"*If you label it* this, *then it can't be* that":

Revisiting New Journalism in Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe

By

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ABSTRACT

JILL RADWIN   *"If you label it* this, *then it can't be* that": Revisiting New Journalism in Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe. Department of English, June 2011.

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This thesis explores the works of Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and Tom Wolfe, a group of writers most often defined as the "New Journalists" for their untraditional blending of fictional techniques with reportage. I refer primarily to three texts: Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, Didion's *The White Album*, and Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and then go on to analyze the authors' later careers through a study of their more recent essays and essay collections.

I examine the ways in which these three authors break conventions of traditional journalism, most notably through their rejection of ethical boundaries, the varying level of "truth" or authenticity in their works, and their use of blurred genre. Through close readings of my three primary texts, I reveal how each author counters traditional journalism through a focus on the self. I conceptualize each writer's focus through the lens of different disciplines: Didion as philosopher, Mailer as memoirist, and Wolfe as social psychologist. These distinctive authorial roles provide a background for a discussion of each writer's later New Journalistic works. I locate their writing in the context of both the New Journalism movement, characterized by the 1960s and 1970s, as well as in later decades, thereby asserting that the movement is characterized by authorial presence rather than by time period. In this way, I reveal that the New Journalism movement did not conclude, but rather, has persisted through the later careers of each author.

Introduction

The New Journalism, as defined by Tom Wolfe, is a movement of writers during the 1960s and 70s who experimented with distinctive techniques of reportage. While the New Journalists are clearly influenced by the 19th century social-realists, traditional journalists, and autobiographers, they nonetheless use distinct techniques within their work. Outside of Wolfe's *The New Journalism* anthology, few writers have sought to define the New Journalism movement directly. Rather, critics have adopted his label as well as a loose definition based upon information and excerpts from his compilation.

Wolfe published the anthology in 1973, which included essays featured in magazines such as *The Village Voice*, *Esquire*, *New York Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *The New Yorker*, and *LIFE* between 1963 through 1970. Wolfe's anthology sought to define nearly a decade of what he considered to be an innovative journalistic style in the work of several authors. As defined, the New Journalism merges fiction and reportage. Consequently, authors and critics have labeled the New Journalism movement as everything from "the new nonfiction" to "creative nonfiction" to "literary journalism" (Frus 121, Bloom 278, Boynton xi). Wolfe notes, "It was late in 1966 when you first started hearing people talk about 'the New Journalism' in conversation, as best I can remember. I don't know for sure. . . . To tell the truth, I've never even liked the term. Any movement, group, party, program, philosophy or theory that goes under a name with 'New' in it is just begging for trouble" (*The New Journalism* 37). Not only does the title "New" lead to the inherent controversy of the movement but "Journalism" is also misleading. In contrast to traditional methods of reportage, this genre of writing seeks to overthrow conventions in favor of a more subjective approach.

In my exploration of the New Journalism I will look specifically at three authors: Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and Tom Wolfe. While Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe all reject traditional conventions of reportage in their works, each writer is entirely distinctive in both style and subject matter. Norman Mailer began his career as a novelist at the age of twenty-six, publishing three novels before his career as an essayist took off. In 1955, he helped co-found *The Village Voice* for which he wrote a weekly column for about a year. He went on to publish his first nonfiction book, *The Armies of the Night* in 1968, a work that came to define him as a writer. *The Armies of the Night* documents the March on the Pentagon, a protest of the Vietnam War in 1967. He writes the work as part narrative, part history. The narrative portion spans the majority of the book since Mailer not only delves into his experience as one of the protesters at the event but also into personal details. He describes the events preceding the march, the action itself, and his experience in jail after his arrest for crossing a police line. He contrasts his own memories of marching with figures like Robert Lowell, Edward de Grazia, and Dwight Macdonald with a more subjectively newsworthy account in which he offers the reader more general data rather than personal memories and opinions. Throughout the work, Mailer paints himself as an icon, overshadowing much of the event's importance with musings on his own self-worth.

In contrast to Mailer, Joan Didion began her career as a journalist. In 1965, during her senior year of college, Didion won an essay contest for *Vogue*, the award being a position at the magazine in New York. During her time there, Didion published her first novel followed by her first nonfiction book, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. These works were followed by *The White Album*, a collection of essays originally featured in

publications such as *Life, Esquire*, and *The New York Times*, among others. In *The White Album*, Didion confronts the political climate of the 1960s, though in a broader sense than Mailer. She weaves together a variety of personal essays to describe a range of social, cultural, and political themes of the period with particular emphasis on her experiences living in California. She delineates the confusion of the era through snapshots of narratives on subjects such as the Black Panther Party, the sacredness of water to Californians, and a commentary on the shopping mall. Like Mailer, Didion remains in the foreground for most of the work. Together, her essays reveal a sense of confusion and dismay, which she attributes to both to her personal psyche and to the socio-political climate of the time.

Tom Wolfe launched his career as a newspaperman: a general assignment reporter for the *Springfield Union*. He went on to report for *The Washington Post*, the *New York Herald-Tribune*, and the *Tribune*'s Sunday supplement, *New York Magazine*. From the 1960s through the early 1970s, Wolfe published a variety of experimental nonfiction works and essay collections before *The New Journalism* anthology in 1973. In the anthology, he excerpts two of his own works to elucidate some characteristics of the "new" genre. One such work is a chapter from *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, entitled "The Fugitive." *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* differs from the works of Mailer and Didon in that Wolfe foregrounds his subjects rather than himself as a reporter. Wolfe attempts to recreate the world surrounding novelist and counter-cultural icon, Ken Kesey, and his "Merry Pranksters." The Merry Pranksters were a group that experimented heavily with psychedelic drugs, rejected social norms, and often lived together communally. They are well known for their road trip across the United States in a painted

school bus they called "Further." Wolfe's novel details this road trip along with the "Acid Tests," when the Pranksters distributed LSD to large groups of people in order to perform mass experiments and participate in shared experiences with the larger community. Wolfe also documents Kesey's retreat to Mexico in order to escape drug charges for the possession of marijuana. In this particular work, Wolfe attempts to blend in with his subjects rather than stand out as author. This provides a contrast to Wolfe's introduction to *The New Journalism* anthology, which highlights his pride in forming a distinct genre. Clearly, he considers himself a founder of the movement, revealing an underlying egotism as well as his primary motivation for creating experimental nonfiction.

In his review of Wolfe's *The New Journalism* anthology, Michael Wood writes, "is there even anything there to be given a name at all? Do these writers have anything in common beyond the time and the country they live in, a certain insistence on their own personalities and a willingness to do a lot of legwork for a story?" ("The New Journalism" 1973). In the first chapter of this thesis, I will address Wood's question by tracing the commonalities between the work of Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and Tom Wolfe. Specifically, I will look at Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, Didion's *The White Album*, and Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* all published during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which will help me conceptualize some main facets of the movement. Three journalistic conventions that the New Journalists reject in their works are ethical boundaries, a high level of authentication and truth, and adherence to a specific genre, in that the authors blur fiction and nonfiction. By focusing on these conventions I will reveal the distinctions that place these particular writers outside the realm of journalism.

While the works of Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe are extremely different, a common thread of self and identity lies in them. In the second chapter I will look at the authors' emphasis on the self as it relates to a variety of different disciplines. In Didion's *The White Album*, the author contemplates her place in the world and her innate sense of insecurity. Here, Didion writes philosophically more than journalistically. The author looks at herself through a number of interrelated anecdotes to try to delineate her reality. While her work contains aspects of existential thinking, specifically in regard to her focus on morality, most of the collection presents feelings of nihilism, or the belief that life and existence lacks purpose or meaning.

In contrast to Didion's theoretical approach, Mailer's focus on the self in *Armies* is highly reminiscent of memoir. While Mailer defines his book as both "Novel" and "History," I argue that the author's documentation of self is given far more attention than his story of the march. Like a typical memoirist, Mailer discusses a personal account of a particular event in his life as a means to explore his character. Like all memoir writing, the work is marked by the importance of memory and its subjectivity. Finally, it maintains a level of intimacy uncommon to most journalistic or nonfiction works.

The most distinctive of the three authors is Wolfe, whose book is less about his own identity and much more about other "selves," notably Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. Wolfe takes on the role of a social psychologist insofar as he documents both the inner psyche of the Pranksters as they experiment with LSD and other mind-altering drugs, and the social dynamic of their cult-like clan. Wolfe examines the Pranksters as a religious sect. He draws upon sociological theory, such as that of Max Weber, by whom his writing is heavily influenced. In many of his works, Wolfe focuses on the idea of

"status," or one's position in society as reflected by a number of factors beyond one's

class or socio-economic position alone. In *Electric Kool-Aid*, Wolfe identifies the

Pranksters' status as it relates to their particular group, rather than society as a whole.

Although the Pranksters are considered "outsiders" as members of the counter-culture,

Wolfe's analysis relates their unique community to society in general.

