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Author

Figlerowicz, Marta

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Marta Figlerowicz

Landscapes and Ladles

Joan Didion's *Where I Was From*

In the final paragraph of *Where I Was From*, Joan Didion describes one of the last times she visited her mother. The mother gives her and her daughter Quintana two family heirlooms:

She gave the serving spoon to Quintana and the ladle to me. I protested: she had already given me all her silver, I had ladles, she had given me the ladles. 'Not this one,' she said. She pointed out the curve of the handle. It seemed that she had what she called a 'special feeling' for the way the handle curved on this particular ladle. It seemed that she found this ladle so satisfying to touch that she had set it aside, kept it. I said that since it gave her pleasure she should continue to keep it. 'Take it,' she said, her voice urgent. 'I don't want it lost.'¹

As Didion suggests throughout this section, to accept these utensils is to acknowledge that her mother is dying. This spoon and ladle will soon stand as imperfect reminders of a person Didion is not prepared to lose. Didion's mother is trying to give her not only a small object, but also a bundle of memories and feelings. These memories and feelings are tied not just to this ladle but also to a dizzying array of domestic interiors

and outdoor landscapes through which this ladle has traveled. The ladle recalls her mother's youth and her family's pioneer history. It brings back memories of her family house as well as of a sensitivity peculiar only to her mother, a sensitivity so unique that even her daughter puts this 'special feeling' in inverted commas. By hinting at such a wealth and breadth of possible connections, Didion makes this scene seem multiply nostalgic. But the nostalgia that pervades this scene is a feeling not simply of fond recollection, but also of erosion or confusion. Didion's awkwardness before her mother's offerings—her uncertainty about what she is being given, and why—dramatizes how much both women might value these objects but also how little of their many-sided past associations these objects actually preserve. Didion highlights both how much communal and personal history might be connected to this ladle, and how much of this history will probably be lost in its transmission.

Published in 2003, *Where I Was From* has been described as Didion's effort to reckon, most immediately, with the deaths of her parents. These deaths also lead Didion to meditate on the larger history of her home state, and on the feelings with which her

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attempts to reach back toward it are tinted. Nostalgia seems the right term for the feelings Didion is exploring, though this nostalgia is not of the saccharine, idealizing kind Didion derides at several points in the volume. The version of this feeling she seems to embrace has most to do with what Svetlana Boym defines as "reflective" or "creative" nostalgia. In *The Future of Nostalgia* Boym describes reflective or creative nostalgia as a cure for an idealized, seemingly objective sense of history. To view the past with reflective nostalgia is, for Boym, to acknowledge that

the writing of history is always at least partially driven by the present-day needs and feelings of the persons and communities attempting to write it. The search for the past is a search not merely for facts but also for subjective satisfaction. The large-scale, abstract truths that history might appear to yield tend to be little more than wish fulfillments. Particular nostalgic feelings can also, for Boym, be mined for a deeper and more complex sense of history. By leading us back into fine details of how we used to relate to particular bodies, buildings, landscapes, and objects, nostalgia scales down grand historical narratives into a more fragmented and democratic sense of the past. It allows for many individual perspectives, and many contradictory aspects of each such perspective, to coexist with each other and thus—one hopes—to also keep correcting each other.²

On one level Didion's *Where I Was From* enacts an argument very much like Boym's. Interweaving personal and social history, bits of novels, memories, pulp journalism, and statistical data, Didion casts a reflectively nostalgic eye onto California to break down grand accounts of her home state as a space of freedom, opportunity, and optimism. *Where I Was From* stresses the capacity of nostalgic memories to subvert idealized versions of the past. Like Boym's book it ultimately represents nostalgia not merely as a recuperative but also as a creative act. But by probing the disparities of scope and scale among the various sites and objects her nostalgic memories relate to, Didion's essays also explore a problematic dimension of nostalgia that Boym does not address directly. Didion's version of reflective nostalgia stresses that the scales of the many objects, landscapes, cities, and states a person might reminisce about are dramatically incompatible with each other. They are also incompatible with the bodily scale of the human being who acts on all these memories and stores them. Didion showcases how difficult it is to appreciate the past presence of a landscape or a building from within

