

The Aesthetic Paradox:

Detachment and Intimacy in Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1970) and *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977)

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Abstract in Norwegian

Joan Didions romaner *Play It as It Lays* og *A Book of Common Prayer* ble begge publisert på 70-tallet og kan leses som et svar på de turbulente tilstandene som preget Amerikas samfunn på 60-tallet. I denne masteroppgaven ønsker jeg å se nærmere på hvordan Didions estetikk gjenspeiler de emosjonelle implikasjonene som et aggressivt og kjølig miljø kan ha på karakterene som befinner seg i miljøet. For å gjøre dette har jeg lokalisert det jeg argumenterer er et estetisk paradoks mellom emosjonell distanse og intimitet i skrivingen hennes. Dette paradokset gjennomsyrrer lesningen av verkene og i tillegg benytter jeg meg av Wolfgang Iser sin resepsjonsteori og Jonathan Baumbach sin metafor om et marerittlandskap for å støtte oppunder analysen. Kapittel en vil ta for seg *Play It as It Lays* mens kapittel to vil ta for seg *A Book of Common Prayer*. Konklusjonen min vil vise at det estetiske paradokset fungerer som en refleksjon av tiden romanene ble publisert, nemlig 60-tallet, men også at disse fortsatt er relevante å diskutere flere tiår senere nå som urolighetene igjen begynner å tilspisse seg i USA. Med dette håper jeg å kunne bidra med et nytt perspektiv på Didions estetikk.

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INTRODUCTION

“The center was not holding”
(Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* 84)

In 1919 Irish poet William Butler Yeats rendered the image of an apocalyptic world in free fall at the cusp of a great shift in the global order in the classic poem “The Second Coming”. The poem was an answer to Europe’s state of disorder as a result of ongoing revolutions and the first World War. American author and journalist Joan Didion reflects in a preface to her essay collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, which derived its name from Yeats’ poem, how its lines “have been my only points of reference, the only images against which much of what I was seeing and hearing and thinking seemed to make any pattern” (Didion xi). Although Didion’s essay was written decades after the poem’s publication, Yeats’ image of a world in chaos was still highly relevant. At the time, Didion was witnessing American society in a state of unravelment that came to characterize most of the 60s. Yeats’ arguably most famous line in the poem; “things fall apart; the center cannot hold” (line 3), is echoed by Didion when she writes that “the center was not holding” as a description of a country hanging on by threads (Didion 84). Her claim to the poem’s lines conditioning the patterns she observed around her offers an explanation to the detached aesthetic that permeates the novels *Play It as It Lays* and *A Book of Common Prayer*, both of which were influenced by the movements of the decade. In this thesis I will explore how Didion aesthetic reflects the emotional implications that a detached and hostile landscape can have upon the individual. These implications are manifested through an aesthetic paradox of detachment and intimacy. The backdrop of the historical and political context of the 60s is however essential to the understanding of why this particular aesthetic marks Didion’s work of the period. In the following I will provide an overview of the most important occurrences.

Brief historical and political context

During the 1950s, as the United States faced a flourishing period of prosperity with vast economic growth and a skyrocketing birthrate, African Americans and many immigrants were “trapped in appallingly squalid ghettos, in a climate of urban neglect and social deprivation, cut off from the general affluence of the period” (Bradbury & Temperley 329-330). Social critic Michael Harrington additionally points out the 40-50 million people still living in a “culture of poverty” within the nation in the very beginning of the 1960’s (qtd. in Tindall et.

Al. 564). However, as the 60s continued this would soon come to change for the better. President Lyndon Johnson decided to declare a war on the poverty facing America and his administration went about attempting to create a society which consisted of “abundance and liberty for all” where he sought to end all poverty and racial injustice (564). This was an ambitious task which proved to carry both successes and failures through its many initiated programs and acts. However, despite some of its failures, the important aspect that remains is that this laid the first groundwork for a social and economic environment wherein more people were given a fair opportunity for a better life than before.

The 60s proved to be a controversial time and a decade of increased unrest. The state of poverty in the face of prosperity was only one of the many examples of the divide which occurred in American society. As mentioned previously the population number skyrocketed in the years following the war, leading to a record number of young people in society. Pacified by growing prosperity and peace, many Americans felt comfortable bringing more children into the world again which led to a baby boom. When these children entered their late teenage years, the enrollment into colleges across the nation quadrupled from 1945-1970 (Tindall et al. 575). College is for many a time for engaging in activism and hoping to inspire social and political change. Bradbury and Temperley explain that there was a spirit of protest hanging in the air during the 60s and early 70s (338). But exactly what was brewing in the social climate at the time? What were for instance the youth reacting to?

The 50s were characterized by the aggressively conformist attitudes held by many of the wealthy American middle class (Bradbury & Temperley 338). In the following decade, many and especially young people started rejecting these notions and too neatly organized ideas of what the ideal lifestyle should be. Instead, they started to challenge these attitudes by turning to “long hair, tie-dyed shirts, recreational drugs, rock music, and group living arrangements” (Tindall et al. 576). This was the emergence of the Counterculture movement. Followers of the movement shared a rather laid back and non-materialistic attitude toward life, but counterculture was more than simply an aesthetic. It was a gathering of people with “a sense of opposition to officialdom” and it marked yet another divide in society between the ‘official’ America which had just elected republican Richard Nixon for president, and the counterculture’s “hippies, yippies, political activists, angry blacks, alienated youngsters, and disenchanting parents” (Bradbury & Temperley 342). Even the counterculture movement proved to be internally divided. Whilst some indeed chose to simply follow the ‘lifestyle’ aspect and would attempt to provoke others by for instance making love or ingesting illegal

drugs whilst in public, others followed a more politically inclined path and were concerned with reality as an oppressive system of institutions and ideologies (342).

The Counterculture movement's reach expanded rapidly and became a source of inspiration for much of the art to emerge from the decade. For instance, actors James Rado and Gerome Ragni wrote the groundbreaking rock musical *Hair* (1967) which followed the young Oklahoma man Claude Bukowski and his meeting with the hippie culture of New York. What made the musical highly controversial upon its premiere was its bold depiction of sexuality, drug use, foul language, and contemporary political issues. The musical's peculiar title was likely a reference to the characteristic appearance of the many hippies of counterculture who would sport a long and wild mane. The untamed nature of their hair could be argued to be a reference to the generation's desire for freedom. In the 1979 film adaptation, one of the show tunes carries the same title and, in the line, "Oh say can you see my eyes? If you can then my hair's too short" the national anthem is invoked (Forman 43:40). The anthem mentions the country's claim to being the land of the free which is perhaps what the tune was alluding to. Shortly afterwards when Berger, one of the main characters, asks for money, his father responds, "get a haircut, and I'll give you the money" (Forman 45:37). Berger refuses to do so and thus also refuses to adhere to a restriction upon his freedom. The desire for freedom to pursue one's own passions and the possibility for achieving happiness is arguably the cornerstone of the Counterculture movement.

Even though *Hair* as an art piece celebrated the carefree and creative nature of the hippies and challenged the contemporary politics, not all pop culture pieces at the time concurred with its attitude. In Merle Haggard's 1969 country song "Okie from Muskogee," he directly responds to the Counterculture movement when he sings "we don't let our hair grow long and shaggy like the hippies out in San Francisco do" (0:50-1:01). The activities and gatherings of the followers of Counterculture was mainly localized in larger cities such as New York and San Fransisco. In contrast, the more rural countryside and small towns of America held on tight to the traditional lifestyle and "love living right and being free" (0:29-0:33). By saying this, Haggard establishes a higher moral ground for the people coming from more rural places such as Oklahoma for behaving in 'the right way'. Haggard takes a stand against the illegal activities of the hippies already in the opening of the song, singing "we don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee, we don't take no trips on LSD; we don't burn no draft cards down on Main Street" (0:08-0:28). Although the song was intended to be a satirical piece, it has become a symbol of the polarization between those who embraced Counterculture and those who did not, between city and countryside.

Discussing Counterculture also includes looking at some of the contemporary political issues of the time. The word 'counter' is in itself indicative of what many within the movement were concerned with. Their political views countered that of the official consensus. The Vietnam war, for instance, was one of the most defining political issues at the time. It gave cause for great uproar and polarization within the American population and resulted in a growing distrust for the government. Americans protested the war as young men were "drafted to fight on foreign soil for a suspect cause" (Bradbury & Temperley 324). Another major issue which led to great developments on both the political and social scale in the country was the Civil Rights movement. This was a fight for equality and justice for all African Americans with minister and activist Martin Luther King Jr. as its central figure. His idea of militant nonviolence was the inspiration for thousands across the country to oppose Jim Crow practices by the use of direct action (Tindall et al. 559). This immense effort eventually led to changes in civil rights legislation, which culminated in the crucial Civil Rights Act signed by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964. It effectively "prohibited discrimination in public places, provided for the integration of schools and other public facilities, and made employment discrimination illegal" (Civil Rights Act 1). These results ultimately gave new momentum to activists fighting for racial equality.

The Civil Rights movement was also instrumental in inspiring other movements into action, including the Feminist movement. The first wave of feminism occurred during the first two decades of the 20th century where women gained the right to vote. Then a long period of time passed by before the second wave of feminism emerged. Professor Imelda Whelehan explains that the second wave came about as "a response to the lean years after the achievement of putative equality; the result of a dawning recognition that the system itself seemed to have an inbuilt propensity for institutionalizing gender (as well as other) inequality" (3-4). According to historian Joshua Zeits, the second wave became concerned with a variety of subjects such as workplace and credit equality, marriage equality, sexual liberation, political agendas, and education equality to name a few (667-678). In addition to these subjects, Whelehan argues that what characterized the second wave feminism was an "overt resistance to conventional definitions of what 'being a woman' meant" (5). Feminists now wanted to challenge the dated picture of the ideal woman. Tindall et al. discuss an issue of *Life-magazine* published in 1956 which describes the ideal middle class American woman as "a thirty-two-year-old pretty and popular suburban housewife, mother of four, who had married at age sixteen" (534). The article further describes her interest in being a great hostess who is capable of sewing her own clothes, is singing in the church choir and is devoted to her

husband” (534). The 60s then became a time for protesting the domesticity encouraged in the preceding decades.

As the 60s came to an end and the 70s took over, the social unrest largely quieted down, and America entered a calmer decade. Nevertheless, the feminist movement still saw major developments during this time. A notable win for women across the country was the Roe v. Wade ruling of '73 which put a stop to state laws denying abortions occurring during the first three months of pregnancy (Tindall et al. 578)¹. This allowed for increased privacy and autonomy which gave women the opportunity to reclaim ownership of their own bodies. However, this was not the only achievement of the feminist movement. Their fight also ensured that women on a much larger scale were able to enter the workforce which ultimately changed the makeup of traditional sex roles and the American norm. Males were no longer the breadwinner of the family and females no longer the housekeeper, the norm evolved into a two-career family structure (Tindall et al. 578). Despite these developments, some women still insisted that they were happy in their roles as wives and mothers. Zeitz quotes feminist Gloria Steinem's answer to these women; “the whole point of the Movement is individual choice – for both men and women” (Zeitz 685). Autonomous individualism is a key element of the characterization of second wave feminism. The ultimate goal was for women to be able to pursue self-realization no matter what that may entail for each individual. They would then have the possibility to decide their own fate and their own trajectory in life.

A literary decade

Both the possibility for and restriction of autonomous individualism for women was explored in literary feminist discourse during the second wave. Arguably one of the most famous pieces of feminist literature to have originated from the period was activist Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* published in 1963. The controversial book caused a massive uproar. Author Stephanie Coontz looked at how Friedan's book impacted women in the 60s in *A Strange Stirring* where she notes that *The Feminine Mystique* was blamed for disrupting history and destroying the 50s image of the woman's place being in the house (xv). On the other hand, Coontz also mentions how Friedan's writing “awakened women to their oppression” and thus it “transformed the social fabric” (xv). Women being confronted with the restrictive attitudes and norms holding them back from seeking out their potential is the first step towards breaking the barriers. Academic and writer Marilyn French was another

¹ This was recently overturned on June 24, 2022. See *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* 1-213.

voice at the time which through her debut novel *The Women's Room* published in 1977, added an astonishing life experience to the discourse. Although the work was fictional, it paralleled a great deal with French's personal life wherein the protagonist is a "desperately unhappy suburban housewife and mother who is emancipated through divorce, higher education, friendship and feminism" (Simic 257). This showed women that there was indeed room and possibility for flourishing outside of the conforming norms imposed upon them by society. Literature became a powerful medium for conducting political and social analysis and for encouraging activism.

Published three years after *The Feminine Mystique* was Jacqueline Susann's novel *Valley of the Dolls* which would grow to become one of the biggest novels of its year. Spanning across two decades from 1945 to '65, the three main female characters start out young and hopeful but are eventually consumed by societies' demand for money, performance, and beauty in the entertainment industry. Anne, one of the protagonists, leaves behind her life in small-town Lawrenceville where "everything is assumed" from how she should live to whom she should marry (Susann 3). When questioned as to why she would leave an economically and socially stable environment for the potential promise of the unknown, Anne responds that it is in search for "my identity, maybe my future, my whole life. Giving up before it begins. Neely, nothing ever happened to anyone in my family. They married, had children, and that was it. I want things to happen to me (42). The novel shows the possibility for women to climb to the top of the industry, but equally shows that there are always men and expectations hiding behind the curtains and pulling the strings. Afterall, "this is a man's world – women only own it when they're very young" (134). Susann illustrates the capabilities for autonomous individualism in the very beginning, but quickly shatters the belief with the harsh reality of the isolation that awaits after clawing one's way from expectations and to the top.

Feminist issues were not the only concern showing up in the literature of the 60s and 70s. It also placed a new-found focus on subjectivity rather objectivity, and according to Bradbury and Temperley, it also drew on the spirit of modernism and attempted to respond to the disorder of the social climate (336). Author Philip Roth wrote that the American writer during this period "had his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of the American reality" (qtd. in Bradbury & Temperley 333). Much of the literature then ended up preoccupied with featuring characters who descended into madness and extremity as a result of the environment they found themselves in (334). In 1965 author and academic Jonathan Baumbach describes this fictional setting as a landscape of

nightmares. He commented that American literature has since 1945 left naturalism behind in favor of exploring “the underside of consciousness, delineating in its various ways the burden and ambivalence of personal responsibility in a world which accommodates evil – that nightmare landscape we all inhabit” (Baumbach 3). The backdrop of a nightmarish landscape can be found in many of the literary works created before and after the cusp of the 60s and 70s. Authors such as Hunter S. Thompson, Tom Wolfe, John Updike, Normal Mailer, and Truman Capote were highly acclaimed voices who dared to draw on and play around with the tendencies of a chaotic America.

