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Behind the Shades: A Close Look at the Blurred Lines between Joan Didion's Fiction and Nonfiction

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Abstract

My paper investigates Joan Didion's discussions of mental health in both her fictional and nonfictional works. Prolific and critically acclaimed in both genres, Didion was uniquely candid about her life, especially for her time. In her discussions of mental health, Didion's fiction and nonfiction mirror each other: Didion's fictional female characters and their struggles often parallel Didion and her own. Yet as Didion delved into more specific struggles with mental health, she showed more detail and visualization in her fiction than in her nonfiction. As opposed to writers like Sylvia Plath, whose personal life is often incorrectly projected onto her creative work, Didion was extremely transparent about the motivations behind her fiction and her real-life influences. Through her nonfiction and her extensive interviews, Didion readily revealed the real-life counterparts of her characters and plotlines.

Given that transparency, it is important to ask where and why Didion drew the line between fact and fiction. What purpose does writing fiction serve for such genre-crossing and transparent writers like Didion? My paper aims to answer this question by examining how Didion writes about mental health in her nonfiction and how her life and mental health informed her fiction. My examination will focus on two of Didion's fictional books (*Play It As It Lays* and *Run River*), four of her nonfictional books (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, *The White Album*, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and *Blue Nights*), numerous interviews, and the 2017 documentary *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold*.

Essay

In the first few pages of Joan Didion's 1979 collection of essays *The White Album*, she publishes a psychiatric report from 1968. The report is included in its entirety, discussing the patient's mental breakdown, increasingly concerning deterioration, and other troubling symptoms:

> The Rorschach record is interpreted as describing a personality in process of deterioration with abundant signs of failing defenses and increasing inability of the ego to mediate the world of reality and to cope with normal stress. . . . Emotionally, patient has alienated herself almost entirely from the world of other human beings. Her fantasy life appears to have been virtually completely preempted by primitive, regressive libidinal preoccupations many of which are distorted and bizarre. . . . The content of patient's responses is highly unconventional and frequently bizarre, filled with sexual and anatomical preoccupations, and basic reality contact is obviously and seriously impaired at times. In quality and level of sophistication patient's responses are characteristic of those of individuals of high average or superior intelligence but she is now functioning intellectually in impaired fashion at barely average level. Patient's thematic productions on the Thematic Apperception Test emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal. In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitably to conflict and failure. . . . (14–15)

When Didion reappears at the report's conclusion, she asserts her presence bluntly: "The patient to whom this psychiatric report refers is me" (*The White Album* 15). This twist is significant beyond its shock factor: the reader only recognizes Didion after she establishes her mental deterioration—a distinct choice on Didion's end. The line being used as a twist illustrates Didion's understanding of why her compromised mental state would be a shock; she was, after all, a famous writer and figure even during this time. Didion explicitly acknowledges this public perception in the following line, referencing how her hospitalization happened mere months before she was named a *Los Angeles Times* Woman of the Year (*The White Album* 15). So why is this deeply personal psychiatric report—personal to an almost uncomfortable extent—included in such a meticulously curated essay collection, beyond for its shock value?

Considering the context that the essays were written in, Didion's reprinting of her psychiatric report fits well. It is the beginning blare of the electric guitar in *The White Album*, much like its namesake *White Album* by The Beatles—a way to begin and set the rhythm for the forthcoming songs and essays. Didion's *The White Album* is about the distortion and hegemonic deterioration of society in the 1960s and the 1970s. It covers widespread protests, all-encompassing social movements, Woodstock, the infamous Charles Manson murders, and the spread of hippie culture. Didion expresses this time as a "story without a narrative," something inherently disordered (*The White Album* 47). The significance of a missing narrative is established in the titular essay's first few lines: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live. . . . We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five" (11). But in the absence of narrative, meaning dissipates. Paranoia and mixed signals ensue. Society is seated at the Mad Hatter's tea party. This disorder was perceived by Didion: "I wanted still to believe in the narrative and in the narrative's intelligibility, but to know that one could change

the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical" (*The White Album* 13).

Her psychiatric report expresses this same distortion and deterioration, and its inclusion effectively symbolizes the chaos of the period reflected in Didion's own mind: it too is a story without a narrative. The report reinforces the essays that discuss these lapses in the social contract; in her disillusionment with society through her own ailed mental state, Didion represents the social tensions of the times, the news stories of the day, and the millions of others who felt as she did. The psychiatric report's inclusion is a way to capture a significant period in history—a medical diagnosis and evaluation not only of Didion but of the time. Of the culture.

On a deeper level, however, the reprinting of Didion's own psychiatric evaluation goes beyond this and to a deeper philosophy. Her first published essay, "On Self-Respect," originally printed in the August 1961 issue of *Vogue*, articulates this philosophy: "character—the willingness to accept responsibility for one's own life—is the source from which self-respect springs" (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem* 145). According to this reading, Didion's inclusion of her psychiatric report is an act of self-respect: she is taking responsibility for her own life, her own mental health struggles. And not only is she taking responsibility, but she is doing so in a very public and permanent way: in a bound book. In a show of self-respect. Of vulnerability. Of transparency. But, as it often is with Didion, this explanation is only half of the truth.

