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## California Chaos and a Crisis of Storytelling in America: Reimagining Narrative's Potential through Joan Didion, Eve Babitz, and Susan Sontag

Throughout the 1960s, American cultural criticism regularly warned that the arts were in crisis, amid the growing dominance of cinema, the pace of technological progress, and readers' shifting sensibilities. Many such trends, including the influence of Hollywood and the nascent tech sector, had California as their epicenter. During those years, Joan Didion's essays and novels about California catapulted her to the forefront of contemporary discourse as she depicted a destabilizing, centerless time that defied narrative teleology. She was not alone: Eve Babitz, who famously thanked "the Didion-Dunnes for having to be who I'm not," wrote books celebrating California's disorder, while blurring boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. While these writers are often treated by critics as competitors and opposites, this article traces Didion's and Babitz's intellectual and biographical connections and brings their early works into conversation with one another. I examine their writing through the lens of media theory, novel discourse, and art criticism, as mediated through another writer with California ties: Susan Sontag. Through this analysis, I explore these writers' differing yet overlapping responses to this crisis in storytelling to trace the emergence of a new fiction with a distinct Californian sensibility.

Keywords: Joan Didion; Susan Sontag; Eve Babitz; *Nouveau Roman*; sentiment

The disorder of America's postwar years, which was a time characterized by developments ranging from the nuclear arms race to profound social unrest, fueled a debate among writers and commentators that the arts in America were in crisis, and that the novel was in particular danger of becoming irrelevant, or even obsolete (Arendt 18; McCarthy 455, 456). At the center of many such analyses over the state of the arts were differing

views regarding the novel's task vis-à-vis reality, a debate which was often informed by concerns that a sentimental nostalgia for seemingly simpler times, and the familiar artistic forms that would accompany them, would take hold (Didion, "Questions" 1101). In this article, I look at the emergence of an unsentimental sensibility in the writing of two women with a shared personal history—Joan Didion and Eve Babitz—through their experimentation with literary form when writing about California in the 1960s and 1970s, and illustrate how their respective approaches engage the debate over the future of literary form. After briefly introducing their shared literary and personal biography, I provide an overview of novel discourse in America in those years, using Susan Sontag's early essays as the frame of reference for this new unsentimental sensibility through literary form that I am exploring. Lastly, I undertake a close reading of selected Didion and Babitz texts from the 1970s to demonstrate that this new sensibility is flexible enough to encompass varied approaches to disorder, and argue that engaging the state of California through literature demands this range of possibilities. I conclude with observations on how treating these texts alongside one another, read from the perspective of this new sensibility, can shed light on a new type of California-infused fiction.

Many of the developments that were prompting concerns over the novel's particular fate throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, including the increasing popularity of cinema and the rise of new media technologies, had their home in California, a state whose fraught frontier legacy was evolving to include new types of frontiers and those individuals who sought them out. Gold Rush pioneers had been succeeded by hippies in the Haight-Ashbury district, aspiring actors and directors in Los Angeles, technology-inspired entrepreneurs, and others who were unable to escape California's perpetual westward draw (Leslie and Kargon 440, 441; Didion "Hollywood"). As Didion writes in "Notes from a Native Daughter," California is where "a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension; in which the mind is troubled by some buried but ineradicable suspicion that things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent" (172). This state of unequal suspension is crucial for how I consider the 'state' of California in a literary sense. I use the term 'state' both in the sense of California's established geographic borders, but also in reference to a particular condition that, by virtue of being centerless and disordered, I argue is actually inherently 'inter-state.' The use of this term is also inspired, in part, by the role of interstate highways in California literature of

that period, both as plot device and organizing principle.<sup>1</sup> In my analysis, the term ‘inter-state’ refers to a state that oscillates between order and disorder, fiction and nonfiction, novel and essay, and hedonism and despair. The idea of the inter-state defines how I engage Didion and Babitz and their respective experimentation with form in this article.

Didion and Babitz foregrounded California disorder in their respective works of that period and, I argue, engaged with questions of sentiment, sensibility, and the future of narrative in their attempts at stylistic experimentation with the novel and essay forms. At the level of biography, Didion and Babitz also inhabited partially shared ground: both were born and raised in California, though Didion was from Sacramento and Babitz was from Los Angeles (Didion, *Where* 38; Anolik, *Hollywood’s Eve* 105). Los Angeles was where their friendship began and where Didion played a pivotal role in facilitating Babitz’s early literary successes (Anolik, *Hollywood’s Eve* 73, 171). Their shared social circles included friends such as record executive Earl McGrath, a pre-fame Harrison Ford, musicians Janis Joplin and the Mamas and the Papas, and photographer Annie Leibovitz—in other words, a community featuring some of that period’s most high-profile artists and influencers, some of whom were later referred to directly or indirectly in these writers’ respective works (Anolik, *Hollywood’s Eve* 122; Mehr; Daugherty 185, 236, 240). While Babitz and Didion, informed partly by this celebrity-infused community, shared an interest in Californian disorder, their characterizations of this disorder and, to use Raymond Williams’s term, the “structure of feeling” of those years, differed significantly (Williams 611). This was a distinction that Babitz publicly welcomed, thanking Didion and her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, “for having to be who I’m not” in the acknowledgements section of her first book, *Eve’s Hollywood*, which was published in 1974. The book’s editors, which were then unacknowledged, included Didion and Dunne (Anolik, “Uneasy Friendship”). While their career paths diverged significantly over subsequent decades, Babitz and Didion died only days apart in December 2021 (Anolik, “Uneasy Friendship”; Dellatto).

