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## Horizontal and Vertical Themes in Joan Didion's Memoir *Where I Was From*

1. According to Katherine Usher Henderson, "Few American writers are 'American' in all the ways that Joan Didion is" (140). Didion, a celebrated journalist and fiction writer, has published five novels and several collections of essays, from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979), highly influential and groundbreaking examples of new journalism investigating themes like social fragmentation and rootlessness, to the more recent *Political Fictions* (2001) on the workings of American electoral politics, and *Fixed Ideas: America Since 9.11* (2003), a dissection of the Bush administration's tactics and strategies for determining the public perception of the terrorist attacks and the war in Iraq that followed. While writing on so many different subjects, she has always analyzed and interpreted them from a highly personal viewpoint and a specific Western ideological perspective. Didion, in fact, was born in Sacramento in 1934 into an upper-middle class family and her work reflects her experience as an American and a Californian. Her identity as a daughter of California has caused many of her essays to be both regional and autobiographical in focus (Winchell 94; Muggli 402; Roiphe 1-2). The mythology of her native state figures prominently in them, as she seeks to render the moral complexity of the American Western experience, its dilemmas and ambiguities. Even when she deals with larger social and economic forces at work in contemporary American politics, she understands them in terms of her own peculiarly Californian sensibility (Davidson 36; Didion, "Thinking" 10).

I intend to consider Didion's 2003 book, *Where I Was From*, as well as a number of autobiographical essays and interviews. This book is a complex and challenging text, partly a memoir of her family's pioneer

past and partly a reassessment of the history of California. It is a kind of bookend to her earlier musings on her native state and it investigates horizontal themes (the pioneers' crossing of the American continent as well as the author's personal crossings, that is, her recurrent moves back and forth between California and New York) and vertical themes (the role of the federal government as the main cause for social and political change in California from the Gold Rush to the present). Such horizontal and vertical themes, intersecting both Didion's life and her books, emerge here through the description of her ambivalent, often painful, relationship with a set of specific Western ideas that over the years she has come to reject, and through an endearing recollection of her family past, including her women ancestors. She is thus able to create an enquiry into the spirit of a unique place and, at the same time, the soul of her uncommon family. According to Nicholas Howe, the value of personal books like *Where I Was From* is in illuminating how myths or core beliefs or stories matter to the politics and history of those places (86).

Didion mixes political analysis, family history and journalistic reports to expose as false and self-deluding three sustaining myths that constitute the essence of the California dream. Throughout much of American history the image of California has had a mythic identity: as the geographic limit of the westward movement, it created higher expectations than other states and came to represent a earthly paradise, a garden of Eden, a far-off golden land of promise. Yet, since the beginning there was a gap between the reality of California and the popular image by which the state defined itself. There was a dissonance between the way Californians perceived themselves and the way they were, "between what they believed to be their unlimited possibilities and the limitations implicit in their own character and history" (48). Didion, therefore, has attempted to illuminate the dark side of these pioneer myths, the very heart of the American mystique. They constitute a set of values peculiar to Californians, but also American to the core. She is deeply concerned about such values, even though she sees them only as myths and illusions.

As a result, the Western experience, by its very nature, appears quite paradoxical to her. The three sustaining and interconnected myths of the California dream that she exposes in her book are: (a) The redemptive power of the pioneers' crossing of the continent; (b) Western individualism and distrust of the federal government; and (c) The postwar years' social changes as a betrayal of the original values of the state.

2. Didion has always been fascinated by the history of westward migration in America toward California, because she belongs to a family whose members have lived on the frontier since before the revolution: there have been "twelve generations of circuit riders and county sheriffs and Indian fighters and country lawyers and Bible readers" (219-20). In the essay "Notes from a Native Daughter" she had already mentioned her ancestors who for two hundred years had been moving west on the frontier and had been clearing Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee (173). In the mid-nineteenth century her continent-crossing ancestors came to California and settled in Sacramento: the first members of her family arrived in 1846, while other branches of the same family followed in the year 1852. She grew up in that town, where local history and patriotism were intense, and the founding of California was perceived as a romantic and heroic deed (Moses 2). As she wrote in 1948 in a speech to be delivered at her eighth-grade graduation, the pioneers who came to California were "different" from those who settled in other Western states. They came west for "adventure and money." In *Where I Was From* it is precisely this legacy of the American frontier, inherited by Didion as a child, that she has set out to criticize outlining the confusion embedded in the crossing story (75).

