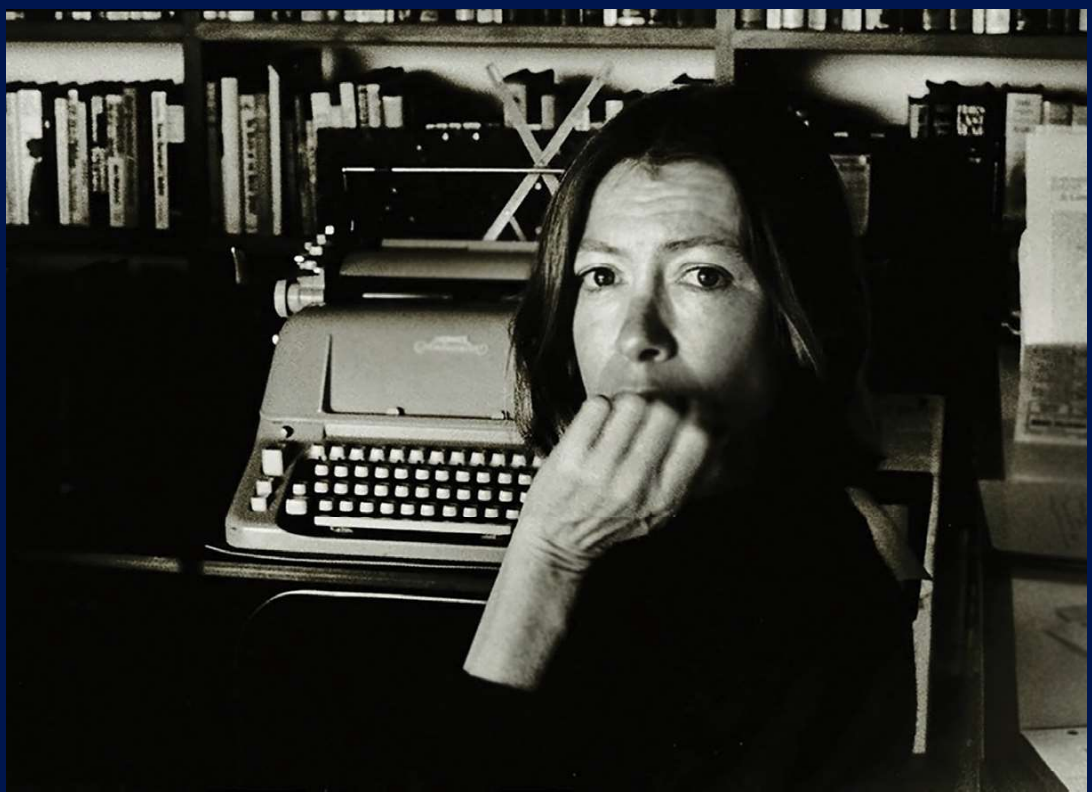
Cinzia Scarpino / Eva-Sabine Zehelein (eds.)

Joan Didion: Life and/with/through Words



PETER LANG

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Joan Didion (1934-2021) was one of America's most iconic writers and intellectuals. Her reportage and essays, as well as her novels and memoirs provide sharp comments on a variety of facets of American culture and politics between the 1960s and the 2010s. Employing the complex relationship between life and words as guiding framework, the volume offers fresh approaches to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, *Play It As It Lays*, *The White Album*, *Democracy* and *Where I Was From*, as well as takes on her final publications *The Year of Magical Thinking*, *Blue Nights* and *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*.

The collection also features photographs of Didion and her husband, John Gregory Dunne, with an accompanying essay by artist and photographer Nancy Ellison, plus a contribution by literary biographer Tracy Daugherty.

The Editors
Cinzia Scarpino is Assistant Professor of American Literature at the University of Milan. Her research interests and publications range from American literature of the 1930s and 1940s and of the second half of the 20th century to environmental studies, screen studies, and Law & Literature.

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Berlin - Bruxelles - Chennai - Lausanne - New York - Oxford

Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

Gratefully acknowledging financial support by
Università degli Studi di Milano and
Otto-Friedrich Universität Bamberg (SPOT program).

