


Spring June 7th, 2018

# Where Woman Is Her Center: Interrogating Morality and Spatiality in the Works of Joan Didion

Hannah Nicole Martin  
*Seattle Pacific University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/honorsprojects>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Martin, Hannah Nicole, "Where Woman Is Her Center: Interrogating Morality and Spatiality in the Works of Joan Didion" (2018). *Honors Projects*. 77.  
<https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/honorsprojects/77>

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by the University Scholars at Digital Commons @ SPU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ SPU.

WHERE WOMAN IS HER CENTER: INTERROGATING MORALITY AND SPATIALITY IN THE  
WORKS OF JOAN DIDION

by

HANNAH NICOLE MARTIN

FACULTY ADVISOR, DR. CHRISTINE CHANEY  
SECOND READER, DR. LUKE REINSMA

A project submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the University Scholars Honors Program

Seattle Pacific University

2018

Approved \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Abstract

This project outlines new and expansive critical categories for discussing Joan Didion's work through an interrogation of Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and earlier personal essays using an interplay of close reading and affect theory. This paper seeks to help move the critical conversation in new directions by shifting the focus towards an analysis of Didion's unique spatialization of memory, articulated through her use of particular details. Divided in two parts, the first section of this paper discusses *The Year of Magical Thinking* while the second engages in a dialogue with the critical voices surrounding Didion, as well as an interrogation of additional essays from Didion's earlier years as a writer, culminating in an assessment that at the heart of Didion's methodology is a deeply moral exhumation of what is lost.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1-2
Part One.....	3
Examining an Instant.....	3-10
The Perpetuity of the Past.....	10-11
The “Vortex-Effect” .....	12-23
Signs & Wonders.....	23-25
“I Tell You That I Shall Not Live Two Days” .....	25-28
Part Two.....	29
Criticism and Gender.....	29-35
A Shared Grammar.....	35-48
Afterword.....	49-51
Appendix on Faith and Learning.....	56-58

## INTRODUCTION

Attempting to reduce Joan Didion's writing to a singular point often runs counterintuitive to its aim, as the overall meaning is a carefully constructed cohesion from what is inchoate and often resists an easy answer or singular significance. Didion is a writer who for decades has eluded critics who have been largely reductive, attempting to cram her into ill-fitting boxes. Anchoring what is not fixed through the act of writing, Didion affixes these uncertain items to the reality of her own selfhood. In intimate, physical, detailed and situational ways, Didion both exhumes the dead (whether a person or a moment passed) and keeps them present through the process of writing, a double-move through her use of incarnational memory and a unique rendering of time that closely mirrors poetry.

This project is split into two parts: the first part begins with an extensive interrogation of repeated referents in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and concludes with an analysis that at the center of Didion is the exhumation of the lost and lost time, and that in gathering and writing on the physical facts of the past, Didion tethers the tenses of past to present. This tether helps her to maintain an identity through time that provides a frame for moving through and beyond grief. The second part of this project consists of an analysis of several of Didion's personal essays from her earlier years and determines that Didion's construction of a grammar of meaning later allows for the composition of her intimately personal memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, to emerge. Because this project outlines new forms of criticism to interrogate Didion with, the paper includes encounters with criticism of Didion's writing pertaining to the topic of inquiry, and engages with the contentions leveled in her direction in order to iterate a new form of reading her writing. This project utilizes the critics to respond to Didion—rather than stacking theorists against each other, this paper considers multiple contentions and utilizes them in conversation. Because the

assessment of “meaning” resonant in Didion’s writing also involves elements of affect theory, this project additionally discusses the ways that Didion’s use of grammar enacted time creates a “female tense” of memory by the duality of embodiment and reiteration.

## PART ONE

**Examining an Instant**

For those unfamiliar with Joan Didion's memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, the text chronicles the events of the year following Didion's husband John Gregory Dunne's death and their daughter, Quintana Roo's, hospitalization. Beginning at the point in time after John's passing, the narrative proceeds chronologically while interspersing events of the past into the present, and the text painstakingly records the specific details surrounding the tragedy of John and Quintana's respective death and illness. Moreover, the text is Didion's attempt to create a center for herself through her returns to memory, a center that is a stay against the dissolution of her life.

Examining *The Year of Magical Thinking*, we are able to witness the recreation of Didion's self through particulars of passed points in time. Her memoir begins with a microcosm of a text-within-a-text, the opening of Didion's year of grief framed by the first four lines that Didion wrote after "it happened" (Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* 3). The *it* that happened is not referenced until three pages later, after Didion considers the ordinariness of so-called "unthinkable" tragedies (4) and describes the "blood on the living room floor" (6). Whose blood? The reader is not made aware of whose blood is on the floor and why it is there (an accident? an illness? a death?) until Didion pauses and reconsiders the effects of her narrative, a methodology she employs wherein she makes a statement (often regarding a physical fact) and then modifies it to suggest meaning through its relationship to other lines.

Didion's first four sentence paragraphs invite us to focus an initial examination of *The Year of Magical Thinking* using Didion's *instant* as a placeholder for details comprising an intact point in time:

Life changes fast.

Life changes in the instant.

You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.

The question of self pity. (3)

Didion's sentences reverberate, each sentence its own paragraph (a contained fact making a statement that is then modified by the related facts), accruing value from resounding off adjacent sentences. This miniature construction mirrors Didion's larger juxtaposition of details that accumulate value by their placement together. As Mark Z. Muggli writes, "[Didion] is fixed on discovering these images' resonance....Both her fiction and her journalism have explored how precision, rhythm, and structure can unbind this resonance" (419). The incoherent, gathered through her grammar of words, allows a meaning to emerge through the process of writing. This is a deeply embodied act that must grapple with the physical world and Didion's relation to it and herself. The *meaning* within the narrative is assigned by way of a given fact's relation to other facts—thus any sentence considered as its own entity is untethered.

Curiously, the claims that Didion initially makes are infuriatingly inchoate and general. To state that life changes fast is merely to reiterate a rarely contested abstraction, yet Didion chooses to begin her text with this generality. We may consider her use of the generality partially incumbent on her decision to begin the narrative with the first thing that she wrote after John's death (1), thus immediately familiarizing herself with the specific point of recognition after loss, but it is also fair to consider it as an example of the movements that Didion frequently makes in her texts, that of distillation through centering. Like the inverse of throwing a stone into a pond, the outer reaches disrupted by a rock, Didion begins with a fact leading seemingly nowhere and ends with the particular in the process of steadily narrowing rings.

Moving to the next paragraph, the first effects of Didion's tactic of distillation arises through further particularization: *life changes in the instant*. The reader may not know *what* the



instant is (similarly as the reader does not know what the *it* is until later), but Didion gives the beginning frames of both setting and context for the moment when life shifts. The general mention of *life* becomes first particularized to a specific instant and then further particularized as *the dinner* during which Didion's life split in two.

Didion continues this particularization of memory by providing speaker and situation: *you sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends*. The *you* could be extrapolated to any individual, opening up the situation for a universal reception, but through Didion's progression, the reader is aware that the *you* is Didion. At the beginning of her memoir, Didion makes no claim other than that this will be a text about herself, and while memoir typically works within the frame of a personal subject, Didion's memoir is remarkable because it luxuriates in creating the specifics of a female tense of self through memory.

As the text shifts from *life* to *an instant* and finally to *dinner*, those three jumps span the conclusion of a life that was initially sustained in the beginning of the paragraph and implies her participation and placement within the moment. By concluding the four paragraphs with a question—*the question of self pity*—Didion ties the passed point in time to the present. As a fragment, *the question of self pity* retains an incompleteness that helps affix the increasingly more specific yet still vague statements of the preceding paragraphs through memory. By retaining a link to the past through an as-of-yet interrogated question, Didion maintains her relationship with the point in time during which Didion was Joan with John. Through the collision of past and present considered in time simultaneously, Didion creates a coherence of self and retains her center, even though she is yet only alluded to in the writing.

Marta Bladdek considers that throughout *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion's returns to the past are attempts at reconstructing prior events so that John may come back: "At a place that appears frozen in time [...] Didion can give into magical thinking, her impossible wish that John's

death be reversible and Quintana's condition not-life-threatening" (Bladek 944). Yet, rather than this be considered literally, Bladek's take may be nuanced by arguing that the detail as written almost seems to "resurrect" the dead, or en-flesh it, giving it space to exist embodied through Didion's presence in the words.

It is worth considering that Didion purposefully avoids using the word *ordinary* prior to the pivotal *instant* because "there would be no forgetting it: the word never left my mind" (Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* 4). It is the ordinariness of life before disruption that makes disruption appear so improbable: "it was in fact the ordinary nature of everything preceding the event that prevented me from truly believing it had happened" (4). Yet Didion is also aware that while there is no easy conclusion or quick summation for tragedy, to type an event such as John's death as an absurdity would be to mischaracterize the point in time, endow it with undue weight.

Didion is often able to construct meaning for herself to move through loss and into a new iteration of herself through the recollection of the events of (ordinary) instants. Yet, for Didion's caution regarding portraying these instants, she often appears to treat the ordinary facts flippantly, verging on the edge of the absurd. When Didion discusses the "ordinary nature of everything preceding the event" (4) of John's death, she reflects on an instance when she "happened" to interview an individual in Hawaii who recalled the "ordinariness" of everything surrounding Pearl Harbor (5). If the *ordinary* events of a day are considered in conjunction, it makes sense that life, for Didion, happens—there is no subaltern scheme to the scope of a day. Didion eats dinner with John in the evenings and then one evening, he is gone. It is this very happenstance that seems to confirm Didion's insatiable desire to gather the physical details of prior points in time, especially surrounding the disruption of the ordinary, as if in doing so, she is able to construct a frame of meaning for herself to move through uncertainty and retain a sense of herself prior to the disturbance of the *instant*.

How much of this recollection is mere foil for a type of magical realism that considers the writing itself a way of rewinding time? Christine Axen argues that Didion's decision to leave Quintana's death from the narrative is a decision "not to edit the book to include this fact" and in doing so, to "[preserve] the reader's dim hope of a return to rationality and normal life" (698). Axen, in examining the ways that Didion compresses the timeline of her life, contending that she "[passes] fluidly between anecdote and reality, between past and present (698), touches the slippage possible when the past is thrust into the present as if it were possible to change it like a flip of a coin.