Given their shared history, several commentators have treated Didion and Babitz as competitors, claiming that their works present dueling and irreconcilable interpretations of Californian disorder in the late 1960s. These commentators set out two distinct categories: Didion’s essays and

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<sup>1</sup> To maintain a clear distinction between ‘inter-state’ as organizing trope and ‘interstate’ as a type of road infrastructure, I use the hyphen only in the spelling of the former term.

novels, they indicate, are sober, even despondent tales of a state beyond repair, while Babitz's writing is refreshing, even joyous, in its embrace of Los Angeles hedonism. For example, in *Alta Journal*, Paul Wilner writes that reading Babitz "is a delicious, guilty pleasure. Unlike Didion or, say, Susan Sontag, she never insists on her intellectual, let alone academic, cred. Too cool for school, she passes by in a blur of eyeshadow, lipstick and go-go boots." Other commentators, including Babitz's biographer Lili Anolik, have sought to establish a professional and personal rivalry between the two women and their work, with Anolik among those arguing that Babitz's writing is an outright rejoinder to Didion's novel *Play It As It Lays*, which was published in 1970 (Male; Anolik, *Hollywood's Eve* 170, 99). Inherent in these arguments, whether at the level of style and content or at the level of biography, is the expectation that only one author could serve as the vanguard of a new kind of writing about California in that period. This suggestion, I argue, evokes the exact problem with which both writers were engaging: that of sentiment driving readers to re-establish a singular, defining narrative line to describe an inherently disordered, centerless time and place that defied meaning. This impulse, seemingly born out of a sentimental longing for a simpler time and tale, runs counter to the temerity that would be required of readers if they were to accept texts whose formal approaches mimic the overwhelming sensory experience of the age.

### **The Novel in America: Crisis Mode**

The early years of Didion's and Babitz's respective literary careers followed decades of writers and critics painting a bleak picture about the state of the novel that, of all the arts—which were generally in crisis—the novel was facing some of the most severe challenges to its survival. While concurring in their diagnosis, commentators and practitioners often differed over cause, remedy, and prognosis. They named as potential threats the rise of cinema, the emergence of mass media, a restless public, or overactive critics, to name a few examples. For instance, in 1957, Saul Bellow wrote that the novel of his day was competing in an increasingly crowded environment, amid mass consumerism and frenetic intellectual activity (3). Amid this sensory overload, America risked, as he put it, becoming a "mass civilization, doomed to be shallow and centerless" (18). Bellow was not alone in warning about the loss of center in this time period and in arguing that this centerless time would have implications for

what the novel could, or could not, achieve. By 1960, writing in *Partisan Review*, the writer Mary McCarthy warned that “[t]he novel seems to be dissolving into its component parts: the essay, the travel book, reporting, on the one hand, and the ‘pure’ fiction of the tale, on the other. The center will not hold” (458). This reference to William Butler Yeats’ line from his famed apocalyptic poem, “The Second Coming,” is an apt parallel. The state of the novel later made its way into another critique of narrative in those disordered years: Yeats’ poem inspired the title and opening lines of Didion’s own seminal essay, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” about counterculture in the Haight-Ashbury district in 1967 (84). Didion wrote in the preface to her essay collection of the same name that Yeats’ poem came frequently to mind as she tried to make sense of a period whose disorder had left her “paralyzed by the conviction that writing was an irrelevant act” (xi).

Throughout these years, commentators differed over what the novel was meant to do vis-à-vis reality and whether the novel’s seemingly well-established formal tenets should remain constant or be cast aside, and if so, how. They also differed over where the novel should go next, a debate which became bound up in questions about sentiment. Commentators asked whether nostalgia for a calmer and seemingly ordered past would drive writers back to traditional formal approaches, even amid questions over whether these approaches were relevant in the face of a reality that beggared belief and was reshaping contemporary sensibilities. Those concerns endured over time: as Elizabeth Hardwick wrote in *The New York Review of Books* in 1969, the novel form “seems more threatened than the other arts by the alterations in sensibility, by the unease of the world, the sense of destiny beyond control and comprehension, by the feeling of borrowed, shortened time and relationships subject to cancellation” (180). This observation highlights an ongoing and persistent conversation in novel discourse over changing sensibilities in 1960s America, which many critics warned would affect the novel’s prospects, while also raising questions over how the novel would inform future sensibilities. Ultimately, as Deborah Nelson argues in her 2017 book *Tough Enough*, “artists and writers of all kinds and from around the globe decried the inadequacy of the formal tools they had inherited” to account for the damage and fall-out of the Second World War and subsequent years (6).

