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“My Hands on the Turbine”: Joan Didion, Water, and Control

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Joan Didion, Water, and Control

Abstract

Water—California water—is a recurring presence in Joan Didion’s work, both her fiction and nonfiction; it is, indeed, an ‘obsession.’ In this article, I argue that water control—as epitomized by the Hoover Dam and California water history—has its counterpart in control over writing, the total command of Didion’s obsessively honed prose. I do so by analyzing two essays of the 1970s (“At the Dam,” “Holy Water”) and her 2003 memoir Where I Was From.

Keywords: *Joan Didion, water, control, The White Album, Where I Was From*

Water—California water—is a recurring presence in Joan Didion’s work, in both her fiction and nonfiction; it is, indeed, an ‘obsession.’ The ‘stuff’ of Didion’s first novel, *Run River* (1963), is “the landscape and weather of the Sacramento Valley, the way the rivers crested” (Didion 2003, 157), with the Sacramento River not only constantly threatening floods and draughts, but also being the site of two suicides and a murder, essentially the drowning of a family and its legacy.¹ In one of the most iconic scenes of her second novel, *Play It As It Lays* (1970), the protagonist, Maria Wyeth, drives to Hoover Dam and “there on the desert” begins to feel “the pressure and pull of the water” and becomes “faint with vertigo” (Didion 2005, 171). In a 1977 interview with Sara Davidson, Didion referred to a non-fiction book project she was currently working on (the then abandoned *Fairy Tales*) in these terms:

I have always sort of wanted to write a book about California water. I’m interested in water—the pipes that water goes through, the mechanics of getting the water from place to place. I could look at a flume all day. I love dams, the way they almost makes me weak, it’s so beautiful. (Didion in Davidson 2018, 29, emphasis added)

¹ “...nobody in Sacramento any more had even heard of the McClellans. Or the Knights.” (Didion 1994, 5). For an analysis of the fluvial motif in *Run River* see Goggans 2010.

Only ten months after this interview, Didion published “Holy Water” in *Esquire*, later collected in *The White Album* (1979) together with the earlier piece “At the Dam.”² In both essays, Didion talks explicitly about her obsession for dams and, in “At the Dam,” she recalls the genuine pleasure of putting her hands on the turbine of Hoover Dam: “for a long time I just stood there with my hands on the turbine. It was a peculiar moment” (Didion 2009, 200).

Didion’s obsessive interest in water is also inseparable from her California family history, as shown in “Notes from a Native Daughter” (1965), republished in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), the first non-fiction piece in which she comes to terms with her geographical, historical, cultural and familial California heritage.³ The Sacramento River, which pervades *Run River* (Goggans 2010), resurfaces:

I remember swimming (albeit nervously, for *I was a nervous child, afraid of sinkholes* and afraid of snakes, and perhaps that was the beginning of my error) the same rivers we had swum for a century. The Sacramento, so rich in silt that we could barely see our hands a few inches beneath the surface; the American, running clean and fast with melted Sierra snow until July, when it would slow down, and rattlesnakes would sun themselves on its newly exposed rocks. (Didion 2008, 171, emphasis added)

As Didion will laconically confirm in a variation on the same theme in *Where I Was From*—“I learned to swim in the Sacramento and the American, *before the dams*” (Didion 2003, 38, emphasis added)—the watershed event in the 20th-century history of the Sacramento River is the construction of the Shasta Dam (1937-1945). A periodization—*before* and *after* the dams—that, as Didion knows, applies to California history as well. In addition, the financial or business aspect of water is highlighted—even typographically: “there is over the main street of Modesto an arched sign which reads: WATER – WEALTH/CONTENTMENT – HEALTH” (Didion 2008, 182). Didion’s eighth-grade graduation speech (June 1948), “Our California Heritage,” which is quoted at length in her 2003 memoir *Where I Was From*, is evidence of “the blinkering effect of the local dreamtime,” a familiar California narrative that has shaped the author’s beliefs in the myth of the West for over four decades, until her admittedly belated realization that that very narrative does not “add up” (Didion 2003, 17; 19). The central part of the speech by the then fourteen-year-old sixth-generation Californian is organized around water: “We had an irrigation

² *The White Album* is her second non-fiction book. “At the Dam” was originally published in *Life* with the title “A Piece of Work for Now and Doomsday,” 13 March 1970, 20B; “Holy Water” in *Esquire*, 1 December 1977, 73-76. Both are reprinted in Didion 2009: “Holy Water,” 59-66; “At the Dam,” 198-201.