Placing Joan Didion in the 60s

A contemporary of these authors and a singular literary voice was that of the native Californian, Joan Didion. Born and raised in Sacramento, she grew up on proud stories of the evolution of California and its citizens. Paul Gleason notes that the pioneer ethic of “self-sufficiency, wealth from the land, loyalty to family and community, distrust of government and newcomers [...]” was preached to young Didion by her family as the image of peak Californian mindset (Gleason). As a child, she accepted this ideal dutifully and further retold the story of Californians as “the adventurous, the restless and the daring” (Gleason). However, the story of a blooming and noble historic past would soon crumble in her eyes as she came to learn of the reality of the political and economic backstory. Professor Katherine Henderson explains that although Didion was a proud Californian, she experienced equivocal feelings regarding Sacramento as her childhood home (1-2). This emotional ambivalence led to a turning point for her in the 60s and Didion herself described it as “a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself” (Gleason). Being confronted with the underlying reality of what she had perceived to be the truth of her history, ultimately altered her understanding of society. I would argue that growing up in this environment primed Didion’s keen eye for the reporting she would come to do on the hippies who ventured into the West Coast state. In the beginning of her career, she was mostly concerned with journalistic work and in “the cold late spring of 1967” she found herself in the acclaimed Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco, the heart of counterculture (Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* 84).

“The center was not holding” is the opening line of her arguably most well-known essay “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” in which she aptly describes the state of the neighborhood during this period (Didion 84). In the reading of her work, the audience is placed on the streets of history and allowed access to her observations of what went on behind

the scenes of a revolutionizing movement. Her essays contain frank notes and accounts of conversations and experiences she made whilst staying in the heart of the action. What sets Didion's voice apart from her contemporaries such as Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe, is the critical angle she employs when discussing Counterculture's hippies and its effects on society. Academic Sam Diamond argues that whilst Thompson and Wolfe considered counterculture for the most part to be a fun scene of freedom and life with only some negative aspects, Didion took on a more sinister view (Diamond 3). Her critical apprehension is only further strengthened through the many observations she makes and notes to the reader. The people she encounters are portrayed as "dangerously irresponsible, perpetuating a cycle of disorder" (Diamond 3). Her writing during these decades mostly carries an objective tone of distance to the subjects she is discussing. Despite this, I would argue that the critical eye with which she perceives the state of society functions to strengthen the work she creates to come out of this period.

The noticeable distancing and air of detachment she employed was not exclusively a characteristic of her work but was also a common aesthetic element found in what became known as the "California cool". In Benjamin Schwarz' article "The Cool School" he distinguishes what made the 50s and 60s prominent art scene of California so different from what could be found in the rest of the country. Drawing on inspiration from "Southern California's eccentric economic, social, climatological, and even technological environment," the cool atmosphere of California was channeled into the works of painters, musicians and architects alike (Schwarz). The result was an accumulation of artistic works that adhered to a collective sensibility where restraint and detachment were dominating. Schwarz notes that the modernism of California also created a sense of quietism which opposed emotional heedlessness. Although the article mainly focuses on works within music, art, and architecture, the overarching essence of the cool California flowed into the literature scene as well. In his closing statement Schwarz gives a nod to the "consummate bard of cool Joan Didion" (Schwarz).

However, the cool essence of the time is not only captured in her journalistic work, but it also marks the pages of her novels through the portrayal of her characters and in the aesthetic of a sharp yet elegant writing style. Didion's aestheticism is of a rather unique nature to what I have encountered in literary works by earlier female novelists. There has always existed this general assumption that women contain a more nuanced emotional and caring nature than do most men. The interesting element of Didion's writing style therefore lies in the singular tone of detachment carried on throughout her novels no matter what challenging

topics she might be tackling. The detachment creates a sense of coldness and distance between the authorial voice and the subject. Didion herself has claimed that one of the greatest influences on her style was Ernest Hemingway. She would type up whole chapters from his works in order to grasp his command of language and style (Henderson 5). Drawing on the style of such an acclaimed and accomplished literary voice such as Hemingway, may have been thought to give her writing a more serious approach. This could then grant her credibility when facing the sensitive and dark topics of her novels. The tone also, in a sense, reflects the author herself as she was often perceived to be cold and withdrawn in nature. What therefore creates a compelling tension within her writing is the presence of intimacy. It may sound like an odd concept to associate with Didion; however, in the 1998 winter issue of *Critical Inquiry*, scholar and cultural theorist Lauren Berlant sought out to offer alternative perspectives to intimacy. She argues that “to intimate is to communicate with the sparsest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity” (Berlant 281). Based upon this articulation and the rest of the arguments laid out in her article, I believe it is fitting to investigate intimacy as a theme in Didion’s work. To my knowledge this has not been addressed in any detail before.

A literature review

The name Joan Didion it is most commonly associated with her non-fiction work. Most of the scholarly attention has been focused on the famous essay collections *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979). In more recent years her memoirs *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011) has garnered a lot of both general and scholarly interest. Daniel Worden and Alex Young note in their 2016 collection of essays on Joan Didion that even though she received a National Humanities Medal and has been recognized as one of the most celebrated writers of our time, there are still relatively few scholarly treatments on her authorship (Worden & Young 581). There exist some book length treatments of her work, notably those by Katherine Henderson and Sharon Felton. Henderson’s *Joan Didion* (1981) analyzes both novels and essays and attempts to draw lines between the works themselves and place their historical relevance. Whereas Henderson relies on her own interpretation and analysis, Felton on the other hand has edited *The Critical Response to Joan Didion* (1994) as a compilation of reviews to highlight some of the notable critical reception Didion’s work has received. Felton remarks that Didion’s name and work appears in a variety of contexts. For instance, her essays are commonly studied by students in composition classes, journalism students study them as a part of the New Journalism genre,

her novels can be adapted to many literary perspectives in advanced literature classes, and she is introduced in courses on women writers and for exploring Latin American connections to name a few (Felton 1). These topics are all explored in further detail in many of the articles published online and in scholarly journals. The two novels that will be analyzed in this thesis have received different amounts of recognition. Whereas *Play It as It Lays* has acquired a lot of scholarly attention, *A Book of Common Prayer* has contrastingly not been as widely discussed.

A fascinating angle with relatively limited exploration by scholars is that of the aesthetics of Didion's work, in particular of her fiction. It has previously been mentioned how the aesthetics of her writing style can come across as both sharp and cold. For many critics this has resulted in a study of 'nothingness' and what is not being said. Mark Schorer argues that this 'nullity' or 'nothingness' are "the essential emptiness of experience" but that the exploration of this nothingness in *Play It as It Lays* results in a "triumph not of insight as such but of style" (Schorer 174). The writing style has both been praised and criticized and Chip Rhodes links the writing in the novel to Hemingway's 'nada' and argues that "nothing might well be something new entirely – something subjective and not objective" (Rhodes 134). The subjectivity can be said to be further explored in themes such as feminine failure in connection to nothingness in Mizuta Noriko's article on *Play It as It Lays* and that of the failure of the nuclear family in Susan Gilbert's article on *A Book of Common Prayer*. Although she may not embody many of the feminine qualities often associated with women of her time, and Didion never claimed to be a feminist herself, she does frequently in her work portray female characters who struggle to fit into the societal expectations laid out for women. Noriko and Gilbert refer to it as a failure, but I rather wish to look at the role of motherhood as a means of connectivity and hope for the protagonists when exploring the themes of detachment and intimacy.

Didion falls into the category of a postmodern writer and in an article on contemporary American fiction, Fabian Eggers and Sonja Pykkö point out the recurring commonality of detachment and intimacy in postmodern fiction and note a link between the two themes. They write that "even those postmodern novels that have frequently been accused of encouraging detachment, even indifference toward the transgressions they depict, are deeply invested in paradoxes of intimacy and the ethics of intimate encounter" (13). They go on to explain the effect of this as "if anything, by forcing novel readers to become newly aware of the often uncomfortably intimate act of reading, postmodernism's intimate poetics can serve to attenuate the need to remain vigilant—as in self-critical and self-reflexive—about

the distance between ourselves and fictive and real others” (13). Overcoming this barrier of distance opens up for the possibility to blur the distinctive lines between reader and text in a merged state of connectivity where intimacy can be experienced. Linda Hutcheon explains that “the postmodern is, if it is anything, a problematizing force in our culture today: it raises questions about the common-sensical and the “natural” (XI). She later elaborates that “with postmodernism we start to encounter and are challenged by an art of shifting perspective, of double self-consciousness, of local and extended meaning” (11). These are all elements to be found in the two novels *Play It as It Lays* and *A Book of Common Prayer* which both feature a grim exploration of characters descending into despair as the superficial layers of the sensible society they have come to know starts to crumble. This theme is highlighted by shifting perspectives and a heightened awareness of the characters’ own roles in their search for meaning, happiness and a sense of security.

Theoretical framework and structure

Both *Play It as It Lays* and *A Book of Common Prayer* contain elements of Jonathan Baumbach’s “nightmare landscape”. The protagonists Maria Wyeth, Charlotte Douglas, and Grace Strasser-Mendana attempt to navigate the hostile environment of society whilst staying sane and keeping a forward gaze. In *Play It as It Lays* Maria Wyeth struggles to find meaning in her life after her daughter is hospitalized and she herself has been institutionalized for some time. Maria finds herself numbed by Hollywood’s unforgiving and objectifying nature and the readers follows along as she struggles to find her path in life. *A Book of Common Prayer* similarly features a dark backdrop and somber themes. Charlotte Douglas and Grace Strasser-Mendana are both foreigners in the fictional country of Boca Grande. The reader observes as they struggle in their own personal relationships and are trapped by the male characters’ secret political and criminal affairs. The male characters surrounding the protagonists in both novels largely serve as a hinderance and cause a negative impact upon the development of the protagonists’ lives. The male dominant structure of the landscape in the novels creates a bitter and restrictive environment wherein the protagonists struggle in their efforts to fulfill the ideal role of a mother and as women in their own right. Didion may not have had a feminist intention in the creation of the two works, but I believe that her role and experiences as a journalist largely influenced the setting and the characters she chose to write and thereby functions as a reflection of what was brewing in the social climate of the 60s.

The method I will employ in my work with this thesis is a close reading informed by Wolfgang Iser’s reader response theory. He presents this in his book *The Act of Reading*

where he, among other topics, discusses the “background-foreground” theory (92-95) and details “the structure of theme and horizon” (96-103). The most central point of note in this theory is that an aesthetic object emerges through the reader’s deciphering of a selective composition of social and cultural codes alluded to by the author. I argue that in the instance of *Play It as It Lays* and *A Book of Common Prayer*, the aesthetic object behaves more like an aesthetic motif and that this motif is composed by the paradox of detachment and intimacy. Iser’s theory will thus help guide the analysis of how Didion’s stylistically detached writing style paradoxically creates an experience of intimacy. To do this I will examine how detachment emerges as the initial effect of her concise and sharp style but becomes accompanied by an intimacy found brewing in certain character portrayals, in the dialogue and in the imagery of the text.

This thesis is divided into two main chapters. The first chapter concerns *Play It as It Lays* where detachment is found primarily in what I have labeled the exterior landscape, and the subsequent effect of intimacy is located in the interior landscape. The second chapter focuses on *A Book of Common Prayer* where the paradox can be found intersecting between the exterior and interior landscape. Both of these chapters will contain an analysis of the paradox in the respective novels in addition to a discussion of how the vulnerability of intimacy in the setting of a hostile landscape causes an inner emotional turmoil. I will conclude with a consideration of the importance that the paradox has upon the aesthetic of the narrative and how this aesthetic becomes a reflection of the emotional implications that a society in disorder can have upon the individual.

CHAPTER ONE

“I lie here in the sunlight, watch the hummingbird”

(Didion, *Play It as It Lays* 214)

Play It As It Lays divulges the flip side of the now often romanticized lifestyle of 60s California. In the exploration of a self-indulgent society where human connection and empathy appears almost non-existent, Didion inspects the effect of this alienating setting upon the individual. The novel features mostly a cast of characters subscribing to this representation of a superficial opportunistic society; however, at the forefront of the cast is former actress Maria Wyeth who has recently been witnessing the layers of this cultural milieu she is accustomed to start to peel off and reveal its absurdity before her. The first time we encounter Maria is during her institutionalization as she addresses the reader directly to provide an introductory glimpse to her perception of reality in addition to relaying some information about her upbringing and current condition. In this encounter we learn of two crucial events in Maria's life. Firstly, the tragic state of her daughter Kate who is hospitalized with an unnamed condition which requires her to need electrodes on her head and needles in her spine in an attempt to figure out what ails her. Secondly, we learn how her mother passed away and how Maria reacted to the news of her demise. Afterwards the reader is taken back in time to witness the progression of Maria's downward spiral as she steadily grows detached from her surroundings and relationships. This backward glance becomes an account of the interactions and events which eventually leads to her own institutionalization.

In the narrative, Maria finds herself numbed by Hollywood's unforgiving and objectifying nature, which causes her to drive aimlessly along the California roads in search of meaning in a place where there appears to be none. Maria unexpectedly falls pregnant a second time but due to an affair she has had remains uncertain as to who the child's father is. Her husband Carter Lang is a filmmaker and prominent figure in her life. When she shares the news of her pregnancy with Carter, he persuades her to have an abortion against her will by threatening to take Kate away from her. The abortion takes place in a newspaper covered bedroom of a tract house and following the event, we start to see the unravelment of Maria's character as she struggles to cope with the aftermath of her decision. Her actions continue to weigh on her and the event haunts her with reminders and nightmares throughout most of the story. Both Carter and her best friend Helene who are supposed to be her closest companions

do not understand the sudden shift in her attitude following the event and urge her to return to her previously blissful and ignorant persona. Nevertheless, the loss of both her mother and unborn child and the forced distancing from Kate severs emotional ties Maria struggles to recover from. Crushed under the weight of alienation and a lack of genuine connection she spirals into a state of self-destruction and disillusion. The only character to grant her reprieve through a mutual understanding of the decent into disillusionment with the state of society is BZ. His character acts as a reflection of her own fragmented self yet simultaneously becomes the awakening she requires to depart from her notion of life's nihilistic nature. In the buildup of her character, her instinct for perseverance first emerges when she is faced with the all-consuming nothingness and certainty of death. In light of BZ's suicide, the strength of Maria's character ultimately solidifies and shows traces of hope for a way out of the darkness of the hostile and unyielding society she finds herself in.

