

CALIFORNIA DREAMING:
PLACE AND PERSONA IN THE ESSAYS
OF JOAN DIDION AND EVE BABITZ

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Joan Didion, a native of Sacramento, California, is the author of many acclaimed collections of journalism and memoir, the first of which were *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979). Eve Babitz, a lifelong resident of Los Angeles, has produced two such volumes: *Eve's Hollywood* (1974) and *Slow Days, Fast Company: The World, The Flesh, and L.A.* (1977). While much critical ink has been spilled over Didion's oeuvre, Babitz was, until the recent reprinting of the aforementioned titles, known best as an artist and muse. Perhaps due to this disparity in recognition and renown, no extant critical piece serves to compare the nonfiction of Didion and Babitz, despite their close geographic and social proximity. In viewing their early work side by side, the Golden West of the 1960s and '70s emerges as the clearest point of comparison; however, the ways in which Didion and Babitz use place and time in their work often differ due to the marked contrasts in the identities they convey. In characterizing herself as a journalist and an observer, Didion offers a perspective that feels objective but is, at turns, wry and cool. Babitz, writing in a manner that was, at one time, considered autofiction, positions herself as the freewheeling focal point around which Hollywood's dizzying cultural landscape unfolds. By manipulating the constructs of place and persona, these writers are better equipped to tell the story at hand and analyze their places within it, cementing their work in California's literary canon.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction..... 1

Joan Didion, California, and the “Impersonally Personal”..... 8

Eve Babitz: From Daughter of the Wasteland to L.A. Woman..... 29

Bibliography..... 50

Curriculum Vitae

INTRODUCTION

Los Angeles, like other cities of its size—Paris, London, New York—is often synonymous with the art and media devoted to its mythic status. Unlike such other cities, however, Los Angeles as it exists on the map today is relatively young, having been officially founded in late 1781 by Spanish governor Felipe de Neve (Hundley 35). California did not become part of the United States until 1850, after Mexico ceded the land as a condition of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (del Castillo 53); as a result of this, the literary canon of the Golden West is less extensive than those of the aforementioned places. However, the ways in which both the city of Los Angeles and the state of California have been portrayed on the page—by Raymond Chandler and John Steinbeck, Nathanael West and John Fante—have served to create a multifaceted and indelible image in readers’ eyes. This image is one of pioneer struggle and Hollywood glamour, of man versus nature and man versus hedonism: a “confluence of luxury and despair; of exploitation and reinvention” (Gordon, “California Literature”). The California rendered by such writers is a vast landscape of dreams and disasters, from *The Grapes of Wrath* and all its Dust Bowl desolation to the unsettling Hollywood backdrop of *The Day of the Locust*.

It is not difficult to argue, then, that both Joan Didion and Eve Babitz number among the writers in this tradition. Didion, born in 1934 in Sacramento, California, is the author of more than a dozen collections of journalism and memoir, the first of which were *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, published in 1968, and *The White Album*, published in 1979. Babitz, born several years later, in 1943, and a few hundred miles south, in Los Angeles, has published two such volumes; her debut, *Eve’s Hollywood*, first appeared in

1974 to little critical noise, followed in 1977 by *Slow Days, Fast Company: The World, The Flesh, and L.A.* In viewing the essays in these collections side by side, California—that “fashionable dwelling place of despair” (Allmendinger 3)—emerges almost immediately as the clearest point of comparison. While Didion was a later-in-life transplant to Los Angeles and Babitz is a self-described daughter of the wasteland, the work of both writers is informed by, and often focused on, the home state they have in common. Another similarity that should be noted is the period during which Didion and Babitz produced much of their best-known work. The late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States were marked by upheaval and discord, from the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement to the evening-news hysteria that surrounded all the perceived ills of “[turning] on, [tuning] in, and [dropping out],” to borrow the words of Timothy Leary (260). Without the sociocultural framework provided by this moment in time, the location from which Didion and Babitz issued these collections lacks a great deal of context.

The ways in which Didion and Babitz use the constructs of place and time in their work differ due to the contrasts in the identities they convey on the page: Didion, operating from the ethos of the New Journalism, acts as a keen yet reticent spectator, offering her reader a perspective that feels objective but is punctuated with wry humor and glossed with a veneer of stylized coolness; Babitz, on the other hand, writes from the vantage point of an active participant, shirking convention in the interest of telling a good story. Writing in a manner that was once passed off as autofiction, Babitz positions herself as the freewheeling focal point around which Los Angeles, with all its people and all its parties, spins. Persona, then, is the next most evident similarity observable in the work of these writers. The personas they convey are strong and reliable, giving Didion

and Babitz license to write on well-trod topics (Jim Morrison, Charles Manson, the agonies and ecstasies of LSD) in ways that feel somehow new. In turn, these personas add an extra element of texture to the subjects on which both writers focus. In cultivating such projections of self, they are each cultivating an ideal, if imagined, audience: Didion, whose contemporaries included the likes of Gay Talese, Hunter S. Thompson, and Dan Wakefield, had earned the journalism establishment's unofficial seal of approval early in her career and was therefore depicting her native West for a New York readership; Babitz, who seemed to care neither for the East Coast literati nor the men who served as its gatekeepers, was writing about Los Angeles for Los Angeles. Another result of a strong handle on persona is the ability to venture beyond one's particular locus of interest—like California, in the cases of Didion and Babitz—while retaining an immediately recognizable voice. When such a persona is paired with that locus of interest, though, voice is further enhanced, heightening the overall impact of the writing in question. By making the most of their carefully fashioned personas across each essay and each volume, these writers are better equipped to both tell the story at hand and analyze their roles within it.

While there has been plenty of critical ink spilled over Didion's work in the last fifty-odd years, there exists only one book-length work on Babitz: Lili Anolik's *Hollywood's Eve: Eve Babitz and the Secret History of L.A.* (2019). Moreover, no extant published piece, to my knowledge, compares Didion and Babitz and their work in a straightforward manner, likely due to Didion's long and celebrated writing career and Babitz's relative obscurity in the field. (If a comparison of the two writers seems unfair because of this disparity, it is also something of an inevitability, given their similarities

and proximity to one another.) With this informational imbalance in mind, the texts I have used in assessing the material at hand are Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and the Story* and Gerri Reaves' *Mapping the Private Geography: Autobiography, Identity, and America*. Gornick, in discussing nonfiction writing rooted in the personal, acknowledges the writer's "twin struggle to know not only why one is speaking but *who* is speaking" (8, emphasis hers). I think it can be shown that Didion and Babitz not only operate according to the "why" and the "who," but also according to the "where"—that is, according to place. Reaves, whose ideas about place and self are different than, though not incompatible with, Gornick's concepts of persona, also sheds light on the personal importance of place in the work of both writers: "Despite our intentions to adhere to the current of life," she writes, "we find ourselves aswirl in that circularity of memory" (2). Place, Reaves argues, is a construct that has the power to moor this swirling circularity and provide some semblance of familiarity and order to both reader and writer. She states that Didion, in writing about her home state, "maps a new intersection at which genre, self, and place meet" (7)—a statement that might also be applied to Babitz's autobiographical writing. Most salient, I think, is Reaves' idea that when a writer elevates place to such a high degree of importance, it becomes "a secular system of belief that transcends mere geographical definition" (19). A writer's internal clock will always be set, in some measure, to place. This alone merits its significance as a primary component of personal writing, on par with self-characterization.

This, I think, might be a good place to pause and explain my interest in Didion and Babitz, as my own attraction to these writers and their work comes from a place that is admittedly not scholarly. When I first read Didion's "Why I Write" in a high-school

composition class, I was taken with the terse elegance of her sentences; soon after, when I came across what are perhaps the most famous pictures of her, taken by Julian Wasser in 1968 for *Vogue*, I was equally smitten with her real-life persona, as it was so consistent with her projection of self on the page. I am tempted to write this off as an anecdote pointing to my own superficiality, but I cannot do so in good conscience, because there is still a loud, adolescent part of me that values coolness¹ above all else. I am drawn to the idea of Didion subsisting solely on Coca-Cola, salted almonds, and Pall Malls² almost as much as I am drawn to her description of the Santa Ana winds, or the way she conveys the experience of suffering a migraine. The singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell described herself as having “felt like a cellophane wrapper on a pack of cigarettes” (Crowe, “Joni Mitchell Defends Herself”) while working on her 1971 album *Blue*, and it feels not inappropriate to apply this general feeling of fragile malaise to Didion—or her persona, or the mood she creates with so many of her essays. It is brittle, yes; it is deceptively revealing, and it has a definite sparkle to it, albeit a peculiar one.

This appreciation of coolness, in turn, is also what drew me to Babitz. Writer Zan Romanoff, discussing Babitz’s recent rise in popularity, argues that Lili Anolik’s 2014 *Vanity Fair* piece on the writer “raised [Babitz’s] profile among a new generation, one weaned on Joan Didion’s evocations of the dark glamour of the West Coast and ready to take L.A. seriously as a literary city” (“How Eve Babitz and Francesca Lia Block Made Los Angeles Literary”). I hesitate to pick a fight with this explanation, since it rings true in my personal experience, but I think it could also be said that Didion’s sensibilities

¹ It seems eminently unhip to explain this in a footnote, but I want to clarify that when I talk about coolness, I’m talking about a mostly harmless breach of the status quo, which manifests itself as a kind of *je ne sais quoi* in its host. When I think about coolness, I think about Grace Jones and Venus flytraps and ² I am grateful to Sara Davidson, without whose piece “A Visit With Joan Didion” (*The New York Times Book Review*, 3 Apr. 1977) I would be unaware of this detail.

prepared this “new generation” not just to appreciate Internet thinkpieces about Los Angeles, but to appreciate its particular brand of cool on some deeper level. Though Babitz’s persona is obviously very different from Didion’s, it is similar in its allure, its cultural cachet, and its deft seamlessness from the page to reality. While I relate to Didion’s detachment and aspire to her level of stylistic mastery, Babitz appeals to me because I lack her instinct for the fast, the hot, the exciting. Reading Babitz is like eating a macaron for the first time, if the macaron were hot-pink and laced with speed: It is delightful, a totally hedonistic adventure, and for me, much of its appeal lies in the fact that I have no idea how I would go about replicating it. When Babitz describes Los Angeles as a place where “there are no winters”—a place where there are “just earthquakes, parties, and certain people” (*Eve’s Hollywood* 126)—some secret nerve I never knew I had twitches to life, because I want to own a place in that way, to know it intimately and really belong. I want that elusive, inborn coolness, too, but I feel doomed to observe it from a distance.