Exhuming a similar approach towards the overwhelming ineluctability of writing (Didion, it seems, cannot *not* write), Axen categorizes the vortex of memories that Didion encounters while writing through John's death as an immobilizing force, one that Didion returns to cautiously until the "trip and trigger of certain memories [...] force Didion to plunge down into herself" (700). Rather than the memories indicating previous tenses of Didion, they tumble into one collapsed time concomitant through the incoherence of memories recalled through grief. Axen contends similarly to Bladek that Didion's use of repetition is indicative of a "soul in agony" (700), or that Didion resorts to memory as a form of magical thinking, suggesting that whatever is lost is not ever physically gone. Didion discloses that for "most of my life [I had] shared the same core belief in my ability to control events" (*The Year of Magical Thinking* 8), then nearly a hundred pages later, modifies her statement by stating that she had "at some level apprehended [...] that some events in life would remain beyond my ability to control or manage them. Some events would just happen" (98). Memory returned to and written on is a way of arranging these events and understanding their relationship through the final image. *The Year of Magical Thinking* becomes a text wherein Didion enters into a vortex of memories and centers the details within herself. "This was one of those events," Didion writes. "*You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends*" (98).

Similarly, Didion's recreation of past events through physical details is also why there is no detail too small to be unaccounted for, as they all matter because they flesh in the spatiality of each point in time. For example, Didion's account of José, the man who cleaned up her husband John's blood, is comprised of quick statements of physical facts. "José. Who was part of our household . Who was supposed to be flying to Las Vegas later that day, December 31, but never went. José was crying that morning as he cleaned up the blood" (6). At first, the sentences stacked together seem to comprise quick fragmentary notes, but considering them in conjunction, they emerge as details that orient Didion to a specific date, particular moment, and to her participation within that moment. Who is José? By stating that he *was* a part of their household, Didion immediately places him in a timeline wherein he is known only through his participation in a point of time that has passed. *Our household*: Joan and John's. When did everything occur? We know what happened through *when*, and we know *when* through the events of individuals surrounding the event. José who was part of a household in a point of time that is now passed, was supposed to be gone. The *supposed to* is almost an echo of the ordinariness of events intended to happen that do not, or seen in the inverse, events not supposed to happen that do, such as John's sudden death. José was supposed to do X but never reached Y because "José was crying that morning as he cleaned up the blood" (6). Through this relation, Didion etches in the point of time by marking it with spatial reminders of both the moments prior to John's death and afterwards, creating a complete image.

Bladek contends that *The Year of Magical Thinking* considers grief in its "spatial aspect," wherein the "spatiality of grief also shows that memory and acts of remembrance are crucial to the process of mourning" (938). Affirming that the "memorial and emotional evocativeness [of places]" (939) exists as "anchors" to self-identity, Bladek argues for spatial remembrance (939), which can be applied to Didion through her own incessant return to both physical places and the details comprising them that affix her to the past. The particular point in time (as a spatial place

comprised of physical facts) is what Didion aims at in her process of writing—rather than a specific *meaning*, Didion returns to memory to the extent that she creates and returns to herself. Drawing upon philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s grief pathographies, Roger Luckhurst argues that Didion takes disparate events and “integrates [them] into one whole and complete story” (91). Crucially, the completeness of this story does not seem incumbent upon a replicated timeline wherein point *a* logically progresses to point *b*, as Didion is not recreating the history of events but rather threading together disparate instantiations. The story is complete to the extent that it considers the relationships of these facts, their resonance to each other.

### **The Perpetuity of the Past**

Didion is careful to enunciate that certain events in her life *always* happened, wherein the modifier *always* becomes integral to the retelling, as the events are unremarkable but contained by a promised continuity, then gone. Recollecting moments that characterized John and Joan’s life, Didion relates a memory from when she and John lived in Brentwood, many years prior to John’s death, and gives us signposts signaling her relation in time with the people she loves. Didion returns to the memory of a garden they shared, and the memory of this shared garden leads to a referent of John. The event of the particular time Didion writes on is composed of inconsequential details: John reads by the water while Didion works in the garden, a “small even miniature, garden with gravel paths and a rose arbor and beds edged with thyme and santolina and feverfew” (Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* 24). Didion references the *garden*, and the *garden* as a physical detail and place leads to her to a recollection of its origination, a memory of the conversation that Didion had with John about tearing out the lawn (24). Didion moves swiftly from a memory of a place into tracking her relationship with John and reorienting herself in a time when they were

physically present with each other. These sign posts are ways that Didion gestures to herself, not the reader, about which way to turn.

After cataloguing the rest of the events of the evening (a swim, a television show watched while wearing towels, another hour of work), Didion writes about the dinners that she and John would have had in a restaurant called Morton's. Of Morton's she writes that it "felt right that summer" and that "there was always shrimp quesadilla, chicken with black beans. There was always someone we knew" (24). The repetition of *always* is essential to these lines, because it characterizes the visits to Morton's with a kind of irreconcilable perpetuity (irreconcilable because it is only now evident that those evenings are irrevocably passed), and communicates the necessity of those specific physical facts for time's perpetuity: the same rice and beans, the unending promise of seeing a familiar face.

In each of these two references, the physical details carry the weight of the memory and become their own reference points for that specific time in Didion and John's life. The *always* in these sentences creates a similar effect as the first four lines of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, communicating a contained and sustained moment in time that is resonant upon retelling now with the sound of John's death. At the close of the section with John, several pages later, Didion returns to her beginning line: *you sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends*. The *life* referenced is Didion's life with John, the statement now embodied by the careful addition of the memory of Morton's, an afternoon swim, all the particulars that characterize a time that she cannot return to, when Didion was Joan with John. Through her increasingly layered iteration of facts, Didion modifies her initial statements and memories by spatializing them through particular details. As Axen writes about *The Year of Magical Thinking*, "Following John's death and Quintana's apparent recovery, Didion is faced with the greatest challenge so far: the redefinition of her life without her

husband” (702). Didion’s method of redefinition consists of words, “her only weapon against the nonsense of the world” (703), words that move her beyond absurdity and into meaning.

## The “Vortex-Effect”

Yet, emerging alongside the increasing influx of details is a lassitude prompted by the unceasing progression of memories that Didion encounters. “I had first noticed what I came to know as ‘the vortex effect’ in January, when I was watching the ice floes form on the East River from a window at Beth Israel North” (Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* 107). This “vortex-effect,” is the indefatigable energy remembered details create when they arrive as chains connecting present to past without explanation. The observed detail begins to erode the structure of the present if the detail merely becomes a chain without a relationship. For Didion’s center to hold, the vortex effect must not collapse her present tense. Yet, Didion’s referral of the chain of memories that cause her to relive her grief as a vortex likens them to a system she believes in, that of natural disasters, “the inexorable shifting of the geological structures that could throw up mountains and islands and could just as reliably take them away” (190). If Didion finds meaning in earthquakes that “abruptly [reveal] evidence of the scheme in action” (190), the scheme being the physical quandaries and uncertainties of the earth’s shifting body, then her awareness of the vortex effect seems also to be an awareness of meaning in even the details that overwhelm. Didion’s question in recollection then becomes what to do with these details.

An answer may come regarding *what* to do with these details if we examine the construction Didion makes in her writing as she moves through time in recollection. Part way through the text, Didion considers the rivers swimming with ice floes as she waits with Quintana in the hospital. Didion again posits a physical place that begins her recollection, shifting her eyes from the floes to the “rose-patterned wallpaper” in the hospital that she concludes must have remained from when “Beth Israel North had been Doctors’ Hospital” (107). This fluctuation in the past reminds her of her twenties, when she worked for *Vogue*, as the hospital was a favorite of



the magazine for “uncomplicated deliveries’ (107). Recalling a specific memory of a woman she calls X who had had an abortion at the Doctor’s Hospital, Didion moves from the memory of X to her use of the memory itself for her novel, *Play It As It Lays*. The novel leads her to a specific time, when she was writing the book and living in “the rented wreck of a house on Franklin Avenue in Hollywood” (110). Within the span of three pages, the Didion in the text watching the river in the present moves to Didion as embodied in multiple moments in her past, suggesting the ways that both memory and writing help orient a person in time and space. From the house on Franklin Avenue, Didion recollects a profusion of lush details that all implicate motion, or the physicality of material facts:

The votive candles on the sills of the big windows in the living room. The *té de limon grass* and aloe that grew by the kitchen door. The rats that ate the avocados.

The sun porch on which I worked. Watching from the windows of the sun porch as Quintana ran through a sprinkler on the lawn. (110)

The candles flicker, the aloe grows, the rats eat, Didion works on the porch, Quintana runs through the lawn. Enclosed within the specific details is the memory of points in time that indicate Didion in relation to another, in his case, her daughter. “I had been writing that book when Quintana was three. / *When Quintana was three.* / There it was, the vortex” (110). The vortex emerges through the influx of details as a trail that Didion wanders back to as she considers the ties between herself and those she loves, detailing the history of their relationship with all the instantiations now passed. These trails produced are not necessarily negative, but become so when they overwhelm Didion, or, when the memories arrive with both suddenness and force and offer no space for Didion to parse out the memories in relation to herself now. While the vortex produces this effect, Didion seems to resist it—in fact, *The Year of Magical Thinking* appears to be a

text about her resistance to writing, to ordering her life after the disorder of an instant, yet the writing wins out in the end.

Quintana at three reminds Didion of a memory of “the night [Quintana] had put a seed pod from the garden up her nose” (the specific *night*, or point in time, is spatialized by its surrounding details, such as the seed pod or the garden, which we already know is Joan and John’s) when the “pediatrician who specialized in seed pods had arrived in his dinner jacket” (110). Similarly as to how the details of Quintana’s birthday cake are placeholders for Didion’s own return to her past, the details of the night of Quintana’s seed pod incident are details that last because they extend beyond themselves and enable Didion to traverse into past instances. They clatter in relation to other facts, as the seed pod swiftly reminds Didion of a night that John and Didion walked around with Quintana after the completion of her novel.