The psychiatric report may, on its surface, appear to be excruciatingly personal, the type of vulnerability that paints Didion as the type to lay all her cards on the table. This is, after all, the reputation that precedes the famous writer: Didion is often cited as a trailblazer in the New Journalism genre, as one of the first writers to intertwine journalistic facts and figures with personal experience and voice. She weaved together the general (national news and public

figures) and the specific (her observations and her private life), leaving readers with a bold main character mixed into their media: Didion herself. This emphasis on the writer as a character is often taken for granted today—but in Didion's time, her personal entanglements with her sharp prose stood out. In some ways, those entanglements made her a target. After all, if all your cards are on the table, winning becomes a markedly more difficult feat.

Didion was well aware of this danger, so she feigned her transparency. She appeared to put all her cards on the table, but she secretly hid some below. It was an illusion to readers and critics alike: they thought they were getting the entire Didion, but they were only getting a part of her—the part Didion wanted them to have, the persona she so carefully rewrote and revised. It was with this persona that Didion managed to protect her self-expression. To assert herself in a world where American women had only recently, in 1974, been granted the ability to open credit cards in their name. When those with psychiatric reports either refused to speak or found no one to listen.

When I first read *The White Album*, I too felt this disillusionment. I did not feel this disillusionment as strongly as Didion did, nor did I express it as eloquently as she did, but I was still disillusioned, disillusioned at myself, an academic, goody-two-shoes self that was distraught with disorder, with obsessive-compulsive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder, growing with every barrage of intrusive thoughts and rambling worries and with every passing, scorching day of that summer. When I opened Didion's 1979 essay collection, I had already expected the sweeping clarity and self-perception of her other works. But I had not expected to experience so *much* of that clarity and self-perception; her psychiatric report was unavoidable and endlessly fascinating, and I read it four or five times in that one sitting. I had previously read three or four of Didion's works, but I had never known she was treated in a psychiatric hospital. This was

something that I thought deserved more attention—a longer chapter, an anecdote, a cleverly crafted and reflective essay. Or no attention at all: this dark period could have been skipped over, relegated to a damp basement corner, if Didion had merely not reprinted the report. Reading the beginning pages of *The White Album* that summer, I first wondered what decorated my own psychiatric report after months of therapy and Zoloft. I then speculated how I could access these records, how Didion had managed not only to get ahold of them but to publish them. My mind then returned to Didion's broader life: If Didion was willing to share her psychiatric report in *The White Album*, what wasn't she willing to share? Where were her other cards hiding?

These are the questions that keep readers returning to Didion, even after reading her closing lines; these are the questions that keep *me* returning. Even today, without a breathing Didion, her persona lives on. With her oversized sunglasses and reverence of California, she maintains a pop culture relevance on par with her literary status. The intimate yet carefully selected details of her persona, along with her devout believers, remain too. The Celine campaign. Her celebrity-studded dinner parties where Janis Joplin drank sake and pre-*Star Wars* Harrison Ford was just the Malibu carpenter. Coca-Cola and cigarettes for breakfast. The lore of her daughter, Quintana Roo, and husband, John Gregory Dunne, both of whom seemed more like Didion's characters than real-life people. Her petite frame and pervasive shyness, mentioned frequently by acquaintances and Didion herself, only to contrast with her rich, decisive prose. Thousands of people taking the day off work when Didion's belongings were auctioned off in November 2022, forcing the auction to be moved online (Haigney). The latter was not simply because attendees were planning to purchase a piece of Didion's estate, where a blank notebook cost upwards of eleven thousand dollars and a pair of sunglasses twenty-seven thousand dollars (Valdez). No, this was more window-shopping than an auction for many attendees, who cared

more to be among Didion's material objects than to own them. It was the mere proximity to Didion that brought the masses, even after her passing.

The reason for this cultlike veneration is clear: Didion made herself a character, both in her writing and in her real life. While writing her nonfictional collections like *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album*, Didion captured not only a point in time but also herself, experiencing said moment in time. Events that dominated the newspaper and history—such as the Manson trials—came with slices-of-life: Didion's cooking of spaghetti for Linda Kasabian and her daughter as they awaited Kasabian's turn to take the stand, or Didion's trip to buy Kasabian's trial dress from a department store. Every experience in her work is filtered through her eyes, eyes that, as her reprinted psychiatric report reveals, pinpoint the complex disillusionment that follows integration into civilization. Didion felt disengaged and betrayed by larger society, writing that "I have trouble maintaining the basic notion that keeping promises matter [sic] in a world where everything I was taught seems beside the point" (*The White Album* 13). Though this disillusionment fueled Didion's writing, it also gave way to the taboo topics alluded to by the writer. The same questions resurface: What wasn't Didion willing to share? Where were her other cards hiding?

