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Joan Didion and the American Dream

JOEL ALDEN SCHLOSSER

“DREAMERS,” declares Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me*, believe the lie of the American dream, deifying democracy to avoid the human costs it has entailed. “Historians conjured the Dream,” Coates writes. “Hollywood fortified the Dream. The Dream was gilded by novels and adventure stories.” As Jedediah Purdy writes, dreamers are “blinker people who imagine America an easy and untroubled home. . . . Dreamers decorate their history with bunting and streamers.” For Coates, these dreamers do not just exhibit bad faith; the disavowal of their complicity in structures of terror against black bodies effectively supports these structures, continuing the legacies of racism in the United States. Dreamers implicitly support a politics of racial exclusion and unjustifiable violence. “It is the innocence,” as James Baldwin declared, “that constitutes the crime.”

Coates’s recent invocation of the American dream as a destructive and evasive fantasy has a strange affinity with a writer who rarely touched the “race beat”: Joan Didion. Yet from her puncturing of the Haight-Ashbury hippies to her skewering of the storytellers on both sides of the aisle in Congress, Didion has interrogated the delusions of the American polity for the past fifty years. Didion’s unswerving observation and sense of the revealing detail propel a critique that is both trenchant and substantive, chronicling the delusions endemic to American democracy and assembling an account that implicates the citizens of cities like Lakewood, California, as well as public figures like Kenneth Starr and Joe Klein. In her essays, Didion names these democratic delusions “the dreamwork,” the mechanics of which is precise if variegated: to avoid confronting their history of violence, destructive inequalities, the desiccation of the democratic system, and a host of other very real social and political injustices, Americans construct fantasies of prosperity, international humanitarianism, and good governance. This “dreamwork” represents everything that shimmers

about “America”: glistening beaches on Oahu or Malibu; the frontier stories of survival and triumph. Yet buzzwords and euphemism hide gritty and unsavory realities; “Ronald Reagan the movie,” in Michael Rogin’s phrase, becomes a model of successful politics. As Thomas Reinert puts it, “Few writers expose so deftly the theatricality, the self-dramatization, the fantasy, the clichés, the rhetorical loopiness involved in what gets said when people talk about politics.”

Still, if Didion’s work anticipates the kind of critique exemplified by Coates, her multiple approaches to these themes as well as her awareness of her own involvement in them make her work a rich site for considering the complexities of the American dream and how to work through its delusions. In this essay, I read Didion’s work as a response to American democracy’s susceptibility to the dreamwork. While Coates joins a chorus of writers uncovering evasions at work in the American polity, Didion shows us the deep roots of these tendencies and the inextricability of the desires animating them. Her work demonstrates a dismaying trouble, namely, the impossibility of escaping such delusory stories, an impossibility that Didion herself endeavors to confront.

Most interpreters of Didion have read her symptomatically, finding in her work signs of declining American imperialism, for example; here, in contrast, I read Didion’s work not to diagnose a pathology but rather as a site of struggle with and against a pervasive thought form in political life today. Didion’s different genres of literary production allow for different approaches to this problem; in each a “Didion” character takes up this struggle against evasion and delusion. The dreamwork of her nonfiction announces a problem much as Coates does, but the allure of romance in her fiction suggests the undeniable attraction of coherence and some form of dream. When Didion turns most directly to herself in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*, moreover, she confronts her own kind of delusion, the “magical thinking” that allows her to flee the reality of her husband’s sudden death. This culminating self-examination prompts a reassessment of her entire life and a recognition of the delusions under which it was lived.

Alongside her critique of the dreamwork Didion introduces narrative as a possible response to the delusionary tendencies at work in American democracy. While narrative can underwrite evasion, naming narrative as dangerous allows Didion to use it without losing her critical distance. Indeed, the very role of the narrator, the character of Joan Didion that allows for distance from what is being narrated, creates a crucial interval between coherent story and the remembered residua of incoherence. Through their self-conscious grappling with the dangers and possibilities of narrative, Didion's essays, novels, and memoirs dramatize a struggle toward ambivalence, a process of reconciliatory yet ultimately unsatisfying acceptance of reality. For Didion herself, this process leads to mourning not just the loss of her husband and her daughter but the destruction of her fantasies about the insulating protection of her own privilege. Didion thus shows readers how to mourn the loss of the American dream and offers a practice for today's dreamers to acknowledge this loss and to begin to piece together a way to live in the face of a broken and unforgiving world. "A very large number of Americans will do all they can to preserve the Dream," writes Coates. Grappling with the delusions of American dreamwork in its manifold varieties, Didion comes to question how she herself has preserved the dream and limns a mode of response to its necessary destruction.



Rereading Joan Didion is a dispiriting affair. For the last fifty years, Didion has crafted piercing appraisals of her fellow Americans, yet many of these assessments remain unheard. Dwindling water reserves and forest fires across the American West; the euphemisms of "democracy building" and "winning hearts and minds" obscuring neo-imperial domination abroad; racialized violence ignored and endemic in America's cities; a growing gap between the haves and the have-nots; speculative bubbles enriching the former while their bursting further immiserates the latter; the emptying of vital community life in the pursuit of the overarching American fantasy of "absolute personal freedom, mobility, privacy": Didion has named again and again the sins and shortcomings of the United States during the past fifty

years. And her work reminds us repeatedly of how little the story has changed.

