

New Nonfiction from Andria Williams: Reading Joan Didion in August 2019

In the summer of 1968, while starting several of the essays that would comprise her collection *The White Album*, Joan Didion began to suffer from a series of unexplained physical and emotional ailments. After an attack of “vertigo and nausea,” she underwent a battery of tests at the outpatient psychiatric clinic at St. John’s Hospital in Santa Monica, CA. In *The White Album*’s title essay, she shares some of the professionals’ feedback:

Patient’s [results]... emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal. In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitable to conflict and failure...

A month later, Didion was named a *Los Angeles Times* “Woman of the Year.” It did not seem to matter to her much. Instead, what she remembers of that year:

I watched Robert Kennedy’s funeral on a verandah at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, and also the first reports from My Lai [in which more than 500 Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children, were murdered by American soldiers]. I reread all of George Orwell...[and also] the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, a 26-year-old woman with faded blond hair who put her five-year-old daughter out to die on the center divider of Interstate 5 some miles south of the last Bakersfield exit. The child...[rescued twelve hours later] reported that she had

run after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister for "a long time." Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew.

She adds, a few pages later: "By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968."

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Julian Wasser/Netflix

Hyper-awareness has always been both Joan Didion's secret

weapon and her *hamartia*. Circa 1968, being seemingly everywhere at once, observing and recording at an unforgiving pace, there is no way the world could not have felt kaleidoscopic, splintered. In *THE WHITE ALBUM*, she attends The Doors' recording sessions (but not for long), visits Huey Newton in jail and Eldridge Cleaver under house arrest. She analyzes the California Governor's mansion, and the Getty Museum (which she sees as an artistic flub, "a palpable contract between the very rich and the people who distrust them least"); she rhapsodizes about water. The Manson murders, happening just down the street to people like her and the subject of her rumination in the title essay, seem a symptom of this summer of dread.

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That summer, Didion also, improbably, starts watching biker films, a habit she continues over the next two years. "A successful bike movie," she declares, "is a perfect Rorschach of its audience."

I saw nine of them recently, saw the first one almost by accident and the rest of them with a notebook. I saw Hell's Angels on Wheels and Hell's Angels '69. I saw Run Angel Run and The Glory Stompers and The Losers. I saw The Wild Angels, I saw Violent Angels, I saw The Savage Seven and I saw The Cycle Savages. I was not even sure why I kept going.

But she does know why she keeps going, and despite the humor of this absurd list and the thought of Joan Didion investing the time to consume it all (did she ever remove her sunglasses?), she begins to wonder what these storylines are giving their audience. "The senseless insouciance of all the characters in a world of routine stompings and casual death takes on a logic better left unplumbed," she muses.

But then, of course, she plumbs it, and what she observes, given the current political climate, feels almost prescient.

I suppose I kept going to these movies because there on the screen was some news I was not getting from the New York Times. I began to think I was seeing ideograms of the future...to apprehend the extent to which the toleration of small irritations is no longer a trait much admired in America, the extent to which a nonexistent frustration threshold is not seen as psychopathic but a 'right.'

I begin to imagine if the heroes of these bike movies had had Twitter. I decide to stop imagining that. They are people, Didion writes in closing, "whose whole lives are an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made. [These people] are, increasingly, everywhere, and their style is that of an entire generation."

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Throughout all these mental roving runs Didion's usual vein of skepticism and aloofness. Danger, for her, is personal, never institutional. It's the threatening man on the street or the hippie at the door with a knife. She's not a revolutionary, not exactly a liberal (though she was one of the first to, in a 17,000-word essay for the *New York Review of Books*, advocate for the innocence of the falsely-accused Central Park Five). Visiting Huey Newton in jail, she mentions that "the small room was hot and the fluorescent light hurt my eyes." A reader can't help but think, at least for an instant, Suck it up, Joan! But mere pages later she's on the campus of San Francisco State, which has been temporarily shut down by race riots, and her shrewd eye sees the truth: "Here at San Francisco State only the black militants could be construed as serious...Meanwhile the white radicals could see themselves, on an investment of virtually nothing, as urban guerrillas."

