

Remembering Memoir: California(s) in Joan Didion's *Where I Was From*

Robert Ward

Introduction

IN 2003, Joan Didion published *Where I Was From*, her first book-length memoir about her Californian heritage. The complexities of this text, its genre and contexts, interest me in this essay. I argue that, by including a range of marginalized historical documents written by nineteenth-century immigrants and frontier women in order to unsettle what Didion calls a master odyssey of the past, she exploits particular aspects of memoir. This master odyssey, perhaps inevitably, consists of polished and complete texts that offer, at times, a romanticized version of California's past. The documents Didion privileges, though, are often fragments: written items such as diaries and letters, oral statements passed down from one generation to another and domestic objects such as a potato masher and a quilt. If memoir helps to "illuminate suppressed histories and creat[e] new emphases," as Leigh Gilmore (2001) tells us, then this montage-like structure, which serves to juxtapose those master narratives and those fragments, furthers Didion's role as a memoirist (16).

Establishing a definitive meaning for memoir at the outset, though, does pose certain difficulties. We know, for instance, that autobiography became more popular than memoir as a form of life

writing in the early nineteenth century.¹ We also know that autobiography tended to focus more than memoir on the life of its signatory—from birth to the moment of writing. It is interesting that key studies of autobiography—and here I am thinking of the work of Philippe Lejeune, Hermione Lee, and James Olney, to name but a few—pay little attention to memoir despite, intriguingly, considering it part of, though not wholly possessed by, autobiography. But Francis R. Hart’s essay, “Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography” (1974), does offer a consensus, albeit tentative: autobiography narrates the life of its signatory; “memoir is personal history that seeks to demonstrate or repossess the historicity of the self” (227).

Hart’s definition of memoir is particularly interesting. Didion, certainly, does not represent her life story in this book. However, she does achieve what Gerry Reaves (2001) calls “an equilibrium that preserves the integrity of the ‘I’ while necessarily incorporating the context of the Not I—history, family, nation, and culture” (119). This inquiry into the ‘I’ and ‘Not I,’ and the interrelations between them, is prompted by Didion’s personal grief:

In the aftermath of my mother’s death I found myself thinking a good deal about the confusions and contradictions in California, many of which she had herself embodied [...] [T]his 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 2003a, 6; my emphasis)

Sentiments such as these reflect another definition of memoir, one brought to our attention by Leigh Gilmore in her book *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001). As Gilmore suggests, memoir has associations with trauma and crises, both personal and cultural. The critical insights quoted above have influenced, in part, my reading of *Where I Was From* and my understanding of Didion’s reasons for choosing *A Memoir*, rather than something else, as the subtitle of her book.

* * *

Didion uses the word “exploration” in the quotation above. That idea of exploration is not achieved through the quasi-documentary nature of New Journalism, of which Didion has been considered a

key exponent.² Rather, as I mentioned earlier, it is achieved by assembling a montage of broad textual representations of Californian life. These representations tell of the personal grief of losing a loved one, or of missing home—but they also remind us of the group or community one is a part. If the “‘memoir mode’ tells only a fragment of a life,” as Ihab Hassan believes, then it can be suggested that *Where I Was From* fills this montage with memoirs (Hassan n.d.). These include sources such as personal journals, letters, and diary entries that chart the experiences of crossing the American frontier during the nineteenth century. In “The Unsettling of the American West: The Mobility of Defeat,” Howard R. Lamar (1979) believes that over three thousand of these fragments were written in all (36), although, given the millions who headed west during that century, the number is almost certainly much higher.

Very few of these fragments appear as canonical documents in the historical grand narrative of California settlement. This may be due to the precarious nature of their genesis, as they were written on the move and under desperate circumstances. But the marginalization of these fragments could also be due to the fact that they often showed a conflicting and less romantic view of the journey to, and settlement of, California than the grand narrative requires. With the myth of California on the one hand, and the actual traumatic experience of immigration on the other, it is not difficult to understand the reasons why many of these fragments were ignored or, better, had their importance mislaid. What we can say here, though, is that such fragments become located in a unique generic category, one Jacques Derrida calls a genre of “lost literature,” whose merits are unknown for future generations because they remain largely unseen.³ Didion’s text recovers this literature and shows its importance in helping to paint a fuller picture of the history of California.