Take, for example, the case of life in the American West. Here is Didion writing in 1977:

It is easy to forget that the only natural force over which we have any control out here is water, and that only recently. In my memory California summers were characterized by the coughing in the pipes that meant the well was dry, and California winters by all-night watches on rivers about to crest, by sandbagging, by dynamite on the levees and flooding on the first floor. Even now the place is not all that hospitable to extensive settlement. As I write a fire has been burning out of control for two weeks in the ranges behind the Big Sur coast. Flash floods last night wiped out all major roads into Imperial County. I noticed this morning a hairline crack in the living-room tile from last week's earthquake, a 4.4 I never felt.

Didion acknowledges attempts to bring water under control while denying, at the same time, that this control is real: fires rage, flood waters rise, earthquakes threaten the fragile infrastructure meant to harness nature's forces. In other words, the dream of easeful life in the American West is a fantasy—one to which even Didion herself shows susceptibility. "Several million tons of concrete. . . made the Southwest plausible," yet when Didion walks across the marble star map built into Hoover Dam, she recognizes this as "an image" she had always seen, the fantasy of "a dynamo finally free of man, splendid at last in its absolute isolation, transmitting power and releasing water to a world where no one is." After winning her acclaim as a writer of the Western mystique, Didion realizes her own delusions when she returns to her birthplace after having lived in New York for a decade. As she walks the wooden sidewalks of redeveloped Sacramento, she sees the false image she has always believed. "It was no more than a theme, a decorative effect."

For Didion, the American West also bespeaks broader tendencies across the United States. "Things had better work here," Didion writes of California, "because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent." In the 1950s, California appeared to

contain the essence of the American dream, where ordinary people could find good work, own their own homes, and enjoy the fruits of an amenable climate. Lakewood, California, represented this dream, a “little suburbia” or “America, USA, right here,” in the words of its residents. In April 1950, thousands lined up to tour the seven completed and furnished model homes of this 17,500 house development, “a tract larger in conception than the original Long Island Levittown.” “Deals were closed on 611 houses the first week. One week saw construction started on 567. A new foundation was excavated every fifteen minutes.” The inhabitants were, “typically, blue-collar and lower-level white collar,” with 1.7 children and steady jobs. “Their experience tended to reinforce the conviction that social and economic mobility worked exclusively upward.”

Yet by 1993—when the McDonnell Douglas plant had closed, when Honeywell and the other contractors had laid off thousands, when the Naval Station was slated for decommissioning—this “conviction” began to appear increasingly fantastical. The “perfect synergy of time and place” that the city and its citizens had seemingly embodied hid a “tacit dissonance at the center of every moment in Lakewood.” The dream of enthusiastic property owners, all with their own stake in the land, “was a sturdy but finally unsupportable ambition, sustained for forty years by good times and the good will of the federal government.”

If this story sounds too familiar in the wake of the recent recession, Didion does not merely anticipate the reporting of George Packer or Naomi Klein. While chronicling the damage, Didion also explains what she calls the “dreamwork” behind and around these mistakes and failings. As she sees it, to support their disavowals of the failings and human costs of the American dream, Americans engage in various forms of fantastical evasion from religious cults to nativism to reassuring narratives of progress and development. Observing the American scene in its cities as well as its forgotten wilderness, in Washington DC as well as those lands shadowed by Washington, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, Didion describes the function of the dreamwork of the American project and in doing so illuminates what

sustains Americans' persistent blindness toward the contradictions contained by their commitments to equality, freedom, and democracy.

By dreamwork Didion means something different from the technical Freudian sense of the term. As Freud explains in his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, the "dreamwork" describes how the latent dream content becomes manifest through condensation, displacement, the transformation of thoughts into visual images, and the production of contraries. The analyst interprets this manifest content as a means of articulating what is latent. For Didion, in contrast, the dreamwork involves a more passive and delusional process. The dreamwork functions to evade the responsibility to make things work, to avoid confronting the inevitable contradictions of the place and the people who live there. By naming the dreamwork, Didion calls attention to its unreality, the absurdity underlying the various dreams through which Americans pursue their lives: Pentecostals who participate in national anxieties through a glass darkly, "unviolated by common knowledge"; biker movies that orchestrate their audience's inchoate resentments; Dallas Beardsley from Palms, California, who wants "to be known" and will sacrifice anything to achieve celebrity; the lost souls of Gamblers Anonymous who seek some repair from "the program." As Didion reports on the hysteria and paranoia of the Manson murders, she reflects: "So many encounters in those years were devoid of any logic save that of the dreamwork." These dreamworks arise as modes of avoidance, ways of fleeing far harsher realities.