During the night that John and Didion walk around, they discuss Didion’s move to *Life* magazine, and John’s hesitancy regarding Didion’s move. Again, the same method of movement that led Didion to this recollection continues: Didion writes about using the potential divorce between her and John to begin her column at *Life*, and the shock others leveled towards Didion because of that inclusion. (“Did He [John] know I was writing it?” Didion asks. “He edited it” [112].) Recalling how John later drove Didion so that she could file the draft, Didion relates these ordinary events and concludes by returning to the energy of the vortex: “see where that particular vortex sucked me” (112). She recaps her progression from signpost to signpost and fills in the image: “From the Dorothy Draper wallpaper border at Beth Israel North to Quintana at three and I should have listened to John” (112). Her last statement, *I should have listened to John* operates similarly in the text as does her final line in her opening page: *the question of self pity*. Since it’s unclear what Didion should have listened to John about (the text implies that it’s more than a stint at *Life* magazine), the inconclusive nature allows the memory to remain fixed to the present

by its uncertainty. This uncertainty is what enables Didion to write through confusion into coherence—through threading the disparate details into the same space, Didion allows the uncertain events to become referents of meaning that previously seemed nonexistent.

In the example of both the night at Morton's (wherein the details tessellate, one next to the other, to create a fuller even if fragmented image of a point in the past) and the chain of recollections beginning with the ice floes and ending with a memory of young Quintana (wherein an observation of a physical fact, such as the curtains, elicits a memory of a detail related to the previous detail that becomes a signpost to the past), Didion envisages a method of distillation that orders memory not through linear progressions but instead in a gathered web of instants, all centered by Didion holding the simultaneity of remembered instants together. While the elliptical quality of the movements Didion makes jumping from one disparate fact to the next may seem to intentionally elide explanation, her explication of the past feels elliptical only to the extent that it suggests memory's porousness and capacity to germinate other related strains of thought. Didion's personal identity is established by charting Didion's movement through different spaces of herself in relation to an other, even if the other is her past self. These spatialized memories all elicit questions from Didion regarding how she was and perhaps how she should be.

From the spatialization of memories, one can conclude that Didion seems to hold multiple occurring events in tandem like marbles in her palms, knocking together each (seemingly) unrelated detail to see what sounds they make in conjunction. An example of this can be found in the text when Didion relates her resistance to a hospitalized Quintana getting a tracheostomy. Didion resists the trach because its presence seems to indicate that Quintana will never recover, a conclusion that Didion reaches through examining a handful of semi-related details. "If she did not have a trach she could be fine in the morning, ready to eat, talk, go home" (125). The physical presence of the trach indicates a meaning—or has a specific physical corollary—that Didion is averse

to. We learn *why* she is averse to this meaning in the next sentence, as she pivots to examining the physical space that Quintana is in, noting the “printed blue cotton curtains,” and relates the confusion of voices the next bed over, as a group of men try to reconstruct the construction accident of the injured man in the next bed (125). “Everything’s going along as usual, and then all shit breaks loose,’ one said,” (126). *You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends*. The similarity of this statement to Didion’s first verbal motif forms a relationship between this smaller instance with the entire inquiry of the book. Yet, “the injured man made no response, or could he, since he had a trach” (126). Didion threads together a relationship between a *trach* and the disruption of the ordinary, implying the gravity of injury that the *trach* connotes is somehow connected to the end of *life as you know it*, which Didion resists. Didion considers how although the man on the other side of Quintana’s bed had seemed fine after having fallen off a ladder he then had issues breathing: “One more perfectly ordinary day[...] *Everything’s going along as usual and then all shit breaks loose*” (126). Here, Didion repeats the microcosm of her own phrase, using the words of the people afflicted in the beds next to Quintana to underscore her sentiment of life ending. The ordinariness of disaster is espoused again. And then: “They did the trach for Quintana on the first of April, a Thursday afternoon” (126). Didion’s resistance to the *trach* seems to be her resistance to what these facts in a web suggest—that the ordinariness of Quintana’s eventual death is another detail without explanation, another memory to subsume to a whole. Didion infers facts about Quintana’s state and the hopefulness of her recovery from the fringe experiences surrounding Quintana in that point of time. Her writing gathers these loose marbles into a handful, rattles them, and then lays them out carefully, trying to attune to the sound they all make in conjunction.

Part of the reason that Didion is able to maintain a hold on these fragments is that she remains embodied in past tenses by reflection in order to extract what meanings they may have for her in the future. Recalling the swimming pool behind her house in Brentwood Park, and her

“decision to float candles and gardenias in the pool” (130) one evening, Didion’s recollection leads to a memory of the house involving John and Quintana. Didion considers an evening that John was in New York for a few days and Quintana at school, when Didion sees that a “red flashing light had filled the kitchen” (131). Upon inspection, she discovers an ambulance across the street, “visible beyond the coral tree and two cords of stacked wood” (131). Didion watches until the red light is gone and in the morning, discovers that the man across the street had died, that “two cords of stacked wood had not kept the woman in the house across Marlboro Street from becoming a widow at dinner” (131). While this event seems to foreshadow John’s death, it also implies that despite their potentiality to cement events of the past via memory, the physical facts cannot actually stay the *instant*. The stacked wood, ordinary physical markers of instatements of order against the untamable force of nature, cannot stop the disruption of death. Didion’s inclusion of the stacked wood in this recollection not only suggests the entire scene of the event (therefore, creating an image), but additionally insinuates that she does not refer back to physical facts as salvific things, but merely signposts of points in time, placeholders for spaces that come into meaning as they are brought into relation with other referents.

These referents and Didion’s dedication to their inclusion in the narrative suggest that for Didion, there is a *right* and a *wrong* way to language the world, both in reading and writing. Extrapolating the occurrence of the “red flashing light” as an “urgent warning” that Didion and John should spend more time in New York, as John had hoped (131), Didion calls John on the phone, and in doing so, attempts to make meaning from the collision of physical facts surrounding her presence in the world. Because of her particular position as a spatial creature interacting with her surroundings and coming to conclusions through her reconciliation of seemingly unrelated items, Didion posits actions predicated on the interplay of disparate things. When Didion considers the moment that she made the call to John and queries what might have happened had

she not picked up the phone—Quintana may be well, John alive—she queries additionally her ability to *read* the tessellations she’s created and signposts she’s placed to guide her. “Had I not misread the meaning of the red flashing light in late 1987 would I be able to get in my car today and drive west on San Vicente and find John at the house in Brentwood Park?” (132). Suggesting that there was a *meaning* to the *red flashing light* to the extent that it pertained to the material chain of events (the man’s death, Didion’s fear, her phone call to John), Didion assumes that she has read it incorrectly, or received the information wrong. “Would I need to relive every mistake?” (132) Didion asks, insinuating that her interactions with the *red flashing light* led her to the wrong conclusion, which ultimately led her to John’s death and Quintana’s illness. Bearing the burden of her present based on her misreading of past events, Didion’s current attempt to get it right in writing seems to be a way of exhuming the past to redeem what has been lost.

If Didion considers the incorrect reading of these details to bear upon the facts of the present, the particular details become paramount for Didion when writing because they allow her to remain centered in the collision of conflicting inferences. Yet, her desire to relay the facts correctly also seems to veil her need for control of the narrative: “Did they think because it was a ‘story’ it could be told without consequence?” (106), Didion cries earlier in the text in response to a misleading fable given to family members of patients in the hospital. The consequences of Didion’s sense of obligation in a story’s retelling is evident in her relation of the red flashing light: the burden of getting the story wrong is looking back and lingering with your ghosts before their end, wondering if there was something you missed that you could have done to elicit a different outcome.

However, Didion is not attempting to return to the past so as to change it, but rather, survey the signposts to see where she went wrong so that she can amend her frame of action for the future. Thus, regarding memory, *rightness* becomes inextricable from her recovery of particular

and accurate details, wherein their accuracy is true to the extent that they are “felt” and embodied and indicate potential avenues for action. Didion’s writing is a process of gathering the tesserae of these details into signposts that provide for Didion a way forward, as well as reminders of herself. They both indicate future action and predicate current presence upon her various tenses of self in the past, thus suggesting the center that holds these details together is Didion, recalling memories by putting them in relation to each other.

The *instant* then often indicates placeholders in the past that are crucial, ordinary moments that must be read *right*. Examining an instance in *The Year of Magical Thinking* when Quintana is transported by helicopter for a surgery, one can see Didion wrestle with *right* as a connotative versus denotative quality of language and morality itself. At this point in the text, Quintana is well enough after her surgery to be transported to New York, yet the transfer is suddenly delayed. Didion, without much cause, argues that the transfer has to happen on Friday, and after the medical team agrees, Didion retreats and watches the helicopters circle on the roof. She muses on the helicopters’ trajectory, eliciting that they are prepared in advance for the “bad days ahead for the husband or wife or mother or father who had not yet (even as the helicopters landed and the trauma team rushed the stretcher into triage) gotten the call [of an accident]” (136). Standing somehow “between” time, Didion considers the slippage occurring between the moment of death and the moment of others’ awareness of it—it being the *instant* that the family may not be aware of even as the crucial moment has passed. Didion’s attempt to read it right and relay the facts is an attempt to remain present to these signposts that refer back to herself. As her memories are wont to do, this memory along with the sight of the helicopters and their task reminds Didion of a memory of John from 1970, an instance along with the red flashing light and the helicopters that signposts a space of warning.

Stopped at a light, Didion and John notice that “the driver of the next car suddenly slump[ed] over his steering wheel” (136). Paused at an intersection, the man literally breaks the space of the point in time: here, then gone. Didion recounts John’s obsession with this image: “There he was, he had kept saying later. He was alive and then he was dead and we were watching. We saw him at the instant it happened. We knew he was dead before his family did” (136). Didion breaks the paragraph and repeats her first phrase, *just an ordinary day*, before quoting John again: “And then—gone” (136). By recounting the suddenness of these events, she seems to reinforce the ordinariness of them, that they arrive without cause or often explanation and accrue value as they’re placed in relation with other instants. However, if this is the case, Didion’s sense of her failed responsibility, that she read the meaning of the *red flashing lights* wrong, suggests that she is unable yet to embody this truth for her present tense. Meaning is resonant in the *ordinary day*, yet Didion seems adamant in refusing the possibility that there was something she could have done to avert death (Axen 701). At this point in the narrative, Didion still seems to be writing through a belief in the past as fluid versus the past as a frame.