³ “Notes from a Native Daughter” was originally published in *Holiday*, October 1965.

problem, so we built the greatest dams the world has known. Now both desert and valley are producing food in enormous quantities” (2003, 17).

As a book about California history combining personal elegy and historical accuracy, *Where I Was From* had engaged Didion’s attention since the late 1970s. It was only with the death of her mother, in 2001,⁴ however, that she could finally distance herself from family and national narratives about California and find the right genre and stylistic frame for her *de profundis*.⁵ For the first time in Didion’s work, California emerges here as both a topographical and geological landscape as well as a cultural construction that has historically depended on water, on the abundance (rains and floods) or absence (draughts and fires) of it, and, ultimately, on the possibility to harness all natural resources, and specifically the copiousness of its river basins fed by rain and snowmelt.⁶ At a historical level, *Where I Was From* shows how, starting with the Reclamation Act in 1902, the creation of 20th-century Californian economy and lifestyle was only possible through federally subsidized projects meant to tame rivers and build dams and irrigation canals.⁷ Yet, the uniqueness of Didion’s contribution lies in the deconstruction of the cultural-mythic fabric of the California success story and is not historical, but historiographical.

⁴ Didion’s father had died in 1997. In her 2003 interview with Dave Eggers about the genesis of *Where I Was From* she said: “[...] I don’t think I could have written it before my parents died. [T]he death of my parents started me thinking more about what my own relationship to California was” (in Eggers 2018, 97).

⁵ “When critics accused Didion of “saying goodbye to California” with this book, of giving up on the place, she was astonished. They had mistaken her sorrow for anger. She said, “It’s a love song, as I read it” (Daugherty 2015, 528).

⁶ An important part of the literary and new journalistic representations of California environmental history throughout the second half of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century has interrogated the relationship between historical, geographical, and geological facts—thus relying on the hard sciences as explanatory frames of reference—in the shaping of a set of defined catastrophic narratives. Works as diverse as Mike Davis’s *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998) and Joan Didion’s *Where I Was From* illustrate how the blurring of boundaries between literature, essays and journalism has been one of the most shared narrative strategies in late-20th century rewriting of Californian history from very diversified yet necessarily environmental perspectives.

⁷ A particularly useful reference for the historical and geographical understanding of the topic is the 1979 *California Water Atlas*—a reference for *Where I Was From*. Table 1, “Historic Water Development,” shows how California’s waterscape is dotted with lakes and canals built for flood control, irrigation (mostly), and urban water supply and the changes between 1912 (yellow) and 1972 (blue) are so visible to be self-explanatory. Table 2, “Measured and Unimpaired Streamflows,” is possibly even more telling: each diagram pair represents streamflow past a gauging station, with the farther diagram (in blue) representing the hypothetical ‘virgin’ condition as it would have been if there were no artificial diversions or storage facilities. Within this table, a detail on the Colorado River measured at three different points of its course—midstream (Lee’s Ferry and Davis Dam) and downstream (Palo Verde)—is particularly impressive (Kahrl, 1979, Table 1 and 2).

In Didion’s historiographical revision of California history, water is not only the most relevant natural element and historical factor, but it also serves as a metaphor for the fluidity of writing strategies that move across different sources, genres and discourses (Daugherty 2015, 525).⁸

It should not come as a surprise that *Where I Was From* is exactly the work in which Didion’s narrative of California water comes full circle, providing the reversal of the “can-do approach” (Didion 2003, 48) that made the settlement of the Southwest “plausible” (Didion 2009, 199). The 2003 memoir is, in fact, a counter-narrative to the California myth she herself had believed in and contributed to in her previous works, especially in “At the Dam,” “Holy Water” and “Girl of the Golden West” (collected in *After Henry*).⁹

What engages and haunts Didion about California water history in her 1970s pieces is its function as an overriding metaphor for *control*: she has a “passion for seeing the water under control. [...] Water is important to people who do not have it, and the same is true of control” (Didion 2009, 65, emphasis added). In the following, I will argue that water control—as epitomized by the Hoover Dam—has its counterpart in control over writing, that is Didion’s total command of her *obsessively* honed prose. If the sense of inadequacy of any narrative, and the failure to make the experiences of her own private and public life and times intelligible is pervasive throughout her *oeuvre* in that decade, so is her aesthetic and ethic will to control her prose “to come to terms with disorder” (Didion 2009, xiv).