Didion and Babitz belong to that rare genus of cool girl for whom the aforementioned *je ne sais quoi* is a birthright. Everything happens to them; everything is about them, but only by accident, it seems. While immersed in their work, I imagined drinking bourbon at Ports with Joan and tequila at the Luau with Eve, and more than anything, this thesis was borne of that desire—however shallow, however misguided and romantic. Though I have spent the better part of the last few years reading critical work on Didion and essays about Babitz and the nonfiction of both writers, I wanted my comparative analysis to be somewhat unorthodox. I wanted to suffuse it, however

clumsily, with the dark pop-culture dreaminess of their work, which is itself a facsimile of the dark pop-culture dreaminess of the West Coast.

In first examining these writers' projections of self and then taking a look at the ways in which they use their respective personas to write about California, one can arrive at a better understanding and appreciation of the essays of both Didion and Babitz, viewed side by side. Despite their differences, Didion, in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album*, and Babitz, in *Eve's Hollywood* and *Slow Days, Fast Company*, offer unique and authoritative perspectives on California throughout the 1960s and '70s by using the constructs stated to their advantage. In doing so, they assert themselves as authorities on both the Golden State and the changing cultural landscape of the era, thereby cementing themselves and their work within the California literary canon.

JOAN DIDION, CALIFORNIA, AND THE “IMPERSONALLY PERSONAL”

“The way I write is who I am, or have become.”

—Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

To attempt to dissect Joan Didion’s persona—whether that be her persona on the page or her self-presentation in real life—is to attempt to dissect a ship in a bottle. It is careful in its construction and deceptive in its delicateness, blurring whatever line exists between the written word and reality: Didion’s self-professed fragility, both physical and psychic, mirrors the tension and thinness of her sentences. To deconstruct the parts of a Didion sentence and try to put them back together in any other (pleasing) way is a near impossibility, but when one remembers Didion’s practice, as a teenager, of retyping Hemingway stories as a way of demystifying his syntax (Kuehl, “Joan Didion”), her style begins to make more sense. It might help, too, to recall her personal packing list, printed in *The White Album*, that includes—among other essentials—cigarettes, bourbon, stockings, and her typewriter (34-35). The purpose of this list, one might assume, is to illustrate the wearying chaos of Didion’s life at the height of her journalistic career, but it also serves to paint Didion as a writer whose audience includes those who understand the importance of bringing one’s own mohair throw on a cross-country flight.

In addition to sharing her appreciation for the jasmine soap at Henri Bendel, Didion’s ideal readership is privileged, if not wealthy; educated, if not intellectual; and cosmopolitan, if not elitist. They are too serious to live in Hollywood but not so serious that they don’t want a glimpse of its guts, and that glimpse, tailor-made for East Coast sensibilities, is precisely what Didion offers her audience. Though there comes a price to

occupying such a niche—Martin Amis, in his review of *The White Album*, suggests that Didion “tries to find a female way of being serious” in her reportage (“Joan Didion’s Style”)—it seems commensurate with the mainstream acclaim that follows.

“Conflating a person’s public-facing self with the private is dangerous,” writes critic Megan Reynolds, going on to attest that “[t]he persona [Didion has] created...leaps off the page and latches on to her thin frame like a succubus” (“The Long Con of Joan Didion”). While this might be interpreted as an attack on Didion and her persona, it is important to highlight some of the criticisms Didion has garnered for her self-characterization as a sort of “neurasthenic Cher,” to borrow a particularly snide epithet from writer Barbara Grizzuti Harrison’s infamous hit piece on the writer (113). Harrison was not alone in harboring such a sentiment—Pauline Kael, who engaged in more than one public spat with both Didion and her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, “hated what she viewed as Didion’s fashionable despair” (Heller, “What She Said”).

Analyses like these cannot be discounted, especially since criticizing Didion in light of current sensibilities has become something of an Internet cottage industry³ in recent years; however, such complaints might carry more weight if Didion had never admitted to conveying a certain persona in the service of her work. She expresses it best in the preface to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*: “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 interests” (xiv). It is true that Didion’s persona on the page cannot easily be separated from the image of the writer standing languid,

³ See Erika W. Smith’s “Reclaiming Joan Didion” (*Femsplain*, 3 Feb. 2016), which takes to task the elitism and “cult of thinness” surrounding Didion and her work, and Maria Bustillos’ “The Center Held Just Fine” (*Popula*, 15 Oct. 2018), a less forgiving essay on Didion’s early politics, that crowns her the “First Lady of Neoliberalism.” Bill Morris’s “Prescient and Precious: On Joan Didion” (*The Millions*, 17 May 2017) defends Didion against charges of snobbery while still deeming her persona “frequently annoying.”

modishly bored, in front of her Corvette Stingray—cigarette going to ash between her fingertips, maxi dress hanging from that oft-fetishized petite frame—but perhaps the reader and critic should not try so hard to draw some arbitrary line between these entities at all. Perhaps doing so would amount to participating in Didion’s journalistic “long con,” to borrow Reynolds’ phraseology. Not only does Didion possess the cultural cachet and disaffected languor specific to her time and place, but she also has the distinction that comes with being a direct descendant of pioneers and Puritanism. “Her constructed personality is so well rendered,” writes critic Emmett Rensin, that readers are “willing to suspend...judgment and believe in its reality” (“Becoming Joan Didion”). It is difficult to see any instance of authorial manipulation, however, as anything more than the ultimate goal of the creative nonfiction writer.

Indeed, when considering Didion, it becomes all too easy to fall under the spell of those famous old photographs without delving into the details of her life; however, because of Didion’s ability to approximate a feeling of intimacy in her work without giving too much of herself away, this is not an easy undertaking. Her father Frank, who succumbed to unspecified mental illness during Didion’s time at Berkeley, was a member of the Army Air Corps, which forced the family to move often during her childhood (Daugherty 50), and she discloses little in her work about her mother Eduene, who encouraged her to enter the *Vogue* contest that launched her writing career (22). It is easy, then, for the reader to imagine Didion emerging, fully formed, into the world, razor-sharp and impervious to the indignities of childhood. Because the background information she provides is so brief and perfunctory, it becomes necessary to search for textual proof of Didion’s persona in her body of work. While unrelated to California, “On Keeping a

Notebook,” one of several meditative essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* that first appeared in various popular magazines, provides some of this evidence. The piece in question is a series of musings on “the impulse to write things down,” which is, in Didion’s estimation, “a peculiarly compulsive one, inexplicable to those who do not share it, [and] useful only accidentally” (*Slouching* 132). Individuals who keep notebooks, she continues, are “lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents,” and “children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss” (132-133). In first presenting herself as someone who keeps a notebook and then characterizing keepers of notebooks in this way, she is not trying to make a joke at her own expense; she is painting herself as someone who is, in addition to being an anxious malcontent, cerebral and intelligent in a way that demands attention rather than requesting it with a bat of the eyelashes. This commanding intellect, however, is tempered with neurosis: While Didion admits that the primary objective of keeping a notebook is to “[remember] what it means to be [her]” (136), she is self-conscious about the egoistic nature of such a pursuit. She is in the strange position of being a confessional journalist; an introspective observer. Because of this, her confessions don’t seem so naked when veiled by reportage, and her observations are given life when paired with the odd personal detail. In regard to this phenomenon, Romanoff writes: “Didion comes off as a woman too self-possessed to be charmed, which is, funnily enough, what’s so charming about her: [To] read her is to have the privilege of hearing what that quiet girl in the corner is thinking, the scene sharply observed, sharply described” (“California Girls”). Didion is cool in her judicious presentation of self, and the information she deigns to offer the reader about her life only reinforces the persona of natural intellect and casual authority she has constructed.

While keeping a notebook is a broad topic, and not one to which Didion ever really returned, the essay is memorable because of the all-encompassing nature of her persona. “I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not,” Didion writes. “It is a good idea, then, to keep in touch, and I suppose that keeping in touch is what notebooks are all about” (*Slouching* 139-140). This calls to mind Gornick’s assertion that the nonfiction writer’s objective is “to use the narrating self only to shape those associations that will provide drive and lead on to inner resolution” (30). She argues that it is only necessary for the writer to “know who they are *at the moment of writing*” (30, emphasis hers), which feels almost like an echo of the sentiments expressed in “On Keeping a Notebook.” Didion’s “narrating self” becomes even more pronounced when she writes about matters pertaining to her place of origin. “Certain places seem to exist mainly because someone has written about them,” she writes; indeed, if “Kilimanjaro belongs to Ernest Hemingway...[and] Oxford, Mississippi, belongs to William Faulkner” (*White Album* 146), one must pose the inevitable question: To whom does California belong?

Didion, a pioneer in the hybridization of journalism and personal essay, has often turned her eye, as a writer, to her home state. “The opportunities for mourning are many” in Didion’s work, roused by “the attachments that she was born into” (Szalai 97)—attachments to place, of course, but also to a socially conservative era and a pioneer origin story steeped in lore. The political situation in California in the 1960s and ’70s provided fertile ground for her sharp perspective and occasional wry humor, as was the nationwide explosion of social change. While Didion was not at all a social outsider during this time, she cultivates a cool, detached persona in relation to her subject matter,

refraining from inserting personal anecdotes where they don't belong. After reading a collection like *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, a reader wouldn't know, for instance, that Harrison Ford built a deck for the Didion-Dunnes at their house in Trancas, near Malibu, but it is consistent with the strange, unique California dream Didion weaves through her prose. Didion's California spans mythic proportions, encapsulating everything from the legendary tales of her pioneer ancestors crossing the snowy Sierra Nevadas to lurid modern-day stories of such characters as Charles Manson and Ronald and Nancy Reagan. She does not put forth an apologist's defense of the place, nor does she criticize it unduly; rather, it is simply—to paraphrase the title of one of her later volumes—where she was from.⁴ This unique position facilitates Didion's creation of an “anatomy of the golden land” (Carton 41) that often reads more like a postmortem.