Offering one way forward, I suggest, was Susan Sontag, whose 1960s essays explored questions of hermeneutics, the innovations seen in French cinema, the challenges posed by long-held distinctions between literary style and content, and many other cultural and literary questions. In her

1966 essay collection *Against Interpretation*, Sontag criticized the state of the novel and the arts at large, arguing in the essay “One culture and the new sensibility” that American writers should adopt the rigor, precision, and detached mode of technical experimentation that had made scientific progress possible (297). Drawing from Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s claims that artists are well-suited to engage with sensory overload, and that technologies could serve as extensions of man, Sontag suggested that artists, experimenting like scientists, could provide “adventures in sensation” that enable a “new sensibility [that] understands art as the extension of life” (Sontag 300; McLuhan 31). This approach would only work if it was done through an unsentimental sensibility dependent on “coolness” and scientific detachment (Sontag 296, 294, 297). In aesthetic terms, the outcome of this experimentation might be unpleasant: as Sontag noted, “[h]aving one’s sensorium challenged or stretched hurts” (303). The result, however, would mean that artists and readers alike could finally appreciate varied forms of art for how they innovate, opening up a range of possibilities for artistic form and analysis (Sontag 303).

Sontag argued that there were examples in the arts of this technical experimentation in practice, enjoining American writers to look for inspiration across the Atlantic: namely, at the practitioners of the *Nouveau Roman* in France. These writers were experimenting with style to test seemingly untouchable tenets of the novel form on the grounds that, if they did not, the novel would die, or perhaps worse, perpetually relive its own past. This argument was set out in detail by two of the *Nouveau Roman*’s most prominent practitioners, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, in their respective essay collections *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963) and *L’ère de soupçon* (1956), both of which were translated into English in the early 1960s (Robbe-Grillet 17; Sarraute 74). Sontag suggested that American novelists could draw inspiration from Sarraute’s and Robbe-Grillet’s essays but could find their own ways to innovate rather than mimicking their francophone counterparts (104–105). If Sontag implied that it was time for an American New Novel, I argue that Didion’s and Babitz’s respective innovations with literary form were examples of a new type of Californian literature in formation, with Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* and Babitz’s *Slow Days, Fast Company: The World, The Flesh, and L.A.* (hereafter *Slow Days*) serving as two versions of a California New Novel.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sontag herself spent part of her teenage years in California, including one year at Didion’s alma mater, the University of California, Berkeley (Moser 81).

### Didion's Los Angeles: "In this light, all narrative was sentimental"

Didion's essay "The White Album," her novel *Play It As It Lays*, and Babitz's book *Slow Days* are three examples of texts that attempt technical experimentation through style, using the inter-state condition of a centerless Los Angeles to explore a new and distinctly Californian unsentimental sensibility.<sup>3</sup> In this section, I show how these texts themselves are, to varying degrees, examples of the inter-state between fiction and non-fiction, and more specifically between the essay and the novel. As I trace their respective versions of this unsentimental sensibility, I examine how their approaches to narrative linearity and telos diverge, even as Babitz and Didion draw from the same history, environment, and contemporary influences. I then show how this new sensibility, by definition, makes it impossible to deem either writer the standard-bearer for this new type of Californian literature, itself inherently inter-state, but instead demands that Babitz and Didion be read alongside one another.

Didion's canon repeatedly asks whether telos and linear narrative ever worked for California and whether attempts to create or perpetuate such a narrative were sentimental. This was a preoccupation that was evident from her first novel, *Run River* (1963), through to her landmark first essay collection, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), and finally to her memoir *Where I Was From* (2003). She was preoccupied with the attempts by many of California's residents to adopt a mythologized "crossing story" that would smooth over the state's many contradictions (Didion, *Where* 159). These attempts foregrounded only the most palatable parts of the Gold Rush and the state's subsequent history, celebrating the triumph of individual will, while ignoring those moments that revealed how the crossing instead may have been a "mean scrambling for survival" (Didion, *Where* 31, 35). This belief system, while compelling enough to be passed on across generations, was deeply flawed. In *Where I Was From*, Didion describes the mindset of Californians who had descended from Gold Rush pioneers:

New people, we were given to understand, remained ignorant of our special history, insensible to the hardships endured to make it, blind not only to the dangers the place still presented but to the shared responsibilities its continued habitation demanded. (95)

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<sup>3</sup> The quotation in this section heading is from Didion's "The White Album" (44).



The problem, she argued, was that living based on this flawed, linear, and inherently sentimental account of the state's past would set people up to fail (129). Yet this fate was hard to escape: the precarious nature of the Californian experience, from the perils of the nineteenth-century crossing to the rapidly shifting twentieth-century economy, made a linear narrative where individuals could overcome those adversities especially appealing (128). In turn, this precarity fueled a dangerous, overwhelming narrative drive that led people to accept this origin story unquestioned, setting them up for disappointment when they let it inform their approach to contemporary American life.

This dynamic between narrative linearity, narrative drive, and Californian precarity creates a destabilizing sense of inter-state that Didion engages with in her 1979 essay "The White Album," a text focusing on the late 1960s in Los Angeles (11). This essay performs what it was like to keep the battle for linearity going through writing, only for writing to fail to restore telos and meaning. Didion opens with the statement "[w]e tell ourselves stories in order to live," which she then undercuts by claiming that

[w]e live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience. Or at least we do for a while. (11)

Rather than being redemptive, narrative, when used to represent reality and ascribe meaning to experience, fails to apply.

