

University of California, Santa Barbara
Raab Fellowship Program

*Behind the Shades: A Close Look at the Blurred Lines between Joan Didion's Fiction and
Nonfiction*

Elaina Smolin
Mentored by Dr. Robby Nadler
Edited by Yiu-On Li

Abstract

My paper investigates Joan Didion's discussions of mental health in both her fictional and nonfictional works. Prolific and critically acclaimed in both genres, Didion was uniquely candid about her life, especially for her time. In her discussions of mental health, Didion's fiction and nonfiction mirror each other: Didion's fictional female characters and their struggles often parallel Didion and her own. Yet as Didion delved into more specific struggles with mental health, she showed more detail and visualization in her fiction than in her nonfiction. As opposed to writers like Sylvia Plath, whose personal life is often incorrectly projected onto her creative work, Didion was extremely transparent about the motivations behind her fiction and her real-life influences. Through her nonfiction and her extensive interviews, Didion readily revealed the real-life counterparts of her characters and plotlines.

Given that transparency, it is important to ask where and why Didion drew the line between fact and fiction. What purpose does writing fiction serve for such genre-crossing and transparent writers like Didion? My paper aims to answer this question by examining how Didion writes about mental health in her nonfiction and how her life and mental health informed her fiction. My examination will focus on two of Didion's fictional books (*Play It As It Lays* and *Run River*), four of her nonfictional books (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, *The White Album*, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and *Blue Nights*), numerous interviews, and the 2017 documentary *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold*.

Essay

In the first few pages of Joan Didion's 1979 collection of essays *The White Album*, she publishes a 1968 psychiatric report. The report is included in its entirety, filled with detailed discussions of the patient's mental breakdown and increasingly concerning deterioration, among other troubling symptoms:

The Rorschach record is interpreted as describing a personality in process of deterioration with abundant signs of failing defenses and increasing inability of the ego to mediate the world of reality and to cope with normal stress. . . . Emotionally, patient has alienated herself almost entirely from the world of other human beings. Her fantasy life appears to have been virtually completely preempted by primitive, regressive libidinal preoccupations many of which are distorted and bizarre. . . . The content of patient's responses is highly unconventional and frequently bizarre, filled with sexual and anatomical preoccupations, and basic reality contact is obviously and seriously impaired at times. In quality and level of sophistication patient's responses are characteristic of those of individuals of high average or superior intelligence but she is now functioning intellectually in impaired fashion at barely average level. Patient's thematic productions on the Thematic Apperception Test emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal. In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitably to conflict and failure. . . . (14-15).

When Didion reappears at the report's conclusion, she asserts her presence bluntly: "The patient to whom this psychiatric report refers is me" (*The White Album* 15). This twist is significant beyond its shock factor: the reader only recognizes Didion after she establishes her mental deterioration—a distinct choice on Didion's end. The line being used as a twist illustrates Didion's understanding of why her compromised mental state would be a shock; she was, after all, a famous writer and figure even during this time. Didion explicitly acknowledges this public perception in the following line, referencing how her hospitalization happened mere months before she was named a *Los Angeles Times* Woman of the Year (*The White Album* 15). So why is this deeply personal psychiatric report—personal to an almost uncomfortable extent—included in such a meticulously curated essay collection, beyond for its shock value?

Considering the context that the essays were written in, Didion's reprinting of her psychiatric report fits well. It is the beginning blare of the electric guitar in *The White Album*, much like its namesake *White Album* by The Beatles—a way to begin and set the rhythm for the forthcoming songs and essays. Didion's *The White Album* is about the distortion and hegemonic deterioration of society in the 1960s and the 1970s. It covers the spread of hippie culture, widespread protests, all-encompassing social movements, Woodstock, and the infamous Charles Manson murders. Didion expresses this time as a "story without a narrative," something inherently disordered (*The White Album* 47). The significance of a missing narrative is established in the titular essay's first few lines: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live. . . . We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five" (11). But in the absence of narrative, meaning dissipates. Paranoia and mixed signals ensue. Society is seated at the Mad Hatter's tea party. This disorder was especially perceived by Didion: "I wanted still to believe in the narrative and in the narrative's intelligibility, but to know that one could

change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical” (*The White Album* 13).