She disagrees, in particular, with the ideas of Josiah Royce who "invented" the myth of the redemptive power of the crossing of the American continent, to these days one of the fixed ideas of the California settlement. Royce grew up in San Francisco, but he later moved to the East Coast becoming from 1885 to 1916 a central figure of the Harvard

philosophy department. In 1886 he published *California: A Study of American Character* in which he held that the crossing had an aspect of quest: it was a pilgrimage, a redeeming journey. "In a sense," Didion has noticed, "each traveler died at the moment of leaving, but was reborn in the wilderness during the crossing, arriving in California as a new creature." And in a radio interview she has added that "not only you started over again, you started over clean. The crossing had redeemed you" (Interview).

In real life the crossing was far removed from the noble odyssey chronicled by California mythmakers. Rather than a noble odyssey, it was "a mean scrambling for survival," since the pioneers arrived in California in wrecked wagons, having faced desolation and death. It was an arduous journey, full of accidents and betrayals. It was, above all, a one-way journey: no return home was allowed. As primary sources in support of her thesis, Didion has referred to the diaries of several early pioneers who made the journey across the continent in mid-nineteenth century. From the journal of her own great-great grandfather, William Kilgore, she has quoted a passage about the bitterness of parting, of abandoning forever home and relatives: "This is one of the trying mornings for me, as I now have to leave my family, or back out. Suffice to say, we started" (20). The journal of Josiah Royce's mother, Sarah, who made the crossing to Sacramento in 1849 with her husband and first child, contains a similar sad remark: "I had for months anticipated this hour yet, not till it came, did I realize the blank dreariness of seeing night come on without house or home to shelter us and our baby girl" (29).

In order to survive the dangers of the wilderness, one was not allowed to stop or to look back. Even sentiments like grief and dissent, cost time. The diaries of early pioneers refer to the Sierra Nevada as "the most dreaded moment," because its passage was the meet terrifying of all trials they had to overcome. Didion has found out that "Independence Rock, west of Fort Laramie on the Sweetwater River, was so named because the traveler who had not reached that point by the Fourth of July,

Independence Day, would not reach the Sierra Nevada before snow closed the passes" (32-33). With regard to this, in the journal of another early pioneer Didion has discovered the story of the finding by a party moving west of a stranded seventeen year old girl, Miss Gilmore, and her dying little brother. Their parents had already died of the same disease and their wagon was blocked because the oxen were lost. The people of the wagon train they had been travelling with had abandoned them, fearful of being caught by winter in the passes of the Sierra Nevada, if they delayed any longer (36).

Miss Gilmore's story impressed Didion very deeply, because it appeared to her as a symbol of the moral ambiguity of the Californian settlement. When, later on, she was asked in an interview if she believed that the story of coming across the plains to California always entailed the abandonment of others, she answered: "I think it does. That was the heart of the crossing story: leaving people behind." She also observed that two things have struck her about it: "One was abandonment, and the other is the fact that . . . it's an enterprise the whole point of which is survival" (O'Hehir 9). Inevitably, then, she was forced to raise the following excruciating question: "When you survive at the cost of Miss Gilmore and her brother, do you survive at all?" (37).

To early pioneers surviving often meant resorting to extreme solutions in the face of a hostile and terrifying natural world. Those who abandoned Miss Gilmore and her brother were anxious, by moving on, to avoid the ill-fated experience of the Donner-Reed Party of eighty-seven pioneers travelling from Illinois to California in 1846. They were forced by winter storms to make camp in the Sierras, and forty of them survived in these mountains by eating their own dead. Didion's great-great-great grandmother, Nancy Hardin Cornwall, was a member of the original party, even though she and her husband left the group in Nevada, at Humboldt Sink, to take the northern route through Oregon to California. Didion admits even today to being "haunted by the cannibalism" of the Donner-Reed Party, and in her study she has a framed photograph of

the Sierra Nevada as a reminder of those early pioneers. Actually, the story of the Donner-Reed experience seems to come up in her books (including *Where I Was From*) every few pages because it is for her an emblem of the realistic, as opposed to the romantic, version of the westward migration in the United States (Kazin 112; Kakutani, "Joan Didion" 38).