The subsequent essay is a succession of disparate images, as Didion describes the "cutting-room experience" of trying to make these images come together in some sort of movie that would restore "the narrative and [...] the narrative's intelligibility" (13). The images range from psychiatric reports on Didion's state of mind to interviews with members of the Black Panther Party and a retelling of a frustrating afternoon with the rock band The Doors—an afternoon where, as Babitz later told both Lili Anolik as well as Tracy Daugherty, who wrote a biography of Didion, Babitz was present (Anolik "Uneasy Friendship"; Daugherty 245). The essay itself, however, does not name Babitz outright. This is a notable omission by Didion, given Babitz's significant role in the local music scene and romance with Morrison (Anolik, *Hollywood's Eve* 32). This omission stands out even more when taking into account that Babitz had recently written about Los Angeles' similarly disparate details herself in *Slow Days*, while presenting the psychic impact of those details very dif-

ferently. Later in “The White Album,” having shared many images that are just “a story without a narrative,” Didion returns to the image of the woman on the ledge that she had used to open the essay (11, 47). This image, initially used to illustrate the impulse to craft narratives to explain the world, is now described only using visual details: that of a woman with “hair incandescent in the floodlights, her bare toes curled inward on the stone ledge” (11, 44). Didion then argues that “[i]n this light, all narrative was sentimental,” which was a realization made possible only by a fruitless attempt to string together disparate images to establish a narrative (44). Didion concludes the essay by alluding to her opening claim that “[w]e tell ourselves stories in order to live” (11) deeming that, on reflection, “writing has not yet helped [her] to see what it means” (48).

Didion claims to have shown in this essay, through the act of writing, that narrative in the case of 1960s Los Angeles cannot be reconciled with this disordered reality. The inherent problem with narrative, she demonstrates, is that it invites the reader to identify with the protagonist, and this identification is sentimental. This concern is consistent with the art critic Michael Fried’s own contemporaneous criticisms of new developments in the visual arts: he famously warned against this type of sentimentality, which he described as theatricality, in his 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood” (Fried 152–153). In a footnote of the original version of that piece, he criticized Susan Sontag’s new sensibility as being “the most egregious example” of such theatricality (Fried).<sup>4</sup> For Fried, the arts should avoid bringing in the perspective of the beholder and elements from other arts and “non-art” (152–153). The arts should instead keep their existing formal boundaries distinct and clear. This is an approach that Didion mimics in “The White Album,” where she shows a “Joan Didion” persona identifying with the “woman on the ledge,” searching for narrative to give meaning to experience, after which Didion illustrates the psychic toll that this effort can cause (35, 14). The implied reader faces the same challenge: they must decide whether they will succumb to the sentimental temptation to identify with this “Joan Didion persona” that Didion has constructed, and then try themselves to apply some narrative line across the essay’s disparate images, or whether they will instead accept the essay and this “Joan Didion” persona as art, fully autonomous of the beholder.

Didion undertakes this same exploration of the collapse of meaning, linearity, and narrative teleology in her second novel *Play It As It Lays*, a text that I consider to be an example of a California New Novel. Didion

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<sup>4</sup> This footnote is absent from the reprinted version of that essay in Fried’s 1998 book of the same name.

completed *Play It As It Lays* after establishing a reputation for her work with the essay form as a vehicle for conveying California's disorder. What she could now do with the novel to engage that same disorder was therefore a recurring question among critics (Leonard; Segal). The stakes are clear from the novel's first chapter, where Didion's protagonist Maria Wyeth, an out-of-work Hollywood actor, insists from within the confines of a psychiatric institution that "NOTHING APPLIES" (4, emphasis in original). Maria adds that, as a child of the American West, she was "raised to believe that what came in on the next roll would always be better than what went out on the last," only to undercut that statement by saying that "I no longer believe that, but I am telling you how it was," in an assertion that mirrors Didion's disavowal of how narrative lines can be applied to experience in "The White Album" (*Play* 4, 5; "The White Album" 11). From there follows a novel that tracks Maria's decline, amid a botched abortion, a divorce, brief trysts with strangers, and eventually her role in the suicide of a friend, leading to Maria's institutionalization.

The stylistic experimentation underway within the novel itself to convey and engage with that decline is manifest through *Play It As It Lays*' fragmentary structure. For example, the novel's 80-plus chapters show Didion navigating between first- and third-person points of view, with the first-person point of view not always featuring the same character. The novel's first three chapters, titled "Maria," "Helene," and "Carter" respectively, are told from the point of view of those particular characters, each giving their perspective on Maria's institutionalization (*Play* 3–14). The remainder of the novel is made up of numbered chapters and is told from a point of view that Didion called, in an interview with *The Paris Review*'s Linda Kuehl, that of a "close third" person—in effect, a form of free indirect style, with access to Maria's thoughts as well as her experiences (*Conversations* 42). Didion maintains this "close third" person, as focalized through Maria, through several of these subsequent chapters, only for the narration to slip into the first person with increasing frequency during the second half of the novel—a slippage that begins after Maria has a traumatic abortion that subsequently haunts her (*Play* 115, 80–84). This slippage between points of view, both focalized through Maria but at different levels of distance, effectively shows an oscillation between differing states of mind as Maria grapples with the psychic impact of the abortion. It is therefore just one of many examples in the text of the 'inter-state' at play—a dynamic that is also performed through the figure of the actual interstate highway. The first numbered chapter of *Play It As It Lays* begins with a description of how Maria would drive on the