Her psychiatric report expresses this same distortion and deterioration, and its inclusion effectively symbolizes the chaos of the period reflected in Didion’s own mind: it too is a story without a narrative. The report reinforces the essays that discuss these lapses in the social contract; in her disillusionment with society through her own ailed mental state, Didion represents the social tensions of the times, the news stories of the day, and the millions of others who felt as she did. The psychiatric report’s inclusion is a way to capture a significant period in history—a medical diagnosis and evaluation not only of Didion but of the time. Of the culture.

On a deeper level, however, the reprinting of Didion’s own psychiatric evaluation goes beyond a clever metaphor, instead speaking to a larger philosophy. Her first published essay, “On Self-Respect,” originally printed in the August 1961 issue of *Vogue*, articulates this philosophy: “character—the willingness to accept responsibility for one’s own life—is the source from which self-respect springs” (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem* 145). According to this reading, Didion’s inclusion of her psychiatric report is an act of self-respect: she is taking responsibility for her own life, her own mental health struggles. And not only is she taking responsibility, but she is doing so in a very public and permanent way: in a bound book. In a show of self-respect. Of vulnerability. Of transparency. But, as it often is with Didion, this explanation is only half of the truth.

The psychiatric report may, on its surface, appear to be excruciatingly personal, the type of vulnerability that paints Didion as the type to lay all her cards on the table. This is, after all, the reputation that precedes the famous writer: Didion is often cited as a trailblazer in the New Journalism genre, as one of the first writers to intertwine journalistic facts and figures with

personal experience and voice. She weaved together the general (national news and public figures) and the specific (her observations and her private life), leaving readers with a bold main character mixed into their media: Didion herself. This emphasis on the writer as a character is often taken for granted today—but in Didion’s time, her personal entanglements with her sharp prose stood out. In some ways, those entanglements made her a target. After all, if all your cards are on the table, winning becomes a markedly more difficult feat.

Didion was well aware of this danger, so she feigned her transparency. She appeared to put all her cards on the table, but she secretly hid some below. It was an illusion to readers and critics alike: they thought they were getting the entire Didion, but they were only getting a part of her—the part Didion wanted them to have, the persona she so carefully rewrote and revised. It was with this persona that Didion managed to protect her self-expression, something increasingly valuable in the fraught social conventions of the time. To assert herself in a world where American women had only recently, in 1974, been granted the ability to open credit cards in their name. When those with psychiatric reports either refused to speak or found no one to listen.

When I first read *The White Album*, I too felt this disillusionment. I did not feel this disillusionment as strongly as Didion did, nor did I express it as eloquently as she did, but I was still disillusioned, disillusioned at myself, an academic, goody-two-shoes self that was distraught with disorder, with obsessive-compulsive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder, scorching me more with every barrage of intrusive thoughts and of rambling worries. When I opened Didion’s 1979 essay collection, I had already expected the sweeping clarity and self-perception of her other works. But I had not expected to experience so *much* of that clarity and self-perception; her psychiatric report was unavoidable and endlessly fascinating, and I read it four or five times in that one sitting. I had previously read three or four of Didion’s works, but I

had never known she was treated in a psychiatric hospital. This was something that I thought deserved more attention—a longer chapter, an anecdote, a cleverly crafted and reflective essay. Or no attention at all: this dark period could have been skipped over, relegated to a dampened basement corner, if Didion had merely not reprinted the report. Reading the beginning pages of *The White Album* that summer, I first wondered what decorated my own psychiatric report after months of therapy and Zoloft. I then speculated how I could access these records, how Didion had managed not only to get ahold of them but to publish them. My mind then returned to Didion's broader life: If Didion was willing to share her psychiatric report in *The White Album*, what wasn't she willing to share? Where were her other cards hiding?