I read Didion’s narrative of water control in the West and Southwest—and specifically California—as a metaphor for her own control over writing.¹⁰ While the metaphor works perfectly in the 1970s pieces “At the Dam” and “Holy Water,” with clear Hemingwayan influences, Didion’s late-century urge to revise and rewrite that narrative and herself along with it (Sullam 2021, 192), that is, her understanding of California history and personal history, will result in a new genre for the author, the memoir, and usher in a different aesthetic phase. By means of Didion’s own preferred reading practices, New Critical close stylistic analysis,¹¹ I will show that “At the Dam” and “Holy Water” present a common pattern of recurring nouns

⁸ For a thorough analysis of *Where I Was From* in a historiographical perspective see Millard 2015.

⁹ Dedicated to the abduction of Patty Hearst, published in *The New York Republic of Books* in 1982, and later collected in *After Henry* (1992).

¹⁰ Due to length constraints, in this article I will not focus on the epistemological and narratological implications of authorial and/or historiographical control in postmodern critique. For a more thorough assessment of Didion’s aesthetic within a postmodern critical frame see Scarpino 2012.

¹¹ As a Berkeley undergraduate Didion took Mark Schorer’s writing classes. Besides Schorer, a prominent New Critic, the whole English Department was a home base for New Critical close reading practices: “I loved Berkeley [...]. The whole way I deal with politics came out of the

and adjectives arranged in symmetrical correspondence: the rational, efficient, nearly superhuman control imposed on California rivers and waters by American engineering and the author’s sacred awe of it. In these two essays, Didion’s fascination for the hydraulic manipulation of California water verges on a Progressive Era transcendence that goes “beyond history” and is not interested in the political implications of the massive harnessing of state, and national natural resources, nor, ultimately, in the environmental hazards posed by it. Didion grasps intuitively the illusion on which the seeming ease of California life lies, but she does not allow the Ur-narrative of California dreamtime to be questioned. Analogously, she does not allow her pristine prose to betray the inevitable contradictions and predicaments of that narrative. The prose style of “At the Dam” and “Holy Water” is terse and declarative, an “impenetrable polish;”¹² it does not involve or invite possibilities, it eliminates them. Paradigmatic expressions of Didion’s New Journalistic signature, these two articles appeared in the general interest magazine *Life* and the more intellectually refined *Esquire*—which in the Seventies became a distinctive publishing venue for New Journalists. They are stylistically sharp, provocative, perfectly self-contained and so they remain—with very few, mostly time contextual, edits—in *The White Album*. The Didion persona is, at once, overexposed and enigmatic, assertive and ironic. With *Where I Was From*, that perfect armor of technical impenetrability and control gives way to a studied self-disclosure, to sentences that allow to expand more into possibilities. It is by acknowledging the contradictions of the “controlling and rearranging” of California water that Didion necessarily relocates her own “controlling and rearranging” writing devices onto a wider canvas (Didion 2003, 23).¹³

English Department. They taught a form of literary criticism which was based on analyzing texts in a very close way” (in Meyer 2018, 73).

¹² “Impenetrable polish” is a quote from Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* in which the author clearly defines that 2005 memoir about the death of her husband as an ethic and aesthetic caesura in her writing: “I have been a writer my entire life. As a writer [...] I developed a sense that meaning itself was resident in the rhythms of words and sentences and paragraphs, a technique for withholding whatever it was I thought or believed behind *an increasingly impenetrable polish*. [...] This is a case in which I need whatever it is I think or believe to be penetrable, if only for myself” (Didion 2006, 7-8, emphasis added).