Cover illustration:
"The Confession" (Joan Didion sitting next to her typewriter).
Photography by Nancy Ellison.
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ISBN 978-3-631-89440-8 (Print)
E-ISBN 978-3-631-89571-9 (E-PDF)
E-ISBN 978-3-631-89572-6 (EPUB)
DOI 10.3726/b21411

Published by: Peter Lang GmbH, Berlin, Deutschland

info@peterlang.com - www.peterlang.com

This publication has been peer reviewed.

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Vincenzo Bavaro

Failing California: Notes on Didion's Cemeteries and Spaces of Abjection

Abstract
In *Where I Was From* (2003), Didion locates a central narrative about California in the "crossing story," about the migration from the Midwest to California. Within that narrative of origin, we are told, the hopefulness and fierce optimism of the enterprise were coupled with the unacknowledged event of loss, defeat, and abandonment. The sick and the weak were to be left behind, their flaws symbolically yet in a brutally concrete way, prevented them from entering the El Dorado. This article focuses on a specific aspect of Didion's representation of California, namely the place of those who do not, or cannot, join the Golden Dream, those who are left out, who can't keep up. Through a reading of selected passages from Didion, which explore the continuum between cemeteries, asylums, and prisons, I try to understand the modes and spaces of exclusion in and from California.

Keywords: California, cemeteries, prisons, asylums, abject, dropouts, rattlesnakes

In her "Notes from a Native Daughter," Didion's California is described as "a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension" (*Slouching*, 172). As it is well known to scholars and readers of this iconic writer, boom and loss are the two unsteady opposites that define a dynamic the author sees at the heart of the Golden State, and which in turn echoes throughout a long tradition that articulates the representation of California along the binaries of Eden and Hell, utopia and dystopia, or to quote from influential historian Mike Davis, Sunshine and Noir (Davis 2018, 13). In *Where I Was From* (2003), Didion locates a central narrative about California in the "crossing story," the story of the pioneering migration from the Midwest across the desert and the Sierra Nevada to California. Within that narrative of origin, we are told, the hopefulness and fierce optimism of the enterprise were coupled with the unacknowledged event of loss, defeat, and abandonment. The sick and the weak were to be left behind, their flaws symbolically yet in a brutally concrete way, prevented them from entering the El Dorado. An essential part of that origin story is indeed the cautionary tale of her own family's ancestors who were initially migrating in a wagon train together with the infamous Donner-Reed party: as a consequence of following an unusual route, the Hastings Cutoff, a

short cut to California, the party spent the winter of 1846–47 snowbound in the Sierra Nevada, and some members famously resorted to cannibalism to survive.

> we were taught instead that they had somewhere abdicated their responsibilities, somehow breached their primary loyalties, or they would not have found themselves helpless in the mountain winter or the desert summer, would not have given way to acrimony, would not have deserted one another, would not have *failed*. ("On Morality" in *Slouching*, 159; italics in original)

In these lines we see the importance of storytelling as a way to produce a claim of legacy and make sense of the past, and in this case the author's intention to question those authoritative narratives. But more importantly for the sake of my argument here, the italicized *failed* is a recurring concept in the following pages, and it conjures a quasi-Puritan error or original sin, the failure to fulfill a promise, the opposite of success which in turn evokes the utopian mission at the root of the Californian enterprise: you either make it or you fail. Interestingly enough, here those who "made it" are problematically the very same who "failed," hence the moral conundrum at the base of (Didion's) California mythology.

In her 2003 memoir, she looks back at her young Girl Scout self, and wonders "Which of us in that sunroom did not at some level share in the shameful but entrenched conviction that to be weak or bothersome was to warrant abandonment?" (*Where*, 198). This recurring origin story, which is at once a national story as well as a very personal one, is the ground on which Didion had built her own understanding of morality, "a word I distrust more every day" and a foundational acknowledgment of right and wrong in a civil society: "one of the promises we make to one another is that we will try to retrieve our casualties, try not to abandon our dead to the coyotes" (*Slouching*, 157; 158).

The crossing story is a remarkable point of entry not only into California mythopoesis, but also into an investigation of what it means to be and build a community, and on what are the rules, more or less internalized, about its functioning: what keeps a community together, and alive. In the following pages I will focus on a specific aspect of Didion's representation of California, namely the place – narratively and physically – of those who do not, or cannot, join the Golden Dream, those who are left out, who can't keep up. Through a reading of selected passages from Didion, I will try to understand the modes and spaces of exclusion in and from California.

