

FINDING INSIGHT IN INTERSECTION: THE LITERARY JOURNALISM OF

JOAN DIDION

THESIS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Context and Definition.....	1
History.....	2
Critiques and Controversy .....	6
Scope and Goals.....	7
II. SLOUCHING TOWARDS BETHLEHEM.....	11
Prefacing a Career.....	11
Discussion.....	14
Implications.....	22
III. THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING.....	25
A Life's Work.....	25
A Culmination of Styles .....	26
The 'Ordinary' and the 'Magic'.....	29
IV. DEMOCRACY AND INTERTEXTUALITY .....	32
Fact in Fiction .....	32
Incidence and Effects of Intertextuality .....	36
V. CONCLUSION.....	39
REFERENCES .....	44

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Context and Definition

The term “literary journalism” refers to a style of writing that presents factual subject matter in a way that resembles fiction writing. Literary journalism may also be referred to as “new journalism,” “creative nonfiction,” or “narrative nonfiction,” and encompasses genres such as travel writing, food writing, and memoir. Literary journalism does not abandon ideas of truth and accuracy; however, its authors aim to tell complex, multi-layered stories by transcending the constraints of traditional news writing.

The inverted pyramid model, deadline-driven reporting, and the use of straightforward, concise language have long been considered tools of the journalistic trade, but adopters of the narrative style of journalism opt instead for a more vivid style of storytelling. With the goal of depicting events both honestly and creatively through the use of illustrative details, chronological development, dialogue, and character development, literary journalism can be viewed as both an in-depth reporting approach and as an art form.

Joan Didion is a writer who has made a career of nonfiction storytelling. Over the course of several decades and within the pages of dozens of essays, Didion has demonstrated the possibilities inherent in the literary journalism genre. By inhabiting the

territory in which fiction and journalism intersect, that is by using fictional storytelling techniques as she presents factual content dealing with the lives of ordinary people, Didion has distinguished herself as a distinctive kind of journalist. A study of her work may allow a better understanding of the genre itself - a genre often difficult to clearly define and evaluate.

### History

Though literary journalism experienced a resurgence in the 1960s and 1970s when Tom Wolfe coined the term “New Journalism,” Wolfe and his contemporaries, who included Didion as well as Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, and Norman Mailer, did not invent the form. Writers such as Charles Dickens, Honore de Balzac, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Tobias Wolff wrote in this style many years before; thus, literary journalism has experienced a long and complex history that today, in terms of form and content, leaves ample material for theorists and researchers to study.

With the inception of the Penny Press in the 1830s, newspapers began to present human interest stories - narratives that readers could relate to their own lives (Schudson, 1978, p. 22). The earliest examples of long form, immersion reportage address serious social and political issues and were authored by enduringly respected writers. In other words, “this journalism in fact has a proper pedigree” (Kramer, 1995, p. 21). Daniel Defoe, Mark Twain, and Stephen Crane are a few early voices of this genre, and their works include political pamphlets, travelogues, and war reporting. According to Roy Peter Clark, a senior scholar at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies “Any historical

study of journalism will reveal the existence of powerful narrative forms of writing, going back not generations, but centuries,” (Harvey, 1994, p. 42).

Scholars consider the 1890s to be a period of particular energy in terms of the development of the genre, as journalists such as Crane and Hutchins Hapgood were producing notable work and Lincoln Steffens, the city editor of the *Commercial Advertiser* in New York, was encouraging journalists to write in the narrative style (Hartsock, 1998, p. 64). The “sketches of life” written during this era (Crane wrote of the New York slums and Hapgood described the Jewish urban ghetto), added depth and realism to the otherwise banally presented news of the day.

Thus, when Wolfe chose to title an anthology of in-depth, creative reporting *The New Journalism* in 1973, some scholars criticized him for simply rebranding an already existing form and pointed out his tendency towards flamboyance. Using “four-letter words, talk about drugs, appearances on television talk shows,” and other attention-grabbing techniques, Wolfe publicized this “new” genre and championed literary journalism as being superior to other ways of writing (Hough, 1975, p. 114). In *The New Journalism*, which featured work by Gay Talese, Hunter Thompson, Didion, and others, Wolfe presented literary journalism as a higher and more effective form of storytelling as compared to both novels and standard journalism. Further inciting controversy and conflict, in his introduction Wolfe found fault with modern novelists and accused them of failing to accurately depict the cultural landscape, thus leaving a void for creative journalists to fill (Wolfe, 1973, preface).

“Wolfe’s theory had a few logic holes,” (Weingarten, 2005, p. 10) in that he seemed to overlook several impressive fiction writers of the day, and in a 1972 issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review* he was famously criticized by his rival and contemporary Jack Newfield for having “the social conscience of an ant” (1974, p. 302), implying that he presented narratives without offering opinions, judgments or solutions. According to Boynton, Wolfe’s own writing primarily operates on the surface level – focusing more on style than political or emotional substance – and he points out the commonly-held view that Wolfe “doesn’t have an activist bone in his body” (2005, p. xiv). As Wolfe’s own writing illustrates, bringing attention to social ills and encouraging positive change are not the aim of every literary journalist, however some scholars have pointed out the existence of a “citizen witness,” a figure who “attests to a constant renegotiation of the relation between the individual and the democratic state” (Bartley, 2009, p. 23). Writers such as Crane, Hapgood, and later Norman Mailer and Didion, employ an approach that merges literary style with political consciousness and a documentary point of view, but not all literary journalists choose to do so (Boynton, 2009, p. xx).

Thus, Wolfe’s style and temperament as a writer bear little resemblance to his new journalist counterparts (Boynton, 2009, p. xx), however his point that journalists were in a position to “threaten the established order” did ring true to many (Weingarten, 2005, p. 10), and the merits and successes associated with the “new” literary journalism have come to counterbalance the criticisms that he himself received. *The New Journalism* introduced a fresh set of voices and signaled the enduring and perhaps changeable nature of a potentially captivating genre.

Even though the “new” American journalists can hardly be called the inventors of this form, they were “doing more of it... and doing it much more self-consciously than it was done in the past” (Harvey, 1994, p. 42). They were also working during a tumultuous time – politically and culturally - and were reading one another’s work. A spirit of growth, development and hyper-examination thus characterized and propelled this movement forward. As a result, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, a larger section of the reading public became acquainted with creative journalistic endeavors like the satirical escapades of Thompson, the unapologetic essays of Wolfe, and the thoughtful, wandering episodes written by a young Californian named Joan Didion. By making themselves a part of their stories instead of keeping themselves at a distance, this generation of writers was able to “revolt against the stylistic and political constraints of cold war journalism” and “move with the beat of the times” (Sherman, 2001, p. 59).

