where I Was From*, she uses it to accentuate the melancholic nature of California's identity. In *Play It as It Lays*, California's character is not displayed in the oceanfront communities (which perhaps would have most to do with the paradise that California is imagined to be), but in the arid wastes of the desert. Hence the metaphor of gambling: it is in the desert that the chances of survival depend on luck. Accepting gaming as an existential modus operandi means consenting to the idea of coincidence and chaos as the main principles of life. This idea, in turn, is expressed imaginatively in the freeway system, that in the novel operates as a nervous system of the land.

The desert is the body that the nervous system of the freeways controls. The parallel between the individual and the geographic scale is stressed through a series of statements: "the still heat of the motel on the desert"[123] corresponds to Maria's inertia: "she lay perfectly still".[124] The sand of the desert, in turn, presents an analogy to the world: "She sat (…) looking out at the dry wash until its striations and shifting grains seemed to her a model of the earth and the moon",[125] and Maria plans to order the overwhelming chaos of the desert by turning it into an art project: "Tomorrow she would borrow a camera, and station it on the dry wash for twenty-four hours".[126] The camera becomes the means of imposing harmony onto a disorderly world; a plan that is bound to fail.[127] The method that Maria wants to use is borrowed from Hollywood, which does not promise success to the operation. Ordering chaos through art (suggested in the novel through the movies Maria stars in), is another means of presenting the analogy between the individual and the macro scale.

The analogy between the character's body and the body of the desert is also used to represent the chaos of existence in the post-frontier world. Maria experiences individuation as difficult: "she was thinking constantly about where her body stopped and the air began, about the exact point in space and time that was the difference between Maria and other",[128] which suggests that individualism, the celebrated virtue of the frontier, is no longer possible. Yet it is quite possible that it has always been an illusion: Limerick offers insight into the approaches of the pioneers to state that those who traveled overland "did not tame, transform, or punish the desert. They simply endured it. (…) Triumph consisted not in mastery, but in escape".[129] Didion's characters are true to this realistic, non-idealized goal. Such an achievement is only possible when one focuses, like Maria does, on her bodily experience of the space, and in this small way triumphs.

To an uninitiated viewer, the desert landscape does not offer much in terms of aesthetic pleasure or utilitarian functions,[130] but Didion's characters become the initiated because they learn to appreciate the desert for what it is, and on its own terms. The writer best equipped to understand the difficulty that deserts pose to humans, Mary Austin, writes, "Desert is a loose term to indicate land that supports no man; whether the land can be bitted [*sic*] and broken to that purpose is not proven. Void of life it never is, however dry and villainous the soil".[131] Didion's characters learn that the desert is in fact a life-giving place, as it allows for a reconfiguration of values and affords them perspective. Before they can reach such a point of appreciation, however, they must go through the ordeal of facing the apparent emptiness of the desert and its frightening lack of signification. Such a void, in the moral sense, is very much the predicament of the characters both in *Run River* and in *Play It as It Lays*: they struggle against the seeming insignificance imposed on them by the landscape, claimed for human habitation, yet inherently inhuman. Thus, they must become a new type of pioneer, one who makes the inhabitable habitable.

In Didion's second novel, this new type of pioneering translates into control, if not over the landscape, then over one's body, with the parallels between the body and the land figuring strongly again. As an actress, Maria uses her body or allows it to be used by others for their ends; in her trip to the desert, she finally gains control over her being. In order to achieve this self-control, she needs to resort to her pioneering skills, her self-reliance. Before she does that, she learns she cannot rely on anybody but herself.[132] Another frontier merit, the unlimited possibility, is inaccessible; when Maria turns for help to her husband, he admits to being powerless: "Jesus Christ, Maria, I'm out here on the desert, I can't do anything".[133] However, it is only through identification with the desert, and thus relinquishing one's individuality and admitting one's inconsequentiality, that one can repeal the sense of powerlessness:

> She began to feel the pressure of Hoover Dam, there on the desert, began to feel the pressure and pull of the water. When the pressure got great enough she drove out there. All that day she felt the power surging through her own body.[134]

The land lends the character the power necessary to carry through her plan of remaining true to the principles inherited from her father, however tragic the consequences.

Inertia is the main force of the desert; Maria admits so when she remains motionless and devoid of energy: "She did not decide to stay in Vegas: she only failed to leave".[135] An important function of the desert is that it reminds Maria of the town of her childhood and in general serves the function of a repository of the dreams of the place of origin. The last acts of the drama in *Play It as It Lays* take place in the desert: "The town was on a dry river bed between Death Valley and the Nevada line. (…) [M]ost of the crew did not think of it as a town at all, but Maria did: it was larger than Silver Wells".[136] The bleakness of the landscape and misery it suggests are the defining features of the place: "because of the hot baths the town attracted old people, believers in cures and the restorative power of desolation".[137] Natural imagery intimates the barrenness that corresponds to Maria's abortion: "There were two trees in the town, two cottonwoods in the dry river bed, but one of them was dead".[138] The associations with the town are of a rather bleak sort; even though for Maria the landscape is reminiscent of her childhood, the scenery is forbidding. It is by no means the paradise the first settlers were dreaming of, neither is it a place into which the frontier was supposed to transform:

> The house was on the edge of the town, a trailer set on a concrete foundation. In place of a lawn there was a neat expanse of concrete, bordered by a split-rail fence, and beyond the fence lay a hundred miles of drifting sand.[139]

The work of taming the environment is Sisyphean: "The woman picked up a broom and began sweeping the sand into small piles, then edging the piles back to the fence. New sand blew in as she swept".[140] The woman's persistence in her task is an expression of the frontier spirit, but the futility of the task signals the impossibility of a paternalistic, Christian subjugation of the land.

What the landscape teaches one is that it is untamable and that it is only human arrogance that allows us to believe that we can shape the land. Didion powerfully suggests the opposite is the case. It is not only the environs, however, that present a lesson. The woman that invites Maria to her house sees her helpless, unprovoked crying and offers her own example, asking: "'You ever made a decision?' (…) I made my decision

in '61 at a meeting in Barstow and I never shed one tear since.'" Maria must answer negatively to this cryptic statement: "'No,' Maria said. 'I never did that'".[141] In a display of pioneering spirit, the woman shows her determination as the only factor responsible for making choices and undertaking resolutions.

The novel, however, is far from offering the reader an easy solution to the sense of hopelessness and dissolution of social order that is so troubling to Didion in all of her works; it is this sense of responsibility for one's actions that is offered at the end of *Play It as It Lays* as a saving grace. There is no return to the prelapsarian, pre-frontier state, because it never existed. Yet the resolve and responsibility, the frontier virtues, are real, and these are the virtues to live by in a directionless world.

Turner's and Didion's Frontierless West

Didion situates the place of insight in the desert, following the classical route of separation from society as a way to find one's self: the course of action prescribed by the Transcendental philosophers and Christian mystics alike. Her view is characteristically Western and Californian, as she combines it with an insistence on the pioneer-era values of self-reliance and family loyalty. Didion's deserts are the places that resist taming and communicate a humbling message to those who would like to believe that they can subjugate the land; hence, her prose suggests that a new approach to nature is required in order to recharge the spiritual resources for the descendants of California's pioneers.

Didion's vision of California's history is anachronistic and conservative, and it approximates the claim put forward by arguably the most influential historian of the West, Frederick Jackson Turner. Steiner points out that what is commonly missed about Turner's frontier theorizing is the fact that Turner placed the frontier in the past, and that he focused on the future, arguing for a more responsible approach to nature, an approach that today would be called ecological. Steiner thus sums up Turner's claim: "The boisterous movement across the land (…) would eventually subside into a mature attachment to particular places upon the land – a sense of environmental awareness and community that would control the growth of cities and machines".[142] Thus, the frontier, understood as a mentality and a way of living, is perceived as an initial stage in the push toward the western end of the continent, with the later phase characterized by a deep connection with the land and its people – an ecological connection.

The attachment to land is not predicated upon the influence that people have upon nature, but the gentle impact nature has upon people; as Turner has it, "Little by little, nature pressed into her mold the plastic pioneer life".[143] Steiner recognizes the central place the natural stimulus has in Turner's writing: "The image of people adjusting to fresh and

varied environments is at the heart of Turner's conception of historical process",[144] and points out that a variety of environments ought to result in a variety of communities, resisting the homogenizing, detrimental course of development the Old Continent followed.

Didion's novels *Run River* and *Play It as It Lays* show the world that Turner did not want to see in the future: fragmented, broken, and populated by detached people who no longer experience a sense of belonging. For Didion's characters, the frontier ended, and with it, their dreams were lost: the dream of freedom, of space, of a sense of belonging; there is nothing that could fill the void they experience. Turner foresaw the danger related to this loss; in Steiner's words, "Turner argued with increasing clarity and conviction that a sense of place and respect for the natural environment were needed in a frontierless society".[145] Didion portrays a world whose inhabitants feel a strong attachment to the land, but they do not understand how their existence there could be based on a different premise than subjugation. They see nature as an alien, threatening force that does not bend to their will, and they refuse to see themselves as members of the natural environment whose rules they must obey.

There is a sense of urgency in Turner's words: "The national problem is no longer how to cut and burn away the vast screen of the dense and daunting forest; it is how to save and wisely use the remaining timber".[146] They suggest that the frontier games are over; responsible behavior is required of the descendants of pioneers: they must realize that the continent ends here in California and the resources that seemed inexhaustible are in fact limited. Such a realization must be followed by a change in approach to nature, and in consequence it means a reevaluation of who they are.

The descendants of the pioneers portrayed in Didion's works experience a sense of confusion that is at the core of their identity, and this perplexity can be explained by their roots. Revising Turner's argument, Steiner reminds us that "Both the compulsion to wander and the desire to settle down (…) grew out of the frontier experience".[147] This paradox, thus, is at the core of their experience. They are pulled in two opposing directions, and it seems that their predicament derives from their pioneering past that is simultaneously their blessing and their curse.

Turner is not alone in his turn toward a communal identification with the environs; Edward Abbey, Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold, and Gary Snyder all in their way advocate it. Such an ecological understanding of one's relation to the land is a far cry from the predatory and parasitic approach that the first American settlers in California displayed, and to which Didion's characters are the heirs. In *Run River* and *Play It as It Lays*, they do not come to the understanding that Leopold and Turner advocate to be the basis of a wholesome community. They fail to understand their role in the environment, and their suffering is this failure's direct outcome.

As much as Leopold and Turner are American critics interested in a prescriptive view of American culture aimed at healing and growth of the nation, Baudrillard in contrast provides a cold perspective on the foreign land. In what sounds like a polemics with Turner and his frontier thesis, Baudrillard claims:

> American culture is heir to the deserts, but the deserts here are not part of a Nature defined by contrast with the town. Rather they denote the emptiness, the radical nudity that is the background to every human institution. At the same time, they designate human institutions as a metaphor of that emptiness and the work of man as the continuity of the desert (…). The natural deserts (…) form the mental frontier where the projects of civilization run into the ground.
>
> (63–4)

His assessment of American culture and institutions is harsh, as if produced in the baring light of the desert, and indeed, for the most part, they might be the result of an illusion, produced by the distance (Baudrillard stresses frequently that he writes as a Frenchman, from the European perspective)[148] and an unwillingness to understand the desert on its own terms,[149] but, as Limerick reminds us, "Deserts have made fools of the wisest people" (1985: 3). As Turner saw American psyche to be the direct descendant of the frontier, Baudrillard proposes first the desert to be the main influence on American culture, and second, he tells us emptiness should lie at the core of our understanding of the desert: only if we grasp the underlying emptiness of every social formation can we perceive the unbroken genealogy between the desert and contemporary culture. As much as the latter proposition seems to arise from Baudrillard's prejudiced approach both to American cultural institutions and deserts alike, the former proposition is interesting, and writers such as Mary Austin or Edward Abbey could certainly help us support this claim. What needs to be stressed, however, is that in Didion the desert is part of the natural order and it displays its radicality – nature in California is not benevolent and kind; it is not an orchard, but a scorching, arid land that demands recognition in its own right.

Baudrillard sees the desert as a "mental frontier", perceiving the land around him in an anachronistic way: his remark proves that the physical frontier is no longer there, but the need to interpret the landscape as such remains. He sees this frontier as a failed one, where "the projects of civilization" are exhausted. Yet, for all his pessimistic assessment, his estimation hints at an understanding of nature and history that is of Protestant provenience: it is a linear history, one that Didion references as well. Civilization was supposed to culminate with the progress of the frontier, but – as Didion shows – it did not. The city upon a hill and the Garden of the World were never what they promised to be; it is the desert – and the impossibility of subjugating it to human will – that signifies this mistake.

In *The White Album* Didion includes one's relationship to Nature as a marker of one's identity:

> To be a Californian was to see oneself (…) as affected only by 'nature,' which in turn was seen to exist simultaneously as a source of inspiration or renewal (…) and as the ultimate brute reckoning, the force that by guaranteeing destruction gave the place its perilous beauty. Much of the California landscape has tended to present itself as metaphor, even as litany: the redwoods (*for a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday*), the Mojave (*in the midst of life we are in death*), the coast at Big Sur, Mono Lake, the great vistas of the Sierra.[150]

To be a Californian means to have an exceptional if ambivalent relationship to nature, which is as complex as one's relationship with history.

Notes

1 Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanach*, 239. It is very useful to support my line of thinking with Timothy Morton's assertion, "there is no such thing as 'nature', if by nature we mean something that is single, independent, and lasting". Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 19–20. For his discussion of the history of the concept of nature, see esp. pages 11–18.
2 Żylinska characterizes it as one that "dispenses with a need for a content-based obligation, while at the same time retaining the sense of duty" and which she specifies as "the Levinas-inspired understanding of ethics as responsibility for the infinite alterity (i.e., difference) of the other, as openness and hospitality". Alongside Levinas, Żylinska's understanding of ethics (within her focus are what she terms "posthuman subjectivities") is inspired by Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler (xi), but it is the Levinasian ethical position that is useful for our discussion of Didion's writing, particularly his idea of the obligation toward the other. Joanna Żylinska, *Bioethics*, 7.
3 Żylinska, *Bioethics*, 29.
4 Gary Snyder, "Place in Space", 458.
5 Carolyn Merchant, *Green Versus Gold*, 467. For an illuminating discussion of the American nature writing, see Joanna Durczak, *Rozmowy z ziemią*.
6 The desert landscape functions on the margin of the popular representation of what California is supposed to be like; Nicolas Witschi states, "The tendency to establish a California narrative by passing first through the deserts and mountains before arriving at the emotional heart of both the region and the story persists to this day", and he cites examples of twentieth-century fiction following such a pattern. Witschi, "Regions of California", 377 n. 3. For a discussion of the California Trail, see Stephen Fender, *Plotting the Golden West*; also cf. Sucheng Chan and Spencer Olin, *Major Problems in California History*.
7 Lawrence Buell, *Emerson*, 143.
8 Myra Jehlen in Buell, *Emerson*, 69.
9 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, 31.
10 In fact, imagining North America as paradise has long been asserted; Leo Marx reminds us that "America was both Eden and a howling desert",

pointing to the paradox inherent in the representation. Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 43.

11 Bernard DeVoto, *Western Paradox*, 359.

12 DeVoto, *Western Paradox*, 359. De Voto discusses the split in the imaginary as the illimitably fertile, welcoming land on the one hand, and the El Dorado, the mythical land of dream on the other. For a poetic rendering of this paradox, cf. Douglas Nichols, "The Girl of the Golden West".

13 Michael C. Steiner, "Utopias West", 183.

14 Mark Royden Winchell, *Joan Didion*, 93.

15 Kevin Starr, *California*, 5.

16 James E. Vance, "California", 195.

17 Francisco de Ulloa was the first European to learn that California was a peninsula, not an island – as early as 1539. Iris H.W. Engstrand, "Seekers", 81.

18 "Know that on the right hand from the Indies exists an island called California very close to a side of the Earthly Paradise; and it was populated by black women, without any man existing there, because they lived in the way of the Amazons. They had beautiful and robust bodies, and were brave and very strong. Their island was the strongest of the World, with its cliffs and rocky shores. Their weapons were golden and so were the harnesses of the wild beasts that they were accustomed to tame and ride, because there was no other metal in the island than gold". *Las Sergas de Esplandián*, (novela de caballería) by García Ordóñez de Montalvo. Published in Seville, 1510. Trans. William Thomas Little.

19 Ruth Putnam, *California: The Name*, 293.

20 Wyatt, *Fall into Eden*, xv.

21 Wyatt, *Fall into Eden*, xvi.

22 In Vance, "California", 195.

23 He describes the purpose of his study, pointing to the mythical character of the land, as he says of the history of California's orange production: "Its history is an allegory of California, a way of recovering lands and peoples not quite lost to us—like paradise itself". Cazaux Sackman, *Orange Empire*, 13.

24 Sackman, *Orange Empire*, 18.

25 Brady reminds us: "the idea of Eldorado was inextricably tied to the possession and cultivation of land". Brady, "Points West", 456.

26 Louis Althusser, *Montesquieu*, 78. Here he draws a famous definition of despotism; what I wish to convey is a suggestion that writing about California can be seen in the context of the postcolonial project, as Homi Bhabha makes evident in his study, *The Location of Culture*. For a commentary on the Althusserian moment, see Bhabha, *Location*, 352–60.

27 Quite obviously, the same ambiguity applies to the New Continent. Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land* writes about the paradoxical approaches to the land, coming to the conclusion that underlines the mythical aspect of the place:

> If the initial impulse to experience the New World landscape, not merely as an object of domination and exploitation, but as a maternal 'garden', receiving and nurturing human children, was a reactivation of what we now recognize as universal mythic wishes, it had one radically different facet: this paradise really existed.
>
> (Kolodny, *Lay*, 5)

One might add that California becomes the culmination of these wishes. For more on the experience of American landscape, see Kolodny, 1984. For a discussion of the first contact in the postcolonial context, see Erhard Reckwitz, "Man and His Bestial Other".

28 Lansford Warren Hastings, *Emigrants' Guide*, 133.
29 As Kevin Starr observes, "the Donner party was Everyman in a morality play of frontier disintegration". Qtd. in Brady, "Points West", 455.
30 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 75. This ambiguity must be placed in a wider context, which Perry Miller describes as "the American theme, of Nature versus civilization". Miller, *Errands*, 205. For more on the theme, see Miller, *Errands*, 204–39.
31 Karl Kroeber claims, "Today, all significant writers whose focus is natural phenomena are in essence 'deep ecologists'". Kroeber, "Ecology", 311.
32 Kroeber, "Ecology", 310.
33 Didion, *White Album*, 59.
34 Didion, *White Album*, 65.
35 Didion, *White Album*, 65.
36 DeVoto, *Western Paradox*, 360.
37 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 36–7.
38 Didion's hints at Puritanism might be seen as yet another symptom of her refusal to include nonwhite agents of California history through a denial of California's Catholic past. The phrase that I use to describe Didion is a paraphrase of Nina Baym's description of another disobedient daughter of the Puritans, Emily Dickinson. I do not wish to draw a comparison between Didion and Dickinson, for there are few similarities, but point to the paradoxical attachment to the religious tradition both writers have.
39 Joan Didion, *Run River*, 38.
40 Didion, *Run River*, 154.
41 Brady, "Points West", 456.
42 A critic finely tuned to the subtleties of a lost world, Walter Benjamin discusses the turn observable in Didion's novel of the historical process that becomes represented in space. To describe the world in which the possibility of an optimistic narrative is exhausted, he talks about a "chronological movement" that is "grasped and analyzed in a spatial image". Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 92. Related issues in Walter Benjamin's oeuvre include, e.g., architectural history (see Claudia Brodsky Lacour's essay for a detailed discussion: Brodsky Lacour, "Architectural History", 143–68), the distinction between "long" and "isolated" experience (cf. Michael Jennings, "Banks of a New Lethe", 89–104), body- and image-space (cf. Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*), or the interconnectedness of the interior/exterior (cf. Tom Gunning, "Exterior", 105–30).
43 Brady, "Points West", 456.
44 Didion, *Run River*, 133.
45 Didion, *Run River*, 84.
46 Didion, *Run River*, 85.
47 Didion, *Run River*, 45.
48 Didion, *Run River*, 84.
49 Brady thus writes about Run River: "The land had shaped their lives and defined their desires; and in return it contained their dead, the generations of family tombstones marking the blood contributed to the struggle for possession". Brady, "Points West", 457. One is tempted to disagree with the critic, though, since the "struggle for possession" often means the dispossession of other ethnic groups, and often "the blood" spilled is a matter of inconsequential, innocent deaths, such as the one mentioned above.
50 Winchell comments on the difference between the two heroines, Martha and Lily: "While Martha has found an uneasy rest, Lily must drag herself home alive, once again to face the kingdom of the mad". The implications of this difference, however, are much wider: as Winchell posits, "since *Run River* concentrates more on Lily than on Martha, one must conclude that

Didion does not find tragedy to be a representative mode of experience for our time". Winchell, *Didion*, 111. I would say that for Didion, survival is a virtue and a value in itself – a Western, Californian way of thinking.

51 Didion, *Run River*, 221.
52 Didion, *Run River*, 222.
53 Didion, *Run River*, 44.
54 Didion, *Run River*, 46.
55 Edmund Morgan, *Puritan Dilemma*, 27.
56 Didion, *Run River*, 264.
57 Anne Bradstreet, "To My Dear and Loving Husband", 131.
58 Zehelein, "A good deal about California", 9.
59 Judith Butler, "After Loss, What Then?" 469.
60 Butler, "After Loss, What Then?" 469.
61 It is suggested through the repetition of the question "What do you want?"; I discuss this aspect in part "Desire and the Wagon-Train Morality" in Chapter 3.
62 Richard White describes an evolution in the representation of California; discussing how it changes from a barren, inhospitable terrain to a paradise, he states, "The old image of the West as the Great American Desert (…) was yielding to the image of an Eden at the end of the trail". White, *Your Misfortune*, 190. In her first novels, Didion in a way reverses the direction of this evolution, proceeding from the Edenic to the desert.
63 Such moral laxity, which Didion depicts with precision, may be mistaken for aimlessness; as an anonymous review from the *New Yorker* notes, Didion's "vigorous style … is wasted on her characters". May 1963, 178, qtd. in Sharon Felton, *Critical Response*, 13.
64 Didion, *Run River*, 33.
65 As Thomas Hinde notes, they are "a lost middle generation". Hinde, "Playing It Rough", 53.
66 Didion, *Run River*, 15, 17, 29.
67 Jennifer L. Randisi, "Journey Nowhere", 15.
68 Didion, *Run River*, 169.
69 Didion, *Run River*, 169–70.
70 Didion, *Run River*, 63.
71 Didion, *Run River*, 64.
72 Didion, *Run River*, 65.
73 Didion, *Run River*, 170.
74 Didion, *Run River*, 62, emphasis in the original.
75 Didion, *Run River*, 81.
76 Didion, *Run River*, 72.
77 Didion, *Run River*, 78.
78 Didion, *Run River*, 63.
79 Didion, *Run River*, 199, italics in the original.
80 Didion, *Run River*, 73.
81 Dawne McCance provides an interesting commentary on the intersection between body and textuality in the context of Kristevan theory, claiming, "if postmodern feminist practices bring the body to life, they do so by putting the unified subject to death: the unified self perishes (…) in what Kristeva calls the practice of the 'text'". McCance, "L'écriture Limite", 156. In a similar vein, Kelly Oliver explains Kristeva's take on female sexuality, stating:

> In *Black Sun*, Kristeva describes feminine sexuality as a melancholy sexuality because the female infant cannot abject the maternal body without abjecting herself. (…) Feminine sexuality is melancholic because to identify as women, females must identify with an abject maternal body.
> (Oliver, Portable Kristeva, 300)

82 Didion, *Run River*, 94.
83 Didion, *Run River*, 94.
84 Didion, *Run River*, 78.
85 Didion, *Run River*, 114.
86 Didion, *Run River*, 94.
87 Cf. Didion, *Run River*, 14, 18.
88 In *Cosmos and History: The Myth of Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade makes an important distinction between two ways of experiencing time, one of them cyclical, which suggests renewal and regeneration, and the other linear, historical, which corresponds to the Christian concept. He writes, "this conception of a periodic creation, i.e., of the cyclical regeneration of time, poses the problem of the abolition of 'history'" (52–3). He further adds, "for 'primitives', nature is a hierophany, and the 'laws of nature' are the revelation of the mode of existence of the divinity". Eliade, *Eternal Return*, 59.
89 Didion, *Run River*, 149.
90 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 57.
91 The Benjaminian distinction between "origin" and "genesis" is developed in the part "A History of Accidents" further in the present chapter.
92 As Joyce Carol Oates states, "Joan Didion has never been easy on her heroines. Suicide always threatens them". Oates, "Taut Novel", 139.
93 Didion, *Run River*, 208.
94 Didion, *Run River*, 208.
95 Didion, *Run River*, 151.
96 Didion, *Run River*, 157.
97 Didion, *Run River*, 158.
98 Didion, *Run River*, 158.
99 Didion, *Run River*, 159.
100 Didion, *Run River*, 95.
101 Didion, *Run River*, 7.
102 Didion, *Run River*, 50.
103 Didion, *Run River*, 50.
104 Didion, *Run River*, 82.
105 Didion, *Run River*, 137.
106 As Adrian Snodgrass notes, "The concept of the passage through fire as a purification and regeneration is widespread. Its Buddhist expression could be matched by parallels from many other sources. (…) It is a common theme in alchemical symbolism". Snodgrass, *Symbolism*, 354. The most extensive discussion of fire symbolism is perhaps to be found in Mircea Eliade's *Images and Symbols*.
107 Didion, *Run River*, 87.
108 Mircea Eliade points out the connection between the rituals of the new year, regeneration and water:

> That the deluge and, in general, the element of water are present, in one way or another, in the ritual of the New Year is sufficiently proved by the libations practiced on this occasion and by the relations between this ritual and the rains.
>
> (Eliade, Eternal Return, 59)

He makes this connection even more evident when he states,

> the victory over the waters (signifying the organization of the world) were equivalent to the creation of the cosmos and at the same time to the 'salvation' of man (victory over 'death', guarantee of food for the coming year, and so on).
>
> (Eliade, *Eternal Return*, 60)

Eliade points to Judeo-Christian tradition, too, when he states,

> The very close connections between the ideas of Creation through water (aquatic cosmogony, deluge that periodically regenerates historical life, rain), birth, and resurrection are confirmed by this saying from the Talmud: 'God hath three keys, of rain, of birth, of rising of the dead'.
>
> (Eliade, *Eternal Return*, 63)

109 Didion, *Run River*, 107.
110 Didion, *Run River*, 92.
111 Didion, *Run River*, 177.
112 Eliade, *Eternal Return*, 66. Eliade points to Isaiah 34: 4, 9–11. He also directs the readers' attention to "similar images in Bahman-Yast, II, 41; and Lactantius, Divinae Institutiones, VII, 16, 6". Eliade, *Eternal Return*, 66.
113 Didion, *Run River*, 177.
114 Michelle Carbone Loris focuses on biblical allusions in Didion's writing, observing the use of nature imagery. She interprets the ending of *Run River* through the recurring reference to one psalm, not quoted in its entirety in the novel, which, however, as Loris proves, provides an important subtext for the novel's overall meaning. Loris states,

> The psalm refers to humankind's 'inequities' and 'sins'; it refers, too, to human mortality and nature's decay as the direct result of the first sin. In *Run River*, nature provides metaphors of sin and decay for this story of the Fall,

thus pointing to the close connection between Didion's understanding of the natural environment and the myth of California's Edenic status. Loris, "Western Story", 25.
115 Corey Lee Lewis, *Reading the Trail*, 66.
116 This point will be developed in Chapter 2.
117 As Phoebe-Lou Adams notes, the novel is "admirably lucid, vivid, and fast-paced"; its protagonist "snivels her way into a mental hospital via a string of disasters", which suggests that the tempo of the novel corresponds to the themes it explores. Adams, "Short Reviews", 151.
118 Brady, "Points West", 465. Stressing the lack of traditional values in the novel and its meaning for the characters, Brady further asserts,

> The Hollywood novel is a dramatic cautionary tale, a condemnation of our tendency to shed the 'old ways' in favor of a 'tabula rasa cosmopolitanism'. Brady adds a reservation to this view: "for Didion, [however], the idealization of a 'lost world' imbued with traditional norms is itself suspect, since our remembered past is a mythic construction.
>
> (Brady, "Points West", 465)

119 Peter Dollard, "Social Disintegration", 2514.
120 Mark Schorer, "Novels and Nothingness", 65. Also cf. Julia Lupton Reinhard and Kenneth Reinhard, *After Oedipus*.
121 Rodney Simard, "Dissociation", 71.
122 Chip Rhodes, "Lacanian Tragedy", 108.
123 Joan Didion, *Play It*, 184.
124 Didion, *Play It*, 185.
125 Didion, *Play It*, 201.
126 Didion, *Play It*, 202.
127 Chip Rhodes in his book-length study devotes one chapter to Didion's works and places them in the context of Hollywood. For more on this issue, see Rhodes, *Hollywood Novel*, 99–119.

128 Didion, *Play It*, 170.
129 Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages*, 20.
130 Corey Lee Lewis explains this problem, stating,

> The difficulty for most Americans in coming to terms with the aesthetics of arid environments is related to the fact that the major ideological strains of our culture were developed in the much colder, moister, and greener environments of central and northern Europe.
>
> (Lewis, *Reading the Trail*, 92)

Patricia Limerick expresses a similar opinion, stating, "deserts have not figured very largely in studies of American attitudes toward nature. The omission is understandable; deserts do not fit well in generalizations designed with better-watered landscapes in mind". Limerick, *Desert Passages*, 9. Lewis writes about Austin's iconic text,

> Throughout *The Land of Little* Rain she continues to demonstrate that the desert has inherent value, a rich diversity of life, and a unique charm and stunning beauty, all of which establish its value independent of the uses to which humans can put it.
>
> (Lewis, *Reading the Trail*, 70–71)

I argue that even though Didion is much more austere in her presentation of the desert, she does come close to Austin in her appreciation of the desert as a place that must be understood in its own right.
131 Mary Austin, *Land of Little Rain*, n.p.
132 Rhodes analyzes *Play It as It Lays* in the light of Lacanian psychoanalysis, calling Maria "part anaclitic mother and part primordial father". He goes on to explain: Maria "combines the immersion of self in the other that the anaclitic mother emblematizes with the destructive narcissism of the primordial father". Rhodes, *Hollywood Novel*, 119. For more of this insightful analysis, see Rhodes, *Hollywood Novel*, 99–119.
133 Didion, *Play It*, 93.
134 Didion, *Play It*, 171.
135 Didion, *Play It*, 169.
136 Didion, *Play It*, 187.
137 Didion, *Play It*, 187.
138 Didion, *Play It*, 188.
139 Didion, *Play It*, 198.
140 Didion, *Play It*, 199.
141 Didion, *Play It*, 199.
142 Michael C. Steiner, "Significance", 448.
143 Frederick Jackson Turner, "Frontier", 154.
144 Steiner, "Significance", 448.
145 Steiner, "Significance", 456.
146 Turner, "Frontier", 293.
147 Steiner, "Significance", 457.
148 James S. Duncan views Baudrillard's analysis as an example of Orientalist detachment with which he sees the "primitives" and he rightly calls him "an intellectual imperialist" (87). Duncan points out, "Like the natives as viewed by the Orientalists, Americans to Baudrillard are so implicated in the system of which they are a part that they need the European intellectual to speak for them" (87). For all his criticism, he still commends Baudrillard's writing as worth reading; in another review Baudrillard's book is deemed "a pastiche of reflections" (*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*).

149 Limerick proposes an alternative to such an uninformed perception of the desert and she defines her own usage of the term in the following way:

> I will use 'nature' to mean the physical world independent of human creation – the rocks, air, soil, water, plants, and animals that humans did not make. 'Nature,' then, will stand for the world of life and matter pursuing its own ends, independent of human design. With this definition, the desert represents nature at its extreme.
>
> (1985: 6)

150 Didion, *White Album*, 66.

2 The Loss of History

> Three hundred thousand in California and more coming. And in California the roads full of frantic people running like ants to pull, to push, to lift, to work. For every manload to lift, five pairs of arms extended to lift it; for every stomachful of food available, five mouths open.
>
> And the great owners, who must lose their land in an upheaval, the great owners with access to history, with eyes to read history and to know the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away. And that companion fact: when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed. The great owners ignored the three cries of history.
>
> —John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

In her first collection, *Slouching towards Bethlehem*, published in 1961, Joan Didion discussed "absolute personal freedom, mobility, privacy" as the end goals and aims of the push of the frontier: "It is the instinct which drove America to the Pacific, all through the nineteenth century (…), to be a free agent, live by one's own rules".[1] Eighteen years later, in 1979, her assessment is less assured: "The frontier had been reinvented (…). They made something of nothing. They gambled and sometimes lost. They staked the past to seize the future", she writes in *The White Album*.[2] In *Where I Was From*, published in 2003, she revisits her own retelling of "the crossing story as origin myth" which she presented in *Run River*, and she examines the claim of her ancestors to "the special rights they believed due them as 'old American stock'" and asks, "What exactly was our heritage?"[3] She comes to a bitter conclusion, rejecting the optimistic view of the past as a community of mutually supportive entrepreneurs, that Josiah Royce's vision of California is closer to the truth: even though he idealized the land, Royce still described the California pioneers as "a blind and stupid and homeless generation of selfish wanderers".[4] Didion's embittered assessment of the past comes decades after her initial presentation of the pioneering endeavor as an expression of feelings of a much higher order such as loyalty or freedom.

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Asking the question about California's heritage, she does not propose answers, pointing to the uneasy and complex past that requires revision, yet her writing makes it clear that in Didion's understanding, the American concept of history pivots on the idea of a neat departure from the past.

In this chapter, I examine the idea of history that, quite paradoxically, rests on freedom from history. I point to the origins of the idea, dating back to the European settlement of North America, which explain the fact that the concept of history as freedom from history must be understood as an attempt to break free from Europe and its ideas of what constitutes history. For an illustration of how such an understanding of American history from a European perspective can only be circular and erroneous, I turn to Jean Baudrillard, and I contrast his views regarding the United States and California (presented from the distance of a traveler and a visitor) with Joan Didion's views of history, which, although presented from the viewpoint of a Native Daughter, come very close to seeing the centrality of a clean break from the past. Didion's problem with history, as evidenced in her prose, is the following: how does one write about California history as a radical departure from the past, without looking back at the past? How does one say what the new path of history is supposed to be, without contrasting it with the failures of the past that one needs to escape? Didion's prose testifies to the impossibility of such an endeavor, but in this failure, one may see the need to reformulate the idea of American, and specifically Californian, history as resting on a departure from the past.

