

Where I Am From

By Michelle Chihara

JOAN DIDION GAVE THE valedictorian speech at her eighth-grade graduation. From the beginning, she seems to have always commanded the speaker's position. In a society that has a habit of responding as if women who speak publicly are hysterical or mad, in a society that often systematically excludes women from public life, Didion has always seemed a step ahead, somehow stronger than anyone who might deny her the podium. Of course, she enrages many. She was a skeptic of the feminist movement, a movement that probably opened some of the doors she stepped through. And yet for generations of women, for women with a range of reactions to the word "feminist," Joan Didion has set the stage. Her enemies might call her neurotic or elitist. No matter. She has already described her own neuroses and headaches, and done it with such insight and grace and detached cool that the charges never stick. In 2003, she published *Where I Was From*, a kind of semi-memoir written after her mother's death. It's a meditation on California and her family's relationship to the land, in which she turned the force of her insight on her own eighth-grade speech and its topic, "Our California Heritage."

As an eighth grader, Didion lionized the pioneers, her direct ancestors who came across the country in covered wagons. At the Arden School in Sacramento, she wore a pale green organdy dress and her mother's crystal necklace, marks of her inheritance. Then in 2003, she wrote to disavow this heritage. She wanted to process her grief as well as to slice through her mother's Old California pretenses. Didion wrote that embedded in her family's attachment to their past, to land in California, and to frontier heroism, there lay confusions about America. Note the past tense in the title *Where I Was From*. This is Didion's attempt to see her mother, her past, and the American Dream clearly. She wrote it to leave some aspect of her inheritance behind. In the book, somewhat heartbreakingly given what happened a few years later, Didion said she wanted to free Quintana Roo from her ghosts. She wrote that Quintana didn't need to grow up under the shadows of the Donner Pass. She didn't have to preserve old things just because they were old and belonged to the Didions.

And yet, the book feels haunted. Didion can, as she puts it, only approach these topics "obliquely."¹ On the one hand, she clearly hopes to disable any sense of entitlement. Just because the Didions can trace their bloodlines back eight Californian generations, Quintana is not landed gentry. Didion was raised to think of herself as almost frontier nobility and she wants to puncture that myth. On the other hand, she writes Old California too well. She conjures the mystique she says she wants to dispel. I still find myself circling around *Where I Was From*, its beautiful and oblique writing. I often revisit it, a long exercise in Didion's singular ability to aestheticize cognitive dissonance. She looks at hard truths directly, unflinchingly. But then she lends Old Sacramento and the frontier mythos her trademark style.

Didion tells you that the crystal necklace will not protect you, but it glows on the page. She tells you that growing water-heavy crops in dry California is unsustainable and foolish. Then she paints the organdy dress in the pale green of new rice on the first days of spring. Being told something is foolish does not inoculate a reader against a longing for pale green organdy dresses. Didion wrote that because Quintana Roo was adopted, the ghosts on the old wooden Sacramento boardwalk did not belong to her. Joan was all that need matter to Quintana. Can you imagine being Quintana Roo? Can you imagine being told that all of the Didion myths and traditions, the fever dreams that haunted your commanding mother, were not yours? Not your inheritance? Wouldn't you still long for your mother's amulets and organdy dresses? Dear reader, I long for them still.

Didion almost always circled around her central topic. In this case, her central topic, her heritage, included a great deal of land in California. The central topic, the eighth-grade speech, and the book raise but then sidestep questions about Didion's role in the development of land. She unquestionably had an effect on the place she came from—which she sold, when her mother died and she left California mostly behind for New York. What about California belonged to her? What part of her belonged to California? She didn't come down on many concrete answers in *Where I Was From*. So in 2012, I tried to come up with some answers for her.