After exploding in the 1970s, this genre continued to slowly grow in popularity and widespread acceptance. By 1993, a study by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found that, when compared to traditional news writing, literary journalism was “generally better read and better at communicating information” (Harvey, 1994, p. 41). Since the New Journalism era began, more newspapers have made a practice of allotting space to longer narratives and skilled reporters have been given the chance to tackle socially-conscious articles that might take several months to research. Major publications like *Esquire*, *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Washington Post* are today known for their basic reporting and also their longstanding inclusion of literary journalism, allowing hundreds of writers the chance to add their distinctive voices to this parallel narrative.



### Critiques and Controversy

Though literary journalism has been appreciated by many, a notable amount of controversy and debate has consistently encircled the genre. In particular, the literary community, academics, and many journalists themselves have voiced critiques of the content, intention, and style employed by creative nonfiction writers. Essentially, the growth of the overlap between literature and journalism created a new realm of exploration and also led to the existence of a rivalry as well as a fair bit of genre confusion. The “problematic terminology” (Hartsock, 1998, p. 71) and ambiguity surrounding the definition of literary journalism has built an element of conflict into the study of this style of writing. As a “critical moving target subject to the whims of a shaping consciousness,” it has also been difficult to apply traditional theoretical paradigms, thus perhaps explaining the lack of a comprehensive analysis of the form (Hartsock, 1998, p. 72).

This leads to the fact that, comparatively speaking, little scholarly critical analysis has been applied to the topic of literary journalism. In general, the fields of mass communication and literature have inspired an overwhelming amount of study; however, the realm in which they intersect has failed to produce more than a minimal amount of published research. An examination of early journalism in academia shows that Wilbur Schramm, often considered the inventor of communication study, played an important role in steering the field in a scientific direction and away from qualitative explorations, which he was once familiar with as a student of English and later as the director of the Iowa Writer’s Workshop (Hartsock, 1998, p. 76). Schramm’s decision to model the study of mass communication in the manner of a social science – characterized by empirical

research rather than textual or stylistic analyses – has had lasting effects on the discipline and left little room for the subject of literary journalism within the world of serious academic inquiry.

According to Hartsock (1998), “it would be unfair to suggest that there was any conscious attempt to exclude the scholarly study of literary journalism from mass communication studies,” but there is evidence that Schramm expressed “antipathy” towards literary study upon returning to Iowa following a stint in Washington, and subsequent communication leaders seemed to fall into line with Schramm’s leading example (p. 77). “Journalism” studies gradually became overshadowed by “mass communication” studies, and inquiries performed throughout the past few decades support the notion that “most large circulation scholarly journals in mass communication study remain quantitative, empirical and behavioral in focus” (Harstock, 1998, p. 78).

### Scope and Goals

This research proposes to examine the works of essayist Joan Didion and analyze her contributions to the genre of literary journalism. By investigating the creative and journalistic techniques that she has employed over the course of her career, a greater understanding of literary journalism may be achieved. Didion gained prominence as a writer beginning in the 1960s in the era of “New Journalism,” and since then she has proved to be a prolific writer of essays, books, and magazine articles on a variety of topics. Her continuous presence and critical success make her a good representation of the genre; thus, an analysis of her style and techniques can lead to a better understanding of when and how traditional and creative journalism overlap.

It is the goal of this paper to describe and clarify some of the stylistic elements that make literary journalism different from traditional journalism, and Didion's work provides an appropriate platform to do so. Thus, the objectives of this investigation exist on multiple levels but work towards the same common goal – to clarify the nature of literary journalism by examining the intersection between literary and traditional journalism as illustrated by the work of Joan Didion, specifically the essay collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and the book *The Year of Magical Thinking*. This paper will also briefly examine her techniques as a fiction writer in the novel *Democracy* and will take note of other aspects of her life and her career that may shed light on her status as a literary journalist.

In terms of methodology, this paper will consist of a textual analysis focusing on Didion's distinctive style and storytelling techniques using primary texts to analyze her work as a journalist. Her earliest published essays, found in the collections *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, and her most recent book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, will be given the bulk of the attention in this discussion, which will primarily analyze the content of relevant passages in each book. These works capture the essence of her style and voice and demonstrate her potential in terms of critical acclaim. Examining *Democracy*, a work of fiction in which Didion employs unconventional narrative techniques and deals with themes commonly found in her nonfiction work, will also shed light on this discussion. In other words, close readings of Didion's best and most representative work will lead to the greatest insights into her contributions to the genre.

In terms of academic study, the practice of journalism exists in the realm of mass communication, thus it has typically been examined in the manner of a social science.

Due to this approach, creative extensions of the field – namely the genre of literary journalism – have not received their due in terms of scholarly critical examination. The subjective nature of literary journalism makes approaching it in a quantitative way difficult and often fruitless. Analyzing creative storytelling techniques with a scientific point of view is largely ineffective; a better way to study literary journalism is through qualitative means. This paper hopes to shed light on the subject of literary journalism from a mass communication perspective by performing a close textual analysis where it has not been done before.

Including points of view found in various journal articles will lend authenticity to this inquiry. Though literary journalism has not been a well-covered topic, a few scholars have addressed it within such mass communication journals as *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, and language and literature journals like *New Formations* and *PMLA*. These articles give context to the work of literary journalists and provide an academic frame of reference for the past, present, and future developments within this genre. In undertaking this investigation, it will be necessary to examine texts that deal with the history of literary journalism in order to form a solid foundation for a more specialized inquiry. Many of these texts have been obtained in print form from Alkek Library at Texas State University-San Marcos and the Faulk branch of the Austin Public Library. Journal articles are available either in print form or online through Alkek Library, as well.

However it came about, literary journalism and its practitioners have escaped comprehensive study from a journalistic point of view; thus, it is the goal of this paper to add to and improve upon the existing narrative by discussing literary journalism in an

appropriate way – by exploring the body of work of one of the form's most prolific and exemplary writers.

## CHAPTER II

### SLOUCHING TOWARDS BETHLEHEM

#### Prefacing a Career

Published early in her career in 1968, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* is a critically acclaimed collection of thematically related essays that showcases Didion's style as a literary journalist. The book, which consists of several essays previously printed in other publications, begins with a highly personal preface in which she writes about the motivating factors behind this compilation. In the early 1960s, Didion felt "paralyzed by the conviction that writing was an irrelevant act, that the world as I understood it no longer existed" (xiii). Her response was to set out on a kind of exploratory journey that would help make sense of the world and allow her to overcome her own insecurities about the craft of writing, and the result was the completion of twenty essays that cobbled together a few years worth of descriptive and meandering reportage on a variety of California-related topics.