The dreamwork thus functions as an inversion of Richard Hofstadter's paranoid style: not a shared belief in a gigantic conspiracy but a shared sentimentality; not a polarization of differences into good and evil but a smoothing over of all complexity; not a beleaguered and embattled self on the brink of redemption but "happy families" in the "promised land." The dreamwork leads Americans to treat any social problem as solvable, an approach Didion locates both in the decision by the California Department of Transportation (CalTrans) to introduce "Diamond Lanes" and big electronic message boards over freeways in an attempt to convince Southern California drivers to give up their cars, as well as in the United States government's interventions in El

Salvador in the late seventies and early eighties. “The American effort in El Salvador,” Didion writes, “seemed based on auto-suggestion, a dreamwork devised to obscure any intelligence that might trouble the dreamer,” a habit she later describes as a tendency “to improving upon rather than illuminating the situation.” Dreamwork thus encourages creative and self-serving redescription, the invention of neologism and the eloquence of rationalization. CalTrans’ message boards alerting drivers to bad traffic show no signs of actually improving matters, but the bureaucrats, on Didion’s account, remain undeterred. So too in El Salvador, denials of certainty about the Salvadorian government’s involvement in the El Mozote massacres allow American officials to act as if nothing has occurred at all. Writing from Miami in the 1980s, Didion details the violence and disaffection in the wake of the US abandonment of Cuba to the Castro regime, and here too the dreamwork plays its role: “In the superimposition of the Washington dreamwork on that of Miami there has always been room . . . for everyone to believe what they need to believe.”

For the “Washington dreamwork” Didion reserves her most penetrating ire. In Washington Didion discovers modern incarnations of the sentimental political myths Hofstadter describes in *The American Political Tradition*, which on Didion’s reading consist above all in the overriding fantasy that “the process” works. *Political Fictions*, Didion’s collections of essays on Washington from the Reagan years through the 2000 election, tracks “the ways in which the political process did not reflect but increasingly proceeded from a series of fables about American experience”: about the “average American voter”; about the importance of a candidate’s “character” in an election; about the “choice” promised by the electoral system as a whole. Didion thus indicts the fantastical thinking that leads the Reagan administration to believe that putting the president on display under just the right circumstances could solve any problem, the insistence that the winner of an election will be whoever tells the best story, and the “spiritless social contract” that treats voting as a consumer transaction, with voters “paying” with their vote to obtain the ear of their professional politician.

Just as the dreamwork of the West insulates and distances the dreamers from the difficult and complicated realities they face, the dreamwork of Washington produces remoteness from the electorate. While Hofstadter's paranoid style personalizes history, Didion's dreamwork depersonalizes it, abstracting from reality to sustain a self-congratulatory story about American democracy. Because the political class regards its obsessions and ambitions as coextensive with those of ordinary Americans, this remoteness only increases when governance actually happens. Many other Americans—those suffering from bankruptcies and failed businesses, those without jobs or denied public assistance when Clinton ended welfare as we knew it—are left out of the process. “This is what America looks like,” then-Governor Clinton announced when he led Hillary, Al and Tipper Gore, and the rest of his “successful cast” off the plane at La Guardia en route to the Democratic National Convention. Yet this was the summer that Los Angeles burned and 213,000 jobs vanished in the city of New York alone. “Those inside the process had congealed into a permanent political class, the defining characteristic of which was its readiness to abandon those not inside the process.”

This dreamwork sustains itself not just because of the remoteness of the self-rewarding and self-congratulating political class but also because journalists have become insiders to the process as well. The first drafts of history participate in buttressing the American dreamwork. Bob Woodward wins his scoops not through hard-nosed investigative reporting but because of the “deferential spirit” that pervades his treatment of sources. The informant who talks to Woodward knows that his or her testimony “will be not only respected but burnished into the inside story”—which explains why so many people line up to divulge. Writing during the Clinton scandals and reflecting on the lack of critical scrutiny when Clinton first appeared on the political scene, Didion skewers the press for their complicity in perpetuating the insider game:

Then as now, the press could be relied upon to report a rumor or a hint down to the ground (tree it, bag it, defoliate the forest

for it, destroy the village for it), but only insofar as that rumor or hint gave promise of advancing the story of the day, the shared narrative, the broad line of whatever story was at the given moment commanding the full resources of the reporters covering it and the columnists commenting on it and the on-tap experts analyzing it on the talk shows.

The press, in effect, set the agenda: “Once the ‘zeitgeist’ has been agreed upon by this quite small group of people, any unrelated event, whatever its actual significance, becomes either non-news or, if sufficiently urgent, a news brief.” Yet this agenda setting takes place within the Washington Beltway, far from the rest of America.

No events more clearly testified to the remoteness of the political class, the nearly total “congealment” of those inside the process and the resulting exclusion of ordinary Americans, than the years of scandals, investigations, and impeachment proceedings during the Clinton presidency. Here a zeitgeist had been agreed upon—that Americans were up in arms about President Clinton’s sexual improprieties—but when polls revealed that Americans didn’t much care—that the balanced budget, welfare reform, and the death penalty ranked as more important issues—the press and the rest of the political class turned against them. “The public was fine, the elites were not,” an unnamed White House advisor told the *Washington Post*. As a Republican strategist asked, “Who cares what every adult thinks? It’s totally not germane to this election.” This kind of dreamwork—delusional, fantastical, magical as well as self-reinforcing, insular, knowing, and uncritical—pervades the American democracy Didion describes.