Virginia Reed, one of the surviving children of the Donner-Reed Party, wrote to her cousin: "Thank God, we are the only family that did not eat human flesh. We have left everything, but I don't care for that. We have got through with our lives. Don't let this letter dishearten anybody. Remember, never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can" (75). Not every settler paid such a high price for survival, but everyone did pay a price for coming. Thus, rejecting the view of California's first settlers as romantic pioneers, Didion stresses the risk and hardship that each of them inevitably bore during the bitterly hard journey. No wonder that after the trials of the wilderness California appeared to them as the Eldorado, a land promising freedom and opportunity! She also investigates the pioneers' personal reasons for coming west, hinting that perhaps their deepest drive was neither for wealth nor for material gain. They misunderstood their own motives and talked about wanting gold and land in California, but in fact they were in search of a renewed identity. As Mark Royden Wichell has pointed out, Didion believes that Americans went west primarily "to run away" from their homes as well as from themselves, and they kept pushing west in search of a new sense of self. The crossing, thus, was a way of escaping "that dread of the meaninglessness which was man's fate" (7).

3. Emphasis on rugged individualism and distrust of centralized governmental authority constitute the local core belief in California. However, according to Didion, this kind of unfettered individualism is highly ambiguous, since the federal government, which many Californian citizens profess to hate, has always funded their state. The dependence on the

federal government, which seemingly runs counter to the preferred self-image of most Californians, represents a pattern already set in the first decade after California was admitted to the union as a state in 1850. Such extreme reliance upon federal money has led Didion to infer that the state itself was basically created by the federal government (Eggers 3).

A turning point in the history of California was the building of the Southern Pacific Railroad, that provided an easy way across the Sierra Nevada and, together with the link to the Central Pacific Railroad, saw the formation of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869. California, thus, was linked to the East and opened to extensive settlement. Although a quartet of Sacramento shopkeepers built the Southern Pacific Railroad — Charles Crocker, Leland Stanford, Collis Huntington and Mark Hopkins — it was the federal money that financed it. The citizens of the rest of the country were the ones who actually paid for the building of that railroad, through a federal cash subsidy plus a federal land grant. In this way, the Southern Pacific became through its federal land grants the largest California landowner of the nineteenth century (and even as late as the 1960s still owned roughly two and a half million acres) (24-25,60,79-80).

Although contradictory, these events do not seem unusual to Didion, since she holds that from the time of the Gold Rush a speculative spirit has always prevailed among Californians as a negative side of their character. From the very beginning of the history of the state most of its citizens have shared the notion of cutting loose and striking it rich, understanding quite clearly that the richest claim of all lay not in the golden minefields but in Washington. The residents of California have always been willing to mortgage the future for a short-term payout: "One of trading the state to outside owners in exchange for their (it now seems) entirely temporary agreement to enrich us, in other words the pauperization of California" (89). As a result, there has never been a real yeoman tradition: the myth of the solitary yeoman diligently tending his 160 acres was confounded by the spectacle of gigantic landholdings numbering hundreds of thousands of acres. California itself "by the year Royce

wrote, 1886, had already sold half the state to the Southern Pacific and was in the process of mortgaging the rest to the federal government" (90).

Didion then quotes Henry George: "What is the railroad to do for us? — this railroad that we have looked for, hoped for, prayed for so long?" as an appropriate illustration of Frank Norris's 1901 novel, *The Octopus: A Story of California*. Norris was a crusading novelist and his work of fiction, based on recent history in the San Joaquin Valley, portrays the clash between federal marshals acting for the Southern Pacific and a group of local ranchers. Yet the plot of the novel presents several ambiguities allowing Didion to interpret it in a new and original way. She contends that *The Octopus* "is not, as it might logically seem to be, a story of an agrarian society overtaken by the brutal momentum of industrialization," because the ranchers share the same speculative spirit that undergirds the actions of the Southern Pacific Railroad. The octopus itself, according to her, is not even the railroad but indifferent nature. Thanks to the enigmatical elements that compound the plot, Didion is ready to praise the novel very highly: "*The Octopus* remains perhaps the most complex statement to date of the Californian condition, and a deeply ambiguous work" (44-45).

