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The Oceans That Part Us: Mother-Child Relationships in Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*

There are many unusual things about Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*: its unique position as a Hollywood novel centered around a female character (one Maria Wyeth), its chaotic and yet structured distortion of the temporal sequence over 84 fragmented chapters, and its frank portrayal of mental illness and abortion at a time when the former was simply not discussed and the latter was not yet legal. What is most fascinating, though, and perhaps also most contested about the novel is the main character herself: who *is* Maria Wyeth? This question is so difficult and interesting because she, in fact, does not know. In a 1970 review for the *Atlantic Monthly*—the same year the novel was first published—Phoebe-Lou Adams dismissed Maria's character as selfish, stupid, and impotent:

The form of Miss Didion's novel is admirably lucid, vivid, and fast-paced. The content is the decline of a self-centered pseudo-actress with a crack in her head. This woman, endowed by the author with the spunk of a jellyfish and the brain of a flea, snivels her way into a mental hospital via a string of disasters that outsuds any soap opera. (qtd. in Felton 65)

This review, in its scathing simplicity, misses the essence of Maria and, really, of the novel itself. Adams does get one thing right, however: *Play It As It Lays* is *extremely* fast-paced. In her essay "Why I Write," Didion explains her initial idea: "to write a novel so elliptical and fast that it would be over before you noticed it, a novel so fast that it would scarcely exist on the

page at all” (“Why I Write”). She explains that she intentionally wrote the novel so that its “action” happens off the page, leaving readers to their own imaginations. What does appear on the page is Maria: her thoughts, impressions, struggles, failures. By the end of the novel, one has the sense (whether correct or not) that one knows Maria intimately. She is certainly not stupid, perhaps a little selfish, and above all, the end of the novel leaves a lasting impression of her strength. The prevalence of water symbolism in *Play It As It Lays* guides the reader in forming these impressions and contributes to its tone and complexity. “Water is the most positive symbol in the novel, and Maria’s attraction to it is an index to the depth and sensitivity of her character, to her potential for salvation” (Henderson 39). Perhaps Maria’s most redeeming quality is her pure, unselfish love for her daughter, Kate. It is her strongest and most consistent feeling; it is the source of her determination to continue on, and it is often expressed indirectly, through symbols and actions. Moreover, it flows from the maternal affection Maria received from her own mother, and remembers as some of her fondest—if also complicated—moments.

In describing her life *as it was*, Maria mentions that her mother read magazines and dreamed of exotic adventures: “*cross the ocean in a silver plane*, she would croon to herself and mean it, *see the jungle when it’s wet with rain*” (Didion 7). It is no accident that water permeates Maria’s mother’s dreams for the future. Water in these recollected scenes is not only symbolic of home, but also of hope: hope that the family can eke out a life for themselves in the arid desert, hope that one day they can travel in planes and see a place that, totally unlike the desert, is continually “wet with rain” (Didion 7).

Additionally, and perhaps for reasons related to home, water also comes to symbolize love for Maria. The strongest emotion the reader sees Maria experience throughout the novel is her maternal love for her daughter, Kate. “The chain of love in the novel passes from Francine to

Maria to Kate and is shown in gestures more than words; Maria remembers her mother cutting her hair in bangs, and when she visits her hospitalized daughter she brushes Kate's hair" (Henderson 27). In one heartwarming scene, Carter recalls Maria playing with Kate on the lawn of the house in Beverly Hills. She is entertaining the baby with drops of water from a hose; he calls out that she might catch a chill, which seemed to aggravate Maria. "Maria [looked] up, [dropped] the hose, and [walked] away from the baby toward the poolhouse" (Didion 14). It would seem that Maria is angry with Carter for what she sees as him trying to prevent her from loving Kate, both in this small matter of playing in the water, and more importantly in having Kate institutionalized.

Maria's other significant love is for Les Goodwin, the lover whose baby she believes she is carrying. At night, when she is overwhelmed by anxiety and can't sleep, she thinks of Les to calm herself, imagining that the two of them live in "a house by the sea" with Kate (Didion 114). She pictures the tidal pools and mussels on the beach; this tranquil scene soothes her, much as the gentle rolling of the waves might soothe a small child to sleep. When Maria and Les finally meet again, they sleep "wrapped together like children in a room by the sea". In these scenes, both reality and fantasy, the sea implies the stability and tranquility of love that Maria longs for in her life, but cannot seem to hold onto.