Indeed, one of the more salient aspects of Didion's persona is the fact that she is from the Sacramento Valley, and that she has spent much of her life in California. When discussing her roots, however, Los Angeles seems as though it might well be on another planet: Though she lived there for much of her career, she was not a native Angeleno, nor did she ever claim to be one. “The Joan Didion who moved from New York to L.A. in June 1964,” writes Lili Anolik in a *Vanity Fair* profile, “was no more Joan Didion than Norma Jeane Baker was Marilyn Monroe...She was a native daughter, but only sort of” (“How Joan Didion the Writer Became Joan Didion the Legend”). People who say they've been to Hollywood, or to Big Sur or San Diego, have not, Didion claims, truly borne witness to the California she calls home. By assuming this position of both authority and nostalgic regard, Didion characterizes herself further as observer and

⁴ *Where I Was From* (2003) delves more deeply into what Didion perceives as the hypocrisy inherent to California—that is, the mythology of the state versus its reality.

insider, giving the reader a glimpse into a matter of personal significance without revealing too much; however, especially in her more experientially based essays, Didion's self-characterization as a neurotic introvert preemptively halts the reader's expectation that there will be a moral, or even an ending, to the story being told.

About her place of origin, Didion writes: "California is a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension; in which the mind is troubled by some buried but ineradicable suspicion that things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent" (*Slouching* 172)—the collective first-person pronoun standing in for pioneers, or Americans, or humanity. Didion's California, that "cataclysmic endpoint of Manifest Destiny" (Allmendinger 8), is a place that is glamorous only incidentally and by way of desolation, but glamorous all the same.

In characterizing her home state in such a manner, Didion's default mode of unease and watchfulness is heightened, and when she describes herself as having been "a nervous child, afraid of sinkholes and afraid of snakes" (173), it doesn't come as a surprise to the reader. When she describes melancholy, virtuous Sacramento as having fallen prey to modernity since the time of her family's arrival, one is inclined to believe her argument, as it is consistent with the feeling of disintegration that pervades "Notes from a Native Daughter." "Between naïve innocence of doubt and self-conscious hypostatization of it," writes Carton, "yawns the wasteland in which, for Didion, neither a coherent self nor a private voice can endure" (48). Perhaps this is the dilemma that gives rise to Didion's persona: a construction that is coherent, if not wholly cohesive. Even

when she hedges, poking holes in her own assertions with every “maybe” and “perhaps,” she is still working toward self-characterization by laying bare her uncertainty and angst.

In marrying a well-wrought persona with a nuanced place familiar to the writer, a strong thematic thread is born. Reaves, in *Mapping the Private Geography*, states that Didion elevates place to the same level of significance as self and genre when writing about her home state. Indeed, it is in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* that these three essential components coalesce, allowing Didion’s sensibilities vis-à-vis Los Angeles and the West at large to take shape.

If any Didion essay provides a thesis statement regarding her relationship to California, it is “Notes from a Native Daughter,” the title of which calls to mind James Baldwin’s 1955 nonfiction debut. While obviously different from the firsthand experiences of poverty and oppression detailed by Baldwin, “Notes from a Native Daughter” portrays, with a similarly critical eye, a period of cultural change often at odds with the lingering past. It is not an autobiographical essay, as Didion maintains a strong focus on social, political, and environmental issues, but, as Didion so frequently uses her own experiences as a vehicle toward illuminating a given subject, it is tinged with the personal: “I come from California,” she writes, “from a family...that has always been in the Sacramento Valley” (*Slouching* 172). Didion’s particular brand of grave cultural commentary, shot through only sparingly with elements of the personal in the interest of establishing authority, is a technique in heavy rotation throughout her oeuvre; however, the ways in which her persona operates are not always predictable. “Going back to California is not like going back to Vermont, or Chicago; Vermont and Chicago are relative constants, against which one measures one’s own change,” Didion writes, but

just when the reader is prepared to interpret this as some testament to the mythic singularity of California, she dismantles such notions. “All that is constant about the California of my childhood,” she continues, “is the rate at which it disappears” (176). The map of Sacramento that Didion tacked to her bedroom wall while living in New York is similarly redolent of this particular homesickness—this longing for a place that will never again exist as she once knew it—and the aforementioned statement, consistent with ideas of cultural collapse and environmental crisis, is also consistent with Didion’s projection of self. “Her sense of doom,” writes Katie Roiphe, “is always in the service of some larger point” (“Joan Didion’s Evasions”)—in this case, her place of origin.

In “Notes from a Native Daughter,” Didion’s California is sometimes strange and sad, but such descriptors seem only secondarily important to the question, to which Didion returns time and again, of whether California is even a real place anymore—whether it was “merely imagined or improvised” (*Slouching* 177) since the days of manifest destiny and westward expansion. Such a statement is in danger of seeming inscrutable to the point of ambiguity if one fails to acknowledge the fact that Didion, the woman who blamed a spell of vertigo on “the summer of 1968” (*White Album* 15), often allows her own neurasthenic tendencies to seep into readers’ perspectives on the matter at hand. This contributes to what Carton describes as the reader’s “enchanted submission to [Didion’s] rhetorical power, of almost relieved communion with her vision, of personal identification” (35).⁵ Rather than portraying herself as an erratic or unreliable narrator,

⁵ It should be noted that Carton arrives at the following point vis-à-vis such submission on the part of the reader: “[T]here remains something curiously uncommunicative about this style; for all its ability to elicit consensus, it facilitates no real community” (50). Perhaps the facilitation of community should not be seen, then, as an objective of Didion’s work.

Didion allows just enough personality to leak into her observations, thus allowing her idiosyncrasies to color place with persona and letting the reader place trust in her words.

Didion, in refraining to venture too far into the Valley towns⁶ forgotten by time, maintains a distance from the changes that have taken hold since her Sacramento childhood. She takes note of the marquee at the Spanish-language cinema and reads the sign in front of a church, but she does not stop for a closer look at either place. In doing this, Didion, simultaneously interested in lamenting change while disparaging the way things used to be, enjoys a wider berth when it comes to lines like the following: “[T]hese towns...hint at evenings spent hanging around gas stations, and suicide pacts sealed in drive-ins” (*Slouching* 181). According to Gornick, it is “directness that dazzles” (19) in personal journalism, but while Gornick advocates for a happy medium in regard to the distance a writer should maintain between herself and her subject, Didion’s cool, judgmental persona allows her to stay a little further away. Whether Didion is zeroing in on cultural and environmental decline in the state or inviting the reader to luxuriate in a moment, however brief, of dreamy and speculative idealization, California remains an ever-present character in her body of work, even when she chooses to keep some of its peculiarities at arm’s length.

“Which is the true California?” Didion asks. “We all wonder” (*Slouching* 179). Perhaps it is Didion’s high style and air of journalistic detachment that allow for a question like that, however rhetorical or reductive, to be posed; perhaps, instead, it is Didion’s habit of calling attention to her own patterns of thought that facilitates such lines. In any piece of personal writing, Gornick posits that there is only ever one “proper

⁶ One might be forgiven for assuming that Didion is referring to the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles County, but in her estimation, the Central Valley, which encompasses the Sacramento drainage system, is the “real” one (*Slouching* 179).

self to invoke” (6). Both here and elsewhere, this “proper self,” for Didion, is the role of spectator—a curious position to adopt in an essay on one’s place of origin, but a position that does much in establishing Didion’s narrative credibility.

In regard to reportage in general, Gornick warns that a writer’s internal pressure to “keep the narrating self subordinated to the idea at hand” (10) can result in excessive detachment from her subject matter; however, in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” Didion manages to do just this without sacrificing the color of the piece. This is possible because of a particular dualism intrinsic to Didion’s writing—her characterization of self, so neurotic and fine-boned, is inseparable from the critical darkness of her style. This dichotomy presents itself often throughout Didion’s oeuvre, and a clear example can be observed in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*’s titular essay.

The piece in question, buried in the volume between several other culturally minded pieces and a number of analytical meditations that are only personal in a peripheral kind of way, focuses not on Sacramento or Los Angeles, but on the infamous Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco in the late 1960s—the nucleus of the American counterculture movement. This essay is Didion’s contribution to a larger discussion of so-called “hippies,” but to categorize it as such would be an oversimplification, as her analysis does not traffic in the moralizing tropes ubiquitous to this cultural moment. Sensing a need “to come to terms with disorder” (*Slouching* xii)—presumably sociocultural—in the California of the late 1960s, she ventured to the Haight, but she was dismayed by responses to her piece, most of which detected a sanctimoniousness that, per Didion, was simply not there: “I saw that, however directly and flatly I thought I had said it,” she writes in the preface to the collection, “I had failed to get through to many of the

people who read and even liked the piece, failed to suggest that I was talking about something more general than a handful of children wearing mandalas on their foreheads” (xii). These so-called flower children serve as her guides, however unreliable, into this world, but the piece’s sharp edges point to something darker and more inscrutable than hash pipes and daisy chains.

The essay itself begins with a grim declaration, casting a pall over San Francisco in 1967: “The center was not holding” (84). Indeed, Didion’s writing on social issues around this time is marked by the absence of any ethical locus, and without first establishing some such focal point, there are few opportunities for moralizing. She continues with an equally bleak summary of the state of affairs in America as she sees it:

It was a country of bankruptcy notices and public-auction announcements and commonplace reports of casual killings and misplaced children and abandoned homes and vandals who misspelled even the four-letter words they scrawled...Adolescents drifted from city to torn city, sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skins, children who were never taught and would never now learn the games that had held the society together. (84)

While there may be little pearl-clutching directed toward the individuals mentioned, whether directly or not, in the above passage, Didion herself is still very separate from these people and these situations, and this alone puts Didion’s narration in danger of seeming disdainful. These adolescents, as previously mentioned, are her entry point into a deeper investigation of everything that has gone so ostensibly awry. She finds these teenagers in the Haight, “where the social hemorrhage was showing up” (85). It must be acknowledged that Didion never lived in San Francisco, but in her odyssey through the streets and past dilapidated houses, Didion is still focused on California, however foreign the particular setting might seem. Throughout the course of the piece,

she encounters the types of people that seem better suited to serve as stock characters in an after-school special on the evils of marijuana. She spends time with Debbie and Jeff, two such teenage runaways. Didion provides no further commentary after Debbie giggles and says, ““This year’s gonna be wild”” (91), but she doesn’t need to—she provides an unspoken invitation for her reader to fill in the blanks. Didion has performed the dirty work of the journalist, leaving all opportunities for incredulity and disapproval (and there are plenty) to the reader.