In particular, her chronicles of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district during the '60s – the people who lived there and the uncommon ideals they represented – offer a distinctive perspective of a cultural movement that much of the country found confusing and unseemly. Didion immersed herself in the daily life of runaways, police officers, cultural leaders, and drug users in order to compile a complex depiction of reality, and

her reportage amounts to an unconventional interweaving of creative form and journalistic content.

In the book's preface, Didion introduces herself to the reader and clearly begins to incorporate her own presence into the stories she is about to share. She expresses disappointment in how her essays were perceived (many were first published in magazines like *Vogue* and *The Saturday Evening Post* before they were compiled in *Bethlehem*), saying that she "failed to get through" to many readers and felt that feedback she received was "beside the point" (xiv). Didion also tells the reader that, while she wrote the essays contained in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, she experienced a serious amount of physical and psychological pain. "I was in fact as sick as I have ever been when I was writing... it was a troubled time" (xv) that working helped to soothe.

She writes that she met each of her deadlines partly out of professional respect but due to a sense of survival, as well. Essentially, Didion wrote the essays in this collection because she felt the stories deserved to be told, but she told them for partly selfish reasons – a fact that she readily admits to anyone who cares to know. Rarely do traditional journalists so thoroughly introduce themselves to their readers. Incorporating one's persona into a body of written work is a technique more often employed by fiction writers, memoirists, and any other writer whose work benefits more clearly from what Miller (2007) refers to as the presence of an "other." From the beginning, the reader is given personal information about the author that will no doubt affect the reading experience.

As a further example of her tendency to blur boundaries, in this introduction Didion also points out her flaws: “I am bad at interviewing people... My only advantage as a reporter is that I am so physically small, so temperamentally unobtrusive, and so neurotically inarticulate that people tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interest” (xvi). In a self-deprecating and unconventional way, Didion initially undermines her skill as a reporter before pointing out her ability to gain unprecedented access to her subjects. She does what Benjamin, Trachtenberg, and Hartsock have discussed as “closing the gulf” between “personal experience and information about experience” (Hartsock, 1998, p. 62). She includes herself in her writing, a common technique in literary journalism. When skillfully done, this adds to a writer’s work by imbuing it with another dimension. Attitude and point of view have no place in straightforward news stories; thus, Didion immediately establishes herself as a different kind of reporter.

“Writers are always selling somebody out,” she says in the final sentence of *Bethlehem*’s preface. A cynical remark, to be sure, but one that fits the self-critical and sharp-eyed persona that she has cultivated in just a few short pages. More so than traditional, hard news journalists, writers of literary journalism unapologetically become a part of their stories. Though “elegant, simple expression is the goal” (Kramer & Sims, 1995, p. 31), writers like Didion deviate from traditional journalism in an important way. “The narrator of literary journalism has a personality, is a whole person, intimate, frank, ironic, wry, puzzled, judgmental, even self-mocking – qualities academics and daily news reporters dutifully avoid as unprofessional and unobjective” (Kramer & Sims, 1995, p. 28). As gatherers of information they must build a bond of trust with their subjects, and



as storytellers they must build a similar bond with their readers. How well authors navigate what journalism professor Norman Sims calls “the borderlands between fact and fiction” (Chance & McKeen, 2001, p. vii) determines how they will be received by discerning readers.

### Discussion

Divided into three sections, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* touches upon a range of topics that can all be tied to the book’s central theme: “things falling apart” (xiii). Didion uses her native California as a backdrop for much of the book, often finding ways to juxtapose ordinary reality with the idealized images of a state known for its fun-loving inhabitants and Hollywood aesthetic. She often alludes to particulars of her own life, as well; from its beginning, *Bethlehem* is a study in intersection.

The first section is titled “Life Styles in The Golden Land” and immediately tackles a host of California stereotypes. The essay “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” is set in “a harsher California... in the season of suicide and divorce and prickly dread” (3). This piece begins with more than three pages of colorful description (the hot Santa Ana Wind, the faded bungalows of Banyan Street) before arriving at the central conflict: a man has died in a fiery car accident and his wife stands accused of his murder. This cinematic technique – setting the mood and scene before divulging the true subject of the story – directly opposes the norms of traditional journalism. Straightforward stories spell out the situation in the first sentence (specifically in a lead that would contain Who, What, Where, Why and When elements), and feature stories often contain such information in the “nutgraf,” usually located within the first few paragraphs of a story;

Didion's extended withholding of this information creates the beginning of a dramatic arc and lays the groundwork for a compelling storytelling experience.

"Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" goes on to carefully and painstakingly relate the details surrounding an ultimately tragic and sordid event. As Didion tells it, though Lucille Miller maintained her own innocence until the end, much of the outside world believes that she planned and carried out the grotesque murder of her husband. Miller was arrested twelve hours after the accident was reported and subjected to a lengthy and dramatic trial that dominated the news headlines for months thereafter. The details surrounding the case are examples of bad luck and poor decisions involving debt, adultery, and depression. The drama-laden background information combined with the fact that the circumstances of the car accident were unusual and deemed suspicious by law enforcement officers led Miller to eventually be found guilty by a jury of her peers and sentenced to a prison term.

By alternating between interviews, background information and much non-essential yet illuminating information, Didion crafts a compelling and detailed piece of long-form journalism. She describes Miller as "a woman who had been chairman of the Heart Fund and who always knew a reasonable little dressmaker and who had come out of the bleak wild of prairie fundamentalism to find what she imagined to be the good life" (15). Miller's father is a "sad-faced junior-high-school teacher who believed in the word of Christ and the dangers of wanting to see the world" (25). Didion's use of descriptive language helps to instill a mood (dread) and a theme (lost opportunity), and the details she chooses to include give the essay a multi-dimensional presence and emotional weight. And, though her language is colorful and carefully chosen, Didion stops short of

making judgments. Like a straightforward news writer she does not take sides, and like a novelist she uses observational skill to create a bricolage of imagery, conversation, and history.

Didion continues her exploration of California's various conflicts of identity throughout this collection and employs several other creative techniques. In the essay "John Wayne: A Love Song," she crafts a stylistic portrait of a famous film star that skips from decade to decade and seamlessly combines personal reflection with journalistic observation. Didion opens the essay with the sentence, "In the summer of 1943 I was eight, and my father and mother and small brother and I were at Peterson Field in Colorado Springs" (29). Thus begins an unusually structured but ultimately moving piece about John Wayne, a piece that illustrates his influence by showing how his All-American persona has been received and reflected by "ordinary" people like Didion herself.