Didion pivots back to Quintana’s transfer and relates how after they got in the helicopter and flew over Lake Mead, one of the paramedics “had a digital camera and was taking pictures of what he kept referring to as the Grand Canyon” (137). Didion denies this assessment, “I said I believed it was Lake Mead, Hoover Dam. I pointed out Las Vegas” (137). Yet the paramedic either disagrees or ignores Didion while photographing the lake as he calls it by the name Didion deems wrong. The inaccuracy frustrates Didion, yet she moves from her irritation to relate a question directed towards her from John: “*Why do you always have to be right*, I remembered John saying [...] He never understood that in my own mind, I was never right” (138). Didion’s deep desire for this extensive correctness further suggests her belief in meaning that emerges when fragmented pieces are placed in their proper relation.



When the helicopter pauses in Kansas to refuel, Didion and Quintana share a hamburger on the airstrip. Later that evening, Didion mentions to Quintana's husband that they had "shared a Big Mac in a cornfield in Kansas" (140). Quintana immediately disagrees: "It was a Quarter Pounder" (140). Didion does not follow Quintana's objection with any explanation, modifying statement, or resolution, but merely lets it stand, a marker of her own "mistake." We can either read this as Didion listening to John (allowing the possibility she may have gotten it wrong, even when it is merely a detail), or Didion relating the story merely to suggest that there is some resonance even in this misremembered anecdote, when considered with the other details.

Didion's dedication to these details focalizes an instant when Didion reads through the final proof of one of John's novels, *Nothing Lost*, and notices a potential error, albeit one she is unsure of how to fix. "I never actually learned the rules of grammar, relying only on what sounded right, but there was something here that I was not sure sounded right" (141). It is telling that Didion relies on the *sound* to determine what is right, since what Didion deems as *right* in her language and life does not often involve clear rules or answers, but merely arises from the clatter of memories clamoring in relation. Thus, Didion's difficulty in this particular instance in changing the error summarizes her difficulty in getting the facts correct. Her inability to decide leads her to the maudlin conclusion that "any choice made could carry the potential for abandonment, even betrayal" (141). While one might initially categorize this claim as gratuitous, it only seems so if not considered outside of this current interrogation of Didion as indebted to the details because they are the referents that last when the physical markers are gone. Didion's desire to get it *right* is both evidence of her loyalty to language and other people, as it encounters her sense of responsibility to tell the story while understanding that any telling has a consequence. Didion returns to John's question in the text:

"Why do you always have to be right."

*Why do you always have to have the last word.*

*For once in your life just let it go.” (141)*

She leaves his queries as statements, indicating that these are not questions about Didion but facts. Just as Didion refused summation from Quintana’s statement, Didion leaves John’s words hanging, the last piece in the text, visible signposts of the last word and potential effects of Didion beginning to—through her writing—gather the disparate even as she moves through the vortex.

### **Signs and Wonders**

As explored above, an additional helpful way to understand Didion’s prose is to interrogate the way she juxtaposes a physical fact with a noticed detail to infer a relationship. A few nights before John’s death, John had Didion look at a list of characters who died in his recent novel. When Didion later picks up the legal pad months after John’s death to leave a note, she discovers the list and the notes the pencil it was written in is very faint. “Why was the pencil so faint, I wondered. / Why would he use a pencil that barely left a mark. / *When did he begin seeing himself as dead?*” (147). Already bringing related spatial facts into coherence (John’s looming death, a list of dead characters, a pencil so light it barely leaves a trace of the person writing), Didion employs the details to go back and question the moment as indicative of a later moment. In a sense, Didion reorganizes her present by remembering the past through lost physical details, thereby re-centering her position in both spaces of time through their relationship.

Leaving behind the question momentarily, Didion turns to an interaction she had with a different doctor in the further back past about the divide between life and death. At an ICU prior to the events of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, while watching Quintana’s cousin Dominique (“Dominique had been the four-year old at John’s and my wedding” [148]) breathe on life support,

Didion disagrees with the doctor's statement that life is "not black and white" (148). She refers back to physical facts which bolster her refusal, stating that as long as Dominique is in the ICU, she's alive, and as soon as the life support is turned off, she will be dead in a few minutes (148). Black and white, death indicates the physical body's non-presence, yet while Didion resists this fact coming from the doctor, she seems to infer multiple signs preceding death (or tragedy) through her account of John's list. After relating her disagreement, Didion returns to John's pad of paper: "There were no faint traces about dead, no pencil marks" (148). No faint traces to indicate the instant, no prior markers of the past about to be severed by the present. "Any faint traces, any pencil marks were left " a night or two before he died," or "a week or two [...] decisively *before he died*" (148). Didion details the moment of severance, the sharp divide (149) between life and death that separates her past and present, the instant in which John's death is made a fixed fact. "I did not believe in the resurrection of the body but I still believed that given the right circumstances he would come back" (150). The right circumstances seem to indicate the events in relation as their own answer: "He would leave the faint traces before he died, The Number Three pencil" (150). At this point in the text, Didion still seems to be playing with memory and the process of writing it as indicating potential return, an act of what Axen cites as Didion's "allowances of 'magic' [that] let Didion compartmentalize the pain she feels, dealing with one aspect at a time, dissolving each with an invented remedy" (700). Axen considers that Didion's repetitions are "magic charms" that Didion uses to resolve the overwhelming notion that "there was something she could have done to save John" (701). She embodies the use of magical thinking, as Bladdek writes, "[as a] suspension [of] the painful awareness of loss's irreversibility [...]. The same beliefs structure Didion's magical thinking, her desperate conviction that her actions may undo John's death and bring him back" (946). Yet, it seems that Didion's pursuit of the past is partially due to her desire to make certain

she has not been remiss in her loyalties—that her actions may be “undone” is besides the point, it is the writing that will make them *right* in the moment of an impossible ending.

### “I Tell You That I Shall Not Live Two Days”

*I now know how I'm going to die*, he had since in 1987 after the left anterior descending artery had been opened by angioplasty.

*You no more know how you're going to die than I do or anyone else does*, I had said in 1987.

*We call it the widowmaker, pal*, his cardiologist in New York had said about the left anterior descending artery. (203)

While so far, we've undergone an interrogation of the physical details within Didion's text, we have yet to fully discuss her use of repetition. Didion's repetitions strengthen the ties of memory, thereby tethering her past to her present while also creating text that “sounds” differently based on which iteration of a phrase she's landed on. Didion's use and repetition of the character of Gawain's statement from *Chanson de Roland* that “I tell you that I shall not live two days” (Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* 26) becomes a motif within the text that bridges the gaps of irreconcilable events. The first instance of this phrase in the text occurs after Didion relates the events of the summer spent visiting Morton's immediately after she states that “[John] mentioned those afternoons with the pool and the garden and *Tenko* several times during the year before he died” (25). Based on the movement from memory to John's reiteration of it, we are able to conclude that for Didion, the two events are linked or at least held in tandem; somehow, John's references indicate his own awareness of his death. Following the quotation, *I tell you that I shall not*

*live two days*, Didion also reiterates her opening line: *You sit down to dinner*. From the interplay of these elements, we are given the sense of a relationship formed between the *instant*, the memory, and John's death that will only accrue meaning as it moves throughout the text.

The next instance of Gawain's statement occurs after Didion first notices the vortex effect, examined in section III. After she states, "I should have listened to John," Didion follows this admission by repeating Gawain's phrase again: "*I tell you that I shall not live two days*, Gawain said" (112). We're asked to hold the two events in tandem: John's death, Didion's decision to listen and/or not to listen to John, which indicates in this point of the text that Didion is writing through her fear of having read the facts wrong, and that in some crucial way, the events that occurred could have been prevented. What begins to cohere is Didion's concern that she has not fulfilled her responsibility to John, and that in remembering, she is able to go back and see where memory led her to the wrong turn off.

Following the incident with the number-three pencil, referenced in the prior section, Didion returns to the motif of Gawain, but not before discussing the increasing symbolization survivors of a disaster impose upon the world. "Survivors look back and see omens, messages they missed" (153). Didion references "symbols" (152): un-emptied inboxes, things out of order, and suggests that this draw towards symbols is flawed, a faulty attempt at creating chains of occurrences where there is no actual progression. Rather than meaning made through a web of instants, meaning is imposed through a linear sequence, and Didion resists the latter because it seems false. Yet, Didion confides that at the point in time in which she writes *The Year of Magical Thinking*, John's voice is still the one on their shared answering machine, and that for her to record a new message would leave her with a "sense of betrayal" (153), as if erasing his voice, a reminder of his physical presence, is akin to erasing the details of John. That Didion keeps John's message indicates her belief in keeping the past alive through as many physical reminders as possible.

Didion moves the pages of John's dictionary and then fears that she can never return to the page he had last opened, that perhaps she had "lost the message" (153). Here the motif appears again: "*I tell you that I shall not live two days, Gawain said*" (153). The sadness concomitant in this reference manifests through the sudden loss felt at losing a final vestige of John by turning his dictionary pages. Didion's physicality no longer encounters John's and reminders of his presence are slowly dissipating—thus, what remains Didion is greedy for, and she squirrels away physical reminders to maintain every detail. Didion, attempting to remain tethered to the tense of herself with John, recreates the language of their world together, every painstaking word, and still fears she will get it wrong.

Yet, the haunted or emptied nature of the physical facts is resonant in the reminders Didion returns to. She keeps the Wickerdale set of dishes—"cream with a garland of small roses and blue flowers and ecru leaves" (163)—from John's mother, and begins using the set again in the year following John's death. "John's mother was dead. John was dead. And I still had, of the 'Wickerdale Spode,' four dinner plates, five salad plates, three butter plates, a single coffee cup, and nine saucers" (163). Her hold on the actual physical details mirrors her hold on the physical facts she remembers and brings out for use, preparing a memory in absence of the material space.

The next instance of the motif occurs in the text after a section wherein Didion reconciles her disbelief in the accident of John's death with the timeline given by his heart condition. "Only after I had read the autopsy report did I begin to believe what I had been repeatedly told: nothing he or I had done or not done had either caused or could have prevented his death. He had inherited a bad heart. It would eventually kill him" (206). Didion, previously assuming the responsibility of John's death as a lack of foresight on her part, finally recognizes that nothing could stay the improbability of his bad heart. Nothing could stay the ordinary nature of the *instant* of John's passing. The past itself could only exist as a reminder of what had happened, what might

happen, and who Didion was through all of it. No more could Didion be “increasingly fixed on locating the anomaly that could have allowed [John’s death] to happen” (204). No more could the events of the past be recreated to imply a different future. It is in *The Year of Magical Thinking* that Didion touches the potentially absurd after the disruption of an instant and emerges armed with details opposing the insinuation that the lost details are without meaning, returning to tenses of herself that she exhumes though the points in time that have passed.