Didion’s status as an interloper is heightened when the reader discovers that during her time in the Haight, she has also been speaking with a police officer on the sly after first unsuccessfully trying to establish such a contact. As an observer, she is neither aiding the police department nor allying herself with the wayward youth of Golden Gate Park; even at the essay’s outset, she does “not even know what [she] wanted to find out” (85). The many details she manages to gather do not necessarily add up to make a comprehensive whole, but they succeed in creating a sense of confusion similar to the chaos of San Francisco in 1967. Her closing anecdote, concerned with a five-year-old girl named Susan who claims to be a student in “High Kindergarten” (128), well exemplifies the impartiality inherent to the journalist’s wandering eye. In the 2017 documentary *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold*, Didion’s nephew, Griffin Dunne, asks her what she first thought when she saw this child tripping on acid. After a long pause, she tells him, “It was gold.” This response, aside from serving as a delightfully aberrant kind of artist’s statement, is consistent with Didion’s persona—a persona that is admittedly sort of reptilian, but, perhaps above all else, the persona of an unapologetic collector of material.

Deborah Nelson, in discussing the way in which Didion is viewed today, states: “Her reputation...alternates between two diametrically opposed characterizations: one as an anxious and emotionally fragile sensitive and the other as an unsentimental, ironic, and unsympathetic critic” (147). These outwardly conflicting “characterizations,” or personas, work to especially cohesive effect when Didion writes about Los Angeles in the late 1960s—a place and time consistent in their chaos.

Despite Didion’s relative unfamiliarity with San Francisco, her portrait of the place falls in line with her idea of California at the time: exciting, yes, but also seedy. Los Angeles, the place she called home for much of her adult life, is the setting of the titular essay of *The White Album*, and it does much, through the marriage of persona and place, in continuing that theme. The fifteen-part piece begins with a line that has been repeated and reprinted and divorced from context countless times since it was first published: “We tell ourselves stories in order to live” (11). Didion uses this line as a way to introduce the sense of personal upheaval that she experienced in tandem with—or perhaps as a direct result of—the cultural tumult of the 1960s. She describes living in a big rundown house on Franklin Avenue that she suspects will soon be slated for demolition: “[It] was precisely this anticipation of imminent but not exactly immediate destruction,” she writes, “that lent the neighborhood its particular character” (16), and one cannot help but wonder if the neighborhood in question could serve as an allegory for Los Angeles at large. Her life in that house is a whirlwind of people coming and going, of “taking a 25-mg. Compazine one Easter Sunday and making a large and elaborate lunch” (20), of a Bob Dylan album on the record player and phone calls from proselytizing Scientologists. She is living the Los Angeles lifestyle of the late 1960s, and though these details might

be to blame for contributing to an air of casual elitism, her deployment of such allusions feels calculated and self-aware. When the reader envisions Didion deviling eggs in a psychotropic haze while “Visions of Johanna” hums in the background, the writer has succeeded in the projection—however forceful, however fanciful—of her persona.

Didion’s claim that it “was hard to surprise [her] in those years” (*White Album* 20) is believable, only because of the sense of impending doom that seems to plague both her and her city. This feeling disappears, however, with the final segment of the essay, focused on the Manson murders of August 8, 1969. The day after a pregnant Sharon Tate and four of her houseguests were slain on Cielo Drive, not far from the Didion-Dunne residence, was the day Didion felt as though the 1960s had come to a close—the day “[the] tension broke” and “[the] paranoia was fulfilled” (47). Though such a statement does not serve in any obvious way to characterize Didion, by making such a declaration, she is playing the role of the arbiter, of the judge. She is not only inviting the reader to see things from her perspective; she is presenting her perspective as reality. Rather than interpreting Didion’s talk of “tension” and “paranoia” as part of a larger, more pervasive feeling of moralizing panic, one might see such discussions as paths by which Didion can better access and present her inner thoughts, albeit obliquely at times. If there is a sense of calm innate to constancy, then there must even be a sense of calm in constant neurosis.

Even in her reportage of the creeping unease in Los Angeles around this time, though, there is no question that this city is, or at least was, her home, as well as a source of curiosity and inspiration. When sitting in on a recording session with the Doors, Didion admits that this scene holds some interest for her, as “[the] Doors’ music insisted

that love was sex and sex was death and therein lay salvation” (*White Album* 21).⁷ Her observation of Jim Morrison, who shows up to the studio late, is characteristically sardonic, but he “tended to suggest some range of the possible just beyond a suicide pact”⁸ (22), and she seems almost enraptured by his presence. She did not see the recording of the album to its completion, but the idea of Didion sitting in the recording studio with the band, just for an evening, doesn’t seem strange at all, especially when one considers the time (1968) and the place (Sunset Boulevard).

Even outside the setting of Los Angeles, the ennui essential to Didion’s persona is in full force; it merely attaches itself to physical markers in other places. In her essay “In the Islands,” centered on a trip to Hawaii with her husband and their daughter, Didion provides perhaps the most substantive and apparent example of self-characterization that can be found in either of the volumes at hand:

I could indulge here in a little idle generalization, could lay off my own state of profound emotional shock on the larger cultural breakdown, could talk fast about convulsions in the society and alienation and anomie and maybe even assassination, but that would be just one more stylish shell game. I am not the society in microcosm. I am a thirty-four-year-old woman with long straight hair and an old bikini bathing suit and bad nerves sitting on an island in the middle of the Pacific waiting for a tidal wave that will not come. (*White Album* 135)

The above statement is a testament to the endless applicability of the self as a centerless vantage point from which such social and cultural confusion may be understood, regardless of whether Didion is correct in her assessment that doing so is just

⁷ This brings to mind the line, in “Light My Fire,” in which “love become[s] a funeral pyre”; however, based on the time at which Didion wrote this essay, the Doors were likely in the midst of working on *Waiting for the Sun*. The band’s third album, released later in 1968, was recorded at TTG Studios, located near the intersection of Highland Avenue and Sunset Boulevard (Hopkins 179).

⁸ It might be noted that Didion also includes a throwaway mention of “suicide pacts” in “Notes from a Native Daughter.” Though this could be written off as a tic in diction—and it does have a seductive sort of misery to it—I think it can also be seen as a peek into Didion’s perspective on social matters in general. To fixate, even by accident, on something like a suicide pact hints at both an ability to recognize darkness and a refusal to engage in its more maudlin aspects.

another trick at her disposal. The piece does convey a strange feeling of gloom, perhaps even hinting at some kind of deeper existential despair, but beneath this surface, Didion is careful, per usual, not to reveal many intimate details. Regardless, if “Didion’s California is a place defined not so much by what her unwavering eye observes,” according to Michiko Kakutani, “but by what her memory cannot let go” (“Joan Didion: Staking Out California”), then perhaps this tenet can also be applied to Didion’s other “places of the mind,” from the relatively minor (Hawaii) to the foremost and specific (Los Angeles).

The chaos of Los Angeles, in Didion’s estimation, is not limited to Manson and Morrison and social discord in general; rather, it is a tangible quality, inherent to the climate and geography of California itself. In “Los Angeles Notebook,” an essay in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Didion discusses the Santa Ana winds, and in doing so, she creates yet another prominent synthesis of place and persona. Referencing Raymond Chandler and Nathanael West, Didion adds to the mythology of the Santa Anas:

There is something uneasy in the Los Angeles air this afternoon, some unnatural stillness, some tension. What it means is that tonight a Santa Ana will begin to blow...For a few days now we will see smoke back in the canyons, and hear sirens in the night. I have neither heard nor read that a Santa Ana is due, but I know it, and almost everyone I have seen today knows it too. We know it because we feel it. (217)

In writing about the Santa Ana winds, Didion is grouping herself with Chandler and West and the rest of the writers in the California literary canon, but her take on this phenomenon is exemplary of the malaise that pervades her writing.

Speaking of the house in Trancas, where she lived for several years with her husband and daughter, Didion writes that she “had come to see the spirit of the place as one of shared isolation and adversity” (*White Album* 222). It is in this essay, “Quiet Days in Malibu,” that Didion attempts to set the record straight on this particular place: Malibu

is not, as it so often seems to non-Californians, “a kind of shorthand for the easy life” (209); rather, it is a scrubby nowhere, the province of rattlesnakes and bikers. In an attempt to get to the proverbial heart of Malibu, Didion talks to a Zuma Beach lifeguard and a Mexican immigrant who tends an orchid nursery, but there is also a twinge of the historic in this piece. Didion, whose pioneer ancestors had followed the imperative to “go West” so many generations prior, seems inexorably attracted to such isolation and adversity—never mind the beach and the orchids and even the bikers. The California where Howard Hughes lived as a recluse in a dilapidated hotel (*Slouching* 67) is not so different in its loneliness from the California that the Donner party tried in vain to reach.⁹

In *The White Album*, the thread of surviving the physicality of a place becomes more apparent, albeit through essays dealing with less romantic topics. In “Holy Water,” a piece concerned with droughts, rivers, treatment facilities, and the like in her home state, Didion writes: “The apparent ease of California life is an illusion, and those who believe the illusion real live here in only the most temporary way” (64). Coming from a native of California, this statement carries with it both the weight of understood authority and an unmistakable air of something else—disparagement, maybe, or at least sober-eyed objectivity. Didion, while vacillating between criticism and reverence of the place, seems immune, by virtue of her persona, to its famous lure; however, in essays like “Bureaucrats,” focused on the state government of California, she does flirt with such conventional romanticism¹⁰ when she writes that “the freeway experience...is the only secular communion Los Angeles has” (83). The reader is left to interpret this not as a

⁹ While Didion’s ancestors allegedly traveled alongside the Donner-Reed party in 1846 (*Where I Was From* 4), they managed to avoid the fate of their companions.

