

April 30, 2007

Terri Smith

Response to *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* by Joan Didion

Prof. Michael Brenson

After reading Joan Didion's essay *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, I was sad. I have never been punched in the gut but imagine this is what a metaphorical sock in the stomach would feel like. In this street fight, however, the opponent came at me so incrementally and so skillfully, that I never felt a single blow. Her essay caused my emotional core to become sensitive to the touch. I was bruised. This discomfort might be, in part, the result of surprise, like when you "have the wind knocked out of you." After all, while I was reading this flowing, in-the-moment account of real life characters I felt no squeamishness. Didion presented the information objectively and rhythmically. Her words, however, had an unpredictable residue. This 1967 essay about emotionally and physically nomadic characters living and loving in San Francisco turned out to be more than the sum of its parts and that "more" felt tragic. Not since the family in *The Grapes of Wrath* wandered the dustbowl have I perceived the abandonment, pain, struggle and confusion of a social group so clearly through the experiences of a few of its members.

Minutes after turning the last page, Didion's lively and lost characters were transformed into specters and sank into my soul. They are now permanent residents. To teach me about these people, Didion asked me to walk with her, sit with her, comb the streets for people with her. We listened to them too. The ones we did not converse with were observed naked and groggy, sleeping, rocking on toy horses, sick and staring at their toes. This is how I learned about these young people – few of them were older than 20. I

found out what drugs they did, how often they did them and why certain substances are better for certain occasions (or for finding love) than others. This information was flanked with brief text outlining Didion's opinion about the larger social phenomena at work. During the journey, however, she gave no indication of her opinion or sentiment about the situation. She simply (or so it seems) inserted herself into San Francisco hippie culture during what she describes as a "cold late spring."¹ She observed public spaces such as parks and streets, asked people about themselves and explored what was happening in the condemned buildings and legitimate apartments of San Francisco. Like all good journalists, she gained the trust of her subjects and then respectfully reported what she saw. Her tone is straight, but the objectivity is not as straightforward as it initially seems. It is layered and artful and moves fluidly from one moment to the next. She, like Ali, "floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee." There is no deception, no trickery, but like any experienced general, boxer or football coach, she makes a complicated strategy seem simple.

I reread *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, attempting to approach it with the same inquisitiveness and desire for understanding Didion brought to her report on San Francisco. Didion's accounts seem to follow the action naturally and chronologically, but most likely she chose these specific events from many. She then mindfully juxtaposed them to create a specific effect. This act is not objective, but based on what Didion believes is important. It is a subjective act. On the first reading, it was obvious that the author incorporated text from the street, the radio, and fliers to add popular context, aural

¹ Joan Didion, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1967), p. 112

lyricism and a sense of what cultural products were being produced by and for hippies. It was also obvious that, with the exception of a couple of paragraphs in the beginning and another block of text on pages 122 and 123, that her tone is objective. This leaves the judgments and conclusions to the reader, but her structure guides us – it tells us what to see and when to see it. With my second pass, however, the more subtle details of the essay’s construction began to emerge.

Didion begins the essay by answering the “why?” question. Why this essay and why now? With the powerful first sentence “The center was not holding”² she sets the tone for the text – its content (San Francisco and its lost inhabitants) and its seemingly ad hoc constitution. Didion explains, writing:

Adolescents drifted from city to torn city, sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skins, children who were never taught and would never learn the games that held society together. People were missing. Children were missing. Parents were missing. Those left behind filed desultory missing-persons reports, then moved on themselves.... All that seemed clear was that at some point we had aborted ourselves and butchered the job, and because nothing else seemed so relevant I decided to go to San Francisco. San Francisco was where the social hemorrhaging was showing up. San Francisco was where the missing children were calling themselves “hippies.”³

About six pages before the story ends, Didion comes full circle with an elaboration on this “game” metaphor, writing:

We were seeing the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum. Once we had seen these children, we could no longer overlook the vacuum, no longer pretend that the society’s atomization could be reversed. This was not a traditional generational rebellion. At some point between 1945 and 1967 we had somehow neglected to tell these children the rules of the game we happened to be playing. Maybe we had stopped believing in the rules ourselves, maybe we were having a failure of nerve about the game. Maybe there were just too few people around to do the telling. These were children who grew up cut loose from the web of cousins and great-aunts and family doctors and lifelong neighbors who had traditionally suggested and enforced society’s values... They are less in rebellion of society than

² Didion, p. 84

³ Didion, pp. 84-85

ignorant of it, able only to feed back certain of its most publicized self-doubts, Vietnam, Saran-wrap, diet pills, the Bomb.⁴

In between these paragraphs and in the last few pages, she accounts for what occurs in San Francisco hippie culture using active language about what happens in her presence “Max reads the flier and stands up;” quotes from people “I been out of my mind for three days;” and descriptions of the kids’ appearances, demeanors and pasts as when she first meets Deadeye’s “old lady” Gerry:

Deadeye’s old lady, Gerry, meets us at the door of their place. She is a big, hearty girl who has always counseled at Girl Scout camps during summer vacations and was “in social welfare” at the University of Washington when she decided that she “just hadn’t done enough living” and came to San Francisco. “Actually the heat was bad in Seattle,” she adds.⁵

Didion’s style of relaying one event after another reflects the cultural restlessness she cites in the beginning. Sometimes she spends only a few sentences on an event or day and at other times one incident can take several pages to unfold. To transition from event to event, locale to locale, she begins with the name of the person she is with: “Max tells me about how he and Sharon got together;” “Deadeye and Gerry tell me they plan to be married;” Barbara baked a macrobiotic apple pie and she and Tom and Max and Sharon are eating it;” “Arthur Lisch gets pretty nervous whenever he sees me now because the Digger line this week is that they aren’t talking to ‘media poisoners,’ which is me.”⁶ These quotes are contained in five pages, exhibiting the frequent shifts of person and place in the essay.

In the last few pages of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Didion begins to connect the go-with-the-flow, drug-steeped lives of San Francisco’s “District” inhabitants with an

⁴ Didion, p. 123

⁵ Didion, pp 108-109

⁶ Didion, pp 110 -114

emerging political movement. She has already introduced us to the political players who pepper the essay, but uses a quote from a San Francisco psychiatrist to transition to a discussion of the larger cultural implications. His quote begins, “Anybody who thinks this is all about drugs has his head in a bag. It’s a social movement, quintessentially romantic, the kind that recurs in times of real social crisis.”⁷ Didion follows with the aforementioned elaboration on the “game.” Then, shortly before the essay comes to a close, we are transported to the park for a political provocation orchestrated by the Mime Troupers who perform in black face talking about how the “love freaks” “stole Chuck Berry’s music.”⁸ It is street theater. This sub-theme of theater appears earlier in the essay. When Didion visits the “Warehouse” she describes it, “The Warehouse was conceived as total theater a continual happening, and I always feel good there. What happened ten minutes ago or what is going to happen a half hour from now tends to fade from mind in the Warehouse.”⁹

By the end of the essay, however, we see that the theater is becoming less fleeting and events, like Didion’s writing, leave a residue on their participants. The theater of the District is at a breaking point. This realization is not expressed so much with a direct statement, but with the essay’s two final scenes. Both involve young children. In the first Otto takes Didion from the Mime performance to his place, telling her “I got something at my place that’ll blow your mind,”¹⁰ they arrive, and Didion sees a child sitting on the floor who Otto explains is five years old who is on acid and takes hits

⁷ Didion, p. 120

⁸ Didion, p. 125

⁹ Didion, p. 85

¹⁰ Didion, p. 127

regularly. Didion describes this child in the same way she described Gerry earlier. Even in a scene where most would be prone to judgment Didion's tone remains objective. In the final scene, Didion returns to the Warehouse and describes the events there:

Sue Ann's three-year-old Michael started a fire this morning before anyone was up, but Don got it out before much damage was done. Michael burned his arm though, which is probably why Sue Ann was so jumpy when she happened to see him chewing on an electric cord. "You'll fry like rice," she screamed. The only people around were Don and one of Sue Ann's macrobiotic friends and somebody who was on his way to commune in the Santa Lucias, and they didn't notice Sue Ann screaming at Michael because they were in the kitchen trying to retrieve some very good Moroccan hash which had dropped down the floorboard damaged in the fire.

After *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*'s last paragraph, it occurs to me that much of Didion's writing is potent because of her ability to find poignant metaphors in daily events. The scenes she chooses have a handful of reoccurring touchstones, including theater, sickness, broken communication, rejected pasts, and edginess (often based on anticipation or secrets). The qualities are introduced through the scenes and their repetition resonates with Didion's opening sentence, "The center was not holding." It seems that the author sees these themes of the Haight Street crowd as a microcosm of larger societal issues – the matters that created this situation in the first place. It is no coincidence that Didion ends the essay with its most poignantly metaphorical event-- one that points to a shaky future. In this last scene the folks at the warehouse are prioritizing a hunt for hash (which has literally fallen through the cracks) over young Michael's safety. A burned child chewing on an electrical cord inspires a sense of urgency in the reader. The one, ill-equipped person watching the child is alarmed and seems unable to guarantee his safety. This final scene is allegorical for what seems to be a lack of

insightful adults – at least ones without ulterior motives – in the lives of these uprooted, wandering and seemingly lost youth. Didion began the essay with the urgency she felt, the urgency that inspired her trip and this text. She ends *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* by instilling urgency in us. Her approach in all of its immediacy encourages readers to see beyond the clichéd accounts of hippie culture in 1967 – ones that generally condemned or romanticized it. The essay, instead, presents the complexity and underlying melancholy of its subjects, asking us to avoid a perception warped by the theatrical, and, instead, to view their existence as a collection of individual lives that are touched by and foreshadow larger social issues.