If Didion’s more recent critique of the remoteness of political and media elites from “real Americans” seems to anticipate today’s rhetoric from the right, Didion distinguishes herself by holding no cow sacred. This vision of the American dreamwork undertaken and sustained across the past fifty years by itself has a claim to the attention of any student of American political life. Even while Didion’s own political views shifted from the “Goldwater Girl” of the 1960s to an

idiosyncratic regular at the *New York Review of Books*, her critical scrutiny of the American dreamwork has persisted: what afflicted the “dreams of a golden land” also beset journalists covering the Central Park jogger as well as Democratic and Republican lawmakers; no American seemed exempt from being a dreamer for Didion.

No American except Didion herself. Across her nonfiction, Didion sees through the delusions even as she constructs versions of herself as imperfect and marginal: the “physically small. . . temperamentally unobtrusive, and. . . neurotically inarticulate” journalist of *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*; the “not quite omniscient author” of *The Last Thing He Wanted*; or, in *Political Fictions*, the outsider “naïve” enough to call Michael Dukakis’s game of catch on the tarmac in Phoenix a farce. When seen in the broader context of the American dreamwork and its blindness toward the losses it occasions, the character of Didion also reveals a deeper tension: while Didion denies, repeatedly, the therapeutic function of writing, her writing nonetheless renders intelligible what had been inarticulate. Didion makes sense of the world through her writing even while she questions the redemptive power of narrative—“For what exactly, and at what cost, had one been redeemed?” Didion asks in *Where I Was From*—and doubts her own powers of articulation. Yet while doing so, Didion also opens up herself as well as her readers to another species of delusion; that is, she risks replacing the American dreamwork she criticizes with a dreamwork of her own fashioning.

Facing both the most lamentable as well as the most risible in the American dreamwork, Didion is never at a loss for words. She can describe her own afflictions with unwavering precision: her depressive condition, her migraines, her self-doubts and hesitations. She can evoke the “special way of being alive” occasioned by driving Los Angeles freeways or the decadent, old-world feel of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. She is a painter with words who finds a deep affinity with Georgia O’Keeffe, “clean of received wisdom and open to what she sees.”

Yet while Didion distinguishes herself with her ability to word the world, she also explicitly doubts her own abilities as well as the sufficiency of narrative for understanding. She frequently returns to

the insistence that, as she puts it in *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, “writing was an irrelevant act.” This tension between Didion’s articulacy and the very adequacy of narrative appears most powerfully in a series of reversals at the beginning of *The White Album*, highlighting an unremarked irony in the title of the recent omnibus of Didion’s nonfiction. “We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” Didion begins, inscribing the lines that would later entitle the volume. She continues:

The princess is caged in the consulate. The man with the candy will lead the children into the sea. The naked woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor is a victim of accidie, or the naked woman is an exhibitionist, and it would be “interesting” to know which.

When Didion begins with “princess,” one might assume she will invoke a more familiar princess story—about a pea, say, or a charming prince. But Didion’s stories are discomfiting and strange. These narrative lines will allow us to piece together the disparate, incoherent moments of our lives, but there’s no guarantee that the script we create will prove reassuring.

Such would be an initial interpretation of Didion’s “we tell ourselves stories in order to live,” one not so different from Hannah Arendt’s invocation of the apocryphal Isak Dinesen apothegm that “all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.” In the next paragraph, however, Didion spins on her heel: “Or at least we do for a while. I am talking here about a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories that I had ever told myself, a common condition but one I found troubling.” We tell ourselves stories in order to live “for a while.” The shift in tone, the sudden transit from reassuring generalization to retrospective and specific insight sounds like the backward glance of someone whose human wisdom has come through suffering. “Doubting the premises” implies something deeper, more disturbing than simply wondering if a story might be true. Something is lost. “I was supposed to have a script,” Didion writes, “but had mislaid it.” She continues, “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." Here a third change in direction appears: not only do we cease telling ourselves stories in order to live, but stories lose their intelligibility. That is, we do not simply "grow out" of stories; stories themselves, upon closer inspection, lose an intelligible function. Because the sense of the story depends entirely on how we craft it—"one could change the sense with every cut"—stories too become susceptible to the illogic of the dreamwork. Stories may connect through some physical means ("more electrical") but no longer do they speak to how we live now (the "ethical").

This sense of the inadequacy of narrative—its failure to make our experience intelligible without falling into the delusions of the dreamwork—runs throughout Didion's work, its explicitness in tension with the intelligible and intelligent narratives that Didion crafts through her writing itself. At times, the reversals appear as starkly as at the beginning of *The White Album*. Didion describes the packing list taped inside her closet door in Hollywood during the years she was reporting more or less steadily. "This was a list made by someone who prized control, yearned after momentum, someone determined to play her role as if she had the script, heard her cues, knew the narrative." Yet in the subsequent section of the essay, driving a Budget Rent-A-Car between Sacramento and San Francisco, Didion finds herself afflicted by the "fright" of meeting too many people "who spoke favorably about bombing power stations." She closes her eyes and drives across the Carquinas Bridge: "Nothing on my mind was in the script as I remembered it."

