Children of Anarchy: San Francisco Upheaval in the Summer of 1967

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Abstract

Joan Didion’s “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” written in 1967, famously documented “the social hemorrhaging” on display in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco, with children, barely adolescents, at the forefront. This paper argues that Didion’s choice of title, opening lines, and overall narrative approach are a deliberate effort to foreground San Francisco not just as a site of “social hemorrhaging,” but as something far more comprehensive: as the epicenter of societal destruction and rebirth in America, amid a scene of “mere anarchy” being unleashed. From the “Eden” that she compares California to in a separate essay, the state has now devolved into something far more ambiguous in the late 1960s, returning back to the ever-present Didion question: how to figure a true Californian sense of place, when that same place is ravaged by disorder. As Didion’s “Slouching” unfolds, it parallels and engages with the apocalyptic predictions and visions in William Butler Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming,” which she features as an epigraph to the collection that includes “Slouching” […]

Reference

Thank you to the organizers for bringing us together this weekend. I’ve really enjoyed our discussions so far and look forward to the rest of today.

The organizers asked us to consider whether the same movement that set off a wave of creativity and brought us the famous – some might say infamous – “Summer of Love” somehow carried within it the seeds of its own destruction. It’s a powerful question, and one that’s especially relevant in our current climate of political, societal, and economic disorder in various parts of the world, which has already drawn numerous comparisons to the late 1960s. (New York Times, n. pag.) It’s also one that suggests an interesting paradox: even if the Summer of Love died, the legacy of that summer and that wider period has been lasting and pervasive. As we can see from the conference papers presented this week, art, music, literature, and film are still drawing on that period for inspiration, as seen most recently in the critical success of Quentin Tarantino’s *Once Upon A Time in Hollywood* (2019), which one of our colleagues presented on this week.

My point of departure for examining this question involves Joan Didion, who along with being the subject of my PhD dissertation, is also strongly associated with this particular period in time, both as a writer and as a character in that wider span of events.

For those who don’t know her, Joan Didion is a writer who was born and raised in California, who came from old California stock. She was from Sacramento, studied at Berkeley in the 1950s, eventually lived in Los Angeles in the late 1960s and early 1970s. She was godmother to the same child as Roman Polanski, bought the dress that Linda Kasabian wore at the trials of the Manson family, invited Janis Joplin to parties at her home, hired a young Harrison Ford as her carpenter.

Her documentation of San Francisco in 1967 was credited for capturing the mood of the place, and the mood of that time. What questions this brought up for me were as follows: where, geographically speaking, was the epicenter of it all, what characterized it, what did it sound like and feel like, what was going on in society, how did it relate to the developments underway in the rest of the country, what drew people from across the United States – and beyond – to that one district in California, named after a San Francisco street corner. More precisely, what was it that drew children there, what they were moving away from?

Yeats to Didion: locating us in space and place

Before I introduce you to Joan Didion properly, I’d like to take a step back, and actually step across the pond to Ireland in the year 1920, when William Butler Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming” was published. This was just after the end of the first World War, and at a time when Yeats’ native Ireland was about to find itself in its own War of Independence. (Levitas, 51-52) The poem sets a striking scene: “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned; / The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.” (Yeats, 3-8)

Unpacking these lines, there is a deliberate vagueness built into this devastating scene: Yeats does not present where we are in the world, nor who is involved. We know only that the best are failing and the worst are rising. There is, as numerous critics have noted, no reference to Ireland, even to Europe. Where and what that blood comes from is not clear: regardless of its origins, the destruction appears totalizing, the world is in the throes of something ominous and strange. It is enough to say that something has happened, and something worse is still to arrive.