¹³ *Where I Was From* was originally conceived as a non-fiction book on California history and water by the working title *Fairy Tales*. The unfortunate publishing history of *Fairy Tales* dates from the early 1970s and is intertwined with that of “Girl of the Golden West.” In 1975, the editor of *Rolling Stone*, Jann Wenner, asked Didion to cover the trial of Patty Hearst, thus reviving Didion’s interest in California history. Consequently, her agent, Lois Wallace, wrote to Random House inquiring about the possibility of publishing the Patty Hearst piece as a part of a history of California that the author had previously proposed as a non-fiction book to Farrar Straus Giroux (*Fairy Tales*). Tellingly, *Fairy Tales* was languishing because of Didion’s

1. “At the Dam” and *Play It as It Lays*: Of turbines, freeways and typewriters

No matter how important Shasta Dam is for the Sacramento River, it is Hoover Dam—the colossus of American engineering built between 1931 and 1935 on the Arizona-Nevada border to tame the Colorado River—that looms large in Didion’s 1970s nonfiction (the already mentioned “Holy Water” and “At the Dam”) and fiction (Didion’s second novel, *Play It as It Lays*, 1970).

Sitting astride the Colorado River, formidable and serene, Hoover Dam was the largest dam in the world at the time of its completion in 1935. Inaugurated in the middle of the Great Depression by F. D. Roosevelt, Hoover Dam utilizes an arch-gravity built upstream: this structure directs the water against the rock walls of the canyon, the dam directs the water into channels, which turns the turbines inside the structure. The architectural style—both the exterior and the interior—is art deco, the fashion at the time.¹⁴ The spirit that led to the project in the late 1920s was, as Susan Scott Parrish writes in *The Flood Year 1927* about the Progressive Era, “a combination of technological trust and missionary purpose” that was boosted through a “propagandistic representation of America’s engineering and managerial powers to harness its resource plenitude” (Parrish 2017, 280).¹⁵

“At the Dam” is typical early-Didion in its construction, built as it is around the author’s reimagining of personal anecdotes interwoven with some contextual information and geared to the rendering of a hyper-subjective, vulnerable, state of mind. Her first visit to the place is reported through the juxtaposition of factual details (“afternoon in 1967,” “precise intersection of time and space,” “the turbines,” “the spillways”) and ineffable reverence for that monumental artifice of technology (“I wonder,” “I used to wonder,” and the inner association with natural wonders, astronomy, and a prayer, the “Gloria Patri”):

Since the afternoon in 1967 when I first saw Hoover Dam, its image has never been entirely absent from my inner eye. [...] Quite often I hear the turbines. Frequently I wonder what is happening at the dam this instant, at this precise intersection of time and space, how much water is being released to fill downstream orders [...] I used to wonder what it was about the dam that made me think of it at times and in places where I once thought of the Mindanao Trench, or of the stars wheeling in their courses, or of the words *As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, amen.* (Didion 2009, 198)

difficulties in finding the right “frame” (Daugherty 2015, 347-348). If the piece on Patty Hearst remained an ongoing preoccupation for Didion until the early 1980s, so was *Fairy Tales*.

¹⁴ For a thorough description of the building of Hoover Dam see Reisner 1993, 125-131.

¹⁵ It is also worth noting that the first issue of *Life* magazine, published on November 23, 1936, featured a cover photo of the Fort Peck Dam (Montana) by Margaret Bourke-White.

Then, succinctly contained in one paragraph, follows the rearranging of historical details from the author’s situated perspective conveyed through “cruelly accurate” prose (Eggers 2018, 93):

Hoover Dam, showpiece of the Boulder Canyon Project, the several million tons of concrete that made the Southwest plausible, the *fait accompli* that was to convey, in the innocent time of its construction, the notion that mankind’s brightest promise lay in American engineering. (Didion 2009, 199)

Anticipated by the stated awareness that “history does not explain it all, does not suggest what makes the dam so affecting,” the core of the essay centers on the description of the dam itself as it appeared to the author on her second visit:

Cranes moved above us as if under their own volition. *Generators* roared. *Transformers* hummed. The *gratings* on which we stood vibrated. We watched a hundred-ton steel *shaft* plunging *down to that place where the water was*. And finally we got down to that place where the water was, where the water sucked out of Lake Mead roared through thirty-foot *penstocks* and then into the *turbines* themselves. “Touch it,” the Reclamation said and I did, and for a long time I just stood there with my hands on the turbine. [...] (Didion 2009, 200, emphasis added)