When Didion turns directly to herself, the tension becomes subtler. On the one hand, Didion includes her own psychiatric evaluation, letting the authority of its diagnosis of her "fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive" condition stand unquestioned. Didion can describe the "guerrilla war" with her own life, fighting her illnesses as well as her ambition, inwardness, intolerance, and rigidly organized

perfectionism. Yet on the other hand, when she is confronted with a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, “the name had no meaning.” “It was another story without a narrative.”



Commentators on Didion have noticed her grappling with narrative and sense making. As Tracey Daugherty observes in his recent biography, “even as Didion frets about narratives in tatters, she is weaving narrative.” But seeing a continuity between the dreamwork of the American dreamers and Didion’s own self-evaluation opens a more complicated problem: the problem not merely that narrative no longer seems sufficient but that the clear-eyed directness, the fine-grained details with which Didion convinces us of her intelligence and truthfulness, itself depend on a narrative—that Didion cannot escape the delusions of the dreamwork she diagnoses in American politics. Turning to Didion’s novels offers another vantage point on this problem, allowing us to see how narrating itself can succumb to a dreamwork even while the narrator consciously resists it.

The critic John Leonard (among others) pointed out how the heroines of Didion’s novels and Didion herself possess an unmistakable family resemblance; the contrast, however, between the two lies in their articulacy. Didion’s heroines lack the words to describe themselves and their situations; they remain “unknown women” made to sacrifice themselves and their lives with little explanation. Narratives not only fail to explain the complexity and complication of the world; they also fail because they are products of precisely the kinds of involuted and opaque selves that Didion portrays in the character of herself constructed through her essays. But Didion does not hold herself apart from this problem: she does not just employ unreliable narrators in her novels; she makes herself into these narrators. Here is the beginning of the second chapter of *Democracy*:

Call me the author.

Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion, upon whose character and doings much will depend on whatever interest

these pages may have, as she sits at her writing table in her own room in her own house on Welbeck Street.

The sophisticated reader would recognize this metafictional move as consistent with Didion's literary milieu; it's new journalism with a dash of Conrad or Melville. But the deeper point concerns how Didion undercuts whatever narrative coherence the novel offers not only by naming herself but by undermining her decisions. She is "the not quite omniscient narrator," as she puts it in *The Last Thing He Wanted*. In *Democracy*, she describes (as the narrator) how she wished to make the novel a romance but could not—she distrusts other people's versions as well as her own. The Didion-like narrator of *The Book of Common Prayer*—a disillusioned anthropologist who studied with Kroeber at Berkeley but has lost faith in the knowledge promised by social-scientific inquiry—ends her account by declaring "I have not been the witness I wanted to be." Characters remain mysteries and Didion's own character as the narrator does not just confess her partiality—"I wanted them to be together forever," she ends *The Last Thing He Wanted*—but calls into question the intelligibility of narrative entirely.

Looking closely at Didion's fourth novel, *Democracy*, helps to connect these radical doubts about narrative sense making to the political critique of the American dreamwork. Set during the shuddering years of American withdrawals from Southeast Asia, *Democracy* tracks Harry Victor's political campaign while also following the sporadic affair between his wife, Inez Victor (née Christian), and the political operative and international entrepreneur Jack Lovett. Playing the politician's wife prevents Inez from eloping with Lovett for much of her life, while the demands of Harry's career destroy whatever love once existed between her and her husband. Examining the space between the public self and the diminished private one, *Democracy* becomes a study of Inez's compensatory remoteness: how public life obliterates her memories as she finds herself forced to narrate her life only according to the dominant dreamwork ("as if you'd had shock treatment," she says); how "life outside camera range had become

only a remote idea”; how on those rare occasions when she does look back, she finds a “quite palpable unhappiness.” At the end of the novel, Inez has at last fled her marriage and absconded with Jack Lovett to Kuala Lumpur. Shortly after their arrival, however, Lovett dies of a heart attack while taking his morning swim. Inez must accompany the body on a seven-passenger Learjet from Pacific island to Pacific island—Halim to Manila, Manila to Guam, Guam to Honolulu with a few refueling stops on “certain atolls unavailable to commercial aircraft”—until she buries it near a jacaranda tree in the little graveyard at Schofield Barracks in Honolulu. Inez returns to Kuala Lumpur with “no special revelation, no instant of epiphany, no dramatic event.” She ceases to claim “the American exemption,” renouncing her stake in the story as she maintains her detachment and emotional solitude.

Readers of *Democracy* have generally approached the novel as an elegiac allegory of the rise and fall of American power after World War II. The deterioration of the Christian family represents imperial decline; Didion invokes the romance of empire while also showing its inevitable decadence. Yet Didion complicates this allegorical reading by calling into question the desire that impels the novel in the first place. As Allan Hepburn puts it, “Didion self-consciously critiques the tendency to cast American political fables as romances, while recognizing that almost no other mode exists to convey the American political imaginary.” This move appears in how Didion emplots herself as the narrator of the novel. “This is a hard story to tell,” she begins. “Didion” (the narrator) lays her “cards on the table” and shows herself piecing together “the shards of the novel” she once thought she was writing. Explaining, “Didion” confesses she had wanted to write “a study of provincial manners” but found herself unable to do so. The sentimental romantic story it might have been fell apart as “Didion” “lost patience” with it. Yet she still hopes for the story to become coherent in some way, picturing Inez or Jack, keeping notes about the way Jack waited for Inez, tacking photographs and news clippings on the bulletin board above her desk.