Yeats’ second stanza, building on the enabling environment described in the first, insists that something significant is to come: something that will be striking in its method of arrival, but also in how it reminds us of its inevitability. “Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the Second Coming is at hand”, the Irish writer goes on, describing a vision of human-animal hybrid, a “rough beast, its hour come round at last” that ultimately “Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born” (Yeats, 9-13, 21-22) Ben Levitas has suggested that this lack of specificity throughout the poem has a purpose: that it “denotes a fear of a more permanent loss” than that which current events might suggest. (Levitas, 51) What remains unclear is what that loss will entail, and how it can be a loss if we do not know what was already there.

Nearly five decades later, Joan Didion’s “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” was published, first in the *Saturday Evening Post* in September 1967, and then reprinted the following year in her debut essay collection, which shares its title with the original piece. She explains in the collection’s preface that she was driven to include the Yeats poem as an epigraph because some of its lines had, in her words, “reverberated in my inner ear as if they were surgically implanted there.” (Didion, “A Preface,” xi) She claims that this moment in time was the first in her life in which she “had dealt directly and flatly with the evidence of atomization, the proof that things fell apart,” driving her to go to San Francisco to regain not just her ability to write, but her faith in what writing could achieve. (Didion, “A Preface,” xi) Writing the essay was an act that she described as “imperative,” and yet the one whose publication left her “despondent.” (Didion, “A Preface,” xi)

**On center and origin**

“The center cannot hold” from Yeats becomes the “the center was not holding” in Didion’s “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” which takes its title from the closing lines of Yeats’ poem. The tense change is key here: we are taken from the future into the past, we are no longer at the stage where the arrival of Yeats’ “rough beast” is imminent – it is here, ready to be born, perhaps already born. While Yeats also left the location of the center, even the time period, openly ambiguous in the final draft of his poem, Didion immediately situates us in a specific time and place: America in the “cold late spring of 1967,” where the potential for a “spring of brave hopes and national promise” had been traded for something else, vague and uncertain, that reeked of some type of failure. (Didion, 84-85)

She then takes us somewhere even more specific: from a country to a city, to a district, to an actual street corner. Here is our center: San Francisco is, effectively, Bethlehem in Didion’s rendition,
and the late spring and summer of 1967 is the time of the revelation, where the Second Coming has arrived, and something has been born in America.

Yet somehow, that birth has failed. “All that seemed clear was that at some point we had aborted ourselves and butchered the job, and because nothing else seemed so relevant I decided to go to San Francisco,” Didion says early in the essay. (Didion, “Slouching,” 85) Aborted, butchered – terms that themselves carry the weight of the “reproductive futurism” that theorist Lee Edelman would criticize in No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive. (2004) Didion was writing just a few years before the landmark Roe v. Wade decision by the U.S. Supreme Court recognized a woman’s constitutional right to have an abortion, at a time when getting an abortion often meant taking severe physical and legal risks. (NPR, n. pag.) The need to perpetuate ourselves was pervasive in American politics, and failing.

The blood-tinged waters of Yeats’ Second Coming are not waters here, but the imagery of death and blood are still present in Didion from the earliest pages of her essay, starting from where she claims that there is a sense of America in that summer of 1967 that “we had aborted ourselves and butchered the job.” (Didion, “Slouching,” 85) But the “we” and “ourselves” becomes even more specific, more bloodied, and more localized: it was taking place in San Francisco, a city where she claims was “where the social hemorrhaging was showing up. San Francisco was where the missing children were gathering and calling themselves ‘hippies.’ When I first went to San Francisco, I did not even know what I wanted to find out, and so I just stayed around awhile and made a few friends.” (Didion, “Slouching,” 85)

Much of my work on Didion is devoted to her efforts to develop some sense of California. California, as she describes it in another essay, “Notes from a Native Daughter,” is a place that cannot be measured against itself, that fails to serve as a fixed reference point: she says that “All that is constant about the California of my childhood is the rate at which it disappears.” (Didion, “Native Daughter,” 176) Anything before California is also a faulty point of reference, according to her description of the state’s mentality: it is the sort of place that begins as it ends, the result of the successful westward crossing from lesser lands back east. (Didion, “Native Daughter,” 172)