The grim atmosphere that coats *Play It as It Lays* is also analyzed in an essay written by Evelyn Fracasso where she draws on Jonathan Baumbach's metaphor of a *Landscape of Nightmare*. In Baumbach's metaphor naturalism has been abandoned in favor of a deep dive into "the shadow landscape of the self, often in the disguise of a dimly recognizable "real" world" (Baumbach 2). He developed the metaphor in 1965 in an attempt to encapsulate some of the recurring concerns he noticed was preoccupying fiction in the years after 1945. He argues that the American novel in these years was largely concerned with exploring "the underside of consciousness, delineating in its various ways the burden and ambivalence of personal responsibility in a world which accommodates evil – that nightmare landscape we all inhabit" (Baumbach 3). Fracasso asserts that Didion's *Play It as It Lays* aptly fits the characteristics of a nightmare landscape when she in the novel chooses to examine "the dehumanization of the individual, the deterioration of the mind, the desolation of the landscape, and the disintegration of traditional values" (Fracasso 153). The concept of a nightmare landscape seems then a highly appropriate description for a novel which at first glance appears devoid of genuine humanity and happiness.

I would like to use Fracasso's essay as a steppingstone for my own analysis and build upon the idea of a nightmare landscape as not only befitting *Play It as It Lays*, but also fitting of Didion's successive novel *A Book of Common Prayer*. This first chapter will deal with the makeup of a nightmare landscape in *Play It as It Lays* whereas the second chapter will examine how the landscape metaphor pertains to *A Book of Common Prayer*. The nightmare landscape as a metaphor is not further explained or developed by Fracasso other than what I have outlined in the previous paragraph. For the purpose of this thesis, I have seen fit to

expand upon the metaphor and divide it into two separate yet interrelated segments: an exterior and an interior landscape. The exterior landscape encompasses influential elements occurring outside of the protagonist(s) control such as setting, structure and other characters which serves to impact the portrayal and experience of the character and the novel. The interior landscape on the other hand encompasses elements occurring within the protagonist(s) inner sphere such as thoughts and emotions. This provides another angle from which to perceive the protagonist(s) and the novel. By looking at both the exterior and interior landscape of the novels, it becomes clear that although hauntingly dark and cruel in its environment, there are surprising glimmers of resilience and shy optimism seeping through. The nightmarish landscape which acts as a detached aesthetic backdrop, makes the remnants of what I will argue is intimacy all the more protruding and impactful for the reader. The detached aesthetic emanates from the exterior landscape whereas the paradoxical experience of intimacy reveals itself in the interior landscape.

Framing the exterior landscape

The exterior landscape significantly impacts protagonist Maria's behavior and mentality, and it establishes the general aesthetic atmosphere throughout the novel which is why it is crucial to understand the framework before delving into the complexity of the interior landscape. In this discussion the exterior obviously concerns the physical landscape in the novel, however, I believe that there are other key contributing factors part of the exterior landscape as well which must be considered as integral to the outcome of a detached aesthetic. I therefore argue that the characters inhabiting the landscape and the very structure and narrative form of the novel itself are additional contributing features. Discussing the exterior landscape then includes a representation of the physical setting by looking at various environmental imagery, an analysis of the structure by looking predominantly at narrative choice and lastly by examining the masculine tone signaled by metaphors pertaining to the title *Play It as It Lays*. These factors all contribute to framing the exterior landscape as the detached backdrop necessary for evoking subsequent intimacy through a contrasting character out of balance with her environment. Maria's character embodies this contrast as she slowly distances herself from the people in her environment and retreats into her own mind to reveal a vulnerability starkly contrasted to the resilient landscape of the exterior.

The setting of the novel is primarily concentrated in southern California with occasional flashbacks to Maria's childhood home in Silver Wells, Nevada. Keeping in line with the characteristic hot California weather, the novel makes many references to it

sporadically through the chapters. Descriptions such as “the hot October twilight,” “this blazing dry October day,” and “the dry still heat” typically occurring in the opening of a chapter initiates the first nudge to awaken the reader’s senses (Didion, *Play It as It Lays* 24, 44, 60). This ensures that they are continuously reminded of the intense and consuming heat of the atmosphere. It is accompanied by wasteland images like “the great pilings, the Cyclone fencing, the deadly oleander, the luminous signs (...)” along the road and the beach is at one point drawn as “oil scum on the sand and a red tide in the flaccid surf and mounds of kelp at the waterline. The kelp hummed with flies” (17, 65). The collage of these descriptions and numerous others, paint the physical landscape as barren, deserted and inhospitable whilst simultaneously reflecting the overall mood of the milieu that Maria finds herself in. The text is effectively trying to pull the reader into the arid landscape by guiding the reader’s sense of sight, sound, and touch in a deliberate direction. Appealing to these senses transports the reader to Maria’s footsteps, not to justify her actions, but to establish a level of understanding as to what such a desolate and hostile environment can do to the mind.

The only refuge Maria finds from the smoldering heat is around bodies of water which are considered precious and far in between. In an early scene where she is amongst friends in her garden, she notes that “the water in the pool was always 85° and it was always clean” (Didion 24). She afterward mentions that it will always keep this standard whether her husband, Carter, pays the rent or not. The pool is considered a reliable constant for Maria whereas her husband is not. It provides her calmness and refuge from the harsh, dry heat and it entitles her to a sense of control in her otherwise chaotic and unstable environment. This solace found in water is not exclusive to Maria. Didion herself elaborates on the fixation on water for Californians in her essay collection *The White Album* where she explains that “actually a pool is, for many of us in the West, a symbol not of affluence but of order, of control over the uncontrollable” (64). The symbolism of water becomes more prominent toward the end when Maria has been in the desert of Las Vegas for too long. As she slowly alienates herself from others she starts to “feel the pressure of Hoover Dam” and the “pull of the water” (Didion, *Play It as It Lays* 171). It appears that the water centers Maria in an illusory perception of control despite her slow unravelment.

Another natural element of symbolic significance in the novel’s exterior landscape is the wind. Although not explicitly noted by name in *Play It as It Lays*, the Santa Ana winds which occasionally pass through the LA area has a superstition linked to them. In her famous essay collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Didion explains the phenomenon: “it is the season of suicide and divorce and prickly dread, whenever the wind blows” (3). The popular

belief is that the dry wind carries positive ions making people prone to cause mayhem they otherwise would not be inclined to. This could act as foreshadowing to the many chaotic turns that the novel takes which includes divorce as well as suicide. In the novel, there are mentions of “a dry hot wind blowing through the passes” (Didion, *Play It as It Lays* 30). The wind is referenced several times later during periods of great distress. When Maria is disclosing the news of her unexpected pregnancy to Carter, she notes that “the wind burned on her face” (49). In addition, following an unfortunate night vaguely explained, Maria’s friend Helene is depicted with puffy eyes and a bruised face in the morning. When Maria makes a slight hint at the previous night Helene shuts it down claiming “I don’t want to talk about it. The wind makes me feel bad” (163). Had the novel not been set in California these images may have been irrelevant, however, considering Didion’s economic and highly intentional writing style she likely had a purpose in mind when evoking these images. If one is familiar with the myth, the early mentions of the wind may act as a grim premonition of what is to come.

Linking the wind to the myth of the Santa Anas is further reinforced when one takes into account the many mentions of it being October: in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* Didion writes “October is the bad month for the wind, the month when breathing is difficult, and the hills blaze up spontaneously” (3). The winds are also thought to bring about more earthquakes than normal. In one scene Maria is watching TV which first shows a woman losing her house in the Tujunga Wash, then reports of an earth tremor near Joshua Tree followed by a minister claiming that eight million people would die by an earthquake. Maria’s response to the ongoing devastation is that it has “a certain sedative effect, (...) and between the earthquake prophecy and the marijuana and the cheerful detachment of the woman whose house was in the Tujunga Wash, she felt a kind of resigned tranquility” (Didion, *Play It as It Lays* 104). Disaster and chaos in the exterior landscape produces a detached emotional response in Maria. Whereas the havoc is usually wrecked inside of Maria’s mind, seeing it on display physically allows her to recognize herself for a moment as the exterior is now mimicking her daily interior. Maria could also be said to temporarily adopt the mindset of the woman who lost her house. Seeing someone remain calm, centered, and detached as her home is ripped away sparks a mutual recognition in her. If this woman can remain standing by staying detached, then maybe it is a viable option for her as well.

Structuring the landscape

Another integral aspect of the exterior landscape is the structure and narrative style of a novel which in large part affects the overarching essence of the narrative. *Play It as It Lays* is first

and foremost split into 87 relatively short chapters with some only stretching a paragraph in length giving the narrative a hasty pace and almost impulsive quality. However, considering Didion's journalism background and experience as a magazine writer it is likely that this economic writing structure is derived from those early days of her career. The pacing is then not impulsive but a deliberate intention at providing the narrative with a sense of urgency. Biographer and literary critic Mark Royden Winchell argue that the novel is structured in a manner which ensures that "the reader's response is in large part subliminal and nonrational" (Winchell 94). Evoking a certain irrational response to the narrative within the readers serves to reflect on a small scale the irrational fragmentation of Maria's character and on a large scale the chaotic upheaval of American society during the 60s as a time of great destabilization. The reader's subconscious steps into the aesthetically detached landscape and Didion thus awakes their senses in an attempt to make the narrative more vivid. In his biography on Didion, Winchell quotes writer Guy Davenport who claims that "Didion has given the novel a pace so violent and so powerful that its speed becomes the dominant symbol of her story" (Winchell 94). I will suggest that in agreement with Davenport's claim, the structured pace of the narrative aids the aesthetic backdrop of the novel to manifest itself as cool and detached.

The narrative choices made in the framing of the novel does not yield itself to a singular shape or a chronological structure. Didion plays around with the idea of perspective and as such the story becomes a matter of projection and perspective. The first three chapters are narrated by the use of first-person point of view split between Maria, Helene, and lastly Carter. All these chapters are used to give the reader alternate perceptions of Maria's character. The opening chapter belongs to Maria wherein she is concerned with relaying her understanding of the world around her as one big game wherein she must play her part as "an agreeable player of the game" to obtain her ultimate goal; getting her daughter Kate out of the institution she is placed in so that they may be together again (Didion 4). She is also highly preoccupied with getting certain facts and details about herself and her life straight. This is used as a way of reaffirming herself as a sane figure in an otherwise unstable reality. By underlining Maria's view of the world and people around her the metaphor of a game provides the initial feel for the hostile landscape that the novel will inhabit, and where human empathy is close to non-existent.

The chapter following Helene's point of view portrays Maria in a contrasting light to that which has so far been presented and underlines the disinterestedness that comes from the descriptions of the exterior landscape. Helene makes no attempt to conceal her contempt for

Maria. She recalls various instances where she deemed Maria to be acting in a “selfish” and “careless” manner and repeatedly reiterates these characteristics when referencing her (Didion 11-12). When Helene says “I made the effort [...] I made it for Carter, or for BZ, or for old times or for something, not for Maria” she distances herself from the friendship they once shared now that Maria is no longer acting in accordance with the accepted norms within their milieu (11). Helene throughout the novel comes across as more concerned with keeping in line with the expectations of female behavior than with helping her friend who has drastically departed from the expectations. Helene claims that “Maria has never been able to bear Carter’s success” and that she was the one “who killed BZ [...] through her carelessness” (12). Thus, through Helene’s eyes, Maria ends up being portrayed as self-serving and a catalyst for destruction.

The third chapter is narrated from the perspective of Carter whose description of Maria builds upon Helene’s perception and further serves to alienate Maria. Carter highlights Maria’s inability to connect and claims that she “has never understood friendship, conversation, the normal amenities of social exchange” (Didion 13). He also makes sure to point out the effect that her otherness has upon the people surrounding her and remembers an evening where “the others at the table look first at her and then away, astonished, uneasy” (13). The image of Maria that Carter draws up makes the reader believe that it is her own peculiar behavior that is the root of her detachment and alienation. Carter further notes that he tried “to find some order, a pattern” to her character but was unsuccessful in his endeavor (14). To look for order or logic in a fragmented character will undoubtedly prove difficult. However, it does not mean that the fragmented character is what is inherently wrong in this picture but rather proves that it takes just a single person not adhering to the socially accepted behavioral patterns, for the dynamic in a group to shift to such an extent that people become uneasy, skeptical, and distrustful. Maria embodies this fragmented character in the narrative. Both Helene and Carter function as one-dimensional characters inhabiting the exterior landscape which allows Maria’s more complex and layered nature to take a prominent and contrasting role within that landscape. The effect of a detached exterior landscape upon the individual who does not adhere to the social conventions of their environment thus becomes clearer to the reader.

After these initial chapters are concluded the narrative style switches to a third-person limited narrator and we are taken back in time to witness the events leading up to Helene and Carter’s portrayals of Maria. The effect of Carter’s portrayal of Maria in contrast to her own understanding of herself is cleverly illustrated by situating the exterior landscape within the

film industry. There is a certain degree of vulnerability that comes along with being an actress. Maria's acting role does not entail any involvement in the directorial aspect of creating a film and therefore she has no control over the projection and perspective that the director steers the film toward. The reader is made privy to how this outcome can lead to vulnerability when Maria is watching two of her own films which were directed and shot by Carter. The second film is scripted and in it she plays a girl raped by members of a motorcycle gang and afterwards comes to the realization that it "didn't mean anything" and that "there's a lot more to living than just kicks" (Didion 19). Maria's reaction to watching herself on screen in this film is a type of disassociation where she does not have any sense of it being herself. Her first film in contrast is a collage of Maria simply going about her day and doing mundane things whilst Carter follows her with a camera. Surprisingly, Maria can barely stand this raw and unscripted first film and much prefers the second film because that girl "seemed to have a definite knack for controlling her own destiny" (20-21). The writing in this specific scene lays Maria's character starkly bare in terms of her psyche and self-perception. The fact that she prefers a crudely violated character to her own reality illustrates how deeply disconnected she has become from society. She no longer recognizes her own role in the makeup of the landscape and thus starts disassociating from reality which is what leads her down the path of disengagement from the exterior and the beginning steps of withdrawing more and more into the interior landscape of her own reality.

Toward the end of the novel the structure is once again altered to include a few short interwoven chapters narrated by Maria in first-person point of view. The tone of these chapters is drastically different to the very first chapter narrated by her. In these chapters, her tone of voice is razor sharp and self-assured as she takes complete distance from Helene and Carter. In the aftermath of BZ's suicide, which Maria bore witness to, they both believe her to be insane and Maria's simple response is "let them" (Didion 203). Echoing the portrayal of Maria in Helene's chapter, Maria reiterates that "my carelessness, my selfishness, my insanity" is what Helene judges her for exuding when she stood aside whilst BZ committed suicide. To this Maria once again responds in a simple manner that "there was no carelessness involved," hinting at the very intentional acceptance she had for BZ's choice to die (203). Although this may appear detached and cold-hearted, it was more so a scene depicting a mutual recognition and an intimate acceptance between two characters. Maria and BZ were both made ill by the effect of a hostile exterior landscape.