According to John J. Pauly, "New Journalism's soul . . . the life-spirit that once

burned so brightly, now seems more or less extinguished" (110). In the third chapter of

this thesis, I examine the perception that the New Journalism ended toward the close of

the 1970s by looking at the later works of Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe. In Mailer's later

works, specifically two essays from *Pieces and Pontifications* published in 1988 and

excerpts from *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing* published in 2004, the author

maintains a constant concern with his identity wavering between egotism and self-doubt.

Mailer consistently treats himself as a character, projects a heightened concern with his

reader's perceptions of him, and continues to break the traditional conventions of

journalism that I discuss in Chapter One.

Didion also remains consistent in her style throughout the years. This is apparent

in two essays entitled "Political Fictions" and "Vichy Washington," as well as excerpts

from *Where I Was From*, all published in her grand essay collection *We Tell Ourselves

Stories in Order to Live*. She continually presents feelings of disconnectedness from her

society, in addition to a reverence for geographic spaces, and the use of gaps, both in her

page layout and content.

Wolfe's later writing reveals an authorial presence more akin to that in *The New

Journalism* anthology than in *Electric Kool-Aid*. In three recent essays, "Stalking the

Billion-Footed Beast," "Pell Mell," and "The Rich Have Feelings, Too," he continues to illustrate the importance of status, as well as the value of blurred genre. Wolfe's egotism is more comparable to Mailer's in these later writings.

By exploring these authors' more recent essays and nonfiction works, I argue that the New Journalism is not merely a temporal phenomenon, but rather an authorial one. The New Journalism has continued through the later works of the authors insofar as the writers have maintained largely similar tactics throughout their respective careers. As media continues to change and grow, particularly with the expansion of digital media and the Internet, it is significant to return to the New Journalism and see the ways in which Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe's writing is pertinent to the changing writing styles and reportage of today.

Chapter 1—

Breaking the Boundaries

As part of the New Journalism movement, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and Tom Wolfe face three main problems. These include ethical concerns, the authenticity of their work, and overlapping genre. The ethical concerns arise from the role of each narrator in the respective works, as well as the interference of personal bias. Another concern, then, is the writers' willingness to engage in an experience and their lack of restraint in doing so. These authors also present different levels of "truth" within the works, leading the reader to question the authenticity of the information. This discussion of truth includes an analysis of the New Journalists as "authorities" on a "reality," and the subjectivity that pervades their writing. Finally, these three authors tackle the complexities of blurred genre, as their work is largely a hybrid of different classifications. This is significant in that each writer addresses the categorization of texts in differing ways: Mailer with his unique form, Didion with her narration, and Wolfe with his preference for nonfiction over other genres as the dominant form.

In "On Hurting People's Feelings: Journalism, Guilt and Autobiography," Carolyn Wells Kraus notes, "The distorting authorial lens preoccupied a number of . . . writers originally associated with the New Journalism" (292). Kraus uses the metaphor of an authorial "lens" to demonstrate each writer's influence over his or her respective work. A lens, in its broadest definition, is a device used to bend beams of light, and in turn, formulate an image. A lens can provide us with a nearly identical perception to that of our unaided eyes. It can also completely alter that perception, allowing us to perceive something that is not really "there" or, likewise, alter an image to the point that it is

unrecognizable as what it once was. Furthermore, a lens only allows us to focus on one image, yielding a narrow perspective. Based on this definition, Kraus treats each New Journalist's psyche as a literary device, which can let in or leave out as much "light," or information, as he or she chooses and yield only a narrow perspective on a whole phenomenon.

I agree that Kraus's metaphor reveals the author's influence over his or her subject, but I contend that it does not go far enough. Instead of a lens, I compare authorial distortion to a funhouse mirror. A mirror also reflects only a single image but, in contrast to a lens, it is inherently distorting. A mirror image necessarily reverses its subject. For the journalist, this signifies that distortion is intrinsic to reporting a story. The metaphor of a funhouse mirror further complicates this concept. In a funhouse, a variety of differently shaped mirrors present us with distinct visual perceptions of a particular object. When a writer inhabits many roles in one text, namely author, character, and narrator, he or she must negotiate the different responsibilities of those roles. The New Journalists face distortion inherent in journalism but distort their narratives further by putting themselves into the reportage, rather than remaining outside the frame. The image of the funhouse mirror is important to understanding the New Journalists as distinct from mainstream journalists and other writers. This metaphor will likewise elucidate how each writer breaks established boundaries and the implications of these choices.

Evasion of Ethics

The funhouse mirror metaphor is particularly relevant when looking at Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*. In one sense, funhouse mirrors symbolize Mailer's

multiple personas, which remain at the forefront throughout his work. The reader is greatly influenced by his differing "reflections." He is at once the author and the narrator, as well as a protestor/protagonist, reporter, novelist, and historian, all of which complicate each other throughout the novel. Mailer discusses his participation in the march as a protestor while simultaneously referring to his career as a reporter. With regard to his narrative role, Mailer presents himself as a novelist in the first half of his book and a historian for the second half. His authorial responsibilities as a reporter, a novelist, and a historian become overshadowed by his biased position as a protestor. What is more, Mailer uses third-person, retrospective narration, reflecting himself and reflecting on himself as a character within the work. His reality is built on memory, forcing him to take a step back from the event and look at himself from a distance. The ethical problem associated with this technique is that Mailer removes himself from critique. Mailer as reporter is ostensibly blameless while Mailer the character must take responsibility for his actions.

In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer is perceptibly self-conscious. He begins his work "From the outset, let us bring you news of your protagonist," followed by an excerpt from *Time* magazine about a speech he gave to the peace protesters preceding the March on the Pentagon (3). He presents an outside perspective on himself as an introduction to his personal narrative so at first it seems that the writer will present both sides of his story, the hallmark of an objective journalist. Following the excerpt though, we are drawn away from the "objective" perspective and into Mailer's own thoughts and opinions. He concludes, "Now we may leave *Time* in order to find out what happened" (4). Mailer undermines *Time*'s "objective" account in favor of his own. The author,

seduced by his own power from partaking in the event, impugns the credibility of outsider accounts. In *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative*, Phyllis Frus notes, "complaints about the New Journalists include the charge that their giant egos got in the way of their materials" (129). For Mailer, maintaining a "giant ego" is entirely intentional. After all, the work is not about the March on the Pentagon; it is about Mailer's experience of the March on the Pentagon. Not only does Mailer put himself into his reportage, but also inflates himself into an icon. At the outset he warns of this fact:

> Mailer had the most developed sense of image; if not, he would have been a figure of deficiency, for people had been regarding him by his public image since he was twenty-five years old. He had in fact learned to live in the sarcophagus of his image—at night, in his sleep, he might dart out, and paint improvements on the sarcophagus. During the day, while he was helpless, newspapermen and other assorted bravos of the media and the literary world would carve ugly pictures on the living tomb of his legend. Of necessity, part of Mailer's remaining funds of sensitivity went right into the war of supporting his image and working for it.
>
> (5-6)

As the work continues, Mailer elucidates this 'image' from time to time, which actually provides a story in itself running parallel to the action of the march. He writes that people had been interested in his "public image" since he was twenty-five when he published his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*. Through his writing, Mailer reflects a unique persona, or image of himself, which he distinguishes as "public." To describe this image, Mailer uses the metaphor of a sarcophagus: a stone coffin often inscribed with symbolic representations pertinent to the individual who occupies it. The sarcophagus is his version

of a façade, one that connotes impenetrability. Consequently, his image or "sarcophagus" is marked by misrepresentation. The visible layer of his identity is a mix of biased media perceptions and Mailer's hyperbolic self-consciousness. In this way, he highlights the difference between his public image and his private image, which remains locked away inside the coffin. The sarcophagus also elicits notions of death, or in his case, being buried alive. Mailer illustrates his insecurities as so pervasive and all consuming that they are toxic. He scorns the "newspapermen and other assorted bravos of the media and the literary world" for being his enemy in "the war of supporting his image." By using such loaded words as "war" and "tomb," he invokes sensitivity to the war in Vietnam and the two-sided quality of both the protest in Washington and the fighting overseas. This parallel serves to embellish his "image," which he considers so crucial to his work.

He discusses a British documentary filmed about him to comment on his identity even further:

> For a warrior, presumptive general, ex-political candidate, embattled aging enfant
>
> terrible of the literary world, wise father of six children, radical intellectual,
>
> existential philosopher, hard-working author, champion of obscenity, husband of
>
> four battling sweet wives, amiable bar drinker, and much exaggerated street
>
> fighter, party giver, hostess insulter—he had on screen in this first documentary a
>
> fatal taint, a last remaining speck of the one personality he found absolutely
>
> insupportable—the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn. (134)

Mailer describes himself as he would like to be portrayed in contrast with how he actually is portrayed to the public. He illustrates himself as combatant using words like "warrior," "general," "embattled," "battling" and "fighter." These words are all charged

with violent connotations, yet it is his identity as a "nice Jewish boy" that he considers his "fatal taint," or his downfall. The contrast of violent rhetoric with "nice" demonstrates the utter contradiction between his perception of himself and the public's perception. In this way, Mailer gestures toward the presence of distortion in all media. He also shows that one's interpretation of reality is formulated a great deal based on one's personal agenda. In Mailer's case, the misrepresentation of his image is merely a truth he is unwilling to admit.