That westward crossing is an essential undercurrent in Didion’s writing: at times it lies in the distant background, never referred to directly, but pervasive in its reach. In other examples, such as her 2003 memoir Where I Was From, the “crossing story” itself proves to be a central preoccupation, as Didion asks whether this story of America’s westward expansion is really as compelling as she claims to have heard. (Didion, Where I Was From, n.pag.) Returning back to “Notes from a Native Daughter,” Didion suggests that California is a place that is difficult to pin down: it is, she says, “unsettling to wonder how much of it was merely imagined or improvised; melancholy to realize how much of anyone’s memory is no true memory at all but only the traces of someone else’s memory, stories handed down on the family network.” (Didion, “Native Daughter,” 177) Roland Barthes, who has played a major role in my research so far, argues that readers often confuse story for representing facts, rather than as built around signs and values that are assigned to them. (Barthes, 242) Ultimately these same stories, given how they are established, may be built on the “concepts which they represent,” but are just one set of all the different concepts that those same stories could potentially represent. (Barthes, 238) The point is, though, that there is still a story established, and that story acts as a point of reference for future stories,
even if its basis is tenuous. For something like California to be disappearing, Didion is questioning whether it must have existed in the first place, and if there must have been a sense of that place established, real or imagined, in order to have that perception that there was a story there worth questioning.

This imagined California is based on the following: to come to California requires undertaking an act motivated nearly by desperation, a do-or-die approach to living, which she ascribes to a combination of a “boom mentality” and a “Chekhovian sense of loss,” due to the underlying belief that “things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent.” (Didion, “Native Daughter,” 172) The crossing out to California may have been full of hardship and uncertainty, but the arrival in California is the end of the line, but not the end of the story. There is no better place to end up, nowhere to run to in cases of failure.

When we arrive in California in the summer of 1967, Ronald Reagan, the movie star turned Republican politician, had just taken office that year as governor of California. The Vietnam War and the civil rights movement were both well underway, triggering and bringing to the fore social unrest and cultural clashes. Lyndon B. Johnson was president, in a year that proved to be his penultimate year in office, having succeeded President John. F. Kennedy after the latter’s assassination in 1963. The children, more specifically, the young adults that arrived in Haight-Ashbury from all over the country, were living at a moment of intense change, which lacked clarity in its potential resolution. They were lost.

Mark Harris, in his landmark 1967 longform piece in The Atlantic entitled “The Flowering of the Hippie,” argued that Haight-Ashbury was a place that had historically been a gathering place to “persons of liberal disposition,” as he describes it. It was largely white, though also with a sizeable black and Asian-American community, though the children known as hippies were primarily white and middle class. (Harris, n. pag.) He argued that these children, who had displaced themselves from their origins, had “come far enough to see distance behind them, but no clear course ahead. One branch of their philosophy was Oriental concentration and meditation; now it often focused upon the question ‘How to kick’ (drugs).” (Harris, n. pag.)

Developing a sense of place, and being able to differentiate spaces from each other, starts, as you would imagine, in childhood. More precisely, Yi-Fu Tuan, a human geographer who studied at Berkeley in the 1950s, at the same time as Didion, argues that building a sense of place in childhood is not immediate, and that it takes time to take on a more specific lens and to be linked to any form of geography. (Tuan, 30) It is a constant process of creating a taxonomy to approach the world and depends first on building parental attachment as an initial geographical locus.