One of the quintessential examples of a grand narrative informing this Californian heritage is Frederic Jackson Turner’s essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (commonly known as the “Turner Thesis”). Originally a speech delivered to the American Historical Association in 1893, Turner’s essay sees pioneer movement west as leading to the manufacture of a definitive American product. The further west the pioneer journeyed, the more perfect that product became, until in California—the terminus of American geography—that pioneer became a rugged, self-reliant, and unfettered individual:

[T]o the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism. (Turner 1996, 37)

Such a lyrical description of an American sensibility draws from, and contributes to, what California history celebrates as “the crossing story.”

Turner’s thesis is curiously absent from the pages of *Where I Was From*, although other canonical narratives, including novels, pamphlets, and historical studies, are present. These are often beautifully complete and bound texts, polished, authoritative, and, predominantly, male representations. Alongside these, in a montage-like form, Didion excavates textual fragments, many of which had been written by women. Didion shows how these fragments have suffered disenfranchisement from an equal share in the telling of the crossing story. This is, without doubt, due to the gender and ethnicity of the writers, but also because these fragments lack literary shine and narrative closure. Within a similar structure, Didion exposes her intentions: to disrupt and disentangle grand narratives, and to heighten the “confusions,” “misapprehensions,” and “misunderstandings” haunting the very fabric of the crossing story.

In her study of women’s autobiographical narratives originating from the Canadian frontier in the nineteenth century, Helen M. Buss (1993) argues that even though the memoir mode of writing was the “best available format for these women, it was still a form shaped for and by the needs of men”:

To tell their own stories, pioneer women, consciously or unconsciously, had to use the form differently from the way men had used it. Perhaps the very fact that critics had always considered the form to be in a no man’s land between traditional autobiography and history has made it particularly suitable for women’s needs. A genre that is least established in the patriarchal order is one open to the task of rescuing, through various female arachnologies, the inscription of female selfhood. (61)

A No-Man’s-Land

Where I Was From is self-consciously overloaded with such liminal spaces, and within these spaces, historically marginalized

texts. Let me extend this to a reading of two sources from the text. The first is an extract from a letter sent by one Virginia Reed, a surviving member of the ill-fated Donner Party. The party, consisting of ninety wagon trains, set out from Illinois in 1846 and headed 2,500 miles west toward the land-grab that marketed California as the quintessence of American idealism. They—some of whom were Didion's ancestors—became marooned in the blizzard snows sweeping over the valleys of Sierra Nevada and Donner Lake. Without adequate supplies of food, over forty people starved to death. Thus Reed:

Oh, Mary, *I have not wrote you* half the trouble we've had, but I have wrote you enough to let you know what the trouble is. But thanks God, we are the only family that did not eat human flesh. (Didion 2003a, 75; my emphasis)

It is easy to see how particular memoirs—textual fragments, letters, diaries, and so on—that were not originally intended to be published, and which positioned the female self within the threshold of community, were deemed an adequate and acceptable form of record for female use. When we come across such fragments, we need to be aware of their layered encoding, which is, as Buss suggests, “unconscious” and “conscious” in its conception and construction. Buss again:

While it is possible for a woman to write a memoir (a recounting of one's place as a member of a group) without too much censure, autobiography (the account of one's self development) is a risky activity for women. A researcher must expect that a woman's memoir will often be more than it purports to be. For example, Lynn Bloom points out that in the accounts of women pioneers we must always consider the “figure ground” relationship and see that although the woman may emphasize the pioneer “ground,” she may be also involved in representing the special nature of her figure in that ground. (24)

This layered encoding opens the intricacies of Reed's textual fragment. On the surface level of assertion, “I have not wrote you” suggests as much the struggle with communicating an “I” as the horror of the moment. Indeed, the “I” collapses into the “we” of the family. Thus, Reed communicates “the pioneer ground” but she also hints at “the special nature of her figure in that ground.” Translating such fragments as encodings is potentially fraught with dangers and can

attract accusations of overreading, and, of course, underreading. Nevertheless, I believe it is important aspect of *Where I Was From*.

Sharing a textual position alongside this source is Didion's description of Albert Bierstadt's painting *Donner Lake from the Summit*, which was completed some years after the event in 1873. But apart from the jacket cover (the paperback shows a young Didion gazing from the window of her car, while the hardback portrays an older Didion gazing contemplatively out to sea), *Where I Was From* does not include any illustrations. Because of this, we are forced to go outside the text to find Bierstadt's painting on the Internet or in other source material. It intrigues me why Didion sends us on this search, and what she expects us to say about this painting when we find it. Clearly, *Donner Lake from the Summit* has been influenced by nineteenth-century transcendentalism. It is a romantically beautiful landscape that owes much to Emerson's "Nature" (1836) and Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Didion draws our attention to the absence of people in such representations of beauty and space, offering Californians what the historian Kevin Starr calls "an objective correlative for their ideal sense of themselves: a people animated by heroic imperatives" (Didion 2003a, 66).⁴ Didion's point, I feel, is that poor immigrant women get in the way of such portraits and their political correlatives.