The answer is both in the details and the details themselves: Didion's nonfictional works, despite their transparency, are largely absent of details. The outline is there, but the fine lines are not. The works paint the big picture, but they are void of color, of shading. The psychiatric report is given, but Didion's own experience throughout the evaluation is left out—only a faceless doctor speaks. This absence is further explored in other pieces from *The White Album*. In her 1969 essay "In the Islands," Didion states the blunt truth regarding her tropical location and marital status: "We are here on this island in the middle of the Pacific in lieu of filing for

divorce" (*The White Album* 133). Yet she makes no other mention of this jarring indictment. There are no fights—only allusions to fights. There is no detail-by-detail description of sleeping on the couch—only a mention of the existence of a couch. Didion addresses the elephant in the room without explaining how the elephant got there in the first place. In this sense, Didion is playing it as it lays: she's revealing the cards she wants to—often showing the taboo tidbits—only to hide other cards, other details. This is the illusion; Didion is controlling her narrative completely. She allows her persona transparency, but she allows it only to a veiled degree. She decides what she wants to explain or what she wants to merely wink at. We're in her world—the world of a woman toeing the line between self-expression and its consequences. Her mentions of mental illness, marital disputes, breakdowns, and divorce push Didion into socially taboo realms—precarious and bleak environments, especially for women. One wrong move and you could fall through the floorboards.

Didion, however, uses the absence of description as her escape. Without the details, Didion's connection with the taboo becomes blurred in the eyes of readers and larger society. Yes, she admits to being psychiatrically evaluated. But would a crazy person be so self-aware of their mental incapacities? How could she be a hysterical woman if she was anything but hysterical? In her nonfiction, the missing details and unfilled blanks allowed Didion to step away from herself and into her persona. This persona watched passively from behind her oversized sunglasses as the world burned around her. She reported on the events in her bluntly perceptive prose. She was the essential cool customer.

But this cool customer persona dissipates in Didion's fiction: It is here, in this fictional space, that Didion can fill in the details without dealing with the consequences. Didion's hidden cards become revealed; the protective blanket of fiction wraps around her, allowing any

resemblance to actual events or to actual persons, living or dead, to be purely coincidental. If you write a fictional novel about witches, you won't be burned at the stake. Instead, your witch characters will. This is what Didion did: she let her fictional characters take the fall. She let them burn at the stake.

This metaphorical burning is best described as the stigma surrounding mental illness, particularly that of women in Didion's time. This stigma has continued to burn today, but it has improved immensely since the 1960s and the 1970s—the flames are not quite as hot or damaging. Though Didion alluded to her mental health struggles in her nonfiction, she painted the entire picture—shading and all—in her fiction, specifically through her fictional protagonists' experiences.

The Mirroring Effect

The female protagonists of her novels, whether it be *Play It As It Lays*'s Maria Wyeth or *Run River*'s Lily Knight McClellan, are plagued with anxieties, insecurities, and miseries. Though the plots vary greatly, the female characters in each story experience roughly the same psychological—and sometimes physical—journey. For Maria, a broken marriage, a sick child, and an illicit abortion leave her wading through depression. The ending of the story is neither happy nor definitive; instead, Maria speaks directly to readers, saying she now knows the meaning of life, something that has evaded and taunted her throughout the novel. The meaning of life, as it turns out, is that life is entirely meaningless—she can only, as the title suggests, treat life like a game and play it as it lays. For Lily, life too feels stiflingly unfulfilling. The meaning of her life, as dictated by the white-picketed American Dream—a loving husband, two children, financial safety—is already hers, but contentment still evades her. A tumultuous affair-ridden marriage, a family death, and another illicit abortion all occur within *Run River*'s pages. Despite

the surface-level differences of these characters, they are, at their core, similarly vexed and apathetic. Passages of their innermost thoughts and disconcertments almost seem ripped from Didion's own nonfictional novels and essays.

My first encounter with Didion occurred, more out of coincidence than anything else, with Maria in *Play It As It Lays*. As I wandered my hometown's singular bookstore—the ubiquitous Barnes & Noble—with its perpetually broken escalator and depressingly vacant mildew atmosphere, I came across Didion in the Classics section. The name itself was hazily familiar, something that connoted "writer you're supposed to read or you're a horrible Writing & Literature student." After a first year of college littered with literary references I didn't get or authors I hadn't yet read, I decided not to further risk my precarious Writing & Literature status: I would read every author in the Classics section to cement my place in the major.

I began with Didion, whom I was drawn to for her fuchsia-hued cover of *Play It As It Lays*. Other than *The Year of Magical Thinking*, it was the only Didion book on the shelves; I figured, especially since my dad was the one paying, *Play It As It Lays* would do as a summer read. What I didn't expect was to finish the book in a single afternoon; and though I finished it in a single afternoon, it stayed with me that entire summer. More accurately, Maria stayed with me. Never before had I come across a narrator so distinct, a voice so acutely candid. Sometimes, if my thoughts wander, I catch myself reciting the opening lines of the novel on page 3: "What makes Iago evil? Some people ask. I never ask."