¹⁰ It should be noted that in *The White Album*, Didion does claim to harbor an “essentially romantic ethic” of her own imagining, wherein “salvation lay in extreme and doomed commitments, promises made and somehow kept outside of the range of normal social experience” (134-135).

throwaway line or as a value judgment of Los Angeles—the contrast of “freeway” and “secular” with “communion” is the kind of jarring juxtaposition¹¹ Didion deploys often, and to great effect—but simply as a testament to knowing the place. This attention to contrasting elements, though, often goes beyond the stylistic level in Didion’s writing, as her preoccupation with opposites—wealth and poverty,¹² black and white, New York and Los Angeles—serves as the framework for entire pieces. This makes sense when one considers that she is, in many ways, a product of a beautiful and idyllic place, so easily romanticized, that is at constant risk of drying up or crumbling into the Pacific.

In performing an analysis of place and persona in Didion’s early nonfiction, it would be difficult not to mention “Goodbye to All That,” perhaps her most famous essay; however, this particular piece is centered not on her birth state, but on New York City, where she spent the better part of her twenties. In addition to highlighting the contrast between these places, “Goodbye to All That” is a testament to the consistency of Didion’s self-characterization—a consistency that transcends both place and subject.

Examining “Goodbye to All That” under Gornick’s lens provides greater evidence for facets of Didion’s authorial presence that may otherwise be taken for granted. Gornick posits that “[out] of the raw material of a writer’s own undisguised being, a narrator is fashioned whose existence on the page is integral to the tale being told” (6). This might at first seem difficult to apply to “Goodbye to All That,” since the persona Didion crafts feels like a seamless component of the essay’s fabric; however, the effortless quality of the narration proves its success as an “achieved persona” (20).

¹¹ This technique, while written off by Harrison as the literary equivalent of “a magician...pull[ing] a rabbit out of a hat” (116), might be seen as evidence of what Carton describes as the “interdependence of Didion’s stylistic effect of cohesion and her thematic demonstration of anarchy” (35).

¹² *South and West: From a Notebook* (2017), based on notes Didion took while traveling through the Gulf Coast region in the 1970s, is arguably more concerned with wealth and class than any of her other works.

It might be helpful, in considering this idea of “raw material,” to review the introduction to *The Situation and the Story*, in which Gornick recounts an anecdote about a funeral. During this funeral, a woman delivers a successful and memorable eulogy by “imagining herself as she had once been,” thereby aiding in “the coherent flow of association” (5). This same technique is at play throughout “Goodbye to All That”—while Didion’s mentions of vermouth cassis and the map of Sacramento County hanging on her bedroom wall add color to the piece and introduce the significance of place, they also serve to characterize Didion as a narrator. Just by examining the two aforementioned images, the reader can tell that Didion is a cosmopolitan girl who knows her way around a fully stocked bar, but she is also a young person not immune to homesickness. Either of these personas on their own might make for either a pretentious or a too-sentimental narrative, respectively; here, however, they are working together toward the achievement of a particular balance, acknowledged by Rensin: “[Didion] is aspirational and skeptical but not to the point that her authority might be called in...question, occasionally troubled by maladies of the heart but always, always in control” (“Becoming Joan Didion”).

While Didion does not show an utter lack of empathy for her past self, her writing is devoid of “the smooth surface of sentimental self-regard” (Gornick 20). Gornick posits that “without detachment there can be no story” (12), and Didion, in characterizing her remembered self as simultaneously innocent and self-aware—“was anyone ever so young?” (*Slouching* 227)—creates a persona that intrigues and invites without forcing itself on the imagined audience. Didion reminds the reader continually that she is the kind of girl who sets out to make it in New York City alone, but she also admits that she cries in Chinese laundries and fantasizes about going back West. It is clear that the latter serves

not as a cheap means of gaining readers' sympathies, but as a way for Didion to humanize, in however stylized a manner, her past self. Didion is, in this essay, both the naïve remembered self and the older, wiser remembering self, but these differing visions are not irreconcilable, particularly when the idea of home is concerned.

At the beginning of "Goodbye to All That," Didion writes, "It is easy to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends" (*Slouching* 225). This, according to Gornick, is the "insight that [organizes] the writing," and everything else, from the darkly innocent nursery-rhyme epigraph to the notion of a casually bicoastal lifestyle, serves as a testament to the "persona...created to serve the insight" (23). Largely through the use of "detached empathy" (7), Didion makes use of her many selves, both past and present, and through her reminiscences of both California and New York, she elevates these places to a near-mythic level of personal and general significance, thereby transforming them into Reaves' conception of a place-based belief system that transcends longitude and latitude.

Though Didion's persona may indeed function today as a "mental shortcut" for a readership that "tend[s] to be young, female...white, and somewhat inwardly tortured" (Mlotek, "Free Joan Didion"), it functions on the page as the manner by which Didion convinces herself and her reader of some larger truth. This larger truth, though, seems to be of secondary importance to the carefully constructed self which Didion projects. The consistent opacity of this persona—an "impersonally personal" quality, to paraphrase Roiphe; vacillating between neurotic worry and aloof detachment but never losing focus—works to establish a trust in the reader that comes into play when matters of home are concerned. Didion, in her unique preoccupation with California, creates the place anew.

EVE BABITZ: FROM DAUGHTER OF THE WASTELAND TO L.A. WOMAN

“I want to tell you a little about myself. I am really an artist, not a writer.”

—Eve Babitz, *Eve's Hollywood*

Addressing the body of twentieth-century American literature devoted to the Golden West, Allmendinger states that “there is a sense that the region is resistant to Puritan values and Protestant notions of progressive reform” (3). In examining Didion’s essays about the social tumult and political upheaval in her home state, this sense of resistance is apparent, but it is the resistance and ostensible dysfunction of other people that seems to interest Didion. She, after all, is descended from pioneers, and she recognizes herself as a “survivor...of a peculiar and inward time” (*White Album* 208)—that is, it can be assumed, the buttoned-up 1950s, during which WASP conservatism dominated the culture at large. While Didion characterizes herself as an individual moving away from this background, Babitz seems entirely removed from it: a woman untouched, unbothered by carpet colors and Sunday-morning sermons. Her self-characterization is introspective and pointed in its own way, but she does not think of herself—or of California—in Didion’s terms, and it would be difficult to ascribe any Puritanical attributes to her or her work. Her California is a place where “the future is uncertain,” to quote the Doors’ “Roadhouse Blues,” but “the end is always near.”

Babitz has always been known as a California girl, but she was not, until recently, known primarily for her writing. Even now, after the rereleases of several of her long-out-of-print books, Babitz is often introduced in interviews and articles as simply a “muse”—a title that she has never outright rejected, but one that seems reductive at best,

given the body of work she has produced. It is true, of course, that in the 1960s and '70s, she had trysts with the likes of Harrison Ford, Steve Martin, Ed Ruscha, and the lizard king himself, Jim Morrison (Anolik, "All About Eve—And Then Some"), and that she attained a considerable degree of cool-girl fame when, in 1963, Julian Wasser photographed her playing chess nude with a fully clothed Marcel Duchamp at the Pasadena Art Museum (Drohojowska-Philp 13-15). It is also true that she was a successful visual artist, having designed album covers for the likes of Buffalo Springfield and the Byrds, and that she once wrote a fan letter to Joseph Heller, author of *Catch-22*, that bore only the following message: "Dear Joseph Heller, I am a stacked eighteen-year-old blonde on Sunset Boulevard. I am also a writer" (Tolentino, "The 'Sex and Rage' of Eve Babitz").

For the purposes at hand, the above statement, while almost painfully coy, encapsulates Babitz's persona well, as her self-projection centered on being "fun and hot and smart, a Henry James-loving party girl" (Fry, "Eve Babitz's Powerful Mix of Sex and Intellect"). While Babitz's experiences inform her writing, they also allow her reader to view the lore of Hollywood in the 1960s and '70s in a more complete manner. This is due, in part, to the fact that Babitz, so often described as a muse and sex symbol herself, is unafraid to act as judge and observer, missing no opportunity to turn her eye on others as well as herself. She acts as both the seer and the seen, shifting seamlessly from one role into the other. This is apparent in the following passage from *Slow Days, Fast Company*, in which Babitz spends a moment comparing herself to her younger sister: "My sister is small, light, beautiful, with no hips and perfect breasts. I am fifteen pounds overweight, which I can forget sometimes until my sister appears. I am sort of invincible

looking and I never display any of those womanly qualities so praised through the ages, like modesty, tact, or sweet vulnerability” (35). In drawing this very clear comparison, she is acknowledging the way in which she is seen by men, as well as the way in which her sister is viewed; however, in doing this, she is also placing her own gaze on both herself and her sister. She is not a sex symbol and muse because of her modesty and tact (or lack thereof), nor is she a sex symbol and muse in spite of these things; rather, she simply exists in these roles. Writer Kaitlin Phillips offers the following description of Babitz’s technique: “All her aperçus and anecdotes are held together by a mood, a tone, the persona she deftly carved out for herself: a muse who is amusing” (“Whatever You Desire”).

Taking into consideration Babitz’s significant experience in occupying the role of one who is seen, it does not come as any surprise that she is such an adept spectator. However, while she is quick to size up people’s appearances and personalities, this seems to function as a measure of self-protection at best and a writerly shortcut at worst. An example of the former can be seen in Babitz’s summation of a minor character named Sam, who appears in a vignette near the beginning of *Slow Days, Fast Company* and fails to resurface, like so many of Babitz’s flings. In describing Sam, Babitz says that he “looks like a Marlboro commercial up close. And he treated me with a chivalrous masculine know-how that I sopped up like a person who’d never heard of how chivalry was just another nefarious masculine scheme to keep women in their place” (*Slow Days* 18). Of course Babitz enjoys being in the company of a handsome man, and her statement implies that she also, to a degree, enjoys the way he acts toward her; however, she is too wise to the ways of the world, as it were, to fall for this rugged brand of chivalry: She

consumes men's attention without pausing to think about it for too long. Babitz's observations, like this one, serve to add a richer descriptive texture to a social life already characterized by the deliberate flaunting of social mores.