The stylistic pattern at work here—a parataxis made of nouns (cranes, generators, transformers, gratings, shaft, penstocks, turbines), verbs (roared, hummed, vibrated, watched, got down), prepositions of place (under, on, down, into), with an internal climax built around the alliterative repetition of “the place where the water was”—is reminiscent of Hemingway’s prose, which is, as Franco Moretti has argued about “Big Two-Hearted River,” “all about control: of space, time, gestures, words” (Moretti 2019, 62). Hemingway is also the single literary influence Didion has always acknowledged. From *The Art of Fiction* 1978 interview with Linda Kuehl:

Did any writer influence you more than others?

I always say Hemingway because he taught me how sentences worked. When I was 15 or 16 I would type out his stories to learn how the sentences worked. I taught myself to type at the same time. A few years ago when I was teaching a course at Berkeley I reread *A Farewell to Arms* and fell right back into those sentences. I mean, they’re perfect sentences. *Very direct sentences, smooth rivers, clear water over granite, no sinkholes*. (in Kuehl 2018, 37, emphasis added)

Sentences like smooth rivers. What unites the tenor of the simile (Hemingway’s-Didion’s sentences) and its vehicle (smooth rivers), is control. California rivers are not naturally smooth and their water not clear—Colorado is one of the siltiest rivers in the world: they have been

made smooth through hydraulic engineering. Hemingway-Didion’s perfect sentences function and read as a cautious recovery from traumatic experiences, namely from emotional “sinkholes.” Formal control is displayed through factual gestures about manmade “things”: cranes, generators, transformers, gratings, penstocks, turbines. Formal precision as a way to exorcise the loss of a solid center, writing as a therapeutic process. Gloria Steinem once wondered why Didion “always writes about masochists, nonfunctioning women, when she herself is such a tough, highly functioning writer” (in Braudy 2018, 12). “A highly functioning writer” whose work is tenaciously devoted to “total control”—“I’m not much interested in spontaneity; I’m not an inspirational writer. What concerns me is total control” (in Nelson 2017, 153).¹⁶ Total control she only gets in front of her typewriter as she revealed in a 1977 interview: “I went to my office and just sat in front of my typewriter, and it was ok. I got control. I calmed down. I’m only myself in front of a typewriter” (in Braudy 2018, 16).

Hemingway is also the protagonist of “Last Words,” an essay published by Didion in 1998 in *The New Yorker* and recently collected in *Let Me Tell You What I Mean* (2021), the author’s last publication in her lifetime.¹⁷ In “Last Words,” Didion falls back, again, into the sentences of *A Farewell to Arms*, precisely the “famous first paragraph” (Didion 2021, 99). Her impeccable stylistic analysis focuses on the arrangement of words, syllables, and commas and builds to a possible explanation of “the liturgical cadence” (2021, 100)—suggestively, as Ihab Hassan once praised Didion’s sentences, elliptical and exact, for their “spare liturgical ring” (Hassan 1990, 112).¹⁸

The close of “At the Dam” circles back to power and control:

I thought of it then, with the wind whining and the sun dropping behind the mesa with the finality of a sunset in space. Of course that was the image I had seen always, seen it without quite realizing what I saw, a dynamo finally, free of man, splendid at last in its absolute isolation, transmitting power and releasing water to a word where no one is. (Didion 2009, 201)

The paragraph is clearly evocative of *The Education of Henry Adams* (1900, 1918)—one of Didion’s assigned readings at Berkeley (Daugherty 2015, 63)—and its celebration of the dynamo

¹⁶ It is a quote from Didion’s 1971 UCLA conference quoted in Digby Diehl, “Chilling Candor of Joan Didion at UCLA,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 1971, Q39 and quoted in Nelson 2017, 153. In 1978 Didion described her own enthusiasm for “talking technically” about her prose as “an apprentice plumber of fiction” (in Kuehl 2018, 36). The hydraulic metaphor is not casual.