Manifest Destiny and Its Fulfillment in California

A clean break has of course been a core element of American historiography for centuries; John Winthrop's idea of building of "a city upon a hill", voiced in 1630, is perhaps the earliest example. In November 1839, journalist John O'Sullivan coined the term that was later used as a justification of both the Mexican–American war and the acquisition of California. O'Sullivan states in his essay, aptly named "The Great Nation of Futurity":

> The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can.[5]

To be sure, O'Sullivan's grandiose pronouncements[6] met with a good deal of criticism at the time of their expression (the most famous example being Henry David Thoreau, who preferred imprisonment to

supporting an "unjust government" waging war on Mexico); yet, they remain a testament to a truly American proclivity to perceive history as a reflection of the divine order. The most glaring inconsistency with O'Sullivan's ideals, though, comes through a revision of the figures of population. O'Sullivan describes European settlement in North America as "the powerful purpose of soul, which, in the seventeenth century, sought a refuge among savages, and reared in the wilderness the sacred altars of intellectual freedom".[7] A modern assessment of the historical processes that O'Sullivan deems with lofty vocabulary is somewhat different. "Seeking a refuge" and erecting "sacred altars of intellectual freedom" was mostly accompanied by a decimation of the native population, or in some cases, its complete erasure. Edward D. Castillo states that "100,000 California Indians died in the first two years of the Gold Rush".[8] Trafzer and Hyer similarly admit that the numbers of Native Americans in California are difficult to estimate, but without a doubt the tendency was one of decline:

> Population figures vary depending on the source, but scholars generally feel that in 1846 the California Indian population was at least 120,000 if not more but had plummeted by the 1860s to somewhere between 20,000 and 40,000. The most dramatic era of population reduction came between 1848 and 1868, when approximately 100,000 Indians died from disease, malnutrition, enslavement, and murder.[9]

It comes as no surprise, then, that O'Sullivan, just as many other glorifiers of Manifest Destiny, must portray white American presence on the frontier as a fulfillment of larger historical processes. In such a wide perspective, the decimation of a certain group, one among many, loses its importance. O'Sullivan is thus able to state,

> American patriotism is not of soil; we are not aborigines, nor of ancestry, for we are of all nations, but it is essentially personal enfranchisement, for 'where liberty dwells,' said Franklin, the sage of the Revolution, 'there is my country'.[10]

Obviously, the freedom that he mentions is not for the Native Americans or the Californios. It is for those who fulfill history's greater plan, and it is these agents of history who are the protagonists of Joan Didion's novels.

Freedom for one group of people as the ideal, justifying bloody subjugation or extermination of another group is explicable only with reference to a higher being. What seemed justifiable with God on "our" side is no longer possible from the perspective of a postmodern critic. Writing about American history, Baudrillard is under no false impression of

its innocence, saying: "America has never been short of violence, nor of events, people, or ideas"; he adds, though: "but these things do not of themselves constitute a history".[11] Stating that, Baudrillard points to the crucial difference between European and American concepts of history; what becomes revealed in his estimation is the disappearance of the events, people, or ideas from the concept of American history. It amounts to a belated, repeated disavowal of those not allowed to become agents of history, pushed to the margins and beyond. When Didion sketches her history of California, with pioneers as the forerunners, she indirectly refers to such a vision of history that Baudrillard describes as innately American.

Frederick Jackson Turner hints at a similar dismissal when he states, "The west looks to the future, the east toward the past".[12] Allowing the West not to cast a backward glance, Turner understands it as a place directed toward the future, but if the West is the place where you no longer have to look behind your shoulder, it also means forgetting the mistakes of the past, dismissing the sins committed, and believing in a clean slate. Such an approach cannot lead to the formation of conscience; neither can it lead to a reconciliation with one's mistakes and learning from them.

Joan Didion makes the same dismissive gesture as Baudrillard and Turner (which in itself suggests that this dismissal is inscribed in American culture)[13]; she comes to revise this view only with her latest books of essays about California, and only partially, at that.[14] She admits that the idea of the crossing as supposedly redeeming was false, but she does not acknowledge those who lost everything, including not only their position as agents of history but also their lives. In other words, she says there is something wrong with narrating history from the perspective of the white man, but she does not specify the problem.[15]

Freedom from History

Discussing the American "conception of freedom", Baudrillard describes it as a "spatial, mobile conception" and states that it "derives from the fact that at a certain point they freed themselves from that historical centrality",[16] by which he means the central position of Europe for the Old World. Similarly, Octavio Paz claims, "América no es tanto una tradición que continuar como un futuro que realizar",[17] which liberates America from the burden of the past, but at the same time yokes it with responsibility for the future: a particularly Californian affliction. To use Baudrillard's formulation, California freed itself from another historical centrality – that is, from the New England Puritan roots and Euro-American values of the "old American stock". But cutting loose cannot last forever: by definition, it is an instantaneous act whose meaning is derived precisely from its impermanence; yet its benefits – never

having to answer for one's shortcomings, never feeling the burden of responsibility – are such that it is difficult not to succumb to the temptation it presents.

Treating the frontier and its temptation of a clean break as a permanent feature of Californian life feeds its central paradox: that of a promise of the Garden of Eden and the threat of expulsion that has always already happened. It can be inferred from Turner's writing that a new perspective is necessary in order to deal with this paradox, which would mean another clean break, this time from the ideal of California as paradise: Turner calls for such a break when he states, "now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history".[18] His postulation, as Steiner reminds us, was that "instead of anxiously facing west from California's shores it was time to turn around and learn to live upon the land we had taken for granted for so many generations".[19] Didion's characters in *Run River* and in her other Californian novels are faced precisely with such a necessity: they have to abandon their view of themselves as pioneers and they need to learn to live on the land their ancestors claimed for them.

Such necessity is fraught with melancholy; just as Turner's essay on the frontier might be described as "this famous funeral sermon"[20]; similarly, Didion's writing can be viewed as a dirge in disguise. With her early novels, she mourns the loss of a certain period of history, which allowed the forefathers of her characters to enjoy the illusion of unlimited growth and freedom. Didion's characters come to the realization that the frontier has closed, which requires from them a new approach to the land. More often than not, they are unable to change their ways and as they cling to the pioneering history as the point of reference, and as they accept the pioneer values as their own, they struggle with a world that demands a change in their perspective. The ensuing frustration and inability to change produces the effect of a melancholy world. They miss the past that was always but an illusion.

Even if illusory, the past exerts a real influence on American character in the present. When Turner says, "He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased"; he ascertains that an element of the frontier spirit can be recognized in America even after the frontier has closed. He explains, "Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise", suggesting what he explicitly states elsewhere that the frontier taught the American people the expansiveness that is the characteristic feature of their national identity. He expresses a wish for the "gifts of free land",[21] even as he states the impossibility of its fulfillment. The position occupied by Turner here is one of a staunch believer in the American expansionist project. Land was free

and it offered itself to the entrepreneurial American; these times, however, are over. Non-American occupancy or possession of the land is not taken into consideration in such a view, because it is the United States that represents the highest order of civilizational development. It is the Americans' role, then, to claim the land given to them by historical necessity and God's command.

In Didion's fiction, the idea of California as a gift to the white pioneers, with its blatant disregard for the contesting claim to the land of other groups such as the Californios or Native Americans, is also left unexplored, even though her later essays testify to her attempts at reconciling her worldview with the demands of a historically truthful account. Didion tries to save the pioneer history even as she notes its relic status, not a livable present reference. Her position is close to Josiah Royce's when he discusses the best option of the development of the post-frontier society:

> Local traditions, the reverent memory of the pioneers (…) the development of community loyalty – these have displaced the merely wandering mood (…). And (…) we have learned one lesson – namely, that in (…) a wise provincialism, lies the way toward social salvation.[22]

Loyalty to one's kin and devotion to the local land: these are postulated as the saving virtues of the descendants of the pioneers both for Royce and for Didion. An attempt to escape history must be placed in the past and seen as a closed chapter; the present demands a localized allegiance. Royce's formulation suggests that the escape from history was indeed successful, since the pioneers are presented as the originators of history, and there is no more distant past than that. In fact, contrary to its explicit postulation, the quote suggests the opposite: that history cannot be escaped, as it proposes honoring the "memory of the pioneers"; thus, it shortens the historical perspective, but it does not remove it altogether. It reveals that an attempt to escape history generates another order of events. It creates a new beginning, but the process itself is replicated in the same manner.

History, Nature, and Hysteria

The impossibility of escaping a history understood in terms of a clean break from the past is one problem with the dominant discourse of California's history; another is its presentation in terms of natural phenomena, portraying historical events as biological or organic. Didion's prose tells the story of California, referring to both: California history is presented as an attempt to flee history, but the history is also narrated in fusion with the discourse of nature. Thus, for example, the weather merges with the past: "Here is where the hot wind blows", Didion writes

about the San Bernardino Valley, "and the old ways do not seem relevant".[23] Such a way of writing is close to Jean Baudrillard's, who claims, "The mythical power of California consists in this mixture of extreme disconnection and vertiginous mobility captured in the setting, the hyperreal scenario of deserts, freeways, ocean, and sun", thus pointing to American character understood in terms very similar to Didion's.[24] He stresses another paradoxical feature of American life, namely, its composition of opposites: "Nowhere else does there exist such a stunning fusion of a radical lack of culture and natural beauty, of the wonder of nature and the absolute simulacrum".[25] This combination of the spectacular beauty of the natural world and what Baudrillard sees as a similarly astonishing lack of culture is a deeply embedded European stereotype, yet one that is repeatedly offered in the context of California – and one that Didion also propagates when she says,

> This is the California (…) of (…) the girls for whom all life's promise comes down to a waltz-length white wedding dress and the birth of a Kimberly or a Sherry or a Debbi and a Tijuana divorce and a return to a hairdressers' school.[26]

The idea of abundant nature and no culture is another variation on the common European complaint about an American lack of history; Baudrillard refers to it when he talks about "An *hysterical* land; focus and meeting-place for the rootless"; he describes California as "the land of non-history, of the non-event".[27] The denial of any history is contrasted with his admittance that simultaneously California is "the site of the constant swirl, the uninterrupted rhythm of fashion, that is to say, the site of tremors going nowhere, those tremors which *so* obsess it, constantly threatened as it is by earthquakes".[28] Nature is again linked with culture, and the two categories are collapsed in an equation. What is revealed in Baudrillard's formulation is a common inability to assess California: resorting to stereotypes can be understood as an unsuccessful attempt to deal with this cognitive conundrum. California is subsumed under a radical difference; it is impossible to describe. In one gesture, it is denied history, which suggests that for Baudrillard it must be linear: it is a succession of events (of which in California there are none), one leading to another, an uninterrupted flow of historical episodes which results in the final culmination of civilization. Baudrillard remains helpless, faced with a fragmented, non-European, nonlinear history; California's past must be situated in nature, rather than culture, in order to become structured and properly comprehended; yet comprehension does not arise, as it cannot be an outcome of such a confusion of categories. Ultimately, Baudrillard's text shows that writing about California from a European perspective is impossible; as Didion says, "A certain external reality remains, and resists interpretation".[29]

Much more important than his impotence in understanding American history is Baudrillard's use of the Freudian category of hysteria when discussing California. Instead of the category of history, hysteria is used as the descriptive classification: the consequence of such a decision is grave, as it suggests that there is an undercurrent of events to be unearthed in the analysis, much like in psychotherapy. Incidentally, in an essay in which Freud entertains an idea that he would later abandon, i.e., his seduction theory, he compares an analyst trying to uncover the causes of hysteria to an archaeologist working in ruins to reconstruct the past.[30] In a similar way, Didion warns her reader, "The apparent ease of California life is an illusion, and those who believe the illusion real live here in only the most temporary way".[31] Freud finishes his image with a triumphant exclamation, Saxa locuuntur – the crumbling ruins speak of the past. The symptoms of a hysterical illness, Freud states, are there "to make themselves heard as witnesses to the history of the origin of the illness".[32] He states more emphatically, "*hysterical symptoms are derivatives of memories which are operating unconsciously*"[33], and he warns against treating them dismissively as he stresses, "*The reaction of hysterics* is *only apparently exaggerated; it* is *bound to appear exaggerated to* us *because we only know a small part of the motives from which it arises*".[34] In the same way, Didion invites her readers to unearth the "truth" about California, to go beyond the surface ease and beauty of life there.

If we understand California as a "hysterical land" in the Freudian sense, then California is revealed as a symptom which must be read if we are to comprehend American identity. California only seems exaggerated: in fact, it tells us about American ailments and weaknesses in order to dispel them and heal. Didion's prose is an expression of this hidden history which, if read carefully, reveals the underlying problems at the core of American identity: its denial and banishment of those prohibited from acting as agents of history.

"A History of Accidents"

In *Run River*, Joan Didion paints a picture of melancholic California, whose inhabitants return incessantly to the ancestral past, unsuccessfully trying to make amends for the mistakes made by the first settlers. Didion's characters are stuck in the past, yet this condition is not so much a predicament they must overcome; rather, it is the very basis of their identity: the impossible burden of the past that must be remembered.

Didion herself melancholically returns to *Run River*, writing about her novel in *Where I Was From*,[35] and thus explains the impulse: "Such calls to dwell upon the place and its meaning (and, if the meaning proved intractable, to reinvent the place) had been general in California since the first American settlement".[36] She presents her novel as belonging to

the exegetic tradition, intrinsic to California's character. Reinvention of the meaning is the key element of the tradition, and as much as in the official history records such practice may be highly problematic; in fiction, it is an acceptable (postmodern) element.

The motivation of a need for the reinvention of a place is at the core of the matter here: the reinvention of California, or of any place, must be accompanied by loss, since it means forgetting (willful or not) the earlier versions of the narrative of origins. It is informed by a lack of cultural memory of the place, and since no inhabited place is without history, by its more or less violent forgetting. The violence of forgetting is a double bind: on the one hand, it means that some memory is suppressed; on the other hand, what is repressed is itself a history of violence: of conquest and subjugation.

Walter Benjamin's distinction between "origin" and "genesis" is useful for a discussion of California's identity in Joan Didion's prose. Origin, he claims, does not "describe the process by which the existent came into being", but rather, it is meant to "describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance". In other words, origin is an instant in a recurring cycle of events; an episode distinguished from other incidents, but not essentially different from them. Benjamin puts it crisply: "Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis".[37] In *Run River*, the frontier past provides a point of reference and a measure against which the present is assessed. In a land that is constantly looking toward the future; however, the past gets lost and must be reinvented: in this sense, *Run River* is primarily the story of California's origin, its frontier spirit and its forever-ahead energy.[38]

The origin story of California presented in Didion's novels is the story of the white settlers who crossed the continent going westward, when they were ultimately stopped in their progress by the land running into the ocean. The story of California's origin told from the perspective of Spanish settlers would be very different: those who call themselves Californios claim the land for themselves, which is evidenced in the name. The origin story would be still a different story if related by the Native American tribes residing on the land before either the Spanish or the Americans settled there. Validation of the claim to the land by either group depends on a different factor; each group narrates the story of their cultural formation as the originator. Native Americans claim their possession of the land on the virtue of their precedence in dwelling there; Californios present the hacienda culture as the first "civilized inhabitance"; the American settlers see the beginnings of the narrative of California's history in their incorporation of California into the union of states. The stories present conflicting narratives; their coexistence is precluded by the inherent idea of beginnings as singular events of history.

Didion's prose tells the story of Anglo-American settlers who see their possession of the land validated by those who died in the process and whose bodies are buried in the California soil. The Knights and the McClellans claim California for themselves and their children, yet even their deaths seem ambiguous as acts validating possession. Lily's sister-in-law, Martha, is a true daughter of the first pioneers: her favorite childhood game is, after all, the "Donner party",[39] and her father humorously calls her, commenting on her readiness to cry, "an untapped resource".[40] Martha is the character who believes in the pioneers' virtues and their ethos; her trust in the pioneering spirit becomes evident when her brother goes to serve in the army on a World War II front and upon his departure she presents him with a "privately printed" copy of "*The McClellan Journal: An Account of An Overland Journey to California in the Year 1848*",[41] which, in her assessment, "might be very inspiring"[42] to his fellow soldiers.

Brady suggests that the gesture "rings hollow" since Everett "never sees action": "the promised land (…) is a closed frontier", she concludes.[43] Yet it is not only because the descendants of the pioneers do not have a chance to prove their manhood in military action that the journal documenting their endeavor proves inadequate. It is also because this very pioneering endeavor is not, as Martha romantically imagines, a story of victory over wilderness and a validation of land possession. Rather, it is a story of "accidents",[44] and the ensuing drive forward is not a triumphant, but an escapist, consequence.

Martha's ideas about the land contribute to her status in the novel as a descendant of the pioneers, which is in itself melancholic, since Martha's attempts to rewrite history and present the pioneers in a way that fits her purpose are always belated. Martha believes in what for others is a closed past. When she reads *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, her father says: "Melancholia's one study you don't need any lessons in",[45] and that is the most direct expression of Martha's symbolic function in the novel as a contemporary pioneer. Martha's melancholy reflects her belated pioneering.

Martha's status as the descendant of the pioneers is emphasized in her burial. Her coffin is

> a long rope-handled sea chest, packed for the past thirty years with Mildred McClellan's linens, end of lace, a box of jet beading from a dress, and the ivory fan carried by Martha's great-great-grandmother Currier at Governor Leland Stanford's Inaugural Ball in 1862.[46]

Martha's funeral not only returns her to the river, claiming the land for those who mourn her, but it also returns her to the pioneering past of her ancestors through the objects that had been deposited in the chest that

is now Martha's coffin. Materiality of the connection is important, as it suggests not only travel, but also situates the pioneer's body in the realm of memorabilia, a remembrance of what used to be.

Martha is a belated, melancholy pioneer, but she is not the only character in the novel suffering from such a predilection. *Run River* subtly suggests that the previous generations were also inflicted with the melancholy that created their inheritance, when after the defeat Walter Knight drinks "the last of his father's bourbon",[47] that he shares with his under-age daughter. Lily comes to understand this inheritance with time. Her father says, "Everything changes, princess",[48] and later she reminisces: "*Everything changes, everything changed* (…). *Things change* (…). *You now share not only that blood but that loss*".[49] The realization that comes to her is that the inheritance of her father's and, by extension, her pioneering antecedents', is one of loss. A more poignant conclusion, however, suggested in the passage, is that history itself is a story of loss, a narrative whose linearity bears as its consequence the loss of a whole plethora of perspectives, whose unifying power is its own limiting weakness.

This loss, intrinsic to the vision of history promoted by the descendants of the pioneers, is bestowed upon the next generation: Lily understands that when she says, "Julie was already beyond choice".[50] What is beyond her comprehension, however, is the reason for this predicament: the very exclusionist stance that characterizes her vision of history. Julie's lack of choice is her legacy that derives from a unified, homogeneous history; the historical discourse that claims history for one group only, excluding others.

Martha, the daughter of the pioneers, understands herself as beyond choice. When Lily asks her about a potential marriage partner, Martha answers that it does not matter; she mocks Lily, who says "there's a lot of time", and states, "There's no time at all".[51] Her perception of time results in a radical rejection of temporal succession: her suicide. She, as other characters, is without choice and time because of the limiting vision of history that marginalizes rather than includes.

History as loss is a particularly dystopian idea of history, as it is narrated after the exhaustion of all possibilities. After history ends and the inheritors for whose sake history is thus narrated are beyond choice, the setting takes on the semblance of meaning that is no longer possible in the historical discourse. Walter Benjamin proposes: "History is secularized in the setting",[52] and it is this secularization in the setting that *Run River* represents. The clash between the spiritual and secular perspectives on history is glimpsed in a conversation Walter Knight has with an outsider, who describes California emphatically as "God's own orchard",[53] to which Knight responds, "I've got a few of your compatriots in my orchard".[54] Interestingly, the comment that follows explains: "the Okies were still pitching tents at the far end of the ranch",[55] and it

is made not by the character, but by the narrator. *Run River* mourns the fate of those who claimed California for themselves through their dead, and who are now losing their stance as the "native sons" and daughters. For the Knights and the McClellans, history has already ended: it is a history of the fall, of an attempted redemption, of the hope of possession and finally, of the realization of the impossibility of such a vision of history.

Jennifer L. Randisi analyzes the river symbol in Didion's novel, claiming that the river is "symbolic of a much more internalized quest through a territory not of possibility but rather of inevitability".[56] Starting with the idea that going down river is a variation on the quest pattern, Randisi examines the motif of the river to point out the connection between the process of history and the river. She states that it is the "intersection between place and history that creates the concept of 'home,' a place from which (…) there is no escape".[57] This is close to stating that place is synonymous with history, and in *Run River* the place, such as the valley or the river, certainly stands for a process of history, which is, in other words, a narrative presented from a specific point of view. Randisi claims, "What the accumulated past accumulates is family history, and what place illuminates is the effect of memory over time".[58] In this way, Randisi connects personal history to memory and, in turn, to place: the work of memory, which is a temporal practice, exposes the meaning of a place. Memory, another term for history, creates space and in turn allows for its understanding.

The connection between space and history is not necessarily one of creation; it might as well be one of destruction. Judith Butler proposes an understanding of the link between history and space:

> Spatialization will emerge as a response to the loss of eschatology. History itself, on such a view, becomes a kind of catastrophe, a fall from which there is no redemption, the dissolution of sequential temporality itself. As a result of this dissolution, history becomes grasped as a spatial image.[59]

In such a view, space is the effect of the end of history. Butler here refers to Benjamin, who explores the coming into being of space after the catastrophe of history. *Run River* is an illustration of this phenomenon; in Brady's words, it depicts "what happened to a nation that found Eldorado to be an ever-receding horizon of the mind".[60]

Run River, however, does not give up the idea of redemption through a clean break with history right away. When in the last part of *Run River* Lily, the protagonist, muses upon her family, she reaches back not even to those who crossed the prairie and entered California, as she did earlier, but points to the pioneers centuries before: "two hundred years of clearing in Virginia and Kentucky and Tennessee and then the

break, the void into which they gave their rosewood chests, their silver brushes; the cutting clean which was to have redeemed them all".[61] It is ultimately California, to be sure, that affords them the clean break and finally, redemption; the aim of the whole movement, of pushing the frontier from the coast of Massachusetts and Virginia toward the West and finally reaching the Pacific coast, is put in religious terms, which suggests that the pioneering endeavor is the fulfillment of a linear, divinely ordered history.

In *Run River*, even if God does not feature directly as the source of salvation, the characters still search for it. It is the "cutting clean" that was to provide the characters with redemption: the break with the past means a new opportunity and direction toward the future, without looking back to the old life. California in the Manifest Destiny rhetoric is precisely that. Yet at the foundation of such a vision lies the dichotomy that disrupts the possibility of redemption: it is the division between "us" and "them", the distinction between the "past" and the "present" that marginalizes and does not allow for a dialogic understanding of history. Lily thus describes her provenance: "She, her mother, Everett, Martha, the whole family gallery: they carried the same blood, come down through twelve generations of circuit riders, county sheriffs, Indian fighters, country lawyers, Bible readers",[62] stressing blood as the mark of continuity and familial identification. In such a perspective, family becomes a wider category: Lily includes in the same bloodline her husband and sister-in-law, pointing to a more capacious identification. A blood relative is not necessarily the one who descends from the same ancestor, but rather, whose ancestral blood was spilled for the same cause. Family becomes a category of shared history and its willed remembrance; membership in such a class depends on memory.

Not sharing the cultural memory results in exclusion; yet some characters wish to forget their identification (e.g., Sarah or Knight), which is interpreted as a lack of loyalty. Disloyalty, leading to the dissolution of relationships (e.g., Lily and Everett's) and an inability on the part of the characters to admit failure in their personal affairs, is related to their inheritance as descendants of the pioneers: their exclusivist stance is a direct result of their ancestors' vision of California. Those that they exclude, however, are characterized by precisely the kind of energy they lack. Such a correlation is illustrated in the example of the character of Ryder Channing, Everett's nemesis, whose actions lead to Martha's suicide and Lily's transgressions.

Ryder Channing represents the new energy flowing into California, and he knows what wanting is. Ryder's lover, Martha, describes him, stressing yearning as his central characteristic: "Ryder just wants things. That's not so bad, to want things. Is it", and Lily responds, in a misguided attempt to justify him: "Wanting things and working to get them. It's the basis of the American way".[63] Martha mocks Lily's belief

in the American Dream, mimicking Lily by saying, "*There's nothing wrong with wanting to get ahead*". Martha finally reveals to Lily what is wrong with Channing's approach and, by extension, with the pioneering endeavor: "He wants to *use* people".[64] Martha's clear vision in this case must be understood as her insight into the pioneers' ethics, which does not, however, save her from her self-inflicted destruction.

The newness represented by Channing is not, however, as unequivocal as it seems at first. Critics agree on the meaning on the character of Ryder Channing: e.g., Brady calls him "an opportunistic newcomer to the West".[65] In a similar vein, Felton speaks of "an intruder who brazenly wishes to develop the land",[66] echoing Loris' description of Ryder as "an intruder upon the pastoral paradise of the Valley" who represents "the urban power and technological advances that will destroy the apparent rural peace and simplicity" of the farmlands of California.[67] In all these estimations, Channing stands as a direct opposite of Martha, Lily, and Everett; yet what is overlooked is the fact that he belongs to the new wave of settlers in California who see the potential and opportunities no longer perceived by those who pride themselves on being the first ones to cross the Great Plains, and in this sense he claims the land for himself, just like Everett's and Lily's ancestors did. Moreover, Lily, Everett, and especially Martha, idealize the pioneer past; the character of Ryder serves as a reminder that in reality the ideal they cherish is embodied in a person they despise.

Martha, Lily, and Everett are those that Thomas Hinde calls "a lost middle generation", that is the one suspended between the older generation, the offspring of the pioneers, whose connection to the land is close and direct, and the young ones who "despise the philistine West, and will sell and go east".[68] Ryder Channing, with no blood ties to the West, is not caught in the middle; he is the first of his bloodline to come to California. Yet just like with the earlier pioneers, death denotes their belonging to the land, and in Ryder's case, it is Martha's suicide that will tie him to the place and ultimately that will inflict melancholia upon him. Thus, even though at first it is the differences between the characters that are more prominent, with the passage of time, marked with loss, the similarities come to the fore. Lily acknowledges at the end: "If there was one thing that she and Everett and Ryder all had in common, it was that none of their decisions ever came to much; they seemed afflicted with memory",[69] recognizing the affinity between them and naming it with terms that can well be paraphrased as melancholia.

Melancholia understood as an "affliction with memory" provides a link with melancholia in Benjaminian terms. "It is not eternity that is opposed to the disconsolate chronicle of world-history, but the restoration of the timelessness of paradise. History merges into the setting"; thus, Benjamin explains the opposition between linear history and an Edenic vision of escape from the regime of time.[70] He clarifies, "History

is secularized in the setting", which suggests that the two visions of California, one as the Garden of the world and a natural paradise, and the other as the place beyond time or a refuge from it, even though they coexist, cannot be reconciled. Benjamin stresses, "chronological movement is grasped and analyzed in a spatial image",[71] which further emphasizes the impossibility of realizing the fantasy of an escape from time and history. In Benjamin's formulation, time itself transforms into space.

Benjamin's understanding of the merger of history with the setting is useful, because it provides a link between the vision of California that the descendants of the pioneers cherish and the land upon which they dwell. In Benjamin's view, the two fuse, as the land becomes a concrete realization of history. The underlying loss in this melancholy vision is the loss of the Edenic element; the problem of Didion's characters is that they do not realize the fusion or the loss, promoting instead the idea of God's given land and time, which proves false and biased. Their choices are informed by such false beliefs – with tragic consequences.

Martha, the faithful offspring of the pioneers, denies the idea of history made concrete in the land and refuses to accept the validity of the claim to it by characters such as Ryder. As much as Martha's union with Ryder Channing is a failed one, it is based on what seems like a sound premise: it is a relationship between one person who believes in the pioneering endeavor and one who embodies its principles. It does not survive because the two characters do not recognize their closeness of purpose, choosing instead to concentrate on the differences arising from the exclusivist stance that forms the basis for their association with California. Martha records in her notebook: "*July 4, 1948: Told R at picnic he was a redneck, white trash, not fit to eat off E's plates. (…) Now he is on the defensive and thrashing blindly: called me 'you Okie bitch'*".[72] The violence recorded in the passage notwithstanding, Channing uses the exclusivist discourse that is otherwise used against him, the newcomer to the West, thus exposing – however ineffectively – the hypocrisy of such divisions between the newcomers and the old settlers.

Martha is not the only character who does not see Channing's newcomer energy as reminiscent of the old pioneers'; Everett, jealously guarding his agrarian paradise against the hordes of new barbarians, perceives Channing as a threat to the integrity of his world. Yet there are observable connections between the two men: they are both troubled with melancholia inherent in California, which is apparent when, after his father's funeral, Everett "cried for the first time that he could remember, not so much for his father as for Sarah's defection, because she had lost all memory of the family they had been".[73] The reason for his mourning is Sarah's loss of memory, her ultimate betrayal of the place,

which results in his loss of a vision of the family and a wider community. Similarly, Ryder's attachment to California is marked by his loss of Martha, not through the failure of their relationship, but to death. This radical loss links him to California in the same way that the McClellans and the Knights saw themselves linked, and taints him inexorably with melancholia. California is thus a place marred with death; it is not the timeless paradise the characters wish it to be.

An episode which illustrates the falsity of the image of the Californian Eden is the one which describes Everett's first sexual experience at sixteen. The two teenagers work on a school project in which they present such iconic Californians as "the Pathfinder" John Fremont and his wife Jessie Benton. Everett's partner, a girl named Doris Jeanne, is characterized as an outsider who thinks that "California was strictly a drag".[74] Her status as what in the novel would be termed an "Okie" is underlined through her approach to California history: "Although she had taken a clear fancy to the Fremonts, she could not escape the impression that they had first entered California in a secondhand Ford".[75] The sexual experience itself marks her as the more adventurous party: "She wanted to do it again (…) but Everett hesitated, and Doris Jeanne said he was strictly a drag".[76] Through the repetition of the expression "a drag" Everett is equaled with California, thus highlighting the girl's position as an outsider. Doris Jeanne is the opposite of Lily, whose link to California is organic. Through the contrast between the two female characters Lily emerges as the true Californian, not only through the virtue of her pioneer ancestors but also through the imagery of paradise that Didion uses in the scene of Lily and Everett's intimacy.

The vision of the Edenic California is later betrayed through Lily's numerous sexual transgressions: it is not pleasure, though, that she is seeking, nor is it what she gains. Even though pleasure is not assured, Lily persists in her search of fleeting contacts as they possess "an air of infinite promise: (…) all of the possibilities still intact, neither his deficiencies nor her own ever revealed".[77] An identical description might relate to the ideal of California that the pioneers sought on the strength of Manifest Destiny: the West, uninhabited, empty, open for penetration and fertilization, is an unrealized concept that resembles structurally the driving force behind human sexual contacts. What Lily is seeking in those random affairs is what she – and her generation – can no longer hope to find in the land. The frontier closed, the promises no longer showing any potential, the descendants of the pioneers engage in meaningless sexual dealings to dispense of the same energy that drove the settlement of the West.

The tenuousness of the foundations of Californian identity in *Run River* is expressed by all the characters of the middle generation. Lily copes with the feebleness of her identity by transferring the drive for the land into sexual desire; for Everett, the fragility of his Californian self is

expressed through the impending sense of doom that he experiences on a daily basis:

> A dock light first, a torn fence next, maybe the pump goes off and loses its prime: before long the whole place would come crumbling down, would vanish before his eyes, revert to whatever it had been when his great-great-grandfather first came to the Valley.[78]

The image of the catastrophe: the world "crumbling down" and "vanishing", suggests that the time before the white pioneers cannot be anything other than a nothingness of history and an emptiness of space. The time before the white settlers, described by an ineffective "whatever it had been", is unimaginable.

The problem of self-designation that the descendants of the pioneers experience in *Run River* can be best analyzed with the use of the distinction between origin and genesis proposed by Benjamin: they want to see themselves as participating in the process of genesis, of a whole realm coming into existence, whereas their experience could better be described as part of the story of origin, that is, a constant ebb and flow of developing and vanishing. That the characters refuse to see their experience as part of this process, but insist instead on their story being the story of genesis, is their calamity. The suppressed history of California before the American settlement comes back to haunt them in the form of their melancholy and anxiety: they drown in the river that represents the flow of time and thus history (Martha), they are plagued with thoughts of annihilation (Everett), or they dispel their energy in a series of random intimacies that do not offer any pleasure or consolation (Lily).

What they are unable – or unwilling – to realize is the merger between history and the setting that stands in opposition to the understanding of the land given to them on a divine grant – which is their preferred version of history, as it absolves them from any responsibility for the place. Their version of history is internally conflicted, because it rests on an unsound premise: that of the denial of the secular, linear passage of time. They still hold dear the idea of a clean break from history that their ancestors were looking for; yet their belief in their ancestors stands in opposition to the idea of an abandonment of the past: this paradox informs their understanding of their relation to the land, and thus it is a paradox that underlines their Californian identity. Escape from history is impossible, yet it lies at the core of who they are. This conundrum is their doom.

"You Can't Call This a Bad Place"

The past comes to haunt the characters in Didion's prose in many ways: their misunderstanding of linear time and history merged in the setting is a pattern visible not only in *Run River*, but also in *Play It as It Lays*.

Even though Maria makes every effort to remain in the present, the past is evidently important for the character.[79] In Brady's words, "All of Didion's prose asks such questions: how does the past shape the present, and what are the consequences for those who remember that past and those who repress its memory?"[80] The line dividing remembering the past and repressing the memory of it is fine: Maria understands parental inheritance, yet she also knows that her survival depends on her placing focus on the present, not on the past. The lessons from the past leave her disoriented; the terrain they map is no longer what it used to be. Maria understands that the link between place and memory is crucial to her survival.

Maria comes back to the memory of the place she lived as a child, Silver Wells, and reminisces about it in the bleakest moments, both at the time of her abortion and while contemplating suicide, and she makes it clear that as she reconstructs the memory of the place, another memory, the one of her father, must stay repressed: "that was a good thing to think about, at any rate not a bad thing if she kept her father out of it".[81] That the past is related to the male line of inheritance is stressed again when she reminisces about the place where she spent her childhood: "he had bought it or won it or maybe his father left it to him".[82] The options that Maria enumerates emphasize the frontier character of the place, just as the present testifies to the changing fortunes and unpredictability of real estate: "Silver Wells, Nev., pop. then 28, now 0".[83] Maria is constantly mourning the lost world, with which any moral direction has disappeared. The protagonist's sense of directionless life is linked to the vanished world of childhood.

Even though the male line of inheritance is pointed out, the way she reconstructs the place in her memory is connected with her mother: "Silver Wells was with her again. She wanted to see her mother",[84] and through maternity, the memory of the place is linked to the embodied experience and the sensual impression of the heat of the desert: "the heat shimmering off the corrugated tin roof of the shed across the road".[85] When the present moment becomes unbearable, Maria comes back to the desert town of her childhood, trying to conjure the physical sensation of warmth: "if she could concentrate (…) on whether (…) the heat still shimmered off its roof, those were two minutes during which she was not entirely party to what was happening in this bedroom in Encino".[86] The physicality of the past provides respite in the harshness of the present, just like the desert provides escape from California, from its oppressive present and irrecoverable past.

In order for the physical sensation of the past to override the present, the character's sense of time must be distorted and the past must mingle with the present: "Two minutes in Silver Wells, two minutes here, two minutes there, it was going to be over in this bedroom in Encino, it could not last forever".[87] The past takes an equal amount of time to the

present, all moments are transient, and the passage of time allows for reconciliation with the unbearable present. Yet what also results is the continuous receding of the past, thus the present becomes a vanishing point, never to be truly experienced, just like history becomes impossible and cannot offer any consolation or a sense of continuity that would help one cope with the present.

Together with the sense of passing comes a certain alienation that results from an inability to claim control over events: "This was, as it were, her life. If she could keep that in mind she would be able to play it through, do the right thing, whatever that meant".[88] Claiming her life as her own enables her to treat it as a game and perceive it in the categories of ethical choice.