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Here in the summer of 2019, I can, in at least some minor ways, relate to the dread Joan Didion felt in the summer of

'68. Today, it is August 10th. On the third of this month, 20 people were killed and 26 others injured by a gunman who walked into a Walmart in El Paso, Texas at ten-thirty in the morning and began firing with a semi-automatic Kalashnikov-style rifle, aiming at anyone he suspected to be Hispanic. Hours later, nine more people were killed and 27 injured in a mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio. The Proud Boys are marching in Portland and the President of the United States has denounced only those who've come out to oppose them. (It should be noted that these are grown men who call themselves "boys," and that is the least alarming thing about them.) A little over a week ago I watched Private First Class Glendon Oakley, a US soldier who had saved several children during the El Paso shooting and wept openly about not having been able to save more, stand at parade rest while the President pointed at him on live television and said, "The whole world knows who you are now, right? So you'll be a movie star, the way you look. That'll be next, right?"

Oakley looked stricken. "Yes, sir," he said.

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Now it's August 13th and there is a rally at the police station in downtown Colorado Springs. Ten days prior—the same day as El Paso—nineteen-year-old De'Von Bailey was shot seven times in the back while fleeing Colorado Springs police. I watch the unbearable video, circulating on the local news outlets, taken from an apartment security camera across the street. De'Von Bailey, young, short-haired, skinny as my son, runs across a sweep of pavement just like any you'd see in any suburban town. He doesn't pull a weapon or even turn back to look over his shoulder. Two armed cops enter the frame not far behind him. Then, he falls, skidding in a seated position, staying briefly upright. For a moment, from this distance, in a still image, he could be merely relaxing, sitting with one arm propped behind him. Then he crumples forward and the police

close in, cuffing his hands behind his back before rendering aid. In the hospital, De'Von Bailey dies.

Today, the attorneys for De'Von Bailey's parents are holding a press conference outside the police station downtown. The Pike's Peak Justice and Peace Committee has put out a call for citizens to show their support for the Baileys and their demand for an unbiased investigation. I like the Justice and Peace Committee, a group of tenacious old-timers who sometimes, at unpredictable intervals, convene to hold a giant sign in front of the Air Force Academy that reads, "WHAT ABOUT THE PEACE ACADEMY?" They mostly get yelled at from car windows. They have used the same sign for years; the phone number at the bottom has been whited over and repainted several times; it is canvas, more than five feet tall and probably ten feet long, printed with perfect spacing and propped by two wooden posts, so as to be quickly unrolled and then rolled back together for a quick exit as necessary. I joined them in a protest once, this past April, when Donald Trump spoke at the Air Force Academy commencement. I held one end of their sign. I was the only military spouse there, though there were a couple of long-haired Vietnam-era veterans. A man offered me eight hundred dollars to help pay our rent if my husband would divest from the military. "Just until he can find other work," he said. He said he was helping another service member get out now, a chaplain. This man was incredibly earnest, thin, gray-haired, in jeans and a flannel shirt, with no pains taken over shaving or hygiene; I believed him. I thanked him, knowing full well my husband, an officer, is comfortable in his job and does not want to leave, knowing this man would be disappointed in what that says about us; and he shook my hand and said to call him, the church would help get us out when we were ready. I did not know what church he meant, but I am sure its people are good.