Dreams such as this one play an important part in understanding Maria's character. They can be seen as an example of "dream work" in action; in Freudian psychoanalysis, this term refers to the process by which real events or desires are transformed into dreams. Maria's dreams are often unrealistic, unattainable: she dreams of a peaceful life in which she does not abort her unborn child and they live happily, along with her other daughter and one of her former lovers. This is quite impossible, though, for multiple reasons:

Prior to her abortion, Maria dreams that she has given birth to her baby and that she and the baby and Kate are all living with Ivan Costello. Later, however, we learn that when she *had* been with Ivan, he had made it quite clear that he would never marry her and that he would insist on her aborting any child she might conceive. (Winchell 96)

Not only is the idea of Ivan caring for her children an unrealistic one, it is an indicator of Maria's subconscious belief in the impossibility of a happy future. Ivan in this dream is a condensation, or a dream image that represents multiple things: he is an amalgamation of Carter and Les Goodwin, the men currently in Maria's life, and with whom a happy ending is also unattainable. Les is married to someone else, and Maria's marriage to Carter has collapsed.

This hopeless situation contributes to Maria's stated belief that "nothing applies" (Didion 4). Her apparent nihilism, introduced in the first few pages of the novel and demonstrated throughout, colors the reader's perception of Maria, and may at first glance appear to be simply a product of literary trends at the time. Comer argues, though, that it is just as much a product of social influences:

This confrontation with 'nothingness,' however, owes a debt not just to noir or Camus, but also to contemporary debates about women's reproductive freedom—which would culminate in three years in *Roe vs. Wade*. Maria's belief that 'nothing applies' is due in large part to the devastation that follows her half-coerced abortion. (349)

This devastation stems not only from Maria's conviction that in aborting her child she is destroying the possibility of a happy future, but also from her strong maternal instinct, inherited from her own mother and visible in her love for Kate. This love is her driving force, her purest emotion, and her strongest sense of her own identity. "Maria remembers her mother, in particular, with guilt and love, for the bond between mother and child is her highest value, a

value communicated to the reader but not to her friends and not even to the psychiatrists in the hospital” (Henderson 27). This love is the only thing, she confesses to the reader at one point, that motivates her to continue on. The reader eventually discovers, though, that Maria is less than reliable as a narrator, and much too complex a character for a simple answer such as “love”.

Winchell points out that the final scene of the novel reveals the true extent of Maria’s nihilism: “Maria may actually believe she is living for Kate; however, the truth, as Didion’s narrative perspective forces us to see it, is that Maria continues to live because, deep down, she does not even share BZ’s faith in the meaningfulness of death” (98). Before swallowing a deadly dose of Seconal, BZ offers some to Maria (Didion 212). She refuses, as she explains it retroactively, for Kate. However, her offhand manner throughout the scene suggests much more indifference than she is willing to admit.

Moreover, Maria’s love for Kate reveals her psychological relationship to love in general and, unsurprisingly, it is a complicated one. Her dysfunctional, failed romantic relationships with Ivan and Carter contrast strongly with her forbidden love affair with Les, and all of these are still different from her superficial friendships with Helene and the various homosexual men with whom she attends parties. In these relationships, Maria only comes close to real romantic love for Les, who she cannot have. Her deepest love is for Kate, but it is a love that can never truly blossom, as Winchell points out. “Although Maria feels genuine maternal love for Kate, the child’s condition makes it nearly impossible for that love to be demonstrated or returned” (Winchell 94). Maria holds at arms’ length everyone in her life with the capacity to love her, choosing to love (or believe that she loves) only those who cannot ever truly reciprocate.

This behavior is first introduced symbolically in Maria's drives on the freeway. Early on in the novel, when Maria is sleeping outside by the pool, she spends her days driving the freeway in her Corvette, comparing L.A.'s endless maze of highways to a river.

She drove it as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents, its deceptions, and just as a riverman feels the pull of the rapids in the lull between sleeping and waking, so Maria lay at night in the still of Beverly Hills and saw the great signs soar overhead at seventy miles an hour, *Normandie 1/4 Vermont 3/4 Harbor Fwy I*. (Didion 16)

While there is some negative connotation here ("deceptions"), the apparent implication of this passage, and the related descriptions of Maria's driving, is that this activity for her is a way to feel, and stay, alive. Just as a river is a source of life for everything that it touches, so the freeway is a source of life for Maria during this period, or at least a way to stay alive. However, it is also an indication of her avoidant tendencies:

The drives toward the desert are the first instance of a pattern that dominates Maria's relationships with all the people in her life. The pattern is an elaborate dance: when the partner moves towards her, she moves away; when he moves away, she follows. The dance enables Maria to avoid emotional closeness and the mutual responsibility it implies; it also serves her need for suffering and self-punishment, since it keeps her alone and isolated. (Henderson 32)

During one of these drives, Maria finds herself in the desert far outside of Los Angeles, not far from where Carter is currently filming a movie. She considers calling him, but pictures the conversation going badly, as similar ones have in the past, and decides against it. After this close call, she does not drive the freeway anymore. This decision represents not only her

physical distance from Carter but the emotional one as well, and the act of distancing can be seen over and over again in her other relationships as the novel progresses.