The intervention of the federal government in California, however, has gone far beyond the funding of the railroads. Over the years it has created the California State Water Project, a gigantic system of water control that — through dams, canals and levees — has brought fertility to millions of acres of land. A pattern of flooding characterized the Sacramento River before its flow was controlled and rearranged, so that in the 1860s and 1870s a large part of the land lying between Sacramento, San Francisco, and Stockton was marked as swamp and overflowed land. Instead, in the same years the San Joaquin Valley was arid and desolate while today, having been irrigated, it has become a fruitful garden. But Didion is eager to point out that if the Sacramento River represents now the main source of surface water, the staggering cost of controlling or



rearranging its flow, "which is to say the 'reclamation' of the Sacramento Valley, was largely borne, like the cost of controlling or rearranging many other inconvenient features of Californian life, by the federal government" (21-23).

In other words, American taxpayers once again paid for its cost, and they are actually continuing to pay for it, because the creation of the entirely artificial environment that is now the Sacramento Valley has generated, paradoxically, a further input of federal money in the state. In fact, while the California State Water Project makes available the water required to cultivate the crop at a nominal subsidized price, an agency of the federal government named the Central Valley Project subsidizes the crop itself through the commodity-support program of the Department of Agriculture. In this way, federal money has formed the agribusiness, "a vast agricultural mechanism in a kind of market vacuum" for the benefit of several hundred growers, most of them corporate, that are granted both irrigation water at subsidized price and irrigation subsidies (25-26). In 1987 such subsidies amounted to twenty-seven million dollars, eleven million of which went to the Southern Pacific Land Company. As a comment to this absurd situation, Didion has employed a phrase that was common in her youth: "You can't buck the railroad" (51).

4. After World War II the old California of rich growers and ranchers was replaced by the new California of rapid housing development and defense industries. Sweeping changes rapidly transformed the state, and once again such changes found their input in the federal government. From the postwar years to the early 1990s, in fact, the federal government through the agency of its defense and aerospace industries created and sustained a new type of economy based on the threat of nuclear war. This gave rise to California's postwar economic boom: corporations like Northrop, Aerojet General and McDonnell Douglas attracted millions of workers from other states, while plans for intensive real estate development to house the newcomers required the selling of the great ranches.

Thus, in spite of the individualism of the state's residents, California continued to be largely and increasingly subsidized by the federal government. "These are the kinds of contradictions" according to Didion "on which Californians have tended to founder when they try to think about the place they come from." In the good years there was a perfect synergy in the big aerospace and defense industries—politicians, contracts, voters— but around 1992 the boom ended after four decades of good will on the part of the federal government. As government spending was slashed, aerospace and defense plants started closing down or relocating outside the state, and this began to unsettle California since virtually every county depended on defense contracts for billions and billions of federal dollars. While hundreds of thousand of jobs were lost, California fell victim of her own myths (Beasley 17; Porterfield 74).

In the light of the events that during the last fifty years have determined such swift and pervasive changes in California, eventually culminating in the present economic crisis, Didion investigates the meaning of these changes and the way they were perceived by the old residents of her native state. Confronted with the impact of postwar housing and industrial expansion, people like her own family, whose members had lived there for generations, reacted negatively. In particular, when the great ranches were subdivided and sold off, they realized that a part of California's history was erased. Perceiving such change as social and cultural decline, they complained that the state had changed, regretted the past and shunned newcomers: "New people could be seen, by people like my grandfather, as indifferent to everything that had made California work, but the ambiguity was this: new people were also those who were making California rich" (96).