Maria presents a powerful – if vulgar – metaphor standing for the pointlessness of her own life: "her life had been a single sexual encounter, one dreamed fuck, no beginnings or endings, no point beyond itself",[89] which is an expression of a longing for a history that would counter the disordered present. The sterility of her existence corresponds to the barren landscapes of her childhood and the depopulated town inherited or won by her father. The town that used to be the measure of his success for his daughter is a reminder of a past that cannot be reclaimed: "She had a sense the dream had ended and she had slept on".[90] The pioneers' dream is spent; the present does not lend any meaning to the events; they become empty, void, deprived of the underlying vision. The dreamless sleep signifies the meaningless, history-less present.

It is no wonder that in the final episode of the novel the characters go back to the place of ultimate promise and temptation, the desert. Maria once again refers to the symbol of temptation when she recounts a story she read in a newspaper

> about the man at the trailer camp who told his wife he was going out for a walk in order to talk to God. (…) There isn't any punchline, the highway patrol just found him dead, bitten by a rattlesnake.

In an effort to understand, Maria asks two questions, "Do you think he talked to God? (…) I mean do you think God answered?".[91] The desert becomes the biblical space, just like the frontier in the American imagination does, but the sterility of the landscape is reflected in Maria's suggestion that God is either silent or his answer is death. The belief in the redemptive power of the frontier is dead, too.

Claiming the space of the frontier, the American entrepreneur fulfilled the prophetic destiny: when Turner formulated his frontier thesis, he pointed to the connection between rugged individualism and God's plan for humanity, disregarding any possible discrepancy between them. For Didion's characters, frontier individuality is a stage that should ideally lead to a more fulfilling communal phase.

Didion does not present an idealized, sentimental version of the past; the space of memory is sealed, inaccessible. Even if the present resembles what used to be, the place of childhood does not evoke any feelings now: "The heat stuck. The air shimmered. An underground nuclear device was detonated where Silver Wells had once been, and Maria got up before dawn to feel the blast. She felt nothing".[92] The space of memory has been gambled away; the vision of history as a preordained national fate no longer applies, and with these, the meaning of the frontier endeavor is irrevocably lost.

The Freeway Experience

In *Run River*, the characters cannot find the connection between memory and the land; in *Play It as It Lays* the link is gone. If the pioneers came to California searching for a respite from history, they did not find it because it was based on a falsity. Their descendants cannot find any relief from the pressure of history, because their inheritance rests on the possibility of a clean slate, which is again a mistaken premise. Looking for an escape from history, Didion's characters try a variety of means: an escape in the form of extramarital indiscretions, intoxication, going to the desert, and finally driving the highway.

The highway in Didion's prose is not to be taken lightly: it is never simply a matter of going from one place to another, but rather, it takes on the characteristics of a spiritual experience.[93] In *The White Album*, Didion talks about "the freeway experience, which is the only secular communion in Los Angeles",[94] which suggests that the physical isolation of a driver from his or her fellow road users reflects a spiritual isolation that can only be remedied – and that in a limited way – by the experience of a synchronized movement within lanes of traffic. This experience resembles a mystical ecstasy: "Actual participation requires a total surrender, a concentration so intense as to seem a kind of narcosis, a rupture-of-the-freeway. The mind goes clean. The rhythm takes over. A distortion of time occurs".[95] The freeway affords one an experience of freedom that is possible only through discipline and subjugation, but once initiated, it frees the ecstatic's mind of any thoughts. It becomes a meditative practice. Didion supports her view with a quote from Reyner Banham: "the freeways become a special way of being alive (…) the extreme concentration required in Los Angeles seems to bring on a state of heightened awareness that some locals find mystical".[96] The mysticism of the highway is purely a Southern California experience. With the belief in God's plan being fulfilled through the pioneering endeavor and settlement in the West gone, with the possibility of escaping history denied by the actual circumstances, the only option of a spiritual experience seems to be realized in the highway experience.

Interestingly enough, Baudrillard confirms this view of the highway as the uniting space: "the freeway system is a place of integration"; he claims, and he stresses his point, "It creates a different state of mind", as he names driving the highway "this collective game".[97] Having established that the drive on the freeway is not simply a physical sensation, but has a spiritual dimension to it, Baudrillard goes on to point out the connection between driving and the natural landscape of the desert:

> There is something of the freedom of movement that you have in the desert here, and indeed Los Angeles, with its extensive structure, is merely an inhabited fragment of the desert. Thus the freeways do not de-nature the city or the landscape; they simply pass through it and unravel it without altering the desert character of this particular metropolis. And they are ideally suited to the only truly profound pleasure, that of keeping on the move.[98]

The desert lies outside of the sphere of control of the human agent; it suggests freedom, but it also hints at the human limitations of exerting influence over the landscape and the world in general. The desert is proof that humans are not capable of the acts of divine transformation that they imagine themselves to be. The freedom of movement experienced in the desert also suggests that it is an attempt at partaking in an act of divine ecstasy. It is not simply the pleasure of being "on the move", but also of freeing oneself from the limitations of space and time; that is, yet another attempt at an escape from history.

Edward Abbey, an American philosopher who understood the desert and its internal rhythms, writes about an aspect of freedom connected with the dry lands, which is seclusion:

> In this glare of brilliant emptiness, in this arid intensity of pure heat, in the heart of a weird solitude, great silence and grand desolation, all things recede to distances out of reach, reflecting light but impossible to touch, annihilating all thought and all that men have made to a spasm of whirling dust far out on the golden desert.[99]

The effect of the desert is greater distance, as everything seems to retreat farther and farther away, producing an effect of speed, yet at the same time inspiring a sense of human insignificance, akin to a spiritual experience.

Baudrillard similarly points to the religious context of the freeway, mentioning the road signs which, he says, sound like a "litany". In particular, he mentions the sign that obliges the drivers to take a turn off the main road: "'Right lane must exit' (…) has always struck me as a sign of destiny. I have got to go, to expel myself from this paradise, leave this providential highway which leads nowhere, but keeps me in touch with

everyone".[100] The road sign is a sign of expulsion from the Garden of Eden that is, quite paradoxically, the highway, as it provides the driver with the experience of ecstasy, of a joyful transgression of one's boundaries and of joining in with others. Baudrillard stresses the communal aspect of the experience: "This is the only real society or warmth here, this collective propulsion, this compulsion – a compulsion of lemmings plunging suicidally together".[101] The communality does not mean working toward a common goal, as the Pilgrim Fathers would have imagined, but rather, it means an illusion of togetherness ending in an act of annihilation. This communion, then, presented in religious terms as an ecstatic experience, is an illusion, yet the perception of paradisiacal oneness is strong enough to produce a sense of belonging. Baudrillard asks, "Why should I tear myself away to revert to an individual trajectory, a vain sense of responsibility? 'Must exit': you are being sentenced. You are a player being exiled from the only – useless and glorious – form of collective existence".[102] Paradise, in other words, is community; its opposite, the exile, is individuality: that formulation exposes the paradox inherent in American identity, with its glorification of self-reliance and independence as the cornerstones of the pioneering spirit. Abbey might provide an answer to the question above: speaking from the position of a park ranger who does not just visit the desert, but lives there and admires it with humility, he urges the tourists in their cars, "Jesus Christ, lady, roll that window down! You can't see the desert if you can't smell it", pointing to the sensual aspect of learning the desert's ways. "Turn that motor off"; he insists,

> Get out of that piece of iron and stretch your varicose veins, take off your brassiere and get some hot sun on your old wrinkled dugs! (…) Yes sir, yes madam, I entreat you, get out of those motorized wheelchairs, get off your foam rubber backsides, stand up straight like men! Like women! Like human beings! And walk – *walk* – WALK upon our sweet and blessed land![103]

The difference between the French and the American philosophers could not be more striking than in their approaches to the desert and driving. Where Baudrillard wants to see a faux religious experience in the state of California he clearly despises, Abbey sees everything that is wrong with the motorized tourist whom he wants to shake out of lethargy to admire the land he loves.

Driving can be escapist, just like a vision of history as a clean break. Brady points to the connection between freeways as the emblems of escapism and abortion to argue: "Two of the dominant metaphors of the novel's Hollywood landscape are the clean work of its abortionists and the freeways, both of which provide opportunities for escape from past failures".[104] What needs to be added, however, is that the freeway is not

necessarily a one-dimensional metaphor of evasion; and even though Didion herself concurs with Brady's assumption as she depicts "the West Coast phenomenon of the freeway experience as (…) a narcotic surrender of the mind to the present moment",[105] there is more to the experience than a mere offer of flight.

Driving the freeway is offered as an experience of freedom, inadequate and dissatisfying as it is: "In the first hot month of the fall after the summer she left Carter (…), Maria drove the freeway".[106] Driving does not mean experiencing an ecstatic, giddy sense of freedom, but rather, it is a compulsion that exposes a hidden trauma: "it was essential (to pause was to throw herself into unspeakable peril) that she be on the freeway by ten o'clock".[107] The push of the frontier, the necessity of movement, and the underlying anxiety are all suggested in the transformed form in being on the highway: "If she was not she lost the day's rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum".[108] Just as Turner described the frontier as already closed, for the characters of *Play It as It Lays*, all the escape routes are blocked.

In her obsessive driving, Maria does not want to leave the freeway; yet it happens occasionally that the freeway ends:

> Sometimes the freeway ran out, in a scrap metal yard in San Pedro or on the main street in Palmdale or out somewhere no place at all where the flawless burning concrete just stopped, turned into a common road, abandoned construction sheds rusting beside it.[109]

The landscape is man-made, transformed by human activity, but abandoned and left unfinished, as if the inadequacy of the whole project of land transformation has become apparent to the agents of change. The sense of chaos and disorientation that Maria experiences is reflected in the landscape, as much as the futility of human attempts at exerting control over the land is revealed. In this land, history is impossible.

The paradise of California, the last frontier, is subjected to transformation and it is mastery over the land that ultimately justifies its possession. For Maria, the mastery is manifested in her compulsive driving: "Again and again she returned to an intricate stretch just south of the interchange where successful passage from the Hollywood onto the Harbor required a diagonal move across four lanes of traffic", and just like any other skill requiring practice, its final perfection brings satisfaction: "On the afternoon she finally did it without once braking or once losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly" (16). Dreamless sleep as the reward for the achievement suggests that driving itself is a compensatory action, a sign of suppressed mental energy.

The freeway suppresses but also reveals this anxiety: "the irrevocability of what seemed already to have happened, but she never thought about

that on the freeway" (18). The fatalistic approach to events, understanding life as a fulfillment of history or God's plan, is congruent with frontier ideology. Even if it is only a temporary relief, the freeway offers itself as a means of achieving respite; when meeting her lover, Maria and Les "drove up the coast until they were exhausted enough to sleep, and then they did sleep, wrapped together like children in a room by the sea in Morro Bay" (132–3). Maria understands that "There's no point. (…) No point in doing any of those things" (134). Driving the freeway might prove alleviating for the pain of senselessness, but the roads still lead nowhere.

Maria adapts her diet to suit her driving routine: "She could shell and eat a hard-boiled egg at seventy miles an hour (crack it on the steering wheel, never mind salt, salt bloats, no matter what happened she remembered her body)" (17). The egg, in Christian iconography symbolizing the new life and new beginnings, which for Maria are not available, makes her constantly aware of her body. Such insistence on the body and corporeality links her experience to the place which itself symbolizes emptiness, with the dominant significant location in the novel being the desert and the center of the void – Las Vegas. The carnal is strictly connected to the memory, and both point to the nothingness at the core of experience.

The most telling episode concerning the freeway is when Maria drives close to the location where her husband is. The lack of direction discernible in the phrase: "Maria found herself in Baker" is stressed in driving dangerously close to the epicenter of naught: "When she turned off at Baker it was 115° and she was picking up Vegas on the radio". Maria considers seeing her husband, but decides against it as she remembers how they replay the same scenario of their quarrels: "Each believed the other a murderer of time, a destroyer of life itself. She did not know what she was doing in Baker". Instead of meeting with her husband, Maria resolves to go back home:

> On the way back into the city the traffic was heavy and the hot wind blew sand through the windows and the radio got on her nerves and after that Maria did not go back to the freeway except as a way of getting somewhere.[110]

The freeway serves as a way of exercising free movement, but the centripetal force brings one always closer to the dead center. The realization of the existence of the force, and thus admittance that the freedom of the movement is but an illusion, makes the character renounce the habit of driving the freeway.

Even after the illusion of freedom is exposed, there remains some importance attached to the freeway:

> Once in her car she drove as far as Romaine and then she pulled over, put her head on the steering wheel and cried as she had not

> cried since she was a child, cried out loud. She cried (…) for her mother and she cried for Kate[111];

another reason for the emotional outburst is that she remembers this is the day she would have had the baby she aborted. The car provides the privacy otherwise lacking in her world. What it affords is not necessarily an escape from her problems, but a measure to see them from a distance: the speed in driving creates this analytic gap, illusory as it is.

Writing with some dose of sympathy toward the desert drivers, Abbey describes them as impenetrable and imprisoned in their vehicles: "Sealed in their metallic shells like molluscs on wheels, how can I pry the people free? The auto as tin can, the park ranger as opener",[112] proposing a solution, which is to leave the car and experience the world without the protective casing. Yet Didion's characters prefer the illusion of freedom to the actual experience of it, just as they choose the falsified history to a more inclusive and truthful account.

For Maria, all of the aspects of invisibility that speed creates are true: she wishes to disappear so as not to be controlled and coerced by others, she wants the hurtful world to be gone, and she finds appealing the fantasy of the cessation of existence. Driving is connected to the character's disturbed emotional state: "Maria found a doctor who would give her barbiturates again, and in the evenings she drove"[113]; and this connection is exhibited not only once: "the next day she borrowed a gun from a stunt man and drove out to the highway and shot at road signs".[114] However, the senselessness of one's existence is an expression of individual angst that reflects a wider phenomenon, that of the closing of the frontier. The centrifugal force that pushes the characters in Didion's prose off their emotional center, on a national scale, materializes as threads of highways in the desert of the former frontier. The freeway is the symbol of a directionless world.

Escaping the Meaninglessness of History

The sense of direction is again imagined in terms of fate, which in Maria's portentous thinking leads to catastrophic events. First, she is thought to be a prostitute by a hotel clerk who, significantly, uses a gaming expression to censure her: "No dice. (…) Freelance somewhere else"; then again when she is propositioned by a man at a bar, Maria has the sense of a fateful sequence of events: "It seemed to her now that she had been driving all week toward precisely this instant". Escaping the situation is possible thanks to the car and the highway, the two ultra-Californian elements: "An hour later she was deep into the desert, driving west at eighty miles an hour".[115] The desert does not offer relief, but it still suggests a potential freedom of direction in which to proceed in this directionless world.

The desert will be the theater of tragic events that play out at the end of the novel. Suicide and mental breakdown are the price for exiling oneself from paradise, and it is surely a self-imposed exile that the characters in Didion's prose suffer; exile that in turn is the result of a misguided idea as to the foundations of one's identity. Didion's characters reach back to the history of American colonization and the settlement of the West, not any further, and consider the story of the crossing of the Great Plains as the story of genesis, instead of perceiving it in terms of a story of origin in the Benjaminian sense. They insist on seeing themselves as the first Californians, simultaneously stressing the clean break that their pioneering meant. Both these ideas are illusory, which as a foundation of identity is shaky, if not altogether detrimental.

The rituals that are meant to confirm Californian identity are played out in the desert and are connected to speed. Baudrillard elaborates on this connection, stating that

> The desert is everywhere, preserving insignificance. A desert where the miracle of the car, of ice and whisky is daily re-enacted: a marvel of easy living mixed with the fatality of the desert. A miracle of obscenity that is genuinely American: a miracle of total availability, of the transparency of all functions in space, though this latter nonetheless remains unfathomable in its vastness and can only be exorcised by speed.[116]

Play It as It Lays is an illustration of Baudrillard's ideas. California seems a promise of easy living, of paradise, and of a clean break from history, yet it cannot fulfill any of these promises, because they did not grow out of the place, but were preconceived notions brought from the outside. In the Californian paradise, the car enables the miraculous effects of speed to take place; as Baudrillard reminds us, speed is also an exorcising factor, annulling the unimaginable distances. Even if the car allows for an illusion of closeness and the possibility of traversing vast spaces, in fact the illusion remains yet another trick of the shimmering heat.

Didion's prose shows that easy living is one of those mirages: her characters drive obsessively, not reaching any final destination. The desert remains an unreachable place, and thus it is the true Californian space, the one beyond time understood as an incessant escape from the past. The desert provides a respite from the regular flow of time, which normally only serves to remind one that a paradisiacal existence outside of linear time is impossible. The desert restores this possibility; however, it also cancels the belief in human dominance over the landscape. The desert is a humbling intervention in human affairs, the closest one gets to an experience of the divine.

Didion devotes much attention to the experience of time in her third novel, *A Book of Common Prayer*. Even though little of the narrative

takes place in California – it is set in "a menacing social vacuum" of an "imaginary Central American republic"[117] – the state provides an important point of reference for the characters that hail from it and come back to it in moments of trouble.[118] The control that human agents claim to have over time is portrayed as an illusion; in fact, it is time that controls people. The central character and the narrator of the novel, Grace, is dying from cancer, which lends an air of urgency to her narrative, especially that she aims it to be her testimony.

Time is a pressing factor, limiting the characters, but it also proves to extend in ways not predicted by them. When one of the recurring manqué revolutions breaks out, Grace measures time in days and expects the measurement to go up to four, not beyond, yet it does. Charlotte, whose testimony Grace bears, is killed in the outbreak of violence that lasts longer than expected, as if it is the passage of time that kills her.

Grace numbers the days of the revolution, emphasizing that it is the customary naming: "the final closing of the airport is what we usually call Day One",[119] describing the commencement as "the first day of what has come to be remembered as the October Violence".[120] The idea of memory as the underlying principle of history is worth stressing, as it proposes history to be understood as a subjective and largely individual process, even if remembering is shared by a community and perhaps recorded. Individuals may "come to remember" certain events in a certain way, and there is no outside stance from which to objectively assess them. Memory, as fallible as it is, is translated into history.

The connection between time and violence is further accentuated through the fact that Charlotte is said to have lost one of her children, Marin, to history, which also presents an interpretation of the geography of the place as subjective, in the same way that history is subjectified as memory.[121] In her narrative, Grace explains,

> Charlotte saw everything about the actual geographical location of Boca Grande as 'real' and crucial to her: in a certain dim way Charlotte believed that she had located herself at the very cervix of the world, the place through which a child lost to history must eventually pass,[122]

which suggests an anthropomorphic geography, an embodied land that can be read as a body. If Marin, lost to history, must pass through the cervix that is Boca Grande, then Marin's mother's, Charlotte's body, is projected onto the land. Charlotte becomes the land in a reversal of a colonial gesture through which the colonial explorers claimed the conquered areas by rendering them feminine and recording them as such on their maps.[123] Her death becomes the consequence of her identification with the land and it is an effect of an embodied geography as well as a subjectified history.

In an effort to legitimize her voice, the narrator of the story, Grace, states that she is interested in Charlotte "only insofar as she passed through Boca Grande", which is one of the many ways in which the narrator makes a link between herself and the subject of her testimony.[124] Charlotte "passes through" Boca Grande in the same way as she expects her own child to pass through it. Grace presents herself thus as an adoptive mother to Charlotte and simultaneously projects the geography of the land onto her own body, too. The attempt to understand Charlotte's story is aimed at making sense of her own. Geography and history merge again, yet both remain unintelligible without a map – or a vision of history – to guide one's reading.

Just like other characters in Didion's novels, such as Lily or Maria, Charlotte is oblivious of her link with the land and its character.[125] She sees herself as a tourist and a mother, with those two designations repeatedly stated in the novel, yet Grace corrects her self-description as a tourist as inaccurate, calling her a "sojourner" instead.[126] As a mother, Charlotte fails, and these two labels she uses for her position, a tourist and a mother, make it obvious that her understanding of the world and of her role in it is limited. The two roles, of a tourist and a mother, signify two differing approaches to history: one means passing through lands, and it does not require an understanding of the past; the other proposes a history-generating stance through the productive act of parenting. Neither role is played suitably by the protagonist.

The limitations of Charlotte's point of view are exposed by the narrator, who thus contrasts her deeper insight into matters.[127] Grace's role as a narrator is implemented by her occupation, an amateur biochemist and formerly an anthropologist, yet these provide no assistance in learning the meaning of Charlotte's "sojourn". Ultimately, Grace admits that her passion for truth has its limits, as well, when she states, "there remain some areas in which I, like Charlotte, prefer my own version".[128] Like so many of Didion's characters, both Charlotte and Grace prefer an illusion to an inconvenient truth: they want to see their stories as singular, not as parts of a larger narrative, the narrative of loss, exclusion and silencing, conditioned by the location in which they take place.

The land is the key both to the meaning of Charlotte's story presented by Grace and to Grace's narrative. The link between Boca Grande, the locale of the narrative, and California as the land where history comes to an end, or, alternatively, where the linearity of history can be escaped, is discernible in Grace's comment, "Boca Grande has no history".[129] Grace seems satisfied with this point, whereas Charlotte looks for history, which reflects their seemingly opposing positions as agents of history: Grace is an active agent who shapes history, and Charlotte neither understands it nor acts in it. Ultimately, though, their positions are presented as identical, which must be interpreted in terms of

a fatalistic view reflecting the impossibility of having any influence over history whatsoever.

Boca Grande is without history just like California is devoid of it: such a view is possible only if one assumes a certain biased position, e.g., a Eurocentric or colonialist stance. From such a vantage point, this professed lack of history is an expression of a wishful distinction between the grand History and the existence outside it. Boca Grande is supposed to exist outside the larger processes of History, and its time is circular, rather than linear. Whatever happens there, happens repeatedly. There is no progress, no fulfillment of a grand, divinely preordained plan that creates an illusion of control over the processes of history. When she states, "Day Four (…) did not go as planned", and then stresses the disintegration of the expected order further, "there had never been a Day Eight in Boca Grande before",[130] she portrays the hope of exerting control over history, and its frustration. Grace's narrative proves ultimately that such control can never be real.

The countdown that Grace uses to describe the outbreak of violence in Boca Grande is reminiscent of the biblical description of God's act of creation. The fatalism that characterizes Grace's account, however, does not suggest an ultimate human inheritance of the earth; rather, it suggests the existence of forces – not divine, but economic and societal ones – that are larger than any individual agent, however capable of exerting control such an agent might imagine him- or herself to be.

History is a narrative that cannot be controlled: it is further proved by the loss of a child to history, which is not only Charlotte's, but also Grace's experience. Grace talks about losing her son, Gerardo, Charlotte's lover, pointing to the "motive role" that he plays in the narrative, at the same time denying herself any such position. She uses this explanation to "legitimize [her] voice"[131] as a narrator of the story, adding, "unlike Charlotte I do not dream my life".[132] Her scientific method and her realistic, down-to-earth approach do not, however, guarantee her success in an attempt to understand Charlotte, as, according to the narrator's statement at the beginning, "that sojourn continues to elude me".[133] At the end of her narrative, Grace comes to a realization that perhaps "this story has been one of delusion" and approaches it admitting that "the delusion was mine".[134] One can understand the narrator's undermining of her own position at the end as a suggestion that the act of narration might be the only way of controlling history, which is not a concrete, physical control that people like Gerardo would prefer to exert.

Significantly, Charlotte dies a victim of the political upheaval in Boca Grande, and Grace tells her story with the prospect of dying soon of pancreatic cancer. Their narration of history will not survive. They are outlived by Charlotte's daughter, Marin, who is characterized as having "no interest in the past".[135] Even though Grace suggests a female line

of inheritance, it is not a continuation of storytelling or narrating of history. Before Grace admits her defeat with the statement, "I have not been the witness I wanted to be", she repeats Charlotte's words, "Marin and I are inseparable",[136] which suggests Grace's falling under the same delusion of which Charlotte was a victim (since these are Charlotte's words at the beginning of the narrative that the events presented later effectively put into doubt).[137]

The delusion might alternatively be understood as a further emphasis placed on the link between the female characters, Grace being the oldest and in a sense a mother figure for Charlotte and a grandmother for Marin. Grace states that in moments of weakness she reminisces about "what I was taught in Colorado", which leads her to remind herself in the next sentence of the flower that Charlotte brought her for her journey and to comment, "Her mother taught her that".[138] These lessons from the older women in the family are the only ones remembered in critical situations, dealing with life and death. Just like in *Run River* or *Play It as It Lays*, the character's survival depends on their faithfulness to the wagon-train ethics.[139]

The distinction between male and female lines of identification is strengthened by Charlotte's words to her lover, Gerardo, voiced when he tries to convince her to leave Boca Grande because of the danger of the oncoming revolution. Charlotte denies the link: "I wasn't connected to you actually", which makes Grace remark upon these words that they have "the ring of Charlotte Douglas"[140] to her. In a situation of danger, Charlotte reacts with a nonchalance, which Gerardo does not understand, yet which Grace relates to.

Similarities between the two women are presented through their relation to their place of origin: they are both Americans abroad, but more importantly, they are from the West. The reader is invited to note not "the *norteamericana* in Charlotte, but (…) the westerner in Charlotte, the Hollister ranch child in Charlotte, the strain in Charlotte which insisted that the world was peopled with others exactly like herself".[141] Charlotte's daughter, Marin, exhibits an equally biased viewpoint. Grace notes the resemblance between Marin and Charlotte despite the girl's effort to distance herself from her mother: this comes as no surprise, as Marin is consistently portrayed as a Californian throughout the narrative with "the pale wash of green" with which her hair is colored "every summer from the chlorine in pools. California pools".[142]

Grace is able to understand Charlotte's behavior – "She called a number in San Francisco which gave, over and over again in a voice so monotonous as to seem to come from beyond the grave, the taped 'road condition' report of the California Highway Patrol"[143] – and interpret it as homesickness. The information Charlotte gains is of no use to her: she learns for instance that "Interstate 80 Donner Pass was open".[144] It

is, however, a way for Charlotte to keep in touch with the place she truly belongs to. These words have an ironic ring to them, as they suggest the possibility of a safe passage to California through the ominously named Donner Pass. Motivated by a mistaken sense of loyalty, Charlotte decides to stay in Boca Grande instead of going back to California, a decision that has fatal consequences.

Her decision to stay is explained by a willingness not to walk out on a difficult situation, which she had always done before. She had always exercised her right to start anew and escape history; this time she decides to be loyal to the land, but the loyalty is misplaced. She dies for the wrong cause, or in its absence. Charlotte's determination to stay in Boca Grande is informed by her denial of the pioneering belief in clean breaks from the past and from history, but it is too late for her to change the course of events. Her daughter, Marin, who does not believe in the past, will repeat the same delusion that her mother and her adoptive grandmother share: her lack of belief in the forces she cannot control is a denial which results in a delusion. The repetitiveness of the gesture suggests melancholy; it is the melancholy that the pioneers suffered from, as well. There is no escape from history.

The first two novels discussed in the present chapter show the evolution of the vision of history Didion presents in her fiction: the first novel, *Run River*, presents the history of the crossing of the Great Plains as the point of reference, and it is misinterpreted by the characters as the story of genesis in the Benjaminian sense, not a story of origin.[145] The insistence on this fallacious view of history underlies the violent silencing and marginalizing of Californians other than white; it becomes the doom of the characters in both *Run River* and *Play It as It Lays*. As much as history was accessible for the Californians in *Run River*, for those portrayed in *Play It as It Lays* it is no longer so: the frontier has closed, and with it, ends history as they want to see it. The highway experience, which provides them with a momentary yet futile respite, is an attempt to recreate the movement west and to revive history, but it is of no avail. History grinds on – this is the fact that Californians wish to omit to notice. They see the desert as a place outside of time and history, untroubled by memory, but, even if it is an ecstatic place, it does not and cannot recreate the conditions of pioneering. The dream of California as the Garden of Eden gains a new dimension here, as Didion's characters want to see themselves as the first people, not so much in the sense of Adam and Eve, but in the sense of the first pioneers. They dream of a clean break and an escape from history, but it was always an illusion. The Californian characters in *A Book of Common Prayer* realize that with tragic belatedness – they escape California to avoid facing history, but history haunts them and ultimately proves victorious over their skewed, singular perspective. They remain faithful to the story of westering, even as they realize it contributes to their doom. The belief in

the pioneering values as a central component of Californian identity is the subject of discussion in the next chapter, in which the loss of these values is presented as a critical trigger of melancholia.

Notes

1 Didion, *Slouching*, 38.
2 Didion, *White Album*, 181.
3 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 159. Cristina Scatamacchia proposes seeing the reevaluation of Didion's views in terms of what she calls horizontal themes ("the pioneers' crossing of the American continent as well as the author's personal crossings, that is, her recurrent moves back and forth between California and New York") and vertical themes ("the role of the federal government as the main cause for social and political change in California from the Gold Rush to the present"). Scatamacchia, "Themes", 70.
4 Royce in Didion, *White Album*, 28.
5 John O'Sullivan, "Great Nation", 427.
6 The term Manifest Destiny has enjoyed huge success; the number of critical studies written on its use is overwhelming. To mention just a few authors who have written about Manifest Destiny: Greenberg (2005), Hietala (2003), Johannsen (1997), May (2004), McDougall (1997), Merk (1963), Stephanson (1996), Tuveson (1980), and Weinberg (1935).
7 O'Sullivan, "Great Nation", 429.
8 Edward D. Castillo, Foreword, ix.
9 Trafzer and Hyer, "Exterminate Them!" xiii. Other historians writing about the extermination of the Native American population are numerous; among them are: the classic California historian Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History*, 474; Robert F. Heizer, *North American Indians*, 105–6; Jack D. Forbes, *Culturally Different*, 37; David J. Weber, *Mexican Frontier*, 4.
10 O'Sullivan, "Great Nation", 429.
11 Baudrillard, *America*, 80.
12 In Martin Ridge, *Frederick Jackson Turner*, 23.
13 The commentary from French critics is a tradition in itself; Malcolm Bradbury reminds us of that when he states, "it can only seem appropriate that three of the most important books that celebrated the new, Enlightenment American spirit were to be written by Frenchmen, who saw America in their own light and through distinctively French preoccupations and discourse". Bradbury, *Dangerous Pilgrimages*, 30.
14 "Her novels and essays return ineluctably to that promise of starting afresh that the American frontier once seemed to offer", claims H. Jennifer Brady, and she adds, "Didion's novels attempt to claim the history of this national dream for the province of fiction". Brady, "Points West", 453.
15 Ellen G. Friedman states, "California history has the value of myth to Didion", yet she puts a limitation on her claim: "It is, though, a myth of loss in which the promise that drove the pioneers resonates in every evidence of its failure". Friedman, *Joan Didion*, 82.
16 Baudrillard, *America*, 81.
17 America is not so much a tradition to continue, but a future to fulfill (trans. mine). Octavio Paz, *Laberinto*, 50. For an interesting comparison with American perspectives on Europe, cf. Werner Sollors, "Introduction: American Journeys to Poland".
18 Turner, "Frontier", 15.

19 Steiner, "Significance", 464.
20 Steiner, "Significance", 460.
21 Turner, "Frontier", 15.
22 Josiah Royce, "Provincialism", 237.
23 Didion, *Slouching*, 4.
24 Baudrillard also comes close to Turner in this respect. When discussing Turner's frontier thesis essay, Steiner states, "Turner is on the verge of writing history in terms of geology". Steiner, "Significance", 455.
25 Baudrillard, *America*, 125–6.
26 Didion, *Slouching*, 4. Kathleen Tynan reports the following anecdote:

> In the City of Angels, when you ask a writer you respect 'What's happening on the literary scene?' he'll say 'There isn't one'. And after you've asked the same question of Christopher Isherwood, Gore Vidal, Brooke Hayward and Neil Simon, and have had no encouragement for your quest (…), someone says, 'Of course, the Dunnes'.
>
> So you go and see Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne. And John Dunne says, 'We're here because there isn't a literary scene'. To which Miss Didion adds, 'There aren't any appreciators here. No hostesses, critics, publishers or fans'.
>
> (Quoted in Julian Murphet, Literature and Race in Los Angeles, 4–5)

Jean Baudrillard quotes and critiques G. Faye, who states,

> California has invented nothing: it has taken everything from Europe and served it up again in a disfigured, meaningless form, with an added Disneyland glitter. World centre of sweet madness, mirror of our dejecta and our decadence. Californitis, that hot variant of Americanism, is unleashing itself on the young of today and emerging as a mental form of AIDS (…) Even nature in California is a Hollywood parody of ancient Mediterranean landscapes: a sea that is too blue [!?], mountains that are too rugged, a climate that is too gentle or too arid, an uninhabited disenchanted nature, deserted by the gods: a sinister land beneath a sun that is too bright.
>
> (In Baudrillard, *America*, 102–3)

These are but two examples of numerous instances in which California is represented as mentally vacuous and culturally a desert.
27 Baudrillard, *America*, 102. Emphasis in the original.
28 Baudrillard, *America*, 103.
29 Didion, *White Album*, 65.
30 Sigmund Freud, "The Aetiology of Hysteria", 97–8.
31 Didion, *White Album*, 64.
32 Freud, "The Aetiology of Hysteria", 98.
33 Freud, "The Aetiology of Hysteria", 106, italics in the original.
34 Freud, "The Aetiology of Hysteria", 109, italics in the original.
35 Didion devotes almost thirty pages to an analysis of her own novel. Didion, *Where I Was From*, 155–81.
36 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 28.
37 Walter Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 45.
38 For a detailed discussion of Benjamin's thought with reference to his concept of history, see Peter Fenves, "Of Philosophical Style", 67–87; Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics*; Christopher Prendergast, *Triangle of Representation*; or Elizabeth Stewart, *Catastrophe and Survival*.
39 Didion, *Run River*, 100.
40 Didion, *Run River*, 120.

41 Didion, *Run River*, 99.
42 Didion, *Run River*, 100.
43 Brady, "Points West", 458.
44 Didion, *Run River*, 263.
45 Didion, *Run River*, 59.
46 Didion, *Run River*, 220.
47 Didion, *Run River*, 45.
48 Didion, *Run River*, 46.
49 Didion, *Run River*, 46–7, italics in the original.
50 Didion, *Run River*, 120.
51 Didion, *Run River*, 103.
52 Benjamin, "German Tragic Drama", 92.
53 Didion, *Run River*, 38.
54 Didion, *Run River*, 38–9.
55 Didion, *Run River*, 39.
56 In Felton, *Critical Response*, 14–15.
57 In Felton, *Critical Response*, 15.
58 In Felton, *Critical Response*, 16.
59 Judith Butler, Afterword, 469.
60 Brady, "Points West", 456.
61 Didion, *Run River*, 263.
62 Didion, *Run River*, 263.
63 Didion, *Run River*, 186.
64 Didion, *Run River*, 188.
65 Brady, "Points West", 460.
66 Sharon Felton, Introduction, 3.
67 Loris, "Western Story", 26.
68 Hinde, "Playing It Rough", 13.
69 Didion, *Run River*, 246.
70 Benjamin, "German Tragic Drama", 92.
71 Benjamin, "German Tragic Drama", 92.
72 Didion, *Run River*, 229.
73 Didion, *Run River*, 136.
74 Didion, *Run River*, 164.
75 Didion, *Run River*, 165.
76 Didion, *Run River*, 165.
77 Didion, *Run River*, 192.
78 Didion, *Run River*, 13.
79 C. Barry Chabot discusses Maria's "exil[ing] herself to the narrow confines of the present" and stresses that "hope is merely a residual gesture from her former life". C. Barry Chabot, "Vacuity", 122.
80 Brady, "Points West", 461.
81 Didion, *Play It*, 80.
82 Didion, *Play It*, 5.
83 Didion, *Play It*, 5.
84 Didion, *Play It*, 86.
85 Didion, *Play It*, 81.
86 Didion, *Play It*, 81.
87 Didion, *Play It*, 81.
88 Didion, *Play It*, 41.
89 Didion, *Play It*, 69.
90 Didion, *Play It*, 69.
91 Didion, *Play It*, 204.
92 Didion, *Play It*, 204.