¹⁷ Joan Didion, “Last Words: Those Hemingway Wrote, and Those He Didn’t,” *The New Yorker*, October 25, 1998, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/11/09/last-words-6>, reprinted as “Last Words” in Didion 2021, 99-122.

¹⁸ On Hemingway’s influence on Didion see Heller 2021.

as a vitalistic force in chapter XXV, “The Dynamo and the Virgin.” Adams’s description of the “huge wheel” is punctuated with the “murmuring” and “humming” of the dynamo and culminates with its transformation into a religious object: “To Adams the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. [...] He began to feel the forty-foot dynamo as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross. [...] Before the end, one began to pray to it [...]” (Adams 1974, 380). Similarly, in “At the Dam,” the “dynamo is finally free of man,” transfigured into a sacred object, as if it were operating—transmitting power and releasing water—on its own, autonomously, to “a world where no one is” (Didion 2009, 201). What Didion deliberately leaves out is Adams’s “antimodernist edge” (Lears 2009, 454), the celebration of the Virgin.¹⁹ To Didion, Hoover Dam *is* Chartres Cathedral.

The idea of a tangible and dependable ‘engineering’ body underlies another water-related simile in Didion’s work: freeways as rivers. Maria Wyeth, the mentally frail protagonist of the novel *Play It As It Lays*—whose disastrous private life (that includes a failed marriage, a failed career in Hollywood, a mentally unhealthy daughter, an unhappy relationship, an excruciating abortion) will lead her to a sanitarium—drives the freeways of Los Angeles “as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents, its deceptions, and just as a riverman feels the pull of the rapids in the lull between sleeping and walking” (Didion 2005, 16). Driving the freeways is the only energizing, if compulsive, activity in Maria’s life, and one that enables her to exercise control over her otherwise uncontrollable existence. Around the same years, in 1971, the British architecture critic Reyner Banham appropriated the term “autopia” to describe the “fourth” ecology in his popular *Los Angeles. The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. He was amazed by the Los Angeles freeway system and considered them—another wonder of American civilengineering—one of the most tangible places in what was for him an otherwise formless city (Banham 1971). When Maria drives to Vegas, she visits Hoover Dam. Her reactions are almost identical to those of her author in “At the Dam” but the evocation here is connoted by verticality and fall (“sunk,” “below,” “dropped”) and ends on a darker, Conradian (Conrad, another influence)²⁰, note: “All day she was faint with vertigo, sunk in a world where great power grids converged, throbbing lines plunged finally into the shallow canyon below the dam’s face, *elevators like coffins dropped into the bowels of the earth itself*” (Didion 2005, 171, emphasis added). Precipitated by a dangerous abortion, Maria’s state of mind is “a blank tape” in which

¹⁹ “All the steam in the world could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres” (Adams 1974, 388).

²⁰ In her interview with Sara Davidson, after Hemingway, Didion mentions *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad (Davidson 2018, 27).

her visit to Hoover dam comes as a momentary interlude that, not unlike driving the freeways, seems to provide “womb-like protection” (Winchell 1989, 62).

2. “Holy Water” and *Where I Was From*: Of plumbing and foundering

The idea of a perfectly functioning engineering organism controlling California’s water and life and fueling Didion’s reverence is replayed in “Holy Water.” The 1977 article was occasioned by Didion’s trip to the Sacramento Operations Control Center for the California State Water Project. The whole piece, which is twice as long as “At the Dam,” rests on the juxtaposition of technological efficiency (rendered through a paratactic string of nouns, “aqueducts and siphons and pumps and forebays and afterbays and weirs and drains”) and Didion’s “obsessive interest” in it, an interest that does not imply politics and verges on meditation (later “delirium”):

As it happens my own reverence for water has always taken the form of this constant meditation upon where the water is, of *an obsessive interest not in the politics of water but in the waterworks themselves*, in the movement of water through aqueducts and siphons and pumps and forebays and afterbays and weirs and drains, in plumbing on the grand scale. (Didion 2009, 59, emphasis added)

“Control” is, again, at the heart of Didion’s ‘delirious’ attraction to waterworks and California management of water supply. To convey westerners’ irrepressible need to see water “made available and useful,” Didion surprises the reader by choosing the most ‘hedonistic’ symbol of Californian ease and lifestyle, the swimming pool, and deconstructs its ‘misapprehension as a trapping of affluence’:

I have always wanted a swimming pool and never had one. [...] Actually a pool is, for many of us in the West, a symbol not of affluence but of *order, of control over the uncontrollable*. A pool is water, made *available and useful*, and is, as such, infinitely soothing to the western eye [...]. (2009, 63-64, emphasis added)

The need for water “made available and useful” is further emphasized by Didion’s dismissal of whatever “transcendent value” there might be in “a river running wild, and undammed” as an ineffective option to regulate the floods and draughts she experienced as a child. After quoting Bernard DeVoto’s definition of the West—“The West begins where the average annual rainfall drops below twenty inches”—Didion reaches the ultimate conclusion of her argument:

Water is important to people who do not have it, and the same is true of control. (2009, 65)

Water and control, the metaphor is now completely spelled out. As water control makes human and social life possible in the West so a thorough stylistic command of one’s prose makes the writing of what cannot be controlled—“sinkholes,” traumas, chaos—possible. Hemingway comes to mind again. In “Last Words,” Didion’s conclusion about the aesthetic stance of the “writer who had in his time made English language new” (Didion 2021, 103)—one that she must feel particularly congenial—is quite telling of her own testimonial posture:

The very grammar of a Hemingway sentence dictated, or was dictated by, a certain way of looking at the world, *a way of looking but not joining, a way of moving through but not attaching* [...]. (2021, 103, emphasis added)

So quintessentially didionesque, “a way of looking but not joining” is the imaginative and moral principle that informs these two 1970s essays on water. Although she is obliquely aware of the contradictions of “the politics of water”—as expressed succinctly and formidably in the chiasmus: “[T]he apparent ease of California life is an illusion, and those who believe the illusion real live here in only the most temporary way” (Didion 2009, 64)—she does not expose them. She hints that Hoover Dam is “a monument to a faith since misplaced” (Didion 2009, 199) but she deliberately omits the historical details, which would turn the aside into a critical argument. Looking, but not joining, moving through, but not attaching. It will take Didion thirty years—and her “final” book on California, *Where I Was From*²¹—to broaden her moral and aesthetic compass and provide a different reading of California water history embedded in personal history and willing, as Kenneth Millard has contended, to “engage a politics of history that might have some purchase on social change” (Millard 2015, 3).

Where I Was From is intimately connected with Didion’s family history, one of pioneers forged by a Western frontier ethic. Her ancestors were related to the tragic Donner-Reed Party—the infamous 1846-47 overland crossing into California amidst blizzards, on wrong routes, tortured by hunger and cannibalism. The Donner Party, which, as Deborah Nelson argues, functions as an “object lesson” for Didion and is “the most frequently recurring anecdote in the body of her work,” is scrutinized and reassessed in her 2003 memoir (Nelson 2017, 165). The very beginning of *Where I Was From*—an eight-line sentence that “has the sweep of the continent” (Daugherty 2015, 525)—reasserts the author’s ‘native daughter’ status by tackling the history of her ancestors:

²¹ “[...] you’ve been writing about California for so long, but never with such, I think, *finality*. You know, you really come to conclusions here” (Eggers 2018, 96).

My great-great-great-great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Stott was born in 1766, grew up on the Virginia and Carolina frontiers, at age sixteen married an eighteen-year old veteran of the Revolution and the Cherokee expeditions named Benjamin Hardin IV, moved with him into Tennessee and Kentucky and died on still another frontier, the Oil Trough Bottom on the south bank of the White River in what is now Arkansas but was then Missouri Territory. (Didion 2003, 3)

The westward expansion of the American Frontier is mapped in this first chapter through a family genealogy, which is mainly matrilineal (Millard 2015). First Elizabeth Stott—Virginia, Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri Territory—then her granddaughter, Nancy Hardin Cornwall who participated in the “ill-fated” Donner-Reed Party Expedition to Oregon in 1846-47, “the single master Odyssey” of crossing stories (Didion 2003, 31). Finally, Nancy’s great-granddaughter (and Joan Didion’s maternal grandmother), Edna Magee Jerrett, and Didion’s grandfather, Herman Daniel Jerrett, a geologist who in 1915 wrote *California’s Eldorado Yesterday and Today*. Jerrett—whose influence on Didion as a child was pivotal in shaping her ‘Western’ education—was also a California landowner whose fields depended on irrigation and who ran the Loon Lake Water and Power Company.²²

The very rethinking of her grandfather’s self-interested positions about irrigation is also at the basis of a memoir in which Didion shows how the intricate system of dams, aqueducts, reservoirs and pipes that redirected waters in California to make the urban growth and development of otherwise desert areas possible, went hand in hand with a history of federally subsidized agriculture and brought about heavy environmental costs.