Borrowing this notion of the abandonment of the sick, the dead, and the "deviant," its attempted erasure from the social landscape, I initially aim at exploring and interpreting Didion's representation of prisons, cemeteries, and sanitariums (most notably in Part 3 of *Where I Was From*). At the beginning of my research,

I was hoping that these spaces of abjection and their representation could offer a theory of exclusion and marginalization in California, that they could eventually allow me to understand the function of capitalistic surplus and waste-ification of some citizens. Issues that may indeed provide insights for a better understanding of contemporary concerns that affect not only California but the U.S. in general, such as the prison industrial complex, the privatization of healthcare, or the current homeless crisis. But despite her exceptional capacity to assess and analyze complex and contradictory "scripts," to question her own formerly held beliefs, and to unmask naturalizing dominant discourses, Didion is not one to think "in some abstract way;" rather, as she wrote precisely in relation to her essay "On Morality," "[her] mind veers inflexibly toward the particular" (*Slouching*, 157).

Despite her deliberate distrust of master narratives and authority, and her acknowledgment and performance of her own vulnerability, Joan Didion can often become a blinding light for us readers: her uncompromising tone, her unnerving honesty, her commitment to truth, her unique determination to see things clearly, to unbury, or as we love to say in academia, to denaturalize hegemonic discourses. In all her recognition of confusion, disintegration, uncertainty, and in her reticence and resistance to organize and order reality for us, she seems to be, nonetheless, always in control. Not surprisingly, these are all elements that could, and did, make her a virtuoso deceiver. In the preface to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, she writes that "*writers are always selling somebody out*" (xiv, emphasis in the original), almost to signal, among other things, that story telling is far from transparent, neutral, or disinterested.

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live," she famously wrote as the opening line of her *The White Album*, chronicling "a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself, a common condition, but one I found troubling" (*White*, 11). She continues, in what reads almost as a manifesto for her entire work:

> I was supposed to have a script, and had mislaid it. I was supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. I was meant to know the plot but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no "meaning" beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience. In what would probably be the middle of my life I wanted still to believe in narrative and in the narrative's intelligibility, but to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical. (*White,* 12–13)

The loss of meaning she experienced in that collection, eroded and impaired her ability to articulate ethical responses: in her attempt to make sense of a fragmented world, judgement was substituted by "electrical" responses. Nonetheless,

she was committed to search and question the ambiguities of those stories, to highlight the concealed cracks in them. But I believe that when it comes to these "spaces of abjection" like cemeteries, prisons, and mental institutions, Didion approaches the limits of discourse-making, the ability to articulate or produce knowledge through narratives, through storytelling.

What I am attempting to do in the next few pages, is on the one hand to focus on the moments when Didion reflects more clearly on the functions of institutional discursive practices, and how they serve to conceal, justify, and naturalize systems of existing power. On the other hand, I am trying to identify passages in her work where she articulates critical reflections on what we may call Foucauldian institutions entangled in systems of knowledge production, particularly judicial and psychiatric institutions, those who are in charge of identifying (and producing) categories of criminality and insanity. Didion has a recurring interest in the line dividing biological death and discursive, or social, death. We can see this particularly in her attention to cemeteries, to mental institutions, to prisons, and the discursive practices that enable and endorse these institutions.

Of Cemeteries and Rattlesnakes

An iconic representation, in U.S. literature, of the early dialectic between community building and the processes of exclusion, and more precisely between the construction of a utopian community and the abjection of some of its members, is at the center of the Puritan community in Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic *The Scarlet Letter*. As the author famously puts it: "The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison" (Hawthorne 1999, 35).

While this quotation references cemeteries as location for physical death – echoing the book's conclusion – and prisons as the site of social death, one of the novel's major interests arguably lies in the critique to the contested definitions and boundaries of exclusion and belonging. Ideas of utopia, and more generally perfection and perfectibility, require at their core their opposite other, a place, a corner really, of abjection and waste, of material and social death. A symbolic dump. This is not *another* space. This place, both Hawthorne and Didion are very aware of, is constitutive of utopia itself.