This continual juxtaposition between grand narratives and mini-narratives ensures that sparks fly between these representations, one which objectifies an ideal California and one fragment that offers only an impression ("Oh, Mary, I have not wrote you") of the horror of the crossing story. As Jennifer Brady suggests, the story of the Donner Party forms the "original antimyth of the golden land in which the promised land becomes the heart of darkness" (Friedman 1984, 45). Bierstadt's painting exposed an ideological determination to forget or, better, repress the other impression of this landscape. But, in doing so, the painting does give off an aura that Didion exploits. In his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin (1992) tells us that photographs empty of people give us the impression of a crime scene:

The scene of crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence [...] [P]hotographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance. (220)

Connecting this reading of a photograph to a painting is, admittedly, contentious, as both forms of seeing and recording reality depend on distinctive technical construction and critical evaluation. But understanding a people-less painting as a crime scene, burying textual evidence from the sight of its readers, is clearly of concern for Didion. Unearthing its “hidden political significance” is a key part of Didion’s work.

But is my claim troubled by the absence of the painting in *Where I Was From*? This absence could not possibly be related to copyright or reproduction costs, as a reputable press such as Flamingo would certainly fulfill the demands of one of America’s most respected, prolific, and high-selling authors. Nor could its absence be due to some form of literary fashion, as autographical and fictional narratives in the manner of W.G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (1998) or Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins* (1993) continue to include visual material as a paratext. We know that fragments such as Reed’s are vulnerable to being smudged out by more canonical or more acceptable representations. A careful reading shows how *Where I Was From* reverses this process by using a montage-like structure, celebrating the recovery of Reed’s account whilst honoring *Donner Lake from the Summit* only in absentia.

Under the guiding aesthetic of New Journalism, Didion would have left such a generic and cultural dispute to be picked up by a discerning reader. This is certainly true of her short piece “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” (1968). The fact-based story centers on one Lucille Miller, who despite having all the vestiges of a middle-class Californian lifestyle—“the \$30,000 a year, the three children for the Christmas card, the picture window, the family room, the newspaper photographs that showed ‘Mrs Gordon Miller, Ontario Heart Fund Chairman’”—drugs her husband, a reputable local dentist, and burns him to death in his Volkswagen (Didion 1968, 7–8). Even here, the preoccupation with the past, of the crossing story, and its relevance to the complexity of personal and cultural experience in the present, is evident:

The future always looks good in the golden land, because no one remembers the past. Here is where the hot wind blows and the old days do not seem relevant, where the divorce rates are twice the national average, and where one person in every thirty-eight lives in a trailer. Here is the last stop for all those who come from somewhere else, for all those who drifted away from the cold and the past and the old ways. Here is where they are trying to find a

new lifestyle, trying to find it in the only places they know to look: the movies and the newspapers. The case of Lucille Marie Maxwell Miller is a tabloid monument to that new lifestyle. (Didion 1968, 4)

This selection and arrangement of conflicting cultural motifs allows Didion's narrative voice to present the circumstantial evidence that connects the expectations enshrined in Californian heritage with the events that engulfed the Millers. *Where I Was From* maintains this connection but reduces its traces of ironic subtlety and its peculiar tonality of narrative voice to a perspective that forces the reader to confront the issue and its associated questions directly:

Does the preferred version of our history reflect the artless horror and constricted moral horizon of Virginia Reed's firsthand account? [...] Or had it come more closely to resemble the inspirational improvement that was Bierstadt's *Donner Lake from the Summit*? (Didion, 2003a, 75)

Reed was not initially as silent and marginal a figure as Didion makes out, having received notoriety for a short while in contemporary newspaper interviews and magazine articles.⁵ Didion's point, though, is that such moments are fleeting and easily forgotten, especially when those who have "a psychic investment in one or another heightened version of the founding period" maintain their privilege of power (Didion 2003a, 55), although as we must admit, Didion's "attract[ion] to the underside of the tapestry," is also a "psychic investment."⁶ Didion's memoir, then, seeks to repossess the historicity of the self, to give voice to and celebrate the marginal, and to fill peopleless paintings with (shadows of) people. In all this, *Where I Was From* offers a more balanced account of the past, one where Californians can be united with a more democratic story of the crossing and settlement of America, than the grand narrative offers. But this project is fraught with difficulties, as American culture, as do most cultures, still privileges art that looks best above the fireplace. *Donner Lake from the Summit* certainly complements and even justifies a home; Reed's letter, even if its content were to be translated into a painting, does not.