I wrote a chapter of a long and impossible dissertation about *Where I Was From* when I was a graduate student getting my PhD in contemporary American literature. I was also pregnant with my second daughter. After having spent seven years as a reporter and editor and freelance writer, I had gone back to graduate school and gotten married. In 2012, heavy with my second child, I was

also heavy with the paralysis that motherhood brings. We couldn't afford for me to stay at home with the children, but I wasn't sure that we could afford any of my ambitions, either. I felt deeply ambivalent about where I was from and where I was going. I grew up in California, in Berkeley, eighty miles from Sacramento. I can't trace my family lines much beyond the Jewish pogroms and Japanese internments before and during World War II. I did not inherit land. My family's ghosts, of diaspora and displacement, were of the colonized variety. I'm the granddaughter of immigrants with my own desire to inhabit and puncture American myths. In the place of a long line of settled traditions, I had a library full of books. I wanted badly to find, in those books, answers on how to dispel ghosts and claim a space for my daughter. It's possible that I wanted to figure out, once and for all, how much of Didion's ability to command the stage was related to her heritage. In any case, I decided to look at her central topic more directly than she could. It seemed important to me, at the time, to pin down exactly how much of California belonged to Joan Didion.

The University of California awarded me a couple hundred dollars for a research trip. I flew to Sacramento from Los Angeles and dug into the state archives. I spent two days going through the public records, one by one, looking for the Didion family's land holdings. Was I doing academic or journalistic work? I'm not sure I can say. But I dug through hundreds of old records and maps, trying to track the sales of parcels that moved through multiple landholding partnerships. Some of these Didion names were in her book, some I tracked through her brother, James J. Didion. He had power of attorney for her mother when she died. I took many pictures of many documents.

More than six months pregnant, I was already waddling through pain in my hips. Sitting in a cubicle in the city

assessor's office, I got the call from Kaiser with the results of my amniocentesis—the baby was healthy, and I was having a second daughter. I would be the mother of two daughters. I remember picking at state-issued Formica with my fingernail and murmuring quietly that yes, I could hear the nurse on the other end of the line. I would have to slice through the paralysis and puncture the myths for not one but two girls. For us all. I remember the beige of the particleboard desk, and not wanting to disturb other patrons of the assessor's office. I remember imagining that Didion would have approved of me in that moment. I didn't have a typewriter in my suitcase. My shapeless maternity dress was made of the kind of synthetic fabric that seems not to exist in her world. But I stayed cool and detached. Like her, I took the call and got back to work.

My findings, then...

In *Where I Was From*, Didion replaces a discussion of her own and her family's participation in the development of Californian land with a stylized and somewhat backhanded discussion of other land heiresses. She mentions the subdivision of land in the passive voice, as if it's an inevitable natural step into adult life: Didion's family moves into a house "on some acreage outside Sacramento until the time seemed right to subdivide the property."² Later, she mentions that she and her brother applied for a zoning change on a ranch they owned east of Sacramento, changing it from agricultural to residential. "New people" resist the Didions' zoning change. In her book, she segues from any discussion of her agency, as she and her brother went ahead and subdivided the ranch, to an account of aestheticized loss. She writes that her memory of Gilroy, where she and her father ate short ribs at the Milias Hotel among the potted ferns and dark shutters, is a hologram that dematerializes as she drives through

it. The aesthetic disintegration of her memories is haunting, lovely. Perhaps inevitable. But the Didions chose to develop the land, over the protests of others. The zoning didn't vanish. How and when to develop was a decision the Didions made. The entire memoir sits as a book-length effort to look at and then mystify the Didion family's structural intervention in the California real estate markets.

Didion's brother, James J. Didion, is a powerful real estate tycoon. He had power of attorney for their mother, Eduene Didion, and was trustee of the Frank R. Didion family trust in the 1980s. It's his name that appears on most of the Didion family's land deals.

While her own name rarely shows up on the land records, Joan Didion states in the memoir that she and James made decisions about land together. On a 1998 title to a 48,352-square-foot plot of land (just over one acre) at Madison and Date Avenues in Sacramento, Joan signed as a counterparty for JJD Properties, one of a number of trusts and companies that appear under her brother's name. In the 1980s and 1990s, about eight acres of land in over ten discrete plots, transferred out of either that trust or from a member of Didion's immediate family, at Madison and Date alone.