In *Where I Was From* the author discusses a three-acre family graveyard, the Matthew Kilgore Cemetery, which already since the Eighties had been vandalized and was left abandoned, with wild weeds and broken tombstones.

The cemetery is idealized in Didion's 1963 novel *Run River*, whose narrative strategies and rhetoric she heavily revisits and interrogates in this latest work. But what is striking in this image of the neglected family cemetery, is at first the author's realization (or revelation) that the family does not own it anymore, that "somebody sold it" (*Where*, 191), which evokes both the possibility that the past could be erased and forgotten, like century old tombstones in tall grass, and the commodification of California landscape and history. But looking more closely, the reference to the cemetery engages another layer of interpretation that is particularly relevant to my argument. Didion writes that she used to come to the cemetery in high school, but once she happened to see a rattlesnake, and since then she had not get out of the car again when visiting it. Rattlesnakes are recurring symbols in Didion, both a defining element of the West and an abject presence that must be removed in order to inhabit, to belong to, the West. Killing the snake is both evidence of one's own belonging to the landscape (claiming a genealogy in the place) and a social act of responsibility to the community. "I had seen the rattlesnake but I had *failed* to get out of the car and kill it, thereby violating, in full awareness that I was so doing, what my grandfather had told me was 'the code of the West'" (*Where*, 191–92, emphasis added). Once again, here the idea of failing is directly connected to a moral obligation, to a social responsibility.

Eloquently, the image (and the imperative) of killing the snake is followed by a reflection on the institution of asylums, and how paradoxically a state that defines itself as loose and less socially rigid than the rest of the country seemingly fell into a compulsion to identify and lock down citizens as insane: "from the 1870s to the 1920s […] California had a higher rate of commitment for insanity than any other state in the nation" (*Where*, 193). Whereas in the East insanity was managed through regimes of "treatment and therapy," "The idea of how to deal with insanity in California began and ended with detention" (194). The rattlesnake then, a powerful hint to the garden of Eden, also becomes the symbol of a fatal "error," who/what does not fit in, a glitch in the matrix, a hole in the fabric. It serves to define and mark an expendable outsider, an abject in fact.

In Didion's work there are several instances where she explores neurotic behaviors, and personal or institutional efforts to psychiatric evaluation. These are often limiting and unsatisfactory, flawed attempts at producing master narratives and scientific knowledge. Here we can think of psychiatric reports about herself, her daughter, or other fictional characters: the protagonist of her novel *Play It As It Lays* is an immediate clear example, but also the author's own psychological breakdown thematized in *The White Album*

and in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and her daughter's is in *Blue Nights*, where Quintana's psychiatric diagnosis kept changing, manic depression became OCD; OCD became borderline personality disorder. In these examples, the narrative shifts unsatisfactorily and fails to effectively describe or contain reality.

Finally, Didion's work is also rich in references to the significance of prisons, from a 1967 tour of an almost deserted Alcatraz Island ("Rock of Ages") to a 1968 visit to the co-founder of the Black Panther Party Huey Newton in the Alameda County Jail (in *The White Album*), where she hoped Newton could speak about "things specific and personal" but frustratingly realized he was in a position where "safety lies in generalization" (*White*, 30). The specter and the reality of jails and detention surface again, somewhat ironically, in the middle of Haight-Ashbury's hippie counterculture, where she witnesses an equally pervasive governmental drive to discipline and punish, "Almost everybody I meet in San Francisco has to go to court at some point in the middle future. I never ask why" (*Slouching*, 89).

The presence of a line between the community and the outsiders, or more precisely inside the community itself to identify the abject within, is in fact pervasive in her work: in *Slouching*, in what appears to be a typical conversation among old-time Californian immigrants (from which her non-Californian husband seems to be alienated and bored), she writes that "[at my parents' home in Sacramento] we appear to talk exclusively about people we know who have been committed to mental hospitals, about people we know who have been booked on drunk-driving charges, and about property, particularly about property, land, price per acre […]" ("On Going Home" in *Slouching*, 164). How the issue of belonging and outsiderness is, in these lines, entwined with real estate, will return later on.[1] But there is always something that bothers me about these narrative explorations. Possibly their fragmentary nature, the approach that is often so personal and specific as to prevent generalization. But these are trademark of her work, and part of the reason why we cherish it. So let us focus on the way "particulars" are instrumental in Didion's work to undermine the power of master narratives, how it is precisely the strategy of looking at concrete details that allows her to make claims and provide insights into larger general issues.

