Writing a History of the Present:

The Los Angeles of Joan Didion and Eve Babitz

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Abstract

This thesis examines a collection of personal essays written by Joan Didion and Eve Babitz in and about Los Angeles throughout the 1960s and 70s. Through an analysis of these authors' works, this thesis critically examines the genre of the personal essay, making a case for the essay as a form of historical writing. This analysis brings together contemporary scholarship on historical writing with concepts drawn from the realm of affect theory, such as the "historical present" (Berlant 2011, 4), to explore how history can be written in a time where the past, present and future seem to overlap. At the forefront of the Los Angeles history written by Didion and Babitz are the themes of fame, death and morality, which both authors explore from their unique points of view, as Didion writes from the position of a journalist while Babitz writes as an Angeleno[1] socialite and artist. This research addresses a gap in the scholarship surrounding Didion and Babitz as writers of history, as well as the general lack of research into the oeuvre of Babitz, which has received very little critical attention, especially when compared with the works of her contemporary and friend, Didion.

[1] The term Angeleno, used throughout this thesis, refers to someone or something coming from or characteristic of Los Angeles.

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Introduction

> "Many people I know in Los Angeles believe that the Sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969, ended at the exact moment when word of the murders on Cielo Drive traveled like brushfire though the community, and in a sense this is true. The tension broke that day. The paranoia was fulfilled."
>
> (Didion 1979, 47)

> "Whatever we were all going to be when we grew up, I used to think, will never be anywhere near as vivid and bloody as this. And because we were in Southern California–in Hollywood, even–there was no history for us. There were no books or traditions telling us how we could turn out or what anything meant."
>
> (Babitz 2019, 38)

Los Angeles was the site of rapid and rich cultural change throughout the middle years of the twentieth century. As the city grew, "gaining confidence, stature and notoriety", its culture developed in turn, observed in realms such as literature, visual arts, theater, music and dance–forms long considered the "territory of the Eastern establishment" (Fallon 2) of the United States. There were many notable individuals who lent their voices to the chorus of creative minds trying to navigate life in Los Angeles in this time of rapid change, ranging from photographers, directors and actors to musicians, novelists, painters, and more. In the face of this overflow of creative production, this thesis endeavors to look at Los Angeles through the lens of the essayist, particularly that of the profound Californian writers, Joan Didion and Eve Babitz. When I first

encountered the essays of these two authors, I found myself taken by the way that Didion and Babitz wrote about Los Angeles as if it was not only a city, but an *experience*–a way of life. I was fascinated by the way that both of these authors could read and write their setting like it was an extension of themselves. By putting ink to paper, they were creating a history of not only their own lives, but the life of Los Angeles itself.

The Los Angeles of Didion and Babitz is what they both refer to as a "wasteland" (Didion 1979, 157; Babitz 1974, 3)–a sprawling city riddled with as much glitz and glamor as there was darkness and grime. From cocaine-fueled parties at the Chateau Marmont to multi-million dollar film sets, from warm ocean waves crashing onto the sandy shores of Santa Monica to the infamous Manson Family's Spahn Ranch–Los Angeles in the 1960s and 70s was a place of multiplicity. The following research explores how Didion and Babitz attempt to turn the inherent ambiguity of the Los Angeles of their time into a coherent historical narrative. Specifically, this thesis aims to answer the following question: how do Joan Didion and Eve Babitz use the personal essay to construct a history of their shared present in Los Angeles during the 1960s and 70s, centered on the themes of fame, death, and morality?

A Brief Exploration of the Personal Essay

Before we dive into an analysis of Didion and Babitz's works, it's important to first speak about the significance of *form*. Throughout their lives, both authors experimented with a multitude of forms of creative expression: Didion wrote novels, essays, biographies, screenplays and scripts for the stage, while Babitz wrote essays, short stories and novels, while also pursuing a career as

a photographer and album cover designer. In order to evaluate how Didion and Babitz construct their unique histories of Los Angeles, this thesis will focus on one form that both authors share: the personal essay. This form, however, is not one typically associated with the writing of history. In order to shed more light on this complication, one needs to briefly inquire into the history of the personal essay.

The personal essay is a form of writing that can be traced back for centuries. While some scholars may argue that the personal essay can be located as far back as the works of thinkers such as Plutarch, Seneca, Cicero and Horace, the birth of the essay as a modern form is commonly located within the 16th century with the works of Michel de Montaigne (Rosenberg et al. 236-237). From 1580 to 1595, Montaigne published multiple volumes of *Essais* (*Essays,* lit. *"Experiments"*), in which he explored a variety of topics and experiences he encountered in his life, ranging from profound essays on sadness and friendship to entertaining diatribes about thumbs and drunkenness. Overall, Montaigne's *Essais* placed emphasis on the personal voice, thoughts and life of the author–"the idea of thinking about *your* ideas, what *you* feel, what *your* experience has been" (Rosenberg et al. 220). The emphasis on subjectivity and the personal voice has remained a characteristic feature of the essay throughout the long evolution and history of this form of writing.

The personal essay became a popular form of writing in the United States beginning in the 18th century. This time saw the quick rise and fall of the periodical essay–short ruminations on social phenomena typified by the works of Benjamin Franklin, Philip Freneau and John Trumbull (Spinner 2017, 4-5). Taking the place of periodicals, the nineteenth century saw many American essayists shift their focus towards literary criticism and the philosophical, adopting a type of essay writing falling under what the philosopher George Santayana deemed the "genteel

tradition" (3). Ned Stuckey-French describes the typical author of the genteel essay as such: "a gentleman, often a professor or bachelor, chatting amiably at the fireside about his books, his garden, or whatever topic his mind wandered to" (14). According to literary scholar Jenny Spinner, the genteel essay, often read communally within small groups of highly-educated individuals, "romanticized a past that privileged reputability and good manners and that was typically European, rather than American, in flavor" (Spinner 2017, 13). The genteel essay was the prominent form of essay writing in the United States until the outset of the 20th century, when another new type of essay began to take hold. This new essay, labeled by Stuckey-French as the 'American essay', first appeared in the columns of New York newspapers in the 1920s. Unlike the genteel essay, emulating fireside chats about art and literature, the new American essay came from writers who wanted to "make sense of modern life" and respond to the "expanding, increasingly cosmopolitan, and largely middle-class readership" of the United States at the time (Stuckey-French 2). As a result, the American essay exited the genteel tradition and found its new home within middlebrow culture (Stuckey-French 103), and essayists came to be seen as "second-class citizens" compared to novelists or poets (E. White vii). The American essay specialized in social commentary and satire, appealing to growing audiences of "Americans living in society's margins" (Spinner 2017, 15).

The next shift within the form of personal essay began in the 1960s with the birth of the New Journalism movement. Coined by Tom Wolfe, one of the most notable writers within this movement, "New Journalism" referred to a new form of journalistic writing that developed in the United States throughout the 1960s and 1970s. New Journalist works were an amalgamation of non-fiction stories and fiction writing techniques, bringing together "artfulness and practicality in a way that readers found attractive" (Pauly 598). While many of the defining works in this

movement are long-form non-fiction books, such as Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), the New Journalism movement "opened additional possibilities for the essay writer, adding techniques from both fiction and journalism to the essayist's craft belt" (Spinner 2017, 17). These essays, imbued with fiction-writing techniques, exhibited an "overriding concern with what was new in society" (Eason 147). Unlike the 1920s American essays which found their home in newspaper columns, the New Journalism-inspired essays of the mid-twentieth century typically resided in commercial magazines, such as *Harper's*, *The New Yorker, Rolling Stone*, and *Esquire*. As such, the personal essay continued to make its way into the greater American intellectual and cultural landscape.

The overall state of the essay is summed up nicely by G. Douglas Atkins in *Reading Essays: An Invitation*, where he argues that "the essay hangs *between*–between literature and philosophy, creation and fact, fiction and nonfiction, process and product–born of tension, then, and with tension as perhaps its essential characteristic" (xii). The tension at the core of the personal essay is particularly noticeable in the essays of the 1960s and 70s, a time in which "societal change was perceived to be occurring at an abnormally fast rate" (Eason 147). According to Graham Good, the personal essay of the 1960s onward was "born of the experience of displacement and the attempt to piece together some kind of coherence in a world that seems to threaten the dissolution of the self" (102). The personal essay became a powerful tool for individuals to explore what it felt like to exist in a time and place that was rapidly changing and resisted definition. Despite the fact that, throughout its history in the United States, the essay has been used as a medium through which to comment on and keep a record of society, the personal essay has largely been considered a literary genre, rather than as a form of historical writing. Categorized as a "puzzling literary genre" and an "exasperatingly hybrid and amorphous literary

form" (Chadbourne 133), many scholars have placed the personal essay in a separate realm from that of the historical work. Scholars such as Wendell V. Harris argue that the essay is purely a literary expression of an individual's subjective experiences, rather than an attempt to capture historical facts or participate in the "construction of an argument for any theory" (935). In contrast, this thesis will argue for the importance and feasibility of looking at the personal essay as a form of historical writing, through a focus on how Joan Didion and Eve Babitz utilize this form to construct a history of mid-twentieth century Los Angeles.

Looking at the history of the personal essay, one notices that it is quite male-dominated. In her essay "Follow the Yellow Brick Road: Contemporary Women Essayists and Their Golden Moment", Jenny Spinner deconstructs a recent claim that we have entered into a "golden age for women essayists" in the past few decades (Spinner 2022, 261). Apart from mentions of a small number of notable female essayists, such as Virginia Woolf and Annie Dillard, women have been continually "passed over in theoretical and scholarly discussions, and omitted from or underrepresented in annuals and anthologies not specifically dedicated to women" (Spinner 2022, 262). According to Spinner, in scholarly discourse the essay is discussed as an "ungendered, unraced and unclassed" form, when in reality this is only the case when it is the work of a male essayist in focus (Spinner 2022, 263). Qualifiers begin to appear in the (albeit rare) moments that an essay from a woman or person of color enters into the discussion. The history of the essay has implicitly become the history of the white male essayist; hence, it is increasingly important to shine a spotlight on the essays of women and people of color throughout history.

Theoretical Framework

In 1973, the historian Hayden White published his book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, in which he proposed his own formalist definition of historical writing. According to White, the historical work is "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*" (H. White 2). While White's attempt to define historical writing ushered in a "decisive turn in philosophical thinking about history" (Vann 143), many scholars today have begun to take issue with his formalist interpretation of historiography. Especially with the rapidly developing technologies and mediums through which the human experience can and has been captured, there is an increasing demand for a re-imagining of what the writing of history may look like. The historian Jaume Aurell refers to this as a call for a "new *democratization* in historical representation", wherein "history is owned by those who experience or engage with it, not only by professional historians" (149). The historical work, according to Aurell, does not need to be the stereotypical history book that White's definition brings to mind, but it can instead involve "more creative and experimental representations of the past" (146), such as video games and graphic novels. This call for new understandings and genres of historical writing creates the space to discuss a form such as the personal essay of the non-historian as a historical work.

While historians may not have come to a consensus on the exact form that historical writing can or should take, a general commonality in historiographical thought is that history is about the *past*. Despite this, the approach to the essays of Didion and Babitz in this thesis urges one to adopt a new conceptualization of history itself, wherein history exists as much in the

present as it does in the past. A concept at the core of this is the "historical present", a term explored in great detail by the literary scholar Lauren Berlant in their 2011 book, *Cruel Optimism*. In this book, Berlant argues that the present is perceived *affectively*, with a historical sense that "involves conceiving of a contemporary moment from within that moment" (Berlant 2011, 4). The historical present places at the forefront an understanding of time that blurs the boundaries between temporalities. Harry Harootunian refers to this as "thickness"–rather than conceiving of the past, present and future as separate things, a thick present is "filled with traces of different moments and temporalities, weighted with sediments" (476). We reach an interesting paradox when we accept that both: a) history is concerned with the past, and b) the past (among other temporalities) exists affectively within the present. The historical present thus emerges as a potential remedy to this paradox, as it attends to "the historical import of the present moment" (Berlant 2011, 62) and proposes the possibility of capturing a history of a moment as it unfolds. The historical present places a heightened importance on the "self-activity of experience" (Massumi 180), and involves understanding an unfolding moment as "not an event but an emergent historical environment that can now be sensed atmospherically, collectively" (Berlant 2010, 232).

