

NOTES FROM THE FLYOVER

J A S O N M O S S E R

South and West: From a Notebook

By Joan Didion

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FOR READERS WHO MIGHT ASK what to expect from Joan Didion's latest book, its subtitle raises an interesting question, especially since "notebook" and "note" signify no specific literary genre and therefore carry no set of conventions, no definite reader expectations. Notes are sometimes published posthumously as textual scholarship, germs of ideas, drafts of projects small and large, as in the notebooks for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but here there is no more completed work, even though some of these notes anticipate Didion's personal history of California, *Where I Was From* (2003). We have Eliot's notes, actually footnotes, to *The Waste Land*. We have Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, a novella, and Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, a collection of essays. We even have Didion's own "Notes Toward a Dreampolitik," a series of short, thematically focused essays, not to mention other Didion titles referencing "Notes," but none of those compare. A reader may commend Didion for not worrying about labels, but if she implicitly claims to present verbatim notes recorded on a trip taken almost fifty years ago, she can neither gratify nor fail to gratify a reader's expectations because there are not any. If I may be pardoned for pedantry on this point, I am left with the question whether this book, which I read and reviewed unmediated by other discourse about it, has or has not been an enjoyable and edifying reading experience, and my answer is yes and no.

Most of the notes record her 1970 journey from her starting point in New Orleans, east through Mississippi and Alabama, then back around to the Big Easy—the deep South. Despite having lived briefly in Durham and New Orleans, Didion drifts through her Southern sojourn as a stranger in a strange land, yet her prescience is often acute, as when she intuits that organized sports in the South are “the opiate of the people,” and indeed, as an adopted Southerner, I can testify that Southeastern Conference (SEC) football is arguably bigger than Jesus. Of course, the New South through which Didion traveled was poorer, more provincial, and more systematically segregated than it is today, and many of the people she interviewed speak of progress measured by industrialization and the relocation of jobs and factories to the southern states, but also, Didion notes, with implicit irony, by the resulting environmental destruction. She also notes hints of the emergent 1960s counterculture, blowing in on a sultry breeze of incense and marijuana smoke, and observes that “children represent a mysterious subculture in small southern towns,” and yet not so mysterious, merely an extension via mass media of the 1960s San Francisco scene she wrote about two years earlier in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” (1968).

Despite Didion’s claim that all of her “old reporter’s tricks,” means of gleaning information, had “atrophied” in the South, these notes are still journalistic, and as a journalist Didion is always already disposed to witness events, especially those which she simply witnesses from a detached reportorial perspective. As a reporter of not just facts but impressions, Didion remains a master of what Kenneth Burke called the representative anecdote which, in her writing, is the scene or image that illustrates the ironic moment when people say so much more than they realize. A banal conversation between two Southern women discussing the inevitability of bad weather news on the radio concludes with one stating flatly, “And we get it.” (The aftermath of Hurricane Camille can be glimpsed in these notes, but Didion never mentions the storm specifically.) That “We get it” sums up so much of the hardship and despair of working-class lives then and now, but without direct authorial comment. Of course, Didion’s readers, educated, middle-class, and nearly as sensitive registers of experience as the author herself, get it too.

In her journalistic recording of symbolic details, Didion is still practicing what Tom Wolfe called “saturation reporting,” but because she is constantly on the move, never dwelling long in any location, her reportage is light on saturation. American regionalists and local color writers appreciate the im-

portance of immersing themselves in the places they wrote about. In “Notes from a Native Daughter” (1968), a twist on Baldwin’s title, Didion wrote that tourists who spend only a little time in California “naturally tend to believe that they have in fact been to California. They have not been, and they probably never will be, for it is a longer and in many ways a more difficult trip than they might want to undertake. . . .” Might not the same be said of Didion’s impressions of the American South?

