



Dreaming California

Style, Genre, and the Didion Gaze

Katrina Garofalo

Supervisor: Dr. Rob Alexander

Second Reader: Dr. Gale Coskan-Johnson

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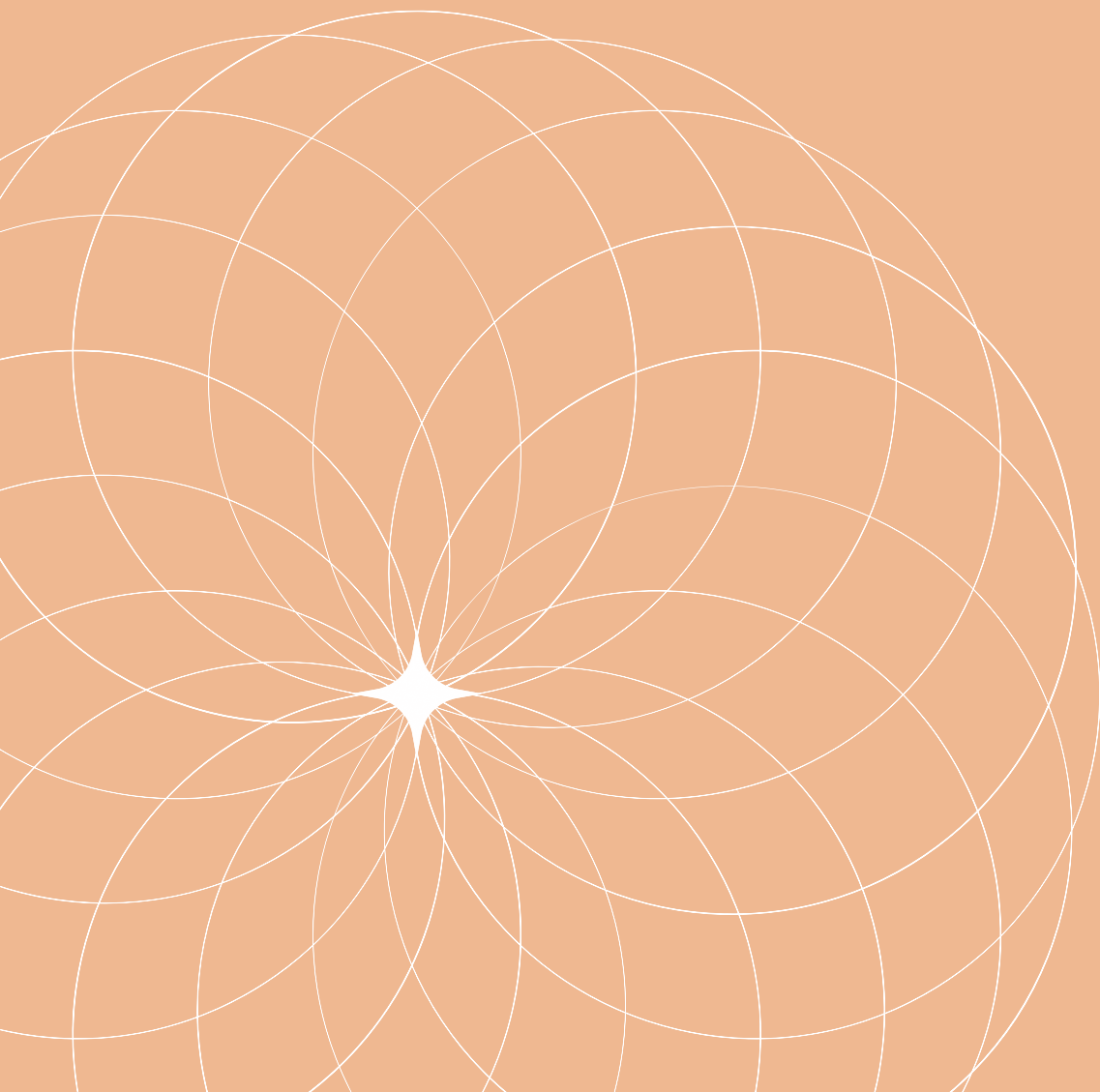
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OVERVIEW

My major research project focuses on Joan Didion's first published collection of literary journalism and essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968). In the text, Didion observes San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury at the height of its counter culture, examines icons of Hollywood masculinity, and questions the meaning of the West as a figure caught between past, present, and future.

Throughout the explorations, California remains the centre on which Didion's perspective turns.

OVERVIEW

Slouching Towards Bethlehem explores an overarching interest in what it is to **criticize hopefully** and to expose oneself to criticism. Didion traces the simultaneous glamorization of her contemporary mid-century California, as well as the ongoing dereliction occurring in the state's subcultures from north to south.

Didion's style takes shape in these works, embedding itself within a tradition of literary journalism rendered unstable much like the environment surrounding her.

Slouching Towards Bethlehem
catalogues California from the distinct
✦ perspective of a writer at once
intrinsically tied to the intangible
energy of place, yet removed enough
to observe it with striking clarity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In *Joan Didion: Substance and Style*, Kathleen M. Vandenberg explores the mechanics of Didion's nonfiction writing, focusing on structure, language, narratives, rhetoric, and creating space for vulnerability.