The essayists in focus elect to mediate the world they live in as they are experiencing it, a practice of self-depiction similar to that discussed by the literary scholar Mark Seltzer in his 2016 book, *The Official World*. Seltzer describes the modern world as inherently autotrophic and self-reporting–a world that stages a society defined by a "self-inciting, self-legislating, and self-depictive form of life" (3). The modern world that Seltzer speaks of refers specifically to the nineteenth century onwards: "If, prior to the nineteenth century, society could not describe itself, now it cannot stop describing itself—in an attempt to keep up with what it is at every moment

bringing about" (6). This self-reporting world is characteristically two-sided, concerned with "the opening to the great outside, the great outdoors, and to the interior, a new continent of self-reflection" (Seltzer 3). Such a balance of exteriority and interiority is effectively navigated through the personal essay, as a form which provides individuals a way of commenting on the world as a whole while simultaneously remaining personal and self-reflective. Ultimately, throughout this thesis, I aim to explore how Babitz and Didion utilize the modern tendency towards near-constant (re)mediation and depiction to construct an essay-based history of Los Angeles that brings the lived experience of the present to the fore.

Case Studies and Methodology

The method for this thesis is a close reading of a series of essays written by Joan Didion and Eve Babitz *in* and *about* Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s. Joan Didion, born in Sacramento in 1934, moved to Los Angeles in 1964 and lived there for over two decades. During this time, she became a prominent figure in the social scene, known for her evocative pieces in popular publications like *Vogue*, *The New Yorker, Esquire,* and *The New York Review of Books*. Over time, Didion went on to gain a successful reputation as a New Journalist, and her essay collections have gone on to become definitive works in the Californian literary canon, as well as the canon of American essayists as a whole. Embarking on a mere two mile journey west from Didion's Los Angeles house on Franklin Avenue one enters Hollywood Hills, the neighborhood in which sits the childhood home of Eve Babitz. Babitz, born in Los Angeles in 1943, found herself inaugurated in the cultural scene of the city from a very young age, being the daughter of

an artist and classical violinist, as well as the god-daughter of the famous Russian composer Igor Stravinsky. Babitz made a big splash in the Hollywood cultural and social scene in 1963, when she posed for a photo taken by Julian Wasser for his collection in the Pasadena Art Museum, depicting Babitz playing chess in the nude against the famous French artist Marcel Duchamp (Wall-Romana 324). Babitz worked as an artist throughout much of the 1960s, taking photographs and designing album covers for musicians such as Linda Ronstadt and The Byrds. Towards the end of the 1960s, Babitz shifted her form of creative expression from the visual to the written, assisted by none other than Joan Didion, whom she thanked in the dedication of her first collection of essays: "And to the Didion-Dunnes for having to be who I'm not" (Babitz 1974, xx). Unlike Didion, whose *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album* hold a permanent spot in the twentieth century American literary canon, Babitz's essays fell into obscurity after the 1970s, until a rediscovery of her works beginning in 2014 when the journalist Lili Anolik wrote a profile of Babitz for Vanity Fair. The article, "All About Eve–And Then Some", brought Babitz to a level of popularity she had never before reached, and compelled *The New York Review of Books* to re-publish her earlier works and compile a brand new collection of her essays, released in 2019.

The essays analyzed in this thesis will be drawn from a total of five collections: Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979), and Babitz's *Eve's Hollywood (1974)*, *Slow Days, Fast Company* (1977), and *I Used to be Charming* (2019). Didion published her first collection of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, in 1968, bringing together twenty essays written between 1961 and 1967. These essays tell the story of Didion's life in the early 1960s, depicting her experience of moving to Los Angeles and becoming integrated into its unique world. The titular essay borrows its name from a verse in W.B. Yeats' 1919 poem "The

Second Coming", and is a riveting exploration of Southern California's counterculture and its impact on youth. *The White Album,* borrowing its name from The Beatles 1968 record, is Didion's second collection of essays, published in 1979. This collection continues to explore Didion's life in California, particularly in relation to her experiences as a journalist covering stories of murder and drug-related crimes, as discussed at length in the titular essay.

Eve's Hollywood, published in 1974, was the first essay collection from Babitz. Containing forty-five essays, this collection paints a picture of Los Angeles through the eyes of an artist and self-proclaimed groupie, exploring relationships, sex, drugs, music and the whimsical Californian landscape. Babitz's second collection of essays, *Slow Days, Fast Company* came only three years later in 1977. Babitz frames this collection not only as a continued detailing of her life in Los Angeles, but also as a love letter to a hesitant recipient: "Since it's impossible to get this one I'm in love with to read anything unless it's about or to him, I'm going to riddle this book with Easter Egg italics so that this time it won't take him two and a half years to read my book like it did the first one" (Babitz 1977, 4). As mentioned earlier, the writing of Babitz fell out of the public eye for a significant period of time, and her works only returned to the forefront of the literary world towards the end of the 2010s. This renaissance of Babitz's writing resulted in the new 2019 collection *I Used to be Charming*, containing over fifty essays written between 1975 and 1997, detailing her time on film sets, relationships with troubled artists, and her near death experience in the 1990s that led her to retreat from society. While *I Used to be Charming* contains some essays written outside of the time frame being studied, this thesis will only be analyzing the essays from these collections written *within* the period of the 1960s and 1970s.

The close reading will be structured around three themes discussed by Didion and Babitz in their portrayals of Los Angeles. The first chapter will explore the theme of fame, with a focus on Didion's and Babitz's portrayals of the celebrity and the fan as two prominent social identities shaped by fame. Following this, the second chapter delves into the dark side of Los Angeles through a focus on death, exploring how the prominence of mortality impacted one's experience of time in the city. Lastly, the third and final chapter analyzes the theme of morality through a discussion of shifting attitudes towards sex and drugs. Through a thematic analysis and close reading of these essays, this thesis will shed light on how the personal essay was utilized by Didion and Babitz, two non-historians, to write a history of the present time and place in which they lived.

Chapter One

Fame: Creating the Star and the Groupie

> "I did not become famous but I got near enough to smell the stench of success. It smelt like burnt cloth and rancid gardenias, and I realized that the truly awful thing about success is that it's held up all those years as the thing that would make everything all right."
>
> (Babitz 1977, 56)

Mark Seltzer claims that a "modern society, to the extent that it is modern, takes note of itself as it goes along" (6), and the Los Angeles of the 1960s and 70s was certainly no exception to this practice. Media production resided, and continues to reside, at the forefront of Angeleno society. The city is home to Hollywood, the center of audiovisual media production in the United States. According to Didion, this billion dollar industry and its subsequent promises of fame and fortune drew the "brightest minds of a generation" towards Los Angeles (Didion 1968, 150). In addition to the world of film and television production, there was also a rich musical scene in Los Angeles, particularly when it came to the genre of rock and roll, which was a defining part of the notorious "California sunshine sound" (Howard 49). Both Didion and Babitz describe the power that music held in the city–in small venues like The Troubadour where "L.A. rock and roll really happened" (Babitz 2019, 106), or in piano bars wherein "the oral history of Los Angeles is written" (Didion 1968, 224). Whether it be films, music, television shows, music videos, photography, paintings or more, there was a constant stream of media and its correlated celebrities flowing out of and within the city. As such, the world of Los Angeles in the 1960s and

70s can be described as one of constant media production and reception. Consequently, from this highly mediated environment emerged related social categories or identities, allowing people to better navigate the world of Angeleno media and the developing notions of fame that came with it. This chapter will be an exploration of the identities that emerged from the highly mediated environment of Los Angeles in the mid-twentieth century, and the extent to which notions of fame impacted the general social structure of the city, as captured in the personal essays of Didion and Babitz.

The massive industries of visual and audio production in Los Angeles have churned out countless celebrities over the years, and Didion and Babitz do not hesitate to speak about the many famous individuals who they believe define Angeleno celebrity culture and the city's world of stardom in the 1960s and 70s. The essay collections in focus are peppered with casual celebrity cameos, ranging from pool trips with Janis Joplin to dinner parties with Roman Polanski and studio sessions with Jim Morrison. Alongside writing about the stars residing atop the city's hierarchy of fame, Didion and Babitz also dedicate a handful of essays to the individuals who they believe to be celebrities in the making, namely Dallas Beardsley and Terry Finch, commenting on the city's questionable promise of fame while doing so. Alongside these famous individuals, the essayists also explore the types of people without whom this notion of fame would be meaningless: the fan. Specifically, Didion and Babitz are interested in analyzing the "groupie", a particular type of fan who received quite a negative and highly sexualized reputation. In the following chapter, I argue that through engaging in discourse about the star and the groupie, Didion and Babitz explore how these fame-oriented identities–seemingly naturally produced as media is created and consumed–are, in reality, artificially crafted. Furthermore, by

placing the star and the groupie at the center of many of their essays, both writers solidify these two labels as defining social categories in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 70s.

The Star

Los Angeles is perhaps best known for the wealth of media that it produces, and at the core of each piece of media typically lies a star, or multiple stars. Rather than praising the star figure, however, Didion and Babitz utilize their essays as a space to interrogate this identity, and question what the celebrity label represents, and to what extent it emerges as a natural social category. Luckily for the authors, they lived in the nexus of celebrity production: Los Angeles. According to Babitz, this city was the only place where "nothing was impossible" and "unknowns become stars" (Babitz 2019, 112). People from all over the nation came to Los Angeles in hopes of finding work and becoming a star, yet Didion suggests that this "Southern California dream" (Fallon 4) was not always successful. In the essay "In Hollywood", Didion sets the scene of a group of Hollywood hopefuls "deteriorating around the swimming pool at the Garden of Allah while they wait for calls from the Thalberg Building [the former executive office of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios]" (Didion 1968, 150). The Hollywood industry was, according to Didion, not an easy industry to enter. Despite this, the obsession with finding fame in Los Angeles remained, inspired by the promise of the Southern California dream, and each year a few lucky individuals managed to cement their status as a star.

Similar to the rest of Los Angeles, Didion and Babitz took great interest in this world of fame and stardom, and thus dedicated a handful of essays to explore what it actually meant for a

person to be a celebrity. The first of these essays to be discussed is Babitz's "All This and *The Godfather* Too: Francis Ford Coppola and His World", from the 2019 collection *I Used to be Charming*. In this essay, Babitz details her experiences behind the scenes of *The Godfather Part II*, where she began as an unnamed extra and eventually made her way into the editing room as an observer. A large portion of this essay highlights a conversation between Babitz and Michael Gazzo, the playwright and Academy Award-nominated actor for his role as Frank Pentangeli. Reflecting on an on-set incident wherein an intoxicated Gazzo mistakenly caused an hour delay in production as a result of not being fed throughout the day, Gazzo says to Babitz, "A lot of people forget that actors are people [...] and they aren't paying us to be people" (Babitz 2019, 14). In this conversation Gazzo insists that he is merely a normal person, yet he is held to the expectation to be and act like someone or something greater simply as a result of his identity as a celebrity. This moment of vulnerability captured by Babitz begins to peel back the layers on a somewhat duplicitous identity of the celebrity. The celebrity is presented to be simultaneously inaccessible *and* relatable, placed high upon a pedestal while also remaining seemingly approachable. Richard Dyer posits that the star is meant to "articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society" (87), despite the fact that they live a life so different to the typical individual consuming their media. By sharing this interaction with Gazzo, Babitz encourages her readers to question the impressions they have of celebrities, and the tendency to view them as relatable or accessible individuals. This presentation of the star as essentially self-contradictory makes the label itself seem inauthentic or in some way artificial.

While Babitz begins the interrogation of the star identity by exploring its deceitful dual-nature, Didion continues this investigation by looking into the very process of becoming a celebrity. In "Notes Toward a Dreampolitik", Didion tells the story of her friend Dallas

Beardsley, who possessed a strong conviction that she would one day become a star. Didion writes about Beardsley's "undiluted" dedication to and work towards her future in Hollywood (Didion 1979, 103), as she spent her days participating in dance lessons and acting workshops, and her nights working multiple jobs in order to support this lifestyle. Didion also details the time when Beardsley, seemingly out of desperation, took out a costly advertisement in a magazine in order to promote herself: "One morning in October of 1968 she bought the fifth page of *Daily Variety* for an advertisement which read in part: "There is no one like me in the world. I'm going to be a movie star"" (Didion 1979, 102). Beardsley's quest for stardom was not the miraculous tale of rising to fame that the Southern California dream promised. Rather, her quest to become a star was calculated, difficult and anything *but* glamorous.

While praising Beardsley's dedication to her career in Hollywood, Didion also categorizes this quest for fame as an "anachronistic ambition", pointing out that "girls were not supposed to want that in 1968" (Didion 1979, 102). Furthermore, this desire for fame is deemed a "fever" tearing through the city, and Didion posits that it's only in an imagined and "invisible" version of Los Angeles where "girls still got discovered" (Didion 1979, 104) and this notion of a glamorous rise to fame truly exists.