Children lack the same ability to connect to a place as their parents: their imaginations, Tuan argues, are linked to activity and movement, allowing them to view their surroundings as carrying far more potential than they seem, but lacking in sentimentality over what those surroundings may once have been. (Tuan, 33) This imagination therefore has a short temporal horizon, looking only at what is happening now and what may be about to come. (Tuan, 33) In his book Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (1977), he also includes a chapter on temporal experiences of place where he introduces this concept of the center, which he links to origin, and suggests that
America’s impressive geological landmarks meant that westward travelers would have felt that they were “moving onto virgin land and into a spacious future.” (Tuan, 126)

Yet there is no sense of anything beyond the immediate to middle future for the children who arrive in Didion’s San Francisco. Decisions on where to live, what to do, who to be with, will change by the day. At some point there is nearly always the prospect of ending up in court “at some point in the middle future. I never ask why.” (Didion, 89, Slouching) Anything past tomorrow is vague. One hippie couple she meets, Max and Sharon, talk about going to Africa and India, “pretty soon now, maybe next month, maybe later” so they can “live off the land” — though really live due to the family funds that Max has. (Didion, “Slouching,” 96)

These friends that Didion made were, by and large, “children” who hailed from places as far flung as Virginia and as close by as San Jose, and who had all somehow landed at this one street corner and its surrounding district. They have a limited vocabulary to describe their pasts, they struggle in articulating any sense of future. The reasons for why they are now in San Francisco are vague in the accounts she shares: one boy arrived from Los Angeles “some number of weeks ago, he doesn’t remember what number,” and may head next to New York or Chicago. He knows nothing about Chicago. He never makes it to New York. He can’t even pin down exactly where he’s from: he tells Didion that he’s from “here,” only to say when prodded “‘San Jose. Chula Vista, I dunno,’” adding that his mother lives in Chula Vista. (Didion, “Slouching,” 86-87)

Didion’s inclusion of these references is not arbitrary. San Jose is nearly an eight-hour drive from Chula Vista. New York is across the country; Chicago is in the Upper Midwest. This kid she has met has no sense of where he was from before, and therefore no way of knowing what it means to go somewhere else, or even what a “somewhere else” may entail, another place with another story. Another kid she describes, from Virginia, tells her that California is “the beginning of the end” — a characterization that, while especially convenient given Didion’s parallels to Yeats’ “Second Coming,” also has links back to an Eastern state whose own history is linked back to the original colonization of what eventually became the United States, and which played a pivotal role in the American War of Independence and the American Civil War that proved to be so defining in laying the groundwork for the racial inequalities that followed the post-slavery years, and eventually was followed by the civil rights movement in the 1960s that was in full force by the time of the Summer of Love. This kid she meets, Steve, tells her that in Virginia, at least, he had purpose, goals, some sense of future. “At least there you expect that it’s going to happen,” with that “it” being “Something. Anything.” (Didion, “Slouching,” 98) Virginia had a known past, and therefore a potential for an imagined future. California, by Didion’s rendering was much harder to grasp.

These children in Didion’s San Francisco are constantly on the move within that city itself. They move from apartments to parks to music venues, looking for adventure, or at least they talk about the possibility of moving, and they have no frame of reference to where they really came from, nor any link to the places where they could go. While they were mobile enough to get to San Francisco and to move around within it, they seem to lack an ability to leave. So ultimately they stay in a town that seemingly has no emotional link to their pasts or future. The action in Didion’s essay is the same: she mirrors their activity, moving from location to location, though in her case with a more overt sense of purpose: looking for children to talk to, for cops to interview.
Didion asks some of these children what they dreamed of becoming when they were younger, truly children in the biological sense of the word. The question, she notes to the reader, is something that “has been bothering me,” and something she can only ask as she is looking away from them, doing something else, fiddling with an ignition switch. The answers she records are striking, and vague. Jeff tells her he has no memory of ever thinking about it, Debbie tells her she once dreamed of being a veterinarian but is now “more or less working in the vein of being an artist or a model or a cosmetologist. Or something.” (Didion, “Slouching,” 92)

How do you perpetuate that sense of place, so you don’t end up with children who say they are from “here” but then say they are from “San Jose. Chula Vista, I dunno”? (Didion, “Slouching,” 86) Who cannot remember their childhood dreams, and then claim to lose their sense of purpose upon their California arrival? That question takes me to Lee Edelman, who has written extensively about the idea of “the imagined Child” and the future. He would argue that worrying so much about children, or more specifically the Child, can be a dangerous proposition, a “Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism.” (Edelman, 4) In his book No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (2004), he claims that “the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust.” (Edelman, 11) The effect can be stifling: there is no present that is not contingent on this imagined future, no decision that should not be weighed against what it means for someone not yet born, someone yet to be born.