“Joan Didion's Style: A Revisionist Western,” an article by Casey Shoop, considers the variety of genres with which Didion engages, as well as the unique aesthetic experience of interacting with her works.

John C. Hartsock's *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience* is an expansive resource on the conventions of literary journalism as a distinct genre, especially concerned with the ways in which it interacts with cultural production.

THE DIDION GAZE


Voyeuristic, critical, exacting

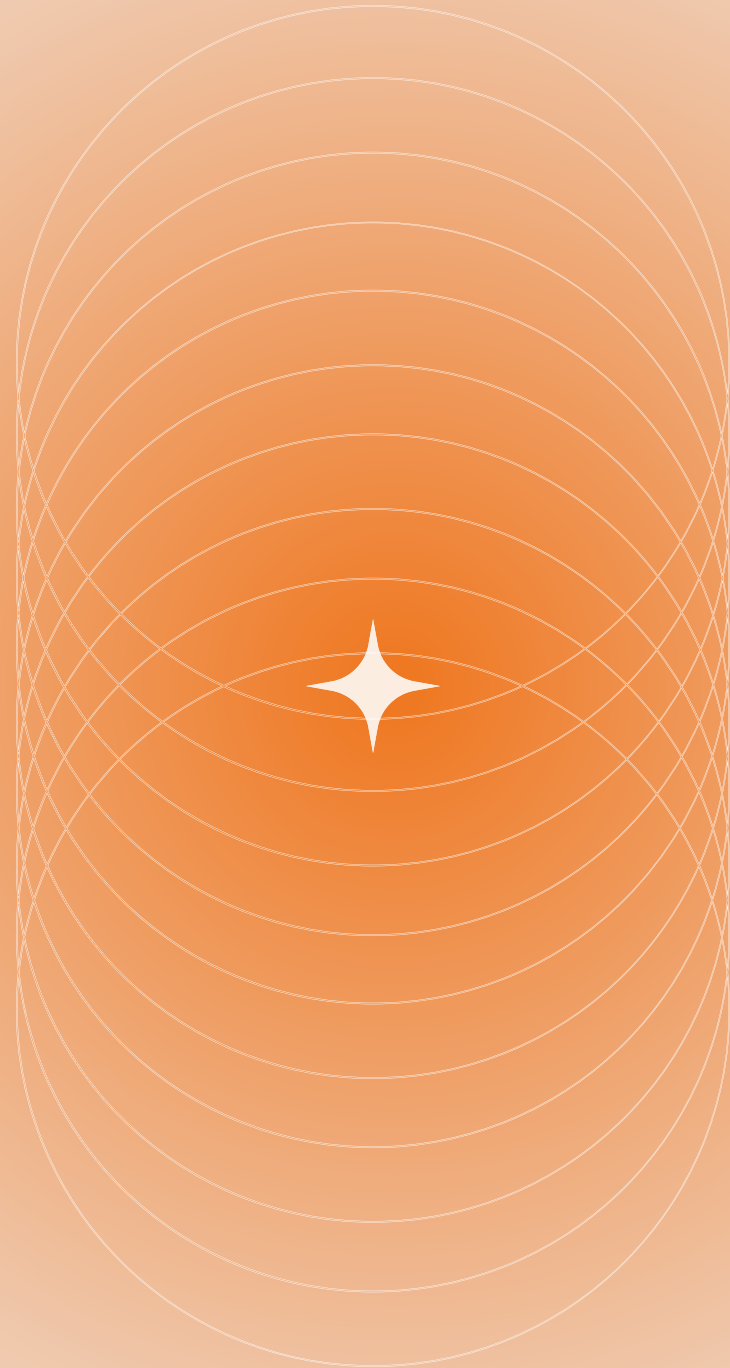
Hilton Als describes the Didion Gaze in his foreword for Didion's *Let Me Tell You What I Mean* (2021). His attention to Didion as a “woman looking at men and not looking away” (xxviii) acts as a reversal of expectations for her generation of writers. My research expands on Als' definition to locate the components of the Didion Gaze in her California writing.

THE DIDION GAZE

Voyeuristic, critical, exacting

The literariness of Didion's journalism invites **a close reading of her nonfiction works** in conjunction with a study of the genres to which her legacy contributes. Her unique perspective generates stylistic qualities that are recognizably hers. Didion's gaze crafts **an unreserved experience of the world she observes**, of the California she records lovingly, harshly, honestly.





Didion's California writing simultaneously rewrites the past, observes her present, and generates narratives for the future. In her nonfiction works, Didion modifies the genres of literary journalism and new journalism to account for the subjective and objective tensions present in her writing. Didion's stylistic attention to time and place effectively transforms her into a keeper of the California she records.




RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What, specifically, are the components of the Didion Gaze?

How do these components construct Didion's signature style, and influence her play with genre?

In what ways do style and genre bend to make space for Didion as she develops her distinctive voice?



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