The incoherence of the narrative in *Democracy* suggests a broader incoherence to “democracy” itself. While “Didion” writes the novel,

she also describes herself teaching a course at Berkeley on politics and the novel in Orwell and Hemingway, Henry Adams and Norman Mailer. She seeks to “consider the political implications of both the reliance on and the distrust of abstract words, consider the social organization implicit in the use of the autobiographical third person.” Yet as “Didion” teaches this course she finds her attention pulled toward details in the dispatches from Southeast Asia, “pinned in the repetitions and dislocations.” The fantasy of “democracy”—that it might take the romantic form that “Didion” wishes for Jack and Inez—cannot incorporate the scroll of statistics, the death and violence and horror of neo-colonial war. The “normal turbulence of a nascent democracy” belies the fantasy that democracy is actually possible. And the incoherence of *Democracy* implies a deep incoherence in American democracy.

At the same time, while *Democracy* chronicles incoherence it also becomes a novel despite its fragmentary qualities. For all that “Didion” resists narrative, she cannot repress her storytelling impulse. “I was trained to distrust other people’s versions,” “Didion” writes, “but we go with what we have.” “Didion” wrestles with the novel but still produces something with an intelligible form: “It has not been the novel I set out to write,” she writes later in the book, “nor am I exactly the person who set out to write it.” Inez’s reasons for leaving Harry never quite compute: Jack’s sudden death—recalling the sudden death of another Jack—means the romance stops short of ripening. The dissolution of Harry’s political career evaporates the mirage of a romantic culmination to all the sacrifices: the events, the public personae, the imposition of remoteness. No longer able to pull together the story as she thought she could, “Didion” finds herself without the ending she had hoped for, bereft of the coherence that she sought. She grasps at reasons, realizing as the novel ends that narrative presumes a coherence that simply doesn’t exist: “Perhaps because nothing in this situation encourages the basic narrative assumption, which is that the past is prologue to the present, the options remain open here.”

Taken together with Didion’s own diagnosing of the dreamwork pervasive in American political life, skepticism about narrative and the knowledge or satisfaction it might hold bespeaks a deeper tension

across Didion's oeuvre: the tension between her questioning of narrative and the narrative form into which she puts her own writing, however fragmentary or marked by metafictionality. The questions raised by Didion's presence in the essays amplify in the novels. *Democracy* reveals the incoherence of American democracy in general and the difficulty of holding this disturbing disjointedness together without any kind of narrative.

Yet the impasse created by delusional narrative on the one hand and incoherence on the other also comes embedded in Didion's broader critique of the destructive dreamwork endemic to American democracy: the abstraction of "democracy" cannot hold together the jumble of military helicopters and political Newspeak, the promise of exporting democracy and the landing strips on unnamed atolls. Didion thus calls into question the very conditions of general intelligibility, of Americans' self-understandings and their capacities to speak and be understood by one another. The moments of "Didion's" self-scrutiny name not just a "crisis in authorial authority," as Alan Nadel has put it, but a crisis in communication at large. At the same time, however, narrative differs in a crucial respect from its cousin the dreamwork: narrative develops through the work of a narrator; the narrator narrates with varying degrees of self-consciousness. While indicating its proximity to the dreamwork, Didion yokes her forms of narrative to practices of self-conscious inquiry and analysis, the necessity of a more realistic and critical sense making.



Didion announces an impasse, an impasse in any effort to understand the self without the supportive but evasive framework of a dreamwork and an impasse within a polity allured by such dreamworks and unable to free itself from political myth entirely. In her essays, the dreamwork describes a multitude of delusions and fantasies that Americans maintain to avoid facing the complicated and senseless realities they inhabit. Yet even as Didion develops self-conscious and skeptical narration as a way of working through the dreamwork,

delusions do not depart easily. In *The Year of Magical Thinking* as well as *Blue Nights*, the dreamwork takes the form of magical thinking, which appears initially in Didion's recurrent fantasies—"delusionary thinking," she calls it—that her husband will return, that, for example, she cannot give away his shoes because he will need something to wear or that the autopsy will reveal that they have made a mistake and John Gregory Dunne is not actually dead. By focusing on her own process of working through delusions of magical thinking, the memoirs offer a window into the process of renarrating a life shorn of dreamworks and thus promise a pathway for dealing with the persistent delusions of American democracy.

Just as Didion's heroines feel themselves sucked into whirlpools of relationships and concatenating events beyond their control, in *Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights* Didion experiences a vortex of memory that pulls her into the past accompanied by a painful sense of loss. While she remembers her daughter Quintana's insistence that she not "dwell" on it, Didion cannot help reexperiencing her loss again and again and again. She plots her driving routes around Los Angeles to avoid triggering these difficult memories but cannot entirely predict what will set another eddy in motion. A visit to Madison Square Garden returns her to a Lakers-Knicks game with John. The theater where they saw *The Graduate* in 1967. A familiar stretch of coastal highway in a television commercial, a stretch outside the gatehouse on the Palos Verdes Peninsula at Portuguese Bend to which she and John had brought Quintana home from St. John's Hospital. "I had hit more dangerous water." "I could see the vortex coming," she writes, "but could not deflect it."