So if the Justice and Peace Committee wants me to show up for De'Von Bailey's family, I will. I scrawl a hasty sign on a

piece of foam core I bought at King Soopers: "NO POLICE BRUTALITY." On an investment of virtually nothing, I drive downtown to the corner of Nevada and Rio Grande to see the street blocked off with traffic cones and police cars, a crowd visible already in front of the brick police station. Parking on a side street, I take my sign and head there on foot, along sidewalks with cracked concrete and sun-bleached grass growing up between the paving. I try to face the words on the sign away from scrutinizing traffic. I pass the bail bonds shop from which Dustin and Justin Brooks, 33-year-old twins, set forth a week prior, wearing bulletproof vests and brandishing their handguns, to confront these same protestors. (Dustin and Justin Brooks are what Joan Didion might call men with an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made.) That was three days after De'Von Bailey's murder. The brothers intimidated the predominantly black gathering until finally being arrested, shouting "All lives matter!" as their hands were pulled behind their backs. Seventeen riot police were dispatched in the skirmish, standing behind plexiglass shields. Hopefully the irony was not lost on anyone that a black boy had been killed for running from police unarmed and two white men could walk around waving handguns and shouting in a crowded area and simply be arrested, off to live another day. If the Dustin-Justin brothers hadn't been shouting, they may not even have been arrested. Colorado is an open-carry state. Who feels safe in an open-carry state varies widely depending upon circumstance. On November 27, 2015, shortly after we moved here, an armed, agitated older white man was seen pacing around outside the CO Springs Planned Parenthood building at 11:30 a.m. Concerned employees and passers-by called the police, but were told there was nothing they could do. "It's an open-carry state," police said. Eight minutes later, the man, 57-year-old Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., burst into the building, shooting three people dead and wounding nine others. One of the employees killed was a Filipina-born Navy wife, who had enjoyed her new job in the Springs, her husband's duty station. The Planned Parenthood location here

has been changed at least three times, and the address is not advertised on their web site.

All this crosses my mind as I walk toward the police station. I do not feel at all in danger, and I know that statistically, I am very safe – far safer in virtually any situation than the other protestors, mostly people of color, gathered on the sloping space of lawn. Still, because of men like Dustin and Justin Brooks and Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., I have left my children at home.

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The rally is peaceful, and sad. Greg Bailey and Delisha Searcy speak about the loss of their son. Their lawyers reiterate a demand for an independent investigation. Young boys hold signs: “Please Let Me Live Past 19.” “Hands Up Don’t Shoot.” Several signs say, “Imagine If It Were Your Son.” The black families console one another, embracing. Three black reverends are there. Their mood is markedly sadder than that of the “allies” like myself who have shown up and for whom the event, though attended with the best of intentions, could be described as almost recreational.



Rally for De'Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

A prominent local Unitarian clergywoman – lean, energetic – is there in street clothes and her rainbow stole, wearing sunglasses, her short gray hair spiked. If not for the stole she might be some fitness celebrity, or a badass chef. There's a contingent from Colorado College. A tall, thin young white man holds a sign that says, "JAIL ALL KILLER POLICE." The Justice and Peace Committee is scattered around (I don't see my military-liberator friend from back in April), but they have (appropriately) left their "Peace Academy" sign at home.

After half an hour or so, as the press conference seems to be wrapping up, the crowd is less quiet, some people whispering to one another. I strain to hear the voice of an obviously distraught black woman who's questioning the Baileys' white attorneys. "How do we know," the woman is asking, "that any investigation will be impartial? How can it possibly be fair?"

(Next to me, three of the "Moms Demand" moms ask a bystander to take their picture. They turn, their blond ponytails swinging, to beam at the camera with the crowd behind them. I feel, almost desperately, that this is not the right time.)



Rally for De'Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

"How will we know it's fair," the woman calls over the crowd, "if the committee is made up of all white men?..." Suddenly her voice catches, and a pause hangs in the air for just an instant. "...White women?"

She sounds so hopeless, so angry, so deservedly frustrated and hurt. I can feel the sharp point of tears gathering in my throat. I report this not so anyone will feel sorry for me but because it happened. I can't hear what response the woman is given. People begin to drift away. It was the last question.

For the rest of the afternoon, I cannot get that moment out of my mind, the way the woman's voice caught, her split second of hesitation before she said "women." Before she said "white women." What was it that gave her pause; was it some vestige of sisterhood-loyalty that she realized no longer applied?