The reason the novel stayed with me, no matter how many other books I tried to read after, was its effect on my overall mood. In simple terms, the novel depressed me. To read Didion's second novel was to trail behind its protagonist and narrator, Maria, and to trail behind Maria was to descend into a murky catacomb. The narration was unflinching and unapologetic,

with Maria often speaking directly to the reader. The novel was bookended with desolation and bleakness. There was no forced positive character arc. There was no "and now, I'm all better." There was only Maria, a complex and dispirited character who seemed to be the only solid piece in a haze of prose. While Maria's emotional and interpersonal turmoil was completely unlike my own, she put my despondency into physical words on a page—something I had not experienced to this degree of specificity before. Though I had done no further research on Didion after reading the book, her real-life inspiration was apparent: unless someone had experienced it themselves, no one—not even a lifelong researcher of mental health—could put into words the subtle experiences and nuances of Maria's particular brand of existential depression.

After finishing *Play It As It Lays*, I immediately turned to her other work. The first I could find was *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, then *The White Album*. Like my first experience reading Didion, I was immediately entranced by her prose. Her blunt eloquence was fascinating to me—especially as someone who often wrote in circles, overexplaining and making the same redundant points. It was this same bluntness that Maria possessed in *Play It As It Lays*. There were times, while immersed in Didion's nonfictional pieces, that I forgot who exactly was narrating. The lines between Didion and Maria crisscrossed to such an extent that, in my mind, Maria's fictionality became questionable.

Maria, like Didion, lives in Los Angeles for the entirety of *Play It As It Lays*. She begins the story at a psychiatric hospital, reflecting on the events that unfold during the novel. While Maria does not explicitly state why she is being hospitalized, the book's plot alludes to a mental breakdown. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Didion also experienced psychiatric hospitalization for a perceived breakdown. In fact, the timelines of these hospitalizations mirror

one another almost exactly, with Didion's evaluation in 1968 and the novel's publication in 1970.

Didion and Maria's mental health struggles are not limited, however, to Los Angeles in the late 1960s. *Play It As It Lays* discusses Maria's past breakdowns, blue periods, and mental deterioration: "She had not cried for her mother since the bad season in New York, the season when she had done nothing but walk and cry and lose so much weight that the agency refused to book her" (60). Didion experienced her own blue periods, specifically in her essay "Goodbye to All That": "I cried until I was not even aware when I was crying and when I was not, cried in elevators and in taxis and in Chinese laundries . . ." (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem* 237). These stories of emotional turmoil, though superficially similar, are further emphasized in the context of Didion's bouts of crying. "Goodbye to All That," chronologizing her twenty-eighth year and its defining depressive episode, is entirely based within New York, where she was living at the time. Thus, the timelines and geographical locations of Maria and Didion's breakdowns reflect the other—a mirror image.

Didion's engrossment with social disorder, apparent from her essays from *The White Album*, also bled into Maria's character. Though this disorder is only discussed briefly as a factor leading up to Maria's breakdown in *Play It As It Lays*, it remains strikingly similar to what Didion's psychiatric report described:

> She could not read newspapers because certain stories leapt at her from the page: the four-year-olds in the abandoned refrigerator, the tea party with Purex, the infant in the driveway, rattlesnake in the playpen, the peril, unspeakable peril, in the everyday. . . . Maria ate frozen enchiladas, looked at the television for word of the world, thought of herself as under sedation and did not leave the apartment on Fountain Avenue. (99–100)

This quotation illustrates Maria's preoccupation with the chaos of the times, and this preoccupation and her own mind were hinted at by Didion in *The White Album*: "I was absorbed in my intellectualization, my obsessive-compulsive devices, my projection, my reaction-formation, my somatization, and in the transcript of the Ferguson Trial" (20). Thus, Maria and Didion's characters and mental states were both deeply affected by the world around them—their minds reflecting the disorder of the times or the times reflecting the disorder occurring in their own minds. While the root of their inherent disorder is unclear, it is apparent that Maria and Didion's mental states and interaction with disorder—social and mental—mirror one another almost exactly.

Yet I believed the similarities between Maria and Didion to be merely coincidence—that Maria was simply a proxy for Didion in this one particular novel. That the mirroring between creator and protagonist was not a pattern in Didion's other work. That Maria was unique.

I stopped believing in coincidences when I read another of Didion's fictional novels. This time it was her 1963 novel, *Run River*. Here, I found the same mirroring that encompassed *Play It As It Lays*, with Lily instead of Maria as Didion's fictional counterpart. Reading *Run River* sparked my all-consuming interest in this persistent mirroring of fiction and reality in Didion's work. Reading her work was different than reading any other author's writing—it felt more like digging for treasure, combing for shards of Didion among her prose and investigative journalism.