On one hand, the depiction we receive of Beardsley presents the woman as a very relatable and driven individual, praised for her talent and commitment to her career. However, even though the essayist depicts Beardsley in quite a positive light, Didion's essay can be interpreted as a general critique of the Los Angeles star-production system as a whole. This interrogation of the celebrity production process, while painting an individual such as Beardsley as undeniably virtuous and talented, suggests the fact that fame itself is "artificially derived" (Gamson 153). Were fame to be achieved naturally or spontaneously, Didion argues that

Beardsley would not be falling into the very fame-obsessed "fever" and compulsive drive for work that she ended up in.

It is important to note that it was not until the 1980s and 90s when larger scholarly discourse surrounding fame and the authenticity of the celebrity label began to pick up steam, particularly with the works of Richard Dyer and Joshua Gamson. Similar to the conclusion that Didion puts forward in her essays years prior, Dyer too asserts that a star is a very carefully created identity, meant to "articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society", as stated previously, and to explore the "promise and the difficulty that the notion of individuality presents for all of us who live by it" (87). Ultimately, through an exploration of this rising star, Didion puts forward an early analysis of what Gamson labeled in 1994 the "celebrification process" (Jerslev 172), presenting the star-creation process as notably unnatural and, in many cases, unsuccessful. Didion's interrogation of the star as an artificially derived identity resembles Gamson's assertion in "The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth-Century America" that the "central American discourse migrate[d] from fame as the natural result of irrepressible greatness to celebrity as the fleeting product of a vacuum cleaner/sausage maker" (141).

Unlike Didion, Babitz presents a more uplifting example of star-creation in "Heroine". This essay contains the story of Terry Finch (believed to be a pseudonym for the singer and actress Ronee Blakley), originally a co-worker of Babitz's at a record label company. Babitz speaks very highly of Finch, who, according to Babitz, had such an enrapturing physical appearance that she "could just make everything stop by entering a room" (Babitz 1977, 57). On top of nearly a whole page spent detailing Finch's beauty, Babitz also highlights her commitment to becoming a star: "Although she was only twenty-six, she was completely in charge of herself.

[...] She was a star, I plainly saw" (Babitz 1977, 56). Despite this drive, the early years of Finch's career were troubled, mainly due to the fact that the recording company that both Finch and Babitz worked for folded in the early 1970s (Babitz 1977, 57). Babitz recounts a conversation with Finch shortly after the release of *Eve's Hollywood* in 1974, where Finch revealed the following:

> It [*Eve's Hollywood*] came out just when I had decided that I probably was never going to amount to anything and that I might as well go back to North Dakota, being out of bread with nothing happening. I thought your book was a good omen. And that night I met this director and he's giving me a part in this film he's doing. (Babitz 1977, 58)

Finch's breakout role (Blakley as Barbara Jean in Robert Altman's 1975 film *Nashville*) ignited a sudden start to her stardom, and Babitz recounts the obsession that blazed through Los Angeles at the time: "People who'd seen rushes at dailies and during editing came away shaken. People were jealous of me because I knew her" (Babitz 1977, 58). The song Finch sang in the film became a hit single internationally, and her face began to appear on countless magazine covers, including *Vogue* and *Time*. According to Babitz, "when she wasn't on the screen, all you could do was wait for her to return" (Babitz 1977, 59), and the writer assumed that Finch's newfound success would lead her to stop returning Babitz's calls. In reality, Finch, who recognized the fragility of her status as "new meat, fresh on the market", maintained her friendship with Babitz, as the two continued to meet occasionally for Bloody Marys at the Musso & Frank Grill on Hollywood Boulevard (Babitz 1977, 61). Finch, while admittedly not "*that* famous"

compared to other stars that emerged at the same time (Babitz 1977, 62), is an example of the rise-to-fame story that dominated the popular view of Los Angeles in the 1960s and 70s (and perhaps even today, as well). Babitz's description of Finch's rise to fame portrays this process as somewhat spontaneous and natural–"the natural result of irrepressible greatness", as phrased by Gamson (141). According to Babitz, Finch possessed inherent talents and beauty, and was given a lead role in a massive film seemingly on a whim. This plays into a very romanticized notion of stardom and the twentieth century California dream that drew outsiders to Los Angeles, and compelled native Angelenos to stick around. Furthermore, this comes as a stark contrast to Didion's portrayal of the star-creation process, wherein the celebrity label is depicted as entirely artificially derived.

Ultimately, the two essayists don't see entirely eye to eye when it comes to the process by which Los Angeles stars were created. Babitz, the Angeleno socialite who befriended many stars over the years, found the glamorous notion of the Southern California dream to be true. According to her, Los Angeles was *the* place where any person could come to be miraculously discovered. However, for Didion, writing with the questioning mind of a journalist, this process of finding fame seemed inauthentic. Scholarship emerging in the following decades would agree with Didion, as "celebrification" became better known as a process of artificial star production. While they don't agree on how the star is created, Didion and Babitz do share a sense of skepticism towards the celebrity, rooted partially in the fact that the star is meant to represent something simultaneously relatable and entirely out of reach. Overall, this fame-oriented social identity, one very significant within and unique to Los Angeles, is presented as something to be critiqued and perhaps re-considered as a defining social category in the city.

The Groupie

Throughout their essays, Didion and Babitz speak about many of the notable musicians and bands that entered the Los Angeles music scene throughout these two decades, such as “the Byrds, the Dillards, Joni Mitchell, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Neil Young, Poco, Linda Rondstadt, Jackson Brown, and all sorts of L.A. surfer-cowboy types” (Babitz 2019, 106). What may be more interesting, however, than the tales of these Angeleno musicians are the essayists' depictions of the devoted fans that followed them. Specifically, Didion and Babitz engage in many conversations about a specific type of celebrity fan: the “groupie”.

In the essay “From the Vault: Teenyboppers, Groupies, and Other Grotesques”, Norma Coates identifies an interesting paradox within the emerging world of American rock music in the 1960s and 70s, wherein there existed a “contradictory need and disdain for women in rock culture” (31). Despite the undeniable contributions of countless women as (often highly sexualized) performers in the world of rock and roll–think of Janis Joplin, Tina Turner, Stevie Nicks–female fans were relegated to a lower status of listener, “demeaned ‘outsiders’ of rock culture” (Coates 30). This disparaging attitude towards female fans is where we see the groupie label emerge, defined in a 1969 *Rolling Stone* article as a “chick who hangs out with bands [...] a non-profit call girl. Like a Japanese Geisha in many ways, and a friend and a housekeeper and pretty much whatever the musician needs” (Hopkins et al). Playing into a double standard at the forefront of society in the 1960s and 70s, wherein men were praised and women criticized for their sexual desires, groupies were ultimately treated as “objects of pity and derision” (Coates 44).

In the essay “Slouching Towards Bethlehem”, where Didion writes about her many encounters with young members of southern California’s counterculture movement of the 1960s, one of the individuals Didion describes is a young girl named Vicki. Vicki, living in the house of a notorious cocaine user named Otto, is a high school dropout who “followed the Grateful Dead up to San Francisco one time and has been here ‘for a while’” (Didion 1968, 102). Disconnected from her family and unsure of what her future holds, Didion describes Vicki’s lack of desire to continue her education and suggests that she will continue to pursue this stagnant life of a groupie. Didion’s depiction of Vicki contains within it a tone of sadness or disappointment, and this same subtle disdain exists as well in another section of the same essay, where Didion describes an additional handful of groupies following the Grateful Dead:

> There are always little girls around rock groups–the same little girls who used to hang around saxophone players, girls who live on the celebrity and power and sex a band projects when it plays–and there are three of them out here this afternoon in Sausalito where the Grateful Dead rehearse. They are all pretty and two of them still have baby fat and one of them dances by herself with her eyes closed. (Didion 1968, 90)

In this quote, Didion uses phrases such as “little girls” and “baby fat” to infantilize the girls following the Grateful Dead, adding another troublesome layer to her depiction of the groupie. Didion assumes a pitiful tone when describing the groupies she knows, as if to suggest that these individuals have fallen prey to a lifestyle that is robbing them of a proper childhood and suitable future.

While Didion's essays fit into her society's attitude of negativity towards groupies, Babitz's essays provide another take on this social identity, wherein Babitz herself openly embraces the groupie label and presents it as a cleverly crafted identity. Importantly, Babitz does not deny the sexual implications that come with the term groupie. In her essay "Rosewood Casket", the writer compares groupies to "dispensation believers, who pay with their bodies in order to be invited to heaven, or what looks like heaven from their seat" (Babitz 1974, 125). In this essay, Babitz portrays the groupie as a woman who embraces her sexuality and what her body has to offer, viewing it not as something to be ashamed of, but rather as a tool. As a result, the groupie as defined by Babitz comes across as calculated and goal-driven, similar to how Didion characterizes the rising star figure, as discussed earlier. This rejection of the groupie as a mindless and sex-crazed celebrity-follower continues in the essay "Honky-Tonk Nights":

> Like more than one carefully educated young woman watching TV the night the Beatles were on Ed Sullivan, I was a groupie. I posed as an album-cover designer and photographer, while others disguised themselves as tailors, record-company secretaries, or journalists. For women like us, hanging out in the Troubadour bar every night was, you know, business. (Babitz 2019, 107)

The depiction of the groupie in this quote is a stark contradiction to the depiction of the young and ignorant Grateful Dead fans we see in Didion's "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." Rather than using infantilizing language as Didion does, Babitz describes groupies as "carefully educated" women pursuing "business". In this quote, Babitz recognizes the shame associated with the groupie label, describing how women such as herself often tried to disguise it by

assuming more socially acceptable roles, like a record-company secretary or photographer. The biographer Lili Anolik suggests that it was this very "designer-photographer guise" that supplied Babitz with "both a front and an alibi, as well as an all-access backstage pass" (39). Pursuing life as a groupie "allowed Eve to infiltrate, edge into territory from which she'd otherwise have been barred" (Anolik 26).

Babitz, the self-proclaimed "clerk-typist by day and a groupie-adventuress prowling the hot Sunset Strip at night" (Babitz 1977, 67), imbues the highly-criticized label with power and agency, and ultimately designates it as an entirely artificial category. Similar to how Didion argues that the star label is artificially produced, Babitz too depicts the groupie label as inauthentic. However, while the star's artificiality is presented as a negative attribute, the deceitful nature of the groupie is put forward by Babitz as a virtue, seeing as the groupie lifestyle could provide someone access to a side of Los Angeles that other social identities could not.

* * *

Ultimately, the essays in focus provide a glimpse at discourse in formation, and by engaging with these texts, we, as readers, can get a greater sense of what society and life in Los Angeles during the 1960s and 70s was really like. Rather than viewing it through the lens of what historians deem to be the facts in hindsight, reading essays written while the history itself is unfolding gives us an authentic sense of how life in Los Angeles was negotiated with. A history focused on one's experience of the present sheds light on how the ideas that define a society and time actively change or come into being, as seen in Didion's and Babitz's explorations of the

emerging world of fame and its related social categories in Los Angeles. Through the personal essay, the essayists explore notions of identity and renown in the city, bringing together societally dominant ideas with their own individual opinions. As a result, we are met with the deconstruction of identities such as the star and the groupie.

The star was a social category praised by Angeleno society and media, yet both essayists argue that this identity is ultimately deceitful and inauthentic. Alternatively, the groupie was villainized by the people of Los Angeles (Didion included), yet Babitz sheds light on how the identity–equally as artificial as that of the star–was empowering and provided women access to parts of the city that they would otherwise not receive. Through this exploration of the world of fame and its related identities, Didion and Babitz emphasize the ever-changing nature of society in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s. This evolving history of the city is captured especially effectively through the personal essay form, as the writers concerned themselves not with what overarching historical ideas could be best assigned to this time period retrospectively, but rather what ideas felt the most pertinent to them as subjective individuals and writers of history in that present moment.