the perspective of a single human body. She also studies how much even very detailed and specific experiences of nostalgia distort and reduce the scope of the material world they try to resurrect. As she depicts them, our humanly embodied feelings easily alter or erase aspects of outer reality that seem too overwhelming. We can even lose our connection to landscapes and buildings that had at one point seemed inalienable from our bodies and lives. Didion notes the difficulty her book itself faces in trying to represent a lost material world and to convey it to others. These imperfections ultimately become opportunities to appreciate the always greater and more varied reality of the world our feelings keep losing track of.

Like Boym's book, *Where I Was From* initially uses a more reflective experience of nostalgia to dissolve a naïve sense of history as a coherent union of the self with her world. The California Didion recalls is populated by persons who live out some version of this latter, unexamined fantasy of perfect order. In their idealized world California's urban growth is part of its natural cycles. "There was this new city growing," says one such person, "growing like leaves." (1021) To enter California is to let oneself be reshaped by these natural cycles so drastically that one seems to be born anew: "Each arriving traveler had been, by definition, reborn in the wilderness, a new creature in no way the same as the man or woman or even child who had left Independence or St. Joseph however many months before: the very decision to set forth on the journey had been a kind of death, involving the total abandonment of all previous life." (969) One's unity with this landscape is further expressed by how reliably one conforms to the laws it imposes upon human beings. "If my grandfather spotted a rattlesnake while driving, he would stop his car and go into the brush after it. To do less, he advised me more than once, was to endanger whoever later entered the brush, and so violate what he called 'the code of the West.'" (1014)

Didion shows that this seeming harmony between humans and nature depends on an ongoing process of erasure or forgetfulness. Such idealized visions gloss over the many complexities of social history. “One difference between the West and the South, I came to realize in 1970, was this: in the South they remained convinced that they had bloodied their land with history. In California we did not believe that history could bloody the land, or even touch it.” (996) Within this fascination with nature as an expression of human freedom, the landscape itself also becomes invisible in its particularity. It starts to seem a “metaphor” for naturalist ideals rather than a real place of its own. (993) In a comic example of such erasure, the paintings she sees in various neighbors’ houses all seem to blend into each other despite pretending to document a variety of historical dates and events: “Many Sacramento houses during my childhood had on their walls one or another lithograph showing the familiar downtown grid with streets of water, through which citizens could be seen going about their business by raft or row-boat. Some of these lithographs pictured the high water of 1850, after which a three-foot earthen levee between the river and the settlement was built. Others showed the high water of 1852, during which that first levee was washed out. Still others showed the high water of 1853 or 1860 or 1861 or 1862, nothing much changing except the increasing number of structures visible on the grid.” (964)

It is one purpose of Didion’s memoir to subvert such idealized notions of natural harmony through the greater diversity and particularity of what she and her relatives remember about her native state. But Didion also finds herself struggling with how difficult it is to draw meaningful specific connections between the sites in which she lived and the human minds and bodies they have affected, including her own. As in the scene with which this essay opens, Didion dramatizes these difficulties as issues of scope and scale. Nostalgic feelings lead her

back to objects but also to whole landscapes; to houses, but also to whole cities. They make her try to recall a small news story but also to reconstruct and define the politics of her entire state. To think of herself, or small memorabilia she owns, as carrying these many scales of associations—all of them disparate, and most of them larger than herself—makes Didion see these attachments as forms not merely of preservation but also of reduction, compression, and distortion. Her body and mind never seem quite capacious and malleable enough to fit them all in.