The author frequently categorizes his identity within the work. He states, "Let us then make our comic hero the narrative vehicle for the March on the Pentagon," suggesting that he is both the "comic hero," a character and the "narrative vehicle" within the work (54). In writing his own version of the event—that is, maintaining the distinctive yet overlapping roles of a narrator, reporter and character—Mailer alters "reality" and secures his place in history, remaining part of the discussion of that protest to this day. According to Kraus, "Mailer insists his intrusive egotism, far from smothering the story, actually illuminates an event that defies objective definition" (292). In contrast to the objective journalists who report on a phenomenon rather than opine on it, Mailer approaches his work with what appears to be unequivocal honesty. Yet his honesty may, in fact, be a complete charade. By subverting objectivity, the author forgoes a representative "standard" for what honesty is. David Eason uses the words of Joan Didion to comment on Mailer's work, stating, "The book is an account of experience, that is, in Didion's words, more electrical than ethical but from which an ethical stance but must created" (201). This ethical stance is not to embrace conventional codes, but

rather to enlighten his readers, forcing them to take apart the pieces of his subjective reality to create their own.

Like Mailer's *Armies*, Didion's *The White Album* is marked by an outward self-consciousness that guides the narrative. Didion writes a collection of personal essays to report and comment on the decade of the 1960s rather than a single event. Similar to Mailer, she attempts to report on a phenomenon that "defies objective definition," thus rejecting the ethical demands of objective journalism (Kraus 292).

For Didion, the funhouse mirror relates to the writer's entirely distinctive roles or various reflections. Didion's perspective as narrator inverts the images of her other identities as author and character. Looking back on the 1960s, she describes being "frequently named," a concept that runs parallel to her various titles and responsibilities within *The White Album* (12). Unlike Mailer, the author solicits trust from her reader by using pronouns like "we" and "us" developing a shared consciousness and treating him or her as a part of her own reality. Consequently, the reader develops what can be considered an unwarranted trust in the narrator. Kraus refers to Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* to comment on the problem of guilt, which many journalists must face. In this collection, often considered a preface to *The White Album*, she writes, "My only advantage as a reporter is that I am so physically small, so temperamentally unobtrusive, and so neurotically inarticulate, that people tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interests. And it always does. . . . Writers are always selling somebody out" (*Slouching* xiv, cited in Kraus 286). As narrator, she is unapologetically candid, yet as the character she describes, she is conniving and to some extent deceitful. In *The White Album* she highlights these contradictory roles, identifying both herself and

the "improvisations" she hides behind (12). In one instance, or "flash cut" as she describes it, Didion writes, "The tests mentioned . . . were administered privately, in the outpatient psychiatric clinic at St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, in the summer of 1968, shortly after I suffered the 'attack of vertigo and nausea' mentioned in the first sentence and shortly before I was named a *Los Angeles Times* 'Woman of the Year'" (15). Didion juxtaposes her psychiatric tests with her "Woman of the Year" award to undermine our understanding of her as a prototype of the successful, well-grounded female. The description of her wavering mental health distracts us from this honorable award. She demonstrates that reality and the self, as she defines them, are largely ambiguous terms full of misrepresentation and contradiction.

In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* Wolfe differs from the other two writers in that his narration is influenced much more by the reality of his subjects, Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, than by his own reality. Wolfe as narrator can be likened to a funhouse mirror image as well; his image a reflection projected by his subjects' funhouse mirror rather than his own. Distortion is inherent in the description of the Pranksters, the position of the narrator, and in Tom Wolfe himself as a New Journalist writer. Frus points out that Wolfe's "extensive localization of his characters" provides "a representation of their subjectivity, not his" (151). "Their subjectivity," of course, refers to the Pranksters with whom Wolfe, as narrator, blends in more and more as the work progresses. Frus initially defines Wolfe's perspective as "an authoritarian third-person narrator with control of multiple points of view [that] alternates with a dramatized first-person journalist who may be 'on the bus' with the Pranksters" (143). In other words, Wolfe

often takes the role of an omniscient narrator, inhabiting the point of view of the characters disguised as his own.

Occasionally, Wolfe uses the first person to identify himself within the Prankster's social sphere. At the beginning of his work he writes:

> For two or three days it went like that for me in the garage with the Merry Pranksters waiting for Kesey . . . I just hung around and Cassady flipped his sledge hammer, spectral tapes played, babies cried, mihs [sic] got flipped out, bus glowed, Flag People walk [sic], freaks loop in outta sunlight on old Harriet Street, and I only left to sleep for a few hours or go to the bathroom. (16)

Wolfe's surreal description, when paired with first person narration, leads the reader to question his relationship to his subjects and the extent to which he identifies with their reality. Through writing, he attempts to imitate the voices of the Pranksters as his own. To do so, he pays particular attention to pace and emphasis (in the form of italicized words) and often uses techniques like stream of consciousness and intermittent dialogue. He writes:

> *In his movie—right right right*—and they all grok over that. *Grok*—and then it's clear, without anybody having to say it. Everybody, everybody everywhere, has his own movie going, his own scenario . . . Yet everybody knows at once ::::: somehow this ties in, *synchs*, directly with what Kesey has just said about the movie screen of our perceptions that closes us out from our reality ::::: and somehow *synchs* directly, at the same time, in this very moment, with the actual physical movie, The Movie, that they have been slaving over, the great morass of

a movie, with miles and miles of spiraling spliced-over film and hot splices

billowing around them like so many intertwined, synched . . . [sic] (145-46)

Wolfe's narrative voice here is a combination of Prankster point of view and his own

lyrical voice. His colorful imagery of "spiraling spliced-over film" and "hot splices

billowing . . . intertwined" is indicative of his own understanding of the psychedelic

experience and altered perception. As Frus notes, Wolfe "may be 'on the bus,'" a

metaphor for taking part in the Prankster lifestyle, but his continuous use of the third

person leads us to question the extent of his participation. Are Wolfe's descriptions a

product of his isolation from the Prankster's lifestyle or rather, his increased awareness

and understanding in observing them? Wolfe writes of the Pranksters, "they all grok . . .

Grok," using the term originally coined by Robert A. Heinlein in his 1960s science

fiction novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Heinlein writes, "'Grok' means to understand

so thoroughly that the observer becomes part of the observed—to merge, blend,

intermarry, lose identity in group experience" (MacFarlane 93). Wolfe reveals that

"they," the Pranksters, are "grokkers," but there is no evidence that Wolfe is a "grokker"

as well. He might appear to completely "merge" into shared experience, and it is clear

that this is partially Wolfe's intention; however, the author's continual use of "they"

disassociates him from the Pranksters to the point that we cannot believe in his thorough

involvement in their group consciousness.

Wolfe's poems, which are scattered throughout the text, exemplify his unique

voice in portraying the Pranksters. As a break from prose, these poems distinctly portray

events in the narrative. For example:

<div align="center">

"CAN

YOU

</div>

<pre>
              PASS THE
          ACID TEST?—"

                    Comes the call
                    Chiseled on each Prankster eyeball
              In Lincoln gothic
                    As we moan . . . (229)
</pre>

This poem refers to the Pranksters' acid tests, during which they would feed LSD to large crowds of people, purportedly to study their response to the drug—but more to share "the experience." It provides an unexpected break from prose emphasized by its position on the page. The poem's surrealism is associated with the Pranksters themselves and also highlights Wolfe's outsider perspective, which is disorienting or unreal since the Prankster reality is not his own. Wolfe's use of "we" places him among the moaning crowd, though he does not outwardly react to their lifestyle and dangerous acid tests. In *The New Journalism*, Wolfe notes,

> Eventually I, and others, would be accused of 'entering people's minds'…But exactly! I figured that was one more doorbell a reporter had to push. . . . I found that things like exclamation points, italics, and abrupt shifts (dashes) and syncopations (dots) helped to give the illusion not only of a person talking but of a person thinking. (35-36)

Through poetry and the typography common to his poetry, Wolfe reports his personal understanding of an "experience" rather than simply reporting on a scene. Unlike Didion and Mailer, Wolfe does not directly introduce his personal opinions, nor does he illustrate extensively his participation in the narrative**.** The reader must conceptualize the author's viewpoint, to some extent, by deconstructing his language and form. These elements

make the narrative difficult to read unlike traditional journalism, which is more straightforward.