Didion is quite aware that the same kind of attitude still shaped her as a writer early in her career. Nostalgia for the old Sacramento of her youth emerged in her 1963 novel, *Run River*, and became a recurrent theme in her subsequent work. As Michiko Kakutani has pointed out, in her first two collections of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The*

*White Album*, "again and again she drew contrasts between the old California she knew from childhood and family stories . . . and the new California of aerospace plants and subdivisions and fast-food restaurants, a place where rootlessness and anomie of the sixties seemed to have taken permanent hold" (Kakutani, "Golden State" 1). By juxtaposing a vision of the past with one of the present, Didion conveyed a sense of loss for a world that had ceased to exist. However, if in the essay "Notes from a Native Daughter" she appeared nostalgic, she did not overlook the shortcomings of the pre-Sunbelt West and avoided idealization: "Did not the Donner-Reed Party, after all, eat its own dead to reach Sacramento?" (176). At the end of the same essay she wondered whether she was actually mourning the old Sacramento or her own childhood: "This has been a story not about Sacramento at all, but about the things we lose and the promises we break as we grow older" (186).

Over the years Didion's vision of the past has gradually evolved: a reassessment and reappraisal of her thinking about her home state have induced her to abandon the dichotomies of her earlier work. "Only recently did I come . . . to understand 'change' itself as one of the culture's most enduring misunderstandings about itself" (187-88). She has realized that what looks like modern deterioration from an idealized past, is really the expression of qualities that have underlain the state's history. Consequently, she argues now that boom and change are the fundamental qualities of the California experience from the time of the Gold Rush to the present. For example, the gigantic population growth that has occurred after World War II has been in no way unprecedented. In the course of her life, from the mid-1930s to the present, the population of California has increased from six million to close to thirty-six million people, almost fifteen percent of the United States total population. Yet this growth was part of a longer trend, since each decade from 1860 to 1960 registered an average increase of fifty percent: no other part of the United States was ever so rapidly peopled. According to Didion, "there had been . . . from the beginning, these obliterating increases, rates of

growth that systematically erased freshly laid traces of custom and community, and it was from such erasures that many California confusions would derive" (173). In this perspective the question of "changes" involving a paradise lost - that is, the transformation of the state from what it had been (or from what its citizens preferred to believe it had been) to what it is now — becomes a vexed issue: "Discussion of how California has 'changed,' then, tends locally to define the more ideal California as that which existed at whatever past point the speaker first saw it" (87, 170).

Didion holds that boom and change represent the most evident and pervasive elements in the history of her native state, so that, in a way, California has not changed at all. However, in the last decades there has been a tremendous difference in the environment, since a large part of the wilderness has been destroyed to build suburban houses and shopping malls. Didion offers a personal anecdote and turns it into a cultural metaphor of how "all that is constant in the California of my childhood is the rate at which it disappears." In 1992, a few months after her father died, she drove her mother from Monterey to Berkeley where they were to spend a few nights at the Claremont Hotel because Didion was to speak at the University of California. During the trip her mother kept asking whether they were on the right road. When she was reassured that they were travelling on the 101 North, she asked: "Then where did it all go?" In the two or three years during which she had been caring for her husband the countryside had changed, and the lawns where the cattle used to graze had been replaced by "mile after mile of pastel subdivisions and labyrinthine exits and entrances to freeways that had not previously existed. For miles she was silent. California had become, she said then, 'all San Jose'" (215-16).

After the publication of her memoir, Didion was asked to comment upon the fact that California's countryside has been partly destroyed by intensive real estate development: "That's certainly true. That's what my mother meant when she said, 'Where did it all go? It's all San Jose.' But then the whole idea of 'California as it was' — it brings you to that ques-

tion, which you can't avoid: If we could see it 'as it was,' how many of us could afford to see it? What California is, for better or worse, is something that has come to support huge numbers of people and their various dreams for the future" (Kakutani, "Golden" 8). According to Andrew O'Hehir, this was "an effort to reconcile Didion's passionate feelings for the state, and her sense of loss about seeing its magnificent landscape devoured, without surrendering to elitist sentimentality" (3).