Chapter Two

Reckoning With Mortality: Murder, Suicide, and Overdose

> "The center was not holding. It was a country of bankruptcy notices and public-auction announcements and commonplace reports of casual killings and misplaced children and abandoned homes and vandals who misspelled even the four-letter words they scrawled. [...] It was not a country in open revolution. It was not a country under enemy siege. It was the United States of America in the cold late spring of 1967…" (Didion 1968, 84)

> "Death, to me, has always been the last word in people having fun without you." (Babitz 1974, 123)

This chapter aims to answer the question of what role death plays in the history and collective imagination of 1960s and 70s Los Angeles, according to Joan Didion and Eve Babitz. In their essays, both writers speak about death in various different forms, of which the three most prominent forms will be discussed here: murders, suicides, and overdoses. When writing about death, one is also consequently speaking about time, to which death is inextricably linked. Death is often presented as a moment of departure from the present, specifically in the progressing time of an individual's "personal life space" (Lee 388). However, speculating further on the topic of mortality may inspire one to question the extent to which life in the present is "bounded by experiences tied to the living and not to the dead" (Lee 388). In "Time to Die: The Temporality of Death and the Philosophy of Singularity", Gary Peters claims that death causes a serious disruption to the "existential balance of the past and future" (218). Rather than serving as a clear

separation between two temporalities–a time before one's death and a timer after–reckoning with death may cause one to reside more appropriately in an experience of time that collapses such a distinction. There are two temporal models of death, according to Peters, the first of which involves "turning one's back on death through the inauthentic distractions of memory and nostalgia", inundating the present with memories of the past (222). The second model is centered on the anticipation of a denied future, involving a "reaching forth into the future in an urgent effort to bring forward into an intensified "now" anticipated moments that would otherwise remain unrealised at death" (223). As suggested by both of these models, death imbues the present with both the past and the future. Bearing this in mind, I argue that death and the impact that it has on the ongoing lives of individuals is most effectively explored in connection to an understanding of time that interweaves notions of the past, present and future–a thick present. Returning to the focus of this research, the historical work that Didion and Babitz pursue in their essays requires one to adopt this very understanding of time, in which we not only look at the present as a singular temporality, but as a temporality containing within it the past and future as well. By writing a history of the present, focusing on an "emergent historical environment that can now be sensed atmospherically, collectively" (Berlant 2010, 232), the authors can therefore address a complex topic such as death in a way that doesn't necessarily confine it to one temporality or suggest that death means the end of the present. Rather, for both of the authors, death in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 70s is a sign of the continuation of the thick present, haunted by specters from the past and ideas of different futures that could be (or could have been).

Throughout *The White Album*, Didion paints a picture of the intense paranoia and obsession surrounding death in Los Angeles, in the context of both her own life experiences as

well as in the Angeleno media. According to the essayist, the overwhelming presence of death and violence in the city instilled within her many anxious tendencies, such as the compulsion to write down the license plate numbers of unknown vehicles:

> It seems to me now that during those years I was always writing down the license numbers of panel trucks, panel trucks circling the block, panel trucks parked across the street, panel trucks idling at the intersection. I put these license numbers in a dressing-table drawer where they could be found by the police when the time came. That the time would come I never doubted… (Didion 1979, 19)

The possibility of death was not only at the forefront of Didion's mind, but it also consumed much of the general population, as exemplified by the popularity of excessively violent genres of film. Didion speaks specifically of "bike movies", a film genre following outlawed biker gangs, in which "brutal images glaze the eye" and the "senseless insouciance of all the characters in a world of routine stompings and casual death takes on a logic better left unplumbed" (Didion 1979, 100). The success of the bike movie, a "perfect Rorschach of its audience" (Didion 1979, 100), in drive-in movie theaters throughout Los Angeles reflects the prominence of death in the collective imagination of the city. Mortality was a subject that the Angeleno public seemed to be fascinated with, and in their essays both authors shed light on why this is the case, and how death and its constant remediations came to shape life itself in Los Angeles.

Ultimately, in the following chapter I analyze how, through a focus on encounters with and attitudes towards death, Babitz and Didion explore how the temporal structure of life was uniquely experienced in Los Angeles, as encounters with mortality and violence became

commonplace throughout the 1960s and 70s, particularly in the forms of murder, suicide and overdose.

Murder

The first context in which this chapter explores death in Los Angeles is murder, a crime that has permeated the city since its earliest years of existence. While murder itself was not unique to only Los Angeles, as homicide rates were also on the rise nationally, the city's highly mediated environment ensured that gruesome events such as murder became quickly associated with Los Angeles. The historian Eric H. Monkkonen traces the long history of Angeleno murders in the article "Homicide in Los Angeles, 1827-2002", within which he identifies the two peak moments of murders in the city. The first peak is located in the 1850s, which Monkkonen attributes to the recent invention of the revolver. Homicide rates began to decrease after the 1870s and continued to do so until roughly 1960, when once again the number of murders began to rise, eventually reaching a second peak in the late 1970s (Monkkonen 174). This mid-twentieth-century increase in murders has a less definite set of reasons behind it. Monkonnen suggests it could have been a result of various factors, from an increase in wartime experience with guns to the 1950s popularity of the often crime-oriented *film noir* genre, or perhaps the overall "weak civic, governmental, and law enforcement structures" of Los Angeles (174-176). While the exact reasons for the increase in homicide rates in Los Angeles in the 1960s-70s remains a question among scholars, what has been researched with more clarity is the media discourse surrounding murders at this time. Homicides in Los Angeles, according to Monkkonen, had the tendency to

generate “hyperbolic media attention”, wherein “far more [was] written about these exceptional cases than about the humdrum daily violence, in part because of the city's print media and its strong presence in film media, from movies to newsreels” (177). In “End of the Road: Joan Didion, Hunter S. Thompson, and True Crime in the Auto-Apocalyptic West”, Jacqueline Foertsch provides some examples of the murderers occupying the front pages of Angeleno media at the time, such as the “Golden State Killer, the Freeway Killer, the perhaps never-caught Zodiac Killer, the Hillside Stranglers, and the Night Stalker” (3). Assigned mysterious pseudonyms and covered in great detail by the media, murderers and their violent actions became commonplace topics of conversation and seemed to occupy the minds of the general population of the city.

Of the two essayists in focus, Didion played a much larger role in the media coverage of Los Angeles murders, and Foertsch argues that it was Didion’s position as a journalist that led to her “willingness to engage her work with the seamy spectacle and resulting hysterias of sensational murder cases” (2). Didion, residing at the time in a “senseless-killing neighborhood” of Los Angeles, was no stranger to stories of murder and violence (Didion 1979, 15). In the first paragraph of “The White Album”, Didion writes:

> We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We 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. (Didion 1979, 11)

This introductory claim clarifies Didion's intentions when talking about a topic such as death: she wants to make sense of something that feels nonsensical, to make overwhelming and seemingly unrelated events feel approachable and understandable. As such, throughout her essays, Didion talks about many examples of death, particularly murders, in an attempt to create a larger narrative or lesson to be learned from them.

A notable example of one murder that became a mass media sensation is the Lucille Miller case, covered in detail by Didion in the opening essay of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream." At first, the death of Miller's husband, Cork, was deemed an accident:

> She [Lucille Miller] says that she was driving east on Banyan Street at about 35 m.p.h. when she felt the Volkswagen pull sharply to the right. The next thing she knew the car was on the embankment, quite near the edge of the retaining wall, and flames were shooting up behind her. [...] After one car had passed without stopping, Lucille Miller ran back down Banyan toward the burning Volkswagen. She did not stop, but she slowed down, and in the flames she could see her husband. (Didion 1968, 11)

Miller was arrested the following morning, accused by the police of murdering her husband by intentionally setting fire to the car while he was asleep (potentially drugged) in the passenger seat. "Physical inconsistencies" at the scene, such as the nature of the skid marks on the road and the fact that the parking rather than driving lights were on, supported the police's accusation of murder (Didion 1968, 12). Further investigation, according to Didion, revealed Miller's potential

motive for the murder: she had been having an affair with Arthwell Hayton, an attorney and the husband of one of Miller's friends (Didion 1968, 15-16). The addition of an affair in the case only intensified the existing media interest in the murder (something which will be discussed further in chapter 3)–particularly after it was revealed that Hayton's wife, Elaine, was mysteriously found dead in their home a few months before the death of Cork Miller (Didion 1968, 17). The gruesome and "sensational nature of the case" drew in crowds of such large numbers and intensity that the glass doors leading into the courtroom were shattered, and people began to camp outside the courthouse in hopes of getting first access to updates (Didion 1968, 20). Didion speaks here of an undeniable urgency and immediacy inherent to the profound media interest in a case such as Lucille Miller's. Within this conversation, a greater emphasis is placed on the present as an arena in which the very fragility of life was to be negotiated with. Through discussing this death-focused media frenzy as it gained traction, Didion's essay thus captures a moment in Angeleno history wherein the very temporal structure of life itself was shifting.

Didion, covering Miller's story for *The Saturday Evening Post*, was allowed inside the courtroom for the proceedings, and thus "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" provided a highly sought-after inside look at the case as it unfolded. Her depictions of the happenings inside the courtroom add to the highly emotional nature of the events, as Didion describes Debra Miller, Lucille's daughter, yelling as her mother is taken away, "She didn't *do* it." (Didion 1968, 25). The completed essay[2], published four years after the murder, ends with the following description of the Miller's house in San Bernardino:

[2] An earlier version of the essay, titled "How Can I Tell Them There's Nothing Left" was published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1966, detailing the events of the case until the end of the trial in 1965.

> The Millers never did get it landscaped, and weeds grow up around the fieldstone siding. The television aerial has toppled on the roof, and a trash can is stuffed with the debris of family life: a cheap suitcase, a child's game called "Lie Detector." (Didion 1968, 27)

In this quote, Didion mirrors the death of Cork Miller with the dilapidation of his family's house. The weeds, taking over the walls of the house, could symbolize a new future for the Miller family, as nature begins to take over and hide the signs of the past. In a different vein, the increasing disrepair of the house could be further emphasis from Didion on the encroaching power that murder holds, seeing as Miller's actions not only led to the death of her husband, but to the destruction of a physical place in tandem. This metaphor presents a paradox of temporality, as Didion uses the Miller house as a symbol for a life suspended in time–not residing securely in any temporality of the past, present or future. The house, standing as it is in the present, is simultaneously stuck in the past and pushing forward into the future–a future consequently inextricable from the events of the past. The house itself then exists in some sort of a liminal space, resisting a clear temporal structure. Such a concept, according to Didion, could be applied to the lived experience of this time in Los Angeles as well. The preeminence of death, particularly violent deaths resulting from murders, made the very structure of life itself seem disorganized or amorphous. Death leaves traces within the thick present that subsequently shift our understandings and experiences of life and time, and such a dynamic was particularly palpable in Los Angeles of the mid-twentieth century, where abrupt violent deaths became common fixtures.

Miller is only one of the many "California murderesses" that Didion came across in her time in Los Angeles (Didion 1968, 25)–a second woman entangled in the world of murder in the city is Linda Kasabian, whose story Didion shares in "The White Album." Kasabian was a member of the Manson Family, a cult active in southern California throughout the late 1960s. Led by Charles Manson, the cult carried out various murders and other crimes between 1967 and 1969, most infamously the murders on Cielo Drive. On the night of August 8, 1969, Kasabian and three other members of the Manson family (Tex Watson, Susan Atkins, and Patricia Krenwinkel) arrived at 10050 Cielo Drive, the home of the Hollywood actress Sharon Tate and the director Roman Polanski. Tate and four guests staying in the house were murdered by the cult members that night. Didion describes the chaos caused by this event the next day, as all of Los Angeles struggled to figure out what happened and why:

> On August 9, 1969, I was sitting in the shallow end of my sister-in-law's swimming pool in Beverly Hills when she received a telephone call from a friend who had just heard about the murders at Sharon Tate Polanski's house on Cielo Drive. The phone rang many times during the next hour. These early reports were garbled and contradictory. One caller would say hoods, the next would say chains. There were twenty dead, no, twelve, ten, eighteen. Black masses were imagined, and bad trips blamed. I remember all of the day's misinformation very clearly, and I also remember this, and wish I did not: *I remember that no one was surprised*. (Didion 1979, 42)

When speaking about her attempts to order her history of Los Angeles, Didion says it was this very day that the 1960s came to an end–"ended at the exact moment when word of the murders on Cielo Drive traveled like brushfire through the community [...] The tension broke that day. The paranoia was fulfilled" (Didion 1979, 47). In this moment, Didion makes her historiographical intentions clear, as she attempts to directly place a chronological structure upon unfolding historical events. Somewhat ironically, the very thing that makes the Cielo Drive murders a notable moment in Didion's timeline of Angeleno history was the fact that it caused such great temporal confusion. The chaotic time directly following the murders of Tate and her four houseguests emphasized to Didion and the rest of Los Angeles the thickened nature of the present, as people frantically attempted to figure out what happened, reminisced on positive memories of the Hollywood star, and contemplated alternative futures and what could have happened if the Manson family never appeared on Cielo Drive that night.