1 On a related scholarly work that brilliantly links the prison industrial complex with land expropriation and the history of settler colonialism in Southern California, see Hernández (2017).

Children and Dropouts

One of the books that I consider central to her evolution as a reporter, as a literary critic, and as a storyteller, her *Where I Was From,* is arguably all on self-deception: American, Californian, and her own individual capacity to deceive herself. To a large extent, the book is a sophisticated and direct attempt at unburying, and denaturalizing master narratives about California. In *Where I Was From* she explores how the whole pioneer mystique is in fact a powerful yet deceiving narrative, and, to quote from scholar Levick, Didion "analyses her own culpability in the mythologization of her home state and the failure of her own narrative authority" (Levick 2021, 63). The development of California was not the product of rough self-reliant pioneers, Didion argues. As Louis Menand highlights in his 2015 article on *The New Yorker*, "it was the act of the federal government, which built the dams and the weirs and the railroads that made the state economically exploitable, public money spent on behalf of private business. Didion called it 'the subsidized monopolization' of the state" (Menand 2015, 71). She discusses the management of the Sacramento River and its extensive system of dams and canals, and how the Sacramento Valley was by the second half of the twentieth century an entirely artificial environment. She reflects on The Pacific Railroad, also built with federal money and the involvement of private capitalists, and later, she focuses on the pentagon funding the aerospace industry and the defense industry, until the nineties. In the act of providing supplies for the Cold War and the space race, Southern California forged both prosperity and mythology. This historical and cultural background, Didion shows, is necessary to begin to understand the significance of social phenomenon like the Spur Posse in Lakewood, the ultimate idyllic planned suburb (originally in an essay published as "Trouble in Lakewood" on the *New Yorker* in 1993, later in *Where I Was Born* in 2003).

But before moving to her analysis of Lakewood, let us briefly go back to her landmark collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, and her reading of the hipster phenomenon in San Francisco, and what it may tell us about understanding communities within larger national societies and power dynamics. Didion's eye for the specific rather than the abstract has led her work to focus quite often on the margins, on the missing link, a hole or *aporia,* on some irresolvable internal contradiction, whose poorly concealed existence reveals the radical fragility of the wider narrative. Dropouts, as people who fail to embrace the mainstream, a majoritarian dominant lifestyle, or who deliberately reject it, have often been the topic of her work. Critic Louis Menand reminds us that for Didion "dropouts are symptoms of a dangerous social pathology" (Menand 2015, 69).

At the end of the Sixties, in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," she investigates what she called "social hemorrhaging," suggesting that what was going on in Haight-Ashbury was the symptom of some sort of national unraveling. Didion famously wrote, in relation to what she calls the children crowding the streets of Haight-Ashbury: "we had somehow neglected to tell these children the rules of the game we happened to be playing" (*Slouching*, 123), at once arguably dismissing the countercultural phenomenon and linking it with a wider social responsibility.

In *Where I Was From,* she once again focuses on the margins in her analysis of the events surrounding what will be known as the Spur Posse, an informal suburban fraternity of current and former highschoolers charged with various accounts of sexual assaults and statutory rape in 1993. The story behind the city of Lakewood, in Los Angeles County, is a vivid example of a California utopian community which has spiraled down into chaos, and it is instrumental for Didion to question a particularly pervasive postwar California ethos of success, self-reliance, and exceptionalism. The creation of Lakewood in the Fifties, that was meant to be the world's biggest subdivision, larger than the Levittown plan in Long Island, NY, was the result of a "perfect synergy of time and place, the seamless confluence of World War Two and the Korean War and G.I. Bill and the defense contracts that began to flood Southern California" (*Where*, 104). Donald J. Waldie writes that "Lakewood was the American dream made affordable for a generation of industrial workers who in the preceding generation could never aspire to that kind of ownership" (in *Where*, 106). In the early Nineties, as a result of massive Defense cuts and ensuing crisis in the aerospace industry, many of the plants who employed the citizens of Lakewood shut down: "Before 1991 ended, California had lost sixty thousand aerospace jobs", and overall "some 800,000 jobs were lost in California between 1988 and 1993" (133; 134). In the several pages Didion dedicates to the Spur Posse (102–52), she builds a multilayered argument on the intersection of California exceptionalism and the collapse of state-sponsored late capitalism, on the overlapping between corrupted politicians and public interest, and uses her investigative skills to uncover personal stories behind a heavily mediated public event. Didion's unveiling of the economic structures that enabled the Lakewood utopia to develop and thrive also reveals the dark side of the narrative that got these golden children stuck into what seems like a nightmare of insularity, "This was not a community that pushed its children hard, or launched them into the far world. Males were encouraged to continue, after graduation and indeed into adulthood, playing ball (many kinds of ball, all kinds of ball) in the parks and on the schoolgrounds where they had grown up" (142–43). Lakewood, California becomes for the writer the site of the