5. Before writing *Where I Was From*, Didion published a number of autobiographical essays in which she dealt with the meaning of the old Sacramento of her youth, but she showed a considerable reticence about her parents. Not until her mother died in May 2001, two weeks short of her ninety-first birthday, did she set out to write a memoir in which she recalled several episodes of her parents' lives. As a matter of fact, she began her book in the 1970s, but found it impossible to write and put it aside. It was not only her feelings toward her family that prevented her from completing her work, but also the fact that the whole subject was creating in her mind too many questions that she was unable to answer: California was a wearying enigma to Didion. In the following years she wrote three long pieces for the *New Yorker* and one for the *New York Review of Books*, hoping they would help her to clarify her views, but she found the impetus to complete her memoir only after the death of her mother, as she subsequently confessed: "I had thought of doing it, but it became an overwhelming sense of something to do after she died" (Hirschhorn 68). She went back to write it although she still did not have a clear notion of her subject, as she admitted in an interview about the progress of her work: "I'm about half way in, two-thirds of the way through. It's nonfiction. I'm sort of stymied by it right now. I don't know exactly where I'll go from where I am . . . It goes kind of to someplace else" (Wimmer 42). This statement confirmed Didion's earlier definition of writing as an act of self-discovery, which she had first expressed in her famous 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" (2).

In the case of *Where I Was From*, however, many questions still remain unsolved: "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 that are so much a part of who I became that to this day I still confront them only obliquely" (34). Later she has made it clear that this is a book about America in so far as the idea of moving west has always been the key to her idea of America. *Where I Was From*, therefore, is about her falling away from the very idea of California she inherited, the whole story being essentially Manifest Destiny. Since it is not so much about her home state as it is about her state of mind, the pervasive tone of Didion's meditation is elegiac, due also to the sadness of becoming an orphan after her mother's death. The tone of her prose, however, is also one of irony (O'Hehir 3).

Didion makes her verdicts personal by presenting her own family—Californians for five generations — as prime embodiments of the state's contradictions. Thus, autobiography is made to serve a larger point (Aviv 2). Although she sees many discrepancies in the attitudes and the mentality of her parents, a strong bond of affection ties her to the members her family. In particular, she has always been fascinated with the extraordinary pioneer women who were her ancestors and to whom she pays a tribute: "These women in my family would seem to have been pragmatic and in their deepest instincts clinically radical, given to breaking clean with everyone and everything they knew" (7). It is noteworthy that in her 1976 essay "Thinking About Western Thinking" she had employed the same sentence, remarking that their descendants were a similarly restless lot (10). The family portraits weave the book together, with charming accounts of different, sometimes hilarious, stories about these women. Didion relentlessly translates the events of their lives into parables of the period. Such stories now mean to her something different from what she

had been told when she was a girl, because she does not believe anymore in the myth of the frontier. Nevertheless, she confesses that they "still have power for me . . . I don't think they have any truth for me. I think they're stories." And yet "there's no way to shake loose of these stories" because "there is no real way to deal with everything we lose" (O'Hehir 3-4).

This is the key concept around which Didion's memoir revolves: the death of her parents, the loss of the old Sacramento of her youth, the myths she once believed in, the relationship between the past and the present. She recalls a personal episode that yields a vivid metaphor for her theme. The last time she saw her mother was eight weeks before she died of cancer and, on that occasion, she gave her a piece of silver flatware, a small ladle. Her mother said that she had a "special feeling" for it: she had found so satisfying to touch that particular ladle that she had set it aside. "Take it," she said, her voice urgent, "I don't want it lost" (225-26). Didion seems to argue that what gets lost in the course of one's life can be partially found again through remembrance. An object like that small ladle, thus, becomes a telling symbol of the continuity between generations.

In the 1967 essay "On Going Home" Didion wrote about returning to her parents' house for the first birthday of her daughter, and she made clear that home for her remained the old Sacramento of her youth (164-166). She implies the same thing in her 2003 memoir, whose title is *Where I Was From* rather than *Where I Am From*, because old Sacramento does not exist any more and she has not really found a new home. This partly explains why she has moved every few years from one place to another, showing a restlessness quite similar to that of her women ancestors. After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley in 1956, she went to New York and lived there for eight years ("Goodbye" 225-38). Then she moved back to the West Coast along with her husband, but rather than returning to Sacramento, she went to live in Los Angeles and still felt restless. In the essay "On the Morning After the

Sixties" she commented upon her feelings: "I got out of Berkeley and went to New York and later I got out of New York and came to Los Angeles. What I have made for myself is personal, but is not exactly peace" (206). In fact, while living in the Los Angeles area for some twenty years, she changed three different houses until she finally returned to New York in 1988. Even though she now lives on the East Coast, she has repeatedly stated that she has not abandoned California at all. For example, as soon as she moved to New York she started a column for the *New Yorker* called "Letter From Los Angeles" that allowed her to travel very frequently to her native state. Over the years she has continued to go back and forth across the continent, and California has remained at the core of her life, as the publication of her memoir demonstrates. In *Where I Was From* she has written about making "declamatory breaks with California" and "equally declamatory returns" (38). However, as Nicholas Howe has pointed out, her declamatory breaks seem unlikely ever to be complete (86).