The night of violence on Cielo Drive cast a haze of confusion and panic over the city of Los Angeles, a fog which Didion attempts to navigate in "The White Album" as she gets to know Linda Kasabian while she is on trial testifying against her fellow members of the Manson Family. Didion explains that despite her attempts to get her to speak directly about the murders, Kasabian preferred to talk about simpler topics, like "childhood pastimes and disappointments, her high-school romances…" (Didion 1979, 43). Unlike the general public, enraptured and terrified by the murders, Kasabian avoided speaking of them unless it was absolutely necessary, generating what Didion described as a "juxtaposition of the spoken and the unspeakable [that] was eerie and unsettling" (Didion 1979, 43). This notion of the spoken-unspeakable dichotomy harkens back to Didion's opening message of *The White Album* collection, wherein she posits that there is a human tendency to look for some kind of meaning in even the most nonsensical,

inhumane moments. This compulsion to find meaning–the "the social or moral lesson in the murder of five" (Didion 1979, 11)–may explain why a topic such as death, despite its threatening and controversial nature, found itself at the forefront of media and discourse in Los Angeles. Ultimately, whether it was an attempt to find meaning and make order out of disorder, or if it was simply morbid fascination, murder was undeniably at the front of the Angeleno psyche in the 1960s and 70s. Furthermore, Foertsch argues that, even if Didion may have been personally repelled by this violence and fascination with death, she was also "indebted to it for some of her most memorable writing—for enabling the attitudes of paranoia and neurasthenia that defined her beloved literary persona" (4).

While Didion's depictions of murder are quite detailed and reflective, any mentions of murder in Babitz's work are very off-hand, and don't receive a similar amount of attention or reflection as we see in Didion's essays. For example, in the essay "Hollywood and Vine", Babitz mentions the murder of a man she briefly met as a teenager:

> A few weeks earlier I had let a spectacularly handsome man drive me home from a party I wasn't allowed to go to, and when I told him I was 14, he dropped me off a block from my house and said, paternally, before he gave me an unpaternal and never-to-be-forgotten kiss, "don't let guys pick you up like this, kid, you might get hurt." After that I never saw him again except on the front page of the papers two years later when he was found dead in Lana Turner's bathroom. He was called Johnny Stompanato, poor guy. (Babitz 1974, 14)

The unsolved murder of Johnny Stompanato has since been deemed one of the most notorious crimes of the 20th century (Chua-Eoan), yet all that Babitz has to say about his death is simply "poor guy". Babitz's arguable indifference towards his murder suggests a certain insensitivity towards death, perhaps a result of overexposure due to the increase of homicides during Babitz's time in Los Angeles, as suggested by the trends described by Monkkonen. This desensitized view of murder is brought up again in the essay "Heroine", when Babitz speaks about the death of a friend of hers: "Two days later he purchased some specially perfect junk and was killed. Nobody noticed for four days and then finally the police noticed the smell and removed him from the alley off Santa Monica Blvd" (Babitz 1977, 56). The language with which Babitz describes his death is notably casual, as if the murder of a friend was simply an unavoidable part of life in Los Angeles.

While Didion speaks of mass paranoia caused by murders and their inherently "sensational nature" (Didion 1968, 20), Babitz embodies an antithetical attitude in "Heroine" and "Hollywood and Vine", as she approaches murder with a general attitude of disinterest. Despite the fact that they take on two entirely different tones, however, both essayists' depictions of murder may point towards the same fact: homicide was an unavoidable part of life in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 70s. For Didion, tasked with reporting on the most gruesome and provoking murders to the interested masses, murder became a defining lens through which to view the city. Didion draws attention towards the capacity for murder to entirely disrupt the function and structure of life in Los Angeles, as the present becomes increasingly thick, inundated with ghostly traces of the past alongside futures that could have been. Babitz, on the other hand, whose writing was typically focused on her life as a socialite, faced less of an imperative to write about murder, which to her seemed like a given facet of Angeleno life. For

Babitz, it was not death in the form of murder that compelled her to investigate how one experiences life. Rather, it was her experience with suicides and overdoses that brought about a reconceptualization of life and its complicated temporality. As such, the following section will therefore explore the alternative ways that death was presented and historicized by Babitz.

Suicide and Overdose

While much of Didion's writing throughout the 1960s and 70s approached the topic of death through the stories of gruesome murders, Babitz typically wrote about death in connection to other tragic forms of loss, namely overdoses and suicides. It must be clarified that the line between overdose and suicide is somewhat blurry at times–for instance, an overdose could be both an intentional form of suicide or an accidental cause of death. Due to this struggle to securely delineate these two causes of death (particularly in regards to how they are portrayed by Babitz), this chapter deals with them in conjunction.

Just as homicide rates in Los Angeles were at a high throughout the 1960s and 70s, suicide rates were also on the rise, to such an extent that the scholar Andrew Bennett has referred to the twentieth century as the "suicide century" (2). In Los Angeles in particular, the looming threat of suicide seemed to exist in the very foundations of the city, as Babitz depicts in "The Garden of Allah", the closing essay of *Slow Days, Fast Company*:

> The awkward basement pillars of the Chateau Marmont support the past. The ghosts and furies from Alla Nazimova's garden eventually wafted across Sunset

> when the respectable savings and loan building was erected by Bart Lytton. He probably thought that he could just come and build and the Garden would cease, but a few years later he lost everything, and not long after that, despondent, he killed himself. That's the trouble with Hollywood; the things that don't exist are likely to kill you if you threaten them. (Babitz 1977, 161-162)

In this quote, Babitz suggests that it is the history of Los Angeles ingrained in the land itself that can compel one to commit suicide: Lytton, attempting to build atop the foundations of the once-iconic Los Angeles landmark, the Garden of Allah Hotel, couldn't escape the ghosts of the Angeleno past. For Didion, too, the very landscape of the city pointed towards the undeniable presence and possibility of suicide, which she says is clearly visible even to strangers driving through Los Angeles and its suburbs on Route 99: "these towns must seem so flat, so impoverished, as to drain the imagination. They hint at evenings spent hanging around gas stations, and suicide pacts sealed in drive-ins" (Didion 1968, 181). Through descriptions such as these, Didion and Babitz utilize their essays as a space in which to explore Los Angeles as a city of undeniable loss, particularly when it comes to suicide.

In *Suicide Century: Literature and Suicide from James Joyce to David Foster Wallace*, Bennett posits that is is literature, more so than any other medium or field, through which the theme of "self-killing" can be most effectively explored, as it offers a space wherein "suicide can be conceptualized and imagined, actualized, promoted, and resisted" (2). Furthermore, he says that it is through literature that one "most rigorously explores the phenomenon, and in particular the phenomenology, the lived experience, so to speak, of suicide" (Bennett 4). The importance Bennett places on the phenomenology of suicide points once again to the efficacy of Didion and

Babitz's approach when writing their history of Los Angeles, seeing as they focus on capturing the historical present and the lived experience of existing in a specific time and place. By capturing the stories of deaths and ruminating on how the temporal structure of life is impacted by death, the essayists develop a history of Los Angeles wherein the experience and social conceptualization of mortality finds itself at the very center.

Unlike the murders depicted by Didion, Babitz typically bore a personal connection to the victims of suicide and overdose described in her essays. In "The Girl Who Went to Japan", Babitz postulates on some of the leading causes for suicide while she speaks to a friend who attempted to commit suicide, but survived. This friend, Nellie, was given the nickname "Suicide Girl" by Babitz and another friend, Karen, after they were informed that she had "slashed her wrists in the snow among the violets on three separate occasions" (Babitz 1974, 264). Babitz recounts the following conversation with Nellie, wherein her motivation for suicide is revealed:

> She held her tiny hands to her undoubtedly perfect breasts where she found stretch marks. "When I first saw them and I knew I was getting older, I couldn't stand it. That's when I slashed my wrists." Her hands left her breasts and she held out her naked wrists where those almost imperceptible slash scars left by razors were the only other flaw. That and the stretch marks. (Babitz 1974, 265-266)

Here Babitz provides an example of someone who viewed death as a way of escaping anticipated temporal structures. With the passing of time comes the aging of the physical body, a fact of life that Angeleno society seemed to criticize. Nellie's suicide attempts, according to Babitz, resulted from a fear of this passing of time and a connected fear of no longer meeting societal standards

for beauty. In *Suicide in Modern Literature: Social Causes, Existential Reasons, and Prevention Strategies*, Josefa Ros Velasco affirms that suicide can, indeed, be prompted by societal pressures and expectations–it is a "social fact, a by-product of every society" (xi). Societal pressure, in the case of Nellie, is directly related to the continuation of time and the inevitable approach of the future, the very potential of which existed in the present in the form of stretch marks and wrinkles. For Nellie, a willful death provided the possibility to remain frozen in a moment in time where the future, while bearing its traces, never fully comes to be. Despite this, her suicide attempts failed and she continued living in the ongoing present, thickened by physical traces of her past in the form of scars and traces of the future in the form of stretch marks.

Alongside deaths explicitly framed as suicides, Babitz also talks about many instances of fatal accidental overdoses. Overdosing, according to Babitz, possessed a somewhat romantic charm amongst the people of Los Angeles: "smoking, although glamorous, has never been as glamorous as heroin–and dying from cigarettes just doesn't have the tragic sunset quality that O.D.ing lends to death. Heroin is the celebrated romantic excess of our time" (Babitz 1977, 53-54) (the third chapter of this paper will explore the overall theme of drug use in further detail and dive into *why* drug overdosing was glamorized by Babitz in this way). The "tragic sunset quality" inherent to overdosing can be observed in Babitz's description of Janis Joplin's sudden 1970 death in "Heroine". Babitz, hoping to shoot an album cover for Joplin, found the singer one day floating in the pool of the Landmark Motor Hotel, seemingly alive but incapacitated by the large amount of drugs she was on. Unable to do the photoshoot due to Joplin's intoxicated state, Babitz left the hotel, and it was very soon after this event that Joplin then died from an overdose:

> A week later she died. And people wondered how she could do such a dumb thing to herself when she had everything. [...] Janis Joplin was always wondering when her prince would come, and the wait was such a bore that she purchased total surcease on the smooth, blank, clear, smiling lake of heroin. A famous friend of the famous. (Babitz 1977, 54-55).

Babitz frames Joplin's death in a romantic, albeit macabre, light, suggesting that she only overdosed because she could no longer wait around for love. With this depiction of Joplin's death we see an example of the imaginative and exploratory capacities of literature as described by Andrew Bennett. One could never know for sure *why* Joplin overdosed, or if it was intentional, but writing about it offers the space for an individual such as Babitz to explore this event, and cast it in a different light. This practice is also a reflection of the second temporal model of death as described by Peters, wherein we come to terms with mortality by bringing ideas of out-of-reach futures into conversations in the present.

While the generally accepted story of Joplin's death categorizes it as an accidental overdose, Babitz uses this essay to question if it was in some way intentional and even romantic. Bennett affirms such a line of thought, saying that it is possible to see a brutal event such as suicide as "a source of affective sustenance, even of optimism–as a way of getting on, rather than getting out (you get on by thinking of getting out, holding the option open as a way of escaping it)" (2). Writing, particularly in the form of the personal essay, provides Babitz the opportunity to explore the theme of suicide and find within it meaning, in the same way that Didion searches for meaning in the tales of the murders she writes about.

Not only were drug overdoses glamorized and promulgated by the tragic passings of iconic California stars, but, according to Babitz, they were above all a function of life in Los Angeles: "When someone dies of heroin, like magic two or three close friends spring up in his place to pay God back by becoming junkies themselves. Perversity is a correlate in all of this" (Babitz 1977, 62). Babitz portrays a fatal overdose as an unavoidable event in Los Angeles, one which the residents of the city were well aware of, but neglected to take considerable measures to prevent. As such, to hear of the passing of a friend or acquaintance due to an overdose became somewhat ordinary. For instance, in "The Sheik", Babitz learns in casual conversation with a high school friend of the very recent passing of another mutual friend of the two: "She was dead, he told me. Died only two months before, in fact. OD'd" (Babitz 1974, 88). Carolyn, the friend in focus, accidentally overdosed by taking too many pills prescribed to help ease her intense period cramps, which Babitz recalls "kept her on the nurse's cot every month for three days" when they were in school together (Babitz 1974, 88). This nostalgia and reminiscing carried out by Babitz exemplifies, once again, a form through which death emphasizes the thick present and brings within it further traces of the past.

* * *

According to Didion and Babitz, death was a defining aspect of life in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 70s, as homicide rates were at an all-time high and the nation was deeply entrenched in the "suicide century" of the 1900s (Bennett 2). Furthermore, as argued by Seltzer, existence in this modern time was just as much about *mediating* aspects of life as it was about actually *living* it.

As such, not only was death a topic encountered by many Angelenos on a personal or literal basis, but it was also unavoidable within the massive amounts of media that permeated every aspect of life in the city. By writing about death, Didion and Babitz not only contribute to this ever-increasing media attention, but they endeavor to deconstruct it and explore how death and an awareness of its inevitable approach lead to "an intensification of time-consciousness" (Peters 220). For both essayists, the subject of death functioned as an entry point to further explore the concept of the thick present in Los Angeles–a temporality haunted by ghosts from the past and glimpses of possible futures.