Play It as It Lays

The last aspect of the exterior landscape I will touch upon is how the title *Play It as It Lays* pertains to a game metaphor which is present for the duration of the novel and speaks to the perception of society promoted in the work. From a young age Maria grows up learning to understand life and the world around her through a series of card and game metaphors taught to her by her late father Harry Wyeth. The title of the novel thus establishes the first hint at this red thread throughout the narrative. Essentially, the worldview constructed for and by Maria comes down to an already dealt game table where she is merely a pawn trying to navigate a hostile landscape without a rulebook, doing as best as she can with the hand she is dealt. *Play It as It Lays* as a title signals this and alludes to the idea that even though one may not have control over the exterior factors one finds oneself afflicted by, it is possible to acknowledge them and play into the advantages one possesses. That is not to say that Maria was raised with an entirely negative world view as a result. Her father was a chronic gambler, and she was “raised to believe that what came in on the next roll would always be better than what went out on the last” leaving an optimistic tone (Didion 5). Nevertheless, this optimism is challenged when she faces the loss of her mother in an accident and is told by her father that this is indeed a bad hand and to not let it cripple her but remember that “you’re holding all the aces” (9). Contrary to the comfort Harry Wyeth is attempting to provide her with, this metaphor elicits the opposite effect and instead leaves her confused as to “what was the game?” (10). Nothing appears to make sense as the figure of her mother is brutally ripped away from her. In the wake of Maria’s loss, her perception of the world grows detached as she is left with an empty sense of meaninglessness.

In addition, there are references to an unjust imbalance between male and female “players” in this exterior landscape. As Maria watches BZ and a masseur she makes note of their “gleaming, unlined bodies” whereas Helene in contrast was “not immune to time” and her flesh had a “lack of resilience” (Didion 46). Maria sees then that “whatever arrangements were made, they worked less well for women” (46). However, this is not only noticeable in relation to appearance. There also appears to be certain behavioral expectations linked to being a woman such as fitting into the role of a docile, serene and cheerful component to the landscape. As Maria falls deeper and deeper into a state of melancholy, numerous references are made about her having “lost [her] sense of humor” (208). She is slowly retreating into a shell of herself and this uncertain quality to her character leaves her vulnerable to negative outward influences. Male characters such as BZ and Carter appear on the page to be more

steadfast and sure of their place in comparison to female counterparts such as Maria, Helene, and Susannah. This cruel imbalance in the landscape provides opportunities for intentional manipulation and guided influence working to destabilize Maria's foothold in both society and in herself. I do not believe it is a mere coincidence that both Maria and BZ's mother are described as playing "solitaire" on two separate occasions in the novel (10, 57). In the nightmare landscape they inhabit, being a woman is a solitary endeavor where they have learned that they must look out for themselves.

Carter's influence upon Maria is illustrated already in an early scene of the novel where she shares with him that she is pregnant; however, she is not sure whether the child is his or not. Carter who did have previous knowledge of her affair is aggrieved by the news but remains surprisingly calm. The next day Maria receives a call from him where his voice is described as "measured" and "uninflected" (Didion 54).

I love you, she whispered, but it was more a plea than a declaration and in any case he made no response. Get a pencil, he ordered. He was going to give her a telephone number. He was going to give her a telephone number of the only man in Los Angeles County who did clean work. (54)

The choice of tone in the exchange solidifies an air of distance between the two characters. Careful to use descriptive words that depict Carter as stable yet stern illustrates the power dynamic between the couple. He demands that she obeys his command to abort the baby, but she carefully expresses her uncertainty. In Amanda Anderson's "Forms of Detachment," she goes into many of the various literary critical approaches to detachment. One such approach which I believe captures the desired aesthetic experience of the above passage comes from feminist studies. Anderson writes that "feminist studies of modernist aesthetics have shown that practices of detachment, denaturalization, and self-transformation are frequently gendered male and sharply counterposed to images of femininity as mired in nature or custom" (25). Maria employs the male gendered practice of detachment when handling the situation and transforms her attitude in order to evoke a more masculine approach so as to be taken more seriously by Carter. When Maria then later returns his call, she is described as "calm, neutral, an intermediary calling to clarify terms" (Didion 54). This intentional mirroring of Carter's collected tone of voice makes Maria appear similarly detached to the topic of conversation. Emulating this detachment in turn grants her a more masculine approach to logic ensuring that she comes across as in 'careful control'. This tone of neutrality ends up becoming a reality and a major component in Maria's character development as the narrative moves along.

However, by trying to adapt to the exterior landscape in an unnatural manner, she grows more uncertain and destabilized in her own character.

Entering the interior landscape

As the makeup of the exterior landscape has now been established, it is time to enter the interior landscape. This is where the intimacy takes center stage. Although *Play It as It Lays* at first glance appears surprisingly indifferent despite its serious themes, the aesthetic form becomes a work of contrast where moments of genuine intimacy emerge as more impactful due to its detached backdrop. Maria has previously been interpreted as both a callous and self-absorbed character. Rodney Simard argued in his critical essay of *Play It as It Lays* that “her victimization is not due to society, but to herself. She is primarily the victim of her own ego weakness and her suffering is largely self-inflicted; she is, in terms of contemporary psychoanalytic practice, a narcissistic personality” (qtd. in Felton 68). Contrary to Simard’s argument, I believe that Maria portrays the outcome of a sensitive person being exposed to an overstimulating apathetic environment wherein emotional detachment becomes a survival mechanism to a series of tragedies. Most of the incidents in Maria’s life which ended up having a lasting emotional impact upon her, occurred outside of her control: her mother’s death, Kate’s medical challenges and partly the abortion she goes through with. These tragedies combined with a milieu where personal success ranks high and difficult topics are dismissed with a shrug creates a breeding ground for emotional turmoil.

The detached aesthetic created by such an arid and inhospitable exterior will prove to significantly impact the way Maria comes across on the page as both a victim of her environment, but also as a breath of sincerity. Therefore, the novel can be argued to derive much of its intimate quality from the raw articulation and portrayal of Maria which makes sure to capture darker aspects of the human psyche. Maria thus becomes a symbol of the aesthetic paradox. The following exploration of the novel’s interior landscape therefore entails an analysis of one of Maria’s most prominent preoccupations and motivations, namely motherhood. Additionally, it includes a look at privacy as a condition for intimacy. In the privacy of Maria’s mind, the audience is allowed access to her memories where she seeks comfort in the image of her mother. Her mind also grants access to the intimate emotional bond she forms with BZ which functions as a mirror to understanding herself.

The role of motherhood

The detachment that clouds the exterior landscape throughout the novel functions almost as a hiding place for the sensitive topics being addressed and the vulnerability that these topics can

cause. By carrying the detached aesthetic on through dialogue, imagery, writing style and even the very structure of the novel itself, it may be easy to overlook the remnants of intimacy that are clearly lingering in between the pages. The hurried pacing of the novel is another hiding place for the unexpected intimacy that allows for the reader to almost brush past this crucial element unless keenly aware and engaged with the text. The remnant of intimacy makes itself visible already in the opening pages of the novel when Maria mentions “what I play for here is Kate” (Didion 4). Maria thus explains her own stake in the game when she reveals that her own daughter is what keeps her going even as everything around her is starting to disintegrate and lose sense. It is this lingering hope and dream for life as a family that drives Maria forward and paves the way through the desolate and detached landscape. To Maria, the pursuit of happiness is already underway. To create a safe space and to be the reliable and nurturing mother her daughter needs is what she imagines her version of happiness to be. By exposing Maria’s motivation in life this early peak the reader’s emotional investment in her character and the statement is made further intimate by Didion’s choice of perspective. Earlier in this chapter of the thesis it was mentioned that Maria grew up being taught to understand the world around her as the setup of a game. Playing into this worldview that Didion has established for Maria, she makes use of metaphors alluding to the game such as the one mentioned above, when revealing vulnerability in Maria for a very intentional purpose. By utilizing these specific metaphors, Didion angles the reader’s perspective to understand the story through Maria’s eyes by using her frame of reference to explain the vulnerability that she holds but does not show to her peers. It opens the door for interpreting *Play It as It Lays* as a work that portrays the possibility for achieving peace and happiness in a desolate and hostile world.

However, despite alluding to the possibility of achieving happiness through motherhood, Didion also captures just how arduous, lonely, and emotionally taxing this pursuit can be within a landscape not fit for such motivations. The road to achieving happiness is not displayed as an easy one for Maria as she is faced with some of the devastating outcomes that motherhood may result in. One such outcome is the controversial act of abortion and the detrimental aftermath which may ensue. Carter is one of the external factors within the landscape who becomes an obstacle in Maria’s path to happiness. He forces Maria’s hand when he threatens to take Kate away from her unless she aborts the child she is carrying. This results in one of the most famous yet controversial scenes of the novel where Maria finds herself in a newspaper covered bedroom about to undergo life altering procedure. Preceding this scene, an important interaction occurs between Maria and the intermediary

bringing her to the bedroom in Encino. In an absurd and almost ironic contrast to the serious event about to take place, the intermediary absentmindedly chats on about how nice the neighborhood is for kids and his thoughts on buying a Camaro. As Maria nods along she comes to an unconventional realization.

In the past few minutes he had significantly altered her perception of reality: she saw now that she was not a woman on her way to have an abortion. She was a woman parking a Corvette outside a tract house while a man in white pants talked about buying a Camaro. There was no more to it than that (Didion 79).

This scene illustrates when Maria's emotional detachment truly solidifies as she disassociates from what is to come. Instead of seeing past the moment she grounds herself in the now thanks to the intermediary who blissfully disregards the severity of Maria's circumstance. The absurdity of this interaction cushions the step into the appalling handling of the abortion itself. "This is just induced menstruation", she could hear the doctor saying. "Nothing to have any emotional difficulties about" (Didion 82). These are some of the first few words spoken by the doctor and alerts the reader to the overall ignorant attitude concerning emotional trauma that will be carried on through the other characters in Maria's circle. The scene further enhances this disregard when the doctor asks, "Hear that scraping, Maria?" the doctor said. "That should be the sound of music to you..." (83). Throughout this process the reader witness Maria's continuing dissociation and the beginning of a haunting which will not abandon her.

Much of the narrative afterwards is dedicated to follow up this scene by illustrating how the decision to abort a child can leave a crippling psychological impact. Moments before the abortion, the role of a mother is shown to be important for Maria. Despite the nurse's protests she insists upon seeing Kate and "twice invented pretexts to run back, kiss Kate's small fat hands, tell her to be good" (Didion 72). This Maria would come to realize she did because "she expected to die" because she only believed in "punishments, swift and personal" (73). Fearing the worst possible outcome of an illegal abortion leads to Maria once again show that her priorities lie with her daughter. This vulnerable moment indicates where she seeks out connectivity. Although Kate is incapable of reciprocating the love Maria shows her due to her disability, the familial bond they share is the closest thing she has to an authentic form of intimacy with another character. Following the abortion, Maria's vulnerability grows more prominent as the story takes on an enhanced grim atmosphere. In sleep she is haunted by nightmares of clogged plumbing where the pipes contain "hacked pieces of human flesh" (97). When she is awake, she avoids newspapers because of the chilling stories of abandoned children and children in disastrous peril (100). These haunting images amongst others leave

her in a sedation like trance and visualizes the profound emotional scar the procedure left behind. The unashamed honesty with which these dark thoughts and dreams are relayed on the page reveals yet another layer to her mind for the audience to navigate.

Maria's dreams are, however, not always as grim as the ones mentioned above. In one she dreams of the life she imagines for herself and Kate in a nice, clean house on the beach where everything is serene, and they are accompanied by Maria's lover Les Goodwin. Kate does lessons and after they gather mussels together and enjoy them by the lamplight but as soon as she wakes, she realizes that the dream was tainted. Kate is not able to follow lessons, the mussels are toxic, and she is not speaking to Les. Once again in her waking state she is haunted by the consequences of her actions. All of the horrors that have occurred eventually breaks her down far enough that she ends up institutionalized. Nonetheless, despite ending up in an institution and becoming increasingly emotionally detached as an effect of the inhospitable exterior landscape she lives in, Maria embodies remarkable resilience. Whilst in there she lays out her plan for the future; "(1) get Kate, (2) live with Kate alone, (3) do some canning" (Didion 210). No matter how cruel the exterior landscape has treated her, Maria's interior landscape remains steadfast and hopeful with the focus once again returning to the future after having focused solely on the present as a manner of coping with the strain. Although motherhood brought her permanent emotional scars, it still retains its position as a beacon of hope within the interior landscape. Motherhood has also been one of the most prominent gateways into understanding Maria as a character capable of intimacy despite the detached exterior clouding the narrative.

Privacy in the interior landscape

Another angle from which one can examine the interior landscape, is through considering privacy as a condition for intimacy. On the topic of the women's movement, Paul Gleason notes in an article published for Point Magazine that "the movement's slogan, "the personal is political," struck Didion as a special kind of threat, since it imposed a sentimental storyline not only on her public life but also, and even more troublingly, on her private affairs" (Gleason). From Didion's perspective, the private and the public should be regarded as two separate entities wherein the private should not be considered as an appropriate space for others to speculate and inquire into. The weary attitude she holds towards the blurred line between public and private matters may to some degrees have influenced Didion in the creation of a character who struggles to understand how much to give of herself and what to

hold back in the search for intimacy. Based on this perspective, one may consider private space as a necessary basis for luring forward intimacy.

Nancy Yousef thought along the same line and argued that “the term intimacy refers to both what is closely held and personal and to what is deeply shared with others. Intimacy designates the sphere of the inmost, of the private, and also the realm of cherished connection and association” (12). Although Maria struggles to connect intimately with the people surrounding her, she could be argued to connect intimately with the reader as the reader becomes a witness to her innermost private memories, thoughts, and emotions. This is most evidently illustrated through the intimate relationship she once shared with her mother. Maria sets out by keeping the reader at a distance when she initially attempts to put up a detached facade regarding the facts of her life. Towards the end of the first chapter, she shares the memory of learning about her mother’s accidental demise. In the back of a taxi, Maria was reading a letter from her dad and explains that “when I hit the fact in the middle of the second paragraph I began to scream and did not work for a month after. The letter is still in my makeup box but I am careful not to read it unless I am drunk, which in my current situation is never” (Didion 9). With the characteristic detachment Didion is known for the naturally tragic incident is quickly stated with little emotional elaboration. However, by including brief yet weighted statements such as saying that she is not capable of rereading the letter unless intoxicated, she shows the first cracks in her facade and how profoundly she was impacted by the loss.

As the narrative moves past her mother’s demise, we witness Maria slowly withdrawing from the exterior landscape and increasingly retreating into her own mind. This allows for a greater exploration of the interior landscape because the vulnerability of her character grows more prominent. The chapter after she called to set up an appointment to have the abortion opens with “the next morning in the dry still heat she woke crying for her mother. She had not cried for her mother since the bad season in New York” (Didion 60). It begins to dawn on her what she is about to go through with, and the thought takes a toll on her conscious. This is further emphasized when she starts hypothesizing around the circumstances of her mother’s passing and “think about the mother dying in the desert light, the daughter unavailable in the Eastern dark” (61). It becomes clear to the reader that Maria is carrying around a great amount of guilt both for what is to come, but also for not being present and closer with her mother in the time leading up to the accident.