Born in Iowa but raised primarily in California, Wayne came to personify the American Dream by working hard, becoming a movie star, and acting in over 100 films in which he played variations of the same character again and again - a tough and impressive alpha male who had the power to restore order to a world filled with conflict. Though weakened by lung cancer partway through his career, Wayne, as he put it, "licked The Big C" (32) and continued to make films about the classic American phenomenon known as the Wild West.

In "John Wayne: A Love Song," Didion has gained access to the set of the film that Wayne's illness had delayed. She keeps herself at a distance in these portions of the

essay, acting as a silent observer of a tense and testosterone-driven situation (the actors and film crew are not happy to be filming in cold, lonely Durango, Colorado). Again, she does not comment extensively on the situation with her own opinions, rather she reports painstaking details that allow the scene to speak for itself, including several pages of natural dialogue that read like a novel or screenplay.

In between flashbacks to her childhood and general reflections concerning Wayne's impact on the cultural landscape, Didion goes on to describe having dinner at a restaurant with Wayne and a group of other people. She marvels at how "time brings odd mutations" (41), because she never could have imagined this as a young girl, never could have imagined sitting across from someone whose face was "in certain ways more familiar" than her own husband's (41). When placed in the context of personal anecdotes, the sketch of an American icon becomes something more than a traditional biographical portrait. Didion transcends the straightforward news article as well as the typical format of a celebrity profile when she views John Wayne through the prism of her own life. Again, she finds the place where reportage meets creative writing and makes this territory her own.

The titular essay of this collection serves as a centerpiece for the book and demonstrates Didion's methods and style at their clearest. "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" (a line derived from a W.B. Yeats poem) begins by clearly and directly referencing Didion's central theme: "The center was not holding" (84). She is referring to the political and cultural climate of the United States in 1967, a time of "social hemorrhaging" (85). Through her eyes, though the country was not experiencing an open revolution or enemy siege, it was a time of confusion, loss, and runaway youth.

Didion goes to San Francisco, “where the missing children were gathering and calling themselves ‘hippies,’” (85) in order to experience the phenomena associated with cultural upheaval firsthand. In her usual honest and straightforward fashion, Didion reveals to the reader, “I did not even know what I wanted to find out, and so I just stayed around awhile, and made a few friends” (85). Again operating as an orchestrator of pastiche, she collects quotes, paraphrases, and descriptions of the people and the San Francisco surroundings, recording the names, conversations, and (often illegal) behavior of Haight-Ashbury residents.

This neighborhood was at the time overflowing with young people who had no jobs, no stable homes, and plenty of time to talk with Didion. She often finds her subjects haphazardly on street corners; sometimes she brought Cokes and hamburgers to the park where runaways would congregate, sharing her gifts as a way of introducing herself. She would ask about their pasts and their futures, and when they offered her drugs she would refuse – in one instance on the grounds that she is “unstable” (93). One runaway asked her age, and when she told him she was 32, he said, “don’t worry, there’s old hippies too” (93).

Intermixed with business-like descriptions of what is happening are Didion’s own thoughts and impressions. On an old warehouse where people gather: “I always feel good there” (95); she writes that she feels an affinity for a three-year-old boy named Michael who is often left to amuse himself while the adults around him do things like smoke hash and bake macrobiotic bread. One episode consists of Didion observing three people taking acid in their apartment. For four and a half hours they sit silently on the living room floor as the drug takes effect, and Didion acts as a passive observer for those

hours. She delivers this information nonchalantly – “At three-thirty that afternoon Max, Tom and Sharon placed tabs under their tongues and sat down together in the living room to wait for the flash... Except for the sitar music on the stereo there was no other sound or movement until seven-thirty, when Max said ‘Wow’” (106). Unlike she does in her John Wayne essay, Didion does not take this opportunity to recall events of her own life or draw connections between this scene and the state of the world at large. Rather, she shows restraint as a narrator and allows the strangeness of this event to speak for itself.

That is not to say that she always remains a passive observer or goes unnoticed by the citizens she encounters (in spite of her admittedly slight physical presence). A few Haight-Ashbury fixtures think of Didion as a “media poisoner” and resist her efforts to uncover information, but this does not stop her from questioning them and, to her advantage, this piece of information artfully foreshadows a later discussion. Official sources also prove resistant; one day Didion attempts to speak to a police officer in order to determine how law enforcers view the Haight-Ashbury situation. As most reporters would do – “hard” news or narrative – Didion asks questions and takes notes from this assumingly qualified source. A few minutes into the interview, the police officer abruptly leaves the room and then returns, telling her he can answer no further questions without approval from the Police Sergeant and must confiscate her notes.

If this were a straightforward story to be published in a mainstream newspaper such as the *Los Angeles Times* it is unlikely the reporter would have included the details of an incident like this, but Didion relates the entire awkward exchange (even revealing the contents of the forbidden notes) as well as the follow-up (she is told it is “taboo” to speak to anyone). Rather than taking a traditional route and perhaps writing that “The San

Francisco Police Department was unavailable for comment,” she makes her reporting roadblock and police resistance a part of her narrative.

She also (by means she does not explain) ends up with an “unofficial taboo contact” in the police department who adds yet another point of view to the essay. His anonymity lets him speak frankly about the San Francisco police department, thus, in her own offbeat way, she ends up securing an official source after all. She also includes thoughts from a psychologist, who calls what is happening a “quintessentially romantic” social movement that is sure to end up being overtaken by a form of authoritarianism (120).

According to Hindman (1998), alternative media are those that challenge the notion of what journalism is “supposed” to be. Traditional journalists are generally expected to meet certain professional norms and follow specified techniques such as aiming to be objective, remaining distant from their subjects, using official sources, and structuring ideas in a certain way. Alternative media adopt different perspectives and points of view than those typically published. By most standards, Didion qualifies as an alternative journalist, but it is clear that her techniques overlap with standard practices as well. Through her methods and her resulting narratives, she consistently defies easy categorization.

San Francisco’s drug scene, to which many people attributed most of the city’s problems during the 1960s, is attended to with unsparing detail by Didion. Her sober handling of trends, definitions, and protocol are intermixed with quotes and colorful details of the people she has befriended: “When I was in San Francisco, a tab, or a cap, of

LSD-25 sold for three to five dollars, depending upon the seller and the district... Where Methedrine is in high use, heroin tends to be available, because, I was told, 'You can get awful damn high shooting crystal, and smack can be used to bring you down'" (108).

She speaks to a man known as Deadeye who plans to open a house where people can stay to talk about and work through their problems. Didion asks where he will find the money to operate such a house; he tells her he can make it by selling drugs on the street, apparently seeing nothing hypocritical about his plan. Again, Didion includes none of her own thoughts in this passage; she simply relays the exchange as it happened.