93 Marc Augé studies non-places, a category to which he ascribes "airports, railway stations, bridges, and some hypermarkets"; surely highways could be classified as such. Augé characterizes them as

> communal spaces able to give those who use them, travelers, customers or clients, a feeling that neither time nor beauty are absent from their history. They are further fragments of utopia, in the image of our time divided between passivity, anxiety, and, despite everything, hope or, at the very least, expectation.
>
> (xxii)

94 Didion, *White Album*, 83. For a discussion of space and place, see the iconic study of Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience*.
95 Didion, *White Album*, 83.
96 Didion, *White Album*, 83.
97 Baudrillard, *America*, 53.
98 Baudrillard, *America*, 53.
99 Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 132.
100 Baudrillard, *America*, 53.
101 Baudrillard, *America*, 53.
102 Baudrillard, *America*, 53.
103 Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 233.
104 Brady, "Points West", 463.
105 Qtd in Brady, "Points West", 463.
106 Didion, *Play It*, 15.
107 Didion, *Play It*, 15.
108 Didion, *Play It*, 15.
109 Didion, *Play It*, 17.
110 Didion, *Play It*, 33.
111 Didion, *Play It*, 141.
112 Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 233.
113 Didion, *Play It*, 180.
114 Didion, *Play It*, 197.
115 Didion, *Play It*, 173.
116 Baudrillard, *America*, 8.
117 Winchell, *Joan Didion*, 138.
118 In fact, one reviewer calls Charlotte "another Maria" (qtd. in Felton, *Critical Response*, 95); this accusation is reiterated in Thomas Mallon's review of *Democracy*, Didion's fourth novel, as he states, "Inez Victor has in the past gone by the names of Lily Knight McClellan, Maria Wyeth, and Charlotte Douglas". Mallon, untitled review, 196.
119 Joan Didion, *Common Prayer*, 263.
120 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 263.
121 Peter S. Prescott rightly notes the similarities between *A Book of Common Prayer* and Didion's other novels, stating: "Joan Didion is our foremost practitioner of the literature of permanent nervous collapse. The geography of her books may vary slightly, but the spiritual landscape alters little, if at all. The West has completed its decline". Prescott, "Didion's Grace", 81. Also, cf. Elizabeth Woods Shaw, Untitled Review of *A Book of Common Prayer*.
122 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 197.
123 Zbigniew Białas discusses "geographically perceived sexuality" in "an immobile female principle", while analytically disentangling the imposition of the female body upon a map and its implications as a violent cartographic and epistemological act – cf. his *Mapping Wild Gardens: The Symbolic Conquest of South Africa*, esp. pages 135–9.

124 Patricia Merivale categorizes *A Book of Common Prayer* as "an elegiac romance" and thus explains the genre's tenets: it is

> a fictional autobiography which must disguise itself as the biography of a person now dead. (…) All elegiac romances have 'biographers' who disingenuously claim to be quite unimportant compared to their 'heroes'; only in the end does the narrator emerge as the central character.
>
> (Merivale, "Greene-land in Drag", 46)

125 Henderson makes a similar observation, claiming that

> Institutions like the family, faltering in Run River, are so shapeless in this novel as to be scarcely recognizable, and the novel has no reassuring symbol of permanence like a river, no sheriff to represent order, no Edenic vision, however nostalgic.
>
> (Henderson, *Joan Didion*, 65)

126 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 11.
127 Hollowell calls this the "anti-interpretive stance", and he claims it is to be "found throughout Didion's works". He explains that it "indicates that causality no longer operates very well as a way of satisfactorily explaining the fragmented aspects of the daily lives of her heroines". Hollowell, "Against Interpretation", 165.
128 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 197.
129 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 14. Samuel Chase Coale makes a similar observation as he notes, "The facts alone reveal the inevitable breakdown and corruption of older, more stable values: the family, American life, individual identity, loyalties, suburban mores, California pieties". Coale, "Witnessing the Abyss", 115.
130 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 267.
131 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 21.
132 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 21.
133 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 21.
134 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 272.
135 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 52.
136 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 272.
137 Victor Strandberg points to a number of parallels between *A Book of Common Prayer* and literary classics, among them F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* with its final lesson learnt by the narrator, which is "Nick's discovery that 'They're a rotten crowd'", which, in turn, as Strandberg stresses, "has its analogue in Charlotte's 'Goddamn you all'". Strandberg points to a number of references to other literary works, saying that "Didion clearly links herself to a major tradition in American fiction" and comes to the conclusion that *A Book of Common Prayer* "approaches the category of a great reading experience" and it may "become one of the landmark novels of the decade". Strandberg, "Passion and Delusion", 161–2.
138 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 272.
139 A similar set of preoccupations is visible in three short stories Joan Didion wrote and published between 1964 and 1967, "Coming Home", "The Welfare Island Ferry" and "When Did Music Come This Way? Children Dear, Was It Yesterday?" Winchell notes, "Among the most nearly central of these themes [which dominate her work] is loss of home and of one's past". Winchell, *Joan Didion*, 112. Connected with these losses is the loss of wagon-train values – the subject of Chapter 3 of the present study – and loyalty to one's kin.
140 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 266.

141 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 230.
142 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 229, see also 69.
143 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 224.
144 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 224.
145 Benjamin throws some light on these concepts in his correspondence: see *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*. For their more rigorous philosophical examination, see Juergen Habermas, *Modernity*; Fredric Jameson, *Archeologies*; and Robert J.C. Young, *White Mythologies*.

3 The Loss of Ethics

> The American community in early California fairly represented, as we shall see, the average national culture and character. (…) we Americans therefore showed, in early California, new failings and new strength. (…) But we also showed our best national traits, – traits that went far to atone for our faults.
>
> —Josiah Royce, *California: A Study of American Character*

With the publication of her first volume of essays, Didion established herself as a moral writer: she wrote from the position of a concerned outsider, observing the chaos of the 1960s, a conservative not easily swept by what others saw as the electrifying energy of the Flower power movement, warning us that "the center" – we may assume it is the moral center she is talking about – is "not holding": Americans have lost the ability to follow their conscience, and it is in California that we see the signs of "social hemorrhaging",[1] she tells us. The problems she diagnoses in the 1960s are a consequence of the mistakes made at the very start of the settlement of California, and they continue till this day. Didion has been asking questions about the responsibility for the losses, "a birthright squandered, a paradise lost",[2] as she describes it in 2003, for several decades now.

In this chapter, I focus on the way such responsibility, described in the simplest terms as a mandate to follow the "code of the West",[3] is represented in Didion's fiction. The code signifies the moral compass for the whole of America, since, in the words of Josiah Royce, which Didion quotes, "we Americans (…) showed, in early California, new failings and new strength".[4] California emerges as a litmus test for American values: seen from such a perspective, it is America's conscience. Didion advocates the adherence to what she deems a "primitive" code, stressing the difference between (corrupted) moral imperative and (simple and advisable) want, yet even as she illustrates the disastrous effects of following the wagon-train code, she stops short of presenting an alternative: commitment to the land instead of the clan. What Snyder calls being "totally at home" provides an option to avoid the pitfalls of the exclusivist

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pioneering code and the misplaced loyalty which produces anguish in Didion's characters.

As a Californian writer and advocate of a responsible approach to land, Gary Snyder advises us, "one must be tuned to hints and nuances". Snyder illustrates what might be described in Aldo Leopold's phrase as "land ethic" in the following anecdote:

> After twenty years of walking right past it on my way to chores in the meadow, I actually paid attention to a certain gnarly canyon live oak one day. Or maybe it was ready to show itself to me. I felt its oldness, suchness, inwardness, oakness, as if it were my own. Such intimacy makes you totally at home in life and in yourself. But the years spent working around that oak in that meadow and not really noticing it were not wasted. Knowing names and habits, cutting some brush here, getting firewood there, watching for when the fall mushrooms bulge out are skills that are of themselves delightful and essential. And they also prepare one for suddenly meeting the oak.[5]

Being "totally at home" in California defines the prelapsarian sense of belonging that all Didion's characters long for, and that she advocates in her ethical concerns. Paradoxically, it becomes clear in Didion's oeuvre that this condition has never occurred "naturally", that in fact it must be worked toward. It is the condition for the future, even though it has always been imagined as part of the Californian myth of El Dorado and Eden on earth. Having written about California and its moral condition for more than half a century, Didion understands better than most writers that the feeling of being "totally at home" in California might just remain an unreachable ideal, another "California trick", yet the disregard for it results in pangs of conscience that her characters know so well.

The Emergence of Conscience

Discussing melancholia in his 1917 essay, Freud assumes that the loss that triggers melancholy is "a loss in regard to [the] ego"[6]; importantly, it is the loss that occasions the emergence of an agency that enables a critical evaluation of the self. The loss of self-respect of the melancholic is presented as a gain of conscience; and the reaction to loss, which spawns melancholia, at the same time "affords of the constitution of the human ego".[7] Without loss and without melancholia, then, there is no ego, and there is no sense of the self.

Freud pauses at the moment he presents melancholia as the ego-constituting process. He introduces the category of "conscience" that he describes as a critical agency that splinters off from the ego and contends that: "in the clinical picture of melancholia, dissatisfaction with the ego on moral grounds is the most outstanding feature".[8] In the context of

my discussion of Californian identity, the loss of the idea of California as the Garden of Eden or the place of escape from history can be perceived as constitutive of California's identity that is portrayed in Joan Didion's fiction.[9]

The loss of the frontier, "running out of the continent" (to use Didion's phrase) to explore and to settle, are the problems that the United States as a nation had to come to terms with in the mid-nineteenth century. With the incorporation of California into the political structures of the country, it also had to manage the loss of certain ideals: one of an uninhibited growth of the territory, of the freedom of the frontier, and finally, of an entrepreneurial settler who survives in the wilderness on account of his or her faithfulness to the code of ethics that Didion terms the wagon-train ethics. It is the betrayal of this code that prompts the psychic annihilation of Didion's characters and renders them spiritually void.

The questions of the values that guarantee one's spiritual and physical survival are among the issues to which Didion returns with insistence in her fiction. Obliteration of those values is signaled by the themes that Didion recurrently represents: abortion, illnesses or deaths of children, sexual transgressions, unfulfilled or perverted desire, and gambling – these appear in *Run River*, *Play It as It Lays*, as well as in *A Book of Common Prayer*, constituting a thread that can be traced throughout all of Didion's writing, and resound with an echo in *Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted*.[10] In her first published volume, *Slouching towards Bethlehem*, she already expresses her interest in these ethical issues and presents their connection to the pioneering history, thus making ethics an issue inherently bound to the pioneering enterprise in early California, and later elaborates on those issues in her second collection of essays, *The White Album*. Over twenty years afterward, in 2003, she returns to this issue in *Where I Was From*.

The significance of *Where I Was From* derives from the fact that there she discusses the reinvention of the meaning of California,[11] talking about "a birthright squandered, a paradise lost".[12] The central story among those of Didion's own childhood memories and state politics is the story of immigration, whose emblematic narrative becomes the one of the Donner-Reed Party.

The echoes of the Donner-Reed Party's story reverberate through Didion's essays and novels: in *Run River*, for instance, the marriage between the protagonists Everett and Lily takes place "that October evening, the night the year's first snow settled over the Sierra Nevada",[13] which suggests fated decisions and doomed outcomes. In *Where I Was From*, Didion refers in an explicit manner to the stories of the overland pass, including her ancestors'. Didion mentions the Donner group's ordeal, but refuses to romanticize it. The extent to which Didion finds the story of the Donner-Reed Party problematic is visible in her assessment of its

consequences. She quotes the moral lesson that is to be drawn from the Donner Party ordeal given by one of the survivors: "Remember, never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can" and describes it as "the artless horror and constricted moral horizon".[14] She suggests that if this is the lesson that the survivor took from the tribulation, then perhaps there is no redemption and no resulting moral victory.

The Donner-Reed Party is not the only morally ambiguous and disappointing example. In general, Didion is critical of the vision of the crossing as a story of triumph of moral and physical strength and talks of the "darkest (…) betrayals", evoking an example of a Miss Gilmore, abandoned by her party to certain death. This story, taken from a diary by an emigrant named Bernard J. Reid who crossed the Great Plains in 1849, prompts Didion to ask a pertinent question, "When you survive at the cost of Miss Gilmore (…), do you survive at all?",[15] signaling the importance of spiritual survival, but also suspending its plausibility.

The idea of the importance of spiritual survival allows Didion to state, "The redemptive power of the crossing was (…) the fixed idea of the California settlement", which again she does not leave as unproblematic. She asks, "for what exactly, and at what cost, had one been redeemed?"[16] Through her questioning of the idea of survival and redemption, Didion reevaluates her earlier prose and the underlying assumptions. Survival is not merely a continuation of biological existence, but it becomes a matter of responsibility for others, a communal identification that requires recognition of the other and his or her fragility. It requires facing the Other in the Levinasian sense.

Didion asks the questions of the cost and aim of redemption, prompted by the diary of Reid's; Patricia Limerick places Reid's account in a slightly different light, calling it "a litany of deaths recorded and of graves glimpsed along the way",[17] yet also revealing the central motivation of Reid and his party: getting rich on gold.[18] The pecuniary aim of the supposedly redemptive crossing would make the cost of it seem not only banal, but even sinister. Dying on the way to paradise might appear a reasonable risk; dying of scurvy en route to the hellishly exploitative mines does not seem like a fair price. Didion's silence on the question of the incentive for the crossing is telling: when she suggests the moral rather than the economic motivations of the pioneers, she responds to and perpetuates the common illusion, which Limerick describes as "the fantasy that westward movement could set one free from the past".[19]

The Melancholic Donner Party

The Donner Party story provides a subtext for her narrative in *Run River*,[20] the novel which, in her own words, was written to deal with the homesickness for California she suffered when she moved to the East Coast and whose aim was to view from a safe distance "the place

[she] came from".[21] It is explicitly referenced in a fascination that one of the central characters of the novel, Martha, displays. On the walls of Martha's childhood bedroom there are no typical adornments expected in a girl's room, but "a large lithograph of Donner Pass, on which Martha had printed, in two neat columns, the names of the casualties and the survivors of the Donner-Reed crossing".[22]

Yet the numbers are not so easy to calculate. "Of the eighty-one people who had been trapped by the early autumn snow at the eastern edge of the Sierra, thirty-six had died and forty-five had survived",[23] writes Ethan Rarick. McNeese counts the group as it was formed, not as it was near the end of the journey and tells us, "'the Donner Party' included a total of 90 members", and adds, "of those 90 individuals, 47 survived and 43 died".[24] Depending on the moment, whether we measure the group's numbers as they leave Independence, Missouri, or as they decide to take Hastings' cutoff, historians vary on the number of emigrants included in the survivors of the Donner Party. Didion's character wants the numbers to be clearer than they can be.

The wish for the body count to be clear-cut and unambiguous is one of the aspects of pioneering as a death-seeking enterprise. Martha, the last believer in the pioneers' ethical code, dies a self-inflicted death in the waters of a river that symbolize history. She loses the struggle against the linear history that moves away from the ethical values of belief in family and loyalty to next of kin. Her body is given to the waters rather than to the land, and even her burial is threatened by an impending flood. The connection between the corporeality of the pioneering enterprise and a claiming of the land is also represented through the image of the desolate gesture of Martha's grieving brother: "Everett had been out before dawn, pulling up every daffodil left after the rain, tearing down whole branches of camellias".[25] The cultivated garden is sacrificed as a tribute to the daughter of the pioneers. Didion attaches "a totemic significance" to the camellias, as the flowers "were planted locally in memory of the pioneers".[26] Everett's mourning is performed in a denial of life; it is an act that celebrates death, both through pulling out plants and thus depriving them of existence, and through using the kind of plant that symbolizes the pioneering endeavor.

Everett decides to bury his sister on the ranch, and when told it is against the state law, he reacts with indignation: "*I'm not talking about any law run through by the undertakers' lobby. I'm talking about what's right and what's wrong*".[27] His words indicate an individualistic, self-reliant approach to the law characteristic of the early pioneering era, and the scene is reminiscent of other instances of settlers' deaths in California, whose survivors were obliged to decide between the correct manner of performing funeral rites, and what was prescribed by law. Such instances are provided by Didion in her memoir *Where I Was From* but also in such California classics as *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Yet Martha's funeral bears another similarity: when Everett refuses to observe the socially acceptable norms of grieving as he decides to bury his sister on the farm, he plays a role evocative of Antigone. In Judith Butler's discussion of Sophocles' *Antigone*, she states, "Her melancholia, if we can call it that, seems to consist in this refusal to grieve that is accomplished through the very public terms by which she insists on her right to grieve".[28] If we were to translate it into terms applicable to Everett and Martha, Everett recalls the foundation of the pioneering ethos, that is, self-reliance and individuality, as the rationale behind his performance of burial rites for his sister. He evokes "the right" and "wrong" as the uncomplicated categories dictating public life, yet he insists that his grieving be situated outside the public sphere. Ultimately, it is the loyalty to one's kin that is the highest law, and other identifications are subservient to this familial obligation: one's family comes before the community or the nation.

One necessary consequence of this classification of familial dependencies is an incestuous relation between members of the group, and *Run River* presents such a bond, albeit not in a literal form, between Lily and her lover Joe, as well as between Martha and Everett. When Lily becomes pregnant and the possible father is Joe, Everett thinks about the pregnancy in terms that could be understood as incestuous: "What real difference would it have made: it would have been Lily's, and Lily was his, and as far as that went, Joe Templeton was a distant cousin of his".[29] Fatherhood is perceived in a communal way, and this understanding suggests that the highest level of loyalty and the closest bonds are ones within a community bound by the pioneering past.

Everett's sister reacts to Lily's indiscretions with a force that also suggests a passion for her brother that transgresses the boundaries of an ordinary sibling fondness. When Martha realizes Lily is unfaithful, she tells Lily, "You've got no right to my brother",[30] and after she aborts the child that would possibly have been Joe's, Lily agrees: "Martha had said it all: Lily had no right to her brother".[31] Martha's harsh verdict derives from her wagon-train ethics that determine her loyalties. From Martha's perspective, any kind of affection other than familial is fleeting: "Whoever loved anybody for more than two weeks. Except your own family".[32] Both Everett's and Martha's suicidal deaths prove that familial bonds, understood in the larger way as "blood" relationships, even those suggestive of the incestuous extreme, are superior to other unions.[33]

The instance of Lily's mother teaches the same lesson. Edith Knight speaks about her husband's mistress with a magnanimity that is justified by the propinquity of "blood": "Miss Rita Blanchard has lived all her life on Thirty-eighth Street. (…) She is from an old, old family in the Valley. A family (…) which crossed the Great Plains a year before my own".[34] Edith Knight is willing to justify her husband's marital indiscretion by the mistress's status as an heiress of the pioneers. Living her whole life at

one address validates, in Edith's eyes, her trustworthiness. This belief is as mistaken as the premise behind it, since it suggests that migrating to California is legitimate only for the first migrants; the claim to the land staked by the belated comers, the "Okies" and other "dubious" groups (which includes also those who had been there before the white settlers), is rendered null.

In *Run River*, the whole story is presented from Lily's perspective, with an occasional glimpse of Everett's or Martha's points of view. Lily survives her sister-in-law and her husband, yet it does not mean that her standpoint is well substantiated: just like Everett and Martha, she prides herself in being a descendant of the first settlers, and she is as willing to justify their transgressions. The last fragment of the novel, in which the particular perspective is presented, mitigating the assessment of the events covered in the narrative, such as marital infidelity, abortion, suicide, and finally murder, thus characterizes the Californians: "They had been a particular kind of people, their particular virtues called up by a particular situation, their particular flaws waiting there through all those years, unperceived, unsuspected, glimpsed only cloudily by one or two in each generation".[35] This fragment, naming the pioneers "particular", excludes them from ordinary judgment, and simultaneously suggests that their virtues, also "particular", thus not ordinary ones, are generated when an occasion arises; the flaws, however, hail from an earlier time. In this sense, then, the virtues are the pioneers' own, while the flaws are their ancestors'. The land, the circumstances, the particular moment in history – they make people virtuous; what is necessary is to forget the defects of the past. Such an ethical obligation thus pivots on oblivion, which is a form of violence and falsity at the same time.

That might explain the sense of belatedness haunting the characters of *Run River* (as well as those of *Play It as It Lays*): Martha believes in a code of behavior that used to be observed by the generations before her and that dies with her; Everett, "a type of Adam"[36] with whose demise "the agrarian tradition dies",[37] believes in an affinity among them that first informs his willingness to accept his wife's lover's baby as his own and ultimately dictates his killing of Lily's lover; and Lily, who comes to understand that it is too late for choosing at the moment when her husband kills her lover, which is a late moment for understanding, too.

Yet belatedness is not limited to the code of ethics the characters observe; a sense of delay is produced through various means in the novel, for instance, when Martha before her death considers calling Sarah, but decides "it's too late".[38] In another instance, when Martha drowns, Lily thinks that Sarah should have been informed, yet Everett decides that "*Sarah can't come, there's no reason to call her* (…). *It's too late*. She left here of her own will and anyway it's too late now".[39] The ambiguity of this sentence is never resolved and the lateness mentioned may refer

to the fact that nothing can be done for Martha, or that it is too late for Sarah to undo her self-expulsion from paradise.

The sense of belatedness is suggested in the statement, "Lily heard the shot at seventeen minutes to one",[40] which is the opening sentence of the novel. The number seventeen appears with regularity throughout: Lily and Everett's house has seventeen rooms, Lily is seventeen when she and Everett start dating, and when Lily reminisces with her mother, it has been seventeen years since Martha's death. Seventeen comes to symbolize an early maturity, prematurely spent, and it exposes the sense of belatedness plaguing the characters. The number suggests stability (the house), but also sexual activity. Just as losing her virginity is a liminal moment of entry into adulthood, Martha's death in the novel is the liminal moment of the loss of the youthful illusions of the characters, and a reminder of the irrevocability of their choices. That Lily hears the shot fired by her husband at that precise moment means that it is already too late for them right at the commencement of the narrative.

Just as seventeen is the symbol of tenuous maturity, sixteen symbolizes coming of age. "Lily believed at sixteen", the reader is told of the character's youthful naivety, "as firmly as she believed that it was America's mission to make manifest to the world the wishes of an Episcopal God, that her father would one day be Governor of California".[41] Inherent in this belief is the equation that Lily makes between her father and God. Her belief in her father's gaining the principal political position is on a par with the mission California has to perform before the world. The frustration of the former questions the soundness of the latter.

Lily's sixteenth birthday is the precise moment when her beliefs are tested. In one of the numerous biblical references interspersed in the novel, Lily's father brings her an apple, suggestive of the temptation and the fall. "Just you remember that everybody gets what he asks for in this world",[42] says Lily's father, dropping sixteen silver dollars on her bed. Her father gives her money while talking of the expectations one might have in life. His view, corresponding to the all-American belief in boldness as an important ingredient of success in life, is belied by the gesture, through which the materiality of his gift already imposes a limitation on Lily's possible interpretation of what she might ask for in life.

Lily is skeptical: "Maybe that's not such a prize", she answers, and her father corrects her, "I didn't say it was any prize. (…) I said it's nobody fault but your own. My own. Anybody's own".[43] His hesitant response to her uncertainty signals a critical order in the perception of responsibility. If one asks for little, one receives little: thus, we could summarize the father's conviction concerning one's worldly ambition. The consequence of such a lack of ambition is formulated in terms of "fault", which shifts from "your own", through "my own", to "anybody's"; and even though in the character's words these phrases are meant to signify the same, we might be tempted to read them as an expression of order:

starting with blaming others, through accepting liability, to a dispersal of burden as communal.

Lily comes to understand her father long after his death. When she reminisces about the moment when he imparted to her the knowledge of the fundamentals in life, she realizes that he deluded himself, and wanted her to hold the same delusions:

> *A little late for choosing:* her father had known it, even as he denied it. But deny it he had. *You say what you want and strike out for it*, he told Lily on the morning of her sixteenth birthday: it was one of their rare attempts to grope through a conversation with each other, deafened as always by the roar of the blood between them. (…) *You say what you want and then go after it, and if you decide to be the prettiest and the smartest and the happiest, you can be.*[44]

Their communication is obstructed by "the roar of blood", which suggests that their connection is of a different, more basic nature: it is primeval and preverbal. The "roar" also hints at a violent character of their association, apparent as well in the advice: one needs only to state one's wish and claim it, no limitations are mentioned, the freedom seems unlimited. The father's suggestion obviously echoes the pioneering ethos, which values individuality and brazenness highly. One's individual liberty in pursuing happiness reigns supreme, and it necessarily assumes a disregard for compassion or communality.

What the quote above also states is that the necessary condition for the pioneering philosophy is willful oblivion: Lily's father, she realizes, was aware of the belatedness of his viewpoint, yet he rejected such an interpretation. Even as he comprehended his erroneousness, he taught it to his daughter, thus passing on to the next generation the inheritance of falsehood. Lily thus sees herself as without choice, and in turn her own daughter, as well. Denial of the memory of deprivation produces a melancholic identity.

The final estimation of California's history exposes its falsehood, linking it to individualism as the stance that necessitates self-delusion: "It had been above all a history of accidents: of moving on and accidents. What is it you want, she had asked Everett tonight. It was a question she might have asked them all".[45] Such a reassessment of the history of the pioneering endeavor suggests a lack of direction and an inability to state a purpose. The question about "wanting", posed repeatedly in the novel, remains without answer.

One reason for the inability to respond to such a question is the self-deception practiced by the many generations of settlers. When Lily reminisces about her father, she characterizes him as possessing an "*exceptional talent only for deceiving himself*" and she describes him as "*a good man but maybe not good enough*",[46] in a sense thus accusing

him of mediocrity. Lily's husband, Everett, is described in similar terms; upon his suicide Lily considers

> what she would say (…) to Knight and Julie. She did not know what she could tell anyone except that he had been a good man. She was not certain that he had been but it was what she would have wished for him, if they gave her one wish.[47]

The grandeur of dreams spent, now all that remains is a humble wish for a decency of character. Yet even the fulfillment of such a modest hope is doubtful.

Desire and the Wagon-Train Morality

The question about wanting is posed in the novel on several occasions, one of them being the moment when Lily admits to her infidelity: "I'm pregnant and I don't think by you", says Lily, and Everett answers, stressing the necessity of knowing, "Any Mexican would know better. (…) Any West End whore".[48] It is such emotional moments that reveal the full score of the undercurrent of bigotry. Lily then asks, "What do you want (…). What do you want me to say", to which Everett's answer is, "Nothing".[49] His response signals a retreat from the perspective of their pioneering ancestors, spurred by the dissolution of marriage and family loyalty, the cornerstones of frontier ethics. Nothing remains of the pioneering values, and the characters pay a high price. Brady discusses the theme of "wagon-train morality" in Didion, and she points out that the appeal of the frontier depends to a large degree on the "promise of individual liberty and the absence of social controls", but the fulfillment of such a model and the very survival of the pioneers was premised on their ability to "recognize and uphold the primal loyalties due to each other as blood kin".[50] Lily, a dark "Lilith" rather than the springtime's "Lily-of-the-valley" now, violates the wagon-train code, motivated by an individual desire which goes against loyalty toward one's kin.

For Didion, familial loyalty as the basis for the moral code on the frontier is fundamental to Californian identity; however, it is not a new idea. Frederick Jackson Turner states: "Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family".[51] Didion echoes these words when she explains the same moral code: "I am talking (…) about a 'morality' so primitive that it scarcely deserves the name, a code that has as its point only survival, not the attainment of the ideal good".[52] Didion goes on to describe the kind of morality that she calls "primitive"; she discusses the bare principle allowing the survival of a group that finds itself in an equally archaic environment and she insists on the code's intrinsically Californian character.[53]

Just as she presents family loyalty as the "primitive" basis for Californian identity, she portrays California in prehistoric or biblical terms. Thus, she characterizes California as a primordial land, when she presents a lesson children learn at Sunday school: "Q. *In what way does the Holy Land resemble the Sacramento Valley?* A. *In the type and diversity of its agricultural products*".[54] In fact, she insists that "we are what we learned as children"[55] in order to argue for her credibility as a representative of California and a spokesperson for its character: "my own childhood was illuminated by graphic litanies of the grief awaiting those who failed in their loyalties to each other".[56] In this light, the story of *Run River* is the story of a betrayal of such "primitive" morality. Lily's unfaithfulness, her abortion, Everett's negligence and murder, Martha's suicide – each of these transgressions carries equal weight to Sarah's betrayal of her family allegiance. Lily ultimately emerges as the survivor in the story, because she understands that the land and the family are who she is.

The repeated question about what one wants is a basic question that, when answered straightforwardly, guarantees one's survival. In her discussion of morality, Didion veers toward the simple fulfillment of basic needs as the superior answer to our wishes:

> When we start deceiving ourselves into thinking not that we want something or need something, not that it is a pragmatic necessity for us to have it, but that it is a *moral imperative* that we have it, (…) then is when we are in bad trouble,

adding ominously, "I suspect we are already there".[57] Through this observation, she suggests that a basic loyalty to one's family guarantees survival, as much as it is also a simpler and more "moral" way of identifying one's allegiance. The claim of possessing a "moral imperative" is equated with "bad trouble", possibly a suggestion that a belief in one's destiny sanctioned on a higher level is a premonition of a serious disturbance – a mistaken belief that lies at the foundations of Californian identity, as evidenced by O'Sullivan, Royce, Turner, and other adherents of Manifest Destiny in its various configurations, and one that informs a certain slanted vision of California history according to which it commenced with the white, American settlement of the land in the mid-nineteenth century.

The spuriousness of California history corresponds closely to the falsity of Lily and Everett's marriage. Lily suspects that there is more to marriage than what they have: "They could lie in bed in the mornings with Knight between them and laugh, but that did not quite make, Lily thought, a family",[58] and she sees herself as an impostor who plays the role of a "river matron" quite ineptly.[59] Everett agrees with this assessment: "Although he was not sure what his idea of a wife's function was,

he knew that Lily had been closest to fulfilling it when she had been trying least",[60] even though he displays an ambiguous approach toward his own marriage: "Lily completed the picture, gave him the sense of having settled things"; yet when he is in the army, he begins to "look upon life on the ranch as a bacchanalia of disorganization, peculiarly female disorder".[61] This moment is recognized as Everett's "betrayal",[62] since Everett feels justified in leaving his young family and staying away in the barracks: "his absence from them was (…) blessed by all the Allied Powers"; even though as he is away, "every night, he lay in bed and made new plans for the ranch".[63] Everett's absence has grave consequences for his marriage as it provides an excuse for Lily's indiscretions: "*You don't know how I need you*".[64] The unfulfilled need, the basis of the elemental moral code expressed in the novel, is the driving force behind the characters' actions.

Need as the motivation for settling in California is a morally justifiable rationale, as Lily's father reminds her on her sixteenth birthday: "you come from people who've wanted things and got them. Don't forget it".[65] The lineage suggested in the quote proposes ideals more basic than those of Manifest Destiny as the ultimate referential point, yet the narrative shows that the descendants of the pioneers have diverted from such principles. Wanting or needing, which Didion presents as legitimate reasons for action, in contrast to seeing it as a "moral imperative", is here given as the underlying driving force of the emigration of the pioneers.

In many moments of the narrative, the issue of wanting is central to the discussions of the characters. "What is it you want" is a question that reappears in various configurations[66]; for the first time in a conversation between Lily and Everett when she considers alibis for the murder he committed, and for the last time in the closing episode of the narrative. Everett refuses to participate in her efforts or to explain his position: "There aren't any reasons. I don't want that". Lily states a point that is also repeated later in the novel, pointing out that "It's a little late for choosing". Everett stresses his point: "You don't see. I don't want that",[67] which implies blindness on Lily's part. Lily will see the answer at the end of the narrative, when she returns to the question of what he wants: "Maybe the most difficult, most important thing anyone could do for anyone else was to leave him alone; it was perhaps the only gratuitous act, the act of love".[68] The idea of a belatedness of choice is reconfigured here, as it suggests not only that the descendants of the pioneers lag behind, holding onto outdated concepts, but rather that wanting in the first place brings none of the desired effects. If there are no reasons behind the wagon trail, then the wagons-west code is rendered unfounded.

Want is an expression of a death wish, as desire can only cease in death; and this Freudian idea is recognized in *Run River* when Everett leaves for the army. He specifies his reasons: "I want to go. (…) I waited

a year. (…) Now I have to go", and when Lily points to his hesitation between a desire to go and a necessity, she defines his motivation as a wish to die, to which he agrees, "All right. I want to die".[69] Even though in this conversation the immediate desire is to finish the conversation rather than to die, the connection between wishing and death, often guised under the concept of traveling or going away, becomes apparent.

The theme of travel, the fantasy of "a long vacation"[70] weaves through the narrative as an unfulfilled wish. "We could go away this winter"[71] is a scenario that Everett proposes to save his and Lily's marriage. Yet it is uncharacteristic of him, as his connection to his farm prevents any such separation from it, which foreshadows the impending doom of his marriage. The wish is expressed at the point when it is already too late: the first shot sounds off and the second is coming.

Not articulating any wish can also be interpreted as an oblique expression of a death wish, which is apparent in two episodes connected with Lily's pregnancy. When she announces it, she asks him: "what do you want (…). What do you want me to say", to which he answers, "Nothing".[72] As a consequence, they discuss divorce: "Lily asked Everett if he wanted to divorce her. He did not. Of course he did not. What, then, did he want. He did not, he said, want anything".[73] In a characteristic clipped style, the conversation reports the dissolution of a wish to communicate, which forms the basis for any social interaction. Even though the characters do not wish to terminate their contract, the manner in which they convey the message denies any possibility of their successful alliance.

Desiring also has a different facet: *Run River* makes explicit connections between paternal authority and desire, understood both as a sexual urge and more generally as wanting. The link is evident in the episode after Walter Knight's death, in which Lily's mourning debilitates her to such a degree that the first reaction she gives is to "a diamond her father had given her mother the day she was born", not only a memento, but also a symbol of the riches of California and the might of her father, extending over the reproductive power, which again suggests a link between the father's authority and sexuality. Lily states firmly, "I want it", and it is "the first unequivocal statement she had made in two days".[74] Lily expresses a desire not only to possess the trinket inherited after her father's death; the desire is also of influence and control.