I was not the only one who noticed this mirroring or participated in this literary scavenger hunt. Those closest to Didion knew how true to form her first fictional novel was: in Griffin Dunne's 2017 documentary, *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold*, her brother, James Jerrett Didion, remarked on his sister's mirroring of reality in *Run River*, saying, "It was a story about people we knew. It was a Sacramento story" (00:09:31). *Run River*'s Lily seems most obviously

a stand-in for Didion; though the likeness at first appears superficial, Didion imbues Lily with similar physical traits and personality quirks: Lily suffers chronic, all-encompassing migraines—as did Didion, who in 1979's *The White Album* dedicated an entire essay, "In Bed," to her stress migraines (Kuehl). Both Lily and Didion attended the University of California, Berkeley (though Lily failed to finish her degree). Throughout the novel, Lily is repeatedly described as excruciatingly thin: "No one had ever called her beautiful, but there had been something about her a compelling fragility, the illusion not only of her bones but of her eyes" (Didion, *Run River* 16). Didion was described as such throughout her life, by both herself and her reviewers: for most of her life, she stood barely over five feet tall, and her weight never exceeded double digits (Kakutani). Didion's other female protagonists possess this same thin body type, with Charlotte Douglas in *A Book of Common Prayer* being introduced as "an extreme and volatile thinness. . . . She was a woman . . . with a body that masqueraded as that of a young girl" (32).

Lily's fragility extends beyond her physicality, manifesting in her manner of speaking and her interpersonal interactions: "The most insignificant social encounter was for Lily . . . fraught with the apprehension of possible peril" (Didion, *Run River* 172). Lily is all too aware of her social struggles, frequently bemoaning her inward nature: "There was, Lily sobbed, something wrong with being shy when you were going on twenty-four years old, and anyway she was not shy, she was simply no good around people and that was that" (Didion, *Run River* 173). Didion is also characterized as such; in a *New York Times* profile from 1979, journalist Michiko Kakutani describes Didion's presence as "a voice so soft, so tentative at times, that one frequently has to strain to hear her." Didion herself was painfully aware of her wallflower status, often admitting to it in her nonfiction: "My only advantage as a reporter is that I am so physically

small, so temperamentally unobtrusive, and so neurotically inarticulate that people tend to forget my presence runs counter to their best interests" (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem* xiv).

These similarities, while notable, all pale in comparison to their shared historical significance. Lily, like Didion, is a descendant of the first California pioneers who settled in Sacramento; Didion's ancestors famously departed from the Donner Party in 1846, ensuring the former's survival. This near brush with tragedy and danger, characteristic of the California landscape, was the backdrop that Didion grew up among—a backdrop that inevitably shaped Didion, especially in her sense of looming darkness, death, and helplessness. The stories that Didion grew up with, of her ancestors whose human efforts were folly in the face of nature and whose loss was a persistent part of life, are the same Lily knows by heart. The tragedy and peril in Didion and Lily's bloodlines connect them beyond the California frontier—the danger affects their sense of self and their mental state. Lily drowns in her passiveness and in her apathetic view of the life surrounding her; she approaches her life not as a series of decisions but as something that just happens to fall on her lap—the husband, the children, the affair, and the novel's culminating murder–suicide.

This passenger seat experience—this lack of control—that so troubles Lily also disturbed Didion. Death and peril were never far from Didion's mind, which she made clear with her repeated advice in *Where I Was From*, a 2003 collection of essays: "Remember, never take no cutoffs, and hurry on along as fast as you can." The quote was not originally hers; it was from a survivor of the Donner Party writing to a traveling family member (Lacy 500). Nonetheless, Didion latched onto it as her own, infusing it into her own anxious approach to life and into the character of Lily. Didion's fascination with the Donner Party and her pioneer ancestors marked *Run River* as a modern pioneer story, as inscribed on the novel's back cover. However, upon a

close examination of Didion's mapping of her own qualities and mental state onto the novel's main female character, a singular conclusion arises: Lily is not the lone modern pioneer—Didion is too.

With both *Run River*'s Lily and *Play It As It Lays*'s Maria functioning as Didion's fictional counterparts, these female protagonists share strikingly similar reflections. Maria, in many ways, mirrors Lily's characterization, as yet another plagued with raging headaches: "From my mother I inherited my looks and a tendency to migraine" (Didion, *Play It As It Lays* 5). She, too, follows the thin body type common to Didion fiction and personal life: "She never puts on any weight, you'll notice that's often true of selfish women" (*Play It As It Lays* 12). Maria, despite being in the Hollywood film industry, has difficulty navigating interpersonal relationships: "Maria has never understood friendship, conversation, the normal amenities of social exchange. Maria has difficulty talking to people with whom she is not sleeping" (*Play It As It Lays* 13).

The similarities between Lily and Didion are not unique to her other novels. Rather, the mirroring of Didion's female protagonists and herself is a recurring theme discussed by readers and literary critics alike. In Kakutani's profile of Didion, she described the universal Didion protagonist:

> The "Didion woman" has by now become a recognizable literary figure. Women who have misunderstood the promises of the past, they are habitues of a clearly personal wasteland, wandering along highways or through countries in an effort to blot out the pain of consciousness. They lose their men to suicide, divorce and cancer; their children to abortion, bad genes and history. They are outsiders, but they are also survivors, fatalists who keep on playing the game regardless of the odds.