This technique is effective due to the stirring subject she deals with and the component of human lives involved. Many of her interviewees have just arrived in San Francisco as idealistic and naïve teenagers seeking freedom and a better life. Those who have been there longer are often aimless, drug-addled, and sick, and Didion – again and again – finds ways to compare one group against the other so that the startling contrasts need no blatant explication. This technique can be illustrated through the example of a young girl named Gerry, an aspiring poet who has yet to truly become a part of the Haight-Ashbury culture. She shyly shows her notebooks to Didion, who takes notice of their innocent themes and girlish handwriting. "When Gerry writes 'crystal' in her books, she does not mean Meth" (110).

Within the final pages of the essay "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," Didion assumes a more powerful authorial voice. She analyzes, dissects, and makes connections in a brief narrative detour before returning to her previously restrained and observation-oriented style. In the space of a few paragraphs, she explains how the sights she has seen



may apply to the larger American situation. Positioning her focus on her own profession, Didion addresses the role of the media and points out the major problem therein, namely that “the signals between the generations are irrevocably jammed” (122).

Where - as an individual reporter - she withheld drawing conclusions before, here she includes herself as a member of the media and points out certain failures; they have neglected to see that “the hippies” are “pathetically unequipped children” trying to build a community in a social vacuum (122), choosing instead to paint the picture with broad strokes and demonstrating a less-than-insightful eye for detail and meaning.

### Implications

The overall effect of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* is twofold. Not only does it shed light on the experience of being alive in America in the 1960s by providing in-depth coverage of what Susan Orlean calls “the dignity of ordinariness” (Kramer & Sims, 1995, p. 4), it demonstrates that stylistic storytelling need not be viewed as a mysterious and indefinable genre of writing. Just as factual information can be transmitted by means of an unadorned news article, truth can be relayed through a wandering and often poetic arrangement of dialogue and descriptions.

William Howarth said of creative journalist John McPhee that he “buffs and polishes a fact until it reflects a greater reality” (Kramer & Sims, 1995 p. 8), alluding to the artistic components of literary journalism. Through arrangement, irony, and word choice, reading a piece of long-form, creative reporting can be an informative and rewarding experience. Didion’s particular interviewing style (restrained, straightforward, more listening and observing than talking and leading) and choice of subject matter place

her into the category of an alternative and more creative style of journalism, but her methods are not entirely nontraditional.

In terms of the conflicts that exist between traditional news writing and narrative storytelling, Clark (2000) discusses the idea of the “false dichotomy” as it often appears in the world of journalism. For example, news editors may argue about focusing on one of two inherently opposite possibilities: giving readers what they want vs. giving them what they need, long stories vs. short stories or emphasizing writing vs. reporting. “The false dichotomy infects every issue important to journalists. It diminishes our conversations, limits our options, and divides us into camps, setting one orthodoxy against another; all of this violates the interests of those we serve” (Clark, 2000, p. 11).

Narrative journalism vs. traditional journalism is the ultimate example of the false dichotomy, says Clark (2000). Some journalists have grown to revile the traditional inverted pyramid style of writing, in which a news story begins with a brief explanation of the Five W’s and the H (Who, What, Where, When, Why and How), because of its unadorned straightforwardness. Pragmatic journalists – and those writing online news – tend to support this established format for the same reason that others detest it; when quickly and clearly recounting a newsworthy event, a straightforward approach is often preferred.

The tension that exists between one format and the other need not exist, argues Clark (2000). As long as the proper venue is chosen for each piece and as long as each story is tackled by a thoughtful and thorough writer, no journalistic injustices have occurred. As Clark (2000) notes, the Five W’s are not necessarily strictly constrained. In

the hands of a literary journalist, “‘Who’ becomes character. ‘What’ becomes plot. ‘Where’ becomes setting. ‘When’ becomes chronology. ‘Why’ becomes motive. And ‘How’ becomes narrative.” Journalism can be analyzed and conducted in a number of ways, but focusing on inner conflicts is ultimately counterproductive. “Good writing and good reporting reinforce each other. Period” (p. 12).

## CHAPTER III

### THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING

#### A Life's Work

During the thirty years after *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* was published, Didion continued to observe, absorb, and describe the world around her in various ways. *The White Album* (1979), a collection of essays, picked up where *Bethlehem* left off – capturing examples of America's fragmented identity in the 1970s – and novels like *Play it as it Lays* (1970) and *Democracy* (1984) showcased her abilities and interests as a fiction writer. Following the events of September 11, 2001, Didion wrote "Political Fictions" and a memoir, *Where I was From*, was published in 2003. Throughout these years Didion maintained a presence in literary journalism and in literature, continuing to build upon her image as a prolific, perceptive witness with a habit of bringing her own life into the realm of her writing. In spite of all this, Didion remained relatively unknown outside of specific circles; however, that changed with the publication of *The Year of Magical Thinking*. She didn't often explicitly write about him, but it was a well-known detail that, since 1964, Didion had been married to John Gregory Dunne, another writer. The couple enjoyed a lifestyle that was both disciplined and cosmopolitan; they worked side by side and edited one another's writing (even collaborating on a few screenplays) and also traveled extensively and socialized with an elite set of intellectuals and cultural

trendsetters. They were close partners in work and in life until December 2003, when Dunne collapsed and died of a heart attack in the couple's New York City living room.

Her recounting of this event and the waves of change it brought to her life are the subject of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a national bestseller that won the 2005 National Book Award and brought Didion's work to the attention of more readers than ever before. Even though the book's content contains highly personal and tragic material (the narrative is also shaped by Didion's daughter's serious illness), she maintains her signature measured tone, achieving critical acclaim in the process. By incorporating her skills as a reporter and her style as a storyteller, Didion adds to her body of work as she simultaneously copes with the tragic events of her life, making *The Year of Magical Thinking* an engaging and surprisingly accessible piece both to read and to study.

### A Culmination of Styles

*The Year of Magical Thinking* has been difficult to categorize due to its hybrid nature, but it can be argued that elements of memoir, nonfiction essay, and medical journalism intermix to make something of a travelogue of the grieving process. Repetition and a fluid, stream of consciousness approach give the book many novelistic qualities, but ultimately the narrative is grounded by hard facts and relatively mundane details.