Such categorization is the most common way in which Babitz makes meaning of her observations and displays her own cultural capital. One man, Frank, simply reminds her "of men [she] knew in New York who tried to be vegetarians and played recorder duets by Mozart" (*Slow Days* 21); another, whom she simply refers to as "the Last American," is described as being "obviously too busy to think beyond a turtleneck and an all-right jacket, but he was so artlessly physical that he was Astaire himself" (43). Both of these descriptions could be seen as backhanded compliments, but they also provide helpful mental shortcuts to the reader as to who these men are and what Babitz thinks of them. She performs similar descriptive work in regard to a minor female character named Day Tully, stating that this girl had "the matter-of-fact face of a 1948 calendar girl for farmers" (73), leading the reader to guess that these pithy, culturally minded snippets might simply be the currency on which Babitz's judgment runs, doing as much work to characterize the individuals and places in her life as they do in constructing her own self on the page.

Perhaps even more so than Didion, Babitz has a reputation that often seems in danger of preceding her work, and like Didion, Babitz gives the appearance of enjoying—or at least maintaining control of—a highly stylized public image. It would be too easy to set aside that famous image of a young, topless Babitz opposite Marcel Duchamp in favor of examining her work by itself, but to do so would also be reductive. Like Didion, she is an observer, but first and foremost, she fashions herself a participant.

Babitz, in recognizing the public quality of her persona, is at an advantage in regard to imagining, and perhaps manifesting, her audience. If to read Didion is to figure out what the wallflower is thinking, to read Babitz is to savor the kind of story you only ever hear at really good parties. She seems to know this and is in fierce control of her spot at the center of the room, using this position to magnify her own experiences—to assert herself as the only tastemaker worth heeding. When she declares Nathanael West a “creep” for portraying Hollywood as “shallow, corrupt, and ugly” (*Eve’s Hollywood* 189), she is announcing her disregard for smug East Coast supremacy. She holds no esteem for ancestors on the Mayflower or Ivy League pedigrees, but rather than excluding the New York establishment from her readership, she invites them to take her as she is or leave her. This is even more apparent when she pairs Didion with Raymond Chandler when talking about the Santa Anas, or when she writes: “...[W]hat is a size-three person to do? Most of the ones I know get migraines in the back of one eye. Their look of despair and hopelessness gives them weight and dimension” (*Slow Days* 99). While this can be interpreted as a jab toward Didion and her discipleship, it also functions as Babitz’s means of distancing herself from Didion’s California. In doing so, she is carving out a different audience that is all her own.

Eve’s Hollywood, Babitz’s debut work, has, throughout its history of publication, been billed as an autobiographical novel, biographical fiction, and, most recently (and most accurately), a collection of personal essays. The reasons for this could be related to something as dry as sales, but *Eve’s Hollywood* could easily be read as fiction—not because of the way in which it’s written, but because of its sheer entertainment value, and because of its portrayal of Hollywood as a multifaceted, mythic haven for the talented

and the beautiful and the weird. In discussing the pop-culture canon of California, Allmendinger posits that the state, at one time “a blank slate,” transformed into “a giant projection screen, a fictional substitute for other places” (3) in the latter half of the twentieth century. While Babitz has experience with many of the other places surrounding Los Angeles proper, the city is both her beloved hometown and her ever-changing playground, and it takes center stage, as one would expect, in this collection. Though the idea of Hollywood as a sort of Munchkinland—a Technicolor dreamscape devoid of reality or meaning—might seem uncomplimentary, Babitz never denies that such an idea of her home exists; rather, she subverts this idea by offering proof, time and again, that L.A.¹³ does, indeed, have meaning and unique merit. Her proof is in the details, or perhaps the mythology, of her life: The city, more so than her mother or father or even the Chateau Marmont, which she includes in the book’s dedication (xxi),¹⁴ formed her. If it can be said that Didion’s aim is to influence her readers’ perceptions of a particular place—in this case, California—through her writing, it could be said, in turn, that Babitz’s persona and work are shaped in full by the city of Los Angeles itself.

Babitz’s conception of her home state is almost completely devoid of the pall that seems to hang over Didion’s California, but this is also unsurprising, as such anxiety is not characteristic of the persona Babitz presents to her reader. Babitz is a lifelong resident of L.A.—her mother, an amateur artist, moved there from a small town in Texas during the Great Depression; her father, a studio violinist and native New Yorker, arrived there

¹³ In writing about Didion’s Los Angeles, using the abbreviation “L.A.” seems somehow wrong—a far too casual way to communicate the city’s peculiar darkness. Turning to Babitz, however, the shortened form feels right: Just because she paints L.A. with a candy-colored palette doesn’t render the place frivolous. If, according to Babitz, Didion “made it [okay] to be serious about L.A.” (Anolik, “Didion”), then Babitz made it acceptable to add levity back into the mix.

¹⁴ Other notable inclusions: Proust, Rainier Ale, “Eggs Benedict at the Beverly Wilshire,” Babitz’s “gynecologist extraordinaire,” and—perhaps most importantly, for the purpose at hand—“the Didion-Dunnes for having to be who I’m not” (xix-xxvi).

with his family as a teenager—and while her origin story differs greatly in this way from that of Didion, she is quick to establish her persona as one of authority. After doing so, she begins her defense of L.A., which, unlike Sacramento, is too often dismissed as being an “intellectual wasteland” (Allmendinger 3). She reminisces about going to the Luau,¹⁵ a kitschy Hawaiian-themed restaurant, with none other than Igor Stravinsky, who happens to be her godfather; she listens to Bessie Smith records with her father, and she visits Bunker Hill with her mother, as they share a fondness for the neighborhood’s charming decrepitude. It’s hard to guess what someone like Didion would think about the L.A. of Babitz’s formative years, but that’s not so important—what matters most is the persona Babitz constructs in these first pages of her collection. There is a youthful frivolity to the self she projects on the page, but when this self is paired with Babitz’s beloved hometown and her memories of being a child there, this defense of L.A. becomes all the more powerful, setting the stage for the essays to come. When Babitz, in obliquely referencing the municipal structure of the city, writes that “there had to be *some* adversity in the middle of all that sunshine and money” (*Eve’s Hollywood* 12-13, emphasis hers), the reader might laugh, but it’s hard to believe this statement after all her talk of figs and caviar and the L.A. Philharmonic.

Indeed, it is impossible to separate Babitz’s L.A. from the laundry list of characters—many famous, some not so—who populate it. Of Babitz’s name-dropping ways and her status as a party girl and muse, critic Meaghan Garvey writes:

Of the handful of critics who [have] jumped on Babitz’s bandwagon in the last few years, many try to explain her appeal with a rundown of the

¹⁵ It might be noted that in *The White Album*, Didion describes the Luau as a place for “music people”—the kind of place that garnishes fussy cocktails with hibiscus blossoms. Instead of offering an outright statement of opinion, Didion writes: “Spending time with music people was confusing, and required a more fluid and ultimately more passive approach than I ever acquired” (25-26).

myriad rock stars and art world celebs with whom she partied, romanced, and served as L.A.'s coolest, wittiest muse. . . . That muse thing works both ways, though. For every *Duchamp Playing Chess with a Nude* . . . there's an instance of Babitz investing the inspiration from her lovers right back into her own writing. ("Eve Babitz and the Dream of Los Angeles")

It should, then, be noted that while Babitz's persona and Babitz's legend are largely one in the same, the way in which she repurposes her best-known exploits—posing opposite Duchamp, sleeping with Morrison—does just as much work in characterizing her, though this phenomenon has often been left unexamined by critics, perhaps due to its messy nature. These stories are the essence of Hollywood in the 1960s and '70s, and it is the Hollywood of this era that begat Babitz.

Much like Didion's "On Keeping a Notebook," Babitz's "Hollywood Branch Library" essay provides the reader with background on Babitz's personal history in regard to reading and writing, but unlike the former, it is tied inextricably to place—a quality that becomes apparent just by looking at the title. The mood and subject matter of this piece present a clear departure from the comparable work of Didion, but the construction and projection of persona are equal in strength. The conceit of this piece is somewhat strange, in that Babitz seems determined to discuss literature—even to the point of bragging about the books she's read—in the most Babitz way possible; that is, she describes Anthony Powell as "a downright soufflé" (*Eve's Hollywood* 231) and says that M.F.K. Fisher is "just like Proust only better because she at least gave the recipes" (233). Babitz, who relies heavily on name-dropping in many of the other pieces in the collection, seems to be using a similar strategy here, but instead of artists and rock stars, she is referencing Virginia Woolf and Marshall McLuhan and "Gloria [Steinem] the

Crass and Gross”¹⁶ (233) at warp speed. This technique builds and plays off Babitz’s persona in that she is trying to sell herself, forcefully projecting a hot, hyperactive personality. She proclaims herself an artistic, writerly type, and it is this, perhaps, that backs up her claims of what’s cool and what isn’t. In speaking on the work of Max Beerbohm, she writes, without much further elaboration, that it’s “like Kahlua”—“any idiot can like it” (235). Such proclamations add to Babitz’s persona as a bon vivant versed in pop (and sometimes high) culture: Like Didion, she positions herself as an arbiter of taste. Serving as such an arbiter, even in the setting of a public library, is enough to aid in the development of her persona—Babitz is, of course, a party girl, but she hangs out at the public library in Hollywood and is ostensibly quite knowledgeable in matters of literature.

The book on which Babitz lavishes the most praise is not *Domby and Son* or *A Room of One’s Own*; rather, it is *Los Angeles: A City of Four Ecologies* (235). This is unsurprising, considering Babitz’s abiding love for all things related to her hometown, but it also serves to underscore the symbiotic relationship between persona and place. Without L.A., Babitz’s writing would likely still be suffused with the effervescent and the youthful, but with the backdrop and significance of place, her persona feels stronger, more authentic, and more at home. When Gornick argues that the writer of personal journalism must “keep the narrating self subordinated to the idea at hand” (10), Babitz’s manic and distractible attitude toward her subject is highlighted; however, in maintaining

¹⁶ Though Steinem never responded to this minor dig, it might be noted that she did have a few words to say about Didion. Addressing a journalist en route to interview Didion, Steinem allegedly said, “Ask [Didion] how come, if she spends all her time crying and swimming and struggling to open a car door, she finds the energy to write so much?” (Wacker 17). This rhetorical question, I think, is less successful in mocking Didion than it is in highlighting the consistency of her persona and craft.

a loose relationship to whatever the idea at hand might be, Babitz, in her inimitable way, excuses herself from abiding by the usual strictures of the genre.