This notion of forgetting (or remembering) particular sources touches a personal nerve for Didion. She begins writing her memoir during the days following her mother's death on May 15, 2001. But

her grief is never wholly personal; instead, as Buss says of a memoir mode, it is part of the community or social group:

In the aftermath of my mother's death I found myself thinking a good deal about the confusions and contradictions in Californian life, many of which she had herself embodied. (Didion 2003a, 6)

Her mother, we are told, embodied characteristics that have become associated with California and the American West: a rugged individualism that remains suspicious of state and institutional involvement in personal and family affairs. Didion's father, who died in 1992, also believed, almost instinctually, in this definition of a Californian and lived his life with the conviction that immigrants unsettled Californian culture and tradition. Leonard Wilcox's claim that Didion's preoccupation with the past is "profoundly conservative" (Wilcox 1984, 71) may have some currency for understanding her earlier work, but it can, in my judgment, only shape a serious misreading of *Where I Was From*. As this text shows, her parents' values and beliefs are profound "contradictions." Californians, like other Americans, rely on state and institutional involvement in their personal lives; immigrants mapped, settled, and built the New World. But Didion uses a montage-like structure once again to place the term "contradictions" alongside the term "confusions." There is no blame attached to the parents; they are products of a particular ideological discourse, one that *Where I Was From* continually attempts to question and unsettle. The tears shed by her mother and her father's eventual recognition of the benefit of psychiatric help for his depression are examples of this attempt to question and unsettle.

Conclusion

The argument in this essay might perhaps be summed up by returning briefly to a point I made in my introduction: that is, according to Gilmore, the idea that memoir has associations with trauma or crises. Marcus Billson (1997) agrees:

The memoir as genre is closely associated with periods of crisis: both historical crisis [...] and intellectual crisis. [...] In times of crisis, the memoir-writer understands that his past and his very present are stepping stones to an unknown future. He experiences life more intensely, because the very foundations of life as he has known them are threatened. (61)

The anxiety of personal and cultural crisis is certainly a recurring theme in Didion's work. We see it, for instance, in *The White Album* (1979) in her inability to answer the phone, as well as her addictions, migraines, and breakdowns. In this book, as in *Where I Was From*, Didion attempts to link the problems she experiences with contemporary California and its heritage. *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) also displays some, although admittedly less, evidence of this pattern, as Didion tries to "write her way through" the death in 2003 of her writer-husband John Gregory Dunne.⁷ Because of such recurring themes, John Lahr's criticism of Didion as an "entrepreneur of anxiety" (Winchell 1989, 1) does seem pertinent. But Billson's thesis—crisis happens when the "foundations of life are threatened" leading only to an "intense experience of the present" and "an unknown future"—has, I believe, more value for understanding the complexities of *Where I Was From* than Lahr's skepticism.

As a memoirist, Didion represents what Reaves sees as a balance between the "Not I"—the heritage of California—and the "I." In order to maintain this balance, Didion establishes a montage-like structure to her book that allows primary source historical fragments written and spoken by marginalized individuals and groups to share a platform with more canonical documents of the past. *Where I Was From* displays an affinity with these fragments and allows them to shape its own narrative construction and style. This becomes evident in Didion's description of a quilt, which as a cliché of late twentieth century American feminism nevertheless still broaches valid questions concerning the nature of texts and the truth of representation:

In [a] room of the house I had on the Pacific Ocean there hung a quilt from another crossing, a quilt made by my great-great grandmother Elizabeth Anthony Reese on a wagon journey during which she buried one child, gave birth to another, twice contracted mountain fever, and took turns driving a yoke of oxen, a span of mules, and twenty-two head of loose stock. In this quilt of Elizabeth Reese's were more stitches than I had ever seen in a quilt, a blinding and pointless compaction of stitches, and it occurred to me as I hung it that she must have finished it one day in the middle of the crossing, somewhere in the wilderness of her own grief and illness, and just kept on stitching. (Didion, 2003a, 6)

We may notice that the "compaction of stitches" mirrors the compaction of sources in *Where I Was From*. Indeed, that compaction of stitches also mirrors the repetition "I remember ... I remember," which gains increasing urgency toward the end of the book. Thus,

both quilt and text are objects that represent something other than what they are, and this “something” can often be difficult to work through and name. By titling her work *A Memoir*, though, Didion has started a process of personal recovery that also seeks to recover narratives of home, which, as we know, is so important in times of loss.