Another challenge for the three writers is the foregrounding of personal bias in their writing, a practice that is frowned upon in most "objective" journalism. These authors frequently broadcast their agendas to the reader as a means to guide the work. Mailer is known as an avid political activist and as a candidate for Mayor of New York City. The writer discusses his personal and political views unabashedly throughout *The Armies of the Night*. In writing about his activism, he unapologetically feeds his personal views to his readership. He defines himself as a "left conservative," an attempt to explicate his seemingly contradictory views. For example he explains, "Mailer had a diatribe against LSD, hippies, and the generation of love, but he was keeping it to himself" (14). Mailer here sarcastically rejects ethical boundaries by acknowledging that he should keep his views to himself, yet revealing them nonetheless. In contrast to his conservative opinions, he explains, "Since he was also a *Left* Conservative, he believed that radical measures were sometimes necessary to save the root" (185). In detailing his controversial views at both political extremes, Mailer confronts the potential alienation of his readers, yet relies on his honesty to connect with them. He writes, "[The hippies] would never have looked to blow their minds and destroy some part of the past if the authority had not brainwashed the mood of the present until it smelled like deodorant. (To cover the odor of burning flesh in Vietnam?)" (93). Like his own image, Mailer inflates his personal views with biting sarcasm and a loaded analogy that jumps out at the reader. Furthermore, his distinction as a "Left Conservative" runs counter to his reader's expectations of a political activist. American politics is defined, in a large part, by the

two-party system. By blurring these two political extremes, Mailer comments on the hypocrisy of both the war and politics in general. He warns that not everything is cut and dried. Mailer is not a hippie but he opposes the war. Consequently, he finds the titles of liberal, conservative, right, and left to be too restrictive. His categorization as Left Conservative reveals Mailer's personal agenda in protesting the war as much more than a two-sided affair. He shows the reader that he or she must read deeper into the often superficial language used to classify social, political, and generational phenomena.

Didion likewise raises her own agendas as part of her reportage. She argues a personal opinion most vehemently in her essay collection entitled *"Women,"* specifically in her essay "The Women's Movement." Didion argues that the new wave of feminism is dominated by superficialities, lacking significant political or revolutionary qualities. Yet, paradoxically, she goes so far as to compare the women's movement to the politics of Marxism: "Marxism in this country had ever been an eccentric and quixotic passion. One oppressed class after another had seemed finally to miss the point. The have-nots, it turned out, aspired mainly to having" (110). Didion dramatizes feminism as a movement built on the struggle between classes: women against the rest of the world. Lynn Marie Houston and William Lombardi reassert, "Didion points out that the movement becomes diluted by women who are merely bitter and who do not understand the ideology behind the equality they seek" (92). The topic of feminism is already incredibly controversial in and of itself, but the time frame of the 1970s when Didion wrote her essay, is especially significant for the women's movement. The piece comes at the tail end of the 1960s when the woman's movement was fueled by revolution and change, particularly by the civil rights movement and other rising social and political factions. In fact, the feminist

magazine *Ms.* was published the same year as Didion's essay. Her stance in "The Women's Movement" is especially divisive since she is a successful female writer. Didion symbolizes the strong woman, an image that the women's movement thrives upon and as a writer, demonstrates that women can be just as accomplished as their male counterparts, if not more. Yet, Didion does not entirely support the ideology of the feminist movement. The notion that she is inherently feminist can be explained by the funhouse mirror, which takes one aspect of Didion's identity and projects it as a defining feature. In her book, *Feminism and Its Fictions*, Lisa Maria Hogeland cites a 1977 interview between Didion and Susan Braudy of *Ms.* magazine. She explains, "Near the end of the interview, Braudy describes herself as finally asking the 'feminist question': 'Why does she write about women in despair who believe in nothing and do nothing, when Didion herself is a strong woman who does a major thing—her writing? Why doesn't she write about women more like herself?'" to which her husband, John Gregory Dunne, himself a writer, ambiguously responds: "'Joan writes because she writes'" (Hogeland 88). By speaking for Didion rather than allowing her to address the question herself, Dunne reduces Didion's work to writing for the sake of writing. Indeed, Dunne, like many readers and critics, misses the point of her writing, specifically in this essay. That is, Didion is not anti-feminist; rather she is against the methodology that has taken hold of the movement. Didion is staunch in her critique of feminism's tactics and, like Mailer, risks insulting her readers and their conception of her as reporter and narrator. She writes, "These [feminists] are converts who want not a revolution but 'romance,' who believe not in the oppression of women but in their own chances for a new life in

exactly the mold of their old life" (118). Like Mailer, Didion does not apologize for her opinions, nor does she try to rationalize her controversial viewpoint in any way.

In contrast to the other two writers, Wolfe's personal agenda is less evident. He aspires to a higher form of writing altogether: beyond the revered novel. Wolfe started out as a reporter for a number of newspapers. Later he became a contributor to *New York Magazine* and *Esquire*. He went on to publish works of nonfiction, but it was not until 1987 that he published his first novel. In *The New Journalism* anthology he notes society's veneration of the novel and appears to see it as a higher form of writing:

> What [reporters] had in common was that they all regarded the newspaper as a motel you checked into overnight on the road to the final triumph. The idea was to get a job on a newspaper, keep body and soul together, pay the rent, get to know 'the world,' accumulate 'experience,' perhaps work some of the fat off your style—then, at some point, quit cold, say goodbye to journalism, move into a shack somewhere, work night and day for six months, and light up the sky with the final triumph. The final triumph was known as the novel. (18)

Wolfe describes mainstream journalism as merely a writer's first stop on the road to success (fiction). Yet Wolfe wants more than success. His agenda is to redefine literature altogether, creating an even higher form of writing. Still, Wolfe concedes, "When we talk about the 'rise' or 'death' of literary genres, we are talking about status, mainly. The novel no longer has the supreme status it enjoyed for ninety years (1875-1965), but neither has the New Journalism won it for itself" (50). The author seems to understand that the New Journalism is not yet the highest form of literature, which is what he seems to aspire to in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. But this aspiration manifests itself in the

author's redefinition of style. This is Wolfe's most direct attempt to rebel against the conventional reporting he did in the past. The book is an exposé, but rather than documenting facts, Wolfe exposes a shared experience. In *The New Journalism* he writes, "[The reporters] never guessed for a minute that the work they would do over the next ten years, as journalists, would wipe out the novel as literature's main event" (22). Although he asserts that New Journalism eventually surpasses the novel in literary success, the author must continually support this fact in his own "New Journalistic" works. This is his highest goal in writing *Electric Kool-Aid*—to tell the Pranksters' story as it has never been told before. On the back of the book is a quote from *The Village Voice*: "*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is an amazing book . . . [a] book that definitely gives Wolfe the edge on the non-fiction novel." Yet, in writing a "non-fiction" work, Wolfe sets his reader up for a series of facts. The question remains whether or not we lose anything through Wolfe's unconventional form. Although he would argue that there is much to be gained from subverting convention, one might counter that the writing is somewhat indigestible, a failed attempt at creating the most valuable literary method. Frus notes, "[Wolfe's] effusive, excessive style fetishizes language. By calling attention to words for their own sake, as in his use of synonym or redundancy, pleonasm, and catalogs and lists, he in effect separates style from subject" (146). The author's sense of style distracts from the actual subject matter and consequently his agenda to create a higher form is more self-interested than expository.

The New Journalists also spark controversy as a result of their willingness to fully engage in an experience. Mailer, for instance, forgoes his authority as reporter and engages his reader as a contemporary. The reader, rather than accepting Mailer's story as

"truth," may take a step back and judge the writer for his actions and question his integrity. In developing an opinion of the character, the reader constructs his or her own unique understanding of the story and the extent to which he or she believes the narrative. Mailer writes of himself as the subject:

> All right, let us look into his mind. It has been burned out by the gouts of bourbon he has taken into himself the night before (in fact, one of the reasons he detests napalm is that he assumes its effect on the countryside is comparable to the ravages of booze on the better foliage of his brain). . . . (*Armies* 55)

Mailer boldly claims to give the reader access not only to his thoughts and opinions, but to his "mind." The author promises his reader that he will immerse himself in the work. In turn, the reader must accept the consequences of reading another's mind and seeing the painful or angry thoughts otherwise hidden from the public. Again, the description of his brain is associated with rhetoric of the war showing the author's engagement in the text, as well as reinforcing his image as a parallel storyline.

Eason discusses this notion of the reader-writer relationship by categorizing Mailer's work as a 'modernist text.' He explains, "Modernist reports call attention to reporting as a way of joining writer and reader together in the creation of reality" (Eason 193). For Mailer, the text is a medium through which to air his dirty laundry and, in doing so, drag the reader in with him. For example, Mailer notes that he did jail time for "assault upon his second wife" (165). This remark occurs when he is in jail for crossing a police line during the march. His sporadic admissions add controversy to an already controversial event. Such candor reinforces the New Journalist ideal of authenticity over objectivity.