freeway every morning for weeks after she and her husband Carter separated—a separation that Didion signals can be read in multiple ways, as either “the summer [Maria] left Carter (the summer Carter left her, the summer Carter stopped living in the house in Beverly Hills)” (*Play* 15). Didion describes how Maria felt the need to be on the freeway at a certain time each morning, as otherwise “she lost the day’s rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum” (*Play* 15). Driving without a destination in mind, Maria would look instead for moments of mastery in navigating stretches of highway, especially this one “intricate stretch just south of the interchange where successful passage from the Hollywood onto the Harbor required a diagonal move across four lanes of traffic” (*Play* 16). Didion then sets out the effect that this mastery could have: when Maria achieves this move “without once braking or once losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly” (*Play* 16). In other words, being on the interstate could help Maria achieve another mode of inter-state: one that staves off bad dreams and ruminations, painful memories, the actual disarray of her daily life, and what these signals may all mean (*Play* 16).

As Didion later demonstrates, this sense of control proves fleeting for Maria, and is indeed only an illusion. On a day when Maria drives much further than planned and the momentum she seeks proves elusive, her mind begins to amble beyond her control, as she imagines unhappy conversations with her estranged husband that become so fraught and so persistent that she must take medication to quiet her brain and drive home (*Play* 30–32). The result of this experience, Didion writes, is “that Maria did not go back to the freeway except as a way of getting somewhere,” thus changing the freeway from being a site where Maria could remain ‘inter-state,’ able to exist in a state where she does not have to acknowledge her personal decline, to a form of infrastructure limited to linear, forward movement (*Play* 33). Didion uses other types of infrastructure throughout the text in similar ways. Plumbing, for example, as well as parking lots and intersections, are all sites that figure in Maria’s decline both before and, to an increasing degree, after her abortion, as she finds herself repeatedly at odds with the driven, forward-focused Hollywood community in which she lives and, intermittently, works. Plumbing becomes linked to Maria’s abortion, more specifically to the fetus that she aborted, as the dreams that she had once sought to quiet through freeway driving are now filled with macabre images of fetal tissue blocking actual plumbing (*Play* 97). When the plumbing in her hotel room in a later scene appears to be partially blocked, following a night when Maria watched

her own guest appearance on a television series called *Interstate 80* to convince herself that she was in control of her life, that she was “safe,” Maria returns to the interstate to drive back home (*Play* 104). This is not for any sense of comfort that the linear movement of driving the interstate to her house might give: Didion presents this decision instead as a concession that “[t]here would be plumbing anywhere [Maria] went” (*Play* 104). By the time the novel reaches its close, Maria’s decline has advanced to the point that when a friend, BZ, commits suicide as she lies alongside him on a motel room bed, she does not stop him (*Play* 213).

Didion’s technical experimentation in *Play It As It Lays* therefore reinforces and defies linearity and narrative teleology. This experimentation includes, but is not limited to, Didion’s use of both numbered and named chapters, a non-linear chronology, and repeated references to freeways, plumbing, parking lots, intersections, and other aspects of American infrastructure as devices for exploring and testing the fluidity of Maria’s mental state. Ultimately, given the many stylistic innovations at work in the novel, it took even more efforts at experimentation with the novel form for Didion to convey the inter-state nature of Los Angeles than it did when she later wrote “The White Album.” Compared to Didion’s understanding of the novel form and its affordances, the essay form that she had begun to employ and refine throughout the 1960s had allowed more naturally for conveying fragmentation and disorder, given that, as Theodor Adorno argued, the essay is driven by “discontinuity,” most at home when analyzing “a conflict brought to a standstill” (Adorno 38, 41). As Didion explained in several interviews after she completed *Play It As It Lays*, she was trying to write a novel capturing the “meaninglessness of experience” in Los Angeles, while warding off the immensely powerful pull exerted by narrative drive (*Conversations* 5). In fiction, this task proved harder for Didion to achieve than in non-fiction, she told David L. Ulin in 2011 (*Conversations* 152). Ultimately, narrative drive and linearity, and therefore sentiment, were built into Didion’s interpretation of the novel form and its affordances.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Didion’s views on sentiment and the novel, and her demand that novelists push back against sentiment through deliberate and consistent experimentation with technique, are set out in further detail in her 1965 essay “Questions About the New Fiction” in *National Review*.