Just as Didion has insisted on not having ever abandoned her native state, she has also argued that critics were wrong in reading her memoir as a farewell to California: "It's a love song, as I read it!" To which one of her critics has replied that it may be a love song, but a love song full of questions and doubts" (O'Hehir 4; Kakutani, "Golden" 2). As a matter of fact, even though disenchantment represents the overall theme of her book, Didion has appeared surprisingly optimistic about the future of her state, in spite of the current economic crisis. The American West, Wallace Stegner once wrote in one of the region's most quoted aphorisms, is "the native home of hope," but right now California is also the second home of tension, regret, and dismay (Limerick 19). The bad times of the present have produced unemployment, increasing crimes rates, decline of education, budget deficits, and a gubernatorial recall. Didion wrote her book before the recall of Gray Davis as governor and the subsequent election of Arnold Schwarzenegger, yet such events support her views about California's ambiguous promise. Schwarzenegger's immigrant story



seems to embody "the founding myth of the place as packaged by the Hollywood dream factory" (Johnson 4).

When asked a personal comment about that election, Didion has noticed that "California doesn't deal very well with anything but boom. And there's no way that the election of one governor or another is going to change the economy." Nevertheless, she has contended that the cycle of permanent change and permanent boom has not come to an end, since "a new industry always comes along . . . You have to have faith." The future of California does not look unhopeful to her: "You know, it won't be ideal, but there will still be the *place*, or enough of the place. Yeah, everything is all San Jose, but there's still a lot left, which gives everybody a pass on really doing anything about it" (O'Hehir 10). In *Where I Was From* Didion has written that when she was young she believed in good luck and fresh starts. Today, in spite of all her disenchantment, she still does: "Of course I do. That was the core story. I'm stuck with it. I've had a truly hard time believing that there isn't a way out, that there isn't a way west" (Hirschhorn 68). Wallace Stegner's definition of California as "the native home of hope" is still valid for her.

6. Vertical and horizontal themes emerge in Didion's *Where I Was From*, intersecting public and private ones. Being a personal memoir as well as a reassessment of the author's basic ideas about her home state, the book presents these elements as inextricably interweaved and continuously crossing over each other. Didion has identified several deeply-rooted Californian core beliefs and has demonstrated their relevance to both her personal history and the history of the state. Her work succeeds in illuminating that these core beliefs are only myths not coinciding with reality, and yet they have always mattered to the politics of California, and they still influence the life and expectations of its inhabitants, including her own. A distinctive circularity marks Didion's tale as she moves from one theme to the next till, at the end, she returns to the first one. Since she is a writer who is distrustful of abstraction, she always ties them to a series

of concrete events and personal experiences, focusing on revealing details. The themes she investigates are either vertical or horizontal, even though they may acquire both features according to their changing relationship with the public and the private spheres.

Vertical themes are strictly connected to Western individualism and self-reliance. According to Didion, Californians' stress upon political decentralization and distrust of centralized federal government contradict the state's actual reliance on Washington. She shows how the role of the federal government has been the main cause for social and political change in California from the creation of the state to the present days. In particular, she demonstrates that postwar population increase, social change, and environmental disruption are all parts of a longer trend that has been continuously fostered by Congressional policies. This is a typically vertical theme because it implies a hierarchical relationship: California's political and economic power structure is — and has always been — dependent upon the federal government, that dominates the state and generates most of its economic opportunities. However, when one takes into account the American political system, the relationship between the state and the federal government becomes horizontal, symbolizing the center of political power versus the peripheral. At the same time, it is a geographical relationship (thus, once again a horizontal one) because it represents the east of the country as opposed to the west.