Didion's journalistic focus on Los Angeles murders presented various struggles to cope with a lack of temporal structure as a result of death. Violent deaths such as Cork Miller's and Sharon Tate's are presented by Didion as examples of how the loss of life reveals the many traces of the past and future that the present contains, further emphasizing the importance of writing a history concerned with the present and one's lived experiences. Also captured in Didion's essays is the mass fascination that the city as a whole seemed to have with murder, and the sense of immediacy and urgency that such murders inspired. Incessant demands for information, details, and explanations behind murders further clarify the significantly present-oriented nature of discourse surrounding death in Los Angeles. Shifting the focus away from murder, Babitz approaches the topic of death by sharing her own encounters with suicide and overdose. Similar to the conclusion reached by Didion, Babitz asserts that death, in any form that it may come, draws attention to the present. Through the example of her friend Nellie, Babitz argues that suicide can be understood as a way of trying to avoid arriving at a future whose early warning signs one grasps in the present. Furthermore, when ruminating on overdoses, Babitz exemplifies both of the temporal models of death that Gary Peters introduces,

involving bringing past memories and future hopes into the present as a means of coping with death. Ultimately, As Didion and Babitz write their histories of Los Angeles in this time, attempting to capture the "defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (Berlant 2011, 96), death is identified as a topic which irrevocably changed how life was experienced on a daily basis.

Chapter Three

Debating Morality: Sex and Drugs

"The idea of an "artistic community" evaporates into the slow days. Inspiration and words like that get hurried along with the fast company; it's impossible to tell if one's been inspired, or if it was the cocaine, or what. [...] In Los Angeles it's hard to tell if you're dealing with the real true illusion or the false one." (Babitz 1977, 8)

"I found love on acid. But I lost it. And now I'm finding it again. With nothing but grass." (Didion 1968, 97)

Similar to how Didion and Babitz investigate the concepts of fame and death in Los Angeles, the essayists also utilize their essays as a medium to explore how the city's leading notions of morality and goodness were actively evolving throughout the 1960s and 70s. This investigation of morality occurs through a focus on two highly debated topics: sex and drugs, two-thirds of a defining slogan of this time, "sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll". Sexuality and drug use were very prominent topics of discussion in the 1960s and 70s, as the sexual revolution reached its peak and drug use was on the rise throughout the United States. According to Didion and Babitz, sex and drugs provided Angelenos a means to not only pursue pleasure and a liberation of the mind and body, but discussions surrounding these topics also allowed for societally accepted notions of morality and goodness to be debated. The following chapter will analyze Didion's and

Babitz's representations of morality in formation, ultimately highlighting the "abnormally fast rate" with which the society and ideals of Los Angeles experienced change (Eason 147).

Drugs

While this section delves into discourse surrounding drug use in the 1960s and 70s, it's important to first clarify the long history of drugs in the United States, beginning well before the time period in focus. In his essay "The Intoxicated State/Illegal Ration: Drugs in the Sixties Counterculture", the historian David Farber reveals that "drug use was endemic in the United States by the mid-1960s, well before any Summer of Love. Americans lived in a society in which powerful substances were metabolized to change mental processes and bodily functions" (19). In the late 19th century, various drugs became commonly used in the American medical field. Cocaine was endorsed by Dr. William Alexander Hammond, the U.S. Army's Surgeon General, in 1886, and within only twenty years of this endorsement over 200,000 Americans became addicted to the substance (Jonnes 22-25). Similarly, by the start of the 20th century, there were also an estimated 250,000 opiate-addicted Americans (Jonnes 25). Another commonly found drug in the United States was marijuana, which was legally obtainable in pharmacies from the mid-19th century until it was criminalized in 1937 (Jonnes 124). Later in the 20th century, lysergic acid diethylamide, better known as LSD or acid, made its way into American markets. Following the Second World War, the United States saw a considerable legitimization of drugs by mental health practitioners, and LSD in particular was deemed an effective "cure for psychological problems" (Farber 21). Alongside mental health-related uses, LSD and various

other drugs became a tool commonly utilized by actors, writers, artists and directors to combat creative blocks. While many Americans embraced the use of substances, there were also many individuals and groups who fought against it. The American congress established various laws taxing drug sales or banning the use of certain drugs altogether, such as the Harrison Act of 1914 and Marijuana Tax Act of 1937. Despite the government's attempts, however, drug use continued to increase as the 20th century carried on.

For decades, drugs were often framed as either medicinal or recreational substances. However, as the world entered into the 1960s, a handful of individuals began to shift this framing, and argued for a deeper understanding of drugs as a "psychedelic sacrament that would lead individuals to a higher consciousness" (Farber 22). One example of such groups, provided by Farber, are the Merry Pranksters, a collection of young hippies based in La Honda, California. The Merry Pranksters viewed drugs–LSD in particular–as a tool with which they could "re-negotiate the social space" and develop an "acid vision" of what society should look like (Farber 24). In order to share this understanding of the sociopolitical potential of drugs, the Merry Pranksters organized a series of "Acid Tests" throughout the 1960s, events wherein they distributed mass amounts of LSD in hopes of "maximizing physical, sensual input, loading up the mind and pushing tripsters toward a vast collective experience that roared toward the unknown" (Farber 26). The promise of an expanded consciousness attracted countless individuals to California from all over the nation, many of whom were quite young. Slowly, drugs became inextricable from cultural rebellion, and they eventually came to serve as "symbols of the counterculture both in mainstream culture and within the counterculture itself" (Wesson 157). Bearing all of this in mind, it can be said that by the early 1960s drugs were typically used in the United States for any of the following three purposes: 1) medical, 2) recreational, and/or 3)

sociopolitical. The following analysis will focus primarily on the second and third of these motivations, as drugs were utilized by individuals in and around Los Angeles to find pleasure and reconsider the structure of society and the ideals governing it.

For Babitz, drugs are a defining feature of life in Los Angeles, to such an extent that she categorizes her life in the city according to which drugs were the most prevalent at any given time, referring to invented designators such as "B.C., Before Cocaine" (Babitz 2019, 111). Many of Babitz's essays place drugs, particularly cocaine and acid, at the center of her experience of the city, as can be seen in the following quote from her essay "Slow Days":

> The idea of an "artistic community" evaporates into the slow days. Inspiration and words like that get hurried along with the fast company; it's impossible to tell if one's been inspired, or if it was the cocaine, or what. [...] In Los Angeles it's hard to tell if you're dealing with the real true illusion or the false one. (Babitz 1977, 8)

The "gigantic, sprawling, ongoing studio" (Babitz 1977, 8) that is Los Angeles is, according to Babitz, inseparable from certain illusions that exist at its very core. Art and inspiration were tenets of Los Angeles's society, yet for Babitz these very qualities were at times indistinguishable from the sensations brought about by drugs, making it difficult to tell if you were encountering the "real true illusion" of artistic inspiration or the "false" illusion of intoxication. This depiction of Los Angeles clarifies the extent to which drug use was, for many people, an inherent aspect of life in the city.

Throughout *Slow Days, Fast Company* and *Eve's Hollywood*, it becomes clear that Babitz herself was an enthusiastic and experienced user of drugs, as were most of the people in her life.

In “The Answer”, Babitz recounts her earliest interactions with drugs, beginning in 1960 when she became friends with a medical student in an attempt to convince him to get her LSD. Instead, he suggested that she take Romilar, “a cough pill made out of synthetic morphine. If you took 20 of them, you were no longer subject to the laws of gravity” (Babitz 1974, 203). Beginning with Romilar in her late teens, Babitz began a long journey of drug use, later involving experiences with cocaine, acid and peyote. This evolution in Babitz’s drug habits, beginning in the medicinal realm and eventually ending up in the world of recreational use, mirrors the general history of drug use in the United States as discussed previously.

When recounting her experiences with drugs in the 1960s and 70s, a common factor in Babitz’s essays is her tendency to glamorize or speak very highly of these substances. In the essay “Rosewood Casket”, Babitz details a picturesque day spent with the singer Gram Parsons (who she refers to under the pseudonym of James Byrns):

> We were standing; we’d forgotten to sit down. The cocaine had illuminated the world so much that we just hung there in the middle of my dream adventures I’d been nurturing along now coming true. [...] We talked on that cocaine all afternoon, sometimes drifting out to the little balcony and sometimes talking in a kind of coke code. We drank bourbon and smoked a mixture of Lebanese and Pakistani hash. When it got dark I left, my illusions intact. (Babitz 1974, 135-136)

A similar story is found in “The Answer”, where Babitz describes another day spent on drugs, this time in the company of an employee of the L.A. *Free Press* named Randy:

> On Saturday he came and picked me up in his maroon Lincoln Continental and took me to his house, which lay in a dale of Hollywood completely apart from any other houses so that you could imagine you were in rustic Switzerland without even having to try, much less taking acid. The maroon Lincoln Continental looked exotic in the driveway, like a speedboat in Peru. We wore jeans and old T-shirts and no shoes. He went to the refrigerator and poured us each a champagne glass full of LSD (Sandoz) diluted in spring water. We toasted and drank. Randy was not a serious person, he drank his acid like champagne. (Babitz 1974, 206-207)

Whether it was days spent getting to know mysterious men or catching up with old friends while chipping away at an "inch-high mountain of white crystals", Babitz does not shy away from describing pleasurable memories made while on drugs, referring to them at times as being in Eden (Babitz 1977, 157-158).

Unlike groups such as the Merry Pranksters who viewed drugs as a tool to achieve enlightenment and find what Babitz refers to as "The Answer", when speaking of her own drug use Babitz places the emphasis on sensory experiences and bodily pleasure (Babitz 1974, 205). Rather than searching for greater meaning or solutions to existential quandaries, Babitz describes her motivation for using drugs very simply: "I didn't want The Answer. I wanted the colors" (Babitz 1974, 205). In fact, Babitz comes across as very critical of those who were in search of The Answer, stating that, while she desired the colors, she would be "damned if I was going to have some "hippie" around with me" (Babitz 1974, 204). Recounting an experience she had on acid, Babitz writes,

> Then I sat down and waited. He must have given me about 250 micrograms from what I know now. Psychiatrists in the book were giving people 90 and the kids on the Strip were taking anywhere from 150 to 1500. 90 was child's play.
>
> About half an hour later my mouth tasted like blood and things took on a shine. They became so completely beautiful and shiny that I kept being afraid that they would stop. Soon I could stand up in ENOUGH colors. Oh, at last, the childhood pain of color entered effortlessly and filled me with colors, all the ones I loved. Green, especially, stole the show. The fear of beauty walked the plank. Beauty was all there was. (Babitz 1974, 206-207)

Rather than as a tool for enhanced introspection, Babitz describes drugs mainly as a tool to achieve pleasure–substances that allowed her to see life through a more glamorous lens, seeing as they were the "celebrated romantic excess of our time" (Babitz 1977, 53-54). Despite this romantic notion, however, Babitz does not neglect the glaring risks that came with using drugs. She speaks multiple times of deaths that resulted from drug overdoses, which she believed had a certain "tragic sunset quality" to them (Babitz 1977, 54), and in "Rosewood Casket" she clarifies the following paradox that one finds themselves trapped in after using cocaine:

> There are only three things to say about cocaine. One, there is no such thing as enough. Two, it will never be as good as the first time. Three, those first two facts constitute a tragedy of expense in ways that can't be experienced unless you've had cocaine. Its expense lies in knowing that someone's having fun on Mt.

> Olympus without you and that you should try to stay there always. Your brain will settle into a puddle around your sinuses and you will die. (Babitz 1974, 134)

Babitz uses this essay as a space to clarify that she is fully aware of the risks that her lifestyle brings, and yet she elects to take these risks in order to experience the pleasure and colors she so desperately seeks. Her essays provide an insider's view of what drug culture was like in Los Angeles–just as there were individuals who used drugs to make a sociopolitical statement, there were countless others who simply used it as a tool to make life more interesting. According to Babitz, the general attitude towards drug use in Los Angeles was becoming increasingly positive, ultimately signifying the shifting state of morals in the city.

While Babitz paints a romanticized picture of creativity and exploration when speaking of drugs, Didion's essays provide a far darker image. This, arguably, comes as a result of Didion's positionality at the time compared to Babitz's. While Babitz was the young socialite and avid drug user, Didion was a reporter and, notably, an *outsider*, whose aim was to find the dirt and grime within the story and put forward a compelling argument. As such, her essays take on a far more critical attitude. Similar to her approach when writing about the groupie identity, when speaking of drug users Didion mainly focuses on this behavior amongst California's youth population. She justifies this focus in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" as she recounts a conversation with a San Francisco police officer:

> We are in an interrogation room, and I am interrogating Officer Gerrans. He is young and blond and wary and I go in slow. I wonder what he thinks "the major problems" in the Haight are.