The connection between sexual desire and control is central to an understanding of the relationship between Martha and Ryder. Martha renounces her own yearnings, but Ryder knows that the denial is not genuine: "You want it,' he said. (…) 'I do not.' (…) 'I never wanted it' (…) 'A lot of times I only pretended to want it.' 'You want it now, all right'".[75] On one level her rejection of desire is a reaction to Ryder's scorn; on another, when Martha ascertains, "I don't want his *jobs*, I don't want his *favors*, I don't want anything *about* him",[76] it is a denunciation of all

that Channing stands for, that is, the new element in California. She criticizes him stating, "It's perfectly apparent to me that you aren't capable of giving anybody anything. All you want to do is to *use* people".[77] Martha denounces his desire as an egotistic force, which is precisely the kind of energy that stood behind California's settlement. When Martha comes to a realization that the pioneers' endeavor was driven by such aggressive forces, she cannot reconcile this realization with her own idealization of the pioneer past. Suicide then becomes the only option available to the disillusioned and embittered character.

An episode in which the issue of wanting is given a central position is the one in which Lily is subjected to an obscene monologue by a fellow passenger on a plane.

> The incredible thing happened, only it did not seem incredible until later, on the ground, in the light: the man began a low, loving, brutally obscene monologue. (…) *Do you want it or don't you. I don't want it*, she said finally (…). *You want it all right baby, you want it. Three hours of it.* (…) What held her in trance was his total lack of interest in anything else about her (…). There could be no question of (…) approval or disapproval, no roles at all.[78]

In the end, she does not do it, but what the man proposes is tempting, which is explained to a degree by Lily's self-regard: "She always smiled that way at men she did not know, unable to think of anything else to do and wanting them to want her, recognize her as the princess in the tower".[79] Desire is presented as a narcissistic force; its route is circular, bouncing back to the sender of the impulse who wants others to want her. The ultimate attraction of the proposed transaction is the absolute removal of history and memory: the two characters do not play any role in each other's lives. The desire is the only force that exists there, and that is its sole value; it is a pure drive forward, seemingly with no ideological investment.[80]

Knowing the object of one's desires is part of what one must learn to understand one's role in life; the other part is learning the way to fulfill the desire. In Everett's case, it means taking responsibility for his family, a sentiment that he understands as extending beyond his own actions: "his entire commitment to Lily had become an unbreakable promise to protect her from the mortal frailties which were, since they were hers, his own". Yet the rationale behind his desire remains unclear: "He wanted to save them and he would. It was only that he was not sure how. He could sort out no clear reason, no starting point".[81] The character's intention is to save his family: the use of religious discourse here suggests that his design refers to a larger picture of California as a redeeming place. One obvious problem is the inability to identify the starting point for the proposed salvation, the reason for which is the mistaken belief

in the beginning of the history in California; the other problem is that despite the intentions, there is no distinguishable validation.

Everett's problem with redemption mirrors the obscurity in the pioneering endeavor in California. In her commentary in *Where I Was From*, Didion poses the question of identity in terms of holding a belief: "In California we did not believe that history could bloody the land, or even touch it".[82] Characteristically speaking for the land, Didion refuses to admit the connection between the history of violence and identity, and she does so to point out the problem implicit in such a refusal. Yet as in her essays she correctly diagnoses the ailments inherent in the perception of California as an earthly paradise untouched by violent history, in her fiction she still rejects the option of a multivocal narrative and speaks for the descendants of the white settlers, presenting a vision of California as the land belonging to the hardy pioneers who claimed it as their own on the force of Manifest Destiny. Didion links identity and the land in a direct and explicit way, melancholically mourning their loss. As Zehelein puts it, "In *Where I Was From*, the loss of place is the loss of identity"[83]; a similar observation could apply to *Run River*.

Violence embedded in history finds representation in Didion's novels, albeit without any reference to the historical reality of the ethnic and racial discrimination of various groups. It is an unidentified violence, connected rather to the idea of an impossible earthly paradise, but never to the original sin of prejudice and intolerance toward minorities. With the murder at the commencement of the narrative, a violent impulse is performed, but not named: "Everything seemed to have passed from his reach way back somewhere; he had been loading the gun to shoot the nameless fury".[84] In fact, "The only real thing had been the shot (…) cracking reflexively through all the years before".[85] The reality of violence is acknowledged only in the final moments of life, which emphasizes the gravity of the revelation, but it does not lead to a reconfigured understanding of the ethical call of the land, requiring an acknowledgment of racial violence and dispossession inherent in the westering.

Yet the fear of a violent turn of events, a symptom of such an unacknowledged realization, is always present in the characters' lives. Everett expects a catastrophe at all times: he imagines it happening "those nights the kiln burned, the levee broke, the ranch went to nothing".[86] His greatest fear materializes when he kills Channing: "It was as if the kiln had burned already".[87] Fearing external elements, he does not take into consideration his own violent impulses, which ultimately bring about his demise.[88]

Not taking into account one's imperfection is congruent with the pioneering ideology of Manifest Destiny. With God and History on their side, pioneers are exempt from the mistakes of ordinary mortals. Their direction is always onward, and the impulse is to leave behind the past

and begin anew. Everett expresses precisely such a wish for a fresh start, as he holds a picture of himself, his sisters, and Lily as children:

> as if by tracing his finger down the crack in that yellowed snapshot he could recoup all their mortal losses, as if by merely looking long enough and hard enough he could walk back into that afternoon (…) and begin again.[89]

The wish can never be fulfilled; the pioneers leave for their descendants an inheritance of troubling memory and a set of false beliefs in their own infallibility. When Everett thinks that he, his wife, and her lover "had simply been spectators at something that happened a long time ago to several other people",[90] he makes a connection between his actions and his ancestors', suggesting in a New England Puritan fashion that his choices were never real and that his fate had always been preordained.[91]

Betrayals of Familial Loyalty

Everett's murder of Channing is one of the major transgressions committed by the three central characters of *Run River*, all of the crimes involving termination of life: Martha commits suicide, Everett kills Ryder, and Lily aborts a child. In Didion's fiction, abortion is never a justifiable act, and in *Run River* it stands not only for a singular error of judgment, but rather for a lifetime of deceit and the final betrayal, understood as a denial of marital faithfulness as well as faithfulness to familial loyalty, the very foundation of the pioneering ethical code.

Just as Everett perceives his act of murder from the perspective of the puritan dogma of predestination, Lily also wants to be absolved of responsibility for her offense. Even though she blames her husband: "*You made me get it*, she would say", she accepts the gravity of her act:

> Over seven years, the August day she went to San Francisco by herself had become, in its manifold evidence of mutual error, the heaviest weapon in both their arsenals, the massive retaliation each withheld until all else had been exhausted.[92]

Till Everett's murder, Lily's abortion is the most serious offense, yet because the murder is represented at the very beginning of the narrative, the termination of pregnancy becomes only one in a series of acts of disloyalty that the couple performs.

The abortion carries multiple meanings, one of them revealed in its connection with gender. Blaming him for the abortion, Lily thinks Everett "robbed her of her womanhood",[93] yet after some reconsideration she sees her husband "not as the blight of her womanhood but, on the contrary, as her only hold on sanity".[94] In such a formulation, the category of

womanhood stands in contrast to another, quite incompatible quality – sanity, which, in turn, is granted by the masculine category. Since Lily perceives her identity as granted by her father's power, it comes as no surprise that in this post-frontier landscape she should also see masculinity as the source of sanity.

Abortion is also connected to the land and natural phenomena, and more specifically, to the unpleasant aspect of the weather pattern in California. In a sense, it is the weather that makes certain decisions necessary, as if the land and nature motivated and justified people's betrayals. When Lily goes to San Francisco to have an abortion, Martha naively explains to Everett: "She just decided to go as long as it was so hot – you wouldn't be*lieve* how hot it was in town today".[95] The summer heat provides a backdrop for an irregularity in the sequence of events: Walter Knight dies, and Lily gets an abortion. For acts considered unjustifiable, such as the latter, the summer's high temperature provides justification. Even though "hot nights make better parties",[96] which is the only positive assessment of such arid weather, it is suggested that the heat encourages promiscuous behavior. The weather gives Lily an excuse to refuse to go to a party with Everett, while she is planning her date with Channing, which leads to his murder. "It was entirely too hot"[97] sounds almost like a plausible explication of the reason behind the murder.

The main danger in a farmer's life is the threat of the farm being obliterated in fire. Fire, the hellish element, has no raison d'être in Californian paradise; it is its antithetical constituent. The catastrophe that Everett imagines is being consumed by the flames, to which a religious overtone is given: to guard himself against the evil of heat, Everett offers "his unthinkable prayers" which link the sense of catastrophe with Lily's abortion and an impossible hope connected with it: "should the hops come through the drying, the child she was carrying was his".[98] Even though the hops do come through the drying, the hope for a progeny that is his remains an unfulfilled fantasy.

The guilt over Lily's abortion is distributed between Lily and her husband, as she makes the decision, but he blames himself, asking: "had he not betrayed her in his mind, wished to stay away, wanted no trouble".[99] Everett accepts the price for his indifference: "He (…) knew that he would pay all of his life for letting her spend this one hour in some nameless doctor's office".[100] The pioneer's desire to start anew cannot be satisfied; both characters are to blame for their ungrounded faith in the possibility of always being able to leave their mistakes behind.

The sense of culpability leaves the characters only occasionally: "Their betrayal of each other (…) seemed for a few hours that Saturday afternoon and evening a simple dislocation of war, a disturbance no more lasting than the wash from a stone thrown in the river".[101] When the shame is lifted, it is compared to circles in the water after a stone sinks in it, but elsewhere the river serves as a symbol of memory itself; so the

clean conscience is only temporarily so. Significantly enough, a lack of remorse is only possible when the two characters leave California for the Nevada line to gamble there, as if conscience itself was a Californian phenomenon.

Gambling, a morally suspicious activity, represents fate in many of Didion's novels; in *Run River*, it is also a representation of the forces one cannot control. When Everett fears that Lily's abortion might cost her her life, he thinks about it in terms of a gamble: "He had lost her, and (…) maybe it had gone all wrong and she was dying there by herself (women died from abortions (…) and whether the odds were with her or not she would be afraid of it)".[102] The fear connected with hazardous actions is there, irrespective of the outcome. Everett projects his fear on Lily when he imagines her dying after the abortion; he also experiences the anxiety himself: "to risk losing her would be to risk losing Martha and Sarah and himself as well".[103] Thus, the apprehension and guilt connected with the abortion, which is a betrayal of the pioneering ethical code of valuing family as the highest good, are a sense of unease over one's identity as a Californian and a descendant of the pioneers. The act of abortion challenges the foundations of Californian identity built on the pioneers' ethics, which in turn results in the loss of control symbolized by gambling.

Lily's assessment of the act stems from a different principle, yet is as devastating as Everett's in its final estimation of guilt. Lily does not see any rationale behind her own choices:

> She could not think why she had gone to San Francisco (…) or how she had gotten pregnant (…) by somebody she did not much like or why, the heart of the matter, she had thought it made any difference.[104]

Just like Everett, whose conclusion about the aborted child comes close to incestuous as he blurs the difference in parenthood between himself and Lily's lover, Lily too loses the sense of a difference between what matters and what does not. The explanation for such haziness of judgment is provided again by the hot weather: it is the heat that "drain[s] the distinction from things".[105]

The abortion in *Run River* constitutes an act of betrayal not only between the couple, but also across generations, which is suggested by the funding for the abortion: "To get the cash she had sold ten shares of an oil stock her father had given her as a wedding present".[106] Hope for the future inspiring the present is denied in the abortion; in so many of the novels of Joan Didion, abortion is precisely that: a symbol of hopelessness and an end to one's plans and aspirations, but childbearing is not without its pitfalls, either, as evidenced by Mildred McClellan and "her death in childbirth".[107] Death and abortion are radical ends to one's

expectations, but when Lily diagnoses her daughter Julie with no choice, she responds to a similar sense of melancholia inherent in California – or their perception thereof.

That the land is central to their sense of identity is stressed time and again in the novel, and it is also tested in connection with the abortion. The first question Lily asks Everett when he comes to retrieve her after her trip to San Francisco is, "Did you get the hops finished?"[108] Lily is suggesting through this query that the crops are of greater consequence than her body, but she is also in this way making a belated attempt at a reconciliation with her husband. In her own estimation, her unfaithfulness is of no consequence to their relationship: as she asks her lover, "you think you've got some claim on me? (…) Nothing we did matters to me. Nothing touched Everett and nothing touched me",[109] indicating that their marriage remains impervious to ordinary marital tribulations. The veracity of this assumption remains impossible to test, as the relationship ends with Everett's suicide after his murder of Lily's lover, yet the last conversation between the dying man and his wife seems to suggest that the affection between them, despite all their problems, will last, as it is validated through its connection with the land.

When Lily reflects on her own marital indiscretions, she justifies them by ultimately affirming her loyalty to Everett, stating: "*None of the others could help her*"; and she elaborates on the idea of fleeting contacts with men as inadequate: "*Joe could not help her and none of the others could help her, none of the one-night, two-night stands, none of the times when she had simply not known what else to do, how else to talk to someone, none of it could help but Everett*".[110] Although it remains unclear in what capacity those contacts were supposed to help her, Lily's husband is stated to be the only one with whom her relation is not purely sensual, but – perhaps through its validation in the land – theirs is a lasting connection, despite Lily's infidelity. The suggestion is, however, that the sexual contacts were meant to partake in, if not facilitate, redemption; it is only the marital contract, corroborated through the link with the land, that promises redemption.

The sentiment that is expressed in *Run River*, as well as in other novels such as *Play It as It Lays* and *A Book of Common Prayer*, is the importance of a simple familial loyalty. Domestic relations are important, and they ultimately constitute the basis for one's spiritual and physical survival. In *Run River*, the narrator reflects: "There was a certain comfort in the unkempt graveyard. (…) [T]here was about the place none of the respect for death implicit in a well-tended plot",[111] thus showing the relationship between the consolation that a graveyard might offer to the bereaved and a refusal to accept death as the ultimate measure of life. In an essay commenting on *Run River*, Didion puts forward a proposition, "Could this have been (…) some admirable wagons-west refusal to grant death its dominion?"[112]; through such an idea she proposes a

correlation between the process of mourning and a pioneering venture. The pioneers, she is suggesting, were looking to conquer death and overcome melancholia. The movement westward and the settlement of the West are measures to defeat melancholy – unsuccessful as they perhaps must be.[113]

The attempts to triumph over the dominant mood of melancholia are in vain; *Run River*, *Play It as It Lays* and *A Book of Common Prayer* all testify to that. All the female characters in these novels endure the loss of children or undergo unwanted abortions; they all commit acts of transgression against themselves and those they should be loyal to. Their moments of relief from desperation are rare. Lily muses, "*I should have taken the Holy Ghost not Everett* (…). A pillow over her head, she had lain still all morning, lifting the pillow only to watch the rain outside",[114] which is one of the instances that show her dissatisfaction with marriage. Grace describes a relative as someone who "appeared to locate the marriage bed as the true tropic of fever and disquiet", and she adds, "I understand this position".[115] The toxicity of Maria and Carter's relationship is illustrated by Carter's words in bed: "Well *go* to sleep, cunt. Go to sleep. Die. Fucking vegetable".[116] None of these characters have a relationship that is worth their commitment or loyalty. The wagon-train ethical code proves obsolete.[117]

Didion makes her characters realize the state of affairs after their parents' deaths, as if they remain childish and naive till the moment they are left alone. Lily spirals into depression after her father passes away, and then Everett admits after his father's death: "Everett saw that what Lily had said was true: everything was falling apart".[118] Maria expresses dissatisfaction with the lessons learned from her parent: "he always had a lot of plans, I never in my life had any plans, none of it makes any sense, none of it adds up".[119] Charlotte also relies on the ancestral knowledge, and it is as pointless: "Charlotte remembered to bring me a gardenia for my trip",[120] which, as the narrator states, is a lesson taught by her mother, and the trip she mentions is the one that will take her to safety, and leave Charlotte in Boca Grande where she will die. The characters' loyalties are misplaced, and this fact contributes to their demise.

In all three California books, Didion presents the process of falsely recognized loyalties leading to a suicidal death: in *Run River*, it is realized in a most explicit fashion. When Martha commits suicide, the other characters' reaction is one of an unwillingness to acknowledge it: "*she knew better than that*",[121] say both Everett and Edith Knight. The narrator stresses the point: "*She knew better than that:* Everett said it, Henry Sears said it, her mother said it", and Lily is the only one who admits, "all she could say was *I don't know*".[122] In this ambiguous statement, Lily either refuses to accept that Martha's death was indeed self-inflicted, or, if we take the statement to refer to her, she reveals suicidal tendencies through the contrast between the fact that one

is supposed to "know better" and the fact that she does not. Everett blames himself for the death of his sister: "He had let her go, had not kept her safe".[123] Everett's sense of guilt grows out of his duty toward his family which he feels he does not fulfill. Failing at familial obligations results in death and generates guilt in the survivors.

Familial attachment is a complex issue in *Run River*: Everett blames himself for one sister's demise, and the other is deemed "the prodigal sister",[124] as she expelled herself from the Californian paradise and lives elsewhere. Sarah's position as an outsider is stressed through her willingness to sell the land,[125] on which she is as insistent as Martha is opposed. The attachment to the land is, in fact, one measure of familial relations. Everett's son, Knight, thinks of moving east, asking his parents rebelliously, "You think I want to stay on this place? You think I want one lousy acre of it?"[126] Everett's reaction shows that the sense of loyalty to the family is synonymous with a connection to the land: "He's not coming back. (…) He's disloyal".[127] Murder, suicide, abortion – all of these tragedies are the direct outcome of a misplaced loyalty and a betrayal of the wagon-train ethics.

An illustration of the confusion the characters experience is provided by an episode in which Martha becomes intimate with a stranger after her lover Ryder's wedding. She tells the man he disgusts her and that she also "disgusted herself, she was no better than Lily" and when he asks who Lily is, she says, "*she's my sister* (…) *and you aren't good enough to say her name*".[128] Martha thinks she stoops down to Lily's level of extramarital adventurousness, yet she defends her sister's-in-law name against an imagined insult from a stranger. The family circle is to be protected against outside forces; yet the disintegration of the family is of an implosive nature: it is caused by internal, not external factors.

Lack of integrity, misplaced loyalty, detachment from the land, and a loss of ethical values: all these contribute to the feeling of senselessness experienced by Didion's Californian characters. The randomness of their experiences is symbolically represented through gambling, which is not so much a pastime, as a small-scale equivalent of life forces. Luck rather than logic is the underlying force. The loss of control over their lives that the characters experience is an outcome of their perception of life as haphazard.

Life as Gambling

In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Joan Didion stresses the importance of writing the first sentence of a novel, as it is the one that determines the shape of the whole novel. She explains: "What's so hard about that first sentence is that you're stuck with it. Everything else is going to flow out of that sentence. And by the time you've laid down the first two sentences, your options are all gone".[129] The first sentences of *Play It as*

It Lays read: "What makes Iago evil? Some people ask. I never ask",[130] and they illustrate the exhaustion of possibilities for the protagonist, Maria Wyeth. The situation that is represented in the opening sequence is an ethical situation: the fact that the protagonist does not ask questions certainly results from a variety of causes, but whatever they are, it transpires that Maria avoids addressing the fundamental ethical question, that is, the question of evil.[131]

If the first sentences of the novel leave one with no options, then *Play It as It Lays* illustrated this principle perfectly: the novel comes back to the idea of asking questions in its final episodes, thus taking us full circle to the beginning; at the end, however, the reader senses that some provisional answer, an oblique one, perhaps, has been given. In the final episode of the narrative, one of the few in which Maria is given the first-person narration, she states, "I used to ask questions, and I got the answer: nothing. The answer is 'nothing'".[132] The assertion she presents is not an empty, meaningless statement. "Nothing" is in fact a valid answer, one that other characters in the novel are not willing or not ready to admit. Only Maria confronts the question and accepts the answer. She presents her own reluctance to avoid addressing ethical questions, then, as either brave or wise.

This ethical issue is connected to the line of inheritance: "After everything I remain Harry and Francine Wyeth's daughter and Benny Austin's godchild. For all I know they knew the answer too, and pretended they didn't".[133] Maria upholds her position, at the same time hinting at one of the central similes of the novel, life as gambling: "One thing in my defense (…). I know what 'nothing' means, and keep on playing".[134] Even though she understands the vacuity and purposelessness of life, she continues living, and this will to survive she presents as her apology.

Maria describes herself as a player, yet an understanding of life in the categories of game results in the protagonist's sense of chaos and purposelessness.[135] The question of evil remains unanswerable precisely as it is formulated within the frames of a disorderly, directionless world. "Nothing applies"[136]: thus, she sums up her sense of confusion, which can be understood as there are no rules by which to play, but also that there is no interpretative frame that allows her to understand the world around her. Maria's sense of futility is connected to the present; she insists on living "in the now",[137] yet the past holds a certain allure of rules, meaning and order that are gone from her life.

The character knew those in childhood; in adulthood, she discovers they do not possess much value:

> My father advised me that life itself was a crap game: it was one of the two lessons I learned as a child. The other was that overturning a rock was apt to reveal a rattlesnake. As lessons go those two seem to hold up, but not to apply.[138]

If the second lesson presented by her father is cautionary (overturning stones might be understood as asking questions, which Maria avoids), the first seems to hold a promise of taking advantage of one's good luck, randomness that can be turned to one's advantage. It turns out, however, that for Maria life as a game means a randomness that results in chaos and confusion.

Baudrillard points to the connection between gambling and its location: "Gambling itself is a desert form".[139] Taking a risk at a game is thus designated as "inhuman", almost inorganic through its connection with the desert. For Maria, as well as for Didion's other characters, gambling is certainly one way of attempting to escape the limitations of ordinary routine and a step beyond the boundaries of their lives.[140] Yet the relief from the dreariness of their ordinary lives is only temporary. Baudrillard explains the appeal of both gambling and the desert, saying: "Neither the desert nor gambling are open areas; their spaces are finite and concentric, increasing in intensity toward the interior, toward a central point, be it the spirit of gambling or the heart of the desert"[141]; even though Didion's characters wish to perceive both spaces as borderless, in fact they are confronted with their limits. They both trick one with illusory signs that cannot be read with the use of ordinary paradigms; Baudrillard calls it "a privileged, immemorial space, where things lose their shadow, where money loses its value, and where the extreme rarity of traces of what signals to us there leads men to seek the instantaneity of wealth",[142] thus pointing to the arbitrariness of signs both in the desert and in a casino.[143] Faced with random signs that one cannot win; the lessons Maria learns from her father become highly ambiguous.

Parental Influence

The idea that the world is a casino and life a game, passed on by the protagonist's father, is presented subtly yet consistently throughout the novel, commencing with the title. The phrase "play it as it lays" suggests taking the world as it is, which is what Maria is trying to do, and always turning the situation to one's advantage, which does not always work for her. She identifies her understanding of the world as a paternal legacy: "From my father I inherited an optimism which did not leave me until recently".[144] This legacy, however, is an inheritance of loss more than anything else: her father kept losing and hoping to win, and such a fluctuation of luck taught Maria not optimism, but rather, hopelessness and instability.[145]

Optimism and resourcefulness, creating rules on the spot: these are the conditions of the frontier, and Maria is the daughter of a frontiersman. She mentions her father's advice: "Don't let them bluff you back there because you're holding all the aces", to which her answer is, "maybe I was holding all the aces, but what was the game?"[146] Maria admits

to not knowing the set of laws that govern her life, thus exposing the central problem undertaken in the novel: an ethical problem of choosing good over evil, of following the rules with the best of intentions. Maria is a daughter of the pioneers, yet a fluidity of the rules that was characteristic of the early days of the settlement of the West is a harsh inheritance. This lack of rules that for Maria's father meant freedom, for Maria means disorder and confusion. In *Play It as It Lays* the frontier is closed, and even though the frontier spirit prevails, the characters experience the painful confusion of the post-frontier, post-Edenic world.[147]

Imagery is one of Didion's ways to hint at the loss of paradise: in Maria's father's advice mentioned previously, overturning stones might reveal a rattlesnake. Maria's fear of rattlesnakes is constantly present, although no snakes ever appear: especially in urban spaces, they function more as a figure of danger rather than a genuine threat, and even in the desert they remain a suspicion, not an actuality: when for instance Maria is looking at photographs of highway accidents, she "searched the grain of the photographs with a magnifying glass for details not immediately apparent, (…) the rattlesnake she suspected on the embankment".[148] As an omnipresent symbol of the oncoming apocalypse, they contribute to the atmosphere of terror and anxiety.

Just as Maria knows that from her father she inherited the idea of life as a game and a pioneer's belief that every circumstance can be turned to one's advantage, she recognizes her mother as the one who taught her to be prepared to deal with adversity. In a truly pioneering spirit, Maria learns from her mother's almanac and is able to admit that "She knew a lot of things about disaster".[149]

It is precisely at the moment of abortion that Maria recalls her mother's lesson; the mental picture that she creates helps her forget the present:

> a picture of herself as a ten-year-old sitting on the front steps of the house in Silver Wells reading the gray book with the red cross on the cover (splints, shock, rattlesnake bite, rattlesnake bite was why her mother made her read it).[150]

The parent presents a warning against the snake, the symbol of temptation and the possible consequence of giving in to the temptation, which is expulsion from paradise. Yet Maria's mother expels herself from the earthly paradise: she commits suicide, leaving her daughter with no lessons and no directions, just a fear of rattlesnakes and a compulsion to drive the highway.

That it is the mother that must be associated with the warning of peril and the feeling of loss is stressed continuously. Maria thinks about her mother after she aborts her pregnancy and connects the abortion to her mother's death in the West, when she was in the east: "in the dry still heat she woke crying for her mother. She had not cried for her mother

since the bad season in New York".[151] Again, the symbol of lost paradise appears: Maria mentions a repulsion of food because "every time she looked at food the food seemed to arrange itself into ominous coils".[152] The symbol of the expulsion is apt, since Maria is away, and the physical distance between the two characters, mother and daughter, is accentuated symbolically by the duality of light and dark, as Maria thinks about what she was doing at the precise moment her mother lost control over her car: "the mother dying in the desert light, the daughter unavailable in the Eastern dark".[153] The desert represents the temptation, but also danger. Paradise comes at a price.

If the mother is the more cautious of the two parents, the father represents the optimistic belief in the future that he passes on to his daughter. He stresses the importance of active participation in life: "She can't win if she's not at the table"; and his quip: "You wouldn't understand that" is directed at Maria's mother.[154] The discussion presents a fundamental difference between the parents, the active, risk-taking father and the passive, cautious mother. Yet Maria stresses the affinity with her mother and the differences between herself and her father: "he always had a lot of plans, I never in my life had any plans",[155] and in moments of distress, when she thinks she is hemorrhaging to death (in Didion's understated prose "She did not think she was menstruating"), she thinks of her mother: "She wanted to talk to her mother".[156] Even though she turns to the mother, recognizing the similitude in their experiences, neither parent had in fact prepared her for the confusion of the post-paradisiacal world.

The lack of moral direction is amplified by the sense of loss experienced by the protagonist as painful: "Everything goes. I am working very hard at not thinking about how everything goes".[157] The sense of passing, experienced as painful, is triggered by the loss in her own life, and in turns provokes her to muse upon her parents', especially her father's, losses.[158] The effort put into avoiding the thought of transience seems too great to bring the character consolation, yet it also relates to the radical severance of emigration, which, according to both Turner and Didion, characterizes the frontier mentality.

In her analysis of *Play It as It Lays*, Brady situates the moral center of the novel in familial duties and she claims that "it is Didion's profound belief in the primacy of 'primitive' and instinctual moral obligations and family bonds that form the basis of our judgment of Maria's act [abortion]".[159] She elaborates on the point, referring to the ethical code of the early settlers: "Maria transgresses the code of 'wagon-train' ethics, which dictate that blood kin must recognize the value of each other's lives and struggle for mutual survival".[160]

Brady stresses the highest value that the pioneers placed on family that enabled their endurance: "It was the betrayal of this truth that forfeited the Donner-Reed party's claim to the paradise they sought in the West;

and like these unfortunate pioneers, Maria learns its value only in retrospect".[161] The Donner-Reed Party's transgression was cannibalism, the ultimate denial of humanity; Maria's offense is abortion. Brady is very perceptive in her analysis, understanding Didion's characters in the light of "wagon-train ethics", yet what she disregards is the fact that Maria's lapse, just like so many other characters of Didion's, is predestined: Maria does not undergo the abortion willingly, nor does it leave her unscathed.

Maria's act must be understood not as her carelessness or ignorance. She perceives herself in the line of maternal inheritance: at first, she sees that they are similar: "She was staring into a hand mirror, picking out her mother's features",[162] and then she comes to a more radical view, seeing herself and her mother as one: "She looked again into the hand mirror and again saw her mother".[163] The mother, with her passivity and wariness of snakes, gives up on life and expels herself from paradise; and that is the most unpardonable transgression. Despite all, Maria still "plays it as it lays", thus acting against all diversity, in the pioneering spirit, and this is her saving grace.

Maria is aware that her predicament is typical of women, and she suggests sharing affinity not only with her mother, but with her gender in general. Maria watches an anonymous woman in a mu'umu'u with a hypnotic insistence: "As if in trance Maria watched the woman, for it seemed to her then that she was watching the dead still center of the world, the quintessential intersection of nothing".[164] The woman never reappears and remains nameless; Maria's assumptions about her seem to be a transference of her understanding of her own situation and the loss of control over the unfolding events that she is experiencing.

Brady claims that Maria betrays her loyalty to her family, yet a fuller understanding of Maria's situation would be to suggest that Maria is betrayed by the lessons she is taught that do not apply and by a gender inequality that deems her powerless. To empower herself, Maria imagines a perfect situation, a peaceful existence in a house by the sea, and in it, a nuclear family is central to her sense of well-being:

> In the story Maria told herself at three or four in the morning there were only three people and none of them had histories, only the man and the woman and the child and, in the lamplight, the opalescent mussel shells.[165]

What she comes to realize, though, is that the sea is poisoned, the shells toxic, and her dream corrupted. Ultimately, she understands that "the still center of the daylight world was never a house by the sea but the corner of Sunset and La Brea",[166] which is where she is at the moment. It is the present moment that Maria tries to save. Saving the space of her childhood memories or her relationship with her parents is impossible, thus the present is all she has.

Parental Transgressions

The loss of the place of childhood and memory is necessarily accompanied by the loss of parents. Brady presents this loss in the light of Maria's actions: "Maria abandoned her parents when she went east to New York, and she betrays them again when she aborts the child which would provide a link to a world that was lost with her parents' deaths".[167] The character's transgression against her parents and her abortion are thus linked; however, one should not ignore two issues that critics overlook: the first is that what prompts Maria's abortion is her struggle to keep her child Kate, whom her husband threatens to take away from her if she does not agree to undergo the procedure. The second issue to be considered is Maria's reluctance to leave and her father's encouragement for her to go away, which makes Maria's "abandonment" of her parents less obvious.

Yet Brady correctly links abortion to parental transgression. In her bleakest moment, Maria concentrates on Silver Wells, but she makes every effort not to think about her father: "her father was not in this picture, keep him out of it, say he had gone into Vegas".[168] Gambling remains associated with the father; procreation is not an issue of interest to him. Yet both are life-and-death matters; just as gaming is a way to imagine life figuratively, pregnancy is represented as possibly fatal on two levels: it can end in the biological death of the organism of the mother, but it can also be a sign of larger forces, bringing an end to a human understood as an element of a fatalistic universe. Maria makes this link apparent when she states: "She realized she expected to die. All along she had expected to die (…). Maria did not particularly believe in rewards, only in punishments, swift and personal".[169]

Maria expects to be punished for the abortion, even though she is coerced into having it by her husband. The moment Carter announces his will, using their daughter as leverage, is presented in terms of yet another game that requires proper strategy: "He paused, confident in his hand. She waited for him to play it through".[170] For Maria, accepting life as a game has disastrous effects.

Maria uses another figurative way to imagine her life: she compares herself to the abortionist, calling herself "a radical surgeon of my own life. Never discuss. Cut. In that way I resemble the only man in Los Angeles County who does clean work".[171] She accepts culpability for the abortion, even though she does not undergo the procedure out of her own volition. When she does have the abortion, she presents it as an act of final submission that would make her regain control over her life, a final sacrifice: "She would do what he wanted. She would do this one more thing and then they would never be able to touch her again".[172] The reader is not informed who "they" are, which contributes to the general sense of menace and lack of control that accompanies Maria.

Dreams become the plane of existence where Maria can exercise a fair amount of control, in contrast to reality. The East Coast functions as an antithesis to California, this corrupted frontier. Maria dreams about New York: "In the dream (…) she had the baby, and she and the baby and Kate were living on West Twelfth Street".[173] But just as she realizes that her dream house on the beach is by a toxic ocean, she also comes to understand that her dream of the East Coast is impossible. The dreams that follow her abortion signify her sense of guilt, and they take the metaphorical shape of a house with a faulty sewer system: "A few days later the dreams began. (…) Of course she could not call a plumber, because she had known all along what would be found in the pipes, what hacked pieces of human flesh".[174]

The abortion is compared not only to murder; it amounts to a holocaust:

> 'This way to the gas, ladies and gentlemen,' a loudspeaker kept repeating in her dreams now (…). Her instructions were to whisper a few comforting words to those children who cried or held back, because this was a humane operation.[175]

Maria recognizes the dehumanized aspect of her life and the lack of control she exhibits that thwart any possibility of a fulfilling life. She recognizes her role as an accomplice, as she grasps the hypocrisy and cynicism of the modern post-frontier world.[176]

The sense of danger she experiences prompts her to take refuge in magical thinking. She decides to consult a hypnotist after she receives an ominous letter that states: "your worries may date from when you were a baby (…) in your mother's womb". She visits the hypnotist "with a sense that she was about to confirm a nightmare"[177] and while she is there, the man tries to induce the hypnotic state: "you're lying in water and it's warm and you hear your mother's voice", but Maria's reaction is to contradict him: "No, (…) I don't". He asks her what she hears and sees and what she is doing, to which her response is, "I'm driving over here, (…). I'm driving Sunset and I'm staying in the left lane because (…) I'm going to turn left at the New Havana Ballroom. That's what I'm doing".[178] Maria insists on remaining in the present, as dwelling in the past brings no consolation. Neither is the recourse to the irrational of any help.

The reality as the characters perceive it must be faced and empirically tested, and even though throughout the novel biblical imagery is used, there is no appeal to a higher agency. The only solace they receive is from driving. The modern experience of the freeway functions as an extension of the dream of freedom associated with the frontier. Baudrillard states, "Driving is a spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated",[179] and his formulation helps explain the reward that Maria obtains from her trips, even

if they lead her nowhere. Baudrillard calls space and dimensions "truly immoral",[180] thus pointing to the reasons behind the Californian fascination with driving and the highways: they provide the experience of a temporary, and false, relief from the values that do not reflect the needs of society. The space is immoral, because it obliterates the distances between places, and driving between them allows one to have an immoral experience. Yet the escape from morality – a belated and melancholy recreation of the push westward – is only temporary, and in fact illusory.[181] "The West", Limerick reminds us, "had no magic power for dissolving the past",[182] and Didion's characters learn it the hard way.