## PART TWO

### Criticism and Gender

Although Joan Didion received the National Book Award for Nonfiction for her memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in 2005, her writing career began in 1956 after she won an essay contest out of school and landed a job at *Vogue* magazine. She published her first novel, *Run, River*, in 1963, and since then, has written over twenty-five significant works and collections, including nonfiction essay collections such as *The White Album* and *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, fiction (*A Book of Common Prayer* and *The Last Thing He Wanted*, notably), as well as reportage and journalist work (*Salvador*, *Miami*). Didion is a beneficiary of literary awards such as the St. Louis Literary Award and is the recipient of an honorary Doctor of Letters degree by both Harvard University and Yale University. As the subject of a recent documentary, *The Center Will Not Hold*, and the author of a book of notes, *South and West*, released in 2016, Joan Didion remains in the middle of culture and its confessions and contentions because of her profound and incisive use of language.

Interested in the physical facts of life (“Why I Write” 1976), Didion focuses on what she terms “images that shimmer around the edges,” that is, images that emerge without direct corollaries or without seeming conclusion, that one must watch carefully to locate “the grammar in the picture” (“Why I Write”). Her writing abounds in these images: red dresses, table settings, airport lobbies, descriptions of the river. Her writing resists explanation. In fact, her writing often delights in refusing summation at all. Because of the seeming nascent nature of her claims, critics often wrestle with the necessity of these images, finding that the line between necessary and arbitrary detail is either blurred or nonexistent.



In “The Poetics of Joan Didion’s Journalism,” Muggli argues that Didion’s “repetitive rhythmical cadences and repetitions of words” evoke “an extreme form of metaphor [...] we might call ‘emblem’” (407-408). Others, such as Bruce Bawer in “Didion’s Dreamwork,” decry the “incessant repetition and parallel structure” as no more than “neurotic tic[s]” (88). While Muggli contends that Didion’s details, such as the juxtaposition of two unfamiliar images, “carries rhetorical weight as documentation precisely because [they do] not illustrate any of the story’s arguments” (404), Bawer draws the opposite conclusion and insists that the particularity of these physical details are without a point and merely an example of Didion “pouring out the fact, in a tone heavy with implied significance, that in the end don’t really mean anything” (Bawer 94). Bawer’s frustration with Didion primarily seems to stem from her reportage work in Salvador, which Bawer claims exemplifies Didion’s predilection towards self-aggrandizement as the center of a conflict not about her, demonstrating her “utter moral vacuity” (101) and “insularity” (102). While Bawer claims that *The Year of Magical Thinking* works because it is about her “real subject” (102) that is, herself, he is less charitable regarding her method in any work not overtly termed as personal.

While the scope of this project doesn’t allow for an intense overview of Didion’s reportage, a brief examination of “Slouching Toward Bethlehem” may illuminate one of the moves that Didion makes in both her personal nonfiction and public essays that critics such as Bawer dislike. Dealing with the “social hemorrhaging” (Didion, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” 67)<sup>1</sup> in San Francisco during 1967, the essay consists of Didion’s encounters with a group of young adults over a summer. She spends a few months with people who live on Haight Street and employs her personal experience with these individuals to present a conclusion through the accrual of initially

---

<sup>1</sup> This and all further citations of the essays in the project are from *We Tell Ourselves Stories In Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction*.

insignificant details, rather than leaving a moral imperative. In the close of the essay, Didion confronts disarray that she reports but does not remark on: a child, Michael, has started a fire and burned his arms, and while his mother yells at him, the other adults present are unaware of the small disaster because they are attempting to secure “some very good Moroccan hash which had dropped down through a floorboard damaged in the fire” (97). A horrific conclusion, that is not in any traditional sense, a conclusion, to an essay that centers around mundane interactions—from eating burgers on a hill to watching the young adults take acid—the impact of the conclusion is sustained by these preliminary physical details carried throughout the essay. It is perhaps Didion’s decision to not include an overt moral statement that Bawer dislikes, or that allows some critics to conclude she is vacuous. Yet it seems that rather than indicating a moral indifference, Didion’s resistance to moralizing could indicate the danger of “morality and truth” when they are not “seen as contextual and relative” (Harred 6), or grounded in the specifics of an individual’s particular spatial experience.

It’s potentially helpful to consider what extent *gender* plays in criticism of Didion’s writing, especially criticism that seems to misunderstand her work so profoundly. Many contentions arising through my study centered around the personal featured in Didion’s writing. Yet it is possible that these critical concerns only arise because Didion is a woman writing about herself—that the selfhood of women is such unknown territory for (largely male) critics that it ceases to even exist in their eyes. (In an interesting piece dealing with teenagers and Didion, we see the effects of this bias or prejudice: commenting on an experience of difficulty students underwent in a classroom while reading Didion, Louise A. DeSalvo and Marian Price conclude that the students’ intractability stemmed from “the difficulty that young women and men have in coming to terms with the selfhood of any woman” (DeSalvo & Price, 183)). One typically egregious example of this critical stance is Martin Amis’ conclusion that Didion “tries to find a female way of being serious” with

the implication that she failed at doing so because her writing has a “thinness” to it (167). Yet, these types of questions are entirely beside the point and border on offensive.

My inquiry here stems not from Didion’s gender, but Didion’s method. For this project, my interest lay with the particular syntax Didion created for herself, a grammar wherein she is always centered through relating past events and relationship via physical facts, which is, I argue, the correct way to approach her distinctive prose, outside of reductive and incorrect gender binaries and gender fallacies. Avoiding the perpetual reduction possible in considering what elements and events relate to female/male sensibilities, I find very helpful Alenka Zupančič’s writing on the implicit dichotomy referenced in discussions of gender/sex (2012) and concur with her reiteration (in the vein of Judith Butler) that gender as performativity creates and natures itself through time (2012). Beginning with this sensibility of gender for the framework of this inquiry allows for the room to discard limitations imposed by equating gender preternaturally with aesthetic and linguistic choices, and instead, opens the door to question Didion’s particular approach as a method enacted by herself alone. As I will argue later, Didion’s use of embodiment in her reiteration of memories instead creates a specific pattern of spatial extension that I consider to be a “female tense”—I use this language within the framework created by Zupančič and Butler, that this tense is female because it is enacted by a woman through a period of time (i.e., the history of Didion writing). I consider this a crucial contribution to a new critical vocabulary with which to interrogate Didion’s work.

The most profuse criticism leveled at Didion and her work revolves around her particularity, and so her particularity is where I also turn. From the vantage point that specific details consist of crucial inclusions in Didion’s narration, the question I began to ask became not *what* do these details mean, but *why* these details. In short: *what* is Didion doing and *how* is she doing it.

In particular, Didion's precise recreation of points in time creates texts laminated with levels of particularity. The difficulty comes when her drive towards recreating the past with such exactitude can be alarming to readers because it does not immediately answer the question *why*. Thus, a physical detail considered in isolation seems to indicate an indulgent solipsism on Didion's part, to a reader who has no way yet to anchor this detail in a wider narrative context. And yet the pattern that soon emerges finds this seemingly irrelevant memory actually mooring Didion herself to a place in time. It is a form of narrative incarnation that only emerges slowly over the course of reading her work.

In a decidedly scathing essay by Barbara Grizzuti Harrison entitled "John Didion: Only Disconnect," wherein Harrison dismisses Didion's style as a "bag of tricks" (115), Harrison takes offense at the fact that Didion's "lavender love seats match exactly the potted orchids on her mantel" (115). This fact offends Harrison not only by its existence, but its iteration. That Didion would take the time to report on these lavender love seats—to therefore, indicate them as a crucial memory—Harrison finds distasteful. At the heart of her criticism, in reality, is the focalization of Didion as the subject, regardless of whatever else Didion professes to write about. Harrison dislikes that she cannot trust Didion for the facts—yet, the facts are what Didion relays, only to the extent that they are personally verifiable by Didion herself. The facts *are* the particular details, the repetitions that Didion employs to anchor a specific memory in time. Thus, the detail of the potted orchids is merely representative of taking a tack and pinning it to a board, the written equivalent of saying, *hold that thought*. Importantly, these details (or facts) are always physical and linked to the material world: the china in her cabinet, a book on a coffee table opened to a saved page, the discarded leis on the hotel floor from Didion's daughter. What Harrison seems additionally to dislike is that Didion makes none of the usual self-writing moves that shift readerly

attention directly to the narrating self, the “I” that leads the way. Instead Didion substitutes the physical as affective placeholder and reveals herself through the details she recalls.

The desire for physicality is a desire Didion readily admits of as evidential of her sensibility in her essay “Why I Write.” Citing her intractable draw to “the specific, to the tangible, to [...] the peripheral” (“Why I Write” 1976), Didion relates an incident at Berkeley University wherein she tried to concentrate on theory but instead became curious “if the lights were on in the bevatron up the hill” (1976), a curiosity she argues did not derive from an interest in the lights as symbol or metaphor. Rather: “I was only wondering if the lights were on in the bevatron, and how they looked. A physical fact” (1976). The facts interest Didion because the facts are what remain after the context producing the symbolization has passed—the physical facts, in essence, render Didion’s own body within the tense of the past. When Didion extrapolates an image from a memory and affixes the felt and embodied memory with her relation of the events, she recalls the place in time back to the present and re-aligns her self with that passed point in time. As Felicity Callard and Constantina Papoulias write in “Affect and Embodiment” on Antonio Damasio’s account of representation, “mental images are not images of an event or object but images of our interactions with that object. Memory is therefore inherently relational and affective” (Callard & Papoulias 257-258). These critical claims seem especially important for Didion’s work, as well. Didion’s remembered physical facts reiterated as images are attempts at strengthening her own bond with the moment of the memory’s point in time. Her draw to the physical fact is an example of Damasio’s “mental images as *dispositions*” (257), wherein the images she carries through time depict different dispositions, or tenses of her self.

