She claims that Newport’s “great summer houses” are also “monstrosities,” the “products of the metastasis of capital” (“Seacoast” 209, 210). She reveals “the underside of Hollywood” to be a “middle-class slum” where “no one is welcome” (“7000” 67). She visits Guaymas, a town defined by “a shadowy square . . . a racket of birds, a cathedral in bad repair” (“Guaymas” 215). Joan Didion’s main focus in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* seems to be the portrayal of various locations as harsh, undesirable, and flawed. But in actuality, she is constantly torn between criticizing and sympathizing with her environment. When she reduces each place to its ugly, raw elements—the vivid, unsettling details she uncovers—she somehow becomes closer to it, bound to it, more invested in discovering its importance. Didion’s criticism allows her to deconstruct the landscapes in which she finds herself. But ultimately, this critical deconstruction reveals, and satisfies, her need to put something—perhaps herself—back together.

Essential to Didion’s criticism is her ridicule of the superficial aspects of her surroundings. Getting married in Las Vegas, according to her, requires only three things: a bride to “swear she is eighteen or has parental permission,” a groom to swear he is “twenty-one or has parental permission,” and “five dollars for the license” (“Marrying” 79). Didion reveals the absurdity of Las Vegas through her description of its lenient and competitive wedding industry, purposefully choosing details which portray the city as both tacky and distasteful. The marital services offered—“sauna baths, payroll-check cashing, chinchilla coats for sale or rent”—are available at all hours, because in Las Vegas, marriage “is a game to be played when the table seems hot” (81). In revealing the way in which the city’s manufactured industry transforms the traditional, sentimental process of marriage into a trivial, impulsive game, Didion scrutinizes Las Vegas with microscopic precision. She claims that “what happens [in Las Vegas] has no connection with ‘real’ life,” and that the city is an odd place “in which to wear a candlelight satin Priscilla of
Boston wedding dress with Chantilly lace insets, tapered sleeves and a detachable modified train” (81). In her eyes, Las Vegas weddings are otherworldly, lacking the delicate refinement that weddings in the “real” world possess. Didion depicts Las Vegas as flawed and inappropriately frivolous through her inclusion of striking, tangible details such as the five-dollar license and rentable chinchilla coats. But this harsh criticism of the city’s superficial absurdity is only one aspect of her complex attitude towards her surroundings.

Didion displays a peculiar sense of sympathy for the places she deems imperfect, overlooking the very flaws she first exposed. Las Vegas, she decides, serves an important purpose, granting “the facsimile of proper ritual . . . to children who do not know how else to find it” (82). Didion sees that this fantasy world has its purpose; she sees nobility in the city’s willingness to provide a semblance of ceremony to people denied a dignified wedding elsewhere. She sees, for example, a “several months pregnant” bride “too young to be served” celebratory pink champagne at dinner, but granted a celebration nonetheless (83). Atypical, “imperfect” weddings of this sort are not exclusive to Las Vegas. Didion writes of another such case in San Bernardino, California: the groom’s wife had died, his mistress had been imprisoned, and his new bride was the governess of his children. Yet despite their colorful past, the man showed up “in black tie, with a white carnation in his buttonhole” and the woman “wore a long white peau de soie dress and carried a shower bouquet of sweetheart roses” (“Dreamers” 28). In their polished costumes, the couple attempted to hide and ultimately forget the unfortunate circumstances surrounding their union. Completing the bride’s ensemble was “her illusion veil,” but truly, both of Didion’s brides wore an illusion veil: each tried to momentarily erase her past through the fantasy of an ideal wedding (28). But Didion does not denounce their need for this illusion; rather, she seems to understand it, respect it. Despite recognizing each wedding’s ostensible imperfections she is driven to find value in them, to justify their unsettling existence. She exhibits this same drive in her description of Las Vegas, which she deems both “bizarre and beautiful in its venality and in its devotion to immediate gratification” (“Marrying” 80). Though critical of the “bizarre” individual elements of which Las Vegas is composed, Didion finds something “beautiful” in the complete product, in the judgment-free fantasy world that
the city offers. She ultimately eschews her critical focus on apparent flaws in favor of appreciation for the value hidden beneath seedy surfaces, suggesting that she does not solely want to ridicule the environments which she observes.

In order to find the source of the sympathy that disarms her cynicism, it is necessary to inspect exactly how Didion constructs her criticism. Her harsh observations are made only once she has established a disconnect between her environment and herself; distance is what allows her to dissect her subject and critique its imperfections. In “Los Angeles Notebook,” Didion describes the city in chaos during a Santa Ana wind, a kind of hot spell that supposedly rewrites the residents’ minds and makes them temperamental. Through personification, she renders the environment threatening: the “malevolent” wind is “whining” down through the mountain passes (218). The Santa Ana here seems to have more life and vigor than Didion herself, who reports the scene in passive, distant third person. Assailed by constant fires, Los Angeles’s weather during this period “is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse;” the Santa Ana’s “violence” and “unpredictability” determine the way that life is lived in the city (221). Didion does not see the severe environmental phenomenon as cause for worry, stress or concern—it is simply a consequence of living in Los Angeles. Though she admits that the Santa Ana affects her lifestyle, she retains a calm, indifferent attitude towards it. This casual brush-off reflects Didion’s desire to be independent of the forces around her, invulnerable to their control. Observing the San Francisco neighborhood of Haight-Ashbury from afar, writing in third-person past tense, she recalls it as “a country of bankruptcy notices . . . and commonplace reports of casual killings and misplaced children and abandoned homes” (“Slouching” 84). As she does in her detailing of Las Vegas, Didion makes these detached observations with a critical eye, only successfully depicting Haight-Ashbury as corrupt when she has removed herself from its borders.