Before exposing the fallacy of a narrative of California settlement and economic success predicated on rough individualism and unravelling the story of “subsidized monopolization of California,” Didion sets the tone of the entire book:

You will have perhaps realized by now (a good deal earlier than I myself realized) that this book represents *an exploration into my own confusions* about the place and the way in which I grew up, *confusions as much about America as about California, misapprehensions and misunderstandings so much a part of who I became that I can still to this day confront them only obliquely*. (Didion 2003, 17-18, emphasis added)

To revise that history, she starts with the “reclamation” of the Sacramento Valley, that is, the engineering rearranging of the Sacramento River:

²² Daugherty also reminds us of the narrator of Didion’s *Democracy*, a woman called Joan Didion, who writes “As the granddaughter of a geologist, I learned early to anticipate the absolute mutability of hills and waterfalls and even islands” (Didion 1984, 18).

The cost of *controlling or rearranging* the Sacramento which is to say the “reclamation” of the Sacramento River Valley, was largely borne, like the cost of *controlling or rearranging* many other inconvenient features of California life, by the federal government. (2003, 23, emphasis added)

Control is, again, key to retrieving and revising the history of Reclamation. “The extreme reliance of California on federal money—so seemingly at odds with the emphasis on unfettered individualism that constitutes the local core belief” (2003, 23)—only shows how California’s boosting economy has been made possible, that is, ultimately, controlled by federal money. The point of origin is irrigation:

The citizens of the rest of the country would also, in turn, subsidize the crops the railroad carried, *make possible the irrigation of millions of acres of essentially arid land, underwrite the rhythms of planting and not planting, and create, finally, a vast agricultural mechanism in a kind of market vacuum*, quite remote from the normal necessity for measuring supply against demand and cost against return. (2003, 25, emphasis added)

By pondering and expanding on “the kinds of contradictions on which Californians have tended to founder when they try to think about the place they come from,” Didion aligns her reading and writing of California with those by Frank Norris, Jack London, John Muir, Carey McWilliams. Her/their relationship with California is defined as an ongoing quest (“We worry it, correct and revise it”) that entails declamatory “breaks” and “returns” (2003, 38).

Didion’s revision of the narrative of California’s “unfettered individualism” and optimism unravels yet another social, cultural, and discursive short circuit. Among the other “inconvenient” features of California life “controlled” and “rearranged” by the federal government are prisons and mental institutions. By focusing on California commitment for insanity rates in the 1920s, when detention in sanitariums awaited not only the “mentally ill,” but also “a wide variety of other deviants—imbeciles, dotards, idiots, drunkards, simpletons, fools, the aged, the vagabond, the helpless” (Didion 2003, 193)—Didion points at the existence of an institutional pattern designed to hide what is socially undesirable and uncontrollable from sight. She then adds, as a coda, that in California “madness” itself was thought, conveniently, “to come with the territory, on the order of earthquakes” (2003, 196), thus diverting social issues to inevitable environmental causes which, as such, would be handled through total control, that is detention.

California rivers are dammed, and expendable Californians are detained. In the midst of raging rivers, extreme weather phenomena, man-made ecologies, and a history predicated on the myth of “unfettered individualism” (Didion 2003, 23) but drugged by federal money, Didion’s stance

is one of inquiry and engagement: “Yet California has remained in some way impenetrable to me, a wearing enigma” (2003, 38).

The narrative impenetrability of the “enigma” depends on the amount of control one is willing to renounce. If the history of California water is, ultimately, one of misplaced and failed control, Didion’s writing of it in *Where I Was From* is one that, eventually, accepts, appropriates and articulates its aporias.

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