This description, while seemingly only commenting on the similarities of Didion's female protagonists to one another, also speaks to Didion's own similarity to the characters she created. In other words, the shared qualities of the female protagonists are also the qualities of their creator. These details that create a mirroring effect are the very shards of Didion herself. They are where her hidden cards lay.

Addressing the Mirror

The complexity of Didion's balance of cards on the table and those hidden underneath is furthered by Didion's public nature. Despite her self-described shyness, Didion remained prominent in popular culture, often appearing in televised interviews or events regarding her writing. In these interviews, Didion openly discussed the real-life inspirations behind her fiction. Given Didion's already transparent writing, these interviews further promoted her transparent nature—that she was laying all her cards on the table.

In a 1978 *Paris Review* interview, Linda Kuehl askes Didion the hard-hitting questions: she asks about the similarities Didion shares with Maria in *Play It As It Lays* and with Lily in *Run River*. Didion seemingly addresses these questions directly, not shrinking from the spotlight. She asserts the lines between her fiction and nonfiction clearly. After Kuehl asks about the autobiographical quality of *Run River*, Didion denies the connection: "It wasn't except that it took place in Sacramento. A lot of people there seemed to think that I had somehow maligned them and their families, but it was just a made-up story." Later in the interview, however, Didion admits that her inspiration for the story came from a murder she read about in *The Sacramento Bee*. Later still, she reveals the novel was formed out of homesickness—an all-consuming nostalgia for the people, the landscape, and the stories that she had grown up with.

This shift in answer, this shuffling of the cards, also occurred when discussing *Play It As It Lays*. After Kuehl asks if Didion is often mistaken for her characters, Didion again distances herself from these counterparts:

> There was a certain tendency to read *Play It As It Lays* as an autobiographical novel, I suppose because I lived out here and looked skinny in photographs and nobody knew anything else about me. Actually, the only thing Maria and I have in common is an occasional inflection, which I picked up from her—not vice versa—when I was writing the book.

This claim is abruptly overturned in Dunne's 2017 documentary, where Didion says that "Maria was quite a bit of myself. Obviously, not line for line" (00:42:05). Her admittance to mirroring is then further discussed by discussing the events occurring during the writing process: Her psychiatric hospitalization, just as Maria experienced. The perils of new motherhood, with Didion giving Maria a daughter, Kate, who was the same age as three-year-old Quintana Roo. Kate largely absent from the novel due to an unspecified hospitalization, just as Quintana Roo was absent from Didion's life due to the latter's psychiatric hospitalization.

Then there were the marital problems that dominated the pages of *Play It As It Lays*, with Maria's husband, Carter, becoming further and further estranged—just as Didion struggled through her own marriage with Dunne: "He was not happy with what he was doing, and what was going on in our marriage was we were not happy" (00:38:01). At the time of Didion's drafting the book, Dunne had been staying in Las Vegas to write his 1974 novel *Vegas: A Memoir of a Dark Season*. He had not only left his wife and his young daughter behind—he had done so in an extremely fraught time during Didion's life. This abandonment is much the same within Maria and Carter's relationship.

As further explored in Dunne's 2017 documentary, the idea of detachment is central to *Play It As It Lays*. Maria, as a character and as a narrator, is inherently detached. The point of view in *Play It As It Lays* switches between the first person and a close third person that simultaneously invites readers into the mind of Maria before suddenly kicking them out. This detachment not only separates Maria from readers and from herself but also speaks to Didion's detachment as a whole—both in her writing and in her personal life. The intermingling of the points of view within *Play It As It Lays* was discussed by Didion in the 1978 *Paris Review* interview with Kuehl:

> I wanted to make it all first person, but I wasn't good enough to maintain a first. There were tricks I didn't know. So I began playing with a close third person, just to get something down. By a "close third" I mean not an omniscient third but a third very close to the mind of the character. Suddenly one night I realized that I had some first person and some third person and that I was going to have to go with both, or just not write a book at all. I was scared.

While it is clear in the previous quotation that the piece's detachment is developed in part because of Didion's difficulty to proceed on a craft level, the alternation between first and third person—specifically in the latter half of the novel, where third person is primarily employed—also illustrates Didion's difficulty in placing herself fully in Maria's shoes. Maria, in the book's ending, becomes completely undone: her breakdown commences. Maria narrates the novel, yes, but from the psychiatric hospital while in the thick of her breakdown. Didion, too, was in the thick of it: she wrote *Play It As It Lays* soon after leaving the psychiatric hospital, the fog not yet fully lifted. In this sense, the detachment illustrates Didion's grappling, in real time, with her existentialism and perceived senselessness.