After the abortion is completed, she is more alone and confused than previously and as a result she grows increasingly vulnerable. When she threads on unfamiliar ground it is her

mother's presence that she longs for so dearly and she imagines "Silver wells was with her again. She wanted to see her mother" (Didion 86). Envisioning her mother becomes a calming mechanism in instances of confusion and fright. Eager to be doing something with herself she agrees to star in a new movie. Unfortunately, she learns that she is not playing the teen lead but rather a schoolteacher and horrified she gets in her car and drives until she "pulled over, put her head on the steering wheel and cried as she had not cried since she was a child, cried out loud. She cried because she was humiliated, and she cried for her mother and she cried for Kate [...]" (141). She comes to the realization that that was the day the baby was supposed to have been born and it all becomes a heavy burden for her to bear. The intimacy of their familial mother-daughter bond transcends death in the story. In the privacy of her own mind, Maria can conjure up memories and seek out her mother as a source of comfort in difficult times. Even though this relationship is not an indicator of intimacy in the traditional sense of the word, it does indicate that there is intangible intimacy to be found within the interior landscape.

There is another dynamic within the novel that provides an attempt at a different kind of intimacy, one between Maria and BZ. The two of them meet for the first time when Carter is cutting the *Angel Beach* movie and is trying to entice BZ into investing in it. Already in this initial meeting there is a tension present between the two as gazes are locked multiple times. This was likely not due to a romantic interest considering the occasional references to BZ's homosexuality, but it does come across as a type of silent mutual recognition in each other's character. When asked about his opinion on the film, BZ pinpoints that the story itself is missing; "how did Maria feel about the gangbang, the twelve cocks, did she get the sense their doing it not to her but to each other, does that interest her, you don't get that, you're missing the story" (Didion 111). This observation illustrates the drastic difference between two of the most important male characters in Maria's life. Carter's primary concern lies in his own best interest and in creating something splashy to draw people in, but the depth is absent which makes him a prime example of the detachment that clouds most of the characters in the exterior landscape. In contradiction, BZ, similarly to Maria, is sensitive to the apathy of the exterior and struggles to find his place as he searches for meaning and connection others.

In an article titled "Privacy, intimacy and personhood", Jeffery H. Reiman attempts to find a common understanding of what exactly privacy entails and how it relates to intimacy. One of the viewpoints he brings forth is a crossing of James Rachels' and Charles Fried's belief about this topic which in short concludes that "intimacy is both signaled and constituted by the sharing of information and allowing of observation not shared with or allowed to the

rest of the world” (Reiman 304). This is certainly applicable to the case of Maria and BZ. Throughout the novel there are many incidents of brief dialogue between the two where a sort of mutual understanding takes place that the other characters are not privy to comprehend. However, the reader is let in on this secret recognition through Maria’s thoughts as we follow her perspective. For instance, when all of them are in the desert to work on a new movie and Maria is simply tagging along to the location, she grows increasingly tired of the sameness of it all and the lack of purpose which she tells BZ who asks

What else are you tired of?

I don’t know.

You’re getting there, BZ said.

Getting where.

Where I am. (Didion 192)

Then a few pages later we witness a similar type of interaction between the two characters: “Tell me what matters,” BZ said. “Nothing,” Maria said” (202). Maria makes sure to specify that the likes of Carter and Helene do not understand this crucial notion of what nothing means and thus hints at the private comprehension of the world that only she and BZ shares. The intimacy in private moments is located in the dialogue itself between them and a searing honesty can be detected there. Honesty accompanied by privacy is another prominent quality necessary for creating a foundation upon which intimacy can be built. For the reader, in the instance of BZ and Maria the intimacy that emerges through the short and direct dialogue likely stems from a mutual recognition which does not rely on extensive verbal exchanges to be felt.

Yousef argues that “[...] the ethical and epistemic goal of mutual recognition that is always at stake in the imagination of intimacy as a form of sympathetic insight or achievement” (13). However, there is a discrepancy to the intimacy between them. The sympathetic insight that Yousef refers to is present to an extent most notably in ending when Maria allows for BZ to follow through with his intension of committing suicide, knowing that his wish is to escape the world. But this is where Maria and BZ’s characters take different paths despite their apparent joint struggle in the landscape. I believe that the main function of BZ’s character is to create a mirror persona who responds to the detachment of the exterior in the same sense that Maria does. This is done to show that there are different outcomes to the game even if you start out with some of the same prerequisites. Knowing BZ and losing him sparks a resilience in Maria and makes it clear to herself that she does in fact want to keep going for her chance at happiness. She appears so very detached at times, but it is in the

meeting of his death that she comes across as strong. She and BZ are capable of generating a different type of intimacy through their sameness, yet they show two opposite outcomes of existing in a chaotic and hostile world: give in or persevere. It is in their interactions that the readers of the work truly get an insight into the intimate effect of a detached aesthetic backdrop.

The Aesthetic Paradox

Iser writes that an aesthetic response is called so “because, although it is brought about by the text, it brings into play the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader, in order to make him adjust and even differentiate his own focus” (X). The author can manipulate this focus to a certain degree by using imagery to target specifically desired emotions and images to evoke in the reader’s mind. Iser proposes a theory of theme and horizon which explained in short, entails that the reader can only be involved in one view at a time which constitutes the theme. This precedes the horizon which consists of “other perspective segments” the reader has been exposed to. Iser gives the example that “if the reader is at present concerned with the conduct of the hero – which is therefore the theme of the moment – his attitude will be conditioned by the horizon of past attitudes toward the hero (...)” (97).

As we approach the ending of the novel, Didion revisits an old simile. In a scene of foreshadowing, we see Maria institutionalized and receiving a visit from her friend Helene. Helene ends up accusing her of carelessness and selfishness for not seeing the signs leading up to BZ’ suicide. But Maria did in fact see the signs and chose to allow BZ the peace he so desired. When Helene does not recognize this mercy, Maria suffers a break down and in an introspective moment thinks to herself “fuck it, I said to them all, a radical surgeon of my own life. Never discuss. Cut. In that way I resemble the only man in Los Angeles County who does clean work” (Didion 203). The metaphor “a radical surgeon of my own life” conjures up an image of a violently aggressive thought pattern targeted towards herself. This aggression is the result of a buildup of a hostile interior landscape that Maria has dwelled in for too long, causing a deterioration.

“Cut. Don’t discuss” are also effective words used to create an image of how she is slowly alienating herself after the loss of BZ. This ultimately makes her retreat even further into her own mind. Those three words are also self-reflexive of Didion’s writing aesthetic in the sense that she uses an economy of style when writing dialogue. To intimate, in the view of Lauren Berlant, “is to communicate with the sparsest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity” (281). Didion’s portrayal of intimacy falls

appropriately in line with Berlant's view. Her detached writing style which consists of straightforward descriptions of heart-rending situations and complex yet accessible illustrations of human consciousness, are what gives the writing a sense of vulnerability. Not hiding behind elaborate proclamations and descriptions lends itself to a transparent honesty which creates an aesthetic response of intimacy for the reader. The last words of the quote above will awaken Iser's horizon within the reader. The simile of "I resemble the only man in Los Angeles County who does clean work" crosses the horizon back to the first quote mentioned. This was the man who emotionlessly performed Maria's abortion. Readers will be reminded of the chilling detachment that coated Maria's stream of consciousness at the time as a mechanism of coping with the trauma her body was experiencing. Evoking this haunting image once more and this time aligning herself with this man illustrates the darkness her consciousness has moved towards.

Despite the darkness the narrative almost drowns in at the end, the final chapter does once again hint at the hope and possibility for a chance at happiness. The timeline of the first and final chapter align, and Maria hinted at the positive turn her mindset eventually takes already at the start. She says, "I try to live in the now and keep my eye on the hummingbird" (Didion 10). Then at the end, she once again returns to the image of the hummingbird and says, "I lie here in the sunlight, watch the hummingbird" (213). Fracasso notes in her essay that the hummingbird, which despite its excessive wing motions, can look completely still and "at rest in the center" (Fracasso 159). She argues that Maria is paying attention to this bird in an attempt to "emulate its upright position" (159). I believe that the image of the hummingbird can further be used as a reflection of the nightmare landscape she inhabits and the chaos that was society at the time. The wings batting mercilessly and tirelessly is the unforgiving ruthless exterior landscape which never stops. The calmly centered body is Maria and her flawed yet deeply intimate interior landscape.

The aesthetic paradox culminates in Maria as she presents as detached to and by the exterior landscape whilst simultaneously managing to depict intimacy through a vivid interior life encompassing both vulnerability and resilience. She represents both the detachment brought about by existing in a hostile exterior landscape and the absurd contradiction this detachment creates in that it pulls forward the most basic human desire for connection with other people through intimacy. Thus, *Play It as It Lays* becomes a work of dynamic contrast and Maria a symbol of the aesthetic paradox.

CHAPTER TWO

“Land of contrasts”

(Didion, *A Book of Common Prayer* 241)

Published seven years later, in 1977, *A Book of Common Prayer* has been recognized as an even more ambitious literary work than *Play It as It Lays*, evident through the enlarged cast of characters, the political nature mirroring the 60s, the foreign setting, and the intricate relationship dynamics. In this novel, the use of contrast is even more prominent and seeks to highlight various differences through the use of narrative perspective. In chapter eleven of part five we find this chapter’s introductory quote which reads “land of contrasts” (Didion, *A Book of Common Prayer* 241). This statement comes as a result of the actions in the preceding chapter where the novel’s protagonist Charlotte, who has previously been mostly shown to have a naïve romanticized notion of the country is brutally confronted with its reckless violence. The quote is not solely descriptive of this singular incident but overarchingly describes the aesthetic feel of the whole novel itself. Not only is the fictional country Boca Grande a great contrast from the California setting of Charlotte’s life prior to arriving there, but the perception of Boca Grande also varies depending on the different characters’ point of view. The protagonist Charlotte Douglas is a contrast in herself as we come to learn more conflicting aspects about the character as the narrative moves along. Most importantly, the contrast of detachment and intimacy becomes more pronounced by placing a character such as Charlotte with a stubborn hold on her values and mindset in a rough culture not easily affected by her delicacy.

A crucial difference between *A Book of Common Prayer* and *Play It as It Lays* worthy of note for the purpose of this thesis, is that detachment and intimacy are found within different spaces in the two novels. In *A Book of Common Prayer*, detachment is not limited to the exterior landscape and intimacy to the interior landscape as was the case in *Play It as It Lays*. In this novel the detached and intimate aesthetic appear more overlapping and are found almost equally in the makeup of both landscapes. The interior landscape and the exterior landscape coexist and mutually affect one another which produces a melting pool of intimacy and detachment occasionally difficult to decipher from one another. Thus, the lines blur between the physical and the psychological, the intimate and the detached. Because of this, chapter two will not follow the dual division of the previous chapter but a more singular train

of thought loosely modeled after the themes of chapter one. This will entail a look at structure to start off, then an analysis of some descriptions of the natural imagery in the exterior landscape, followed by a consideration of how nostalgia and private places frame intimacy. Then the focus will be turned to the dynamic between Grace and Charlotte and the manifestations of mother-daughter roles in the novel.

The last segment of chapter one explained Iser's strategy of understanding a text through a textual structure of 'theme and horizon'. Underlying this strategy is also his concept of the background-foreground relationship. These two strategies of comprehension somewhat intersect each other but it is functional for the analysis of *A Book of Common Prayer* to look closer at the background-foreground concept in order to understand the aesthetic representation of the dynamic of intimacy and detachment. To explain this concept Iser borrows a term from R. Posner who wrote that "the schemata of the text stand as the first code, while the aesthetic object stands as the second code, which the reader himself must produce. [...] It is mainly from this activity – the deciphering of the 'second code' – that is derived the aesthetic pleasure which the reader feels as he reads" (qtd. in Iser 92). The schemata are the preconditioned frame of reference the reader holds before entering into the reading activity. This frame of reference has been conditioned by the experiences, knowledge and cultural values and norms gathered throughout the reader's life. This encapsulates the first code and colors the outcome of the second code which means that the aesthetic object "will vary in accordance with the social and cultural code of each individual reader" (93).

Iser further writes that the social values and norms that an author selects to evoke within the text, will allude to a specific frame of reference in the reader. He clarifies that "the very process of selection inevitably creates a background-foreground relationship, with the chosen element in the foreground and its original context in the background" (Iser 96). In Didion's case, it becomes clear through looking at both her authorship and journalistic work that she was highly concerned with the direction that American values and norms were headed in as a result of the chaotic whirlwind of the sixties. In *A Book of Common Prayer*, she makes these values (individualism, freedom, pragmatism, optimism, patriotism etc.) a prominent feature of the novel by setting them up against the foreign setting of Boca Grande. The character of Charlotte, as one of the two North Americans there, portrays many of these values throughout the narrative. Thus, she becomes a striking contrast in a landscape which for the most part opposes the values she embodies. This highlights for the reader a contextual background made up of traditional American values. The foreground then becomes concerned with the manner in which they are portrayed and how this affects the overarching aesthetic

reception in the reader as a response to processing the background. Didion chooses to present these themes through a layered experience of detachment and intimacy which leaves the aesthetic a paradox. Iser argues that in a literary work, the selection of social norms is functionally

prompted by different perspectives within the literary text and the interaction between perspectives is continuous, because they are not separated distinctly from one another, and they do not run parallel either: authorial comment, dialogue between characters, developments of the plot, and the positions marked out for the reader – all these are interwoven in the text and offer a constantly shifting constellation of views (Iser 96).

These various modes of perspectives will all be discussed further in the following analysis where authorial comment, dialogue and plot all play their part in creating the aesthetic paradox of detachment and intimacy. The emergence of the aesthetic object in the foreground will be returned to toward the conclusion.

Structuring *A Book of Common Prayer*

This concept of a background-foreground relationship and how it is made more intricate through overlapping perspectives is especially applicable to *A Book of Common Prayer* due to its interesting play with narration and the detrimental effect Didion's choice of narrative angle has upon the outcome and aesthetic of the narrative. The novel opens with the line "I will be her witness" which situates the narrative framework straight from the onset (Didion 11). The sole narrator of the novel, the "I", is Grace Strasser-Mendana who is an American woman that "married into one of the three or four solvent families in Boca Grande" (18). This position makes her privy to knowledge of the ever-changing power dynamic that shapes the country. Additionally, it puts her into contact with Charlotte Douglas, the "her" of the opening statement and the central character of the novel. Grace places the narrative's focus on telling Charlotte's story but begins by briefly sharing some personal information about herself and her own experience of Boca Grande. Afterwards she addresses the reader: "I tell you these things about myself only to legitimize my voice" and she further explains that "it does not matter who "I" am: "the narrator" plays no motive role in this narrative, nor would I want to" (21). However, despite her own claims to not being of importance to the narrative, one cannot deny that the reader also comes to know Grace as well. By sharing Charlotte's story, she explicitly reveals certain facts about herself and through her analysis of Charlotte she also implicitly uncovers parallels and contrasts between the two of them leading the reader to gain

a more profound understanding of both. The choice to angle the narrative of Charlotte's story from the perspective of Grace allows for an intimate gaze into both women's challenges with creating meaningful connections with others and with pursuing happiness and peace in a tense society on the brink of destruction.