In her California novels, Didion portrays characters that are faced with loss: they either undergo an abortion (Maria, Lily) or lose a lover and life (Martha). They try to cope with their loss either by gambling, driving, or sex, or they choose the most radical way out: death. They struggle to organize their world by imposing a value system, which is one form or another of what Didion calls the wagon-train ethics: the belief that the highest good is to be found in loyalty to one's kin, and that is the guarantee of one's physical as well as spiritual survival. This ethical system, however, proves to be inadequate, as the world does not adhere to the same set of beliefs, which leaves the characters frustrated and dejected.[183]

The system itself is founded upon a crucial misconception, too, which is the idea that the pioneers are motivated by selflessness and responsibility for the community. In her California novels, Didion's characters melancholically mourn the loss of the pioneering values. In her later works, Didion revises this misconception, which prompts her to ask questions about the redemptive value of the crossing and suggest that perhaps there had been none. With each of her subsequent texts dealing with Californian identity, Didion's narrators and characters utter their assumptions about the past and its system of values with a voice that gradually becomes less certain. The benefit that is a side effect of this loss, however, as Freud teaches us, is the emergence of the critical agency: the conscience. At the end of *Run River*, Lily learns the value of marital affection; in *Play It as It Lays*, Maria praises persistence in the face of adversity and presents it as her saving grace. Both protagonists save what they can from their mistaken belief in the pioneers' ethical code. Their gains are small, yet, as Maria says, they keep on playing.

Notes

1 Didion, *Slouching*, 84–5.
2 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 170.
3 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 96.
4 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 189.
5 Snyder, "A Place in Space", 460.
6 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3045.

7 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3045.
8 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 3045.
9 Katherine Usher Henderson starts her deliberations upon *Joan Didion*'s works by stating, "Didion's novels explore the moral dilemmas and the human failures resulting from the confrontation between traditional American values and a new social and political reality" which she continues with an interesting metaphor to ponder Didion's characters, that of a prism in which white light is broken into colorful components. Henderson finishes her colorful metaphor by saying, "as darkness shadows colors, the violence of the contemporary experience exposes these values as myths". Henderson, "Edenic Vision", vii. However interesting Henderson's analysis is, I could only wish the color metaphor exposed the color politics of Didion's novels, with their curious inattention to ethnicity that one might deem color blindness.
10 Winchell compares the nothingness that Didion's characters face to the nada of Ernest Hemingway's short story, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place". Winchell states, "BZ and Maria have both experienced something very similar to the nada of Hemingway's story", but it is fair to say that this comparison might as well be extended to include Didion's other characters, such as Lily, Charlotte, Inez, or Elena. Winchell, *Joan Didion*, 137.
11 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 28–9.
12 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 170.
13 Didion, *Run River*, 66.
14 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 75.
15 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 37.
16 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 36–7.
17 Limerick, *Legacy*, 101.
18 Limerick, *Legacy*, 100.
19 Limerick, *Legacy*, 89.
20 Ellen G. Friedman puts it crisply, "The Donner-Reed party is Didion's symbol for the spirit that built and haunts California". Friedman, *Joan Didion*, 83. I suggest it is much more than that, standing for the very impossibility of living up to one's fantasy of moral living and a failure to construct a viable future on the basis of such an ideal.
21 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 169. My claim is not, however, that it is essentially an autobiographical text; the complexity of the subject matter suggests that it goes well beyond the scope of a life-writing project. As Henderson notes,

> The themes of *Run River* are not primarily regional or narrowly historical; they are deeply moral and universal. They are expressed by the integration of traditional myths with the private history of the novel's characters and the public history of their community and nation. (…) The novel's complex moral statement unfolds as the experience of the characters validates the myths and resides finally in the pattern of concentric circles which ties together the historic and the mythic dimensions of time.
> (Henderson, "Edenic Vision", 92)

22 Didion, *Run River*, 100.
23 Ethan Rarick, *Desperate Passage*, 227.
24 Tim McNeese, *Donner Party*, 125.
25 Didion, *Run River*, 221.
26 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 161.
27 Didion, *Run River*, 221, italics in the original.
28 Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, 80.
29 Didion, *Run River*, 154.
30 Didion, *Run River*, 119.

31 Didion, *Run River*, 182.
32 Didion, *Run River*, 103.
33 Discussing the overall sensibility in Didion's works, Friedman asserts,

> Didion redeems the nihilism that a vision of an atomized world invites, allows meaning to penetrate her severe universe, with individual commitments that give purpose to the life of the person making them. The commitments are by definition 'doomed and extreme' because there is no coherent order into which they may be absorbed.
>
> (Friedman, *Joan Didion*, 88)

34 Didion, *Run River*, 81.
35 Didion, *Run River*, 263.
36 Loris, "Western Story", 22.
37 Felton, "Introduction", 3.
38 Didion, *Run River*, 219.
39 Didion, *Run River*, 223, italics in the original.
40 Didion, *Run River*, 3.
41 Didion, *Run River*, 35.
42 Didion, *Run River*, 34.
43 Didion, *Run River*, 34.
44 Didion, *Run River*, 33, italics in the original.
45 Didion, *Run River*, 263.
46 Didion, *Run River*, 47, italics in the original.
47 Didion, *Run River*, 264.
48 Didion, *Run River*, 139.
49 Didion, *Run River*, 140. Nothingness is quite often noted as a central preoccupation of Didion's prose (see, e.g., Geherin, Griffin Wolff, or Winchell), but it is, more often than not, placed in the context of Hemingway's *nada* and pointed out in Didion's Hollywood novel.
50 Brady, "Points West", 454.
51 In Brady, "Points West", 454.
52 Didion, *Slouching*, 159.
53 Even in *A Book of Common Prayer* the idea of wagon-train morality is prominent; as Henderson notes, "Mortality (…) is a prominent theme in the novel" which leads her to conclude, "Didion is making a powerful existential statement: bound together by the certainty of death, living without benefit of belief in a benevolent deity, we can only care for each other". Henderson, *Joan Didion*, 86. This statement comes very close to the definition of wagon-train morality.
54 Didion, *Slouching*, 174, italics in the original.
55 Didion, *Slouching*, 158.
56 Didion, *Slouching*, 158.
57 Didion, *Slouching*, 163, italics in the original. Here one can hear the echoes of William James' distinction between the "healthy-minded" and the "sick souls" and his perception of melancholy as a "form of self-condemnation and sense of sin". James, *Lecture VIII*, 159. For more, see James' *Lecture VIII*, "The Divided Self, and the Process of Its Unification" (155–76).
58 Didion, *Run River*, 74.
59 Didion, *Run River*, 73–5.
60 Didion, *Run River*, 170.
61 Didion, *Run River*, 130.
62 Didion, *Run River*, 155.
63 Didion, *Run River*, 129.
64 Didion, *Run River*, 128, italics in the original.

65 Didion, *Run River*, 35.
66 Didion, *Run River*, 21, 23, 24, 263.
67 Didion, *Run River*, 21.
68 Didion, *Run River*, 263.
69 Didion, *Run River*, 97.
70 Didion, *Run River*, 9.
71 Didion, *Run River*, 8.
72 Didion, *Run River*, 140.
73 Didion, *Run River*, 233.
74 Didion, *Run River*, 83.
75 Didion, *Run River*, 215.
76 Didion, *Run River*, 188.
77 Didion, *Run River*, 190.
78 Didion, *Run River*, 245.
79 Didion, *Run River*, 243.
80 Slavoj Žižek explains "the intimate relationship between drive and demand", and he states,

> A drive is precisely a demand that is not caught up in the dialectic of desire, that resists dialecticization. Demand almost always implies a certain dialectical mediation: we demand something, but what we are really aiming at through this demand is something else—sometimes even the very refusal of the demand in its literality. Along with every demand, a question necessarily rises: "I demand this, but what do I really want by it?" Drive, on the contrary, persists in a certain demand, it is a "mechanical" insistence that cannot be caught up in dialectical trickery: I demand something and I persist in it to the end.
>
> (*Looking Awry* 21)

81 Didion, *Run River*, 30.
82 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 71.
83 Zehelein, "A good deal about California", 8.
84 Didion, *Run River*, 30.
85 Didion, *Run River*, 262.
86 Didion, *Run River*, 138.
87 Didion, *Run River*, 30.
88 Everett's fear of "the kiln burning" is discussed in Chapter 1 in the part "Writing to Remember".
89 Didion, *Run River*, 147.
90 Didion, *Run River*, 19.
91 Henderson hints at the connection when she refers to D.H. Lawrence who claimed that the single motivation of the American settlers was the willingness to "get away". She goes on to explain the incorporation of such a belief in Didion's works, saying,

> Didion believes that the early settlers of California, like the Pilgrim Fathers, misunderstood their own motives. While they talked about wanting gold or land, they unconsciously sought a renewed identity that was no more accessible in California than it had been in Kentucky or Tennessee or wherever they came from.
>
> (Henderson, *Joan Didion*, 44)

92 Didion, *Run River*, 233, italics in the original.
93 Didion, *Run River*, 233–4.
94 Didion, *Run River*, 234.
95 Didion, *Run River*, 152.

96 Didion, *Run River*, 40.
97 Didion, *Run River*, 4.
98 Didion, *Run River*, 150.
99 Didion, *Run River*, 155.
100 Didion, *Run River*, 153.
101 Didion, *Run River*, 155.
102 Didion, *Run River*, 156–57.
103 Didion, *Run River*, 169.
104 Didion, *Run River*, 178.
105 Didion, *Run River*, 177.
106 Didion, *Run River*, 179–80.
107 Didion, *Run River*, 226.
108 Didion, *Run River*, 183.
109 Didion, *Run River*, 232.
110 Didion, *Run River*, 234, italics in the original.
111 Didion, *Run River*, 83–4.
112 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 192.
113 Griffin Wolff makes a comment on the ultimate lack of solace in Didion's prose, comparing it to Hemingway's:

> Hemingway's nightmare (values vanishing as time plunges ahead) presides visibly in Didion's novel, with this important difference: Hemingway never altogether confronted despair. His heroes could still pray (…), could still formulate dreams that suggested the genuine possibility of heroic activity. Didion's fictional world does not offer these consolations.
>
> (Griffin Wolff, "New American Heroine", 126)

114 Didion, *Run River*, 95, italics in the original.
115 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 84.
116 Didion, *Play It*, 185.
117 Commenting on the first three of *Joan Didion*'s novels, Thomas Mallon points out,

> The women in these novels have remnants of a conservative personal morality (…). They no longer have a connected ethical code; its remains can only be called upon fitfully, confusedly. (…) Ethical coherence (…) has vanished for the characters and the country.
>
> (In Friedman 66)

118 Didion, *Run River*, 133.
119 Didion, *Play It*, 7.
120 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 272.
121 Didion, *Run River*, 224.
122 Didion, *Run River*, 226.
123 Didion, *Run River*, 227.
124 Didion, *Run River*, 248.
125 Didion, *Run River*, 249.
126 Didion, *Run River*, 253.
127 Didion, *Run River*, 253.
128 Didion, *Run River*, 206, italics in the original.
129 Joan Didion, "The Art of Fiction", n.p.
130 Didion, *Play It*, 3.
131 Henderson hints at this ethical quality when she comments on the novel's heroine, "Maria Wyeth lacked control, but she demonstrated a capacity for sympathy totally lacking in her friends; in this capacity, as well as her

willingness to face her own terror, Didion may see a slim but real hope" (1985: 40).

132 Didion, *Play It*, 210.
133 Didion, *Play It*, 210.
134 Didion, *Play It*, 214.
135 Henderson states that Maria's system of beliefs, inherited from her father, is "a trivial secularization of the positive side of the original American dream: the sense of God's special covenant with Americans" (1985: 21).
136 Didion, *Play It*, 4.
137 Didion, *Play It*, 8.
138 Didion, *Play It*, 200.
139 Baudrillard, *America*, 128.
140 As Henderson points out, "Maria is the one person who has no role in the filming, the one person who does not belong on the desert"; and yet, Maria seems to belong to the desert more than others because of her childhood and because of her deeply experienced sense of futility. Henderson, *Joan Didion*, 39.
141 Mike Gane defends Baudrillard's thought against accusations of oversimplification and banality, stating that Baudrillard's understanding of the desert is sophisticated and dynamic: "It began in the mode of the hyperreal, (…) a fusion of minerality and deculturality" to be transformed into "the new transpolitical inner desert of indifference". Gane, *Baudrillard*, 190 n6.
142 Baudrillard, *America*, 128.
143 Baudrillard's musings on the desert and the casino do not account for the political forces at play at the intersection between the two spaces. Carole Goldberg and Duane Champagne discuss the "advent of tribal gaming in the 1970s" – which is roughly the time Didion's characters gamble – and state that "Remarkably, and against the odds, California tribes succeeded in establishing casino gaming as a highly lucrative form of economic development". Goldberg and Champagne, "Ramona Redeemed", 44–5. The process has a very concrete influence on everyday existence: "California Indian communities were extremely poor disenfranchised, and gaming funds enabled the tribes to start building tribal social and economic infrastructures that had never been possible with federal funding". Goldberg and Champagne, "Ramona Redeemed", 48. The result is, according to Goldberg and Champagne, remarkable: "Today, California Indian tribes have greater political access to and influence in state and federal governments than ever before". Goldberg and Champagne, "Ramona Redeemed", 45. In their essay Goldberg and Champagne discuss the blind spots of Helen Hunt Jackson's novel *Ramona*, but it is safe to say that Baudrillard and Didion are guilty of the same oversight.
144 Didion, *Play It*, 5.
145 Geherin draws a comparison between Maria and Sisyphus of Camus' story, coming to a conclusion, "one must imagine Maria happy". Geherin, "Nothingness", 114.
146 Didion, *Play It*, 9–10.
147 In David J. Geherin's estimation,

> Didion's novel is neither primarily a sociological commentary on the values of contemporary American society nor a psychological case study of its heroine. It is, rather, a picture of personal dread and anxiety, of alienation and absurdity lurking within and without. For although Hollywood is her setting, nothingness is Didion's theme.
>
> (Geherin, "Nothingness", 104)

One could agree to a point with this assessment, as it is not only personal "dread and anxiety", but an affliction of a generation projected upon the whole nation.

148 Didion, *Play It*, 197. Cf. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes*.
149 Didion, *Play It*, 80.
150 Didion, *Play It*, 81.
151 Didion, *Play It*, 60.
152 Didion, *Play It*, 60.
153 Didion, *Play It*, 61.
154 Didion, *Play It*, 88.
155 Didion, *Play It*, 7.
156 Didion, *Play It*, 90.
157 Didion, *Play It*, 8.
158 Discussing Maria, Geherin points out, "Most desperate of all is her search for the past. (…) In the end, she is forced to admit that the past no longer exists". Geherin, "Nothingness", 111.
159 Brady, "Points West", 464.
160 Brady, "Points West", 464.
161 Brady, "Points West", 464.
162 Didion, *Play It*, 62.
163 Didion, *Play It*, 64.
164 Didion, *Play It*, 67.
165 Didion, *Play It*, 114–15.
166 Didion, *Play It*, 115.
167 Brady, "Points West", 464.
168 Didion, *Play It*, 81.
169 Didion, *Play It*, 73.
170 Didion, *Play It*, 54.
171 Didion, *Play It*, 203.
172 Didion, *Play It*, 74.
173 Didion, *Play It*, 71.
174 Didion, *Play It*, 96–7.
175 Didion, *Play It*, 126. This is an obvious reference to Tadeusz Borowski's short story based on his Auschwitz experiences, "This Way For the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" ("Proszę Państwa do gazu" in the Polish original).
176 Geherin thus describes Maria's predicament:

> While Maria exhibits some of the recognizable symptoms of schizophrenic behavior, Didion apparently does not want the reader to dismiss her simply as mentally or emotionally disturbed. Her sickness is metaphysical, a manifestation of her difficulty in adjusting to her newly discovered consciousness of absurdity.
>
> (110)

177 Didion, *Play It*, 119.
178 Didion, *Play It*, 124.
179 Baudrillard, *America*, 9.
180 Baudrillard, *America*, 9.
181 In his classical study, "Nature and the National Ego", Perry Miller claims, "If there be such a thing as an American character, it took shape under the molding influences of these conceptions [America as Nature's nation] as much as under the physical impositions of geography and the means of transport". 210.

182 Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, 90.

183 Writing about *Play It as It Lays* and *A Book of Common Prayer*, Leonard Wilcox opines,

> Both have 'conservative' messages insofar as they show the ravages of a failed sense of ethical coherence and generational continuity; both imply the redemptive capacity of historical knowledge for the world where the past is devalued and the future difficult to envision.
>
> (Wilcox, "Narrative Technique", 79–80)

4 The Loss of Language

> Facing west from California's shores,
> Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,
> I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of maternity,
> the land of migrations, look afar,
> Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled.
> —Walt Whitman, "Facing West from California's Shores"

Didion persistently probes the American character and its most concentrated form, Californian identity. Even though she says in her first collection of essays, "We had aborted ourselves and butchered the job",[1] and in *Where I Was From* she talks about a "deep apprehension of meaninglessness",[2] yet, in *The White Album* she asserts famously, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live",[3] celebrating the role of language and the meaning of narrative in survival. Without narratives we cannot survive, even if the survival of the communal "we" is at the expense of "them": the silenced, dispossessed non-agents.

If conscience, discussed in Chapter 3, becomes the principal institution of the ego as a result of the unacknowledged loss which allows the subject to sustain the lost object (as Butler proposes after Freud), then, in the same way, California is no longer the central preoccupation of Didion's narratives precisely in order to allow these novels to undertake the themes of American identity and America's position in the global context. Charlotte, Inez, and Elena, the protagonists of *A Book of Common Prayer*, *Democracy*, and *The Last Thing He Wanted*, even though they are Californians, are primarily *norteamericanas*, representatives of their country, trying their best to speak for it honorably, motivated by their conscience.

Didion constructs her characters in such a way as to enable them to change and grow, even if their development is accompanied by a gradual envelopment in silence. The relationship between representation through language and melancholia is marked by reticence: "The melancholic would have said something, if he or she could, but did not, and now believes in the sustaining power of the voice".[4] The object is lost because the melancholic failed to speak at the moment of

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departure, but now s/he speaks with the belief that her/his speech will preserve the object and prevent its loss. The voice of conscience is the voice of melancholy, belated preservation. Since California could not be preserved as the paradise of the pioneering past, it is now mentioned as the country of origin of Didion's characters, who thus preserve it in their memory and construct their North American identity on the loss of California.

Language is an apt indicator of where and how America has gone wrong – the point which Didion proposed in her very first publication and has endorsed throughout her career. In this chapter, I look at Didion's last three novels in order to analyze the melancholic language which Didion self-consciously uses to construct her vision of American identity. The melancholic language is the language of identity, which is to say, the language of our projected attachments, both on a personal and national level. A master stylist, Didion reveals her characters' attachments through silences, omissions, and reticence. Language becomes the sign and symptom of disconnection and loss, as it collapses under its own weight. California, in Didion's fiction, gradually becomes more of a linguistic concept with no referent in reality, but it always remains a powerful symbol of the will to survive and to live, despite an all-encompassing melancholia.

Looking Awry at Conscience and Loss

If in her first two novels, *Run River* and *Play It as It Lays*, Joan Didion places the narrative in California and makes Californian identity quite explicitly the focus of her reflection; in her consecutive novels, *A Book of Common Prayer*, *Democracy*, and *The Last Thing He Wanted*, the characters are removed from the Californian context, even though they hail from the Golden State, and the commentary on California's character is conveyed in a less explicit manner. This gradual retreat from the Californian setting and an implied rather than stated interest in Californian ideals signal the loss of the language with which Didion described her place of origin before. The meaning of California can only be glimpsed when "looking awry", to use Žižek's formulation,[5] and it is the final stage in the melancholic representation of California in Didion's novels.

Judith Butler explains, "In melancholia, not only is the loss of an other or an ideal lost to consciousness, but the social world in which such a loss became possible is also lost".[6] The classic California ideals, its being an earthly paradise, the garden of the world, or the place where one can escape the processes of history and be restored to a simpler, moral existence, are documented as lost in Didion's first novels, *Run River*, *Play It as It Lays*, and *A Book of Common Prayer*. In the last two, *Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted*, the social world in which these losses occurred is also lost: California is no longer the setting of the narrative.

Removing California from these novels as a clear point of reference is a melancholic gesture: the world Didion described earlier is now lost.[7]

Yet in her later prose, Didion does not declare the loss of the world, but rather, removes it from the spotlight; in other words, California is lost in Didion's prose as the main theme, but this loss is not overtly announced. Judith Butler helps to understand such a removal with reference to psychic processes, which she presents in social terms:

> The melancholic does not merely withdraw the lost object from consciousness, but withdraws into the psyche a configuration of the social world as well. The ego thus becomes a "polity" and conscience one of its "major institutions", precisely because psychic life withdraws a social world into itself in an effort to annul the losses that world demands. Within melancholia, the psyche becomes the topos in which there is no loss, and, indeed, no negation. Melancholia refuses to acknowledge loss, and in this sense "preserves" its lost objects as psychic effects.[8]

In Didion's last two novels, California is withdrawn into the memories of the characters who remember it as a point in their past, e.g., as the lost world of their childhood. Hence, its loss is denied its totality and California is preserved as a "psychic effect": Charlotte is a worldly traveler who yet remains a Hollister ranch girl, Inez thinks "of Berkeley as another place in which she might later remember being extremely happy",[9] and Elena McMahon pays particular attention in a characteristic Western way to swimming pools and the weather patterns that might result in a drought; *A Book of Common Prayer*, *Democracy*, and *The Last Thing He Wanted* all reference California and their characters or author-narrators are Westerners who live elsewhere, yet carry within themselves the Western way of thinking.[10] California functions in the last novels as a place constructed in language and in memory.

The melancholic longing of Didion's characters occasions their reminiscing about California, which illustrates the mechanism of representation. Melancholia itself is what initiates speech and what makes it possible to write about the lost loved object: the melancholic rift between the object and the ego enables representation. Didion says that she "wrote herself a California river", thus explaining her motivation to compose her first novel; it is the distance between the place described and the writer/narrator that initiates the narrative about the place. In other words, one has to leave California to write about it: that is true of many of Didion's characters and narrators.

Didion writes about California history and the pioneering past in her first novels only to withdraw it as the main subject from her later novels, which allows her to situate California as a place of origin in a more personal, individual sense: her characters claim California not as

a place of origin in the wider, national sense, but in a more personal, individual sense. This enables Didion's later novels to escape the limitations of her vision, which is a historical inaccuracy in the presentation of the California past as white and Anglo-American. Didion's California history reaches back to the settlement of the mid-nineteenth century; a Mexican or Spanish heritage of California and cultural and ethnic mixing is avoided, which creates an incomplete vision of the Californian past. Such partiality is surprising in a writer who carries out a rigorous and thorough analysis of Californian character; even though she presents herself as the state's spokesperson, ultimately her California is a state of familial stories, of personal language, and of intimate memories.

Nevertheless, Didion's prose suggests a drastic shortening of historical perspective: it is no longer history that reaches back to the pioneer era, but history that commences and terminates with one's immediate forebears. It testifies to the loss of language that makes it possible to speak of the larger historical processes and identity, as it retreats from making general claims about the Californian character to a modest perspective, in which the focus is placed on the way identity is shaped by our parents rather than on the influence exerted by the larger forces of history.

The progress of Didion's prose is from an explicitly stated interest in the pioneering past as the vital shaping force of Californian identity in *Run River*, through the chilling effects of the forsaking of the ethical values of the past in the Hollywood novel, *Play It as It Lays*, through the removal of the narrative to an imaginary location and ascribing to California the role of a place of origin in *A Book of Common Prayer*, to the final abandonment of California as a locale of her fiction altogether while discussing American character and the international role of the United States in *Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted*. When Butler describes the totality of presence of the melancholic she states, "The melancholic seeks not only to reverse time, reinstating the imaginary past as the present, but to occupy every position and thereby to preclude the loss of the addressee"[11]; by the same token, Didion's characters occupy a (limited) variety of positions of historical agents, allowing her prose to provide a multifaceted discussion of the Californian character, at the same time testifying to its melancholic character.

The Language of Melancholia

Didion's highly critical opinions about the United States and its social, cultural, and moral disintegration[12] can also be understood in the light of melancholic discourse. Freud notes as one characteristic feature of a melancholic, "a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic" and describes a melancholic as one who "has come pretty near to understanding himself". He voices astonishment – one wonders if it is perhaps ironic – "why a man has to be ill before he can be

accessible to a truth of this kind".[13] Didion notes the illness, the disorder, and the paralysis that plague the world around her and she reiterates her diagnosis throughout her long career. For Freud, the debasement that the melancholic expresses is shameless; Freud even talks of "satisfaction in self-exposure"[14] – similarly, Didion exposes the problems that her people, her generation, and her kin bring upon themselves through their selfishness and many delusions. The self-condemnation Freud mentions is not in any relation to the opinion of others or an external reality, but rather, it corresponds to the melancholic's assessment of his psyche. It lets Freud assume that the loss that triggered melancholy is "a loss in regard to his [melancholic's] ego",[15] yet it is a loss that occasions the emergence of an agency that will enable a critical evaluation of the self. The nausea and vertigo that Didion's speaking persona experiences "after the sixties"[16] is the physical manifestation of a critique directed at one's self for the wider situation in the country.

Didion speaks of her generation and of her nation: "we were that generation called 'silent'", she says in "On the Morning after the Sixties",[17] and she explains the silence by the fear shared by her generation, "that dread of the meaninglessness which was man's fate".[18] Breaking the silence, she gives voice to her nation at that moment of history when they experience alienation from the state and lose their sense of self-worth. The loss of self-respect in Freud is presented as a gain of conscience, and the reaction to loss which is melancholia at the same time "affords of the constitution of the human ego".[19] Similarly, Didion's critique of the state of affairs, not only in her essays but also in her novels, is evidence of her ability to turn language into a tool of melancholic expression, and in the process to testify to the emergence of conscience.

Especially in Didion's later novels, *Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted*, she leaves unanswered the issues that she undertook in her earlier prose, yet her characters or her narrators carry within themselves the question of the Californian identity, and it resurfaces, if not as a central preoccupation of her prose, then as a marginal issue. Butler helps us see the reconfiguration in Didion's prose in terms of melancholic reflection, saying that "The psychic form of reflexivity" that is melancholic in its character "carries the trace of the other within it as a dissimulated sociality", which points to the connection between the melancholic nature of contemplation, which in Didion is the musing upon national character, and the introjection of the object of affection. Butler asserts that "the performance of melancholia as the shameless voicing of self-beratement in front of others effects a detour that rejoins melancholia to its lost or withdrawn sociality".[20] In Didion, her harsh critique of American morals, society and politics, is an expression of her affection, and it is especially California that is reserved a unique place in her writing. Its centrality in Didion's writing is asserted even through its relegation to a marginal position.

The Limits of Language

In Didion's first two novels, California is in the focus of her narrative, whose whole effort is directed at explaining the Californian character, yet even in these novels, the limitations of language are exposed, and the role of language questioned. This situation is particularly acute in the moments of confrontation with the limits of language, that is, with death.

Such confrontation is necessarily violent: Butler reminds us that "The melancholic (…) registers his or her 'plaint,' levels a juridical claim, where the language becomes the event of the grievance, where, emerging from the unspeakable, language carries a violence that brings it to the limits of speakability".[21] In *Run River*, Everett approaches the limits of speakability when he states his guilt: "He had, he told her last night, killed Martha himself. She had been in his care and he had killed her",[22] taking responsibility over his actions to the logical extreme, or perhaps even overstepping its limits. Everett displays the melancholic structures of speech in his grieving, yet these structures underlie the very idea of California in the novel: possession of the land claimed through the dead buried in it is a violent ownership, which hides the unspeakable, that is, other ethnic groups whose claim to the land remains unrecognized.

Exclusion in *Run River* is subtly represented, yet it reaches as far as the memory of the first settlers. Everett's father, presented in a pioneer manner as "a man beset by his own energy, scrawny with tension",[23] describes all Mexicans and South Americans as "goddamn wetbacks" and all Asian people as "goddamn Filipinos", while Easterners are to him either "goddamn pansies" or "goddamn Jews".[24] Any place that is not California is of no interest to him: "Mississippi, Tennessee, what's the difference. (…) It's all Del Paso Heights to me".[25] Martha repeats the same sentiment about Hawai'i: "it was all, Martha said, Del Paso Heights to her".[26] The local perspective that the characters exhibit limits their perception of the outside reality. The history of California is the narrative of their families' overland passage in wagons: that is when history starts and that is where it is fulfilled. No other place carries significance, no other narrative than the linear, familial history is considered legitimate. Such closed, self-referential discourse is doomed, as it hides the violence behind the language of exclusion.

Such language is a double-edged tool and is used successfully against those who use it. Even though he is believed to be a perfect candidate through the virtue of his family roots, Lily's father loses in the governor elections precisely because of the language of exclusion used against him. Walter Knight's opponent portrays him as one of "the robber land barons" and "the sworn foe of the little fellow".[27] In Walter Knight's circle, his opponents are "those Okies",[28] which shows that the two politically hostile groups compete using different categories of differentiation: for

Walter Knight, the difference is between those whose families crossed the plains with his and those who came later, to the already cultivated paradise. For his opponents, however, the difference is one of class. Walter Knight loses, because he does not recognize the difference of discourse that represents the difference in identification of his audience, who do not see themselves as the descendants of pioneers, but rather as members of the working class.

Run River is not the only instance of a narrative documenting the loss of history through language and the violence inherent in the exclusivist stance adopted by the characters who perceive themselves as the agents of history, which is synonymous with their self-designation as the speakers on behalf of the land. In *Play It as It Lays*, the violence of the language of exclusion takes more covert forms,[29] but it nevertheless emerges as the central problem of the narrative that the characters try to combat through such strategies as drugs, driving, or engaging in random, dissatisfying sexual encounters.

Walter Benjamin analyzes the consequences of the loss of history and comments on the pattern of movement that emerges in its place; commenting on Benjamin's understanding of choreographic movement, Butler asserts: "The loss of history is not the loss of movement, but a certain configuration (figural, spatial, simultaneous) that has its own dynamism, if not its own dance" (469). She describes the "spatial thinking" as a feature that for Benjamin characterizes melancholy.[30] Driving in *Play It as It Lays* is an activity that exhibits this kind of dynamism: it does not mean movement in the linear sense of allowing one to travel from one point in space to another, but rather, it is circular and does not assume a destination to be reached. The loss of movement of the groups of the first pioneers who reached the end of the continent is translated into the incessant movement of the characters of *Play It as It Lays*, who never progress, moving around in circles.

The circularity of their senseless movement, as well as their self-destructive tendencies, correspond to the stylistic solutions of the novel, which further stresses the violence of representation. The clipped dialogue, the descriptions, the pointlessness of the interactions between the characters: they all amplify the underlying mood of depression. The ultimate explanation Maria gives to her continuing existence is "Why not",[31] in itself the denial of a reason. The ending of the novel stresses an impossibility to communicate: as Maria explains, "Carter called today, but I saw no point in talking to him. On the whole I talk to no one".[32] The closing passage of the novel takes us back to the beginning, when Maria commenced by stating that she never asks the reasons of evil or death. "There is no satisfactory 'answer' to such questions", she states[33]; the point which will be reiterated at the end. Thus, *Play It as It Lays* shows circular movement in driving, but also in speech; it evidences the collapse of communication.[34]

Estrangement from the Body

This communication breakdown, a function of melancholia, is illustrated not only through the loss of the power of speech to convey meaning; it is also evident in the way the characters experience sensual connectedness. Benjamin's explanation of the bodily aspect of mourning is useful here; mourning in Benjamin, as Butler stresses in her commentary, "is, ineluctably, an encounter with sensuousness".[35] Butler explains further, emphasizing the process the body is subjected to that leads through mourning to melancholia:

> The new choreography of the body constitutes one consequence of this shattering, but that is a form of mourning that is not yet resolved into melancholia. The melancholic form deadens the very body enlivened, in a ghostly way, through pantomime.[36]

The resulting "alienation from the body",[37] which characterizes the relationship between history and the body, does not allow for an emergence of language that would assuage the melancholic suffering.

Estrangement from the body is a figure that appears in all of Didion's California novels, taking different shapes, but always suggesting a troubled relationship with the character's own sensuality on the one hand, and expressing their connection with the land and history on the other.[38] In *Run River*, Lily's extramarital escapades are a way of filling the void rather than any positive experience; while with her husband "usually in bed she pretended that she was someone else, and she supposed that Everett did too".[39] Their lack of carnal contact parallels the absence of verbal communication: "sometimes whole weeks passed without their having what could be called, in even the crudest sense, a conversation".[40] The suspicion that their life is not what it should be can be sensed in their declarations of affection: "I love you. I know you and you know me and nobody else does. Everett please baby *love* me",[41] which is repeated at the end of the narrative, with Everett about to die, confirming Lily's statement: "'I love you.' 'I know that. (…)' 'Nobody would have known it (…). The way it's been'",[42] suggesting that the events presented in the narrative belie the declaration, and the contradiction is resolved to present the words, not actions, as veritable. Thus, within the narrative presented in *Run River*, the progression is from alienation from the body and its mournful deadening toward a melancholic resolution in the declaratory finale.

Estrangement from the body is present in *Play It as It Lays* as well. In the pivoting episode of the novel, Maria's abortion, the person who arranges the procedure is a disembodied presence: "The voice on the telephone had known what she wanted without either of them saying it. The voice on the telephone had said that this would be expensive".[43]

The incorporeal, elusive presence emphasizes the violence of the procedure the character undergoes. What the voice announces is paradoxical, as it "knows" the aim of their contract without them "saying" it and it turns into "he" as future communication is announced with the use of a phrase, being in touch, that suggests embodiment. Maria projects the detachment from her own body onto the contact who appears as a voice, in this way dealing with the traumatic event.

One of the consequences of the loss of the body is the loss of language. Maria's expression of her depressive state is encapsulated in her words, "I am just very very very tired of listening to you all".[44] She stresses it further: "I don't like any of you (…) you are all making me sick"[45] to which another character responds, "If it's not funny don't say it, Maria".[46] In the vacuous landscape of Hollywood, language is expected to convey the pleasant, not the difficult. Maria breaks the rules of communication by stating the inconvenient truth, which simultaneously hinders further interaction. Language serves to break the exchange of ideas, not to promote it; thus, it loses its central function and testifies to the melancholy permeating the characters' existence.

Another aspect of the characters' lives that exacerbates their misery is substance abuse: after one doctor refuses to renew her prescription, Maria finds another[47]; the references to drugs at parties are frequent: "there's some coke in the bedroom",[48] and on another occasion "four or five joints were being passed in the living room".[49] In all of these cases, there are no conversations between people; any attempt at communication ends in failure. "In fact, melancholics make the best addicts", Susan Sontag remarks, "for the true addictive experience is always a solitary one"[50]; the solitude and isolation of Didion's characters is as much a result of drugs as it is a failure of the language.

Self-destructive ways of dealing with melancholia and the dissolution of interpersonal relations established in language are not the only remedies that melancholics seek; a reevaluation of perspective is another method of coping with the dissatisfying situation. Sontag proposes that "Irony is the positive name which the melancholic gives to his solitude, to his asocial choices"[51]; in other words, if one cannot change the roots of the underlying melancholia, then looking at it from a different angle and giving it a new name might lighten the burden. Irony is a ploy Didion uses self-reflectively[52]; in *Democracy*, she invites the reader in a Melvillean manner, "Call me the author"[53] only to distance herself from the narrative (very much like Ishmael, again).[54] She describes "A poignant (to me) assignment I came across recently in a textbook for students of composition" and quotes the assignment: "*Didion begins with a rather ironic reference to her immediate reason to write this piece*",[55] in this manner amassing the levels of irony. Joan Didion the narrator of the text, who demands from the reader to be called "the author", makes a reference to Joan Didion the author outside of the text, in a postmodern

attempt to merge the two roles. This in itself is ironic; by calling her prose "ironic", Didion points to the artifice of the construction of the narrative.