We could argue that Didion’s need for precision in recreating these physical facts is, as Axen writes, a method of preservation “in case there was some way that imitating the moments before death could ultimately turn the clock back to that day” (699). Crucial to Didion’s sensibility

and methodology is her conception of time and intimacy with points in time that have passed, and importantly, the particular images she's attentive to seem to arise from notions of *home*. *Home*, for Didion seems to be a referent for the non-spatial place in which she is centered, which comes from her ability to hold a myriad of disparate events in resonance in a single instant. Examining an earlier essay by Didion on her home, we can observe the effects of these facts transformed into a specific grammar of self.

### **A Shared Grammar**

In an essay written in 1967 entitled "On Going Home," Didion discusses the discrepancies between her conception of her current home and her family's home, discrepancies arising out of the difference in place (her home with her husband, her home where her family lives). Iterating confusion arising from the altered language that she speaks with her husband John versus the language she speaks with her family, Didion states that "when we [Didion and her brother] talk about sale-leasabacks and right-away condemnations we are talking in a code about the things we like best" ("Going Home" 125). The specific referenced detail (in this case, shared phrases) functions as a code, a link in a memory chain, and is an important tool in Didion's rhetoric. The things that Didion and her brother like best are markers of the place they are from, the "yellow fields and the cottonwoods and the rivers rising and falling and the mountains closing when the heavy snow comes in" (125). These details that Didion references begin with description of physical facts and close with action, implicating a specific point in time that encounters a shared experience, Didion and her brother's witness of the time of "rivers rising and falling" (125).

In the sense of a particular point in time, such as of the mountain passes' closing, Didion uses the insinuation of the point in time of witness to tether her back to both a place and time

now nonexistent. Ultimately, this link leads Didion back to who she was, which seems to be a way of reminding her *who she is* (and perhaps, what she thinks). Accomplished through particularity—code of language as referents for shared experiences—this link is sustained by the intimacy between Didion and her brother. Thus, *sale-leasabacks* become referents for a shared grammar sustained through time by Didion’s writing and another form of affective placeholder, as well.

Similar to the vortex effect referenced in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, it appears to be precisely what sustains Didion that also immobilizes her. While at home, she writes of paralysis by “the neurotic lassitude engendered by meeting one’s past at every turn” (“Slouching Towards Bethlehem” 126). The physical details of Didion’s life derail her, not because of their fact, but their lack of initial apparent cohesion. Didion lays the detritus of a drawer upon her bed and in doing so, lays down the detritus of her life: swimsuits, rejection letters, teacups—all saved physical facts without “final solution” or “any answer” (126). Yet, Didion holds them. As the items rest without cohesion, placed carefully by Didion, they act as a microcosm of the work that Didion is doing in all her writing: gathering up the facts of the past, laying them out, seeing what the tesserae of details form in relation. Always with Didion exists a pull back to her own history as a form of answer, which eventually manifests as a way of control. The same tenses of self, as reference points for how one should act, become markers of an inevitable grammar of selfhood.

Didion’s interest in these fragments leads her to itemize them in loving and meticulous detail to the fullest extent. Their communication is important not only for Didion herself but for what Didion will pass along once she is gone. In the same essay, Didion writes of visiting her great-aunts with her daughter (referred to in this essay only as *baby*), and aestheticizes nothing from the encounter except this final image: “the baby plays with the dust motes in a shaft of afternoon sun” (127). The image or fact that remains is a single witnessed instant that is meaningful because it is remembered and stored against an eventual disruption of the image.

When Didion ends the brief essay in the present—“It is time for the baby’s birthday party” (127)—she begins by listing out physical details, almost as an enactment of points in time capable of being saved and passed on because they are sustained as affect placeholders through witness and language. At the party more details arise: “a white cake, strawberry-marshmallow ice cream” (127). The elements of the party are included not because they are pertinent to a reader’s sense of the party, but because they are elements she engaged with and retains a mental disposition towards. They are included because they function similarly to thumbtacks in a mapped self, more affective placeholders. Remembering and recreating the specifics is necessary for the facts to be sustained in time as loops drawing Didion back to herself.

In Didion’s return, she impresses the sense of home that she would like to impart to Quintana. Similar to *sale-leasabacks*, the physical details are comprised of both events and facts. Didion writes that she wants to give Quintana “a sense of her cousins and of rivers and of her grand-grandmother’s teacups, would like to pledge her a picnic on a river with fried chicken and her hair uncombed, would like to give her *home* for her birthday, but we live differently now and I can promise her nothing like that” (127). Here again we have the shared experiences that become the instances Didion wants to pass on, instances united by the ways the details they reference run into each other. *Home* becomes a tense of self from when Didion’s spatial and physical home consisted of river picnics, her own hair uncombed, her great-grandmother’s teacups in her own hands. Just as *right of way condemnations* entail more than traffic violations, so does *a picnic on the river with fried chicken* imply more than any benign picnic; the general articulated through a particular memory (established through physical facts) communicates the reference points comprising Didion’s sense of self, her own tense, the female tense.

I contend that this practice is both protective and preventative. Floyd Skloot writes that “Didion’s work seems centered around this vast, deeply felt sense of loss [...] It is as if she had



been preparing all along, as a person and as a writer, for the events she would face between December 2003 and August 2005” (255). Perhaps in gathering the ruins of the past towards her, Didion attempts a stay of safeguarding against uncertainty and loss in the future. Yet Skloot argues Didion’s typical tactic as a “memoirist [relying on] the irony, repetitions of phrasing, and technical gambits that always sustained and distanced her” (256) is a tactic that becomes mannered and stale, evidence of style as a crutch. He doesn’t understand her unique rendering of the female tense here. Rather than these details repeated in conjunction confirming the past, Skloot finds Didion’s attempts mere form without content. Qualifying her method of repetition as an indulgent practice diminishes the meaning behind these practices, that of processes necessitating attention to the temporality of an instant. Because of the time required for the facts to remain tethered, the images that arise for Didion are images that do not ever explain or provide “answers.” To suggest that their inclusion without explanation disqualifies them in the narrative is to suggest that anything in a text not moored to certainty or emerging as an original thought is somehow wrong or irrelevant, a crucial misreading of Didion. Didion’s ability to rest with the incoherence or uncertainty of memory enables her to make meaning from what others might deem as mere markers of an absurd world emptied of meaning.

As an alternative to Skloot, Muggli states that for Didion, the “un-interpreted Image is a timeless moment of despair—it is an inexplicable part of an inexplicable world, evoking a chaos indecipherable” (410), because it is an image of a moment *not* considered in time. The *timelessness* in this sense refers to its continuation: without the framework of past and present within which to make the image, it exists unmoored in a vortex of images, without reference or final point. Thus, the un-interpreted image is an image of the absurd, because it is an image posited as meaningful without placement beyond its *present* instant. The act of interpretation (or, Didion’s placement of the instant within the text), is the image’s transformation from metaphor into what Muggli terms

emblem (407), what he calls the process of equating the image as an object capable of suggesting a larger symbolic meaning (410). However, I contest Muggli's assessment that there is any one larger and/or symbolic meaning here. Rather, I argue that the meaning is itself as Didion writes, "resonant in the words" (1976). The meaning is the language and the way the language is used to cohere the disparate, inconclusive fact to a particular point in time. The literal sounds and letters themselves bring into embodiment the structure of ephemeral things. Meaning's construction through image is Didion's form of grammar.

Yet, while discussing the physicality of the details Didion includes, an analysis would be remiss without accounting for the supposed slippage in Didion's own factual representation of the past. In her essay "On Keeping a Notebook," Didion discusses part of the value in writing, at least to the extent of one's personal narrative, is that one's memory may contradict reality while still confirming the "truth" of the past. Rather than a literal representation, the remembered details need only be relationally true, details that tether moment in memory. "For now only have I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters" (103). The faithfulness is not to literal "fact" but to remembered truth. This remembered truth manifest through the physical, particular spatial points in time.

Bladek discusses the necessity of spatiality for remembrance and argues that "places store and evoke memories" (938), and that we remember specific times through our spatial positioning in those moments (939). What Didion does is gather the dissimilar remembered facts (whether they are "true" or "false" to the extent of their accuracy is besides the point) and spatializes them as signposts in a final frame she draws her own image from. The truth of the matter is the verification quality for Didion herself: "*How it felt to me: that is getting closer to the truth about a notebook*" (103). The process of writing is the pathway that provides a return to herself. On Didion's works,

William Howarth writes that “writing becomes not futile but heroic, shaping significance out of life’s inchoate experience” (641). Didion’s process of “assembling [...] a collage” of moments (642) is a process using the patterns of language from past to present and into the future.

So the point of my keeping a notebook has never been, nor is it now, to have an accurate factual record of what I have been doing or thinking. That would be a different impulse entirely, an instinct for reality which I sometimes envy but do not possess [...] In fact, I have abandoned altogether that kind of pointless entry; instead I tell what some would call lies. (Didion 102, 103)

On Didion’s decision to relay the nonfactual fact, Muggli argues that her use of detail, often the ahistorical detail (404), results in a rhetorical style accounting for both what happened and what *may* have happened, evidence of Didion’s *poetics* (the interplay of metaphor, image, and fact) (406). The description of the reported physical fact that is itself non-factual seems to posit the “truth” of the fact” in the category of a relational truth, wherein the veracity of any statement is established by its surroundings instead of its singular existence.

For example, Didion’s use of “fictional data” to describe real events is a technique Muggli argues enables Didion’s writing to account for “different degrees of metaphoric power” (407), enacted through the “repetitive rhythmical cadences and repetitions of words” (408). Didion’s elliptical writing style therefore mirrors her patterns of reconciling the seemingly unrelated event into relation through discovering the nonlinear but deeply spatial manners these images are connected through. The “cracked crab” (Didion, “On Keeping a Notebook” 103) that Didion affixes to her memory of lunch with her father is fictitious, yet the fact of the crab’s existence in memory is enough to lead Didion back to the “afternoon all over again” (103). The “*Dirty-crepe-de-Chine wrapper, hotel bar, Wilmington RR, 9:45 a.m. August Monday morning*” (101) note left in Didion’s notebook acts as a referent for the memory of the woman, of that morning.