Whereas *Play It as It Lays* is a shorter novel with sparse writing and dialogue where much is left communicated to the reader in between the lines, *A Book of Common Prayer* on the other hand employs a more elaborate and literal writing style throughout. Despite these noticeable differences in the structure of the writing, the characteristically raw and direct style that Didion favors is carried on in both works. *A Book of Common Prayer* is a longer novel divided into six main sections where each section is of varying length and is further divided into smaller chapters. The narrative does jump back and forth in time and in between memories but a brief summary that highlights some broad strokes of the plot and important events that occur in the novel will follow to provide some context for the analysis.

The first section introduces Grace who previously worked as an anthropologist before she lost faith in her practice and decided to get married and take up the study of biochemistry. Her background in science appears to greatly influence the manner in which she interprets the people around her and specifically Charlotte. The reader also comes to learn of the tragic fates awaiting the two main characters. Grace is suffering from pancreatic cancer and expects to die shortly, and it is revealed that Charlotte will die at some future point in the narrative but not by which cause. Going into the second and longest section we learn that the cause for her demise is murder. Additionally, we get a glimpse into the tragic backstory of Charlotte's daughter Marin who disappears after participating in a terrorist attack involving both the bombing of the lobby in the Transamerica building and a plane hijacking. The house on California Street becomes an important setting for the plot. This is where Leonard is introduced more thoroughly as Charlotte's husband, and we encounter her ex-husband Warren as well. The third section is one of the shortest and details Charlotte's travels before coming to Boca Grande. These were places she went to in search of Marin. The only exception is Merida, the last location and where Charlotte takes her baby to die. The baby girl had suffered complications and did not live past two weeks as a result.

In the fourth section it is revealed that Warren is dying of an unknown illness only referred to as bad blood and the story delves deeper into the abusive relation between Warren and Charlotte. When Charlotte learns that he is not only abusive toward her but also toward the other woman they are currently travelling with she finally musters up the courage to leave him. As she catches a flight to get away from Warren her water breaks. We already learned of

the baby's short life in the previous section but here the reader gets a more vulnerable glimpse into the devastating state of shock Charlotte goes into after grappling with too much heartbreak from both the realization of Warren's character and the loss of her child. The fifth section shows Grace speculating as to how these previous events all could have contributed to Charlotte's attraction to Boca Grande despite its growing state of political unrest. Grace reminisces back to Charlotte's first encounter with many of the players in the political scheme such as Gerardo, Antonio and Victor who all played a part in the tremor to the country and to some degree upon her tragic fate. But before the escalating violence ensues, Grace makes note of the good efforts she witnessed Charlotte made for the country. Her work at the clinic which entailed both administering birth control and cholera vaccines, her plans for creating entertainment and improvement in various areas of need showed some of her great initiative to assimilate into the landscape. Lastly it details Warren's passing and Charlotte's somewhat detached reaction. The sixth and final section spans only nine pages and provides an account of what occurred over the course of a few days that was eventually remembered as the October Violence. On day eight Charlotte was detained at a barricade near Capilla del Mar after showing her passport. The following day she was shot in the back and thrown on the lawn of the American Embassy. By Grace's account she was a patriot worthy of the honor of an American flag to be draped across her casket, sadly this was only symbolized by a frail printed children's t-shirt. Grace's regret was that nothing ended as it was supposed to, she had "not been the witness [she] wanted to be" (Didion 272).

It was previously mentioned that contrast is a central aspect of the novel which also makes itself evident through the contrasting tone of voice that evolves from the beginning of the narrative to the end. An alteration in the aesthetic tone occurs when in the introduction to Grace in the first pages she comes across as detached from her own role in the narrative. Simultaneously, her tone is confident and factual in her initial analysis of Charlotte's story as one of delusion wherein she herself is to be considered a viable witness due to her credibility after having "been for fifty of [her] sixty years a student of delusion" (Didion 11). This contrasts greatly to how she comes across to the reader in the closing chapters of the novel. Grace concludes in the final sentence "I have not been the witness I wanted to be" (272). The tone has then changed to reflective and almost melancholic. After having followed and relayed Charlotte's life story it appears that the vulnerability that comes from such an intimate act influences the aesthetic rendering. It appears that detachment allows for self-assuredness whereas intimacy leads to a clouding of one's vision and capability of objective interpretation. Grace's evolving emotional attachment to Charlotte shows how her complex interior

landscape can be influential upon the representation of the exterior landscape through the dynamic movement of a third person limited narrative angle. The final sentence mirrors the opening one which is likely done with the intention of having the reader's mind cross Iser's theory of horizon back towards the opening line where she confidently stated, "I will be her witness" (11). There is no doubt that narrative perspective then becomes a crucial theme of great impact upon the representation of the story. Grace highlights her detachment by claiming no motive role in the beginning only to realize that the story is entirely based upon her subjective interpretation of Charlotte and what she heard from others. The very choice to tell Charlotte's story and to angle it from a sympathetic standpoint is indicative of Grace's motive role. "I am told, and so she said. I heard later. According to her passport. It was reported. Apparently" are statements resonating in her mind in the conclusion (272). This does not qualify her as an unreliable narrator, but rather makes her conscious of her own limitations in attempting to accurately retell Charlotte's story. To the best of her ability, she tries to remain detached and factual such as the nature of a scientist calls for, but her realization is that one cannot share another person's life story without becoming emotionally involved.

The title *A Book of Common Prayer* is an additional piece that is telling of the intimate quality to the narrative structure. Didion was raised as an Episcopalian and thus the inspiration for the title was indubitably drawn upon from the traditional liturgical prayer book *The Book of Common Prayer*. The title alerts the reader to some of the religious connotations to be found within the story such as Grace referring to herself as a 'witness' which is a prevalent term used in religious texts of someone being present for an important event. When explaining the exact nature of the story she is about to tell, Grace prefaces that she wishes to "call this my own letter from Boca Grande. No. Call it what I said. Call it my witness to Charlotte Douglas" (Didion 16). By prefacing her role as a witness with the main focus placed upon Charlotte rather than the country Boca Grande, Grace tells us indirectly that she considers Charlotte's life as an important story worth sharing. The title referencing religion is more explicitly detailed early in the narrative when Grace relays a few details she learned about Charlotte as a child. Particularly she learned that through her comfortable upbringing, Charlotte would in her prayers "routinely asked that "it" turn out all right, "it" being unspecified and all inclusive, and she had been an adult for some years before the possibility occurred to her that "it" might not" (Didion 59). The naïve angling of Charlotte's childhood prayers versus the realization of what the future holds foreshadows the darkness to come. In light of this, the title can in a more literal sense indicate that the narrative becomes Grace's prayer for Charlotte's memory.

The dichotomy of the exterior landscape

In *Play It as It Lays* the physical landscape contributes largely to the detached aesthetic backdrop of the novel and is noted for being both arid and hostile. The physical landscape of the fictional country Boca Grande in *A Book of Common Prayer* is similarly described by Grace as being inhospitable with “no hills, only the flat bush and the lifeless sea” and she elaborates how “the bush and the sea do not reflect the light but absorb it, suck it in, then glow morbidly” (Didion 14). These descriptions of the physical environment induce a hostile effect working to create a desire for distance in the reader. The reader as well as the fictional inhabitants of Boca Grande are further alienated from the place when Grace explains the inner workings of the country as one with no history and responsibility, “every time the sun falls on a day in Boca Grande that day appears to vanish from local history” (14). Such strong environmental imagery coupled with what could be considered a case of collective amnesia surely would elicit the same detached aesthetic backdrop as seen in *Play It as It Lays*, however, there is an intimate effect also seeping through the exterior landscape brought about by Charlotte. Her character challenges the detached backdrop and works to invite the paradoxical effect of intimacy into the landscape through her naïve ignorance yet optimistic imagination of “what Boca Grande could become” (15). Through a deluded perspective of the place, she chooses to detect “the spirit of hope” (15). This seemingly willful ignorance to the reality of Boca Grande’s harsh exterior is noted by Grace as a delusion on Charlotte’s part. But can there be intimacy in delusion?

Before exploring this question further, it is important to underline how descriptions of the exterior landscape in some instances function as a backdrop that mirrors the action of the plot’s dynamic development and foreshadows the movements of the social and political climate. One of the first descriptions of Boca Grande that one encounters is through Grace who disagrees with Charlotte’s perception where “she characterized Boca Grande as a land of contrasts. Boca Grande is not a land of contrasts. On the contrary Boca Grande is relentlessly the same” (Didion 13). This statement is found in the beginning of the narrative when the pace is slow, and the political and social climate is still stable with no hint of turmoil on the horizon which is in line with Grace’s description of a land that is simply “the same”. Grace’s tone of aloof nonchalance that she uses to describe Boca Grande here, mirrors the overarching unchanging nature that coats the scenes in the early stages of the narrative. In line with the idea that the whole novel is a work of contrast, Grace will come to change her own opinion on this statement later as the disorder of the social and political climate intensifies to a volatile

turning point. The reader will be alerted to the changing currents in the landscape slightly ahead of time through descriptions of natural imagery. These descriptions become a method for building up the tone that will hang over the changing pace of the plot.

Similarly to *Play It as It Lays*, *A Book of Common Prayer* evokes Baumbach's metaphor of a nightmare landscape when he hints at the exterior's toxicity which impacts both the characters' lives and the reader's image of the setting. Grace explains the state of the landscape in the middle of the narrative by saying that "fevers relapse here. Bacteria proliferate. Termites eat the presidential palace, rust eats my Oldsmobile" (Didion 155). This assertion seems to indicate that there is no hope for the nightmare landscape they inhabit, however, the following statement alludes to a shift in the pace and a turning point in the narrative. Grace contemplates that "everything here changes and nothing appears to. There is no perceptible wheeling of the stars in their courses, (...) only the amniotic stillness in which transformations are constant" (155). A central theme in the novel is motherhood which is a primary occupation for Charlotte and the role Grace mimics in her relation to her. This dynamic will be explored further later but for now it is of note that it leaves the work shrouded in explicit and implicit metaphors pertaining to motherhood. The word choice 'amniotic' is therefore not coincidental. Amnion is "a thin membrane forming a closed sac about the embryos or fetuses of reptiles, birds, and mammals and containing the amniotic fluid" ("Amnion"). What is interesting about Grace referring to the landscape as being in an amniotic stillness then, is that it makes one think of a state of passive peacefulness. However, by adding the contrasting image of transformations occurring within this steadfast stillness, it appears to indicate that the exterior landscape of Boca Grande may be deceptive of its own underlying dynamic current.

Didion keeps the reader attuned to changes about to occur ahead of time through these descriptions of the exterior landscape. When seemingly detached and factually stating "volcanoes about to erupt transmit for days or weeks before their convulsion a signal called "the harmonic tremor" she leaves a hint that the social and political climate in Boca Grande is about to take a volatile turn (Didion 193). She further notes how this manifests specifically in Boca Grande by exemplifying that "the postal rates begin to fluctuate mysteriously. There is a mounting mania for construction..." and all this signals that "a game is underway, the "winner" being the player who lands his marker in the Ministry of Defense" (193). What follows this change of tension in the narrative is an account of the moments leading up to the October Violence. For Grace in particular this appears to awaken an increased sense of what is at stake which impacts her thoughts and actions to be more emotionally driven. For the reader,

this elicits a change in the detached aesthetic that has taken up much of the backdrop and tunes into the more intimate realization of what is at risk.

Looking back at the contrast of the calm that Grace was accustomed to in the beginning of the narrative versus how drastically her world had been uprooted at the end of the year that Charlotte arrived, she “recall[s] it now as a year when we actually had “seasons.” Definite “changes.” Changes not in the weather but in the caliber of the harmonic tremor” (Didion 237). The harmonic tremor was a term used earlier in the narrative to alert the reader to the oncoming change in Boca Grande. Therefore, Grace is making note of how drastically different the country changed as a result not only of Charlotte’s arrival, but of the violent political conflict that ensued, and which Charlotte found herself a victim of. Even her death was hinted at by the descriptive language used in the moments leading up to it. Charlotte was “seeming to concentrate on the scarf as if oblivious to the potholes in the sidewalk and the places where waste ran into the gutters” (267). Charlotte’s seemingly obliviousness and naivete has at this point become a recurring characteristic in the narrative. Juxtaposing this image of innocence to blemishes in the exterior landscape such as potholes and gutters reflects the coming tragedy of Charlotte’s murder as an innocent figure caught at the mercy of an unjust hostile landscape. Grace tells of an exterior landscape describing the state of Boca Grande following the major political tremor: “Today we are clearing some coastal groves by the slash-and-burn and a pall of smoke hangs over Boca Grande. The smoke covers everything. The smoke obscures the light” (271). Despite making the effort to clear some of the damaged exterior, the smoke that covers everything and obscures the light is indicative of the lasting impact this tragedy will have and how the nightmare landscape is still very much intact.

Most of these descriptions concerning the exterior landscape have worked to uphold a detached aesthetic. However, the exterior landscape in *A Book of Common Prayer* contains both aspects of the paradox of detachment and intimacy. Despite the many dreary images there are some descriptions of the exterior landscape in the novel that invite the interaction of a different perspective. This is one that angles the narrative in a more forgiving and arguably intimate manner. This perspective comes from Charlotte who considers her “story one of passion” whereas Grace believes it to be “one of delusion” (Didion 11). Like mentioned in the previous chapter, discussing the exterior landscape does not only encompass environmental descriptions, but a crucial feature of the exterior makeup is also the characters inhabiting it and how their actions impact the interior landscape of the protagonists. Charlotte’s story was already consumed by tragedy before arriving in Boca Grande, but it was there that her life

took a fatal turn as a result, in part, of the actions of others. Author and academic Victor Strandberg explores what he calls a ‘missing center’ in Charlotte and discusses how passion and delusion actively become a part of her center throughout the narrative (226-227).² He brings up an important observation that Charlotte’s “delusions” originate (...) in her upbringing as the archetypal all-American girl dedicated to the quintessential middle-class ideal of self-improvement (“improving one’s world and one’s self simultaneously”)” (Strandberg 231). This interpretation of the origin of her delusion, he concludes, explains why Charlotte is drawn to Boca Grande. He argues that “Charlotte finds in Boca Grande only one outlet for her norteamericana “delusions”: she “takes care of” Boca Grande” (232). This notion of Charlotte “taking care of” Boca Grande makes a previously mentioned question arise; can there be intimacy in delusion?