Indeed, the major preoccupation of *Democracy* is the dichotomy reality – non-reality, and the dissolution of the division between them is realized through the postmodern strategy of incorporating the persona of the author in the narrative. In Chapter 2 of *Democracy*, the narrator starts with the words, "*Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion*", commenting on such a manner of narrating: "So Trollope might begin this novel",[56] suggesting that what was possible for the Victorian novelist is no longer available to the modern writer. There is a degree of nostalgia noticeable about these words: Didion mourns the past, but knows there is no return to it. Her melancholy is but an ironic ploy.[57]

The repertory of tools available to the writer and the narrator is made explicit. She states, "I have no unequivocal way of beginning it [the novel]", adding,

> I have: 'Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air,' Inez Victor's fullest explanation of why she stayed on in Kuala Lumpur. (…) I have those pink dawns (…). I have the dream, recurrent, in which my entire field of vision fills with rainbow.[58]

When she exposes the writers' workshop, she suggests that she does not have in her repertory the means to conduct her narrative other than the most elusive, nonlinguistic elements.[59] At her disposal are not words, but sensations. The narrator denies the causality implicit in the traditional narration, as well, when she states: "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".[60] Quite ironically, she promotes the suspension of disbelief and encourages the reader to share her assumptions, at the same time undermining the distinction between the author and the narrator. Her ultimate comment reads, "Cards on the table",[61] a reference to gambling which in her prose provides a powerful symbol of the irregularities of fate and of the randomness of human experience.

The narrator reiterates the point at the end of her narrative: "Colors, moisture, heat. Enough blue in the air", calling it "the essence", yet admitting the failure of her endeavor: "It has not been the novel I set out to write, nor am I exactly the person who set out to write it".[62] This might be read as a commentary on the process of writing which changes the writer in its course, but it might also be an admission of fallacy endorsed earlier: I, the narrator, am not identical with the writer. In either case, the language fails to establish causality or to convey the message that was intended by the author/narrator or expected by the reader.

The narrator of *Democracy* mimics the words of the narrator of Didion's previous book: the narrator of *A Book of Common Prayer*, without

an aspiration to be seen as an equal to the author, admits, "I have not been the witness I wanted to be".[63] In an equally similar way, she describes the intangible elements to which she ascribes the essential value: "I continue to live here only because I like the light",[64] which she specifies as "The opaque equatorial light. The bush and the sea do not reflect the light but absorb it, suck it in, then glow morbidly".[65] In the two novels, it is the elements of atmosphere or weather that have a crucial bearing on the characters' decisions.[66] By stressing these ethereal facets, the more logical, linear lines of development are denied importance. Ultimately, the reasons behind the characters' actions are as opaque as the light.

In *The Last Thing He Wanted*, the motivation of the characters is explicitly presented as obscure; their incomprehensibility is depicted through a reference to the elusive elements of the landscape: "Maybe she looked at him and saw the fog off the Farallons, maybe he looked at her and saw the hot desert twilight".[67] An alternative explanation hints at aspects of the weather: "Maybe they looked at each other and knew that nothing they could do would matter as much as the slightest tremor of the earth", and the natural phenomena that remain beyond human control: "the heavy snows closing the mountain passes, the rattlers in the dry grass, the sharks cruising the deep cold water through the Golden Gate",[68] the last part reminiscent of California, the Donner-Reed Party, and the moral obligation toward the community to kill the snake in order to protect others, that lies at the core of the ethical code of the descendants of the pioneers in California, which Didion writes about in *Where I Was From*.[69]

Translation and Betrayal

Protection of the community, perceived as one's duty, and the betrayal of this responsibility, function as some of the most important tropes in Didion's fiction; in *A Book of Common Prayer*, an ethical obligation that Grace takes upon herself is the self-appointed role of the witness. "Seré su testigo",[70] (I will be her witness), Grace says about her narrative in which she presents Charlotte's story, but the fact that she announces her role in Spanish suggests that it is not only testimony that she is about to present, but also a translation.[71] Simon Critchley reminds us that Levinas liked to point out "*Traduire, c'est trahir* (to translate is to betray)", but, he adds in his commentary on Levinasian ethics, "the translation of the saying into the said is a necessary betrayal",[72] where the said is a statement whose truth content can be assessed and ascertained, while the saying is an ethical situation of the content being conveyed to a particular interlocutor, an "ethical residue of the language that escapes comprehension".[73] Didion's fiction documents this residue and translates the saying, the immediate, ethical situation, into the said: the narrative. In the Preface to *Slouching towards Bethlehem*, Didion says, "That is

one last thing to remember: *writers are always selling somebody out*",[74] noting the necessary betrayal already in her first collection of essays. In Didion, the ethical situation is the determined emphasis placed on the elusive rather than on the linear and the logical, and even though she talks of the betrayal that novelists commit, this is the burden that her fiction documents in various ways, and tries to exorcise in the process.

In *A Book of Common Prayer*, Grace finishes her narrative with the words: "The wind is up and I will die and rather soon and all I know empirically is *I am told*",[75] which testify to the ultimate unknowable nature of human experience, its untranslatability and, finally, its brief, finite character. For this reason, Didion' narrators choose to concentrate on such aspects of experience as light or wind. However, assuming such a perspective does not necessarily mean escapism, but rather, it amounts to an ultimate acceptance of the limits of one's perspective, which derives from focusing on the small. The phrase "I am told" stresses the mediated nature of one's experience, which constrains the viewpoint further; it can be understood to mean the character's identification with the text, i.e., I am what is being told, I am the mediation of language.

The restrictions placed on one's scope of vision – by the very mortality of the subject as well as by the clash with other agents' perspectives – are accepted with resignation. When Grace agrees to bear Charlotte's testimony, she transmits the message from Charlotte's dying husband, who asks Grace, "*Tell her it's all the same.* (…) *Tell her that for me*".[76] The communication from Warren Bogart "for Charlotte and Marin had read only '*you were both wrong but it's all the same in the end*'".[77] The oppositions are resolved; and the differences in opinions held, even if they influence one's life and death, are ultimately not as important as the quality of light is. Faced with death, which is the ultimate limit to one's field of vision, one comes to an understanding that no position one occupies is more valid than the other.

In *Democracy*, Inez describes the death of her lover in a similarly disenchanted way that hints at the Bible via Hemingway: "We were together all our lives. (…) Not that it matters. (…) I mean the sun still rises and he still won't see it".[78] Death is the definitive boundary of one's experience and all ethical assessments of it; having moved away from the physical limitations of one's movement, Didion presents this melancholy frontier in her later novels. In *The Last Thing He Wanted*, a novel that Didion describes as a "romance after all",[79] one of the lovers, Elena, also dies. Whether her lover, Treat, understands the circumstances of the woman's death or not does not matter; whatever conclusion he might come to is immaterial, "since Elena McMahon was already dead".[80] The narrator passes on the remarks of the bereaved lover: "This was Treat Morrison's last word on the subject. *I mean it's not going to bring her back*".[81] In the situation of a confrontation with the threshold of experience, language fails to convey any meaning; it

does not perform its function, and as such it becomes a highly suspicious tool whose value is questioned to the point where the seemingly more elusive aspects of experience such as light or weather conditions become more reliable indicators of significance and more trustworthy reasons for the characters' actions.

The romance between Treat Morrison and Elena McMahon is explained by their resemblance; in an exchange between them, when they recognize this correspondence, Treat says: "I read you", to which Elena answers, "I read you too",[82] establishing the parallel between them through the metaphor of reading. They read each other, which is to say they understand the signs that for them make up a coherent system, even if for others they might seem a random collection. The narrator confirms, "Of course they read each other. (…) Of course they saw the color drain out of what they saw when they were not looking at each other. They were the same person. They were equally remote".[83] Their connection is explained through similarity, but also through the perception of the outside world that they share. Reading each other, that is, using language, is as important as a clarification of the link they share as the elusive observation of color.

The characters in *Democracy* are similarly portrayed as sharing an outsider status. The narrator admits the indistinctness of their characters: "I have no memory of any one moment in which either Inez Victor or Jack Lovett seemed to spring out, defined", in order to establish the connection between them: "They seemed not to belong anywhere at all, except, oddly, together".[84] The ambiguity concerning the characters' personalities and their motivations is stressed repeatedly in the novel, with the narrator claiming, "human behavior seems to me essentially circumstantial".[85] However bold such a claim might sound, the narrator refuses to present a consequential stance, instead contradicting herself on another occasion when she states, "It occurs to me that Inez Victor's behavior the night she flew to Hong Kong may not have been so circumstantial after all".[86] She leaves the responsibility to draw conclusions and establish causal connections between events to the reader, in a postmodern gesture rebuffing the necessity of a logical sequence of events in fiction.

Part of the postmodern strategy in *Democracy* is the presentation of a vulnerable, uninformed narrator who states, "I (…) still lack the reason why Inez Victor finally agreed to talk about what she 'believed' had happened"[87] and situates her reflection in the more general context of a novelistic probability and the responsibility of the writer. She claims, "When novelists speak of the unpredictability of human behavior they usually mean not unpredictability at all but a higher predictability".[88] She rejects the idea of higher probability in favor of the randomness of experience and the vagueness of sensations and posits them as more important than logical plot development.

In *The Last Thing He Wanted*, the narrator is as skeptical of the possibility of understanding the cause and effect chain in her protagonists' behavior, turning instead to character as an explanation – however unreliable – of the progress of the plot of a novel, stating that her narrative would have been different, "If I could believe (as convention tells us) that character is destiny".[89] The narrator calls this explanation conventional, signaling again that her interest lies in the deconstruction of these novelistic conventions and revealing the artifice of her own narrative.

Despite these concerns, the narrator distances herself from her own figure, saying, "The persona of 'the writer' does not attract me".[90] This explicit denial of the interest in the writer suggests a disparity between the writer and the narrator. The narrator, the figure that stands for the craft, is in the focus of her text, all the time the stress being on the fissure between the viewpoint of the narrator and the narrative itself. She admits, "This business of Elena McMahon (…) is hard for me. This business of what 'changed' her, what 'motivated' her, what made her do it",[91] again frustrating the conventional expectations of a novelistic causality while simultaneously pointing to the character being a linguistic construct, not in any way related to the reality outside of the narrative.

The narrator is careful to raise the same reservations about another of her characters, Elena's lover. The narrator says, "I should understand Treat Morrison. I studied him, I worked him up. I researched him, I interviewed him, I listened to him, watched him",[92] yet for all the stress placed on the construction of a character, the narrator also blurs the lines between her narrative and the persona of the narrator. The narrator exposes the artifice of the narrative, speaking directly to the reader: "let me give you a paragraph from my notes. Not interview notes, (…) but early draft notes, notes lacking words and clauses and marked with *CH* for 'check' and *TK* for 'to come'",[93] supposedly showing the development from the notes to the finished product of the narrative, and seemingly exposing the gaps and bringing to light her own powerlessness in making a coherent story.

Language is revealed to be inadequate as a tool to portray the complexity of relations between people, or the intricacy of factors contributing to the emergence of a particular event. Didion's narrator shows the false starts and dead ends in her story to question the linearity of her account: "There are pages of such draft notes (…) all of them aborted. I see now that there was a common thread in these failed starts", and she explains, "I was trying to deal with something about Treat Morrison that continued to elude me",[94] showing that the language of a novel is not an appropriate instrument for the depiction of her characters.

In *Democracy*, these lines are blurred even further, to the point that the narrator comes to resemble Joan Didion, the author. "Inez called my house in Los Angeles",[95] the narrator states at one point, and later she talks about one of her characters: "After I finished my first novel and left *Vogue* (…) I actually ran into him quite a bit".[96] The first novel and a job at *Vogue*

are facts from Joan Didion's life; obscuring the distinction between the author and the narrator of the novel suggests that language is an inadequate apparatus not only for transmitting a novelistic message, but it also fails to sustain the expected boundary between fiction and reality.

Both novels in which Didion experiments with postmodern techniques insist on the presentation of their protagonists as resisting characterization; in all cases isolation lies at the root of this predicament. The narrator describes Morrison as "someone who projected nothing so much as an extreme, even resistant loneliness, an isolation so impenetrable as to seem to demand analysis, examination, a reason why".[97] Similarly, the two central characters of *Democracy* are depicted as remote: "Inez seemed (…) emotionally inaccessible",[98] the narrator states about one, and about the other, Jack Lovett, she says, "There had been that emotional solitude, a detachment that extended to questions of national or political loyalty. It would be inaccurate to call Jack Lovett disloyal, although I suppose some people did at the time",[99] which at the same time points to inaccurate estimations made by other observers, adding to the impression that a proper understanding of the characters or their motivations is impossible.

What Didion represents as an extraordinary feature of her protagonists is an amplification of what in Levinas is an inherently human condition. Discussing Levinasian alterity, Critchley writes: "there is something about the other person, a dimension of separateness, interiority, secrecy", that is, Levinasian alterity, "that escapes my comprehension", adding a proposition: "That which exceeds the bounds of my knowledge demands *acknowledgement*".[100] This unknown element, that is always part of our confrontation with another being, requires that we recognize its presence. The ethical situation lies thus in a recognition of the difference of the other subject, not necessarily in a reduction of the gap between the subjects. Didion's narrators in *Democracy* as well as in *The Last Thing He Wanted* both recognize their characters' alterity, and in a postmodern manner reject the possibility of diminishing this cognitive distance between themselves and their protagonists, stressing the distrust toward language as a communication tool.

For the narrator in *Democracy*, however, the situation is explicitly described as nonethical, even though it contradicts the common understanding of such an occupation as arms trafficking: "What Jack Lovett did was never black or white, and in the long run may even have been (…) devoid of ethical content altogether".[101] The narrator places the character's actions in the context of media coverage and comments, "since shades of gray tended not to reproduce in the newspapers the story was not looking good on a breaking basis",[102] which might be read as an ultimate condemnation of the political system altogether as unethical. The eponymous democracy has evolved into a state in which no ethical distinctions are possible,[103] because it functions as a news piece and as such it operates with slogans, not labels that would correspond to the surrounding reality; it consists of "entire

layers of bureaucracy dedicated to the principle that self-perpetuation depended in the ability not to elucidate but to obscure".[104] The language does not reflect reality nor does it clarify its subtleties, and its failure to do so results in the failure of democracy as such.[105]

The question of the possibility of drawing a distinction between what is real and what is not is undertaken by *The Last Thing He Wanted* and discussed in several instances. The category of the "real world"[106] is in fact used cynically to justify unethical choices; the narrator talks of the "rhetoric of the time" which explains that "*in a perfect world we might have perfect choices, in the real world we had real choices, and we made them*".[107] This cynical view stands in contrast to the narrator's assessment, which she calls "a revisionist view of a time and a place and an incident about which, ultimately, most people preferred not to know"; which she sums up with the phrase, "Real world".[108] The narrator occupies the moral position: her narrative gives testimony to what "most people" prefer to ignore, which means that it gives language an ethical quality to make distinctions between right and wrong.

This optimism is contradicted when the protagonist attempts to convince her adolescent daughter that the category of real life is not connected to material possessions,[109] asking her, "a Jacuzzi (…). A pool. A tennis court. Three cars. Is that your idea of a real life?".[110] The girl's answer, "*I had my father*",[111] points to the wagon-train ethics, yet the narrator prefers to resort to the intangible and the elusive: "smell of jasmine, pool of jacaranda. An equally indefensible idea of a real life".[112] What is termed "real life" does not have any referent in the outside reality, but rather, it is a label attached to a set of beliefs that the characters choose. The arbitrariness of this sign reveals the arbitrariness of language.

The Modern Pioneers and the Loss of Memory

What for the character constitutes real life is symbolically represented by the phrases repeated at the occasions Elena needs to remind herself of reality: "Smell of jasmine, pool of jacaranda, blue so intense you could drown in it"[113] is twice evoked in her quarrel with her teenage daughter, and then later the mantra "smell of jasmine, pool of blue jacaranda"[114] is repeated when she enters the world of arms trafficking and is confronted with a different reality. For the first time the words evoking the scent and the sight, the intangible elements that inform the decisions of the character against the pressure of the concrete, appear at the moment of the character's realization of her life's stagnancy:

> the smell of jasmine. The pool of blue jacaranda petals on the sidewalk where she sat. The sense that under that tent nothing bad was going to happen and its corollary, the sense that under that tent nothing at all was going to happen.[115]

This instant is represented as critical as it is a decisive moment after which the character changes the course of her life.

The protagonist uses the phrase once more when she decides to cut her losses: "she would leave out her father and she would leave out Catherine and she would also leave out the smell of jasmine and the pool of blue jacaranda petals on the sidewalk".[116] Just like in the other novels of Joan Didion, the decision to leave is a characteristically Western decision, one that testifies to the frontier character of the protagonist. At its center is the ability to cut loose and move on without looking back, but its price is the betrayal of the loyalty to one's kin that would secure one's survival.

In the novel, Didion sketches a coherent portrayal of the Western character; the narrator distinguishes the protagonist who is from San Francisco with the emphatic description, "No regrets. Treat Morrison had no regrets".[117] Such a characterization is consistent with the parallel the narrator draws between Treat and Elena: "She knew how to cut and run. She had done it often enough. Cut and run, cut her losses, just walked away".[118] Both Californians, they are depicted as able to leave the past behind: one of the traits that Didion typifies as intrinsically Western.[119]

Another characteristic that the narrator of *The Last Thing He Wanted* attributes to Elena, a character with an ability to reinvent herself, is the trait that belongs to the world of pioneers; Elena is described as possessing "the character (…) of a survivor"[120] on one occasion, and on another, the same trait is reinforced: "there again a survivor, there again that single-minded efficiency".[121] Her survival skills depend on the ability to focus on the basics, and even though Elena's physical existence is never jeopardized when she is in California, she is inherently a pioneer, which conditions her willingness to place herself in harm's way.

A similarly confrontational stance is exhibited by Elena's lover, and it is yet another of the parallels that the narrator sketches between the two characters. Morrison sees himself in opposition to the polished, well-educated, privileged characters; his disdain for them reveals itself only rarely, but it is a pivotal trait:

> This was a vein in Treat Morrison that would surface only when exhaustion or a drink or two had lowered his guard, and remained the only visible suggestion of whatever it had meant to him to come out of the West and confront the established world.[122]

Being a Westerner means standing in opposition to the world of manners and civilized behavior; it means being a pioneer, one who has the ability to leave the past behind and who sees himself or herself as the avant-garde element of society. It is the trait that the narrator describes as "the core dislocation in the personality",[123] which hints at the idea of movement: the displacement inherent in their character is the feature of the pioneers.

In *Democracy*, the central character demonstrates this same disconnectedness, even though the narrator describes it in a different way, saying: "it occurred to me (…) that Inez Victor had herself been a kind of refugee. She had the protective instincts of a successful refugee. She never looked back".[124] Whether refugees or survivors, the protagonists of Didion's prose are lone rangers, impossible to classify or categorize, because just like the pioneers, they constitute their own point of reference. This feature is evident in the rhetorical question Treat Morrison poses to Elena, "Where did you ever belong",[125] referring to her as much as to him, and it might characterize the characters in *Democracy*, as well. Being a Westerner means experiencing the loss of a loss: it means being exiled from the paradise that was never there.

The central character of *Democracy* is one of Didion's melancholic pioneers, as she sees her life conditioned by a loss at its core: when asked by a journalist "what she believed to be the 'major cost' of public life", Inez answers, "Memory, mainly".[126] The narrator explains "the essential mechanism for living a life in which the major cost was memory" in three curt phrases: "Drop fuel. Jettison cargo. Eject crew".[127] Living a public life requires the loss of personal memory; upholding the distinction between private and public requires sacrificing the former for the benefit of the latter. The loss of memory is to a large degree the loss of language, a melancholic mechanism that sustains the grieving subject.

When Julia Kristeva tells us that melancholia[128] is "dependent on a *time* rather than a *place*", she explains this viewpoint, saying that the "nostalgic persons did not desire the place of their youth but their youth itself".[129] By the same token, in the last two novels, Didion does not situate the source of her characters' suffering or anxiety in their nostalgic look back to California, but rather, by characterizing them in a mode that is reminiscent of the pioneers, her narrators suggest that what is lost for the characters is the time of their youth, understood as the mythical time of the pioneers.

Kristeva calls the depressed person "a dweller in truncated time"[130]; similarly, Didion's novels portray a fragmented past: it is either the imaginary past of the pioneers, imagined as heroic and glorious, or it is a past of random events, not connected by logical succession, and thus frustrating and unfulfilling. The narrator in *Democracy* notes the properties of time: "In 1955 on this campus I had first noticed the quickening of time. In 1975 time was no longer just quickening but collapsing, falling in on itself"[131]; to describe the process in different terms, the narrator portrays an imploding world.[132] It is a world in which memory is lost and the distinctions are blurred; a world in which, as the narrator says, "Inez Victor lost certain details".[133] The division between what is true and what is not is obliterated; as Inez remarks about her media presence, "Things that might or might not be true get repeated (…) until you can't tell the difference".[134] The predicament of this melancholy world devoid of memory is that nothing matters anymore.

The narrator of *The Last Thing He Wanted* muses on similar issues, presenting the lack of distinctions as liberating at first, then coming to a different conclusion: "Weightlessness seemed at the time the mode in which we could beat both the clock and affect itself, but I see now that (…) the clock was ticking".[135] In other words, she stresses that time cannot be ignored, and even if one is under the illusion that it can be conquered, time flows at its own speed, regardless of the desires and whims of human agents.

The "truncated time" of melancholia is revealed in the gaps between various time planes. The narrator states that "logical connections seemed to be missing between the Elena Janklow I had known in California (…) and the Elena McMahon in the two AP stories",[136] pointing out the lack of connection between the time she had known the character in California and the time the press stories were circulating about her. In a sense, California and the media reports function on the same plane, and if the narrator questions the truthfulness of one, then the truthfulness of the other is also put into doubt. Elena becomes split between two characters, one of the past and the other of unreality. She functions as a newspaper story, in the realm of language, but that means that her agency is suspect.

The narrator further stresses, "The facts of Elena McMahon's life did not quite hang together. They lacked coherence. Logical connections were missing, cause and effect".[137] In "truncated time", correlation between events cannot be established, which makes narrative impossible. One cannot expect language to provide a mortar that will keep the elements of the narrative together. Kristeva points to a feature of melancholia which is "a *modification of signifying bonds*", and she specifies: "These bonds, language in particular" fail to provide any means of compensation. Kristeva comments on this melancholic predicament, stating that "Instead of functioning as a 'reward system,' language (…) hyperactivates the 'anxiety-punishment' pair".[138] Thus, unable to satisfy the need for signification, language becomes an instrument that fosters apprehension and a further dissolution of causal links between events.

Faced with a deficiency of causality, the characters resort to provisional solutions that hinge on the illogical. The narrator describes Elena's attempts to make sense of the unstable, unreliable world and explains her effort with empathy: "She seemed to find these tenuous connections extraordinary. Given a life in which the major cost was memory I suppose they were".[139] Here the connection between the cost of losing memory and the impossibility of building a coherent narrative of one's life is apparent: the loss of memory results in an inability to see the logic in one's past. The past then is revealed as a narrative that depends on memory and feeds on it; it is not external in relation to the character, but it is a personal construction reliant on one's reconstruction of events. The past becomes a language construct that can only be manipulated imperfectly, but never fully controlled.

The similarities between Elena and Treat notwithstanding, the two characters differ considerably when it comes to their understanding of their ability to act as free agents. The result in both cases is similar, but the underlying principle is opposite. Elena struggles with the lack of coherence, even if outwardly she copes well: "Elena's apparently impenetrable performances in the various roles assigned her were achieved (…) only with considerable effort and at considerable cost".[140] In contrast, Treat adopts incoherence and randomness as his own mode of operation: "Unlike Elena, he had mastered his role, internalized it, perfected the performance until it betrayed no hint of the total disinterest at its core".[141] The result of the two characters' understanding of arbitrariness and chaos is different in each case, but the underlying principle – the absence of cause-and-effect – is never questioned.

In *Democracy*, the narrator has the same problem with presenting a coherent narrative,[142] and uses cautious language to signal this difficulty, saying, "In this light it is difficult to maintain definite convictions about what happened down there in the spring of 1975, or before".[143] Notably – if obviously figuratively – she refers to "light", and explains the impossibility of any definitive distinctions with a reference to geology: even if what is considered an immutable feature of the landscape, such as a hill or an island, is in fact given to mutations as the tectonic plates shift, then it is all the more difficult to present any facts and construct a dependable narrative.[144]

Randomness as an underlying principle of any story is represented with reference to gambling: "Jessie is the crazy eight in this narrative",[145] the narrator states about the protagonist's daughter, whose decisions trigger action. What this arbitrariness proves is that there is nothing one can rely on. Even if the plot centers on a romantic involvement between Jack Lovett and Inez Victor, what they share is emphatically described as naught in a conversation in which Jack Lovett asserts, "We've still got it"; when asked by an eavesdropping third party about what they have, Inez answers, "Nothing" and Jack Lovett confirms, "Plenty of nothing".[146] It is a sign of melancholia in which nothing has been lost and nothing is regretted, yet which locates loss at its core. In *The Last Thing He Wanted*, as the narrator admits, "Oh yes. This is a romance after all",[147] she talks about their short relationship in terms that suggest the narrator's lack of control over the narrative and her wish for it to be otherwise: "I want those two to have been together all their lives".[148] The two novels, at one level romances, locate irreplaceable loss at their center and posit language as the tool that is expected to, but fails to, contain the loss.

Love as the central motivation belongs rather to the sphere of relationships between parents and children, and it is there that it is mentioned explicitly both in *Democracy* and in *The Last Thing He Wanted*. In other kinds of relationships, the sentiment is either "nothing" or it is rendered as an entity impossible to describe, outside of language, that is, on the side of death, not life. Love is mentioned in Elena's personal notes: "*Alcestis, back*

from the tunnel and half in love with death"[149] – in this fragment the tunnel refers to the cancer therapy the woman undergoes,[150] and it suggests a connection between love and death, rather than love and life. Elena might see herself as Alcestis,[151] but her near-death experience is not a sacrifice to bring another mortal back from the land of death; it is devoid not only of ethical value, but of any meaning whatsoever. In this misleading comparison that Elena draws, language is used to confound and to misconstrue.

The scar that Elena receives after her cancer treatment becomes a symbol of the futility of any attempt to gain control over events. Treat Morrison dismisses Elena's cancer scar with the words that deny the mark's uniqueness: "What difference does it make. You get it one way or you get it another, nobody comes through free".[152] Death does not constitute an exception, but an element of daily routine; its role is diminished even if, like love, it escapes language, and it becomes a sign of what Kristeva describes as "melancholia" that "ends up in asymbolia, in a loss of meaning: if I am no longer capable of translating or metaphorizing, I become silent and I die".[153] The lovers cannot translate each other's experiences, reducing them to nonsymbolic, meaningless signs; individualism and the ruggedness of spirit that characterize the Westerners find an ultimate expression in a lack of meaning.

Love, however, takes on the shape of obligation toward the loved other after death; in this obligation, which constitutes an ethical claim, one hears the echoes of the wagon-train morality. Inez performs the duty for her lover and recounts the story for the narrator: she talks about "landing on a series of coral atolls in a seven-passenger plane with a man in a body bag". The narrator specifies further, "An American in a body bag. An American who, it was being said, had been doing business in situations where there were not supposed to be any Americans".[154] The corpse transforms in the course of this short description from a subject of an ethical obligation toward one's lover to a nationalized body, an entity marked by belonging to a specific nation, making Didion's Inez a modern-day Antigone. The loss of life results in the body's return not to the realm of biology, but to the realm of politics: it is as if the political is the basic realm in this situation.

The narrator comments on the politicized body of the figure of the politician, Harry Victor: "I was struck by the extent to which he seemed to perceive the Indian Ocean, the carrier, and even himself as abstracts, incorporeal extensions of policy",[155] making clear that the process of the internalization of the political in the bodily is complete. Victor does not perceive himself as in any way independent from state affairs; his body is incorporated into the larger, disembodied mechanism of the processes which on a daily basis constitute politics, and in a longer view become history. This view is not limited to individual agents, but it also extends to larger entities. As the narrator explains, "All nations, to Jack Lovett, were 'actors,' specifically 'state actors'"[156]; actors: that is, entities that perform a received script and do not exercise their free will. Individual

powerlessness translates into state incapacity. Even if the eponymous *Democracy* is the rule of the majority, through its absorption of individuals it becomes a nightmarish system, one in which an individual must see him- or herself as but a peg in a machine that does not generate friction.[157]

The Language of Democracy

Situating politics at the center of a novel titled *Democracy* is not surprising; the text examines the American brand of democracy and posits it against the backdrop of international locales and interests. In the first half of the nineteenth century in his *Democracy in America* – to which Didion's title possibly alludes[158] – Alexis de Tocqueville was able to state,

> The American institutions are democratic, not only in their principle but in all their consequences; (…) the majority governs in the name of the people [and it is] principally composed of peaceful citizens who (…) are sincerely desirous of the welfare of their country.[159]

Didion's novel presents a disillusioned and bitter reassessment of this optimism.

The loss of a biological body and its transformation into a politicized entity, together with the loss of the political will to exercise on a national level that Didion portrays in *Democracy*, are also two different aspects of the loss of voice, or the ability to use the language to execute one's commands. The two levels on which this loss is portrayed, individual and political, are two aspects of the same phenomenon *Democracy* describes: the dissolution of the ideals behind the democratic system.[160] De Tocqueville makes a distinction between two similar approaches that yet have very different roots and he states,

> Egotism is a vice as old as the world, which does not belong to one form of society more than to another: individualism is of democratic origin, and it threatens to spread in the same ratio as the equality of conditions.[161]

Didion's novels, most notably *Democracy*, show that this distinction does not hold; individualism, which she links with frontier ethics, results in a detachment and breakdown of communication on an interpersonal level, and in cynicism and disengagement on a communal level.

The belief that Americans possess some special traits setting them apart from all other peoples, a recurrent theme throughout 400 years of American history, that has included at various points also American democracy as the distinguishing trait, has helped build the nation's strength, but it has simultaneously led to a sense of superiority and a disregard for other perspectives. American exceptionalism is one of the illusions that Didion's

characters in *Democracy* must be stripped of: "Inez ceased to claim the American exemption", the narrator tells us, and it happens after she understands the chimera of one's role in shaping one's destiny, and she notes "the convulsions of a world largely unaffected by the individual efforts of anyone in it".[162] The belief in individualism and one's ability to make their mark on the world, a characteristically American trait suggestive not only of de Tocqueville's views, but also of Benjamin Franklin's, and of the general Enlightenment optimism, is gone in the world portrayed in *Democracy*. The narrator shows this loss in a global perspective, saying, "The world that night was full of people flying from place to place (…) and there was no reason why she or [any of them] should be exempt from the general movement. (…) Just because they were Americans. No".[163] The mobility of people in the world is forced by circumstance, and is not a matter of willed passage; contrary to how movement might be perceived from the perspective of the push of a frontier, it is not a privilege, but a burden.

Inez's lack of belief in the special position the American state occupies is clearly related to the wider perspective the character is forced to assume, or, to put it in other words, it is the result of glimpsing history: in the words of the narrator, Inez comes to understand that "her passport did not excuse her from (…) 'the long view' [by which] she meant history".[164] This newly gained awareness of having to participate in the processes of history, the subject's willingness notwithstanding, is contrasted with her former view of history, which the narrator explains with reference to her upbringing: "She had spent her childhood immersed in the local conviction that the comfortable entrepreneurial life of an American colony in a tropic without rot represented a record of individual triumphs over a hostile environment".[165] Her formative experiences shaped her understanding of her own input in the world as having an effect on it; the suggestion throughout the narrative is that one cannot influence history and that this belief is a particularly American delusion that does not stand the test of other locations. The "local conviction" the narrator mentions is a characteristically colonial view that is also typical of the frontier: it is a matter of individualism, strength of character, and perseverance, that guarantee one's success in thriving in the wilderness. *Democracy* shows it to be a mistaken belief.

If individual acts cannot be seen as a driving force behind history, randomness results: Inez understands that. When Jack Lovett wants to assure her that her troubled daughter will be all right, he says, "She's as tough as you are", to which she responds, "That never stopped any plane from crashing",[166] which shows her resigned acceptance of the existence of a sphere beyond individual control: accidents, migration, and death all belong in this category. "Toughness" as a trait that runs in the family does not mean closeness on other levels; *Democracy* is also a portrayal of a troubled family, and perhaps it is also a suggestion of what Didion diagnoses as the basic problem with democracy: it is the dissolution of familial bonds and lack of loyalty to family.

Relationship in a family is based not on affection and care, but on a sense of obligation; when Inez thinks about her husband and children she describes herself as: "Responsible for them in a limited way, yes, but not interested in them".[167] Her own mother, in turn, leaves her family behind in order to "go to nightclubs", as the grandmother explains to young Inez[168]; Carol Christian leaves for California, the place that for her daughters does not function as a real location, but remains a series of pictures: "the postcards from San Francisco and Carmel and Lake Tahoe",[169] in the same way that Carol becomes a picture for her daughters: "Janet had studied snapshots of Carol Christian and cut her hair the same way".[170] She leaves to pursue a fantasy, but even if it might be suspected that her motivation is the individualistic, pioneering spirit, her journey to California is not a reconstruction of the route taken by the pioneers, as she travels back East, from Hawai'i, just as the very act of leaving her family is a betrayal of the earlier wagon-train morality.

The snapshots provide an insight into ekphrastic moments in the novel; ekphrasis being what T.J.W. Mitchell terms "the verbal representation of visual representation".[171] Mitchell discusses ekphrasis by dividing its perception into three phases, "the ekphrastic indifference", "hope", and finally, "ekphrastic fear".[172] The first phase is characterized by an acceptance of the clear-cut division between a pictorial representation and its description, and an assumption that one can never replace the other. The second phase rests on the idea of the deferral of mistrust in the power of words to convey the visual, while the third phase brings apprehension that the division between the words and the pictures might collapse. Mitchell posits the third phase to be the most difficult, as it provides "dangerous promiscuity" between the visual and the verbal.[173] As Didion's writing evolves into an ultimate dissolution of the belief in democracy, familial loyalty and individualism, the ekphrastic moments document this dissolution by suggesting an implosion of the division between the visual and the verbal, and between the past and the present. These are not moments of ekphrastic indifference or hope, as they cannot change or lift the dominant atmosphere of gloom and melancholy; they are moments of ekphrastic fear.

The blurriness of distinctions between the visual and the verbal corresponds to the similarly hazy differentiation between acts of loyalty and betrayal. In *The Last Thing He Wanted*, the act of familial betrayal is at the same time the act of a final declaration of loyalty to one's own desires: when Elena decides to leave her husband, she puts her decision in the words "I can't fake this anymore",[174] which suggests that marital life is a falsity that she needs to eliminate. The narrator describes the central character of Treat as "fundamentally dishonest" which she specifies as "dishonest in that he remained incapable of seeing the thing straight" and links it to his origin, not to his personal character, but as a trait "deep in the grain of who he was and where he came from".[175] The narrator provides a biographical note that specifies that he was born in California, which suggests the falsity

to be "in the grain" of the place. It is as if Didion points to the original sin of California, which is the denial of the heterogeneity of its history; it becomes a betrayal of hope and a dystopian vision instead of the Garden of the World, the place beyond history, and the conscience of the nation.