The structure of the book is generally chronological (Didion begins writing shortly after her husband dies and records her thoughts, feelings and experiences over the course of one year), but from one page to the next the structure is unrestrained and often tangential. Didion often changes topics without warning, but the ideas she discusses are

all thematically related. For example, in addition to replaying the circumstances of Dunne's death in unsparing detail, Didion also devotes attention to subjects like grief etiquette, cardiology, and her own tangled memories. This approach is consistent with Didion's previous work, allowing her to handle an emotionally-charged story in a new way. Unlike many traditional "trauma memoirs" that have flourished since the 1990s (Luckhurst, 2009, p. 91), *The Year of Magical Thinking* addresses more than just one person's misery and avoids being perceived as melodramatic. Didion's "icy prose" as well as her established habit of revealing her own struggles and frailties (as demonstrated in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album*, for example) empower her with a "cultural prominence" that has caused this particular book to stand apart from others of its general kind (Luckhurst, 2009, p. 92).

In terms of style, by once again viewing the world through the lens of her own life, Didion finds a way to blend creative storytelling and factual reporting. Straightforward, first-person narration and a chronological approach frequently give *The Year of Magical Thinking* a journalistic feel, and Didion supplements this approach with her own creatively meandering side notes that help to clarify her state of mind and shed light on the grieving process in general. As she deals with her husband's death she also suffers the pain of watching her daughter, Quintana, struggle with poor health; spending time in the hospital by Quintana's side and navigating the health care system keep Didion in a perpetual state of anxiety and vigilance. Memories and fears often surface, allowing her to create a collage of emotions and thoughts.

Didion frames her point of view from the beginning by admitting to her indulgence in "magical thinking," a term encountered in psychology and anthropology

referring to human cognitive processes that often arise during periods of grief. The belief that causality exists between one's thoughts and the physical world often surfaces in the human mind following a traumatic event, and in Didion's case, she believed that Dunne would eventually return to life if she behaved in a certain way. She kept his shoes because he might need them again, she avoided reading his obituaries, and she worried about letting others believe he was dead, even telling herself that she "had allowed him to be buried alive" (Didion, 2005, p. 35).

In the midst of this "refusal to accept the pain of separation" (Luckhurst, 2009, p. 94), Didion exhibits her familiar reporter-like composure and provides details to support the idea that she may not be alone in experiencing disturbances to her cognitive reality. She recounts the following: months after Dunne's death she read an article in *The New York Times* in which a woman describes the magical thinking surrounding the death of her son, a soldier in Iraq. When a military messenger approaches the woman's home to tell her the news, she immediately intuitively knows why he is there and then refuses to let him inside, "I thought that if, as long as I didn't let him in, he couldn't tell me. And then it – none of that would've happened. So he kept saying 'Ma'am, I need to come in.' And I kept telling him, 'I'm sorry, but you can't come in.'" (Didion, 2004, p. 13). Didion relates to the mother's reaction, writing that she "recognized the thinking as my own" (p. 14).

Beginning at the time of Dunne's collapse and sustaining itself throughout the next year, Didion's "magical thinking" brings an unconventional element to this grief memoir. As she has done in her previous work, she risks undermining her credibility by admitting to certain flaws but counterbalances her unorthodox revelations by supplying the reader with facts and the perspective of a knowledgeable voice. Her thinking may be

“magical,” but her prose is extensively researched, carefully wrought, and ultimately relatable. In uncovering the tensions and inconsistencies that exist in our society in relation to death and mourning, Didion reclaims her role as an informative storyteller and in that establishes the possibility for both trust and common ground to exist between her and her readers.

### The ‘Ordinary’ and The ‘Magic’

Didion’s choice of factual matter in *The Year of Magical Thinking* covers a range of topics. As previously mentioned, she first painstakingly describes the moments of her husband’s death and their immediate aftermath; from the title of the book he was reading that evening to the contents of his wallet, Didion systematically recalls the minutiae of that day. From here the story focuses on her daughter Quintana’s illness and the effects these dual emotional blows have on Didion’s psyche. Beyond the personal pain she experiences, however, Didion also includes scientific and theoretical narrative components uncovered through her own research.

*The Year of Magical Thinking* is grounded by scholarly-like references to medical and psychiatric journals as well as other published material on the subject of illness, death and grief. Philippe Aries’ *The Hour of Our Death*, studies on autopsy consent, counseling from a priest, and the contributions of Sigmund Freud are a few sources to which she turns for comfort and illumination. She explains, “In a time of trouble, I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information was control” (p. 44).



Her investigations bring a variety of points of view to the narrative as well as alternating moments of comfort and frustration. “The power of grief to derange the mind has been exhaustively noted,” she writes (p. 34), and proceeds to explore the nuances of her own extensive new knowledge as well as the ways this information may help her to move forward. Particularly, in recognizing her patterns of “disordered thinking” (p. 35) and then discovering that they are not altogether unusual considering her circumstances, Didion applies her trademark composure to one of life’s most unwieldy topics.

In terms of creative storytelling techniques, Didion uses repetition to great effect in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Among others, she repeats the following phrases intermittently: *You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends; The question of self pity; Life changes in the instant; The ordinary instant; Information is control*. These words act as touchstones and are tied to the main ideas and themes of the book; every time they resurface their implications and weight are better understood.

These phrases often relate to what Didion calls “the vortex effect,” where memories are unexpectedly triggered by any number of stimuli (most often objects and places). For example, houses, streets, buildings, and even whole cities might cause her to pause and remember a specific moment spent with Dunne, forcing her to once again painfully confront the fact that he is dead. Didion cites published research by Freud and others to help her elucidate her “vortex effect” experiences, again supplementing her more ephemeral reveries with outsider points of view. Slipping between present and past while repeating key foundational phrases brings fluidity to the narrative even as it disrupts the traditional chronological flow. In short, traditional reporting collides with a

chorus-like recurrence of words, resulting in a narrative that may appeal to a wide swath of readers.

## CHAPTER IV

### *DEMOCRACY AND INTERTEXTUALITY*

#### Fact in Fiction

Didion has established herself as a prolific writer of fiction as well as nonfiction, and a brief examination of one of her novels complements the study of her journalistic endeavors. Reviewers of her fiction have characterized it as sharp, spare, and unsentimental, suggesting her habits as a novelist parallel those illustrated in her essays. For example, in the 1982 novel *Democracy*, she blurs the reader/narrator boundary in a way similar to that of her nonfiction works and crafts a novel with an unorthodox structure. By telling the story from the point of view of a narrator named Joan Didion and by consistently bringing attention to the fact that she – the narrator – is uncertain about how to tell the story, Didion finds another way to blend fiction and journalistic techniques.

*Democracy* is a novel of American politics, international relations and family scandal. Once again embracing her central theme of societal instability, Didion uses a fictional framework to comment on the problems at hand, namely “a national security apparatus designed to maintain America’s global influence; a media-based politic that elevates style over substance; and a loss of connection with the past” (Tager, 1990, p. 173). Storytelling arcs and the use of colorful characters like Inez Victor, a politician’s

wife who doesn't shy away from conflict, illustrate Didion's talents as a compelling novelist, but key plot elements, her use of the first person, and a generally unconventional approach to narration constantly remind readers of Didion's roots as a journalist.