Communicated through the physical facts (the dress, the bar, the place, the time), Didion moves from recollection to recollection, remembering a conversation that is fictitious or true between the woman wearing the dress and the bartender that later unravels to encompass the entirety of the memory. Why did Didion write it down? Is mere remembrance value enough? Didion terms herself as one of the “keepers of private notebooks” (102) from the age of a child, “afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss” (102). If we consider loss the impetus to write items down, even nonrelated and unexplainable items, then the details in Didion’s writing offer profound stays against dissolutions, dedicated attempts at forming a center. “Throughout her narrative, Didion employs spatial imagery to convey the sense of loss and grief by describing her returns to familiar locations or visits to unfamiliar ones” (Bladek 940). These returns help embody Didion in the particularities of all her previous tenses of self.

Therefore it is important to see that the particular details that Didion offers within any narrative piece contain a deeply historical sense of her own witness, and are given meaning in a timeline that extends concentrically instead of linearly. This meaning is not suggestive of anything but the image’s relation to other images in space, meaning made through the process of arranging the details instead of meaning posited preternaturally (the dirty crepe-de-Chine wrapper contains value solely because of the ways it interacts with other details). Importantly, this meaning also indicates Didion’s deep sense of morality.

In her 1965 essay, “On Morality,” Didion writes that her mind “veers inflexibly toward the particular” (“On Morality” 120), which she explicates as her preoccupation with a “primitive” morality akin to a “code of survival” (121). Morality for Didion seems to be a matter of loyalty, as well, that we maintain our responsibilities towards those we are in relation with. She also connects this moral sense with the incarnate physical details that anchor them in reality. For example, in the opening of this essay, Didion relates a nurse’s account of how a stranger sits with a dead boy on

the highway through the night until the medics arrive, because it is “immoral” to leave a body on the highway (120). From the nurse’s statement of immorality, Didion veers from the abstract to the particular: “It was one instance in which I did not distrust the word, because she meant something quite specific. She meant that if a body is left alone for even a few minutes on the desert, the coyotes close in and eat the flesh” (120). The immorality of the action is such because it directly deals with the material world; it is immoral to leave a body because the body will be eaten, the mark of the dead will be gone. Rather than Didion agreeing with an ambiguous sense that it is immoral because of some abstract duty she feels, Didion agrees with the nurse precisely because her sensibility is also rooted in the physical fact of this dead boy, not the meaning. If a body is left alone, the body will be eaten. The last mark of the departed will be desecrated—and this could be avoided. Therefore, it is immoral to leave the body, moral to stay with it, but moral only to the extent that there is a visible physical corollary to the action.

Her relation with this agreed-upon morality seems similar to Didion’s relation to writing itself: because in *remembering*, Didion is able to recall physical corollaries of action to herself through the very physical act of writing. The exhumed tenses of self coalesce in such a way as to remind Didion to whom her particular loyalties are to, and as such, the necessity of reading the past right endows the future with a frame through which to move towards. “Whether or not a corpse is torn apart by coyotes may seem only a sentimental consideration, but of course it is more: 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” (120). Here, Didion shifts from the particular into a larger thematic concern by equating the physical instantiation of staying on the highway with the implication it has beyond that specific instant. Moving from the physical fact, Didion can then imply the question *what does it mean to abandon our dead to the coyotes?* it is only from the movement of triangulation out from the smallest reference points to the larger concerns that we seem able to

encounter questions of how we ought to be, reference points accrued through personal relation with the facts. These physical facts add up to a larger frame for what we are to do, which Didion creates through writing on her dead and living. It is this aspect of loyalty that compels Didion to write. “If we have been taught to keep our promises—if in the simplest terms, our upbringing is good enough—we stay with the body, or have bad dreams” (120). Keeping one’s promises becomes less about any imposed moral imperative—such as, it is a *good* thing to keep one’s promises (without further explanation)—and instead relies entirely on the sustained relationship that demands reciprocity.

From Didion’s conception of morality as a code, how do we extrapolate the same method of morality to Didion’s writing? The specific example of the nurse’s condemnation of an immoral actions seems to be one reference point, but it seems maudlin, if not fully obtuse, to attribute every detail within Didion’s writing as evidence of a moral imperative. From the nurse’s example though, we can consider that every detail that encounters a physical place or Didion’s relationship with a person to be another step in a path leading Didion back to herself, a center formed from signposts, which is how she knows how to act. The continued action of writing is crucial for this path’s creation, and the remembrance integral to Didion to exhume the past through the incarnation of memory. As we see in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, part of this resurrection is also an attempt to see where the signposts went wrong. As Didion reflects on John’s death and recreates the settings of her life with him alongside the instances of his death, she queries herself: “How could we fix it if I could not remember how it started?” (*The Year of Magical Thinking* 31). In doing so, Didion also seems to ask how return is possible without the method of remembrance. It is her methodology that comes from particular physicality allowing Didion the space to ask these questions and make room for the answers in her writing.

Finally, the potential resurrection possible through returning via details to places in time emerges from the physicality of Didion's use of details, physicality stemming from Didion's primary particularity of embodiment. Professor and religious ethicist Shannon L. Jung argues for particularity as an aspect of women's embodiment that leads to an understanding and awareness of "the physicality of ourselves and our environment [which] suggests that we are connected, natural beings" (61). This embodiment considers places, people, and other points in time as crucial components to a formation of self (61), and is an aspect of spatiality (created within the physical space a body inhabits through time). Describing spatiality as "the living extensionality which human beings are," Jung stresses that the materiality crucial for spatiality consists of the image of the self in actual relation with the material world (56). This living extensionality enables the "apodictically relational" element of human life that manifests "symbols [arising] out of the relational dynamics engendered by embodiment and sociality, e.g., home" (56), which "shape and reshape our places" (58). A living extensionality suggests a person both extending into past and future by way of sustained relationships to these points in time, which in Didion's case, seem to be formed by particular, physical details.

Applying this frame to Didion, we can consider that Didion's attention to the particulars of an instant is additionally crucial to Didion because the *loss* of these recollections would not only consist in a loss of the places in time, but a loss of self. Nancy K. Miller discusses the "web of entanglement in which we find ourselves" (544), consisting of relational ties which inherently suggest an embodied relation with something beyond one's own self. "Didion's memoir exemplifies the notion, argued persuasively by feminist theorists, that the female autobiographical self comes into writing, goes public with private feelings, through a significant relation to an other" (544). In Didion's case, the *other* is comprised of her relation to an *other* composed of her previous selves particularized in relation with those she loves and the places they inhabited together.

Lastly, while it seems that Didion brushes against meaninglessness (*The Year of Magical Thinking* 189), she resists it as the final answer. Her year of grief is a year of asking and re-asking questions that implicate her own body (it is Didion remembering and representing the facts of the past known through her own dispositions) and concluding without certain answers. Yet the lack of concrete answers should not be represented as the absence of them. Near the end of the *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion states that she finds meaning in the “constant changing of the earth,” comforted by the fact that “no eye was on the sparrow. No one was watching me” (190). Trusting the physical movements that disrupt the world, plates shifting and hurricanes happening, Didion then seems consoled by being unobserved in this strange world of ordinary disasters. If no one is watching her, then it lends credence to the ordinariness of John’s death—the reconstruction she’s created to retrace her steps gains meaning as it pertains to Didion encountering her past selves in time. *For once in your life just let it go*. Axen writes that Didion’s attempt to “postpone [John’s] last moment [...] is a way of shouldering the guilt for what has occurred” (701). Yet at the close of Didion’s memoir, it seems she has done what she is responsible to do for John and Quintana—written it all down, stored away the past against loss.

Finding “equal meaning” in the geological disruptions of the earth as in the “repeated rituals of domestic life” (Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* 191), Didion lists details of her past, all that involve actions she undertook for her family. From “setting the table” to setting aside “stacks of clean towels, hurricane lamps for storms, enough water and food to see us through whatever geological event came our way” (191), Didion apprehends what may seem to invoke meaninglessness (a storm destroying their home, an illness disrupting their rhythm), by staying the incoherence through meaning-making. These “fragments I have stored against my ruins” (191), as Didion writes, are details that create a tense for Didion to return to when an indifferent world promises dissolution without remembrance. Rather than the details comprising a nihilistic



accumulation of disparate items signifying nothing beyond themselves, the construction of details creates a grammar for Didion to speak that deeply considers the particulars as integral to identity and morality.

Perhaps the fragments are merely fragments—Didion considers this and then disregards the implication, remembering and parsing through the points in such a way as to suggest a meaning between them all. What holds the incoherence together is Didion’s language, binding the broken places in time to a coherence, gathering the many tesserae of time and self into a sustained image. In her notes on journal-keeping, Didion writes that the attention of memory is to “remember what it is to be me” (104), and perhaps that is the point that we may extrapolate from beyond Didion to our own lives: that there is value in a recollection and exhumation of all of our old selves. Didion’s female tense creates a method of meaning that is a reclamation of the instants when perhaps nothing is ever lost. In Didion’s past spaces of self, she greets previous iterations of her existence and resurrects the lost through the materiality of memory, gathering every lost fact into a cohesive center.

## Afterword

This project unofficially began in 2013, when I first encountered Joan Didion in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and was immediately struck by the reliquary to loss that Didion articulated through recounting the details of her days prior to, and after, her husband's death. The precision of Didion's language moved me, and her carefully chronicled iterations of grief experience through time reiterated my own experience of mourning a recent loss in my life. While deeply personal, *The Year of Magical Thinking* felt neither gratuitous or sentimental, a combination I found arresting because it promised exhumation without an excess of feeling. Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* promises little comfort—*death* is not given an answer, but instead confronted—but neither did it promise platitudes. Over the next few years, I read through much of her work and immersed myself in her particular grammar, entertaining conversations with professors about Didion's use of language and highly particularized pull towards meaning emerging through personal details.