This detachment also reflects a particular tension. A tension within the story. A tension within the main character. A tension within the writer. In his introduction to *Play It As It Lays*, David Thomson remarks on this tension: "Would that [first-person] Maria take everything that happens to the close-third Maria? What I am suggesting is that we hear, briefly, a Maria closer to the tough intelligence of her author. . ." (xvi). Effectively, Thomson asserts that the first-person version of Maria is closer to Didion than the third-person Maria. While I think this may be true, I also believe that the latter half of *Play It As It Lays* and its third-person narration reflects Didion's struggle to come to terms with disorder—the disorder that has plagued her personal life, the disorder that runs rampant in the news. To protect herself and her precarious mental state, just as Maria does, Didion must detach herself from disorder. This is something the third-person narration achieves, just as it communicates the premise of detachment that is inherent in the idea of meaninglessness.

In summing up *Play It As It Lays* during Dunne's 2017 documentary, Didion claimed that Maria is "coming to terms with the meaninglessness of existence" just as Didion had during that period of her life (00:43:00). She had previously circulated this idea in her 1977 NPR interview with Susan Stamberg: "*Play It As It Lays* was a way of working that out—dealing myself with the idea that experience was largely meaningless" (00:06:31). It is possible Didion's shift in answer—claiming Maria was not reflective of her, then claiming the opposite—only occurred due to the passage of time and further self-reflection. But the shift could also be based on changes in both social conventions and Didion's literary establishment. Maria is a controversial character in her defiance of social norms and in her engaging with sensitive subject matter, like abortion, depression, and suicidal ideation; admitting a similarity to such a controversial figure could have tarnished Didion's reputation and career at such an early stage. While these are still

taboo topics in the twenty-first century, as evidenced by the reaction to the premiere of Dunne's documentary, they are now much more socially acceptable. Likewise, as Didion established herself, both during the 1977 NPR interview and within the twenty-first century, she gained greater protections to her artistic freedom and reputation. In this sense, Didion's interviews not only showed her transparency but also protected her, letting her control her cards more.

In her nonfictional novels, Didion further commented on her genre-bending and mirroring themes. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion discusses how her interaction with a coworker at *Vogue* inspired a plot point in *Play It As It Lays*:

> "X" was a woman with whom I had worked at *Vogue*. Seductive clouds of cigarette smoke and Chanel No. 5 and imminent disaster had trailed her through the Condé Nast office. . . . On a single morning . . . she had found both that she needed an abortion and that her name had turned up in the files of a party girl investigation by the district attorney's office. . . . A deal had been struck. She had agreed to testify that she had been approached by the operation, and the district attorney's office had in turn arranged a D&C at Doctors' Hospital, no inconsiderable favor at the time when getting an abortion meant making a clandestine and potentially lethal appointment with someone whose first instinct in a crisis would be to vacate the premises. . . . I remembered using such an incident in my novel, *Play It As It Lays*. (108)

Though Didion mentions this life-to-fiction inspiration casually, the fictional interpretation of this event becomes more significant upon the following realization: Didion was not simply inspired by a coworker's story; she instead copied the event into *Play It As It Lays* word for word. There are no noticeable differences between Didion's recollection of the real-life event and her fictional retelling—beyond, of course, Maria acting as a stand-in for Didion.

Again, Didion mentions her source casually: using this story word for word does not, at least in her eyes, seem unusual or atypical.

Didion's blithe tone suggests a pattern in her work. A pattern in which real life is directly translated to the page and dubbed fictional. A pattern that disregards the sensitive nature of certain topics, like abortion and mental health, in their retelling—again, under the guise of fiction. A pattern that puts all the cards on the table and denies that they are on the table, a strategy that hides the player's true standings. A pattern of protection.

In addressing the mirroring and her work as a whole, Didion protected herself. The game continued with more illusions, more revealed cards, and more hints about the cards still hidden. Part of Didion's playing the game, part of her strategy, was addressing the mirror. In these interviews and curated admissions, Didion further built the persona that remains iconic—both to literary culture and pop culture in its entirety.

The Purpose of the Mirror (and Fiction)

I've established that Didion labeled as fiction her vulnerable subject matter, like her mental health, to protect herself. But wouldn't it be the most protective—wouldn't it be the safest—to not write any of these experiences down at all? Or, at the very least, to write these experiences in a private journal and lock it in a safe?

While these alternatives may be reasonable, they fail to address Didion's relationship with writing. At its core, writing is both a coping mechanism and a source of empowerment: as a quiet, physically small woman in a sexist and patriarchal world, Didion wrote to take back control. This empowerment was expressed by the writer herself in an NBC interview with Tom Brokaw: "[Writing] is the only aggressive act I have—the only way that I can be aggressive"

(00:00:56). Sitting down to write, she said, made her a different person because she "was in control of this tiny, tiny world at the typewriter" (00:01:20).

This need for control became even more important as her career progressed. The more successful Didion became, the more public her life got, and the less control she had over her personal life and her persona—now in the hands of the masses. And as the masses scrutinized, misread, and projected on her, they only drove Didion to write more, to regain control in a world where she felt helpless from her mental health and from her identity as a woman.