Another river is mentioned much later in the text, this time as a symbol of death. After her abortion, Maria's psychological and emotional state deteriorates even further, a decline that Winchell attributes to the value she places on the mother-child bond. "Because Maria has strong maternal instincts, her abortion is the cause of much guilt and anxiety. It can also be seen as a symbol of the breakdown of the family and of traditional standards of morality" (97). As she is mourning the child she aborted, Maria is continually haunted by the images of water that Didion crafts: the stopped-up plumbing in her house and apartment, which she knows deep down is caused by "hacked pieces of human flesh" (97); the pouring rain as she tries to flee the apartment and those morbid thoughts (104); and visions of the East River in New York City when she thinks about taking a trip there to get away. "All that day Maria thought of fetuses in the East River, translucent as jellyfish, floating past the big sewage outfalls with the orange peels" (Didion 116). In this dark picture that Didion is drawing, the river represents her womb, which since the moment her abortion has become a place of death and despair. Henderson asserts that such symbolism is an indicator of Didion's view of women in modern society: "Didion believes that women predictably feel guilty after an abortion because they are natural bearers of children...She also regards Maria's guiltiness (which is invariably associated with sexual activity) as the result of social conditioning, the burden of her generation of women" (30). To call *Play It As It Lays* a critique of this social conditioning or of reproductive politics is perhaps a step too far, but the novel is certainly an examination of how women navigate those realities, especially in the spiritual and literal desert that is Los Angeles.

Maria, for her part, has no mother figure to look to for guidance and advice on womanhood and its challenges. She has no parental figures to consult for spiritual and moral guidance in her spiritually and morally corrupt environment. Evelyn E. Fracasso points out the “gradual dehumanization” that Maria experiences throughout the events of the novel, and indeed has been experiencing for the entirety of her adult life (154). The past, normally so important as a point of reference from which to proceed, is lost to her through the death of her parents and the demolition of her hometown, and this loss is dehumanizing. “With both her parents dead (her mother’s body was torn apart by coyotes after an automobile accident), Maria’s ties to her past have been so irrevocably severed that she is unable to ‘go back’ even under hypnosis” (Winchell 95). Fracasso also notes the importance of the abundant images of dryness and heat that pervade the novel, and their relation to Maria’s mental and emotional state.

As part of her aimless search for answers, clarity, something, Maria visits a hypnotist in Silverlake who claims that most people’s problems can be traced to conception and gestation. The hypnotist instructs her to imagine that period of early formation: “‘You’re lying in water,’ the hypnotist said. ‘You’re lying in water and it’s warm and you hear your mother’s voice’” (Didion 124). Maria cannot do it. That feeling of home, of safety invoked by the image of water is lost to her, as permanent and complete as the loss of her mother herself. Henderson sees this event as a failure on the part of the hypnotist rather than Maria. “The hypnotist and his house are both shabby, and the implications of his advertisement are false, for he cannot deliver the insight he offers... Thus the figure of the hypnotist in the novel is one more illustration of the spiritual poverty of contemporary life” (Henderson 31). Much like the images of the false preachers and pseudo-religious health gurus in Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*, the hypnotist is a hollow product of Hollywood’s hollow culture. He represents the spiritual and cultural



bankruptcy at play: there is no recalling the past and thus no relief in the present, no life in the future.

The one remnant of her past that Maria can hold onto is her father's lesson that life is a crap game and the trick is to play the cards that are on the table. Even this lesson, though, doesn't seem to help Maria, as she includes it in her assertion that "nothing applies". "Integrated into the novel is a figurative scheme that both challenges and supersedes the image of life as a crap game. The scheme uses traditional symbols: water as a symbol of spiritual renewal and the desert as the symbol of spiritual desolation" (Henderson 38). Two final water images appear at the end of the novel, highlighting once more the duality of life and death, and Maria's indifference to both.

While she is on location in the desert with Carter, Helene, and BZ, Maria spends her days not on the film set but in the tiny town, which is located "on a dry river bed between Death Valley and the Nevada line" (Didion 187). Note the significance of this description: it is arid, with no water, no home or hope, and with the mention of Death Valley to emphasize the importance of water as life. The town's main attraction is its hot springs, which draw the elderly, who are seeking the water to prolong life. The chapter ends with a stark picture: "There were two trees in the town, two cottonwoods in the dry river bed, but one of them was dead" (Didion 188). This naturalistic image of death, not only as a result of lack of water but a hoarding of water, foreshadows the climax and its final water imagery.