After laying the initial groundwork for the story, chapter two of *Democracy* begins with the phrase "Call me the author" (Didion, 1984, p. 16). She goes on to write, "*Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion, upon whose character and doings much will depend of whatever interest these pages may have, as she sits at her writing table in her own room in her own house on Welbeck Street*" (p. 16). As Didion the nonfiction author often does, Didion the fictional narrator starts by pointing out her own subjective perspective as a storyteller. "Cards on the table," she writes, and proceeds to tell the reader that she lacks certainty, has no faith in her own technique, and is missing the minimum amount of ego "which all writers recognize as essential to the writing of novels" (p. 17). The story thus continues on, creating an unusual reading experience that, though based on fiction, in many way mirrors the understanding of Didion's literary journalism.

As the novel unfolds, Didion continues to address the reader through the narrator, allowing a relationship to form and a sense of dramatic irony to build. This narrator has an academic background and was an instructor at Berkeley (the college Didion attended). Under the guise of examining an old school assignment in which students were directed to analyze an essay, the character Joan Didion reveals something about her style and motives for writing, "*Didion begins with a rather ironic reference to her immediate reason to write this piece. Try using this ploy as the opening of an essay; you may want to copy the ironic-but-earnest tone of Didion...*" (p. 17). This uncommon approach and

the constant acknowledgement of the writing process in the beginning pages of the novel allows the reader to understand that a complex story is waiting to be told; however, Didion gives no guarantee that this narrator will be able to deliver that story in a conventional or linear way.

Further alluding to the storytelling process, the self-aware narrator continues, “*Consider the broader question of the effect of setting: how does Didion use the scene as a rhetorical base? . Consider, too, Didion’s own involvement in the setting: an atmosphere results. How?*” (p. 17). The narrator refers to herself in these passages, but it soon becomes difficult to separate the narrator and the actual author. Does the true Joan Didion wish us to examine these questions in terms of her writing the novel just as the fictional Joan Didion relates her challenges in telling the story of Inez Victor? Readers may ponder this question and may apply it to some of Didion’s previous works, as well.

As a literary journalist, Didion has never hesitated to reveal her state of mind to the reader, and here, in a different genre, she creates a similar effect. She outlines a brief history of a family, one characterized by wealth and murder, before admitting defeat. “You see the shards of the novel I am no longer writing, the island, the family, the situation. I lost patience with it. I lost nerve” (p. 30). *Democracy* is ultimately told in fits and starts, alluding to several different novels and amounting to one that is characterized by a wandering narrative style.

Parrish (2006) notes that *Democracy* is written with Henry Adams in mind; Adams was a journalist, novelist, and historian best known for writing the autobiographical *The Education of Henry Adams*, published in 1907. Didion references

Adams in this novel and has cited him as an influence on her work in general. Here, Didion mirrors the themes of Adams' work, including a book he wrote called *Democracy*, and mimics the central narrative strategy of *Education*, his most famous contribution. "If Adam's 'education' consists primarily of his inability to achieve a usable education, Didion's 'novel' consists primarily of the narrator's inability to find the right form for her story" (Parrish, 2006, p. 168).

Parrish also points out that Didion's novel is, in many ways, a veiled autobiography and furthermore acts as a kind of history in that it attacks American imperialism and citizens' ever fading collective memory (p. 168). Like her journalistic essays, *Democracy* becomes difficult to easily categorize in terms of its authorial presence and subject matter; however, parallels can be found between style and content that may help to guide the reader. Questions related to the authority of the narrator mirror the questions raised about democracy itself. As the reader wonders if the narrator can be trusted to tell an accurate and meaningful story, another question also arises – does a definitive and objective truth even exist? This is a question Didion constantly addresses in her writing - fiction and nonfiction alike.

As she often does in her nonfiction, at one point in the novel Didion takes the opportunity to address the nature of truth in journalism. Inez Victor has undergone a series of interviews to bring attention to her husband's senate candidacy but one day reaches a breaking point. Instead of reciting the stock answers she has been advised to supply to reporters, Inez reacts with honesty and cynicism to an Associated Press writer. When asked about the "major cost" of public life, she says it is "memory" (p. 51). This confuses the journalist, so Inez explains that being a public person is similar to

electroshock therapy and it causes people to “lose track” of what has happened “during your whole life.” She tells the reporter that most journalists already know what story they are going to tell because they all tend to mine their content “from the clips” (p. 53). They don’t search for what is new and authentic, they simply recycle old sound bytes that may or may not be true, a fact that alters the present reality as well as the nation’s history.

Not only does Inez’s weary disdain for this state of communicating drive the plot of *Democracy* forward, it reflects one of Didion’s ongoing topics of examination as well. As she posits in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and various other pieces, the media are easily appeased by the status quo and usually offer nothing more than surface-level inquiries into the state of the world. Didion’s literary journalism and the tactics she consistently embraces – the extended periods of observation, the personal context she provides – go about storytelling in an alternative way. Didion operates differently, which allows her to succeed where other journalists have fallen short. Whether in her novels or in her literary journalism, Didion holds fast to the same themes and demonstrates a consistent ability to deviate from the status quo.

#### Incidence and Effects of Intertextuality

The vast interrelatedness of Didion’s themes and methods help to guide the reader through her career and better understand each individual work. Consistency in perspective and methods combined with diversity in topics of examination effectively interweaves her individual essays and novels into a cohesive whole. Just as reading about journalistic shortcomings in *Democracy* reminds the reader of Didion’s mainstream

media criticisms found in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, several other texts contain greater meaning when considered in relation to her previous and subsequent work.

The “bleak political vision” (Tager, 1990, p. 173) illustrated in *Democracy* also occurs as an undercurrent in Didion’s other work. Her political writing, best displayed in works like *Political Fictions* (2001) and *Fixed Ideas* (2003), are extensively researched and have been critically appreciated for being precise and informative. As opposed to traditional journalists, who are often tasked with being objective by the publications that employ them, Didion openly reveals her political leanings in the Forward to *Political Fictions*, reciting her family’s conservative background and her own eventual registration with the Democratic Party. In spite of this taking of sides, she admits to viewing America’s two-party system with a “somewhat doubtful eye” (Didion, 2001, p. 8), thus her subsequent essays can be read with the full knowledge that Didion is skeptical of the system and not particularly loyal to one party over another. By exhibiting transparency rather than evincing objectivity (a quality that many view as outdated and difficult, or even impossible, to truly embody), Didion again goes about the transmission of information in a different way than her traditional counterparts.