Didion also wrote fiction for superstitious reasons, as revealed in the 2017 documentary: "a novel is a cautionary tale. If you tell the story and work it out all right, then it won't happen to you" (00:54:03). This perception—that a novel functions as a cautionary tale—makes sense, because Didion's fiction addresses more sensitive, socially taboo topics than her nonfiction. But the cautionary tale is not just for readers—Didion also uses the genre as a warning to herself. In her novels, the female characters mirror Didion's own mental and interpersonal struggles, and by taking these characters to the edge, Didion explores how to best approach her own struggles. How to save herself from the edge. It is again a show of control. Control over societal perception. Control over one's own mind.

It is Didion's fervent focus on control that creates the entire card game. Having control means winning—in every aspect. Having control means seemingly revealing all the cards on the table while still having a few hidden. Having control means deciding how the game goes. You decide if you win or lose.

Didion also used writing as a coping mechanism for the disorder embedded within her life, both within her own mind and within her exterior experiences. She articulates this idea in her 1976 essay "Why I Write": "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking

at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear." Writing, therefore, both defines Didion and allows her to understand the world surrounding her. It is thus implied that, without writing, Didion would not have the tools necessary to exist. She would be more haunted and desperate for answers than she already was as a writer.

This idea of writing to cope is further explored in Dunne's 2017 documentary. Here, in discussing two of her fictional novels, *A Book of Common Prayer* and *Play It As It Lays*, Didion admits to the personal function of these pieces: "Novels are also about things you're afraid you can't deal with" (00:51:44). In this context, Didion discusses how both novels center around mother–daughter relationships; as she was writing the books, she anticipated the growing up of and separation from her daughter, Quintana Roo. By writing about the complexities and separation within mother–daughter relationships, Didion was able to emotionally prepare herself for the future and face her anxieties regarding her relationship with Quintana Roo head-on. Within the larger body of Didion's work, this idea of novels-as-coping-mechanisms represents one of Didion's lifelong philosophies: "I myself have always found that if I examine something, it's less scary. I grew up in the West, and we always had this theory that if you saw—if you kept the snake in your eyeline—the snake wasn't going to bite you" (Dunne 01:00:25). This suggests a therapeutic aspect to writing that Didion employed specifically in her fiction. Didion consciously makes these genre decisions and implications, because she clearly acknowledges how her fiction is based on her own life and experiences. She knows that fiction allows her to be in control, when she often feels out of control. She is able to explore her worst fears and darkest thoughts without backlash or aftershock. In this sense, Didion uses her fictional writing as a form of therapy, just as she does in her nonfiction. The natural detachment of self within fiction

allowed Didion to approach the topics most vexing to her while also exploring and protecting her mental health.

Thus, just as Didion's writing functions as a coping mechanism, a self-reflection, and a regaining of control, Didion's mirroring of her fictional protagonists with her own life functions in the same ways. The difference in genre not only protected Didion but also allowed her to maintain honesty—an essential part of her writing. Fiction's protective element let Didion shield herself in both her career and her personal life—something necessary as a female writer during her time. This precarity was something Didion constantly thought about:

> Women who wrote novels were quite often perceived as invalids. Carson McCullers, Jane Bowles. Flannery O'Connor, of course. Novels by women tended to be described, even by their publishers, as sensitive. I'm not sure this is so true anymore, but it certainly was at the time, and I didn't much like it. I dealt with it the same way I deal with everything. I just tended my own garden, didn't pay much attention, behaved—I suppose—deviously. I mean I didn't actually let too many people know what I was doing. (Kuehl)

Didion reveals that societal sexism and literary patriarchy infantilized female writers as hysterics, regardless of what they were writing or who they were. To avoid this, Didion wrote ostensibly more honest depictions of her mental health struggles in her fiction versus in her nonfiction. That way, if she was called a hysterical woman, Didion could rely on the protective guise of fiction to counteract any attack.

To win the impossible card game of life and literature—often hijacked by patriarchy, convention, and other societal institutions—Didion simultaneously laid all her cards on the table and kept others hidden. She shuffled her cards, created illusions to mislead other players, and fought for control of her cards and the table itself. By doing this, not only did she blur the lines

between her fiction and nonfiction—as well as the genre implications of both—but she blurred the rules of the game. She did more than play it as it laid: she bent the rules to her liking. Though her time playing the game has ended, I'm sure that many of her cards remain unturned. She, like her characters, was aware that winning was pointless. That the game itself was pointless. So why did she play?

While there are many reasons, I think the best answer is found in her 1966 essay "On Keeping a Notebook" from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*:

> See enough and write it down, I tell myself, and then some morning when the world seems drained of wonder, some day when I am only going through the motions of doing what I am supposed to do, which is to write—on that bankrupt morning I will simply open my notebook and there it will all be, a forgotten account with accumulated interest, paid passage back to the world out there. . . . My stake is always, of course, in the unmentioned girl with the plaid silk dress. *Remember what it was to be me*: that is always the point (135–136).

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