At first Didion notes such distortions nostalgic memories are prone to in other persons whom she talks to or reads about. The affective reactions these landscapes used to spark in her ancestors—reactions whose expressions are now the basis of her own longings for the past—are tragicomic, failed efforts to take in and make sense of the hills and valleys through which these ancestors pass. The women in her family seem positively convulsed by California's grandly open landscapes into various forms of eccentricity, tension, and downright madness. "They were women, these women in my family, without much time for second thoughts, without much inclination toward equivocation, and later, when there was time or inclination, there developed a tendency, which I came to see as endemic, toward slight and major derangements, apparently eccentric pronouncements, opaque bewilderment and moves to places not quite on the schedule." (956) The keepsakes these ancestors create to mark their passage through the California mountains are not freely, inspiringly spacious, but nervously overcrowded. They are marks both of an intensity of received sensations, and of a paucity of space in which to express them: "In this quilt of Elizabeth Reese's were more stitches than I had ever seen in a quilt, a blinding and pointless compaction of stitches, and it occurred to me as I hung it that she must have finished it one day in the middle of the crossing, somewhere in the wilderness of her own grief and illness, and just kept on stitching." (955)

This sense of distorted, overwhelmed focus affects even the artists and writers to whom Didion looks for more astute ways of weaving California's material past out of the feelings it might have sparked in individual persons. The painter Edwin Markham, whose work she tries to study, turns out to owe his seemingly grand vision of his state to a "curiously" narrow-minded myopia: "Edwin Markham's 'The Man with the Hoe' may have galvanized sentiment against the exploitation of labor, but it was said by its author to have been inspired, curiously, in one of the many apparent connections in California life that serve only as baffles to further inquiry, by study of a Millet painting owned by Charles Crocker, one of the Central and Southern Pacific's 'Big Four,' in other words a Railroad King." (979) Describing William Norris's *Octopus*, a novel that attempts to diagnose the way California's society is shaped around the use and ownership of natural resources, Didion zeroes in on how overwhelmed Norris is by his subject matter. "The idea is so big," writes Norris as Didion quotes him, "that it frightens me at times but I have about made up my mind to have a try at it." (975)

As Didion follows through her own feelings of nostalgia, she is also brought to realize how limited and fragile her own attachments to her birthplace are. Perhaps she only really cares about a tiny region of this state, no matter how enveloping and total this small scope of concern might at times feel. Didion recalls how long she managed to live in California without feeling connected to anything but one small city: "This was California, into the nineteen-fifties, so hermetic, so isolated by geography and by history and also by inclination, that when I first read *The Octopus*, at age twelve or thirteen, in Sacramento, I did not construe it to have a personal

" The city blocks she had once thought of as part of herself seem by now to have fragmented into a set of disconnected objects of which her body is only another, smaller instance. "

relevance, since the events described took place not in the Sacramento Valley but somewhere else, the San Joaquin.” (991)

When she goes back to California with her daughter, Didion is further shocked by how easily she can dismiss even these local spaces as sources of insight for herself and for others. She readily decides that Quintana does not need to know the particular streets and buildings among which her mother used to live:

This wooden sidewalk did not in fact represent anywhere Quintana was from. Quintana’s only attachments on this wooden sidewalk were right now, here, me and my mother. In fact I had no more attachment to this wooden sidewalk than Quintana did: it was no more than a theme, a decorative effect. It was only Quintana who was real. (1100)

Scenes such as these are striking because what Didion recognizes here is not merely the contrast between idealizations and specific memories, but the inconsistency and fragility even of very specific forms of emotional connection to particular places. Didion realizes that the physical ties that bind her to her daughter do not automatically bind this daughter to the place her mother inhabited. Even more anticlimactically, she finds that even her own current-day connections to these streets and buildings are not sufficiently urgent to make her insist that Quintana should devote more effort to attending to them. The city blocks she had once thought of as part of herself seem by now to have fragmented into a set of disconnected objects of which her body is only another, smaller instance. She marvels at herself for having at some prior time believed these streets and buildings to be inalienable from herself.