California's geographical position within the United States leads Didion to examine another theme, the pioneers' crossing of the American continent, which is horizontal, being a westward journey, but it is also vertical in two ways: as a myth of regeneration and moral uplift, and as a search for economic opportunities and upward social mobility. These two vertical themes are rooted upon the idea of California as a land of promise, which Didion finds contradictory because the sense of unlimited possibilities shared by most inhabitants of the state contrasts with its actual geographical and social limitations. Since she believes that California's economic opportunities are mostly provided by the federal government,

rather than being the result of Western individualism and self-reliance, this opens up the way for her to go back to the first theme of her investigation, completing the circularity of her narrative.

Horizontal and vertical themes do not characterize only California's history, but they also intersect Didion's personal life. Like her women ancestors, she has crossed the American continent, moving recurrently between California and New York. When she and her husband first left New York in 1964 and settled in Los Angeles, they were in search of a new start, just as the pioneers had done before them. They had many low income years, but eventually they became quite successful and made a lot of money not only in publishing novels and magazines pieces, but also, and primarily, in writing screenplays for the Hollywood film industry. Therefore, the golden state may have lost some of its luster, as a critic pointed out, but it has still remained a land of promise for Didion and her husband. Similarly, Western individualism may well be a myth, yet the California dream seems to have worked for them thanks to Hollywood, where such rugged individualism is still quite rampant. However, Didion never mentions these facts in her memoir. It is also noteworthy that when in 1988 she and her husband moved back to New York, they were in search once again of a fresh start and new economic opportunities. She later commented upon their decision to move eastward, saying: "We were feeling stale about work, and a move seemed like something to do. It was sort of like moving west" (Isenberg 331). Thus, in Didion's case a horizontal theme regarding geographical dislocation is strictly tied to a vertical theme related to upward social mobility.

Her ambivalence toward the mythology of her native state derives from the fact that California still remains a special place for Didion, where her identity is rooted. This leads her to some contradictory evaluations: on the one hand she argues that "the California sense of itself as a loose society, less socially rigid than the rest of the country" is probably false, but on another hand she still considers it "a more loose place," where

not only she was born and grew up, but also where she decided to return and spend her creative years of maturity. In an interview published in 2000 in Barbara Isenberg, *State of the Arts: California Artists Talk About Their Work*, Didion has stated: "Growing up in California influenced everything about me. I can't imagine not having grown up in California" (332). As a result, in her quest for a different understanding of her home state Didion has shunned historical revisionist interpretations and has accomplished her own revisionism from a highly personal Western viewpoint, full of dilemmas and second thoughts. As Thomas Mallon has observed about *Where I Was From*, "the title is strictly accurate: this is a reconsideration of a place, not the conventional memoir of a person. The book's autobiographical aspect is intellectual and moral" (10).

Didion's passionate love for her native land— in particular, its openness and its flat horizons — emerges from every page of the volume as well as from many of the interviews she has recently given. Two similar episodes are particularly telling of such deep feelings toward California. Recalling the first time she flew back to Los Angeles in 1988, a few months after she had gone to live in New York, she admitted that as the plane landed at sunset: "I had tears streaming down my face because it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen . . . It was the openness. Just the feel of it" (Isenberg 330). Similarly, when in 2001 she flew back from New York to Monterey for her mother's funeral, she experienced the same elation: "Flying to Monterey I had a sharp apprehension of the many times before when I had . . . 'come back,' flown west, followed the sun, each time experiencing a lightning of spirit as the land below opened up" (204).

Nevertheless, according to Didion, California is not a particularly easy place to live in: fires, floods, earthquakes, and other natural disasters match violent "unnatural disasters" created by its inhabitants (from the cannibalistic Donner-Reed Party to the recent riots). As in all of her other literary works, there is a sense of impending tragedy, of incumbent catastrophe in this book, even though here this pessimism is counterbalanced by a remarkable optimism about the future:

I think people who grew up in California have more tolerance for apocalyptic notions. However, mixed up with this tolerance for apocalyptic notions in which the world is going to end dramatically is this belief that the world can't help but get better and better. It's really hard for me to believe that every thing doesn't improve, because thinking like that was just so much a part of being in California. (Isenberg 331-32)

In conclusion Didion admits that these are probably "fixed wrong ideas. But they are, fixed."

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