In the climactic scene, the event to which the entire novel has been building, BZ dies by suicide after taking Seconal capsules with a glass of water. He and Maria are lying next to each other in bed, and he asks her to hold his hand. "He was swallowing the capsules with a glass of water. There were not very many left on the bed...She closed her eyes against the light and her ears against Helene and her mind against what was going to happen in the next few hours and

tightened her hold on BZ's hand" (Didion 213). In this scene, the water has definitively become a symbol of death, a method of destruction rather than a source of life. Maria, buoyed about by all of these images, is finally completely indifferent to them all.

What, then, is the composite of these scenes, images, and ideas? What is the *why*? In "Why I Write" Didion discusses her initial intent in writing *Play It As It Lays*:

I had only two pictures in my mind...the first was of white space. Empty space. This was clearly the picture that dictated the narrative intention of the book—a book in which anything that happened would happen off the page, a "white" book to which the reader would have to bring his or her own bad dreams. ("Why I Write")

In making this claim—not that it is necessarily a false one—that the novel is a mirror to be held up to the reader and perhaps to society at large, Didion is coyly side-stepping the revelation that *Play It As It Lays* is, in many ways, *her* story. "*Play It* is a Hollywood book, not just because it's about Hollywood people, but because it's a book that's also a movie. Didion's the star" (Anolik). In a fascinating article on Didion for *Vanity Fair*, Lili Anolik observes that *Play It As It Lays* is as much about Joan Didion as it is Maria Wyeth. Then, too, it inextricably belongs to that dazzling, demented genre known as the Hollywood Novel; Didion's ancestral roots are just as inextricably planted in California. "Didion calls herself California's 'native daughter,' for she is great-great-great-granddaughter of a pioneer family who came west on a wagon train to the Sacramento Valley in 1846" (Comer 346). Anolik points out that although Didion is from California, she is not from the California of Los Angeles and Hollywood. Like Maria, she is a transplant, moving to Los Angeles to work in the film industry. "She was a native daughter, but only sort of. The California she grew up in—the Sacramento Valley—was closer in spirit to the Old West than to the sun-kissed, pleasure-mad movie colony" (Anolik). This

distinction is particularly important because it reveals something crucial about Maria and thus Didion: their experience of home.

The image of water as home, comfort, sustenance, is prevalent in the background of *Play It As Lays*. Maria is, as she explains at the beginning of her written account, from the vanished town of Silver Wells, Nevada (wells being, of course, essential to a desert town). She describes the town as having “three hundred acres of mesquite,” a desert-dwelling plant that invokes the picture of an oasis in the Southwestern desert (Didion 5). Water flows subtly through Maria’s memories as an indicator of the comfort and stability she left behind in Silver Wells—and it is just as significant that Silver Wells no longer exists. After her separation from Carter and his departure to the film set, Maria begins sleeping outside by the pool at the house in Beverly Hills, searching for some semblance of that sense of home and comfort that the clear, clean water brings. “Outside she did not have to be afraid that she would not wake up, outside she could sleep” (Didion 16). The house in Beverly Hills, which is how it is referred to throughout the novel, is just that—a house. It is not a home for Maria, especially without Kate, and one gets the sense that there has been no home for Maria since Silver Wells.

One can imagine that Didion, who suffered from migraine headaches and recurring bouts of depression, was intimately familiar with this feeling of being adrift, of searching for comfort in bizarre rituals and mindless distractions. Maria’s maternal instincts and related grief hold echoes of Didion’s own strong desire to be pregnant and her eventual adoption of a daughter. Unlike other Hollywood novels, *Play It As It Lays* deals with not only social fragmentation, but the phenomenon as it affects women specifically. “...her California fiction is devoted not just to the cultural changes taking place in post-war California, but to the effect of those changes on California’s women” (Comer 347). The novel expertly captures the essence of the sixties, of Los

Angeles in the sixties, of women in Los Angeles in the sixties. It is *The Day of the Locust* but with the fire and brimstone contained within the protagonist, compressed until it is transformed into a cold, indifferent diamond. It has no action beyond the act of living. It has no plot beyond the passage of time. It transcends character study, social commentary, noir, and satire to create a novel that is over before it has begun, a novel that encapsulates and confounds the human spirit, a novel that is really an autobiography and also a *socio*-biography, a novel that *is* Joan Didion—and what more or less is there?

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