inadequacy of Californian master narratives to describe or to make sense of the reality of the state at the end of the twentieth century.

As Louis Menand writes:

> When the social structure starts to crack is when the dropouts and the delinquents and the crazies turn up. These are not people who don't know the rules, these are people who can see, without understanding why, that the rules no longer make sense. But, once people like that are thrown out of the system, once they become druggies or panhandlers or abusers of various sorts, no one wants them back in. They get scapegoated. Individual moral failure is taken to be the problem. It can't be the system. (Menand 2015, 71)

As we have seen before, for Didion a crucial part of the California ethos and a cautionary tale of her own childhood was the wagon-train morality, a brutal survival strategy which consisted, in Menand's words, in "leaving the weakest behind to freeze in the mountain passes. Survival, not caring, was the Californian spirit" (71). The issue of the dropouts, those who can't keep up, as much as those who are not aligned, has its roots in that foundational narrative: "California's answer to the problem of broken people was to build more prisons to put them in" as Menand writes (71). The recognition of this discursive strategy, however, in Didion's work does not apply exclusively to California.

A Sentimental Scapegoating

In 1990, the editor at the *New York Review of Books*, Bob Silvers, asked Joan Didion to write about a dramatic and controversial legal case and crime which had just been, in theory, solved. The case is often known as "the Central Park Five" or the "Central Park Jogger case." On 17 January 1991 "New York: Sentimental Journeys" was published (later published in *After Henry*). Didion follows the case of a young white professional, twenty-nine-year-old investment banker Trisha Meili, who was brutally assaulted and raped in Central Park, New York. As Steve Weinberg rightly highlights, "prosecutors orchestrated two trials […] the Jurors reached guilty verdicts, as preordained; the convicted teens entered juvenile detention centers, and later were transferred to violence-ridden adult prisons. Case closed. Sub-humans found, locked away and forgotten" (Weinberg 2022).

In a rather inflammatory way, aimed at rekindling a traumatic issue that seemed to be finally about to fade, Didion argued that Meili had become "a sacrificial player in the sentimental narrative that is New York public life" (*After*, 255) The crime's tragic story was exploited and circulated with the goal of distracting attention from the city's underlying problems – specifically, the decay of its economic base at the end of the 1980s and the ensuing growing instability and anxiety in its middle and upper classes. "Stories in which terrible crimes are

inflicted on innocent victims, offering as they do a […] sentimental reading of class differences and human suffering, a reading that promises both resolution and retribution, have long performed as the city's endorphins, a built-in source of natural morphine working to blur the edges of real and to a great extent insoluble problems" (284). Violent crime becomes an all-purpose bogeyman to cover up what Didion considers to be the essential fallacy of New York City as a metropolis, and citizens are (sentimentally) satisfied by these narratives instead of being challenged to dig deeper, to "the economic and historical groundwork for the situation in which the city finds itself: that long unindictable conspiracy of criminal and semi-criminal civic and commercial arrangements, deals, negotiations, gimmes and getmes, graft and grift […] the conspiracy of those in the know, those with a connection" (317).

The press loves these stories for what they do not tell, for what they leave out. As Menand highlights, "they leave unexamined and untouched the class antagonisms and economic failures that are the underlying causes of socially destructive events. Personal stories feed the American illusion that the system is never the cause of anything" (Menand 2015, 72). Didion was right to suspect that the accused teen-agers were wrongly convicted, something that was not established until 2002.