### Babitz's "seduction of a non-reader" in *Slow Days, Fast Company*

Babitz's own canon also foregrounds disorder in the Californian context, especially Los Angeles, and sets out this same disorder as part of the place's appeal, while similarly experimenting with style in order to do that disorder justice through writing.<sup>6</sup> This dynamic persists from her first book, *Eve's Hollywood*, through to later semi-autobiographical novels *Sex and Rage* (1979) and *L.A. Woman* (1982). As with Didion's works, the underlying question is whether traditional approaches to narrative can apply in California. Among the notable examples of Babitz's early experimentation with literary form is *Slow Days*, her second book. Published in 1977, and as has become common with many of her books, commentators to this day differ over whether the text should be classified as an essay collection, a fictional memoir, autofiction, or a form all unto itself (Dettmar; Male; Ellis 1; Anolik, *Hollywood's Eve* 131). Babitz herself did not give the answer. In the early pages of *Slow Days*, Babitz evokes the legacy of the novel and, in doing so, implies that this work will generate comparisons with that particular form but cannot replicate it. In these statements, Babitz indicates that her understanding of the novel form involves the expectation of a linear chronology, plot-driven narration, and some kind of resolution. Given that understanding, Babitz explains that there are aspects of the novel's formal demands that just do not work for Los Angeles, which is where most of that book's events take place. She writes that

[i]t's well known that for something to be fiction it must move right along and not meander among the bushes gazing into the next county. Unfortunately, with L.A. it's impossible. You can't write a story about L.A. that doesn't turn around in the middle or get lost. (*Slow Days* 7)

The pacing of such a disordered city belies attempts at narrative linearity, implying that some other form may be better suited to Los Angeles.

Babitz's own assertions in the text compound the confusion over how to classify her work and imply that this book will be testing various elements of the novel form, particularly through its engagement of the reader. At most, Babitz concedes in the early pages of *Slow Days* that the book is a "love story," though one she leaves unresolved, writing at the outset that this love story was "inadvertent" and that "[she] want[s] it clearly

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<sup>6</sup> The quotation in this section heading is from the opening pages of *Slow Days* (4).

understood from the start that [she does not] expect it to turn out well” (3). This is an assertion that both cedes and maintains control. It invites the reader to assume that the love story will provide the narrative arc, while initially implying that Babitz will not determine the outcome of the text she is writing, even as she does want to control how readers perceive her intentions. The text that follows, however, betrays little information about the lover in question, or even the relationship itself, and how it ends. It also does not clarify whether this first-person narrator is meant to be Babitz herself, or is instead a Babitz-inspired persona. Most of this information comes from what Babitz describes as little “Easter egg” clues for her narrator’s lover that are interspersed throughout the text, namely as brief introductions to each chapter (*Slow Days* 4). For instance, the first of these Easter eggs, for the section titled “Slow Days,” is this italicized note: “*Darling: I know you don’t care about the art of the novel but you might like the part about Forest Lawn*” (*Slow Days* 5, emphasis in original). Since her lover is not a reader, the narrator explains, the only way to draw in his attention is to make it “about or to him,” which is why she includes these brief statements that may mean something to him, even as her wider audience of readers, who she acknowledges do read fiction, may have to approach the text without the benefit of the backstory (*Slow Days* 4). Babitz sets up the sentimental identification with the protagonist for this lover and for her wider audience in order to make this love story work: “[t]he seduction of a non-reader is how I plan to tie up L.A.,” she writes, indicating that she plans to maintain some authorial control after all (*Slow Days* 4). This meandered, disordered city may defy the conventions of narrative, but Babitz will still use these conventions when they suit her.

These various assertions come together in a text that typifies what it means to be inter-state: fiction destined to fail as fiction, a love story doomed from the start that she tells anyway for her readers’ amusement, a narrator who may or may not be a representation of the author, and a love story that the narrator also claims was inadvertent, even as the narrator claims that the structure of the text was designed to draw in the attention of her lover, who is a non-reader. While the book’s events and characters can be linked to actual moments and people in Babitz’s life, as her biographer and other commentators have noted, the narrator claims that in writing this work, she is still running up against the demands of what fiction should be and what makes it recognizable as fiction (Anolik, *Hollywood’s Eve* 130; *Slow Days* 9). Babitz therefore implies that this still may be an attempt at fiction, even if it invokes elements that refer to reality.

The book's own structure further complicates any attempt at definition: its chapters, for lack of a more precise term given the book's unclear classification, have titles that sometimes refer to places, like "Bakersfield," "Dodger Stadium," or "Emerald Bay," or figures, like "Heroine," or weather, such as "Rain," to name some examples. The chapters are not connected in a temporal sequence and can effectively stand alone. Some of the characters are well-developed and given proper names, while others are given descriptions that are more suited to archetypes and stock characters, such as the lover who the narrator describes as "The Last American," the type of man who she claims would have been admired by Henry James and whose posture was reminiscent of Fred Astaire, with Babitz's narrator loosely blending literary and film references from different eras (43). The text performs that aforementioned tension of a novel breaking into its component parts, without trying to resolve it. Through this approach, Babitz makes clear that she will not resolve the 'inter-state' that she is creating for the reader: the absence of linearity may be uncomfortable for readers whose sensibilities have been conditioned by certain expectations of what fiction requires, but that is the structure of feeling of the Los Angeles experience.

The chapter where Babitz describes her narrator's first meeting with 'The Last American' is illustrative of her particular approach to what I term the concept of 'inter-state'—an experience that can be both immersive and disruptive, subversive yet familiar, and liberating while also being confining. Above all, and in a marked difference to Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, this experience of inter-state in Babitz's *Slow Days* is not something the protagonist seeks to block out moments of decline. This version of inter-state is instead playful, at times bordering on celebratory or mischievous. For example, Babitz opens the chapter about 'The Last American,' which is titled 'Dodger Stadium,' with an 'Easter egg' clue that tells her narrator's lover to ignore what follows, effectively daring him to see if what the narrator says is true—that he will not "*like this piece because [he doesn't] like baseball*" and that "*this man*" she describes "*means nothing to [her]. Hardly*" (*Slow Days* 39, emphasis in original). The 'hardly' is ambiguous, with the lover and Babitz's implied reader left to discern whether the narrator 'hardly' loves the man in question, or whether the 'hardly' is instead deliberately, and perhaps coyly, undercutting the narrator's claim that the man is unimportant (39). The injunction to skip the chapter becomes a dare to read it through to see how, and whether, the narrator addresses this ambiguity.