But Didion can never fully separate herself from the places she writes about. She switches to first-person present tense when describing her encounters with “friends” in Haight-Ashbury, offering a much more intimate perspective on life in the neighborhood. With them, she writes, she “dances a little and [does] some liquid projections and [sets] up a strobe and [takes] turns getting a high on that” (“Slouching” 97). The shifts from remote to
insider perspective within this essay suggest that Didion does allow herself to be present in a place, to become close with her environment and its people. In her concluding remark about the Santa Ana, Didion shifts once more to first person: “The wind shows us how close to the edge we are” (“Los Angeles” 221). Though Didion’s “we” is elusive, she admits that she is a part of her environment; there is a silent, subtle communion between her surroundings and her feelings. The statement remains deliberately unclear: we do not know whether the people of Los Angeles, Didion included, feel on edge because of the Santa Ana or whether the perceived effect of the Santa Ana is a reflection of their edginess. With this lack of distinction between natural phenomenon and human experience, between cause and effect, Didion suggests that humans and their surroundings are inseparably intertwined.

Due to her unwitting tendency to identify with her subjects, Didion finds aspects of herself reflected in environments—even those which she has not physically known. For example, she becomes bound to Hawaii, a place to which she had never traveled, through personal history. In December 1941, this distant paradise “meant war and [her] father going away . . . and nothing the same ever again” (“Letter” 189). Criticizing and dissecting Hawaii, which for Didion recalls a particularly painful time, would be to criticize and dissect a part of her own past, something she is hesitant to do. After visiting the island, she “[finds] it difficult” to explain “precisely how and why Hawaii moves [her], touches [her], saddens and troubles and engages [her] imagination” (188). Admitting that she cannot quite verbalize what it is about Hawaii that so affects her, she suggests that a kind of critical paralysis occurs when she becomes emotionally invested in her surroundings. There is a distinction between the ways in which Didion examines the external—her physical environments—and the internal. Didion can tear down the external, breaking it into minute parts which she can then scrutinize. But she cannot analyze the internal—her own thoughts and feelings—in the same mechanical way. Her inability to scrutinize herself seems to create psychological displacement—she unintentionally attains a distance from her own mind, the same distance she could not create between herself and her environments.

Didion struggles to understand herself, and thus attempts to define her identity by a particular location. This impulse is most apparent when she
returns “home” to celebrate her daughter’s first birthday. She immediately clarifies: “not the house in Los Angeles where my husband and I and the baby live, but the place where my family is” (“Home” 164). This distinction creates the simultaneous presence of two homes: the one she came from and the one she has made, and she cannot discern to which of the two she truly belongs—or if she belongs to both. Surrounding by reminders of her past in her childhood home, Didion seeks mental clarity by clearing out an old drawer. She finds pictures of her father as a young man; scrutinizing one image, she “[looks] into his face, and [does] and [does not] see [her] own” (166). In this moment, Didion is forced to face the conflict between separation from and connection with her surroundings on a personal level: she is simultaneously a part of her family and outside of it; Didion is split. As she wanders “aimlessly from room to room” of her family home, Didion feels a “nameless anxiety,” her ambiguous diction reflecting her sense of alienation from both the place itself and from the essential aspect of her own identity that it represents (166, 165).

The travel narratives that compose Slouching Towards Bethlehem are more than critical journalistic portraits of American cities: they are a way for Didion to relocate herself both spatially and psychologically—to recover her past selves, the people she has “lost touch with” (“On Keeping” 139). Didion attempts to reconstruct a lost understanding of who she is by rereading her own personal notebooks. Filled with fragments of overheard conversations and indecipherable notes about her surroundings, the notebooks are a puzzle to Didion; she can only admit they “presumably [had] some meaning to [her]” (131). Discovering that she can no longer translate her own code, she realizes that keeping a notebook was never about documenting her observations, as she once thought, but about documenting herself. Her notebooks allow her to “remember what it was like to be [her]” (136). Didion’s realization that she has been the true subject of her observations leads her to the revelation that “the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable ‘I’” (136). Yet Didion’s “I” encompasses two perspectives, two drives, as she proves in her criticism, albeit subconsciously. Didion’s critical voice is not the only voice present in Slouching Towards Bethlehem; there is also her hidden voice, the Didion seeking the lost facets of herself. Didion’s voice as a critic is loud, biting and harsh, but the
quieter voice in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*—Didion’s shaky, introspective voice—may be the more insightful one. By tearing an environment down through her criticism, Didion is able to apprehend its superficial imperfections. But her deconstructive criticism, masked so as to make her seem emotionally removed from her environment, actually brings her closer to it. She dives into the wreckage she creates, searching for her own displaced identity. At the end of each exhaustive investigation, the sympathetic side of Didion, who relates to the flawed environment because it reflects her own flaws, needs to reassemble what she tore down, to put together the broken pieces and make something of value. She cannot leave her world in fragments. To do so would be to further fragment herself, to lose her quiet voice forever in the wind.

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**WORKS CITED**


“Guaymas, Sonora.” 214-16.
“Marrying Absurd.” 79-83.
“On Going Home.” 164-68.
“Slouching Towards Bethlehem.” 84-128.