In contrast to Mailer, whose work is devoted to his personal engagement in the march, Wolfe creates an illusion of total immersion in his reportage. Wolfe did not witness all of the events he discusses in the text. In the "Author's Note" he explains, "All the events, details and dialogue I have recorded are either what I saw and heard myself or were told to me by people who were there themselves or were recorded on tapes or film or in writing" (415). Wolfe's "subjective reality" is formulated not only from his own experience, as it first appears, but also from the testimonies of others. This fact is significant when looking at ethics as well as questions of authenticity, which I will address later in this chapter. With regard to ethics, Wolfe evades questions of moral responsibility as a means to embody the reality of his subjects. This is notable in situations that he did not witness first-hand.

In one scene, Wolfe narrates a raucous orgy that takes place when the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang meets up with the Merry Pranksters for the first time. Here, two counter-cultural groups collide in a festival of drinking, drugs, and sex. In his final note, Wolfe explains that Hunter Thompson, the author of *Hell's Angels: a Strange and Terrible Saga*, provided him with tapes he used for this section of his book. In the orgy scene, Wolfe details what appears to be a sexual assault. This incident involves the "'new mamma,'" as the Hell's Angels call her, or "common property" (Thompson 168). Wolfe writes:

> The girl had her red and white dress pushed up around her chest, and two or three
> would be on her at once, between her legs, sitting on her face in the sick ochre
> light of the shack with much lapping and leering . . . she twitched and moaned,
> not in protest, however, in a kind of drunken bout of God knew what and men

with no pants on were standing around, cheering, chiding, waiting for their turn,

or their second turn, or the third until she had been fenestrated in various places at

least fifty times. (176)

Wolfe treats this episode as normal, stating "but that is her movie [sic], it truly is, and we

have gone with the flow" (177). Most readers would consider this incident to be

unspeakably appalling. Although Wolfe is not present in the action, his narration supports

impassiveness. Here we see that the reporter's immersion in the minds of subjects

prevents him from acting morally or rationally. I read this part of the text as a gang rape

scene, magnified in crudeness by Wolfe's narration. In this case, he benefits from his

position largely outside the frame. As with Mailer, his use of third-person distances him

from the complicity of his actions, or rather, his inaction.

True or False: Borders of Authenticity

Just as Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe all face ethical concerns due to their New

Journalistic style, the authors likewise confront questions of authenticity within their

work. Whereas "objective" journalists are intent on exposing "truth," these three

"subjective" journalists hope to expose a deeper level of "Truth." While "truth" is

synonymous with a perceived phenomenon or "fact," "Truth" transcends our own

perceptions. It is a divine level of "reality" shared by all. In documenting their own

experiences, Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe demonstrate the fallacy of "universal" truth, as

well as the inherent subjectivity of fact. Like many philosophers, the New Journalists

question reality and the ability to represent it faithfully. Consequently, the writers are

often criticized for fabricating their reportage, omitting significant details, or obscuring

what is most important. According to Pauly, "Earlier critics read the New Journalism as a superior representation of reality, a kind of journalistic deep truth; more recent critics read it as a clever deconstruction of its own claims to authority" (112). The attempt to illustrate a "superior representation of reality" itself provides a commentary on acting as an "authority" on truth. The writers assess their own power in order to comment on journalists in general. By writing about themselves as reporters, these New Journalists highlight the limitations inherent in their authoritative roles. They choose what is important and what is not. By necessarily leaving out parts of the "full story," they call into question whether journalists can truly be "authorities" at all.

Journalist Jack Newfield impugns the authenticity of the New Journalists stating, "Everyone has a different definition of what the New Journalism is. . . . [I]t's the transcendence of objectivity, it's anyone who makes up quotes, it's anyone who hangs out at the Lion's Head bar" (cited in Frus 120). While Newfield's definition is comical, it is equally telling. He describes the New Journalists as a group intent only on writing a good story rather than revealing what actually happened. He notes that they create facts and adhere to a particular image, hanging out with specific people and working to make names for themselves. It is important, therefore, to look at the extent to which Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe actually invent or skew details of their narratives.

According to Frus, "Although [Mailer's writing] amounted to 'an all-out assault on *New Yorker* writing,' Mailer insists that it was necessary, for 'one of the great lies of all time' was that the 'reporter pretended to be objective'" (128). Mailer demonstrates that New Journalists are not alone in forgoing "objectivity;" all journalists do. Unlike the New Journalists, however, "objective" writers mislead the public by claiming that their

work conveys the absolute truth about an event or phenomenon. By comparison Mailer admits his bias when recounting the events that he witnesses. His work may seem less authentic than conventional news in that he only shows one part or one version of the whole picture. The counter-argument, though, would be that his work is more authentic since it is a first-hand experience, meaning it is at least one person's truth: his own. As a novelist, Mailer tells it as he sees it without detaching himself from the action. Eason, who defines *The Armies of the Night* as modernist, explains, "The modernist texts . . . attest to just how fragile notions of realism are in a self-conscious culture, and to the impossibility, in some historical moments, of speaking excessively about reality" (203). In other words, some events, such as the March on the Pentagon, cannot be strictly defined. The reality of the event is the combination of various subjective realities, which together create an honest depiction where "factual" evidence falls short. Particularly notable with regard to authenticity is the structure of Mailer's work into two distinct parts. Eason notes, "The two-part strategy of 'The Armies of the Night' emphasizes that both social life and the report are constructions" (201). By juxtaposing two descriptions of the event, one as "novelist" and one as "historian," Mailer allows readers to choose the version they find more authentic or revealing. Both "constructions" cause readers to question which part is more "real" than the other. At a series of speeches before the march, Mailer holds a vote to determine whether or not Edward de Grazia will replace him as Master of Ceremonies. He announces, "'In the absence of a definitive vote, the man who holds the power, keeps it'" (39). Mailer offers a larger critique of adhering to what is popular or mainstream. In this case, Mailer does, in fact, hold the power. Traditionally though, as a New Journalist, Mailer does not possess the same authority as

the "objective" reporter. In a way, Mailer predicts the future of New Journalism as a less accepted form of reportage simply due to the reigning influence of "objectivity." Again, by calling attention to his own authority (highlighting his distorted authorial image in the mirror) he also questions the authority of others.

Even more personal than Mailer's *Armies of the Night* is Didion's *The White Album*, which leads readers to question its journalistic purpose. While Mailer presents two perspectives, one as novelist and one as historian, Didion remains faithful to the first-person throughout her work, acting as the readers' mirror into the 1960s and early 70s. Didion, though, is not an experienced tour guide. As the narrator, she conveys that she is searching for her own understanding alongside the reader. Lynn Z. Bloom explains, "Writers of creative nonfiction live—and die—by a single ethical standard, to render faithfully, as Joan Didion says in 'On Keeping a Notebook,' '*how it felt to me*' their understanding of both the literal and larger Truth" (278). Didion claims that her writing, more than anything else, is a means to accept the ambiguity of reality. In this way, the author contradicts Newfield's assertion that the New Journalists' "creative nonfiction" is merely a ploy to tell a more interesting story with little regard for the facts. Bloom elaborates, "In contrast to the official story, creative nonfiction presents the unauthorized version, tales of personal and public life that are very likely subversive of the records and thus of the authority of the sanctioned tellers" (278). This is very illuminating for Didion, who in many ways rejects "the sanctioned tellers," or mainstream media. For example, she writes about a press conference held for a campus protest led by militant black students at San Francisco State University: "I considered the illusion of aim [sic] to be gained by holding a press conference, the only problem with press conferences being that

the press asked questions" (*White Album* 41). Didion challenges the established order of

journalism in which "truth" can be obtained through question and answer sessions. She

shows the reader that this press conference did not capture in any meaningful way the

event as it happened, or as she herself experienced it. In fact, the problem is twofold since

a story is composed not only by the media but also by the subject who may want to be

portrayed in a certain way. One of the militants says, "'This has to be on our terms . . .

Because [the media will] ask very leading questions, they'll ask *questions*'" to which

another responds, "'Make them submit any questions in writing'" (40). It is not only the

"sanctioned tellers," that control the level authenticity but also the influence of the

subjects on these tellers. This is an issue that the New Journalists must address when they

place themselves within the frame.

Didion's conscious rejection of authenticity is comparable to traditional

journalists who she reveals falsely proclaim their work to be unbiased. Mark Muggli

writes:

> Her 'I' goes beyond the intentionally neutral voice of the daily newsreporter--it is
>
> a created, shifting character who speaks memorably and who sometimes
>
> anatomizes her own responses. But the most distinctive feature of Didion's
>
> journalism is not her presentation of self but her presentation of objects and
>
> events. (402)

I agree with Muggli but, in contrast, I consider Didion's presentation of self to be

indistinguishable from that of "objects and events." Through her presentation of self, she

is able to illuminate these ideas. It is the "anatomy" or dissection of her responses that is

so significant in discussing the authenticity of her work. Didion goes beyond the

transmission of stories and events to point out her own reactions to them as a critical part of their "reality" or ambiguity. By questioning not only what happened, but also its implications, Didion forces the reader to challenge the truth of a reported event and also develop greater awareness of and sympathies toward "the news."