Yet beyond just "delusionary thinking," the dreamwork within *Magical Thinking* functions at a deeper level. We are so open to the persistent message that we can avert loss and death, Didion writes; we deeply want to live in such a world. This thinking reassures and comforts Didion, just as various dreamworks assuaged Americans in her essays. "I realize as I write this that I do not want to finish this account," Didion remarks toward the end of *Magical Thinking*.

Finishing the book means taking one step further away from the dreamwork it does not just describe but sustains. “This was demented, but so was I,” Didion observes.

This connection here between writing and the dreamwork should give us pause. While writing can identify the dreamwork and understand its deeply rooted delusions, it can also spawn new fantasies. Within this line (and within both grief memoirs taken together), then, we see Didion grappling with the essence of the problem afflicting American democracy: pervasive political delusions and evasion, which Didion names the dreamwork, and an inability to counter this dreamwork without crafting another dreamwork to replace it. Here the underlying mechanisms of Freud’s dreamwork also appear in Didion: the disavowal involved in splitting latent from manifest content, a disavowal against which both the analyst and Didion herself writes. Yet unlike the analyst, Didion also denies the coherent or exhaustive truthfulness claimed by the narrative of psychoanalysis (or writing) itself.

This problem has larger ramifications beyond Joan Didion; it also indicts her audience’s collective fascination with Didion herself, a fascination she has abetted through careful construction of a persona both in writing and in society. As profiles and reviews begin with a glamorous photograph of Didion—most often leaning against a Corvette Sting Ray convertible or gazing out over the Pacific Ocean from the porch of her Malibu home—and proceed to detail the romantic character that Didion has portrayed, this dream of the security of privilege grows ever more pervasive. But an absorption in Joan Didion herself risks missing the imposition of a dreamwork on that image. Even as readers confront the loss that Didion takes up in her memoirs, her “elitist allure,” in Meghan Daum’s words, has a powerful effect, one that is entirely consonant with the dreamwork’s evasive patterns of disavowal.



The Year of Magical Thinking and *Blue Nights* show the impasse of the dreamwork operating within Didion herself as she confronts

the delusion of stability and security under which she had lived. This confrontation, however, also involves a new theoretical turn, a step beyond mere realism and accuracy and toward a practice of working through the narratives and fantasies that have always framed her inquiries. As Didion attends her own dreamwork, the fantasy that success and happiness will not only last forever but that achieving this dream immures one against their destruction, Didion also introduces the psychoanalytic term of mourning to describe her magical thinking and its concomitant effects. She quotes Freud:

Each single one of the memories and the expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathet- ed, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it. . . . It is remarkable that this painful unpleasure is taken as a matter of course by us.

So Freud describes “the work of grief,” which Didion finds “suspiciously like” her own experience of the vortex; mourning seems to capture not just her response to the loss of her husband but her attempts to climb out of the delusions under which she has lived. “The power of grief to derange the mind,” examined by Freud and Melanie Klein, resonates with Didion; these descriptions “promise comfort, validation, an outside opinion that I was not imagining what appeared to be happening.” She comes to understand that she and her husband have never been far from “pathological bereavement,” that their lives, in many ways, have been framed by loss and responses to loss. Such an understanding requires Didion to question her own faith in the American dream.

While Didion does not explicitly take this additional step, the “work of grief” illuminates a process of working through loss with broader implications for the American dream and its dreamers. For Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia,” mourning involves replacing the lost object with a suitable alternative, a process of libidinal substitution. Yet Freud’s theory also offers an “overcoming” that subsequent psychoanalysts, especially Melanie Klein, have challenged. For Klein, one never completely overcomes the loss that pervades human life;

one simply learns to adapt better to it, to accept the ambivalence of our loved objects rather than insisting on the irreparable loss that their absence has occasioned. Didion's writing seeks such an adaptation, finding the words that can mark loss yet giving these always-inadequate words an order and a form denoting a kind of acceptance.

The work of mourning for Didion involves crafting a language out of the shards of the shattered dreamwork, finding something intelligible but not definitive to hold together the incoherence of existence. As Didion's novels intimate, a certain kind of narration plays a key role here: one needs distance enough to see a story *as a story* while at the same time feeling that story *as one's own*. In her memoirs Didion builds on this as a potential response to the dangers created by narration's proximity to the dreamwork, pursuing a narrative that might not succumb to the delusions of the dreamwork, one that can instead hold at once both the senselessness of the event and Didion's work of sense making. Her "attempt to make sense of the period," Didion writes early in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, had to acknowledge that she needed "more than words to find meaning." She envisions instead a cutting room, equipped with an Avid, a digital editing system "on which I could touch a key and collapse the sequence of time" to show the simultaneity of the frames of memory that come to her now. Still, Didion proceeds through words, circling terms and phrases, seeking articulation apart from conventions and stock phrases, the habitual thought patterns of the American dreamwork. Didion wants to find a way to shore up fragments against her ruins.