From early in her writing career, Didion devotes substantial attention to her family’s California ties, and her frequent choice of subject matter solidifies her connection to the Golden State. In tracing her path over the years (she travels extensively and eventually moves to New York City), her identity remains clearly tied to her birthplace, which shapes her literary persona. The California-oriented *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* as well as the state’s appearance in many of her novels (including *Democracy*) and other essays gives her work a sense of coherence and consistency not associated with



all writers, especially traditional ones who leave themselves out of their work. The ever-present sense of context and the humanizing effects of exhibiting allegiance to her home imbue her overall contribution and presence with a unique sense of meaning.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the genre of literary journalism, which has thus far been under examined from a mass communication perspective. Its subjective nature and variety in authors and subject matter make it difficult to easily classify and interpret. This thesis, however, finds that it is possible to strategically analyze specific examples of literary journalism in order to better understand the genre as a whole.

Traditionally, the practice of journalism has primarily been addressed in a quantitative way. Established theories and research methods beginning with the influence of Wilbur Schramm and other leaders of the mass communication field have inspired many examinations to be conducted in a scientific manner. Areas of journalism that do not lend themselves to such treatment, such as literary journalism, have thus largely been overlooked. Writers like Didion, Wolfe, Capote, and others have been analyzed from various other academic perspectives, but from a mass communication point of view these contributors to journalism have not been comprehensively addressed. Thus, in addition to promoting better understanding of the techniques of the genre in general, this study adds to the existing body of work in the specific realm of journalism.

Joan Didion's work provides an apt means of focusing this discussion because her journalistic essays are representative of this hybrid form and because she has become a

prominent and successful example of a literary journalist. In blending traditional techniques with creative storytelling practices over the course of her career, Didion's works – including fiction as well as nonfiction – effectively shed light on the literary journalism genre. This study notes instances of straightforward newsgathering as well as deviations from the norm that are present in several of Didion's essays and in the novel *Democracy*; discussing these specifics from the mass communication vantage point has not historically been a common area of study, allowing this paper to contribute to a thus far neglected intellectual realm.

Specifically, in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (her first published collection of essays), Didion writes about the lives of a variety of people as a means to illustrate the world's frequent disconnectedness. She also chooses to filter the landscape through the lens of her own life, thus establishing herself as a distinctive storyteller capable of balancing traditional newsgathering techniques like researching and interviewing with creative narrative elements relating to dialogue, characterization, and plot development. Didion's essays in this collection establish her distinctive voice and style, foreshadowing her lasting legacy as an influential writer and, for the purposes of this study, allow her creatively presented work to be analyzed in terms of its journalistic merits.

Didion's latest and most critically acclaimed work, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, was included in this investigation because it illustrates how effective a hybrid approach can be. The book covers a tragic year of Didion's life and contains many personal details and digressions; however, it is grounded by facts and systematic research. The melding of unemotional reporting and memoir lead to a successful, touching, and informative book that exists as an achievement for Didion and a compelling example of literary journalism

for journalism scholars to examine. An analysis of the form and content of *The Year of Magical Thinking* sheds light on the genre by reminding readers of its integration of traditional journalism.

This study also examines the novel *Democracy* and finds its style and themes to be complementary to the discussion. Just as Didion's essays move beyond the boundaries of traditional reporting, her fiction often resembles her journalism in terms of content and form. By adopting an unusual narrative technique in *Democracy* and by addressing the state of the media, Didion illustrates that imparting information and truth to her readers can occur in unconventional ways. Her method of combining traditional journalism techniques with invented material characterizes Didion as a unique storyteller and also promotes a level of intertextuality associated with few other writers. This study underscores the existence of a sense of connectedness between Didion's distinct works – a phenomenon more likely to be associated with literary journalism than traditional journalism.

In terms of broad implications, the importance of noting and discussing specific authorial techniques used in literary journalism can be regarded in relation to their effect on the reader and the shaping of the journalistic landscape. Stories concerning long-term political situations or multi-layered sketches of people and communities are often better explicated by means of literary journalism. Straightforward news style often serves an important purpose, but the nature of creative journalism allows for the inclusion of richer detail and a level of nuance otherwise unattainable. This study points out the ways in which alternative storytelling techniques lead to a greater engagement and emotion on the

part of the reader; pinpointing these methods can allow for better understanding of journalism itself and the various ways it can be used to educate and engage the public.

Also, the question of how literary journalism fits into the new media landscape naturally arises. Digital technology and the increased availability of information has made it easier to gain access to examples of literary journalism and also the news of the day, but the existence of “so many competitive forms and sources of digitized information” with a pressure to “publish instantly” has led to a dominant culture of repetitive, packaged news (Brown, 2009, p. 60). In this environment, long and intricate stories have become less visible than easily digestible ones; “We live in the middle of this incredible information revolution, and yet ninety-five percent of the information we get today is the same two percent of human experience repeated again and again and again and again” (Brown, 2009, p. 60).

Literary journalism offers an alternative to these trends, however the genre has yet to find a clear and profitable way to coexist with innovations such as Twitter, blogs and social media - innovations that encourage brevity and subsist on user-generated content. “So far, the Web has not brought forth a new economic model that will pay for the production of a labor-intensive form such as literary journalism. Nonetheless, technology makes possible new connections and new discussions, and these topics should attract our scholarly attention” (Sims, 2009, p. 7). Judging from a few recent developments (the launch of the refereed journal *Literary Journalism Studies* in 2009 as well as a greater emphasis on literary journalism in colleges and universities) proponents of this genre are in the process of finding a way to embrace modern media practices.

In terms of challenges, the inherently subjective nature of literary journalism suggests that limitations exist in terms of analyzing it. An examination like this one, which aims to be focused and strategic in its approach, may be improved upon with certain adjustments. Expanding the sampling of texts from which to mine examples of Didion's authorial decisions may lead to a more comprehensive discussion; the texts in this study were chosen because they represent work from the span of Didion's career and illustrate her consistency in terms of tone and style, so examining a greater number of similar texts would expand and likely strengthen the arguments herein. Also, future studies may aim to apply this approach to other authors in the field of literary journalism in order to better understand the ways that traditional journalism techniques may be altered by other creatively oriented writers.

With its artistic undercurrents and solid ties to traditional journalism practices, literary journalism is a complex and multi-layered genre suited to be analyzed in a qualitative way. This study examines an important method of storytelling from a journalistic perspective, thereby promoting a better sense of understanding and adding to a limited area of academic inquiry.

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## **VITA**

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