The chapter that follows is about the narrator's unexpected falling in love, not just with this 'Last American,' but with the game of baseball: an experience whose pacing, Babitz writes, mimics that of life itself, with alternate stretches of inaction and scrambling (*Slow Days* 46). The audience members themselves, in their vast numbers and in their demeanor, play their own role in the game's pacing. The narrator states, for instance, that once in the stadium with other fans,

the whole event just took over; it became completely itself, in a kind of very loose tension like inside a love affair. You can care or not care at a baseball game, just so long as you're inside the gates. You can casually chat with your friend and know that if anything happens you won't miss it for the crowd will alert you and carry you through. (46)

The parallel to the tension of a love affair nods, even winks, at the narrator's opening dare in that chapter's 'Easter egg' clue to her lover, asking him and the implied reader whether this romance with 'The Last American' is indeed unimportant. This comparison also harkens back to the overall text's opening premise: that the whole book is a love story, written with this loose tension that will carry the implied reader through now that they, too, are inside the gates. The narrator further indicates that this crowd, and by extension the text, establishes a form of inter-state that is inherently contradictory: "I love hordes. They screen out free choice; you're free at last: stuck" (45). The meaning of "free" fluctuates within the second sentence, with the definition of the term oscillating between the states of freedom and enclosure, even as the changing punctuation in those two sentences from period to semi-colon to colon shows Babitz playing with the pacing associated with these statements. As Babitz's narrator and 'The Last American' inhabit this fluid state, or inter-state, so too is the implied reader both free and enclosed within the fluid boundaries of this inter-state text.

The 'inter-state' in this formulation is one of almost complete immersion, with the 'almost' being a critical reminder of what lies just outside this immersive state. The stadium's hordes are one aspect of this immersion; the building's very design is another. The stadium, for instance, is in Los Angeles, but the experience is so immersive that it drowns out nearly all reminders of the city, save "one lone palm tree trying to sneak in [...] —the only way you could tell you were even in Southern California and not just in baseballdom" (47). This immersion is one that is inherently disruptive: Babitz's narrator describes that experience as being so powerful that it transforms her immediately into an impassioned Dodgers fan,

forcing a “rupture” from her earlier self, a “blasé Hollywood lady of fashion” (46). The immersive disruption caused by this inter-state carries over into the evening that follows the baseball game: even as the narrator and her date sit in a French restaurant and the latter soon finds himself in conversation with a movie agent, Babitz indicates that both her narrator and ‘The Last American’ have not entirely left the baseball game behind them (49). As the conversation between ‘The Last American’ and this movie agent unfolds, Babitz describes her narrator as “fading into the background [...], well aware of my place in this traditional back-street romance,” no longer feeling the need to worry about certain preoccupations that were common in her time (50). “There was plenty of time to worry about who was taking advantage of whom in the war between men and women or the future of the country or any of that”—concerns that Babitz had named just a few pages prior, in describing the America her narrator was living in and, therefore, the surprise her narrator experienced in being attracted to this ‘Last American’ (*Slow Days* 50, 43). The inter-state created by the baseball game has both persisted and become contagious, extending to the narrator’s view of the urgency around the social issues of her time and putting any such reflections indefinitely on hold. The allusion that these preoccupations will return is also unimportant. Unlike Didion’s Maria, desperate to find ways to shut out gruesome dream imagery and the messy images of her life, Babitz’s narrator shows little concern over when or if the forward-focused drive of her frenetic surroundings will re-emerge.

Both Didion and Babitz experiment in their respective texts with the boundaries of literary form; where they differ is in how they engage with those boundaries and what this engagement implies about the nature of disorder in California. Unlike Didion, who tests out alternative approaches to storytelling in “The White Album” and *Play It As It Lays* to show that narrative linearity cannot work in California, Babitz accepts the impossibility of narrative linearity from the outset of her work. Babitz makes clear instead that narrative linearity is, by definition, inappropriate for the centerless Los Angeles context. Early in *Slow Days*, Babitz describes the universal frustration of being “confronted with a bunch of disparate details that God only knows what they mean,” using a phrasing that foreshadows Didion’s later reference to “disparate images” in “The White Album” (*Slow Days* 9; “The White Album” 11). Babitz differs from Didion, however, by insisting that she will not try to attempt to organize these disparate details in a way that resembles a “straightforward novel,” repeating that this is something she finds impossible and emphasizing

through her italicization of the word “I” that this is a challenge that may be particular to her (*Slow Days* 9). “I can’t keep everything in my lap, or stop rising flurries of sudden blind meaning,” Babitz continues, suggesting instead that the objective could be to collect such disparate details and see if “a certain pulse and sense of place will emerge, and the integrity of empty space with occasional figures in the landscape can be understood at leisure and in full, no matter how fast the company” (*Slow Days* 9). She can therefore slow the pacing of the environment enough so that the activity within it can be visible to her reader, rather than overwhelming the reader with chaos. While Didion’s texts rely on showing the pitfalls of narrative form when applied to disorder, Babitz claims to let disorder set the terms for how she will play with the legacy of narrative form.