The eight acres at Madison and Date make up less than half of the twenty-three or so acres that Didion family trusts developed in the decades before *Where I Was From's* publication. Two streets, within this subdivided area, bear the name Jerrett, Didion's grandmother's name, and the name Didion. Those twenty-odd acres, in turn, represent a small fraction of the larger family's holdings. Didion writes in *Where I Was From* that the Elizabeth Reese Estate Company, a corporation made up of her family as shareholders, owned a 640-acre ranch in Florin into

her “adult life.”³ I found a mineral rights lease on 183 acres of Elizabeth Reese Company land that voided out in the 1970s. The twenty-three acres at Madison and Date alone must represent only one small group of sales.

I visited Didion Court, part of the Madison and Date development, in 2012. It was a *cul-de-sac* of single-story stucco houses with garages and small lawns that went up to the curb with no sidewalk—modest, stylistically unremarkable, subdivided plots. A temporary basketball net stood in a driveway. This was not the harsh and desolate inland empire of “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” it was the slack suburban postwar reality that Didion recognized made California rich. I tabulated the sales for the Madison Manor development nearby, which was developed before the 2008 financial crash by the Didions and Stamas Engineering. The sum total of all sales must have been significant.

In 2003, Didion wrote about land in Sacramento “where the vineyards got torn up so the Walmarts and the Burger Kings and the Taco Bells could grow.”⁴ Note the passive voice. Didion writes as if Walmart and the strip malls were a force of nature. She writes, in her paratactic rhythms, as if Taco Bells grow in a process unrelated to one group’s ability to keep big box stores inland, away from residential properties at the coast. Another plot near Madison Manor that the Didions sold in 1985 held a strip mall and a car dealership when I saw it. The Didions granted an easement to the city for Highway 80 to cut through their land in 1972. A plot of land east of Highway 80, at Sunrise Boulevard and Old Auburn Road, has property records linking it to the Didion family as far back as 1850. In 1985 the Didions sold it to McDonald’s.

Land use decisions are not a force of nature in a democracy. Development is a complicated process, but it’s not a natural

process. It's a political one. Didion writes about Native Americans coming into her great-great-great grandmother's house, as if the Native Americans too were a feature of the landscape. They were not. They were people with claims to the land. New people, white settlers in covered wagons, refused to recognize the native people's claims through a violent, unnatural series of wars. Power relations among new people and existing owners evolve, but always as politics. Activists and unions in Los Angeles once fought off a Walmart successfully. It is not biological evolution if Walmarts grow when planted. It's the struggle of history. Joan Didion left California, sold to McDonald's, and chose to re-zone the ranch. Her brother, whom she worked with to do this, was a powerful lobbyist for the National Realty Committee during the time when such lobbyists pushed to deregulate mortgage underwriting. He participated in the lead-up to the crisis in mortgage-backed securities in 2008. Powerful land-owning families play a role in how we build our cities, how we claim and imagine the land. I wanted Didion to cop to her role in the process.

Instead of discussing her own, or her brother's, ideas about developing land, Didion wrote about Jane Hollister Wheelwright and Joan Irvine, other land heiresses. She mocked Hollister Wheelwright for objecting to Chevron pipelines on her family's land, as if objecting to a pipeline could be nothing more than pernicious nostalgia. Meanwhile, the Didions held lease agreements with Shell Oil in the 1970s and Texas Oil & Gas in the 1980s, for mineral, oil, and gas rights on hundreds of acres of land in Sacramento. Instead of addressing her own family's pipelines, Didion wrote about Hollister's *naïveté* in resisting a pipeline. She did not look at her brother's push for deregulation in the mortgage industry, as it might relate to her family's choices. She wrote about swallowing meat and telling her brother's children

about cannibalism at the Donner Pass. She wrote a memoir, obliquely, about her idealized past in a Californian landscape where the vineyards *somehow got torn up*. In the passive voice. For Didion, the fast food franchises pop up with an “artless horror.”⁵ She swallows her own ability to look at her family’s decisions. She looks away, and Californian dirt seems to come up in her mouth as the gothic return of the repressed.