The work of mourning thus begins by refusing the conventional narratives, the usual ways of making sense of loss, which have come crashing down with the experience of bereavement. As Didion writes near the end of *The Year of Magical Thinking*: "This will not be a story in which the death of the husband or wife becomes what amounts to the credit sequence for a new life, a catalyst for the discovery that. . . 'you can love more than one person.'" This refusal of narrative echoes the narrator's declaration in *Democracy*. Here, however, Didion cannot resolve the incoherence into the shape of a novel; she

must live with the knowledge that her previous life contained within it a basic misunderstanding.

Yet Didion's work of mourning does not ensure a complete confrontation with her own delusions. Examining the life of her daughter Quintana Roo, *Blue Nights* comes up to the edge of an even deeper delusion about the insulation of privilege and leaves it uninterrogated. Didion won't "cop" to Quintana Roo's "privilege"; she will not acknowledge that part of what makes the loss of her daughter so unbearable comes from its being amplified by the loss of her overarching fantasy. There's still evasion. The work of mourning thus holds a promise unfulfilled; it does not excavate every delusion. Didion ends up like so many of her heroines, still suffering under delusions. Yet, her naming of this delusion does distinguish her. Like Inez, she has given up the American dream and can question, if not outright reject, the reassuring story about her social position. The language of mourning reminds us of the baseline of loss—lost illusions that are painful and difficult to extricate from the ways we narrate our lives—that can elicit confrontation with the self and the delusions it sustains.

Didion's writing involves both grasping for the materials of such a narrative—those strands of memory swirling in the vortex, those shining details that she so brilliantly evokes across her writings—as well as pushing away the forms in which such moments are usually, sensibly comprehended. Such a work leads to unmistakable ambivalence, the ambivalence that Melanie Klein associates with what she calls "the depressive position," a recognition of "poignant psychic reality." Or, as Didion puts it: "It is the blight *man* was born for. / We are not idealized wild things."



In recent years, public loss and death have again become omnipresent—in Parkland, Ferguson, Staten Island, Baltimore, Charleston, and Cincinnati, to invoke just a few of the sites of unintelligible bereavement—and yet the present rituals of mourning and language for articulating these losses seem inadequate to the task. There is no

upside. Managerial skills will not serve us well here. As Didion puts it, “The craziness is receding but no clarity is taking its place.” Coates and others invoke the language of delusionary American dreams; Didion reminds us of the difficulty of clarity, the impossibility of “solving” these problems without working through our own delusive attachments. Didion’s continuing attraction may lie in the dreamwork that she seems to present in the character of Joan Didion, yet both the examples of the novels and her own testimony to the impossibility of completely abjuring such a dreamwork militate against this. If loss has not yet touched us, it soon will. Denying any way to escape the history of violence and disavowal endemic to American democracy, Didion’s work illuminates, amid its chiaroscuro of doubt and skepticism, a course of possible redress, not a redemptive vision but a pathway toward repair.

In effect, Coates’s *Between the World and Me* declares, as Purdy puts it, “This is intolerable . . . We must press toward another world.” Didion, in contrast, returns us to the contestation that produces any “we.” And if Coates’s argument seems to envision a Didion-esque realism of arriving at the truth through hard-nosed examination, Didion’s work as a whole shows the dangerousness of believing that one could ever be, as she described Georgia O’Keeffe, “clean of received wisdom and open to what she sees.” By denying the entanglements of shared language and deep-seated delusions, the self-possessed, distant observer position itself concocts a fantasy. At her best, Didion shares with her readers the aporia of thinking and writing, the impasse of inquiry when confronting the need for stories as well as their dangerousness.

Unlike Coates’s critical realism, Didion continues to remind her readers, moreover, of the stories we tell in order to live. All stories involve some delusion and some may well be necessary. We want to live according to scripts; indeed, we often have no choice. In political terms, Didion acknowledges the deep romance of American democracy, how we live out, in the quotidian of being citizens, democratic aspirations toward wholeness and coherence. The complexity of Didion herself as a narrator across the nonfiction, fiction, and memoirs bares the heart of democratic striving: the internal struggle to examine

the riven self that both animates and impedes any collective change. Didion's *Democracy* inclines us toward romance while showing its impossibility.

"There is no real way to deal with everything we lose," Didion writes in the final pages of *Where I Was From*, her reckoning not just with her own geography and her mother's death but with the history of fantasies and illusions—the dreamwork or the stories we tell—in California and in America. This sentence interweaves the personal and the political and gestures to the broader problem of the dreamwork and American democracy that unites Didion's work. Didion confronts herself and her readers with the loss of the American dream, showing the destruction of the fantasies of continuous growth and security as bulwarks against change and decay. As John Leonard put it, "All these years, Didion has been writing about loss." Didion's unheard prophecies catalogue these losses: the lost dream of an easeful life in the American West; the lost fantasy of responsive democratic governance; the lost illusion of the United States as a "beacon of justice" for the world; the lost magical thinking that "the blue nights could last forever." The evasions of American democracy and the innocence, in Baldwin's language, of its citizens continue to plague the polity. At the same time as she marks these losses, Didion denies any straightforward way to deal with them: words seem inadequate, narratives always incomplete. Didion's turn toward mourning suggests a practice of working through the crumbling American dream and toward a deeper appreciation of the ambivalence of American political life. We would do well to follow her.