Now, let me go back to California, and to *Where I Was From*. Here is what seems to me the strongest and broadest claim about Californian institution of social control, and specifically what I called earlier spaces of abjection, and she sees them as necessary to the mythology of the land.

Didion mentions the prison industrial phenomenon specifically in rural towns in California that were "so impoverished in spirit as well as in fact that the only way their citizens could think to reverse their fortunes was by getting themselves a state prison" (*Where*, 183). However, the author continues, "Then I remembered, then I realized. We were seeing nothing 'new' here. […] We were seeing one more enthusiastic fall into a familiar California *error*, that of selling the future of the place we lived to the highest bidder, which was in this instance the California Correctional Peace Officers Association" (183-84, emphasis added). Selling out the future of a place is the *fil rouge* that connects the stories narrated in the memoir, and here it specifically mirrors what the author had written about her family cemetery.[2] Both the

2 In an essay by Michelle Chihara ("Where I Am From" in Nelson, 81–91), the scholar analyzes the naturalizing discourses that Didion uses in this book to talk about her family decision to subdivide the land and apply to a zoning change from agricultural to residential, often in a passive voice, as if in an "effort to look and then mystify the

economic structure and the master narratives underlying these transformations are the focus of Didion's critique. But it is interesting to notice the word "error," which is akin to the "failed" we discussed before; California has a tendency to err, her error is a disavowal of the past's lesson, her compliance to laws of profit and commodification, and probably more poignantly, hers is an error towards the community. In other words, it is an error, like the former "failure," that involves issues of morality.

In 1995 "for the first time, California spent more on its prisons than on its two university systems, the ten campuses of the University of California and the twenty-four campuses of California State University" (187). The California Correctional Peace Officers Association, had by the early 2000s about 29,000 union members, "with thirty-three penitentiaries and 162,000 inmates," California's correctional system was "the largest in the western hemisphere" (185). The latest count of inmates (2019) shows a reduction in number of inmates over the 33 state penitentiaries: about 122,000, with a staff of sixty thousand and a budget of more than twelve billion dollars (nicic.gov). The author's juxtaposition of these varied interrelated topics then highlights a continuum between cemeteries, asylums, and prisons, and her questioning of the reasons behind the detention of these citizens once again flips the focus from the detainee to the detainer, from the disciplined to the discipliner, as previously seen, for disparate reasons, both for the Spur Posse and the Central Park five. Didion adds, in relation to this long history of detention in California:

> The apparently pressing need to commit so many and in many cases such marginally troubled Californians to indefinite custodial detention seem not at the time to have struck their fellow citizens as an excessive lust for social control. Nor did these fellow citizens appear to see their readiness to slough off bothersome relatives and neighbors as a possible defect in their own socialization. Madness, it became convenient to believe quite early on, came with the territory, on the order of earthquakes. (*Where*, 196)

The ironic return to the naturalization of these ideological discourses is both crystallizing, in so far as it performs the very naturalizing strategies of systems of power, and troubling, since throughout the text the question of why California loves its spaces of abjection remains without a clear answer. According to Scarpino, prisons and mental institutions are examples

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Didion family's structural intervention in the California real estate markets" (Nelson 2020, 86).

of "inconvenient" features of California life "'controlled' and 'rearranged' by the federal government" (126). Scarpino argues that Didion's pointing at "the existence of an institutional pattern designed to hide what is socially undesirable and uncontrollable from sight" is a byproduct of a persistent, and often unacknowledged, obsession with control, and her final reference to natural phenomena deliberately diverts "social issues to inevitable environmental causes which, as such, would be handled through total control, that is detention" (Scarpino 2022, 126).

The image of the rattlesnake returns as both a measure of the natural world and as deeply loaded with symbolic connotations: the garden of Eden, the error, the innate fallibility of humans. Detention seems to be a product of the same obsessive compulsion to clear the ground from any rattlesnakes one may encounter, as a form of social responsibility, as demanded by the code of the west her grandfather preached to her. But it is also an ingrained iteration necessary to struggle to achieve or maintain the appearance of an impossible Utopia.

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