I HAVE BEEN CIRCLING around these thoughts since 2014. I wanted Didion to come clean, and yet in 2016, it got harder to keep my faith in the collective democratic processes that might have benefitted from her being more direct and honest. Didion wrote *Where I Was From* out of a gimlet-eyed urge to disengage, to cut loose from America’s crazy myths. She felt bad about the Taco Bells and McDonald’s. But she also mistrusted her own feelings, her desire to preserve things as they were, and she saw the need to let developers build for all the new people. Who can blame her for this? Now, in California with two daughters, I find I need her more than ever. In 1961, a young Joan Didion wrote for *Vogue* with a certain Victorian severity about the need for toughness, for moral nerve, in her essay, “On Self-Respect.” Her metaphors back then were the colonizer’s: she cited as a role model, of all people, the British general “Chinese” Gordon, with his stiff upper lip and self-sacrifice. People like him had self-respect, she wrote; they knew to give formal dinners in the rainforest. For them, “the candlelight flickering on the liana call forth deeper, stronger disciplines, values instilled long before. It is a kind of ritual, helping us to remember who and what we are.”⁶ In 2003, in *Where I Was From*, Didion tried to move away from that Victorian severity. She tried to relinquish her mother’s conservative faith in

rituals and traditions. She tried to reimagine the organdy dresses and crystal necklaces as useless totems from a bygone world. Like formal dinners in the rainforest, they were nothing Quintana had to worry about. And yet she found nothing to replace them.

Didion skewered one-percenters like Joan Irvine and Jane Hollister Wheelwright; she shone a light on their pretenses. Perhaps it is her brother, James J. Didion, whom Joan failed to bring into focus. Immune as she was to some threats, she always leaned toward puncturing the myths of women. She was always hardest on herself first. She wanted to question her own impulse to protect the Milias Hotel. She knew that upper-class affectations can make you feel safe without keeping you safe, that the unblemished land would not barricade her against her own deeper “apprehension of meaninglessness.”⁷ She knew in 2003 that the levee wasn’t holding.

In the end, all of my digging amounted to little more than my own swallowed effort to say to Joan Didion: Please don’t give up on California. Keep the land, and the organdy dress, and wear it to dinner in the Mojave. Didion was trying to tell me, like she was trying to tell Quintana, that whatever haunts the wooden sidewalks in Sacramento was none of my business. And so I went there and walked those sidewalks, with my unborn daughter. I wanted to call her out, but in the end, I only did it because I wanted to walk beside her. Whether or not Joan Didion is now or has ever been rich, whether she is a good feminist or a good mother, a bad real estate developer or a good leftist critic—to quote Didion quoting her mother, *what difference does it make?* She belongs to California, and no one in journalism or academia has given me a better language than hers. I wish she hadn’t mentioned Chinese Gordon. I wish she had gone easier on 1970s feminists. But she was right in other ways: We need rituals to help us remember

who and what we are. I will not deed my Japanese Jewish Welsh American girls growing up in Los Angeles any acreage to speak of. So what do I have to offer them? Crystal necklaces. The collected works of Joan Didion. The names of California wildflowers. A promise to stay with our shared ghosts.

ENDNOTES:

1. Joan Didion, *Where I Was From* (New York: Vintage International, 2003), 15.
2. Didion, *Where I Was From*, 168.
3. Didion, *Where I Was From*, 12.
4. Didion, *Where I Was From*, 179.
5. Didion, *Where I Was From*, 73.
6. Joan Didion, "On Self-Respect," *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968), 147.
7. Didion, *Where I Was From*, 205.