> Officer Gerrans thinks it over. “I would say the major problems there,” he says finally, “the major problems are narcotics and juveniles. Juveniles and narcotics, those are your major problems.” (Didion 1968, 93)

Whether they were “long term run-aways” or “short-time day-trippers” (Farber 35), countless youth found themselves drawn to groups such as the Merry Pranksters. Generally, these young individuals were deemed “ill prepared for spiritual exploration or cultural creation” (Farber 35). According to Deadeye, a drug dealer that Didion interviewed many times as she learned more about the Californian drug market, many of his potential customers were teenagers who ran away from home and began taking drugs so that “you don’t have to worry about sleeping or eating” (Didion 1968, 109) (despite the high demand, Deadeye clarifies that he generally tried to avoid dealing to “kids”).

Throughout *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Babitz writes about countless interactions with the young individuals within the counterculture movement. The first of such individuals presented by Didion is Max, a young adult who she meets in San Francisco. Despite the fact that she is speaking to Max as an adult, Didion emphasizes the fact that he began his journey with substance use very young:

> Max sees his life as a triumph over “don’ts.” Among the don’ts he had done before he was twenty-one were peyote, alcohol, mescaline, and Methedrine. He was on a Meth trip for three years in New York and Tangier before he found acid. (Didion 1968, 88)

Alongside Max, Didion also introduces Sharon, who she describes simply as "blond and scrubbed and probably seventeen" (Didion 1968, 96). Together, Max and Sharon take STP (a substituted amphetamine) while Didion observes them, making note of their inability to maintain a stable thread in their conversation. When writing about Max and Sharon, Didion describes their use of drugs as mainly recreational–they typically get high and talk about art and listen to music. This is reminiscent of Babitz's approach towards drugs, viewing them as a means to feel pleasure and enhance the aesthetic beauty of life.

Another duo that Didion writes about are Jeff and Debbie, two recent teenage runaways. Didion speaks to Jeff, sixteen years old, and Debbie, fifteen, about why they ran away from home, and, recognizing the potential for them to fall into the drug habits prevalent of their time and place, urges them to think about their futures: "I ask them to think back to when they were children, to tell me what they had wanted to be when they were grown up, how they had seen the future then" (Didion 1968, 92). In an attempt to portray drug use as dangerous and subsequently immoral, Didion draws attention to time, and the fact that any and all decisions made in the present have a significant impact upon one's future. Didion compels Jeff and Debbie to think about their past and the people that they used to be in order to better reconsider what their futures could look like. This is, once again, an instance where Didion emphasizes the thick nature of the present, as it contains within it glimpses of various temporalities which she insists play a significant role when debating a morality-centered topic such as drug use.

Ultimately, of all the examples Didion provides of young drug users, the most jarring story she tells is that of Susan:

> When I finally find Otto he says "I got something at my place that'll blow your mind," and when we get there I see a child on the living-room floor, wearing a reefer coat, reading a comic book. She keeps licking her lips in concentration and the only off thing about her is that she's wearing white lipstick.
>
> "Five years old," Otto says. "On acid."
>
> The five-year-old's name is Susan, and she tells me she is in High Kindergarten. She lives with her mother and some other people, just got over the measles, wants a bicycle for Christmas, and particularly likes Coca-Cola, ice cream, Marty in the Jefferson Airplane, Bob in the Grateful Dead, and the beach. (Didion 1968, 127-128)

This analysis began by establishing the three commonly understood purposes for drug use at the time (medicinal, recreational, political). However, with the story of Susan, Didion is providing an example of a participant who isn't necessarily motivated by any of these factors. Rather, five-year-old Susan's use of drugs has come purely as a consequence of her environment, about which she has no say or better judgment. By presenting examples of the innocent youth that were being impacted by the growing culture of drug use in southern California, continually decreasing in age with each example, Didion puts forward a harsh critique of the prevalent use of drugs at the time. As Farber says in "The Intoxicated State/Illegal Ration", many members of the counterculture movement "were just clueless kids caught in a mass-mediated fad" (35), and

Didion furthers this notion of youthful ignorance and a subsequent loss of promising futures in her essays.

In their essays, Didion and Babitz assume contradictory attitudes towards drug use at the time. Didion, a journalist and non-drug user, focuses on how drug use impacts children who often didn't know any better, adopting the position that drugs were dangerous and immoral, seeing as they threatened to derail the future of unknowing youth. Alternatively, Babitz speaks highly of many substances and the experiences she's had as a result of taking them. For Babitz, uninterested in finding greater political or universal truths, life is superficially enhanced by drugs, which allows her to experience certain pleasures. While the two authors don't necessarily agree on the value that drugs provide to one's life, their attempts to capture in writing the history of drug use in their time do provide a glimpse at how this practice was actively debated amongst the people of Los Angeles. According to the essays in focus, there were various different attitudes towards drug use, rather than one overarching idea of whether or not it was moral or correct. For some citizens of Los Angeles, drugs represented an appropriate way to achieve pleasure or enlightenment, while for others drugs were an immoral and harmful substance, the very use of which threatened one's future.

Sex

When navigating attitudes towards morality in Los Angeles, another topic that Didion and Babitz explore through their essays is sexuality. The understanding of obscenity and which sex-related topics or practices were socially (un)acceptable went through a considerable evolution

throughout the twentieth century, and particularly in the 1960s and 70s. In the article "Social Change: The Sexual Revolution", the researchers Jeremy Greenwood and Nezih Guner provide a detailed overview of sexual behaviors throughout the 1900s. According to their article, in 1900 only roughly 6% of American women had premarital sexual experience, and that number began to slowly increase throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century (Greenwood and Guner 893). After 1960, however, this percentage began to exponentially increase, jumping from roughly 30% in 1960 to 80% by the end of the 1980s (Greenwood and Guner 894). Greenwood and Guner, amongst many other scholars, attribute this mass increase in sexual behavior in the mid-twentieth century to the sexual revolution. The historian Robert O. Self defines the sexual revolution as "a new call for sexual freedom that embraced pre-marital heterosexual sex, homosexuality and forthrightness about sex in media and culture" (289). Beth Bailey's essay "Sex as a Weapon: Underground Comix and the Paradox of Liberation" provides insight into how media was impacted by the sexual revolution, as hundreds of underground newspapers circulating sexual content came into being by the end of the 1960s. These underground papers served a dual function: spreading "graphic or otherwise "offensive" representations of sex to confront–and offend–mainstream society", and establishing sex as a symbol of freedom and liberation (Bailey 308). Ultimately, just as drugs became a symbol of countercultural rebellion in the 1960s and 70s, Bailey posits that "transgressive sexuality offered a visual and verbal language with which to challenge the Establishment" (307). Sexuality gradually became a tool with which a countercultural identity could be created and expressed (Bailey 306).

While the sexual revolution took place throughout the entirety of the United States, Los Angeles functioned as a nexus of sexual discourse and media production. Robert O. Self reveals in "Sex in the City: The Politics of Sexual Liberalism in Los Angeles, 1963-1979" that Los

Angeles was the country's center of pornography and erotica production, the "smut mailing capital of the nation" (293). The highly mediated environment characteristic of Los Angeles ensured that sex became solidified as an inherent aspect of life in Los Angeles, whether encountered in practice or through media. Consequently, this increased focus on sex brought with it many conversations and debates surrounding the moral or ethical nature of such a topic. The following analysis will delve into this discourse on morality as captured by Didion and Babitz.

Similar to the two essayists' approaches to writing about drug use, Didion and Babitz occupy slightly different roles when writing about sexuality. Babitz, once again, has the tendency to write from the point of view of an insider or participant, focusing on her personal experiences, while Didion occupies a space on the periphery, commenting on the topic in focus from more of a critical point of view. A notable example of Didion's positionality as an outsider when speaking about sex is the essay "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream", in which Didion elects to place sex at the center of a conversation surrounding a murder case heavily covered by the media at the time. In this opening essay of the *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* collection, Didion tells the story of Lucille Miller, described in greater detail in the previous chapter. Assigned to cover this event for *The Saturday Evening Post*, Didion follows the case as it unfolds throughout the essay, with a particular focus on the ongoing attempts to figure out Miller's motivation. Eventually, Didion reveals that lying at the core of the crime was an affair, which she deemed somewhat unsurprising: "In some ways it was the conventional clandestine affair in a place like San Bernardino, a place where little is bright or graceful, where it is routine to misplace the future and easy to start looking for it in bed" (Didion 1968, 16). In this case, Didion speaks about sexuality–in particular, the immoral sexual behavior of having an affair–as a consequence of the

environment. For her, it is the very habitat of San Bernardino, the arid Angeleno suburb, that pushes individuals towards potentially obscene behaviors. Alongside speculating on where sexual behavior such as Miller's may come from, in "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" Didion also comments on the intense media attention that such morally-questionable acts tend to attract. She first clarifies that there was already a notable amount of media interest at the outset of this case–after all, Didion herself was there writing an article about it. However, this media interest experienced a massive increase when word of Miller's affair with Arthwell Hayton, a successful San Bernardino attorney and former member of the district attorney's staff, became public knowledge. Crowds of people fascinated by the debauchery at the core of this murder case began to appear outside the courthouse, described by Didion as such:

> The crowds were so mad that the glass courtroom doors were shattered in the crush, and from then on identification disks were issued to the first forty-three spectators in line. The line began forming at 6 a.m., and college girls camped at the courthouse all night, with stores of graham crackers and No-Cal. (Didion 1968, 20)

The southern Californian public, according to Didion, was fascinated by the sexually-charged nature of this murder, to such an extent that people came out in droves simply for the slim chance to be picked as a member of the jury (Didion 1968, 20). While Didion is capturing the public fascination with what is generally seen as immoral sexual behavior, the essayist herself is not putting forward any specific critique or judgment when it comes to that behavior. Rather than

attempting to challenge or affirm any existing attitudes towards Miller's affair, this essay simply functions as a means to capture the Angeleno tendency to turn sexuality into a spectacle.

As exhibited by the mass interest in the Lucille Miller case, sexuality–particularly in the unconventional form of an affair–was a riveting, attention-grabbing and provocative topic among the public. Particularly in the modern and thus intensely mediated environment of Los Angeles, stories of sexuality were in constant circulation, whether it be in the form of underground newspapers, comics, pornographic films or essays such as Didion's. Despite the overwhelming media fascination with sexuality, Didion argues that the leading social movements were not effectively using this public interest to empower or destigmatize sex. In "The Women's Movement", Didion insists that in day-to-day life there was an aversion to "adult sexual life itself: how much cleaner to stay forever children" (Didion 1979, 116). According to the author, the understanding of sexuality being put forward by political movements at the time was often flawed, leading towards an "astral discontent with actual lives, actual men, the denial of the real ambiguities and the real generative or malignant possibilities of adult sexual life" (Didion 1979, 118). Despite the fact that it was concurrent with the sexual revolution throughout the 1960s and 70s, the feminist movement in focus in this essay was, according to Didion, not doing enough to effectively embrace or destigmatize adult sexuality, particularly for and among women. As a result, sex, while widely discussed, continued to be viewed by many Angelenos as immoral or taboo.

While Didion presents sex as spectacle in Los Angeles, one which many people of the city found simultaneously troubling and fascinating, Babitz presents sex as a much more casual topic or practice. In doing so, she urges her readers to view it not as an immoral act, but as a natural part of life. When speaking of sexuality, rather than focusing on the stories of others,

Babitz consistently places herself at the center of the story, and she doesn't hesitate to speak in detail about her sexual experiences. For Babitz, sex was a very casual and approachable topic, one which she specifically separates from ideas of love and romance. In the essay "Sirocco", Babitz says "I would be satisfied with just the sunsets in Los Angeles and forget finding the someone I didn't mind" (Babitz 1977, 68), arguing that the charms of Los Angeles itself were able to replace her need for romance and love, thus leaving sex to be explored on its own. This speculation on how one's environment consequently impacts their approach to sex bears a resemblance to the statement discussed earlier from Didion, wherein she asserts that the very setting of suburban Los Angeles was conducive to certain sexual behaviors.