One effect a reader can expect from reading notes is that they will be elliptical, but the omissions in Didion’s book raise a vexing question that any reader might ask: are these notes pure unedited transcriptions from her notebook, or has she revised them for publication? They do not read like telegraphic transcriptions; they have the polish and elegance we expect from Didion’s prose. If, then, she revised, toward what purpose? One frustrating feature of these notes is that they present certain narrative gaps. Referring to a former New Orleans lover only as N., Didion confesses, “I tried to kill him with a kitchen knife,” but she does not say why, nor does the cryptic note he leaves her later help to clarify. Not that writers are obligated to tell us anything they want to keep confidential, and even though a reader can assume she omits the name to protect herself legally or personally, why begin a story she does not intend to finish? Her companion on this trip was her husband John Gregory Dunne, and she writes that they had “A senseless disagreement on the causeway,” but if it really was so inconsequential, why mention it at all? In an earlier essay, “On Keeping a Notebook” (1968), she wrote that “We are not talking here about the kind of notebook that is patently for private consumption, a structural conceit for binding together a series of graceful *pensees*; we are talking about something private . . . an indiscriminate and erratic knowledge with meaning only for its maker. And sometimes even the maker has difficulty with the meaning,” raising the question whether readers might struggle with her meaning as well. In her much anthologized essay “Why I Write” (1976) she wrote, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means,” so I understand why Didion wrote these notes; I am less certain about why she published them and how she imagined her audience.

She reveals her notion that “for some years the South and particularly the Gulf Coast had been for America what people were still saying California was, and what California seemed to me not to be: the future, the secret source of malevolent and benevolent energy, the psychic center,” so she trav-

els “to find out . . . what was making the picture in my mind.” In “Why I Write,” Didion claimed, too self-deferentially for such a perspicacious reporter, that early on she realized that she was incapable of thinking in abstractions, only in terms of images that “shimmer” for her: “*My attention veered inexorably back to the specific, to the tangible, to what was generally considered . . . the peripheral,*” but what she presents in her comparison of California to the South is not an image, rather an unformed, vaguely articulated notion. She seems to conclude that the real psychic life of the nation is to be found on the East and West coasts, and she bemoans with a kind of regional chauvinism the “isolation of these people [Southerners] from the currents of American life.” The South, for Didion, still represents the “wilderness,” the “bloodied land” which Californians, she suggests, had cleansed generations ago, the same California that, in *Play It As It Lays* (1970) and “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” (1968), Didion represents as a Wasteland.

The California section of the book is much shorter and even more elliptical. Didion writes that in 1976 she “*tried to report*” the Patty Hearst trial, thinking that “*the trial had some meaning for me—because I was from California,*” but adding that “*This didn’t turn out to be true,*” so she “never wrote the piece,” but if there are no new facts, no new insights, why is she telling us about it? She subsequently states that the story she wants to tell is actually her own, and that tendency to place herself in the middle of the stories she tells is one of the distinguishing features of her essays, as well as of her literary journalism, but she finally reveals that “At the center of this story there is a terrible secret . . . and the secret is that the story doesn’t matter, doesn’t make any difference.” So, is the real story the one of how the story she set out to tell did not matter and continues not to matter? Perhaps it seemed so at the time and yet, years later, in her collection *After Henry* (1993), she published “Girl of the Golden West,” her ostensible account of the Hearst trial.

As in much of her writing, Didion’s notes display her tendency to see life in terms of art: “Fayette [MS] had the aspect of a set from *Porgy and Bess*.” Recorded in past tense, her experience is always already allusive and aestheticized. Her New Orleans notes are informed by the Southern Gothic: “In New Orleans in June the air is heavy with sex and death . . . death by decay,” the Faulknerian death of the Old South. Underlying her whole southern journey is a sense of her need to keep moving or drown in the miasmic wasteland of suffocating heat and mind-numbing ignorance. “It occurred

to me,” she writes, “that had I lived there I would have been an eccentric and full of anger,” rather like Flannery O’Connor must have felt growing up in Milledgeville GA. Didion frequently fantasizes about catching the nearest plane out of this or that forlorn little hamlet. Constantly on display is Didion’s culturally elite perspective as a Berkeley graduate, New York journalist, and Hollywood screenwriter. She reflects some awareness of this when she states “I have never known deprivation.” Her descriptive passages devoted to clothing and household furnishings in her Sacramento past signify affluence. When she is writing in this vein, one has the feeling of reading a description from an upscale catalogue. As she closes with how the Western landscape “looks right to the eye, sounds right to the ear,” I could only think of Mitt Romney’s remark about how the trees in Michigan are just the right height.