I'd been hoping to briefly throw white men under the bus, let them take the fall. I wanted to huddle in my sense of at-least-some-shared-experience. It would have eased my discomfort. My discomfort does not need easing. My discomfort is no one else's problem to solve. Anywhere from 47 to 53 percent of white women, depending on whose poll you believe, voted for the current president. 95% of black women did not. When she let the word "women" out, when she let the words "white women" out, it was the tiny slap-in-the-face of realizing the intersectionality you champion may not want you back. I am glad she said it. And for a moment— and I think it's okay to say things we are ashamed of — I'd been hoping, so badly, that she wouldn't.

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That night I chat with my husband about Joan Didion and the late sixties and ask him if he thinks the upheaval we're feeling now is anything like what people must have felt in

1968, when it must have seemed in some ways that the world was ending. He was a history major in college, so he tends to have a good perspective.

“No, not at all,” he says almost immediately. “Because think about 1968. Think about the instability. I think it was much worse then. The draft was still going strong. You could basically be called up from your own house and have to go fight a war with no choice at all.”

I recall Didion’s essay “In the Islands,” which I’ve recently finished, one section of which she spends watching the funeral of a young soldier at the military cemetery in Oahu, in the dip of an extinct volcano crater called Puowaina. He was the 101st American killed in Vietnam that week. 1,078 in the first twelve weeks of that year. That essay, however, was written in 1970. Maybe 1968 felt somehow quaint by then. Maybe, by then, people were wishing they could go back.

“And you had Martin Luther King, Jr.’s death, RFK’s,” my husband is saying.

“And the Civil Rights Act had only been signed four years before,” I add. I have always liked brainstorming.

“Sure. Now I think it’s the onslaught of information, all this instantaneous, inflammatory news, that makes us feel that things are really unstable.”

I think he’s right. This is no summer of 1968. I start to believe that Joan Didion, less threatened by the events of the time than many, but more observant than most, held up pretty well, considering. And over time at least a few of the problems she was experiencing, some attributed to a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis and treated with lifelong prescriptions, waned. Others didn’t. She’s not a calm person by nature; she’s anxious; I imagine she cannot turn off her brain. She’s 84 now. She’s survived the loss of her husband and her daughter.

I'm not sure how. I do know that ten years after the events she describes in the title essay of *The White Album*, finally completed in 1978, she ends with the admission, "writing has not helped me to see what it means."

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Even later that night, as she has all summer, my youngest daughter wakes me at exactly three a.m. She appears by my bed in pajama pants and a short-sleeved shirt, clutching her stuffed animal. The animals change nightly. Tonight it is Joey, a seafoam-green sheep. She whispers, "I have to go to the bathroom."

She does have to go to the bathroom. But more than that, this is her new ritual, exciting for her, a very mildly transgressive foray into the dark of night, in which I stumble groggily behind her and she switches on every light in the house as she goes, Joey under her arm, chatting up a storm. It's as if the hours of sleep she's had already have bottled up a torrent of potential communication, and she wants to tell me everything. She had a dream where she was drawing faces on paper plates. She had a dream that we all got ice cream. She talks and talks, all shaggy red hair and freckles like tiny seeds scattered across her sleep-pinked cheeks; expressive, energetic eyebrows. Her mood is tremendously good. She washes her hands, dripping water even though I say dry them all the way, please, and I switch off lights as I go to tuck her back in. She is perfectly happy to go back to sleep; this was all she needed, this little check-in under the pretense of a bodily function; and so I have made no move to curb this new habit, and in fact almost look forward to it, sometimes waking up just moments before she comes into my room.

As I start to shut her bedroom door she calls out, "I'm excited for tomorrow!"

I turn around, laughing. "Why?!"

She laughs, too. "I don't know!"

I quietly close her door and wander into the kitchen, where there's only one light still on, above the sink. I stand and look at the few dishes and mugs there, then out at the dark, flat yard. There is no way I can go back to sleep, and it does not, now, seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 2019.