The essay that first begins to flesh out the relationship between place and persona for Babitz is “Daughters of the Wasteland.” In it, she provides a brief family history, and although it is, in this regard, similar to Didion’s talk of her own Sacramento roots, there is little self-aware grandiosity at play; rather, Babitz’s chief concern in providing this background information seems to lie in creating a sense of near-mythic romance about her roots, both familial and geographic. Within her origin story, a different kind of divine providence is at play—an all-lowercase manifest destiny, unrelated to guns or gold. It is the idea intrinsic to her work, and particularly to the “Daughters” piece, that there is no place but L.A. suitable or even sensible for the persona she has created. Inhabiting the role of the “native daughter,” Babitz finds it difficult to sympathize with negative stereotypes of her hometown, though she realizes, again, that these clichéd ideas do exist. At the outset of *Eve’s Hollywood*, she provides a sort of thesis statement in regard to this matter:

Culturally, L.A. has always been a humid jungle alive with seething L.A. projects that I guess people from other places just can’t see. It takes a certain kind of innocence to like L.A., anyway. It requires a certain plain happiness inside to be happy in L.A. to choose it and be happy here. When people are not happy, they fight against L.A. and say it’s a ‘wasteland’ and other helpful descriptions. (3)

After waxing nostalgic about a childhood filled with flowers and caviar and the music of her father and his friends, Babitz eventually comes around to a begrudging, tongue-in-cheek understanding of the “wasteland” matter. Recounting an anecdote in which she and her sister “got stuck together with bubble gum” at a performance during the Ojai Festival, she writes, “[If L.A.] hadn’t been a wasteland, there wouldn’t have

been bubble gum there in the first place” (*Eve’s Hollywood* 13). (Babitz’s Hollywood would be unimaginable without such stories, though, so perhaps the bubble gum is a non-negotiable bit of impropriety.) This incident, though otherwise minor, brings to mind a thoughtful distillation of much of Babitz’s work by the critic Larissa Pham: “All this sounds as though Babitz is frivolous, which she can be, if you aren’t looking closely” (“Your Own Private Party”). To look closely at Babitz’s body of work is not to discount all her name-drops and joking asides; rather, it is to search for the greater significance in these characteristics of her writing.

With this idea in mind, “The Sheik,” a piece regarding Babitz’s teenage years at the infamous Hollywood High School, might be better analyzed. On the first page, Rudolph Valentino, the silent film star whose “Sheik” character served as the mascot for Hollywood High, is mentioned, as is Morrison; however, these serve primarily as pithy invitations into the essay itself—Babitz, in proclaiming her insider status and pop-culture acumen, projects her sense of self early in the piece and primes her reader for what might lie ahead. Babitz tells a story of her high-school years, but since she positions herself as a unique individual in a unique time and place, it is less of an essay about adolescence than it is a piece on beauty. Taking into account the stereotype of L.A. as a superficial place, this is unsurprising: “In the Depression, when most of them came here,” Babitz writes, referencing transplants to Hollywood, “people with brains went to New York and people with faces came West” (*Eve’s Hollywood* 81); however, rather than deeming this dynamic shallow, Babitz finds an almost supernatural power in those with good looks. In this assessment, Babitz is one with this particular L.A. ethos in that she appreciates beauty and respects its strange power in those it inhabits. One such person, a classmate

named Carolyn, is brought to life by Babitz's description of her "colors" (84)—her hair and eyes and skin—which makes for a jarring experience when Babitz reveals that Carolyn, a "captive in the Sheik's harem" (85), died of a heroin overdose after graduation. This detail, however, fulfills a purpose greater than shock value: It serves to draw a line between Babitz and girls like Carolyn. These girls, while beautiful and tragic, are characters at Babitz's disposal. "The only ones who don't have to pay attention to the details are the ingénues," she writes in "A Confusing Tragedy," and Babitz—"bitingly self-aware, the perfect faux naïf" (LaCava, "Slow Days, Fast Company")—is drawn inexorably to the specific, and to great effect. Though she does not explicitly number herself among the class of the "extraordinarily beautiful" (79), they are part of the larger story of L.A., and therefore part of hers, too.

The artificial gleam of Hollywood is Babitz's clear focus; however, when writing in any substantive way about the West, its landscape and environment must be taken into account. Turning to these physical realities of California—its landscape, simultaneously lush and unforgiving; its climate, paradisiacal and strange (at least by American standards); its freeways and fires and water supply—the first and most striking link between the writing of Didion and that of Babitz is the attention they devote on the page to the Santa Ana winds. Though comparable in their attitude of awe toward this natural phenomenon, their respective personas work to destroy any real thread of similarity that may exist between their points of view. If the Santa Anas are, in fact, to blame for Didion's specific malaise and sense of doom, then they must also be the reason behind the ebbs and flows, according to Babitz, in her own bisexuality. Babitz, acknowledging the precedent set by other California writers, politely disagrees:

It was one of those nights when the Santa Anas were blowing so hard that searchlights were the only things in the sky that were straight... Raymond Chandler and Joan Didion both regard the Santa Anas as some powerful evil, and I know what they mean because I've seen people drop from migraines and go crazy. Every time *I* feel one coming, I put on my dancing spirits. (*Slow Days* 70, emphasis hers)

After recounting a fling with a woman during a time when the Santa Anas were blowing and all was unbearably dry and hot—unbearable, that is, for Chandler and Didion and every other inhabitant of Southern California—Babitz muses: “Just think, if we didn’t have the Santa Anas, how straight we all would be” (76). While such a statement might seem facetious when taken at face value, but it is exemplary of both Babitz’s insouciant wit and her innate sense of oneness with L.A.

It is with this sense of manic romanticism that Babitz constructs her version of California, punctuated not by sad agricultural towns or coasts lousy with rattlesnakes, but by proper nouns—hotels and restaurants, clubs and bars, certain neighborhoods. The most memorable of these places is the Chateau Marmont on Sunset Boulevard, which Babitz mentions in the rambling dedication to *Eve’s Hollywood* and includes in multiple pieces thereafter, imbuing it with all the qualities of a recurring character. The writer Catie Disabato, in addressing Babitz’s love affair with the hotel, provides some background on its legendary status: Nathanael West wrote *The Day of the Locust* while staying there, many decades before Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears were banned for life from the premises for bad behavior. As for Babitz, she is all too familiar with the perils of navigating its basement parking garage, and she even spent the Watts riots of 1965 in the hotel, with an “ex–philosophy major from Stanford” (*Eve’s Hollywood* 143). It is the Chateau’s legendary status with which Babitz sprinkles her persona and her writing, and in doing so, she is one with the landmark and its myth, just as she is one with

Los Angeles. Babitz, when asked in an interview to describe the hotel, said: “You know, if you want to commit suicide, if you want to commit adultery, go to the Chateau...It doesn’t mind brilliant talent, or romance, or lunacy” (Disabato, “A Woman for Us to Be Until We Figure It Out”).¹⁷ It is unclear whether Babitz recognizes that taste for romance and lunacy in herself, or if she believes that she actually possesses these qualities; however, it is clear that the Chateau, in Babitz’s estimation, is as good as—or better than—any environmental phenomenon or natural wonder in the state of California. She elevates the hotel almost to the status of a sentient being, perhaps because it is an integral piece of the city that made her.¹⁸

“Driving home, with my back against the giant orange bat of a sunset, east on Olympic Blvd. in the rush hour,” Babitz writes, “I decided enough was enough, I would be satisfied with just the sunsets in Los Angeles and forget finding the someone I didn’t mind” (*Slow Days* 68). If the Chateau Marmont plays the role of a more minor character in Babitz’s world, then the city of L.A. itself is her constant costar, alternating between the mythic source of her origin and her one and only true love. While more traditionally revered features of L.A.’s geography and climate—its canyons, the Santa Anas—do factor into Babitz’s conception of her home, it is its manmade structures, from the freeway to the Chateau to the rundown houses of Bunker Hill, that give the place its sparkle and character. This makes sense, given Babitz’s own glamorous and modern sensibilities.

¹⁷ A. M. Homes’ *Los Angeles: People, Places, and the Castle on the Hill* (2002) provides a particularly engaging look at L.A., using the Chateau Marmont as the city’s focal point.

¹⁸ In Babitz’s short-story collection *Black Swans* (1992), she laments breaking up with a writer named “Walter” who is living at the hotel, as the end of their relationship signified that she had “broken with the Chateau Marmont too” (65).

In keeping with such modern ways, Babitz never describes herself (or anyone else, for that matter) as a hippie—“bohemian” is the label that probably suits her better—but as an active participant in the West Coast music and art scenes of the 1960s, she interacted with these worlds’ characters in a way that was more personal than observational. To use Didion’s “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” and its focus on San Francisco as a beginning point of comparison, Babitz is initially just as unfamiliar with the Bay Area as Didion is, but unlike Didion, she has no journalistic interest in venturing too far beyond the Los Angeles city limits. She gives her opinions on San Francisco in an essay entitled “The Answer,” in which she decides to drop acid for the first time. “San Francisco was no place for a civilized person,” she writes. “[It] has always been a place disdained by L.A. people; they drink it in their mother’s milk and it never goes away” (*Eve’s Hollywood* 206). She provides no deeper explanation of this statement; rather, it’s offered in a way that deters any further questioning. Though unwilling to venture north, to the center of the counterculture movement, Babitz is excited to try a “champagne glass full of LSD (Sandoz) diluted in spring water” (207). While the kids in the Haight are melting postage-stamp tabs of the stuff on their tongues, Babitz puts her own Angeleno spin on the process. When she tries the drug again later, in New York, it’s all wrong—she is wracked with anxiety; everything is impossibly ugly instead of impossibly beautiful, and without being in the openness and light of her home state, she feels like dying. This seems like less of a commentary on the effects of LSD and more of a testament to the mythic powers of California. Rather than serving as a shortcut for everything going wrong in the culture at large, Los Angeles is what restores Babitz to psychic equilibrium;

it's her antidote to a bad trip. This is perhaps because she isn't a transplant: L.A. is everything she's ever known.