There is no escape from falsity; even lying is used to present affection: when Elena's father tells her about his all-night vigil in hospital when she was a child, she falsely claims she remembers the moment, at the same time comparing this memory to her own vigil by her daughter's side, expressing hope her child will remember it.[176] When arms trafficking is described, Elena sees the distinction between truth and falsity as blurred: "this was a business in which truth and delusion appeared equally doubtful".[177] The blurred lines between the opposites are a sign of a deeper problem with ethics; the opposites themselves provide a parallel for the seemingly opposing pair, of what is expressed in spoken language and what remains unspoken.

The most pertinent illustration of the collapse of the distinction between moral choices is provided by a reference to the idea of history. In *The Last Thing He Wanted*, history is no longer a blueprint or a set of instructions to be followed, but remains governed by the principles of chaos and randomness. The narrator talks of "History's rough draft. We used to say. When we still believed that history merited a second look"[178]; and specifies her position: "I still believe in history. Let me amend that. I still believe in history to the extent that I believe history to be made exclusively and at random by people like Dick McMahon".[179] It is no longer the idea of history as a fulfillment of Manifest Destiny or a god-ordained path that the nation should follow. Rather, history is a discursive construct that is produced by individuals. In a sense, it is a scary fulfillment of the vision of the ultimate pioneering individualism and ruggedness of spirit celebrated in the West; it is the logical consequence of the reliance upon the separateness of individuals – every man for himself – instead of an insistence on the cultivation of the spirit of communality that Turner ultimately advocated. The narrator admits to the limitations of an individual vision: "everyone focused on some different aspect and nobody at all saw the whole".[180] History is represented in terms of language and simultaneously as a vision; the division between speech and sight collapses. Concentrating on the particulars means disregarding the wider perspective. The disillusioned conclusion one must draw is that neither the big picture of history as a grand discourse of Manifest Destiny, nor the individual perspective is of any use to Didion's characters inhabiting this post-frontier, directionless world.

Didion's last novels illustrate the principle Baudrillard talks about when he states:

> *Utopia has been achieved here and anti-utopia is being achieved*: the anti-utopia of unreason, of deterritorialization, of the indeterminacy of language and the subject, of the neutralization of all values,

> of the death of culture. America is turning all this into reality and it is going about it in an uncontrolled, empirical way.[181]

There is a sense of wonder as much as there is disillusionment. A language that was expected to describe nature, express history, and reflect moral issues fails to do so – Didion's postmodern experimentation is a testament to this fiasco, at the same time demonstrating the language's inability to serve as a community building tool. The collapse of the effective language is final, as betrayal is now the mark of the trade of a writer. Yet there still remains some moral tinge to the work of the author: the writer and the narrator critique the system as they retain some kindness toward the characters; it is not the characters who fail, but democracy. Humans must be acknowledged in their alterity – this is the obligation of the writer; her final faithfulness is to the language, even as it fails to convey democracy, the American ideal. A Westerner in this post-frontier world is defined by the loss of a loss. S/he is a dweller in "truncated time", which means that historical perspective is dramatically shortened and jumbled; the "long view" which is history is now compromised. The loss becomes absolute and thus impossible to deal with, as it simultaneously defines the core of Western, Californian, and by extension, American, identity. Ultimately, "a barricade against some deep apprehension of meaninglessness",[182] which Didion erects with her writing, only protects us from seizing the true scope of meaninglessness, but it does not imbue our lives with meaning.

Notes

1 Didion, *Slouching*, 85.
2 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 207.
3 Didion, *White Album*, 11.
4 Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 182.
5 Žižek thus writes about the indirect gaze:

> if we look at a thing straight on, i.e., matter-of-factly, disinterestedly, objectively, we see nothing but a formless spot; the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it 'at an angle,' i.e., with an 'interested' view, supported, permeated, and 'distorted' by desire. This describes perfectly the objet petit a, the object-cause of desire: an object that is, in a way, posited by desire itself. The paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause, i.e., the object a is an object that can be perceived only by a gaze 'distorted' by desire, an object that does not exist for an 'objective' gaze. In other words, the object a is always, by definition, perceived in a distorted way, because outside this distortion, 'in itself,' it does not exist, since it is nothing but the embodiment, the materialization of this very distortion, of this surplus of confusion and perturbation introduced by desire into so-called 'objective reality.' The object a is 'objectively' nothing, though, viewed from a certain perspective, it assumes the shape of 'something'.
>
> (Žižek, Looking Awry, 17)

6 Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 181.
7 Didion's characters are removed to a fictitious South American country (*A Book of Common Prayer*), to Hawai'i (*Democracy*) or they travel, spending time "only in the world's most perfect places" (*The Last Thing He Wanted* 8). Dominika Ferens, writing about the intersections between literature and ethnography, points to insularity as an important aspect not only of geography, but of culture: "It is in relation to the big place – the continental United States – that the smallness of islands (…) becomes meaningful. Size here serves as a metaphor for the twin asymmetries of access to political and cultural representation" (14–15). For more on the issue see Ferens's *Ways of Knowing Small Places* (2010).
8 Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 181–2.
9 Didion, *Democracy*, 60.
10 When discussing western boosters, "these confident image makers", David M. Wrobel resorts to Gene Gressley's definition of the western character, who noted that the westerner exhibited "a freewheeling optimism, a booster enthusiasm that belied his insecurity". These words might well describe Didion's characters from her later novels. In Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 6.
11 Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 182.
12 Critics note this theme frequently; e.g., Phoebe-Lou Adams calls *Democracy* "a general denunciation of American society" (122), Dollard notes that "Didion is concerned with the theme of social disintegration" (2514), whereas Hinchman talks of the "landscape of nothingness and desolation" (in Felton 90).
13 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 3044.
14 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 3044.
15 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 3045.
16 Didion uses the phrase in her essay "On the Morning After the Sixties" published in *The White Album*, 205–8, but the feelings of nausea and vertigo appear in the earlier collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.
17 Didion, *White Album*, 206.
18 Didion, *White Album*, 207.
19 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 3045.
20 Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 181.
21 Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, 80.
22 Didion, *Run River*, 227.
23 Didion, *Run River*, 56.
24 Didion, *Run River*, 56–7.
25 Didion, *Run River*, 125.
26 Didion, *Run River*, 200.
27 Didion, *Run River*, 43.
28 Didion, *Run River*, 44.
29 In her insightful analysis of *Play It as It Lays*, Sandra K. Hinchman notes the instances of "communication breakdowns and missed connections" which, she points out, have "certain epistemological repercussions". Hinchman stresses, "Because Maria is isolated and cannot establish communication with anyone, she is thrown back on her own meager resources for distinguishing reality from subjective interpretation" ("Making Sense", 89); with poor results, one might add.
30 For a detailed discussion of Benjamin's interest in the aspects of space, see Stanley Cavell (1994), Paul De Man (1995), or Graeme Gilloch (1997).
31 Didion, *Play It*, 214.
32 Didion, *Play It*, 214.
33 Didion, *Play It*, 3.

34 Critics note the terseness of discourse in *Play It As It Lays* and attribute it to the cinematographic influences upon Didion's style, e.g. Rodney Simard (1986) or Katherine Henderson (1985); the same is said about *A Book of Common Prayer*; e.g., Hollowell discusses "a series of jump cuts, the variable sequence of juxtaposed images torn from personal experience in no coherent pattern" and he concludes, "Didion has learned the technique from the movies" (164).
35 Butler, "After Loss", 470.
36 Butler, "After Loss", 471.
37 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 140. For a discussion of similar themes both in Benjamin and in Freud, see Angelica Rauch, *The Hieroglyph of Tradition*, and Alys Eve Weinbaum, "Ways of Not Seeing," 396–426.
38 Cf. Chapter 3.
39 Didion, *Run River*, 94.
40 Didion, *Run River*, 94.
41 Didion, *Run River*, 183.
42 Didion, *Run River*, 261.
43 Didion, *Play It*, 58–9.
44 Didion, *Play It*, 85.
45 Didion, *Play It*, 190.
46 Didion, *Play It*, 191.
47 Didion, *Play It*, 180.
48 Didion, *Play It*, 178.
49 Didion, *Play It*, 152.
50 Sontag, *Sign of Saturn*, 127.
51 Sontag, *Sign of Saturn*, 133.
52 Paul Jude Beauvais in his essay "Postmodernism and the Ideology of Form" provides a lucid analysis of the postmodern irony in Didion's *Democracy*. He posits that "a postmodern mode of consciousness" informs Didion's narrative technique and states,

> This postmodern consciousness imposes what Fredric Jameson has called an 'ideology of form' – a set of demands, both esthetic and ideological, that necessitates Didion's metafictional technique. This technique enables Didion to offer an ironic narrative that calls into question the grand narrative of American democracy.
>
> (16)

For an extensive analysis of postmodern irony in Didion see Beauvais, pp. 16–18.
53 Didion, *Democracy*, 16. Janet Wiehe notes that Didion "achieves the immediacy of journalism at the expense of emotional depth" (Review, 821); Thomas R. Edwards sees in Didion's technique "the devices of anti-fiction" ("American Education", 23).
54 Paweł Jędrzejko in his *Liquidity and Existence* (2008) discusses extensively the figure of Ishmael and his famous commencement of the narrative, "Call me Ishmael"; cf. 180–3; Jędrzejko also provides an insightful reading of the various contexts of *Moby Dick* in his *Melville In Contexts* (2007); both publications are in Polish.
55 Didion, *Democracy*, 17.
56 Didion, *Democracy*, 16.
57 And yet, as Edwards notes, *Democracy* is "indeed a 'hard story to tell', and the presence in it of 'Joan Didion' trying to tell it is an essential part of its subject". Edwards, "American Education", 24.
58 Didion, *Democracy*, 16–17.

59 Didion commences the narrative in *Democracy* with the words, "The light at dawn during those Pacific tests was something to see" – as Michael Tager insightfully notes, the novel paraphrases "The Star-Spangled Banner" (176); Paul Jude Beauvais, adding to Tager's interpretation and commenting on the opening line, describes it as "a sentence that invokes the legacy of Hiroshima while evoking the opening line of the national anthem" (19).
60 Didion, *Democracy*, 17.
61 Didion, *Democracy*, 17.
62 Didion, *Democracy*, 232.
63 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 272. Henderson notes, "Grace served as Charlotte's 'witness' in a religious rather than a judicial sense; (…) she tried to give Charlotte worldly help and protection and to lead her to the truth – in short, to lend her 'grace'" (1985: 83). She goes on to call Charlotte "a modern Christ-figure" with Grace serving as her "apostle" (1985: 83). Didion does use religious innuendos to suggest a spiritual component to the story, but my claim would be that her aim is to portray the world in which no Christ figure can survive and no testimony – in the sense of presenting the truth – can be given.
64 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 20.
65 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 14.
66 In *Blue Nights*, an autobiographical text, Didion describes the peculiarity of light in certain latitudes and presents it as seminal; it is the blue light, almost a character in its own right, that informs the perception of the unfolding events. Similarly, in *The White Album* she insists on water as the defining feature of the West. In *Salvador*, the celebrated reportage, she describes the country as "a state in which no ground is solid, no depth of field reliable, no perception so definite that it might not dissolve into its reverse" (Joan Didion, *Salvador*, 13). The elements of landscape or weather are portrayed as having a bearing on the characters and events not only in her fiction, but also in her journalism and autobiographical writing.
67 Didion, *Last Thing*, 209.
68 Didion, *Last Thing*, 209.
69 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 182, 191, 209.
70 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 11.
71 Donald J. Greiner presents the relationship between the two women in yet another way, stating, "Didion frames the issues of female bonding in layers of irony"; and he elaborates: "Perhaps the central irony in *A Book of Common Prayer* is that Didion controls her language while she shows Grace's and especially Charlotte's words as spinning out of control" (Greiner, *Women Without Men*, 51). For more on the issue of female bonding in Didion, see Greiner, *Women without Men*, 1993.
72 Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*, 18–19.
73 Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*, 18.
74 Didion, *Slouching*, xiv.
75 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 272, italics in the original.
76 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 189, italics in the original.
77 Didion, *Common Prayer*, 247, italics in the original.
78 Didion, *Democracy*, 229.
79 Didion, *Last Thing*, 209.
80 Didion, *Last Thing*, 218.
81 Didion, *Last Thing*, 218, italics in the original.
82 Didion, *Last Thing*, 144.
83 Didion, *Last Thing*, 144–5.
84 Didion, *Democracy*, 84.

85 Didion, *Democracy*, 186.
86 Didion, *Democracy*, 188.
87 Didion, *Democracy*, 215.
88 Didion, *Democracy*, 215.
89 Didion, *Last Thing*, 14.
90 Didion, *Last Thing*, 73.
91 Didion, *Last Thing*, 75.
92 Didion, *Last Thing*, 135.
93 Didion, *Last Thing*, 136.
94 Didion, *Last Thing*, 138.
95 Didion, *Democracy*, 217.
96 Didion, *Democracy*, 39.
97 Didion, *Last Thing*, 138.
98 Didion, *Democracy*, 216.
99 Didion, *Democracy*, 219.
100 Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*, 26.
101 Didion, *Democracy*, 219.
102 Didion, *Democracy*, 219.
103 Michael Tager breaks down the underlying causes of the political hopelessness represented in Didion's novel, stating that these are "a national security apparatus designed to maintain America's global influence; a media-based politic that elevates style over substance; and a loss of connection with the past". Tager, "Political Vision", 173.
104 Didion, *Democracy*, 169.
105 When discussing "strategies of reticence" in a selection of authors, Janis P. Stout compares Didion to Austen, Porter and Cather, to state "Her strategy is more directly aggressive than theirs, employing sarcastic barbs to undermine the dishonesty and specious values that are her target" (in Felton 225–6). Language, thus, does not necessarily fail, but it becomes a powerful tool through a witty presentation of its own failure.
106 Didion, *Last Thing*, 13.
107 Didion, *Last Thing*, 13, italics in the original.
108 Didion, *Last Thing*, 13.
109 For a discussion of commodity culture in Walter Benjamin, see Peter Wollen, 2003, or John Coetzee, 2008.
110 Didion, *Last Thing*, 42.
111 Didion, *Last Thing*, 43, italics in the original.
112 Didion, *Last Thing*, 43.
113 Didion, *Last Thing*, 42.
114 Didion, *Last Thing*, 76.
115 Didion, *Last Thing*, 20.
116 Didion, *Last Thing*, 24–5.
117 Didion, *Last Thing*, 135.
118 Didion, *Last Thing*, 39.
119 In *Where I Was From*, Didion thus describes her mother: "My mother had no interest in keeping (…) any California land: California, she said, was now too regulated, too taxed, too expensive. She spoke enthusiastically, on the other hand, about moving to the Australian outback". When asked by her incredulous husband if she would, in fact, leave California, she answers: "In a *minute*. (…) Just forget it", which Didion implements with a commentary, "the pure strain talking, Elizabeth Scott's great-great-great-great-granddaughter" (14–15, italics in the original). The willingness to leave is thus portrayed as a frontier trait; and the frontier – an ever receding horizon.

120 Didion, *Last Thing*, 14.
121 Didion, *Last Thing*, 16.
122 Didion, *Last Thing*, 156.
123 Didion, *Last Thing*, 154.
124 Didion, *Democracy*, 56.
125 Didion, *Last Thing*, 154.
126 Didion, *Democracy*, 50–1.
127 Didion, *Democracy*, 70.
128 After Kristeva, I am using the terms "depression" and "melancholia" interchangeably here. She points out, "while acknowledging the difference between melancholia and depression, Freudian theory detects everywhere the same impossible mourning for the maternal object" (*Black Sun*, 9), showing the connection and parallelism rather than a difference between the two terms.
129 Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 60, italics in the original.
130 Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 61.
131 Didion, *Democracy*, 72.
132 Beauvais calls "Didion's sense of collapsing time" presented in *Democracy* "a sense that is characteristic of a postmodern consciousness" (24).
133 Didion, *Democracy*, 50.
134 Didion, *Democracy*, 53.
135 Didion, *Last Thing*, 3.
136 Didion, *Last Thing*, 12.
137 Didion, *Last Thing*, 6.
138 Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 10, italics in the original.
139 Didion, *Last Thing*, 230.
140 Didion, *Last Thing*, 154.
141 Didion, *Last Thing*, 155.
142 Hollowell in his essay "Against Interpretation" discusses what he calls the "anti-interpretative stance, found throughout Didion's work" which he describes as a situation where "causality no longer operates very well as a way of satisfactorily explaining the fragmented aspects of the daily lives of [Didion's] heroines" (165).
143 Didion, *Democracy*, 18.
144 Beauvais discusses discontinuity in *Democracy* on the narrative level and states, "The danger of a conventional narrative strategy (…) is that in imposing a logic on her core story it also will impose a narrative logic on a historical period that is characterized by chaos rather than connection". Beauvais, 24.
145 Didion, *Democracy*, 164.
146 Didion, *Democracy*, 105.
147 Didion, *Last Thing*, 209.
148 Didion, *Last Thing*, 227.
149 In *Slouching towards Bethlehem* the narratorial voice claims, "The desert, any desert, is indeed the valley of the shadow of death; come back from the desert and you feel like Alcestis, reborn" ("Guaymas, Sonora" 214).
150 Didion, *Last Thing*, 151.
151 Alcestis, the mythological figure and the inspiration for operas and literary works, appears first in Euripides' tragedy *Alcestis*. When Alcestis' husband dies and is called by Hades, she decides to sacrifice her life in exchange for her husband's (Jennifer R. March, Cassell's *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, "Alcestis"). In Gluck's opera, which is a retelling of the classical story, Alcestis sings about not loving life without her husband, thus justifying her decision (Stanley Sadie, ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*,

"Alceste"). Didion's novel is one of many texts referencing the mythical figure; for instance, Milton's sonnet "Methought I Saw My Late Espoused Saint" compares the dead wife of the lyrical subject to Alceste.

152 Didion, *Last Thing*, 78.
153 Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 42.
154 Didion, *Democracy*, 228–9.
155 Didion, *Democracy*, 89.
156 Didion, *Democracy*, 37.
157 "Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine", urged Thoreau famously in his "Civil Disobedience". Democracy for Thoreau has a very different meaning to the one proposed by Didion's characters, yet it is as much in the center of her novels.
158 Paul Jude Beauvais points to Didion's own hints in *Democracy* which suggest textual links with George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway, Henry Adams and Norman Mailer (*Democracy* 68) and states, "An affinity with Henry Adams seems particularly plausible, given that Didion quotes from The Education of Henry Adams and borrows the title of Adams's 1880 political novel for her own work" (22–3). Didion mentions *The Education of Henry Adams* in "Pacific Distances" saying that it is "a book I first read and scored at Berkeley in 1954" (*After Henry* 123) – a fact that did not escape Beauvais's attention (n5 28).
159 De Toqueville, n.p. Ch. IX, vol. I.
160 In a similar vein, Tager notes, "The corruption of language helps to explain Victor's success. He speaks almost entirely in clichés" (203).
161 De Toqueville, n.p. Ch. II, vol. II.
162 Didion, *Democracy*, 211.
163 Didion, *Democracy*, 208.
164 Didion, *Democracy*, 211.
165 Didion, *Democracy*, 211.
166 Didion, *Democracy*, 205.
167 Didion, *Democracy*, 208.
168 Didion, *Democracy*, 26, 156.
169 Didion, *Democracy*, 25.
170 Didion, *Democracy*, 155.
171 T.J.W. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 152.
172 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 152.
173 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 155.
174 Didion, *Last Thing*, 95.
175 Didion, *Last Thing*, 135–6.
176 Didion, *Last Thing*, 166.
177 Didion, *Last Thing*, 102.
178 Didion, *Last Thing*, 11.
179 Didion, *Last Thing*, 33.
180 Didion, *Last Thing*, 203.
181 Baudrillard, *America*, 97, italics in the original.
182 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 207.

Conclusions

> But is this really what an achieved Utopia looks like? Is this a successful revolution? Yes indeed! What do you expect a 'successful' revolution to look like? It is paradise. Santa Barbara is a paradise; Disneyland is a paradise; the US is a paradise. Paradise is just paradise. Mournful, monotonous, and superficial though it may be, it is paradise. There is no other.
>
> —Jean Baudrillard, *America*

My argument throughout this study has been that the central aim of Joan Didion's writing is to cope with loss, a loss that is often unacknowledged, and because of that, it generates melancholia. Even when the source of melancholia and the loss that occasioned it seem to be clearly stated, there is always a deeper layer of sadness that remains unnamable. After all, as Joyce Carol Oates asserts, "Joan Didion's art has always been one of understatement and indirection, of emotion withheld".[1] In her first novel, *Run River*, with westward expansion no longer possible and with nowhere to go, the characters' lives appear pointless. Similarly, in *Play It as It Lays*, the protagonists' existence is vacuous, as they seem to have lost the ethical values that guided the first pioneers. Yet in both novels, the problem is not that the Californians no longer follow their ancestors' guidance, but that the guidance is presented as commendable in the first place: the idea that the pioneers left an ethical code worth following stands in stark contrast to the assessment of the period that some historians do not hesitate to sum up with the term genocide, exercised on the Native American population.[2]

That Didion's works locate the source of the melancholia of her characters in all the wrong places is also true of her later novels, *A Book of Common Prayer*, *Democracy*, and *The Last Thing He Wanted*: they are not the kind of witnesses they would like to be, they do not save the day, they are not even likeable characters; what makes them interesting and what they share is the fact that deep down they are all Westerners, following the pioneering code of survival in the far-flung corners of the world.[3]

Didion defines herself in her autobiographical works in the same way: as a Westerner and a Native Daughter of California, one who knows

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what behavior is expected from her (if you see a rattlesnake, you kill it, if not for your own sake, then not to endanger the community – a point she has stressed multiple times).[4] Similarly to the way she defines her characters, she also describes her speaking autobiographical persona: as a subject undergoing or coping with loss. The text in which this principle becomes clearest is the one ostensibly documenting the process of mourning after the death of her daughter, *Blue Nights* (2012). As she tackles the main subject of the book, her speaking persona also dwells on another loss, which is the emotional loss of a place, California. She asks, "Could I seriously have construed changing my driver's license from California to New York as an experience involving 'severed emotional bonds'?",[5] and even though, characteristically, the question remains unanswered, the narrative suggests that moving from California to New York entailed similar, if not equal, emotional loss as that of a beloved family member; what is more, it also required healing time, and it was structured in a similar way. In all her texts, even the most personal ones, being Californian equals being marked by loss.

Understanding the Californian character as primarily defined by loss points to a rich history of writing about California in such terms: the first explorers perceived it as an accursed coast (Henry Dana), novelists described it as a false Eden that failed to fulfill their preexisting vision of it (John Steinbeck), the nature writers deemed it a wondrous paradise that was already on the brink of extinction (John Muir, Aldo Leopold). Even in socially engaged fiction, it has been sentimentally portrayed as the past of chivalry and romance (Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton) or the past of lost innocence (Helen Hunt Jackson); what these visions share, and what Didion also references, is the sense of an irrevocable loss of the past. What is surprising about Didion's version of the myth of the "golden era" is that her history is short, as it reaches back only to the pioneers – among whom are her ancestors – who crossed the Great Plains, and not any further. Needless to say, it is an exclusivist vision, historically inaccurate and ethically compromised. Why does a writer of Didion's caliber remain faithful to it then?

This question has driven the present study; Didion seems to preemptively answer such doubts in "Notes from a Native Daughter", an essay published in the collection *Slouching towards Bethlehem*:

> You might protest that no family has been in the Sacramento Valley for anything approaching 'always.' But it is characteristic of Californians to speak grandly of the past as if it had simultaneously begun, *tabula rasa*, and reached a happy ending on the day the wagons started west. *Eureka* – "I have found it" – as the state motto has it. Such a view of history casts a certain melancholia over those who participate in it; my own childhood was suffused with the conviction that we had long outlived our finest hour.[6]

The simultaneity of the beginning and ending of a history which accumulated and imploded in one single moment is how Didion explains her approach to history, calling it characteristically Californian and thus making herself, yet again, the self-proclaimed speaker for the land. There is a tautological quality to it: seeing the beginning and end of Californian history fused in one aspect of it does not seem quite as magnificent to one not invested in perpetuating the vision; it is only from a very narrow perspective that this idea of history appears "grand" and not only does it require a certain effort to present this narrow angle as representative, but it comes at a price, too: as Didion admits, it causes an inexplicable "melancholia" in those who choose to assume it.

Why, then, does Didion's speaker insist on maintaining this erroneous vision of history[7] that produces such melancholic anguish? Perhaps it is because, as the Freudian model of melancholia teaches us, the side-effect of melancholia is the emergence of conscience; Didion's speaker's persistence in her presentation of a limited vision of California history allows her to study the state's emergent conscience, albeit at the cost of melancholia. Judith Butler reminds us, "There is no work of mourning that does not engage melancholia"[8]; for Didion, it means that her melancholic texts mourn the loss, even as it remains unspeakable.

Indeed, the less explicitly it is stated, the more powerful the loss becomes, captivating the subject by its force of inexpressible obsession. The power of the unspeakable loss in Didion's works is visible in her incessant return to the subject of California and the West, even as, or perhaps especially that it gradually becomes less explicit: as California amounts to the overt subject of her first novels in terms of the themes, characters and setting, in Didion's later fiction California recedes to the background, constituting a mere reference point, even if an important one. This recession reflects the difficulty of representing the state and its character as it simultaneously testifies to the grip it continues to hold over Didion's works.

Whether discussing the current political issues or confronting the pain after the deaths of her family members, Didion continues to revisit the question of Californian identity, suggesting a connection between the ethical issues pertaining to the democratic system, the matter of personal loss, and the Californian character. It transpires that the elusive Californian identity is in fact founded upon loss, albeit not in the sense Didion's novels propose. Didion's characters see the loss as located at the moment of westward movement; what escapes their perception is the nature of this loss.

What Didion's prose sees as lost is the glory of the pioneering past that is arguably an illusion; the pioneers may have been "blind", "stupid", and "selfish wanderers"[9] (here Didion evokes Josiah Royce), and the pioneering ethics may be a thing of the past, but Didion's texts propose to see some value in them. The problem is not that the pioneering way of

life is gone; the problem is it was never there in the way it is gloriously represented. The grand past is an illusion, and Didion's speaker is well aware of the fact. Yet, her characters refuse to acknowledge it, nor are they willing to discuss the consequences of holding on to it, even as she progresses in her writing from a nostalgic longing after the lost (ethical and glorious) past (in *Run River* and *Play It as It Lays*) to melancholy musing upon the illusion of such longing (in *A Book of Common Prayer*, *Democracy*, and *The Last Thing He Wanted*). Still, Didion's prose never mentions any westering or pre-frontier body other than white: the question then remains, why does it persist in this vision of the pioneering past as the foundation for the Californian identity?

The answer might be found in Didion's book-length meditation on the meaning of the sense of belonging to a place which she signals with the title: *Where I Was From*. Didion revisits her former views about what it means to be a Californian, and her narrator closes her musings with a statement that hints at disenchantment: "There is no real way to deal with everything we lose".[10] In other words, the sense of loss remains a self-referential entity beyond which there is no recourse. What this statement also reveals is the distinction between a real and an illusory way of dealing with loss, a distinction that seems unsustainable, yet one that helps explain the insistence of Didion's prose on the exclusivist vision of history: her narrator understands one cannot cope with loss in a real sense, so instead she chooses to cope with it by feigning it.

Another answer to the question of the reasons for clinging to this falsified history is provided when Didion's I-speaker describes downtown Sacramento, recently fitted with wooden pavements to resemble the pioneer settlement, and recalls her great-great-grandfather's saloon on Front Street only to remind herself that her adoptive daughter does not have links to the past of the place. She finally states, "it was only Quintana who was real", contrasting the reality of her daughter's existence with the "ghosts" of the old Sacramento that have haunted her prose.[11]

The distinction that these two fragments make, between what is real and what is not, remains the only solution to the problem of history and identity that will be provided, and a tentative one. It seems that Didion's I-speaker is well aware of the fact that her historical vision is inaccurate, but it is her way of coping with loss that underlines Californian identity in her assessment. In a (postmodern) sense, this understanding of the past may be liberating: if the stigma of reality is lifted from it, it becomes one of many possible versions of history; it no longer exerts its hegemonic hold over the subjects of history that would otherwise remain unrepresentable (even if Didion's prose does not represent them, it offers the possibility of representation).

Such feasibility might be the only saving grace of Didion's representation of history and identity in her fiction, because as her narrator claims California for herself and for her daughter, she does not extend

this claim to include others. To put her predicament in Freudian terms, even as she documents the emergent conscience, "the critical agency which is (…) split off from the ego",[12] she fails to mobilize it for the sake of representation of the silenced agents of history. In Freud's explicit declaration, "the melancholic's disorder affords of the constitution of the human ego"[13]; similarly, Didion's melancholic prose is a testament to the constitution of the Californian self. In the Freudian model, the conscience is a voice that critiques the subject in an act of turning upon itself; by the same token, Didion's fiction voices a critique directed at California: it defines its character, simultaneously exposing its limitations.

The unvoiced losses of Didion's prose are many: the Native Americans who inhabited California before her ancestors, the Californios, and the whole plethora of groups who make up the varied, heterogeneous, complex Californian society, which becomes simplified under Didion's scrutiny: now California is homogenized, and the sole group that gains representation is the descendants of those who crossed the Great Plains in covered wagons together with Didion's ancestors. Yet these losses – if we attempt to assign some meaning to them that might save Didion's prose from the accusation of a slanted presentation – may be the price for the emergence of conscience. As Butler remarks, commenting on Freud's argument in *The Ego and the Id*, "the ego is composed of its lost attachments and (…) there would be no ego were there no internalization of loss along melancholic lines".[14] Consequently, the loss of Didion's prose, which is the lack of representation for many Californian subjects, is necessary for the self-reflexive Californian identity that she defines in her writing. To put it differently, her version of Californian identity requires these losses. The question arises, are they necessary for a twenty-first century California?

The California that Hector Tobar paints in *The Barbarian Nurseries*, T.C. Boyle portrays in *The Tortilla Curtain*, or Karen Tei Yamashita sketches in *Tropic of Orange* is very different from the one Didion writes about. None of the writers mentioned would ascertain after Julián Marías, "Certainly, California is a paradise"[15]; yet in their prose, the losses of Didion's fiction do not constitute the indispensable sacrifices for the emergence of the Californian identity: in Tobar's, Yamashita's and Boyle's prose, as in numerous other instances, Californian identity is defined on different, more inclusive and heterogeneous terms. The appeal of Didion's vision, however, is undeniable: a case in point would be Richard Rodriguez's explanation of what California means to him, a place organically connected to him through his own, lived history. As he describes the land of his origin, he stresses the idea of "brownness", the paradoxical, confusing color that implies impurity and abjection, yet also freedom and hope,[16] and he discusses the category of race, celebrating plurality and

heterogeneity. He separates himself from the California that does not include him: "the dead California of Spaniards and forty-niners and Joan Didion's grandmother".[17]

There emerge two competing versions of California, the inclusive, brown California and the exclusive, white one; their rivalry is by no means a state predicament, but rather, a reflection of an ongoing national debate, for, as William Everson reminds us, "The Californian knows that the expansiveness of attitude in the West is simply the well-known national expansiveness carried to its ultimate".[18] Didion's version of history might perhaps be perceived as less exclusive and elitist in the light of Derrida's assertion about the nature of mourning: in *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida suggests that mourning begins with an affectionate relationship and is interminable; thus mourning is a loving incorporation of the other and a form of faithfulness to the other. When Didion's speaker mourns Miss Gilmore, but refuses to mourn Californios or Native Americans, she remains faithful to her whitewashed version of history, but, as Butler reminds us, both the mourned and the un-mourned deaths constitute one's identity.[19] It approximates what Butler elsewhere calls the "loss of loss itself",[20] the most distressing of losses.

In this perspective, Didion's Californian identity is a melancholic celebration (paradoxical as it is) of the survivors of the concrete consequences of an exclusivist vision of history, yet what needs to be stressed is that survival depends on losses; it is "a matter of avowing the trace of loss that inaugurates one's own emergence".[21] Quite perversely, as Didion denies the validity of the stories of those who did not cross the Great Plains with her ancestors, their voices emerge and haunt her prose, demanding to be heard. As Butler stresses, "From the start, this ego is other than itself; what melancholia shows is that only by absorbing the other as oneself does one become something at all".[22] Didion's characters are ill at ease with themselves because they do not admit to being others. Didion claims California for them, yet she cannot present them as the rightful descendants of the pioneers and Californians, secure in their identity. Didion's prose pivots on a paradox: as long as her characters' identity depends on disavowing and silencing the voices of others, they cannot but emerge as melancholic, yet melancholic they must be, for the process of the forging of (Californian) identity necessarily entails loss.

Thus, as they depict Californian identity, Didion's novels do not provide easy answers, but rather, present the reader with a plenitude of questions. California is represented as a paradox: a cultivated garden, a corrupted Eden, an awe-inspiring desert. It is anything but simple; its meaning remains elusive. To borrow Ray Allen Billington's phrase, California is the land of both savagery and promise; Didion's fiction portrays the state in all its conflicted, melancholy beauty.

Notes

1 Oates, "Taut Novel", 141.
2 Cf. Brendan C. Lindsey's *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846–1873*, University of Nebraska, 2012; as well as Clifford E. Trafzer's and Robert E. Hyer's examinations mentioned earlier in the present study.
3 Didion tends to represent the places she writes about as a version of California; for instance, when discussing Salvador in the book of the same title, she states, "In fact El Salvador had always been a frontier, even before the Spaniards arrived" (72), representing the historical fact of colonial domination as immaterial to the essential character of the place which has always been "a frontier".
4 Henderson claims, "Few contemporary American writers are 'American' in all the ways that Joan Didion is" (*Joan Didion*, 140), suggesting that the United States is a more important context for the writer than the region she hails from, California. I suggest that for Didion, as for many others, California is the all-American locale that concentrates like a prism everything that can be found elsewhere in the States, but in a concentrated form. In fact, Mark Royden Winchell quotes Erica Jong to the same effect: "California is a wet dream in the mind of New York" (in Winchell, *Joan Didion*, 91).
5 Didion, *Blue Nights*, 11.
6 Didion, *Slouching*, 172.
7 In a recent biography of Joan Didion, Tracy Daugherty elegantly deals with this conundrum, saying,

> in considering Didion's literary legacy, one can't ignore her silence on certain matters of class and ethnicity. It is made all the more obvious by the richness of these subjects in the work of such writers as Susan Straight, Al Young, Amy Tan, and Richard Rodriguez. Yet this gap indicates less that California is no longer where she was from than that her California was specific and personal, despite its broader applications.
>
> (Daugherty, *Last Love Song*, 583)

8 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 193.
9 Royce in Didion, *White Album*, 28.
10 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 225.
11 Didion, *Where I Was From*, 219.
12 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 3045.
13 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 3045.
14 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 193.
15 Julián Marías, "California as Paradise", 17.
16 Richard Rodriguez, *Brown*, xi–xv.
17 Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation*, 218.
18 William Everson, *Archetype West*, 5. Also see Anzaldua, 1987.
19 Butler is interested in the social and political dimension of mourning when she discusses mourning. She states, "I am as much constituted by those I do grieve for as by those whose deaths I disavow, whose nameless and faceless deaths form the melancholic background for my social world, if not my First Worldism" (Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 46).
20 Butler, "After Loss, 467.
21 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 195.
22 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 195–6.

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