These claims and the admission that this book is an inadvertent love story are as close to a statement of purpose as Babitz will provide. To defy outright the demands of narrative linearity and telos, both through style and content, is an effort that, she acknowledges, requires opposing expectations of what constitutes art. This assertion thus indicates that the construction of *Slow Days* required a level of discipline that is belied by the breezy, hedonistic lifestyle that Babitz portrays. Babitz writes of Los Angeles that

Art is supposed to uphold standards of organization and structure, but you can’t have those things in Southern California—people have tried. It’s difficult to be truly serious when you’re in a city that can’t even put up a skyscraper for fear the earth will start up one day and bring the whole thing down around everyone’s ears. And so the artists in Los Angeles just don’t have that burning eagerness people expect. And they’re just not *serious*. (*Slow Days* 7–8, emphasis in original)

Reading Babitz’s claim against Didion’s assertion in “The White Album” that “all narrative was sentimental” sets up a shared dynamic across their respective texts—one which implies that both authors consider California to be a space where traditional expectations of art and narrative cannot hold (“The White Album” 44). If *Slow Days* does not aim for logical sequence, as Babitz insists, and if “art is supposed to uphold standards of organization and structure,” then the resulting question is how to determine what constitutes art and what narrative can instead encompass in the disordered context of Los Angeles. This question also invites readers to consider another facet of the unsentimental sensibility that Sontag described in “One culture and the new sensibility”: that the interest that writers, musicians, artists, and the like have in so-called popular art—or

art that, in Babitz's terms, is not serious—is a reflection of what Sontag calls “a new, more open way of looking at the world and at things in the world, our world” (Sontag 303). An unsentimental sensibility can encompass this less serious art, as well as art that complies with more high-brow definitions. Whether *Slow Days* is indeed high or low art is not a question that Babitz resolves, but it is a question that she invites, and it remains resonant given the previously mentioned debate over the merits of the seemingly less serious Babitz or the apparently more serious Didion, which is a discussion that persists to this day.

This dialogue between Babitz and Didion is not just implied: in *Slow Days*, Babitz also invokes Didion's 1960s essays about the psychic impact of California's precarious wilderness, suggesting that while these assertions may be accurate, this precarity also opens up a range of energizing possibilities. “From earliest childhood I have rejoiced over the Santa Ana winds,” Babitz writes, even as she also acknowledges that “Raymond Chandler and Joan Didion both regard the Santa Anas as some powerful evil, and I know what they mean because I've seen people drop from migraines and go crazy. Every time *I* feel one coming, I put on my dancing spirits” (*Slow Days* 70, emphasis in original). Didion's essay “Los Angeles Notebook” focuses heavily on the Santa Ana winds presaged by “something uneasy in the Los Angeles air this afternoon, some unnatural stillness, some tension” (217). They evoke, Didion explains, the type of paranoia that reminds her of Raymond Chandler's claim that the Santa Ana winds can quickly lead to violence, to people acting wildly out of character, and to the fearsome prospect that “[a]nything can happen,” serving as proof of “how close to the edge we are” (“Notebook” 218, 221). In simultaneously reaffirming and distancing herself from Didion's and Chandler's view of the Santa Ana winds, Babitz alludes to a Californian sensibility that is broad enough and centerless enough to encompass their reactions as well as her own. Didion's reaction tries to pin down the nature of the Santa Ana winds: their history, how they change human behavior, and how they separate Los Angeles from the rest of America (“Notebook” 217, 220, 221). Babitz's reaction welcomes these winds as an excuse for wildness, the type of winds that caused a young Babitz and her sister Mirandi to “run outside and dance under the stars on our cool front lawn and laugh manically” (*Slow Days* 70). These reactions to the Santa Ana winds and their psychic impact may appear to contradict one another at first, but in this inter-state Los Angeles, both responses can still apply.

The underlying implication in Babitz's decision to refer to Didion and Chandler is that to choose just one interpretation for the Santa Anas would be sentimental. While Babitz is alluded to, but unnamed, in "The White Album," this example of the Santa Anas draws in Didion directly, in a statement that is at once serious, playful, and defiant. This is another example of the inter-state that exists between Didion, Babitz, and literature about Los Angeles. These texts ultimately play out a dynamic that, in Sontagian terms, typifies a "new sensibility [that] is defiantly pluralistic; it is dedicated both to an excruciating seriousness and to fun and wit and nostalgia" (Sontag 304). This pluralistic new sensibility, which Sontag indicates is essential for the American novelist, is one that is apt for the California of Didion and Babitz: a range that can encompass Didion's seriousness, Babitz's hedonism, and the nostalgia that both admit to grappling with when adapting their approach to literary form to depict the contrast between their California heritage and the California of their time. In this final example, this range is underpinned by the precarity of the Santa Ana winds, themselves variable, centerless, and inter-state.

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