This idea of place as identity is elevated further in the essay "The Landmark," in which Babitz begins by bringing up Janis Joplin's fatal heroin overdose in Hollywood's Landmark Motel on October 4, 1970. Babitz is bothered by a journalist's summation of Joplin's passing, which was essentially, "'What else is Janis Joplin going to do on a Sunday afternoon alone in L.A.?"' (*Eve's Hollywood* 272). Rather than waxing sentimental about untimely death or the dangers of the needle, Babitz takes this rhetorical question to heart, launching into a bizarre sort of love letter to the taquitos on Olvera Street. "Taquitos are much better than heroin," she writes with the same air of authority she summons when denouncing San Francisco; "it's just that no one knows about them and heroin is so celebrated" (273). To suggest that Joplin may have simply wandered down the street for some lunch instead of shooting up in a motel room is preposterous, and the way in which Babitz makes this argument might be construed as being tongue-in-cheek; some, however, could take the idea at face value, making it all the more entertaining. Babitz's description of these taquitos, the taquitos that helped to lure her home from a long stay in Rome, is enough of a testament to L.A. as anything: They are made with carnitas "of such loveliness and unimaginable perfection" (277) and sauce that could make you "eat your own father" (280), and two of them "for 45 cents is much cheaper and vastly more reliable than smack" (277). Babitz's testament to the joy of the taquito stand on Olvera Street could be read as a testament to the joy of life itself, but in her view, it's another part of Los Angeles that has a purpose outside of its primary

function. If the city can serve as the antidote to a bad trip, both literally and figuratively, it can breathe sunshine and simple pleasure back into a life devoid of such things.

While Babitz, à la Didion, refrains from speaking too many hard truths about Los Angeles, it is a trip to Bakersfield, as detailed in her essay of the same name, which serves to create a sharp contrast between rural California and buzzing, depraved L.A. In “Bakersfield,” she travels to the country to spend time with a man who, while teaching abroad in London, had discovered a piece written by Babitz about California and shared it with anyone who asked him to describe life back home. The first time they meet, however, is in Hollywood, and the man, Frank, brings Babitz a box of grapes from his father’s vineyard:

Their stems were strong and green, not brown and brittle like in the store, and they hung perfectly like a still life, no matter which way they were turned...I had almost bought some grapes earlier in the year, but they cost \$1.40 for a tiny bunch, and it occurred to me that I’d probably never eat grapes again. First I’d abandoned them for Chavez, and now that the unions had won, grapes were out of my income bracket. (*Slow Days* 14)

This exchange, while uncomplicated on the surface, is emblematic of Los Angeles during this time. Babitz values the bounty and beauty of nature but is almost entirely removed from it, and she is a vocal supporter of progressive causes, despite the fact that she may not benefit personally from their success.

Babitz admits to her old bias that any young person would leave Bakersfield for Los Angeles as soon as possible “if he were not emotionally retarded” (*Slow Days* 15), but it is in Bakersfield where she encounters Marlboro men who rope cattle and “food so American,” she “hadn’t tasted anything like it” (21) before. She encounters neither platform shoes, which she hates anyway, nor diet soda there, and though she chalks her weekend trip up to her sense of adventure, the general aura of the place seems conducive

to anything but. Bakersfield is postcard-wholesome in a way L.A. could never be, and Babitz seems to appreciate this; nevertheless, she reveals herself to be a Hollywood girl through and through as she drives back to L.A. “with a boxful of peaches...to brandy and make sophisticated” (28). Though Babitz’s view of L.A. often intersects with popular notions, including outright stereotypes, of the place, her work is unique because she positions herself as a part, or product, of the city. When she refers to herself as a daughter of Hollywood, she is, of course, invoking her place of origin, but one might read something more into this statement: Babitz is a product of L.A., and her persona on the page—the “mythos of herself” (Pham, “Your Own Private Party”); the embodiment of a Hollywood veiled in legend, as discussed by Allmendinger—reflects this.

While culling some greater meaning from the intersection of Babitz’s persona with her presentation of California does not, on its surface, seem difficult, it brings to light a thornier matter: If Didion’s “long con,” to revisit Reynolds’ argument once more, is the construction of a frail, neurasthenic front behind which she can more deftly issue her acerbic observations, then Babitz’s own game might be summarized best in the first sentences of *Eve’s Hollywood*, which also appear at the beginning of this chapter: “I want to tell you a little about myself. I am really an artist, not a writer” (1). Babitz’s visual art, of course, cannot be discounted when discussing her body of work, but she is arguably known best today for her writing. By distancing herself from her own words in the first pages of her debut book, she is, in a single movement, both elevating the myth of her freewheeling persona and excusing herself from any errors—grammatical, factual, or otherwise—that might be lurking in her own text. She is giving the appearance, in the words of writer Sophie Atkinson, of “celebrating her own skinlessness and swaggering

out into the world, vulnerable, uncowed” (“Advice for Young Ladies Eager for a Good Time”), but the effect of this technique is just that—the creation of an appearance. “Out of the raw material of a writer’s own undisguised being a narrator is fashioned whose existence on the page is integral to the tale being told,” writes Gornick. “This narrator becomes a persona” (6). It is difficult to imagine the words of Babitz—or of Didion, for that matter—as raw material, and it is even more of a challenge to think of their personas on the page as fronts for their own “undisguised beings,” however stylized these façades may be.

If, indeed, it is “directness that dazzles...from the exactly right distance” (Gornick 19), then Babitz’s perfect distance is virtually nonexistent. She is so close to her subject matter—in this case, place—that she becomes the very personification of L.A. If Reaves is correct in her idea that one’s life can be conceptualized as “a line transversing and marking a landscape” (1), then no corner of Babitz’s Hollywood is left untouched by her story. “You can’t write a story about L.A. that doesn’t turn around in the middle or get lost,” Babitz writes in the beginning of *Slow Days, Fast Company* (7). Fortunately, none of her stories are really about L.A. They are L.A. stories, to be sure, but for Babitz, place functions as a third variable, something that feels superior to mere setting. As Didion’s persona works to shape her readers’ view of California, Babitz’s persona comes across as an unalloyed product of the place.

* * *

While Didion and Babitz both went on to produce more work—and, in many cases, quite different work—throughout their careers, the essays contained in their debut collections exemplify the importance of both persona and place in their oeuvre. The personas they construct lend constancy and flavor to their work: Didion, in positioning herself as an authority and injecting her prose with personal details that are somewhat vague yet consistent with her persona, acts as both insider and observer, but rarely as a participant; Babitz, through her bubbly, wry, conversational-to-the-point-of-gossipy writing style and almost obsessive reliance on personal details and background information, characterizes herself as the ultimate participant in whatever is going on. By constructing and maintaining their respective identities, Didion and Babitz are in an advantageous position when it comes to telling their stories and analyzing their roles within each narrative. When this is combined with a strong affinity for place, the indelible mark of persona becomes imprinted on the map, binding the writer to the coordinates she has claimed for herself and her work. The stakes are high when one is forced to take responsibility for a written persona, but the reward is just as great: Sacramento belongs just as much to Didion as do migraines and bourbon, and L.A., after one reads *Eve's Hollywood*, seems to be as much a tailor-made playground for Babitz as it is for the celebrities she can't help but name-drop.

Performing this kind of comparison in order to see a clearer side-by-side contrast might seem simplistic; however, the territories, both physical and otherwise, of Didion and Babitz have so frequently overlapped without ever really touching that such an assessment is necessary. Even as I'm writing this, in 2019, their names are turning up in conversation and on Twitter feeds for strangely similar reasons. In a review of Babitz's

most recent title, *I Used to Be Charming: The Rest of Eve Babitz*, critic Lauren Sarazen praises Babitz's description of Le De by Givenchy, asserting that her "talent for description is so otherworldly that she doesn't even need to describe a perfume's aroma to convey its essence" ("The Resurgence of Eve Babitz Continues"). Just weeks earlier, the pop star Harry Styles explained that his new fragrance for Gucci, *Mémoire d'une Odeur*, was inspired by Didion: "It smells," he said, "like what I imagine Joan Didion's house to smell like"¹⁹ (Goldfine, "Harry Styles"). Parallels like these are amusing, especially if one is on the lookout for them, but like most other parallels, they also beg a closer look. "Because Babitz is contemporaneous with Didion, the two women are often compared to one another," writes Romanoff, pointing to the obvious differences in both personal style and writing style that exist between the two writers. "But in fact they have little in common, aside from being female and Californian" ("How Eve Babitz and Francesca Lia Block Made Los Angeles Literary"). Even if this were true—if Didion and Babitz could not also be compared in terms of persona, or period, or cultural cachet; if Jim Morrison and the Santa Anas and even the designer fragrances were left unexamined—California would still, I think, feel like enough. Joan Didion and Eve Babitz, much like the home state they share, contain fierce multitudes.

¹⁹ It should be noted that the fragrance in question, according to Styles, "smells like roman candles and jasmine" (Goldfine), hearkening to Didion's mention, in "Goodbye to All That," of that similarly perfumed Henri Bendel soap.

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Education

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Indiana University

Bachelor of Arts, English (2017)
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Interests

Twentieth-century American literature and culture; contemporary American poetry; and literature and medicine, specifically illness narrative

Relevant Experience

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Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)

Graduate Research Assistant (2017-2019)
The Frederick Douglass Papers Edition

Editorial Intern (2015-2016)
Indianapolis Monthly magazine

Honors and Awards

Winner, William Schneider Medical Humanities Essay Award, IUPUI (2019)
Second Place, Kneale Graduate Award in Poetry, Purdue University (2018; 2019)
Winner, Kneale Undergraduate Award in Pop Culture, Purdue University (2017)

Selected Publications

“Elegy for Mama.” *Emrys Journal*, vol. 37, 2020 (forthcoming).

“October 13, 1979.” *Grist: A Journal of the Literary Arts*, no. 13, 2020
(forthcoming).

“Fruit in August”; “Midnight Rambler.” *the minnesota review*, no. 94, 2020
(forthcoming).

“Superstar.” *Passages North*, no. 41, 2020 (forthcoming).

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