In "The Unbearable Limitations of Journalism," Marcel Broersma uses an instructive analogy to comment on "the illusion" of reality within mainstream journalism. He writes, "People like to read about film stars and Hollywood, but when they are watching a nice movie at home they do not want to see a pop-up on their TV screen showing the director explaining –in actual time—how the film was made. They do not want the illusion to be broken" (31). In contrast, the New Journalists intentionally break the illusion in their forthright discussion of *how* they obtained the story. Tom Wolfe specifically uses this technique within *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* not only in the "Author's Note" at the end, but also within the work. At one point he details his attempt to find Ken Kesey and report on him:

> I got the idea of going to Mexico and trying to find him and do a story on Young Novelist Real-Life Fugitive. I started asking around about where he might be in Mexico. Everybody on the hip circuit in New York knew for certain. It seemed to be the thing to know this summer. He is in Puerto Vallarta. He is in Ajijic. He is in Oaxaca. He is in San Miguel de Allende. He is in Paraguay. He just took a steamboat from Mexico to Canada. And everyone knew for certain. (6)

Wolfe's writing contrasts with that of the mainstream journalists, who use an unobtrusive writing style to assert a story's significance, rather than explicitly justifying why they wrote it. By describing his methods of reportage, Wolfe causes the reader to wonder

whether or not he dug deep enough for the "truth." After all, Wolfe himself notes that everyone claimed to know "for certain" where Kesey was, even if they did not. We've already seen that Wolfe did not do all of his reporting first-hand. He relied to a large extent on others to recreate for him the events he did not experience, calling attention to the possibility of falsification or misguided reports in his work.

Wolfe stands apart from the other New Journalists though because he does not entirely denounce the myth of objectivity. Geraldine Muhlamn notes, "To [Wolfe], the New Journalism still bears some relation to a certain properly journalistic search for 'objective reality'" (141). Wolfe, it seems, is most concerned with questions of authenticity. Rather than questioning authenticity like his counterparts, Wolfe is concerned with techniques that yield a higher level of "truth." He declares:

> In this new journalism there are no sacerdotal rules; not yet in any case. . . . If the journalist wants to shift from third-person point of view to first-person point of view in the same scene, or in and out of different characters' point[s] of view, or even from the narrator's omniscient voice to someone else's stream of consciousness—as occurs in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*—he does it. (*The New Journalism* 48)

The guiding principal of the New Journalism is, in fact, the rejection of rules. It is paradoxical, then, that Wolfe, an experimental stylist, calls attention to himself as a social realist. Realism is often associated with late-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century literature, which sought to portray realistic depictions of people, particularly the middle class. While social realism aims to mirror the lives of common people, New Journalism aims to look beyond these depictions into the thoughts and feelings of the people

themselves. I contend that Wolfe's claims to social realism are simply an identifiable way to emphasize the higher level of reality that he aims to reach. Frus notes Wolfe's angry fixation on the restricting dichotomy of fact versus fiction:

> Wolfe's attack [on the *New Yorker*] lay in questioning the strict opposition between fact and fiction, and what's more, the power of 'legitimate' institutions to clearly mark the line –in effect to decide what is true and what is false. As [Ed] Cohen reads the attack, Wolfe threatened the institutions that depend on being able to clearly separate what is false from what is true. 'For it is only by distinguishing "fact" from the "fancy" that our society can determine which kinds of knowledge will be used to make social decisions. . . . ' (132)

Wolfe criticizes the idea that fact and fancy are entirely separate entities. Meanwhile, Cohen calls attention to this dichotomy as a guiding principle within our society. Wolfe's goal is to blend fictionalized moments with factual ones, and in turn, create an elevated form of reality, so that "social decisions" are not categorized according to simple binaries.

In *Electric Kool-Aid*, Wolfe constructs reality through language and the imitation of dialogue. Frus notes, "at least part of the new nonfiction's power derives from the acknowledgment of the role that language and the conventions of mimesis play in structuring 'reality' by structuring our consciousness of it" (xx). By calling attention to the words on the page, Wolfe highlights our perceptions about reality and truth, and the extent to which these can be recreated in writing or not. The author wants to place his reader into the action and he is adept at doing so with his style. He is so skillful at this, in fact, that it is hard to believe he was not even present for some of the moments that he

writes about. Wolfe demonstrates the importance of language in formulating a reality,

showing us that it can be just as illusory as it is telling.

Scrambled Genre

The concerns I have discussed, ethical concerns and questions of authenticity, are

both related to a third challenge inherent in the New Journalism. This challenge is

blurring different genres into one. New Journalism itself resists a singular definition, in

that each writer considered a "New Journalist" uses a unique style. In a society intent on

classification, New Journalism has come to be defined as an aggregate of different

genres, movements, and literary ideals.

At its most general, New Journalism is a hybrid of fiction and nonfiction. The

borders of these genres alone yield hundreds of sub-categories. It is this imprecision in

characterizing New Journalism that is often questioned in analyses. According to Frus,

"If the new nonfiction is in any way a response to this perception of an altered reality, it

is likely to be the unreality of the way we divide up discourse" (126). New Journalism

seems to call attention to our classification of writing more than any other recent literary

style. What is more, it questions the validity of these classifications. Eric Heyne refers to

aspects of the New Journalism as "writing over the edge;" transgressing the established

boundaries of genre into which such writing does not fit (326). He asserts that certain

writing styles cannot be boxed in by a particular set of guiding principles. Nearly all of

the New Journalists got their start in one traditional genre or another: some were

novelists, some reporters. According to Pauly, the economic climate of the early 1960s

was one impulse for the blurring of genres and for the birth of New Journalism. He explains,

> *Esquire* magazine's turn to nonfiction in the early 1960s was part of a desperate editorial response to strong competition from *Playboy*. The failure of *Esquire's* older formula opened up a space in which editors were willing to risk unusual styles of reporting. . . . The death of the traditional short story market meant that more professional 'literary' writers were willing to try nonfiction. (119)

Consequently, critics have associated the New Journalists with dozens of different practices that go beyond fiction versus fact.

The postmodern doctrine of "panfictionality" is often associated with the New Journalism. This doctrine rejects the notion that fiction and nonfiction are mutually exclusive entities and concludes that all texts can fit into the category of fiction. Panfictionality does not reject the classification of texts, but rejects that an absolute distinction can be made from fiction. Marie-Laure Ryan argues, "the postmodern attack on the dichotomy loses most of its thrust if we give up the simplistic equation of nonfiction with truth and fiction with non-truth. The present proposal inverts this relation: it is in nonfiction that truth is problematic, and in fiction that it is secured by convention" (180). I agree with Ryan and assert that this principle falls short of providing us with an understanding of the New Journalism since this movement questions the established order, in this case, the restrictive categorization of texts. Furthermore, panfictionality's abolition of "external truth" runs counter to the New Journalist's ability to question reality, whether ambiguous or not (167).

Frus offers a more helpful association when she compares the New Journalism with oral tradition: "The New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s is similar to the storytelling tradition in that readers are encouraged to observe the observer thanks to a self-conscious practice that appears in many guises" (138). Frus specifically compares the author-reader relationship to the performer-audience relationship. I think the comparison to oral tradition is one of the most useful in understanding the distinctions between New Journalism and other genres. Oral tradition is a time-honored practice, deeply embedded in the fabric of many cultures. It serves as a trans-generational form of reporting, and often times the lines are blurred between truth and fabrication. Comparing New Journalism to this art form may be an effective way to preempt criticism of the movement, specifically in reference to the blurring of genre.

Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe all draw attention to questions of form and factuality and critique the overweening importance the literary world has assigned to the categorization of texts. Mailer's critique, in a large part, stems from the two-part format of his text as Novel and History. Mailer sarcastically prepares the reader for the shift in conventions when he switches to his second, more objective section. He writes, "The Novelist in passing his baton to the Historian has a happy smile. . . . Let us prepare then (metaphors soon to be mixed—for the Novelist is slowing to a jog, and the Historian is all grip on the rein) let us prepare then to see what the history may disclose" (219-220). The metaphor of "passing his baton" implies that the distinctions are transferred from one mode of representation to another. He highlights the difference between both sections noting that history may disclose something entirely distinct from the novel. Within his "History" section, Mailer proves his metaphor of passing the baton to be inadequate by

including cynical bits, which break through the façade of objectivity. For example, "the orally-oriented Left were listening to their fourth hour of oratory—how much of one's own saliva must have been tasted by now" (250). Mailer's alliteration of the words "orally," "oriented," and "oratory," act as a tongue twister, ridiculing the extensive speeches, of which, incidentally, Mailer took part in before the march. He mocks them further, commenting on the amount of saliva the speakers have tasted rather than the content of their speeches. In writing a "history," Mailer aims to "elucidate the mysterious character of that quintessentially American event;" yet, in doing so, he remains an intrusive narrator. Michael J. Lennon notes Mailer's response to the notion of genre classifications: "'When you know the kind of bias and warp with which historians write their history--they're dealing with 10,000 facts and they select 300 very careful ones to make their case, and call that stuff history when we all know it's fiction. The mark of a great historian is that he's a great fiction writer'" (96). It seems that Mailer favors the doctrine of panfictionality. This is problematic when looking at Novel and History as distinctive sections in *The Armies of the Night*, for panfictionality says they are one and the same. Ironically, he seems to accept this doctrine, which supports genre classification while calling into question the authoritative hands that act as a puppeteer over these categorizations. He likewise blurs genre in the Novel section: "Of course, if this were a novel, Mailer would spend the rest of the night with a lady. But it is history, and so the Novelist is for once blissfully removed from any description of the hump-your-backs of sex. Rather he can leave such matters to the happy or unhappy imagination of the reader" (52). The author creates a paradox here of Novel and History as separate but overlapping

entities. What is history? Is it his experience, or is it a shared experience defined by statistics and press reports? Mailer's response:

> It is obvious the first book is a history in the guise or dress or manifest of a novel, and the second is a real or true novel—no less!—presented in the style of a history. (Of course, everyone including the author will continue to speak of the first book as a novel and the second as a history—practical usage finds flavor in such comfortable opposites.) (255)

The author recognizes the "comfortable" polarity of fact versus fiction, History versus Novel. By calling attention to truth and fiction, Mailer undermines the stereotypes of genre, producing a sense of discomfort and confusion in his reader. He sets up the reader for certain conventions of form and by then subverting them questions the importance of rules and standards in presenting a kind of truth. He states,

> 'I think a writer has the right to call his work whatever he wants to call it. You might say I'm being confusing, but a writer has certain inalienable rights, and one is the right to create confusion.' You try to write, he told Karen Jaehne in 1987, 'something that defies--no not defies--that straddles categories. Categories are just critics' attempts to bring order to a complex aesthetic universe. . . . These are all forms to be explored, not obeyed. . . . After all, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven.' (Lennon 95)

Mailer does not really adhere to notions of panfictionality: rather, he rejects any and all overarching categorizations in favor of his own. Mailer's writing echoes his conception

of reality, which lacks strict definition or classifiable structure. He is an advocate for personal order rather than conventional order.

In contrast to Mailer's work, which presents the reader with confusion through the distortion of genre, Didion's *The White Album* presents confusion from the perspective of the narrator. The role of the narrator in the work can be likened to that in a memoir, for Didion's presence in her essays is significant to both the narrative and to an understanding of her development against the backdrop of the confusion and upheaval of the 1960s. In David Shields "Reality Hunger: A Manifesto," the author includes a variety of quotes and fragments in an attempt to explicate "reality," or the move toward "reality" in all different forms of art. He writes, "Memoirs belong to the category of literature, not journalism. What the memoirist owes the reader is the ability to persuade him or her that the narrator is trying, as honestly as possible, to get to the bottom of the experience at hand" (106). Based on Shields' definition, Didion's work is more memoir than journalism, a quality apparent in Mailer's work as well. For Didion, writing "as honestly as possible" means using an invasive style, and one that limits formal exposition. Shields' work is experimental in a similar way to that of the New Journalists; yet, unlike the New Journalists, he is intent on maintaining genre distinctions (Shields 106). Didion undermines Shields' perspective on memoir and journalism by blending aspects of news writing with aspects of memoir and fiction, all of which work together to illustrate a "bigger picture" of the time period. One of the reasons Didion's *The White Album* is read as literature is its classification in the library under P for Language and Literature (Hesse 238). We are taught, from the first time we enter a library, that each and every book has its place and that this place tells us something about the book itself. Consequently, our

understanding of texts is conditioned, in some way, by the institutional categorization of such works. Frus explains,

> According to [Ed] Cohen, by 'blurring' the genres that preserve the hegemony of dominant institutions (allowing them to determine 'what kinds of knowledge count as social knowledge making social decisions or instituting social change',) Wolfe and other New Journalists are able to substitute the individual's perception for traditional societal judgments. (147)

I agree with Frus that the New Journalists subvert the established generic order and undermine the power of "dominant institutions." Didion is wary of "the powers that be" contributing to any sort of valid representation of our world. Instead, she adopts aspects of literature and other art forms, arguing that these forms of representation are the most meaningful in constructing a kind of reality. Words bear a particular of weight on her consciousness. For example, the author writes, "Certain places seem to exist mainly because someone has written about them. Kilimanjaro belongs to Ernest Hemingway. Oxford, Mississippi, belongs to William Faulkner […] but a great deal of Honolulu itself has always belonged for me to James Jones" (147). Didion demonstrates that a writer owns the words that he or she writes and, in turn, they create spaces. Much like Mailer, who is associated with the rhetoric of the March on the Pentagon, Didion holds claim to other aspects and moments of the 1960s. The author's use of overlapping genres highlights the impossibility of fully detaching authorial presence from one's work, undermining the logic of genre classification.

Wolfe maintains a different perspective on genre blurring than Mailer or Didion. He differs in that he adheres to the notion that genres are typically separate. At the same

time, he concedes that reporting plays a role in all forms of writing. He believes that unlike other genres, journalism can take on a hybrid form, as it does within the New Journalism. This notion contrasts with the doctrine of panfictionality since Wolfe contends it is nonfiction, rather than fiction, that extends through all genres. He believes that all writing maintains some truth, rather than that all writing is inherently fictional. In *The New Journalism* anthology, Wolfe writes, "The crucial part that reporting plays in all story-telling, whether in novels, films, or non-fiction, is something that is not so much ignored as simply not comprehended" (27). He notes that it is not widely understood that reporting blurs into all genres. Wolfe believes the highest form of writing that can be translated from reportage is the novel in which journalism and literature can be effectively intertwined (18).

Wolfe blends reportage into his novelistic form in *Electric Kool-Aid*. For example, he commonly includes dialogue without introducing who is speaking. In the author's note he explains that all the dialogue is recorded, either by him or others to emphasize its "truthfulness." When one reads the dialogue though, one is led to question both who the speaker is and the context in which they are speaking, the dialogue breaking journalistic form and woven into the narrative. In mainstream journalism, quotations offer an outside perspective from the rest of the story. In Wolfe's work, quotations slip imperceptibly into the narrative, producing the notion of an "insider" perspective. What is most significant is that dialogue makes up a large majority of the work. Wolfe highlights the importance of truthful reportage while breaking conventional modes of representation.

In his epilogue, Wolfe adheres to a more conventional journalistic form. He describes the events that follow the action of the narrative with clarity and concision. This is unlike the rest of the work, which thrives upon techniques like stream of consciousness and repetition. He has stepped outside of his experience with the Pranksters to explain the details of the work, which should not be skewed by the distorted perspective employed throughout the majority of the work. Consequently, Wolfe calls attention to his experimental style and the extent to which it is effective in portraying "reality." The author illustrates that reporting can present itself in many different forms and still create understanding for the reader.

The three factors that I discussed: ethical dilemmas, questions of authenticity, and the use of overlapping genres are obstacles that these three writers face, which complicate the categorization of their works as "journalistic." In the following chapters I continue to distinguish these New Journalists from conventional reporters. Their separation from traditional journalists allows them to focus on the "self" in their writing. As each author faces the aforementioned obstacles differently, he or she also thinks about the self in distinct ways. In the following chapter, I discuss how these writers treat identity by focusing on the disciplines that influence their unique works.

Chapter 2—
Reporting Within: Investigations of the Self

As explored in the previous chapter, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and Tom Wolfe distinguish themselves from the mainstream journalists of the 1960s and 1970s by breaking the conventions so deeply rooted in reportage. Many critics refer to the social framework of this time period as the main impetus for the New Journalism, considering such a style to be merely a literary reaction to the era. This time period was indeed a divisive one, associated with the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the sexual revolution, the popularization of drug usage, and the hippie youth movement. I agree that this revolutionary social environment fostered the liberating qualities of the New Journalism. Yet, these writers did not break boundaries simply to create their own form of counterculture. Rather, going against convention allowed these authors to incorporate self and identity more thoroughly into their works. In a period of upheaval, these authors turned to the self, or in Wolfe's case, to other selves in order to center their writing during a time of exceptional confusion, all three contemplating identity in differing ways.

Joan Didion represents the philosophical presence in the movement. In *The White Album*, she exemplifies the abstract quality of news and undermines the notion that reportage is straightforward. For Didion, news exceeds facts, particularly in the sense that her news accounts and essays bear weight on her personal life. She explores this deeply personal aspect of journalism that is traditionally objective, attempting to rationalize the irrational and determine her position amidst it all.