Despite being faced with the extreme cruelty of the exterior landscape on several occasions, Charlotte chooses to remain in Boca Grande which she has developed an intimacy to. When the country is on the brink of what will come to be known as the October violence, as most are fleeing for their lives and Leonard and Grace are begging her to leave, Charlotte concludes that “I walked away from places all my life and I’m not going to walk away from here” (Didion 256). When she struggles to feel connected to the people around her, she appears to seek intimacy through an attachment to Boca Grande instead. She is on multiple instances observed by Grace as working tirelessly to better the place and grow roots there. Grace writes that Charlotte “volunteered to give inoculations, and did, for thirty-four hours without sleeping” during a cholera epidemic (215). When a bomb blows up one wing of Charlotte’s office building, Leonard is baffled by the news that she risks her life and goes charging in whilst “the ceiling’s still falling, she gets three people out, she’s a heroine, she’s mad as hell, she’s shouting ‘Goddamn you all’ the whole time” (250). These are just a couple of instances where Charlotte shows her dedication to Boca Grande and eventually, she refuses to leave even as the country is spiraling further into its state as a landscape of nightmare. Forming this type of attachment to a country and using it as a substitute for human intimacy is starting to blur the line between the physical and imaginary.

Drawing on Lauren Berlant, Eggers and Pyykkö write in their article on intimacy and detachment in the postmodern novel that intimacy “denotes a “utopian” vision which operates in the interstices between fantasy and reality. For Berlant, intimacy does not constitute a

² For further analysis on the use of delusion in the novel, refer to Strandberg’s article “Passion and Delusion in *A Book of Common Prayer*”.

feeling or specific kind of emotional attachment, (...) but “an aesthetic, an aesthetic of attachments” (qtd. in Eggers and Pyykkö 8). By taking this interpretation of intimacy as a point of departure, whether others view Charlotte’s insistent attachment to Boca Grande as delusion or not becomes irrelevant. In her fantasy, there is an intimacy present that is noted on the page which in turn produces an aesthetic of intimacy. The reader is then left with the conflicting paradox that is a detached backdrop marked by the hostility of the exterior landscape, and the intimate aesthetic it produces through its effect upon the interior landscape that is Charlotte’s delusion. When she is given the last opportunity to leave the chaos of Boca Grande, she once more prefaces that she cannot. Gerardo desperately claims that she does not realize what she is doing. To that Charlotte simply responds, “I realize (...) I do realize” (Didion 265). It is not explicitly written what this realization refers to, but it may be indicating that it is not delusion on her part at all, but that she is in fact aware of the dangerous place that she leaves herself in. It was a conscious choice to defy everyone’s persistence and to remain in the only place she still felt connected to. Grace’s final musings supports this when she concludes “all I know is that when I think of Charlotte Douglas walking in the hot night wind towards the lights at the Capilla del Mar I am less and less certain that this story has been one of delusion. Unless the delusion was mine” (272). Charlotte sees a possibility for belonging to Boca Grande despite Grace’s continued insistence that the exterior landscape poses great danger. When Grace comes to the realization that perhaps Charlotte is not delusional after all but is in fact aware of the risk and chooses to defy it, the intimate attachment Charlotte forms to the landscape is given stronger merit. An intimate effect can then be said to be possible to achieve through depictions of delusion.

The house on California Street

The previous chapter touched on privacy as a possible condition for inviting an intimate effect into the narrative. It was noted that in *Play It as It Lays* the experience of privacy is limited to the mind and memories of Maria’s interior landscape. In *A Book of Common Prayer* on the other hand, the intimate effect emanating from privacy manifests in physical spaces in the exterior landscape such as the previously mentioned Boca Grande, but also in what Charlotte refers to as the house on California Street. This is where Charlotte lived along with her husband Leonard and her daughter Marin up until Marin’s radicalization and subsequent disappearance. Charlotte remains there for a short while afterward but most of the story follows her after she leaves the house on California Street in San Francisco to travel with Warren in the hope of finding Marin and at last, she ends up in Boca Grande. Although most

of the narrative is set in other places than the house on California Street, it is continually referenced throughout. It becomes a beacon and a vital element to the makeup of the exterior landscape. Through Charlotte's desperate need for stability after her story is uprooted into one of chaos, the house on California Street becomes a repeated symbol for refuge and solace in her interior landscape.

The first mention of the house on California Street situates the place in a positive light through Charlotte evoking a fond memory. She tells Grace that "she had just woken up one morning in the house on California Street and decided to fly Marin to Copenhagen" so that she could see the Tivoli gardens (Didion 47). At this early stage, the memory makes the house seem like a place of possibilities where Charlotte could wake up and choose to spend an entire day with her daughter if she pleases. However, this perfect ideal is quickly shattered when reality comes knocking on the door and on "the morning the FBI men first came to the house on California Street Charlotte did not understand why" (58). The sanctuary of Charlotte's private space is invaded, and she struggles to reconcile her perfect view of Marin with the extreme reality of her actions. The sentence marks the turning point of Charlotte's up until then mostly comfortable and sheltered existence. The turning point is further visually enhanced when "after the FBI men left that morning Charlotte went upstairs to Marin's room" where she describes the room by the use of words such as "pristine," "unchanged," and "untouched" (67). At first this familiarity of the room may appear as a positive when one considers how much Charlotte cherishes the house and the memories it holds and considering that she likely needed something to ground her after being shocked by the devastating news of Marin. However, she then notices that "all that Marin had removed from the room was every picture, every snapshot, every clipping or class photograph, which contained her own image" (67). This becomes a very clear visual indication of Marin abandoning the house, her mother, and her sheltered past. To Charlotte, the room remains the same as she has always remembered but the soul of the house, her precious Marin, is visually and physically gone and only Charlotte's memory of her remains in the essence. The house on California Street then manifests as a site in the exterior landscape that holds the paradox of detachment and intimacy.

To a degree, the house on California Street is also an integral influence upon the interior landscape since much of the house's importance is tied to Charlotte's idea of what the house represents. During the story it becomes abundantly clear that Marin is the center of Charlotte's life. The house on California Street is one of many telling marks in the landscape of this aspect to the story. Charlotte explains that the reason behind why she tries to cover for

Marin is “to keep Marin from the harm outside” (Didion 65). As the ongoing investigation into Marin’s disappearance continues and Leonard becomes aware that the telephone calls in the house are being listened in on, he expresses his wish for Charlotte to leave the house and stay with friends. Disagreeing she says, “I don’t want to leave the house” and insists that “I have to be here when Marin calls” (71). The only problem with her refusal is that if she calls, Charlotte will know her location and be unable to claim unawareness if placed under oath. However, as she mentioned earlier, she will do anything to keep Marin out of harm’s way so when Leonard continues his attempt to reason with her, she simply responds “I guess I’ll just wait here and perjure myself (...) And then hire you” (71). The motivation to keep Marin safe seems to always be at heart in every choice and action that Charlotte takes no matter the cost. Even as she leaves behind the house on California Street, her decision of where to relocate is made with Marin in mind. When she arrived in Boca Grande “she believed that she had located herself at the very cervix of the world, the place through which a child lost to history must eventually pass” (197). This reiterates the notion that Charlotte forms attachment to places such as the house on California Street and Boca Grande because she is always longing for Marin and travels to these places in the vain hope that they might be reunited. Using the term cervix once again underlines Charlotte’s desperate need for maintaining her role as a mother. Her interior landscape weaves its way into the exterior and endows upon it an intangible importance as markers of intimacy.

Nevertheless, the house on California Street is not only a space to wait for Marin. There is an additional level of sentimental nostalgia attached to the house that makes it become an intimate constant that is revisited on several occasions. Whenever Charlotte is facing an emotional struggle, she seeks refuge and solace in the nostalgia that the house offers. When she is made aware that Warren is sick and likely to die shortly, she escapes into thoughts of the house and imagines that

in the empty house on California Street in San Francisco it would be three o’clock in the morning. The night light in Marin’s bathroom would be burning just as she had left it. The crossed spots on the Pollock in the dining room would be burning just as she had left them. Leonard would have gone on by now from Miami to Havana via Mexico City. Leonard was in Havana and Marin was gone. Warren was either dying or not dying and Marin was gone (Didion 159-160).

Even though initial remembrance brings her a brief sense of stillness and stability in that everything can be expected to be found exactly as it was left, reality reels her back in, reminding her of the fleeting presence of the people closest to her. Grace also takes note of

Charlotte's comfort in the imagining of the house. She writes that four o'clock appeared to be a hard time of day for Charlotte where she would start remembering things and how "she would sometimes call me up at four o'clock and tell me what she was remembering." Sometimes it would be "those crossed spots on the Pollock in the dining room of the house on California Street" and how they were either "too bright" or "too exposed" but "she could not determine which" (221). Even whilst picking apart the elements of the house she did not like it is likely not a coincidence that these are the images she brings up when she faces the time of day which she struggles most with.

Charlotte is not the only character with a sentimental attachment to the house on California Street. When Leonard explains the circumstances of Warrens demise, he adds that "he had a letter in his coat with the number on California Street" (Didion 246). It is but a brief hint at Warren's mind also tracing back to the house. For him, the house may have represented the source of a constant center in the world where he could locate the only person that seems to have mattered to him, namely Charlotte. Charlotte's daughter is also shown to have formed an underlying attachment to the place. When Grace brings up the topic of the Tivoli gardens to Marin to see if she remembered them "she broke exactly as her mother must have broken the morning the FBI first came to the house on California Street" (260). For Warren and Marin these instances may not be indicative of solely a direct attachment to the house itself, but through these unguarded moments, Charlotte is unveiled as the obvious connection to the house and its nostalgic effect upon other characters and the narrative. The house on California Street becomes a recurring image of an interwoven paradox that manifests itself in both the exterior and the interior landscape.

The dynamic of Grace and Charlotte

There is a distinct difference between the portrayal of men and women in *A Book of Common Prayer* and consequently a difference in how this affects the intersection of the exterior and interior makeup of the landscape. The men come across for the most part as one dimensional, but they significantly contribute to inducing a hostile quality in the exterior landscape through their bold language and careless actions. Creating such an unpleasant exterior environment, in turn, affects the interior landscape of particularly Grace and Charlotte. These two women find themselves at the center of the action. One might imagine that this would leave a crippling influence but in Grace and Charlotte's case it does not simply generate a detached or intimate aesthetic, instead it generates the aesthetic paradox where the two overlap. The introduction brought up some of the values contributing to Iser's notion of a background working to guide

the aesthetic object in the foreground, in this case the paradox of detachment and intimacy. These values are shown, not only through their status as women, but in their status as foreigners. Some of the first facts Grace acquires about Charlotte upon her arrival is from her passport which says “Nationality NORTEAMERICANA. Type of Visa TURISTA. Occupation MADRE” (Didion 22). This marks out two facts which become crucial to the dynamic of Grace and Charlotte and their place in the landscape: norteamericana and Madre. Charlotte is clearly noted as a foreigner but Grace, despite marrying into a native family and having lived there for decades, still gets called “de afuera, an outsider” (56). The theme of motherhood is represented in different capacities, mainly through Charlotte’s role as a mother to Marin and the child that died of complications, but it is also represented in the mother role that Grace evokes in her relationship to Charlotte.

Both Grace and Charlotte were born and raised in America which has conditioned their way of thinking and values to coincide with American codes. Didion utilizes their foreigner status to highlight these values in the background so that the foreground can be guided in the direction of the aesthetic paradox. Charlotte for one shows great capability for individualism through self-reliance in what to the natives is considered a shocking sight. Whilst accompanying Grace and Elena to a local picnic “she grabbed up a chicken on the run and snapped the vertebrae in its neck (...) the men were killing chickens with machetes but Charlottes kill was clean. There was no blood” (Didion 49). The strangeness of a woman, and even a foreigner doing this is highlighted by the chapter ending in the sentence “nationality norteamericana” (50). Already in this early scene the reader is given evidence that Charlotte’s American background is a cause for singularity in the landscape. This is not the only instance where she shows proclivity for taking care of herself by being pragmatic. Grace notes that although Charlotte “grew faint when she noticed the blue arterial veins in her wrists [and] could not swim in clouded water” she could surprisingly “skin an iguana for stew” and “make the necessary incision in the trachea of an OAS field worker who was choking on a piece of stake.” These are only a few instances “suggestive of the ambiguous signals Charlotte tended to transmit” (61). The natural efficiency with which she is described to take these actions that most would be emotionally hesitant to even attempt, signals the first hint at detachment embodied in Charlotte.

However, it is not only Charlotte that is illustrated as a singularity in the landscape of Boca Grande. Grace has pursued a degree in anthropology and done extensive work before later on retiring from the field and taking up the “amateur study of biochemistry” (Didion 12). This qualifies her to make the observation that certain values she has acquired by growing up

in a foreign country makes her a taboo within the landscape of Boca Grande. She explains that “I have observed taboo systems in enough cultures to know precisely how Victor feels about me in my laboratory: Victor distrusts the scientific method, and my familiarity with it gives me a certain power over him (...) in my laboratory I am therefore particularly taboo” (209). The power balance between men and women is more traditional in Boca Grande which explains why Grace’s high intelligence establishes her as a contrast that makes others like Victor cautious. He appears to be, like other men in the landscape, exceptionally weary of foreigners. Even Charlotte does not escape his criticism. Disgusting, filthy and crude are words he uses to describe her, “the kind of woman who could kill a chicken with her bare hands” (212). His reaction elicits a realization to Grace that “it occurred to me that morning that Charlotte Douglas was acquiring certain properties of taboo” (212). The unbothered tone Grace employs when recalling this conversation with Victor allows for her to come across as equally detached as Charlotte to the strangeness that their foreign mindset brings into the landscape. Highlighting the foreign properties that Charlotte and Grace display against the landscape of Boca Grande allows for an interesting contrast to emerge.

Although Grace and Charlotte physically portray some detachment to the effects of the exterior, they equally portray the emotional impact it has on their interior landscape. Their role as women and mothers becomes a central meeting point where intimacy prevails. Nancy Yousef draws from intimacy a condition she coined as “being-alone-together” which Eggers and Pyykkö denotes as the “unbridgeable gap between an undisclosable inner world and the profound need to find communion with others with equally unreachable depths” (Eggers and Pyykkö 7). The intimacy between Grace and Charlotte stems from precisely this notion of being alone together. Both are depicted with an air of emotional distance from the other characters inhabiting the landscape. The people that they did have an intimate connection to are gone. Both are separated from their husbands, Charlotte by choice and Grace by death. But there is an even deeper emotional severance that works to connect the two women through their joint experience. Grace says “one thing I share with Charlotte: I lost my child” (Didion 20). Her child, Gerardo, is not physically gone but the intimate attachment is not there anymore, and their bond has evolved into one of acquaintances. Charlotte, on the other hand, “lost one child to history and another to complications” (11). The traditional family structure has crumbled and instead they turn to each other in the pursuit of an intimate connection that can be understood as a desire for “being-alone-together”.