Notes

1. For further discussion of the move from memoir to autobiography during this period see James M. Cox, 1980. “Recovering Literature’s Lost Ground Through Autobiography,” in Olney 123–45.

2. Along with the work of contemporaries Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joe Eszterhas, Didion was anthologized by Tom Wolfe in his groundbreaking *The New Journalism* in 1973.

3. This term appears originally in Derrida’s essay “Plato’s Pharmacy.” It was brought to my attention in an epigraph to Stuart Kelly’s *The Book of Lost Books* (New York: Viking, 2005).

4. See also Kevin Starr. 2005. *Coast of Dreams: California on the Edge* (London: Allen Lane).

5. This may be true of Reed, but the surviving members of the Donner Party were ostracized. As Jennifer Brady says, “They were rescued only to become social outcasts because they had resorted to cannibalism” (Friedman 1984, 45).

6. Didion, quoted in Susan Stromberg (Friedman 1984, 27).

7. The idea of writing as therapy is a pertinent means of understanding much of Didion’s work. As she says, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking” (Didion 1984, 6). This gives our reading a sense of the work as it is being formed, and Didion frequently draws our attention to this. What this does, when it works, is provide a connection between Didion and her reader that is profoundly human, that collapses any binary of power between author and reader. The opening words of *The Year of Magical Thinking* then are also the first words Didion wrote on her computer after the death of her husband: “*Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends. The Question of self-pity*” (Didion 2005, 3).

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. 1992. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. London: Fontana Press.
- Billson, Marcus. 1977. “The Memoir: New Perspectives on a Forgotten Genre.” Quoted in Buss, 61.

- Brady, Jennifer. 1984. "Points West, Then and Now: The Fiction of Joan Didion." In Friedman, 43–59.
- Buss, Helen M. 1993. *Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women's Autobiography in English*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press.
- Cox, James M. 1980. "Recovering Literature's Lost Ground Through Autobiography." In Olney 123–45.
- Didion, Joan. 1979. *The White Album*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- . 1984. "Why I Write." In Friedman, 5–10.
- . [1968] 2001. *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. London: Flamingo.
- . 2003a. *Where I Was From*. London: Flamingo.
- . 2005. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Friedman, Ellen G. 1984. *Joan Didion: Essays & Conversations*. Princeton, N.J.: Ontario Review Press.
- Gilmore, Leigh. 2001. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Hart, Francis R. 1974. "Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography." In *New Directions in Literary History*, ed. Ralph Cohen, 221–47. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Hassan, Ihab. n.d. "Ihab Hassan in Focus: An Interview with Ihab Hassan," conducted by Jerzy Durczak. (www.ihabhassan.com/durczak_interview_ihab_hassan.htm).
- Kakutani, Michiko. 1984. "Joan Didion: Staking Out California." In Friedman, 29–40.
- Kelly, Stuart. 2005. *The Book of Lost Books*. New York: Viking.
- Lamar, Howard R. 1979. "The Unsettling of the American West: The Mobility of Defeat." In *Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature*, ed. Dick Harrison, 35–54. Edmonton: Univ. of Alberta Press.
- Lee, Hermione. 2005. *Body Parts: Essays on Life Writing*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Lejeune, Philippe. 1989. *On Autobiography*. Trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press.
- Macherey, Pierre. 2004. "The Text Says What It Does Not Say." In *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, 2nd rev. ed, ed. David Walder, 252–59. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Olney, James, ed. 1980. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press.

- Reaves, Gerry. 2001. *Mapping the Private Geography: Autobiography, Identity, and America*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company.
- Starr, Kevin. 2005. *Coast of Dreams: California on the Edge*. London: Allen Lane.
- Stromberg, Susan. 1984. "Cautionary Tales." In Friedman, 22–28.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. 1996. *The Frontier in American History*. New York: Dover.
- Wilcox, Leonard. 1984. "Narrative Technique and the Theme of Historical Continuity in the Novels of Joan Didion." In Friedman, 68–80.
- Winchell, Mark Royden. 1989. *Joan Didion*. Boston: Twayne.
- Wolfe, Tom. 1973. *The New Journalism*. New York: Harper & Row.