Throughout her essays, Babitz openly embraces her existence as a sexual being, saying again in "Sirocco", "Shawn [one of her lovers] lumped all love together and was drawn to whatever burned hottest, which is usually me" (Babitz 1977, 71). Babitz often refers to this idea that she was the thing that "burned hottest"–not only was she a sexual being, she found herself to be exceptionally alluring and deserving of attention. In "Sins of the Green Death", she compares herself to another person well-known for her sexual charm:

> Nobody was looking like Brigitte Bardot yet but me, except for beatniks, and that's no fun, they threw ashes on the spirit of the thing. So what Graham must have seen when looked at me was a tall, clean California Bardot with too much brown eyeliner, too messy hair and probably too young. I wore my lavender sheath and sandals, no stockings or bracelets. I was dying to kiss him. (Babitz 1974, 162)

Bardot, the French actor, was a leading figure of the sexual revolution, and by eagerly comparing herself to Bardot, Babitz continues to exhibit a very positive attitude towards sexuality. This encouraging take on sexuality did not extend to only her own experiences, however. Throughout many of her essays, Babitz suggests that within Los Angeles as a whole there existed a significant culture of casual sex. She speaks of countless "discarded lovers" and "just friends" (Babitz 1977, 68-71), men that she had sex with, but no desire to pursue a further connection to. In fact, Babitz seemed most attracted to the type of person who also had no interest in romance, "It seemed that all my lovers had but to whisper, "I have to catch a plane out of here in the morning…" and I was theirs" (Babitz 1977, 69). Alongside stories about her sexual escapades with unknown men, Babitz also writes about many places in Los Angeles known for their importance in the casual sex practice. For instance, there was Tana's, the restaurant where "everyone picks each other up and eats garlic" (Babitz 1977, 69). Babitz also describes the sexual energy prevalent within The Troubadour music venue:

> Passion licked through the room, burning with wild desires. "You had to wear a diaphragm just to walk through," Susan Smith, one of the waitresses, told me. "The semen potential was so intense it was enough to get your pregnant just standing there." It seemed that anyone who went home alone Monday nights had to be supernaturally unlucky. (Babitz 2019, 109)

For Babitz, sex was not only an important part of her life, but it was inherent to the Los Angeles lifestyle at the time. By openly writing about the important place that sex occupied in the lives of many Angelenos, Babitz challenges the idea of sex as taboo or immoral. These essays depict the

very attitude that the sexual revolution endeavored to put forward about sex, in which it was not only a practice reserved for married couples, spoken of and performed behind closed doors. Through her essays, Babitz is not only capturing the experience of open sexuality in Los Angeles, but she was also contributing to the unfolding sexual revolution, adding to its prominent "forthrightness about sex in media and culture" (Self 289). Babitz recognized that the times were changing with the advent of the sexual revolution, and thus captured these evolving attitudes in writing.

To wrap up this discussion, a final point that should be addressed when analyzing attitudes towards sexuality in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 70s is homosexuality. In "The Clearly Obscene and the Queerly Obscene: Heteronormativity and Obscenity in Cold War Los Angeles", Whitney Strub argues that the sexual revolution came in direct opposition to attempts in Cold War America to normalize and reproduce the atomized nuclear family (373). Such domestic programs, "predicated on heterosexual marriages in which wives avoided the workplace", reinforced a "cultural conflation of the queer with the obscene" (Strub 373). Despite this, in Los Angeles there existed an "informal, and precarious, alliance of sex business entrepreneurs" who endeavored to challenge dominant societal notions of obscenity, speaking out against the tendency to categorize homosexuality or commercial sex as immoral or unlawful (Self 288). These business entrepreneurs alongside many other Angeleno residents spent much of the 1960s and 70s fighting against the stigma placed upon queer sex and relationships. Didion briefly comments on homosexuality in "The Women's Movement", saying that "One is constantly struck, in the accounts of lesbian relationships which appear from time to time in movement literature, by the emphasis on the superior "tenderness" of the relationship, the "gentleness" of the sexual connection" (Didion 1968, 116). While Didion resorts to speaking

about homosexuality through literary commentary, Babitz once again utilizes her essays as a space to capture her own experiences, as she openly writes about a handful of sexual encounters she has had with women in the past. When speaking of her vast "collection of lovers to keep me warm", Babitz explains that she felt particularly drawn to women, who "always fascinated me by their wit, bravery, and resourcefulness, and who never told you the same story twice" (Babitz 1977, 68). Babitz depicts her sexual encounters with women as less threatening or dangerous than her experiences with men, saying that "you can go places with a woman and come back just fine" (Babitz 1977, 68).

There were a handful of women who Babitz describes having sexual encounters with, one of which is Isabella Farfalla (a name invented by Babitz for the sake of privacy). Babitz initially describes her experience with Farfalla as the result of some kind of alcohol-driven craze, wherein she writes, "The champagne (which was not blue) was free, and we wound up drinking four bottles of it. I also, it seems, wound up madly embracing Isabella Farfalla" (Babitz 1977, 71). Afterwards, however, Babitz retrospectively attributes her experience with Farfalla to the Santa Anas, the occasional dry winds that blew westward from the mountains to the coast of southern California (Babitz 1977, 72). For Babitz, the Santa Anas represent unpredictability, as if the very winds themselves bring with them a wave of insanity or confusion. Speaking of these winds, Babitz writes, "I've seen people drop from migraines and go crazy. Every time *I* feel one coming, I put on my dancing spirits. [...] I know those winds the way Eskimos know their snows" (Babitz 1977, 70). Didion exhibits a similar attitude to this meteorological occurrence in "Los Angeles Notebook", saying "There is something uneasy in the Los Angeles air this afternoon, some unnatural stillness, some tension. What it means is that tonight a Santa Ana will begin to blow" (Didion 1968, 217). For both of the authors, there was an inherent

unpredictability to the Santa Ana winds that could "affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability" (Didion 1968, 221). Babitz brings up the Santa Anas again when speaking of another sexual experience with a woman, wherein she had a threesome with her lover at the time, William, and a woman named Day:

> William claimed afterward that I was the first to pounce. What I wouldn't do with Isabella, who knew what she was doing, I now smoothly instigated between Day and William and myself. Passion from boredom and vodka flashed through my veins, passion and fanned curiosity toppled us, Santa Ana-ed, down upon William's bed. Only not William. I wouldn't let William touch me, and we almost tore poor Day in half. (Babitz 1977, 74)

Once again, we can see Babitz directly associate specifical sexual behaviors–some of which were directly defined as unlawful–with the very setting of Los Angeles itself. Were it not for the romantic Los Angeles sunsets and the dry, maddening southern Californian winds, Babitz suggests that she wouldn't have had the sexual encounters with men and women that came to define a large part of her lifestyle in the 1960s and 70s.

What can be seen throughout the essays of Didion and Babitz is a clear fascination with sexuality residing at the core of Los Angeles culture and society. For Babitz and Didion, the Angeleno fascination with and openness to sexuality was not solely a consequence of the shifting attitudes towards sex across the nation, as the sexual revolution spread. On top of these shifting attitudes, the essayists suggest that the Los Angeles landscape and environment itself had the ability to evoke a certain sexual compulsion within an individual, leading one to pursue sexual

behaviors that would typically be deemed immoral or obscene by the dominant social standards of the time. However, by writing about these actions very honestly and without critique, the essayists contribute to movements at the time that endeavored to destigmatize sex and challenge its associations with immorality.

* * *

Drugs and sex are two topics through which Didion and Babitz explore the leading conceptions of morality in Los Angeles throughout the 1960s and 70s, a time in which society was rapidly changing and morals were in a constant state of negotiation. When speaking about attitudes towards drug use, the essayists find themselves in opposition, as Didion writes from the critical lens of the journalist and non-drug user while Babitz writes from the perspective of an avid drug user. As a result, Didion presents drugs as dangerous and a particular threat to the Californian youth, who she believed to be easily charmed by the promises of finding greater universal truths. Meanwhile, Babitz uses her essays to praise drugs as a means to enhance life, even if they don't allow one to find the aforementioned universal truths. Ultimately, while their personal opinions don't align, the essayists make a similar point about the shifting attitudes and conceptions of morality in Los Angeles, as drugs became a fixture of life in the city.

Similar to the shifting attitudes towards drugs, the sexual revolution taking place throughout the mid-twentieth century led to a similar shift in attitudes towards sexuality. As Los Angeles became a center of explicit media production and sex-oriented businesses, attitudes towards sexuality experienced significant shifts. Individuals such as Didion and Babitz endeavored to challenge limiting notions of what was acceptable when it came to sex, as they

present stories about homosexuality and casual sexual encounters, in addition to suggesting that there was something inherent in the very landscape of Los Angeles that compelled people to make sexually devious or unconventional decisions.

Once again, through discussions surrounding sex and drugs, the essays of Didion and Babitz capture a present moment in time, defined by shifting ideas, structures and beliefs. Through a focus on the present and its ever-evolving nature, Los Angeles of the 1960s and 70s is presented as a place of constant social change, once again emphasizing the importance of the essayists' work to capture the history of Los Angeles as it was unfolding. By writing these essays, Didion and Babitz provide a history of the city as it evolved each day.

Conclusion

With the constant evolution of new forms of media and the increasingly "new *democratization* in historical representation" (Aurell 149), conversations surrounding what qualifies as historical writing are imperative. Through this analysis, I've argued that the personal essay, long regarded as a purely literary genre, can be effectively utilized to write history. In particular, the personal essay is an effective tool to write a history of the *present.* The present, as dealt with throughout this research, is understood as a thickened temporality, containing within it traces of the past and glimpses of the future. As we perceive the present affectively, we can do so with a critical sense that reveals the potential historical significance of a moment as it is being lived, rather than qualifying an event as historical after the moment has passed. As such, the personal essay functions as an unconventional form of historical writing wherein the essayist can comment on and capture the present based on their embodied, subjective and lived experience of it.

The history in focus in this thesis has been that of Los Angeles in the 1960s and 70s, as captured in the essays of Joan Didion and Eve Babitz. These authors, both born and raised in California, bore a strong connection to the city at this time, and devoted multiple essay collections (alongside additional memoirs and novels) to capturing their experiences of Angeleno life. Los Angeles, a hub of artistry and creative industries, was a city of rapid and abundant media production. Despite the overwhelming amount of media created in and about the city, I argue that the essays of Didion and Babitz in particular stand out amongst the crowd, due to the unique historical work that they perform. The history they produce in their essays is present-oriented and subjective, based purely on their own understandings of the city and its society. This not only gives readers an intimate look at what life was like for these two talented

individuals, but it provides a remarkable insight into an everyday experience of the city in a time where it was actively changing.

While there are many notable aspects of the Los Angeles history that Didion and Babitz write, the main themes discussed in this analysis were fame, death and morality. Fame, addressed in the first chapter, was a concept that heavily influenced the creation of social identities in Los Angeles. Didion and Babitz focus in particular on the labels of the star and the groupie, exploring how these fame-oriented identities came about artificially. The star as the holder or receiver of fame is portrayed by the authors as duplicitous and inauthentic, challenging the tendency for these individuals to be revered. Alternatively, the groupie as the ostracized fan and giver of fame is portrayed as empowered and calculated, yet ultimately inauthentic as well. By placing these two labels or categories at the forefront of the Los Angeles social scene, Didion and Babitz clarify the extent to which fame, whether artificial or not, greatly shaped society.

The second chapter discussed death and subsequently temporality, exploring how time was experienced quite uniquely in Los Angeles as encounters with mortality and violence became commonplace. Gruesome murder cases were sensationalized by the Los Angeles media, exhibiting the strong sense of immediacy and urgency prompted by the recognition of mortality. Less sensationalized were the daily reports of suicides and overdoses, events that prompted family and friends to reminisce and imagine alternative futures. Ultimately, Didion and Babitz show how death and an awareness of its inevitable approach led to "an intensification of time-consciousness" (Peters 220), wherein attention is drawn to the present as a complex temporality encompassing the past and future as well. Just as death is understood as an unavoidable part of life, Didion and Babitz cement death as an undeniable figure looming within the history of the entire city itself.

Lastly, the third chapter explored the world of morals and vices in Los Angeles through a focus on attitudes towards sex and drugs. Taking opposing viewpoints, the essayists highlight the ongoing debate over drug use at the time, as Didion categorizes it as an immoral and dangerous practice, while Babitz praises drugs for their ability to enhance life and find pleasure. Where they eventually find common ground is in their portrayal of sex in the city, wherein typically taboo topics such as premarital or homosexual sex are presented in a positive light, and the very landscape of Los Angeles itself is portrayed as a motivator for sexual behavior.

To conclude, the personal essays of Joan Didion and Eve Babitz capture a moment in time which is notoriously hard to capture. Los Angeles at the time was going through a period of rapid change, as social structures shifted, ideas of morality and goodness came and went, and the potential of death and loss seemed to loom around any corner. Through writing a history focused on the present, Didion and Babitz ultimately provide a glimpse into how individuals came to terms with life and existence in the rapidly evolving city of Los Angeles.

This exploration of the historical work of Didion and Babitz points towards the necessity to look at alternative understandings of history and history-writing moving forward. While this analysis focuses solely on the personal essay, there are countless other forms of writing and media that do significant historical and historiographical work, and thus deserve scholarly attention. Alongside framing the personal essay as a tool of historical writing, this research has endeavored to address a significant gap in the research surrounding the works of Eve Babitz. By bringing the works of Babitz and Didion together in the interest of exploring how they capture the world around them in writing, I argue that both authors should be seen not only as significant twentieth-century American literary figures, but as historians as well.

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