Acknowledging the inconsistency and imperfection of the ties that bind nostalgic feelings and their expression back to the objects and landscapes that first sparked them finally lets Didion appreciate her

engagement with these feelings as a form of creativity. The imperfections and constraints she at first feels frustrated by are what allow her to have a relationship to her past through an aesthetic object. These imperfections and constraints allow this object's own relative smallness and fragile connection to the real world to be not merely disappointing but meaningful. This more self-reflexive aspect of her book is most visible in the form of *Where I Was From* in itself. But it first begins to be hinted at when Didion describes this memoir's precursor, a novel called *Run River* that she wrote in her twenties:

This story, the 'plot' of the novel, was imagined, but the impulse that initially led me to imagine this story and not another was real: I was a year or two out of Berkeley, working for Vogue in New York, and experiencing a yearning for California so raw that night after night, on copy paper filched from my office and the Olivetti Lettera 22 I had bought in high school with the money I made stringing for The Sacramento Union ... I sat on one of my apartment's two chairs and set the Olivetti on the other and wrote myself a California river. (1058)

Didion speaks of this early novel with some irony. It is youthful and naïve, the story is a little forced, and her understanding of California still has too much to do with the platitudes she would use to describe it in high school. This younger Joan Didion, as she sees herself now, is also not fully self-aware about her motives. She seems not to realize that the main purpose of this novel was not to bring her home state back to life in New York but to "put ... a protective distance between me and the place I was from." (1066) Even though so much of this novel is about connections among persons and between persons and places, it seems most strongly to prove that these connections keep being rearranged and reassembled in her mind's eye, that her relationship to them can

be reframed and readjusted. By thus acknowledging a freedom and looseness in her affective relationship to the past that her younger self does not acknowledge, Didion begins to offer a picture of nostalgia as a form not merely of memory but of imaginative effort. She starts to depict nostalgia as an effort not merely to return to the original objects one longed for, but to imagine and create new objects (such as that novel) whose relationship to this past history is much more partial and oblique; objects that do not strive simply to bring back this history, but acknowledge and make use of the imperfections inherent in one's relationship to it.

A similar, much more overtly self-aware attitude toward nostalgia animates *Where I Was From* as a whole. On the one hand, this book's efforts at precise recollection—its apparent ambition to hit on most if not all major social events of California, to name its major social transformations, to mark in detail so many of its self-delusions—strike one as a work of intense nostalgic soul-searching, an attempt to recreate the state Didion left behind with as much precision as possible and to showcase its beauty and importance even to persons who may never have seen it before. On the other hand, this effort to recreate the California she has left behind is also an effort to show how hermetic and silly were her youthful notions that she could take in this whole state and hold it in her mind at once. It highlights how misguided Didion's earlier hope that the landscapes she remembers or reconstructs, or the ones described by persons she interviews, are reliable paths back toward the material past in which she lived. Didion's provocative indiscriminacy in folding together all sorts of public and private information, well-known California legends or news events and merely personal histories from her family life, presents this nostalgic effort as a dissonant compression of many registers and tones that might not necessarily belong together, or even fit into the same literary space coherently. By ceaselessly

referring to these lost or distorted objects of feeling, Didion also keeps reminding her reader of the physical presence and limits of the book in front of him or her. She dramatizes how, just like the ladles and quilts of her ancestors, the small material entity she creates is contorted by its relationship to entities much larger than itself; how little of its longed-for material contexts it is actually able to recreate and to sustain.

These levels of formal self-consciousness are expressions of respect for the landscapes, cities, and buildings Didion cherishes—of care not only that they not be lost, but that her own particular ways of keeping them in mind not be mistaken for reliable connection to these landscapes, cities, and buildings in themselves. The narrative strategies she uses acknowledge that even the most intense emotional relationship one has to one's material surroundings is laced with solipsism, distortion, and forgetfulness. What nostalgia recognizes are not only the heights of one's love for these surroundings but also the ease with which past contexts rapidly erode from and evolve within the mind on which they leave such a great impression. Didion's narrative strategies thus transform the smallness and partiality of the aesthetic means she has to recreate these contexts, from signs of failure, into opportunities for appreciating and exploring our bodily and mental limits: from limitations of her art into reasons why this art might seem meaningful and insightful.

[Endnotes]

1 Joan Didion, *Where I Was From*, in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 1104. All other quotations from this volume are cited in-text.

2 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

[Chapter figure part of "Souvenir Nostalgia Photo Series." Photograph by Andrew Manuel. 2014.]