Edelman is careful to distinguish between this imagined future Child and any real children, arguing also that the focus on the former has a stifling effect on both political and historical discourse. Any such discourse, he says, would have to “accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address.” (Edelman, 11)

What Didion describes in “Slouching” is a complete breakdown of this futurism, of this drive towards preserving the hope of an imagined Child to save and fulfil us all. Yes, children are being born and raised, though “raise” is a loose term. Five-year-old children in San Francisco were being raised on acid and peyote. (Didion, “Slouching,” 127-128). Seventeen-year-olds were arriving in Golden Gate Park, still dressed in their ranch clothes from whichever distant town that Didion imagines they came from, waiting to listen to some live music and trying to connect with other children but seemingly failing to connect at all. (Didion, “Slouching,” 103-104) These children in Didion’s San Francisco lack story, lack history, lack a sense of social order, lack attachment or even the ability to form attachments. Yes, there was nothing to hold them back, but nothing to feed off of either to develop that sense of place and attachment that Tuan describes. And if social order is, as Edelman says, there for the sole purpose to “preserve for this universalized subject, this fantastic Child, a notional freedom valued than the actuality of freedom itself,” what does it mean when there is no social order to speak of? (Edelman, 11)

Didion places this societal integration as something that had its origins at some unspecified moment following the Second World War. She makes only a passing reference to the war, more specifically by setting the temporal boundaries of what she describes as “society’s atomization” as being between 1945 and 1967. (Didion, “Slouching,” 123) Those children are not the problem: the problem is the older generation, those who had failed to do their due diligence in teaching those children well:
Maybe we had stopped believing in the rules ourselves, maybe we were having a failure of nerve about the game. Or maybe there were just too few people around to do the telling. [...] They are less in rebellion against the society than ignorant of it, able only to feed back certain of its most publicized self-doubts, *Vietnam, diet pills, the Bomb*. (Didion, “Slouching,” 122-123)

Whether she could successfully communicate that disorder to others, as I mentioned earlier, and perhaps alert people to what this meant for children was another question. She wrote about how the children she met in Haight-Ashbury lacked the words to communicate, to even develop a sense of community. They lacked any sense of the societal rules and norms of engagement. They were, as she put it, “pathetically unequipped children” lacking the familial ties that ultimately were meant to ground people in society. Without that grounding, they were floating, moving, unable to be pinned down. (Didion, “Slouching,” 122-123) They were effectively an “army of children waiting to be given the words,” even as she claims that they lacked any belief in those same words, and therefore any ability to even “think for themselves.” (Didion, “Slouching,” 123) Yet in her preface, she claims that the people who read the piece and connected with it were unable to connect with her own words, with her own story. She said that she had “failed to suggest that I was talking about something more general than a handful of children wearing mandalas on their foreheads.” (Didion, “A Preface,” xii) It was more than that: those people that connected with her piece were talking about the scene in Haight-Ashbury as something localized and discrete, as a “fad” that was “dead now, *fini, kaput*.” (Didion, “A Preface,” xii) Had she lost the right words? Or had her readers?

So now, I leave it to you all: was Haight-Ashbury a fad, was it general, was it a passing fancy? Or was it a sign of a far more significant societal malaise that was now manifesting itself after years of lurking under the surface? As an early PhD researcher, I find I still have more questions than answers. But I hope our discussion can help in that respect. Thank you all.