In her early days in Boca Grande Charlotte takes to writing pages late into the night where “she had tried to rid herself of her dreams, and these dreams seemed to deal only with

sexual surrender and infant death, commonplaces of the female obsessional life. We all have the same dreams” concludes Grace (Didion 57). This establishes them as sharing a connection simply due to them being women, however this later morphs into a connection that imitates the relation of a mother and daughter as the narrative moves along. In many of Didion’s works, the theme of motherhood is a driving force of the novel and a preoccupation that colors both the interior and exterior landscape. When Grace writes about her and Charlotte’s interactions it often evokes this imagery by writing for instance “she said it as a child might” and “I felt as if I was talking to a child” (46, 235). The imagery of the mother-daughter relation is a recurring concept that Grace uses in her narration of Charlotte’s story.

Grace also shows genuine care for her such as a mother might. When Gerardo takes Charlotte out for the day and she returns “her face entirely grave,” Grace instinctively knows that something went wrong (Didion 238). Charlotte is not shown as someone who often openly displays emotion in the narrative so seeing her upset triggers an instinctive motherly concern in Grace. When Grace asks what happened she recalls that “Charlotte looked at me” and said “unopened crates of Lederle vaccines, she said. Cholera. It ran on the street when they shot up the crates” (239). Charlotte is visibly shaken and appears to retort to an air of detachment as a coping mechanism when she prefaces that they were using M-16’s. “I happen to know about M-16’s because Marin had one when she went to Utah, Charlotte said. Charlotte always referred to the day Marin hijacked the I-1011 and burned it on the Bonneville Salt Flats as when Marin went to Utah” Grace explains (239-240). This indicates some trauma lying dormant in Charlotte’s mind from learning about Marin’s actions which caused her to retreat into an air of detachment regarding her reaction to the incident. Grace’s motherly instinct to protect Charlotte from the cruelty of the exterior leads her to resonate with the motherhood imagery once again. She claims, “I think I loved Charlotte in that moment as a parent loves the child who has just fallen from a bicycle, met a pervert, lost a prize, come up in any way against the hardness of the world” (239). This hardness is only the beginning of the effect that the exterior has upon Charlotte as it eventually results in her demise. To honor Charlotte and her patriotism, Grace wishes to drape an American flag across her casket but there was not one to be found in all of Boca Grande. Instead, she notes that “I bought a child’s t-shirt in the gift shop at the airport. This shirt was printed like an American flag” (270). Once more, the image of motherhood recurs.

The role of motherhood does however not always elicit only intimate connections but can also draw upon experiences of detachment. Although Charlotte claims that she and Marin were “inseparable,” she and Warren were “inseparable,” and she and Leonard were also

“inseparable,” Grace reveals that this was not always the reality: “there had been the usual days and weeks and even months when Charlotte had been separated from everyone she knew by a grayness so dense that the brightness of even her own child in the house was galling, insupportable” (Didion 111). Grace further explains that “Charlotte had no idea that anyone else had ever been afflicted by what she called the separateness” (111-112). The separateness that Charlotte describes is arguably synonymous with an experience of detachment to the people around her. As Grace notes, this occasionally even forms a detachment from her own child who is usually Charlotte’s main source of happiness. By Grace prefacing that Charlotte is unaware of the fact that this is an emotional occurrence that others experience as well, she implicitly reveals that she recognizes herself in the separateness that Charlotte is describing. Intimacy is often depicted to reside in familial bonds in the narrative. With this scene, Didion illustrates that intimacy is of a complicated nature where there is also room for the occasional detachment. This detachment weaves its way in and out of the interior landscape at various points in life due to both exterior and interior factors. The reader does not learn what exterior or interior factors caused Charlotte’s experience of detachment in this scene but in the end, as Charlotte is dying, “she cried not for God but for Marin” (268). This indicates that her heart and mind will always lie in the bond she has formed with her child despite the occasional sense of separateness. As such, the foreground becomes enriched by the paradox of detachment and intimacy through its dynamic shape.

CONCLUSION

“I am talking here about being a child of my time”

(Didion, *The White Album* 205)

The aesthetic motif

In this thesis, Wolfgang Iser’s theory of theme and horizon and background-foreground was drawn upon to aid in the analysis of how the aesthetic paradox of detachment and intimacy might affect the reader response. Iser writes of the background-foreground relation that it is “a basic structure by means of which the strategy of the text produces a tension that sets off a series of different actions and interactions, and that is ultimately resolved by the emergence of the aesthetic object” (Iser 95). The aesthetic object in this case is the aesthetic paradox of detachment and intimacy, but a compelling aspect to the paradox lies in its dynamic presence in both narratives. The paradox manifests itself in various descriptions, characters, and symbols throughout and carries a repetitive form. Thus, calling it an aesthetic object does not seem to encapsulate its important place within the aesthetics of the narrative. Rather than referring to the emergence of the paradox of detachment and intimacy as an aesthetic object as in Iser’s words then, I argue that through its behavior in this reading of the two novels it seems more fitting to describe the paradox as an aesthetic motif in Didion’s writing.

The aesthetic paradox is represented differently in the two works which is why the terms exterior and interior landscapes were introduced to more accurately locate where this aesthetic characteristic dominates. The paradox in *Play It as It Lays* occurs as a distinctive separation wherein detachment is represented in the exterior landscape and intimacy in the interior landscape. Although the themes of detachment and intimacy are found in their separate categories, it becomes evident that the detachment emanating from exterior factors such as the arid physical landscape, the distancing of characters such as Carter and Helene and the fast-paced structure of the narrative all have a crucial impact upon the portrayal of Maria. It is within her character that the paradox culminates, seeing as her interior landscape invites an intimate quality into the narrative which stands in contrast to the effects of the exterior. *A Book of Common Prayer* on the other hand does not carry the same distinctive separation of the paradox. Instead, representations of detachment and intimacy blur together and both can be found in the exterior landscape as well as in the interior landscape. In a similar manner to *Play It as It Lays*, the exterior and interior factors mutually influence one

another to evoke the two aspects of the paradox. Charlotte as the main source of contrast in the novel functions to elicit the paradox of detachment and intimacy through embodying the elements herself by her ambiguous nature. However, through her interior forces she also extends the paradox's quality to apply to both physical spaces such as the house on California Street and Boca Grande, but also to her relations, in particular those with Grace and Marin. Consequently, the paradox can be located in both works through analyzing its different forms of representation.

Iser further argues that "it is clear that if a literary text represents a reaction to the world, the reaction must be to the world incorporated in the text; the forming of the aesthetic object therefore coincides with the reader's reactions to positions set up and transformed by the structure of theme and horizon" (Iser 98). Theme and horizon were mostly touched upon in chapter one, but it equally applies to the positions set up in chapter two. Core American values and ideals such as the pursuit of happiness in relation to freedom, individualism, optimism, and pragmatism can be found in the main characters of both works. In that sense, Didion's works are clouded by the horizon of a characteristic American hope making up the background whilst the themes of detachment and intimacy take the foreground to elicit a contrasting emotional effect in the reader that serves as a reaction to the world incorporated in the text. This reaction, Iser notes, is to the world set forth in the literary text, but in Didion's case, this world appears to mirror many of the realities of our real world. The paradox's aesthetic of detachment and intimacy can therefore be interpreted as a reflection of what Didion observed to be the state of the country at the time of writing.

Locating the paradox in times of unrest

To explain the experience of detachment that coats the makeup of the hostile landscape of the two novels, Jonathan Baumbach's metaphor of a nightmare landscape where "the underside of consciousness is explored (...) in a world accommodating evil" was used as a joint reference marker (Baumbach 3). His definition of the nightmare landscape aptly describes the setting of the two novels, not just in terms of physical descriptions but also in terms of the emotional tension that various external components instigate that makes navigating life harder for some of the characters. Creating an opportunistic and materialistic atmosphere, for instance, is shown to have grave implications for characters whose desires do not favor such an environment but rather values conditions of peace and a sense of belonging. However, this is not solely applicable to the setting of the novels. Didion through her work as a journalist marked herself as highly concerned with politics and the direction that American society was

headed toward. As she started experimenting with writing fiction, it becomes clear through her fictional settings of a landscape plagued with unrest and cruelty that she somewhat replicated what she had observed in the various environments she explored as a journalist. The two novels in this thesis were both published during the 70s and carry clear elements that are a nod to the disorder that occurred in society during the 60s. Katherine Henderson also sees this notion when she for one describes Maria in *Play It as It Lays* as a character that “incorporates within herself a set of specifically American illusions, myths learned in childhood, painfully tested in adulthood and finally eroded by the currents of social and economic change” (Henderson 41). Additionally, she calls *A Book of Common Prayer* “Didion’s fictional tribute to the chaos of the sixties” (65). The experience of rejection and disillusionment, breaking traditional family structures and showing the more challenging routes that motherhood can take are all part of highlighting the results of a decade shrouded in conflicts on political and social scales.

Didion begins her essay “On the Morning After the Sixties” by stating that “I am talking here about being a child of my own time” and remembering the surrealistic state of unrest that characterized the decade (Didion, *The White Album* 205). The notion of being a child of her time is elaborated upon when she describes it as “the ambiguity of belonging to a generation distrustful of political highs, the historical irrelevancy of growing up convinced that the heart of darkness lay not in some error of social organization but in man’s own blood” (206). This is a highly applicable testament to the state of American society today as well. In a confusing time where rights are being retracted, identity markers erased, and upheaval is brewing, her words apply also to the cultural and social disorder that the country has once again returned to. Both her fictional and non-fictional work that were published during the 60s and in the succeeding 70s were concerned with the consequences of these changes and explored them thoroughly. In particular, she had a keen eye for capturing the female experience. In both novels the topic of motherhood is central but portrayed in unconventional settings that highlights the broad specter that this role encompasses and that are less frequently discussed. Grace admits that she has no emotional attachment to her son Gerardo and Charlotte loses one child to complications after birth and another, Marin, to radicalization³. Maria has an institutionalized child and is forced to abort another which

³ Marin’s radicalization was likely a nod to the general dissatisfaction in the population during the 60s and to the many student protests that opposed the Vietnam War, police brutality, and advocated for the Civil Rights Movement. This dissatisfaction is seeing a resurgence today with the volatile polarization of the political landscape, continuing police brutality, the uprising of new student protests that oppose the war on Gaza amongst other social and political areas of instability dominating the news image.

consequently shows the circumstances of having an illegal abortion and the emotional distress that may follow. As mentioned in the introduction, abortion was legalized in the 70s a few years after the publication of *Play It as It Lays*. Didion's concern with women's rights and agency was clearly earmarked in these works where she unflinchingly explored the darker, more complex realities that motherhood can bring upon a woman's life.

Both of the novels I have analyzed plus the essay collections I have drawn upon were published roughly 50 or so years ago. Why is it that her work is seeing a resurgence now, decades later? It is conceivable that her layered representation of women and motherhood plays a part in people's continued interest in her work and there are several reasons for this. Firstly, I believe that her understanding of women's situations plays a significant part considering the curtailment that women's rights are facing in America today. Abortion for instance has become an extremely sensitive topic for many following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and we saw mass protests both for and against leading up to this ruling and in the aftermath. Didion's depiction of the emotional turmoil that haunts mothers in the loss of their child, be it through abortion, natural complications, or societal impact, captures a raw image of the female interior landscape. In my opinion, the strength of Didion's writing lies in her ability to shed romanticized and elaborate descriptions and instead opt for a style that is brutally honest in its regard to difficult topics. Perhaps people have grown tired of the lack of clarity that we are seeing today where words and promises are thrown around more carelessly and given less weight by the minute, particularly from big voices in politics and the media. Perhaps author voices like Didion's, with her sharp, insightful, and straight to the point kind of writing appeals to readers who have a desire for writing that unapologetically captures human emotion and difficult topics.

The aesthetic paradox becomes a crucial element in Didion's style that is also telling of a larger sweeping conflict of emotion that comes about as the result of a world in disorder. The growing tensions caused by an increase in polarizing political opinions play a part in creating an unstable landscape that brews with a sense of unrest that spreads across society. Both in the 60s and now there are conflicts spanning across America and the world. With media's influence, the occurrences and escalations of these conflicts appear to happen so fast that a blur of human cruelty and suffering takes up most of the news image. Even if war is raging in another part of the world, news of it reaches most of us eventually and consequently creates a conflicting sense of distance in that there might be miles between ourselves and whatever conflict we are hearing about but at the same time, the fact that we are hearing about it works to place the conflict into focus and brings it closer. We are continuously fed images

and descriptions of a world that seems to accommodate chaos. One might find oneself living in a peaceful corner of the world, but the news of occurrences in another part enters our living-rooms and leaves behind a lasting emotional impact. This has been amplified in our modern society where the newsfeeds are updated every second with new reports through an endless number of channels that is almost impossible to elude. I believe that this sense of unrest that settles in the body after being confronted with such hostility is a basic humane response that recognizes the fragility and luxury that is peace and opportunity. With the images of disorder constantly churning in the back of one's mind, it becomes a reminder of the lack of security one holds in this world.

Didion saw the effect that a society in chaos had upon the individual whether it happened in their own back yard or across borders and thus a paradox of detachment and intimacy became part of her overarching aesthetic. The detached backdrop that she establishes in her writing appears to draw upon the notion that if people do not to some degree tune out most of the chaos, the overwhelming sense of helplessness becomes all consuming. In order to not be paralyzed by the darkness of reality, Didion locates the paradoxical need for finding intimacy with others in spite of the cruelty of the exterior landscape. Considering the external factors of the landscape in the novels that worked harshly against the protagonists, Maria, Charlotte and Grace would have no motivation to go on were it not for them finding purpose through their intimate connections. These intimate connections are what bring a recognizable humanity into the narrative. Intimate bonds are not always bound by romance, sometimes they come in the shape of friends, memories, places, ideals, and family, and they appear to be what roots the characters when the nightmare landscape was raging on. My personal understanding is that Didion articulates a conflicting emotional response that is collectively felt but difficult to articulate. The scholarship on her writing is continuously expanding and with this thesis I hope to have contributed with an alternative interpretation of what I have called an aesthetic paradox in these two novels and ultimately how Joan Didion's style can be used as a capsule to understand the collective emotional impact of a society in chaos. The paradox of detachment and intimacy becomes an aesthetic response that is a testament to the time; what hangs in the air and is collectively felt both then and now.

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