Yet the aspects of Didion that I loved—her intensely specific language, her penchant for repetition, her refusal to moralize or aestheticize abstract themes—were often the aspects of Didion held most in contention by critics of Didion's work. Within the criticism there seemed to be little to no middle ground for fans or detractors of Didion: she is either a writer tremendously loyal to particularity (Anderson 167), which explains her precocity to, as critic Dennis Rygiel writes, “get it right” (122)—*it* presumably denoting the events that she's relating and *right* suggesting the correct relation of the events—or she is a bleak, self-aggrandizing woman with a bent on the absurdity. I confess my initial confusion at the latter claims—while Didion is not a cheery writer, I found the assertions that her writing is nihilistic and indirect (Harrison 118) baffling. Beyond criticism of the cited nihilism in Didion's text, criticism abounds decrying her work as an example of egregious self-romanticism (Bawer 87), rife with a “doom-conscious” feeling (Amis 163), and contrived

through style that is no more than “a bag of tricks” with “momentarily beautiful [effects]” (Harrison 115). It is Didion’s dedication to “getting it right” that sustained my disbelief in her nihilism.

In an interview with Sara Davidson, Didion speaks of her dedication to language: “what I mean is, I use the words all the time. Even the smallest things. A table can be right or wrong” (18). Thus, rather than *right* denoting a moral supposition, it seems that Didion considers *rightness* to be a prerequisite for writing one’s life, a sentiment based on order in language to “maintain a semblance of purposeful behavior” (18). The purposeful behavior appears to be the writing, the *rightness* the loyalty to language (Anderson 165) that enables meaning’s emergence from returned-to details, written remembrances.

Since I found Didion’s writing hopeful in my initial experience reading her texts, I wondered what compelled these critics to conclude that Didion’s writing is bleak because of its exactitude, instead of being profoundly hopeful because it does not flinch from specificity. The claims of nihilism directed towards Didion often seemed to coalesce into a general conclusion that she is resistant to meaning. While Didion does seem resistant to creating a timeline in her writing, wherein event *a* leads directly to event *b* and the progression between the two generates a theme, I consider her resistance evidence of a deep dislike of ambiguity and the often maudlin extremes of imposed morality or imposed meaning. While the question of Didion’s bleakness (and what it conveys in relation to her particular manner of faith or lack thereof) is an important element in a discussion of Didion’s writing, due to the scope of this project, I chose to limit my analysis to an interrogation of the unique female tense she’s created through her tessellations of memory. While my project pertains to Didion’s nonfiction and personal journals, I do utilize criticism from individuals assessing her reportage journalism as well. Again, due to the scope of this project, I limited my inquiry to her personal nonfiction, but all that there exists a further field within which

to apply Didion's rhetoric to less personal subjects. I look forward to that work sometime in the future.

## Acknowledgements

For giving me space to ask the questions I didn't know I was allowed to encounter, thank you to my English Department. Specifically, to Dr. Christine Chaney, for her love and friendship, unflinching support, and profound generosity—especially as I encountered my own disrupting instants—thank you. For the reminders of the shadow side to all grief and joy and for afternoon talks most Fridays, as well as thoughtful care throughout the years, thank you Dr. Doug Thorpe. To Dr. Reinsma, who gave me the binder of articles that helped materialize this project in the early days, and whose deep attention to language still doesn't match his kindness, thank you. For their generosity and conversations throughout the years, thank you Dr. Rebekah Rice, Dr. Brian Bantum, Dr. Tom Amorose, and Dr. Patrick McDonald. Luke and Maddy—thank you for your friendship and constancy through the swells of our lives so far. For talking me out of panic and leading me back from the edge, being the people who know me best and remind me who I am, Taylor and Nathan, thank you, I love you. For every orange, crossword, and reminder that happiness may sometimes be ludicrous in this life that is an honor and a privilege, Eliza, thank you. To my sisters, Chloé and Grace—you remind me of what it means to persevere and to laugh while doing so. Your support and love means this world to me. To my parents, for your gentleness in my early questions. And, tongue-in-cheek perhaps but meant with ardor and earnestness, thank you to Didion who will always be *Joan* in my mind, for giving me a foothold back into a life where the particulars matter.

## Works Cited

- Amis, Martin. "Joan Didion's Style." *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America*. Penguin Books, 1986. pp. 160-169.
- Anderson, Chris. "The Cat in the Shimmer." *Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction*. Southern Illinois UP. 1987.
- Axen, Christine. "A Review of The Year of Magical Thinking." *Death Studies*, vol. 30, no. 7, 2006, pp. 697-703., doi:10.1080/07481180600776101.
- Bawer, Bruce. "Didion's Dreamwork." *Hudson Review*, vol. 60, no. 1, Spring 2007, pp. 85-103. EBSCOhost, [ezproxy.spu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=a9h&AN=25012482&site=ehost-live](http://ezproxy.spu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=a9h&AN=25012482&site=ehost-live).
- Bladek, Marta. "A Place None Of Us Know Until We Reach It': Mapping Grief and Memory in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*." *Biography*, 2014. pp. 935-952.
- Callard, Felicity, and Constantina Papoulias. "Affect and Embodiment." *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, edited by Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz, Fordham University, NEW YORK, 2010, pp. 246-262. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c999bq.21](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c999bq.21).
- Davidson, Sara. "A Visit with Joan Didion" *Essays & Conversations*. Edited by Ellen G. Friedman. Ontario Review Press, 1984. pp. 14-21.
- DeSalvo, Louise A. and Marian Price. "Two Comments on 'Going Home: Selfhood in Composition.'" *College English*, 1984. pp. 182-184.
- Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Knopf, 2005.
- . *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction*. Everyman's Library. Knopf, 2006.

- . "Why I Write." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 5 Dec. 1976,  
[www.nytimes.com/1976/12/05/archives/why-i-write-why-i-write.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1976/12/05/archives/why-i-write-why-i-write.html).
- Harrison, Barbara Grizzuti. "Joan Didion: Only Disconnect." *Off Center: Essays*. The Dial Press  
 1980. pp. 113-137.
- Harred, Jane. "The Heart of Darkness in Joan Didion's 'Salvador.'" *College Literature*. 1998. pp. 1-  
 16.
- Howarth, William. "Itinerant Passages: Recent American Essays." *The Sewanee Review*, 1988. pp.  
 633-643.
- Jung, Shannon L. "Feminism and Spatiality: Ethics and the Recovery of a Hidden Dimension."  
*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 1988. pp. 55-71.
- Luckhurst, Roger. "Reflections on Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*." *New Formations*. pp.  
 91-100.
- Miller, Nancy K. "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir." *PMLA*. 2007.  
 pp. 537-548.
- Muggli, Mark Z. "The Poetics of Joan Didion's Journalism." *American Literature*. 1987. pp. 402-421.
- Rygiel, Dennis. Johnstone, Barbara, editor. "Chapter 8: Lexical Parallelism in the Nonfiction of  
 Joan Didion." *Repetition in Discourse: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Volume One. Ablex  
 Publishing Corporation, 1994. pp. 113-127.
- Skloot, Floyd. "Turning to Memoir." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. 2006. pp. 253-262.
- Zupančič, Alenka. "Sexual Difference and Ontology." *On the Social Media Ideology - Journal #75*  
*September 2016 - e-Flux*, Feb. 2012, [www.e-flux.com/journal/32/68246/sexual-difference-and-ontology/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/32/68246/sexual-difference-and-ontology/).

## Appendix on Faith and Learning

There's little need for me to begin with why I love Joan Didion except to say that I feel protective of her, and in a way it is akin to being protective of myself. Didion, the patron saint of prescient loss, the chronicler of a world split down the center, is as I am, afraid. Fear itself becomes witness and I read her to encounter a woman watchful of every imminent ending. I read her to encounter a person as indebted to the particulars as I am, often without explanation for why they need recalling, save that they exist. I read her because she tells me about who I am through what I attend to, which is the ordinary instant known as meaningful because it *is*—and it is past. I am preoccupied with life to the extent that I am ever anticipating a disruption and close of all I love, and thus Didion's call to attention to these lost days (the tussle between whether one is able to go back to the past—or not) is a call I take in my teeth and wonder if it can be answered.

Writing on Joan Didion, a woman whose salvation seems to lie in the exhumation of loss, has been particularly charged for me as I encounter questions of my own beliefs and faith practices as they pertain to my academic pursuits and more broadly and deeply, my life. Writing of faith at all is a slippery task, charged with the many curvatures of self you had previously disregarded or known nothing of, and considering the ways my beliefs have become embodied during this writing process startles me when align my trajectory with my study of Didion's work. Before I even contemplated studying Didion closely, I bristled at accusations of her supposed nihilism, potentially because they seemed to implicate issues with my own grammar of faith. Unable to reconcile my beliefs about the world and the people inhabiting it by any specific doctrine, I wrestled against the insinuation that doubt begets meaninglessness. In this, I felt similar to Didion. Without answers, I turned to the questions and began gathering my own image of instants, almost as if a form of unconscious prayer.



My friend Natasha Oladokun has said before that poetry for her is a form of prayer, and I consider those same rhythms when I conceive of my own faith. It is the repetition, the magic of language accruing meaning and spoken again in different moments, that I look to as guidelines for my existence. It is the specific that I encounter when I encounter faith at all. The particular gloss of sun in a morning room, a witnessed kindness between strangers, how my partner sneaks oranges and kiwis into my locker at work—these are the particulars that I remember, the particulars that remind me who I am and what I believe to be good, the particulars that I feel like an itch are evidence of some more encompassing good. Perhaps of God.

I realize I have written in fancies, running lightly over the pulse of the question by sentence and sentence to evade the answer, for I am loath to write that which I feel most deeply as grief: that I currently have no language for God, or my own faith. That most days, I deeply want to believe but can only conjure a desire for belief, not belief itself. I pray. I ask that those I love be safe, be protected, that no harm comes. I pass by the walls of churches I once attended and forget the words I would say upon greeting. Study has afforded me the practicality to create a new framework for my own embodied beliefs using the model of Didion's particular paradigm. Writing on Didion during this time has been particularly cathartic, because it has offered a way of parsing meaning from the world that is not incumbent upon my own grammar of doubt's closure—and in the absence of an ability to conjure belief from the detritus of my childhood faith, any ascension towards witnessing the world as flush with meaning is a hopeful return to this meaning being expansive. By return, I mean less *going back*, as if we could ever go back to the bodies of our past selves, the gestures of our past beliefs, but a return to meaning itself as something that mirrors the dark spaces outside of language where we hope for an eventual home. To know that every instantiation, no matter how tiny or ridiculous or painful, adds up to your present as important

instants of what you call *ordinary* is to consider the entirety of your life as humming to a cohesive center. It all mattered, which in another sense is a way of stating, *and nothing is lost*.

*June 2018*