In contrast to Didion, Norman Mailer's depiction of the self is more egotistical than it is philosophical. His *The Armies of the Night* presents the historical March on the

Pentagon as a kind of memoir. Mailer focuses on the significance of this event as it relates to his life experience, but more so as his presence in the march creates a story in and of itself. The importance of Mailer's role, or intimacy in *Armies*, as well as his focus on memory, create a radically subjective approach that counters journalistic convention and emphasizes his work as more of a personal account.

Unlike his contemporaries, Wolfe focuses on selves other than his own in order to document the lives of the oft-misunderstood Pranksters. Through a social- psychological approach, the author attempts to recreate the sensation of a mind on drugs, while comparing the Pranksters with other groups as a means to delineate their actions within a sociological framework. In this way, the author explores identity and group as they coincide with one another.

Once again, the metaphor of the funhouse mirror is appropriate not only for understanding what the New Journalists did, but how they did it. In writing about different phenomena, the authors contemplate their subjects, whether their own "self" or others'. Each writer's unique style allows him or her to look at the self in distinctive ways. The three authors' differing vantage points lead to distinct configurations of identity within their works consistent with their unique perceptions of the world.

Authorial presence is extremely significant within each book, revealing the writers' disregard for neutrality. As these writers forgo journalistic conventions, they, in turn, claim the theoretical approaches of other disciplines, namely philosophy, memoir, and social psychology. By using these respective disciplines as a lens to explore each writer's work, I will identify the ways each treats journalism as an umbrella term—a kind of malleable art, rather than a strict science.

Philosophical Musings in **The White Album**

  Of the three writers, the one most obviously concerned with exploration of the self is Joan Didion. As far as her biography is concerned, Didion emerged as a journalist. Before she published her novels and essay collections, she worked as a copywriter and soon after as an editor for *Vogue* magazine. *The White Album* is considered an extension of her journalistic consciousness. The included essays were originally published in a variety of magazines and newspapers, including *Life*, *Esquire*, and *The New York Times*. Consequently, news permeates Didion's writing, yet her pieces of reportage are distinct from mainstream journalism, often taking the shape of incongruous images akin to pieces of a puzzle. This is apparent from Didion's overarching structure in *The White Album*, as well as her first essay. That first essay, "The White Album," is a series of juxtaposed anecdotes, interwoven by numbers like chapters in a novel. Didion emerges from among the puzzle pieces fearing that none of her reports fit together to form any kind of image. In fact, many of the pieces have gone missing entirely. The writer leaves out details and even disregards exposition. She describes, "all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no 'meaning' beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting room experience" (13).

  I read Didion as much more than a journalist or a reporter, rather as a philosopher whose essential subject is the self. The author sees herself as a product of the stories that surround her. The closest she can come to ascertaining any sort of worldly understanding is to understand her own identity. Didion, like Mailer and Wolfe, is less a journalist and more a thinker, a writer whose subjectivity is characterized in many ways by philosophy. As explored in the previous chapter, journalism is a genre characterized by restriction. In

contrast, the New Journalism is a hybrid of nonfiction and fictional techniques. Breaking the boundaries of reportage, the New Journalism allows for various modes of thinking. J. Lenore Wright notes, "Psychological and philosophical readings of self-representations suggest a different set of possibilities than the modern variations we frequently hear. Perhaps the unabated interest in the self signifies our inescapably rooted philosophical natures—a recurring desire to know who and what we are" (50). In Didion's case, the "narrative line" of "disparate images" is a form of self-representation, which allows the author to philosophize on identity when the rest of reality is so painfully unclear.

One of the most significant aspects of identity in *The White Album* is Didion's inability to stand apart from the stories she tells. A reporter must overcome pathos, to some extent, so that he or she can document a story objectively. Tony Harcup explains, "Journalists' use of objectivity has been described as a 'strategic ritual' to distance themselves from stories: a defence [sic] against charges of bias and lack of professionalism" (93). For Didion, though, writing cannot be regarded as a business. Furthermore, she does not feel the need to defend against charges aimed at her work. This is evident in that she considers herself an "outsider" already (Felton 78). The writer dwells on her material, unable to ignore the meaning behind an event and the significance it has for her, not merely as a journalist, but as a human being. In a review of *The White Album*, Michiko Kakutani notes, "[Didion] is an introvert who says she has always been an outsider, but parties with the biggest names in Hollywood. She is a writer who has dwelled on the atomization of modern society, but maintains what she describes as a 'boring, bourgeois' life" ("Joan Didion: Staking Out" 1979). She is both a renowned writer and a self-proclaimed recluse, a contradiction between public and private selves.

Yet the paradox of Didion's identity is precisely what allows her to philosophize on the nature of reality and the self as its measure. The author is able to negotiate between her introversion and her passion for telling the story. She avoids an authoritative role in her reportage, allowing for a sense of mutual understanding between her and her subjects. Her quiet presence creates a comfortable environment for her subjects to yield up information and personal details. She is able to understand people to the extent that she can understand herself.

Didion's role as a "journalist" enables her to position herself in situations where she can identify major stories, document events, and delve deeply into evidence. Didion remains distinct from a mainstream journalist in that she does not step outside of her story. This is because she is a part of the "narrative." Unlike Mailer, whose egotism is the subject, Didion sees herself as a part of the subject; she is not above it nor is she distanced from it. Much like the people she documents, Didion is a member of the middle class, or the "bourgeoisie." She suffers from migraines and anxiety, which she notes uninhibitedly, diminishing her authority as a reporter by displaying her vulnerability. It is Didion's place in her work that so deeply unites her to each anecdote and which causes her to appreciate each moment more personally and more thoughtfully.

In considering a mosaic of images from her life in 1968 and 1969 she writes, "I imagined that my own life was simple and sweet, and sometimes it was, but there were odd things going around town. There were rumors. There were stories. Everything was unmentionable but nothing was unimaginable" (41). Didion is hyper-self-conscious as she considers the effect that the world around her has on her own life. The "odd things going around town" seem to complicate her existence, leaving her with an underlying

sense of confusion. She notes the "unmentionable," that which is not openly disclosed by the conventional journalists of the time. Reporters merely report, whereas Didion dissects and imagines. Rather than avoiding the unmentionable, she calls attention to it. She forces her reader to join her in thinking about reality and ambiguity, while highlighting her position as author. Sharon Felton writes,

> In a manner consistent with existential philosophy, Didion gives us through
> *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album* proof of a double vision . . .
> the perspectives of both the professional journalist and the personal moralist.
> Didion tells us not only that the center was not holding, but also she locates for us
> exact sites of the emerging fissures. (121)

Didion's role as a philosophical thinker stems primarily from her experience as a journalist. In documenting the culture and the events of the 1960s and 1970s, she sees a disturbing pattern: "disorder was its own point" (37). Chaos gives way to the author's sense of meaninglessness, a feeling that suffocates her and which results in her writing. *The White Album*, specifically, is too often mistaken for reportage and should more often be discussed as the author's self-contemplation.

While Didion is not a necessarily a philosopher herself, she echoes philosophical theories throughout her essays. Although the discipline itself is extremely broad, there are a few reigning ideas that she can be associated with which pertain to her exploration of the self. These ideologies include the theory of existentialism and the doctrine of nihilism, both with regard to a more general branch of philosophy: ethics. Didion wrestles with the moral code that she grew up with as a teenager during the 1950s and the changing values and morals of the 1960s and early 1970s. The author's emphasis on

ethics leads to her existential thinking, the notion that we mold our identities according to the choices that we make. The ideology stresses that the self is changing and that one is responsible for creating one's own unique character. Often, Didion's existentialism borders on nihilism, an extremely skeptical view of the world, which asserts that existence is meaningless. I will look at the author's evolving beliefs throughout *The White Album* and analyze them using these general philosophical theories as background.

In the first essay of *The White Album*, Didion presents the reader with a psychiatric report. Following the report, she explains that it is her own diagnosis from tests administered by St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica. She clarifies that she was admitted to undergo a series of psychiatric tests to explain a recent "attack of vertigo and nausea" (15).

> The Rorschach record is interpreted as describing a personality in process of deterioration with abundant signs of failing defenses and increasing inability of the ego to mediate the world of reality and to cope with normal stress. . . . Emotionally, patient has alienated herself almost entirely from the world of other human beings. Her fantasy life appears to have been virtually completely preempted by primitive, regressive libidinal preoccupations many of which are distorted and bizarre. […] Patient's thematic productions on The Thematic Apperception Test emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. (14)

Didion includes this on the fourth page of her essay, it acting as a kind of exposition of her character in the work. She presents the "deterioration" of her personality and her fantastical conceptions of the world along with her inherently nihilistic viewpoint. While

the report does not reveal Didion's self-perception, it is significant that she includes the report in her essay for an outsider's perspective. In this way, she shares a position with the reader who approaches the quote as a direct reflection of Didion as narrator. The author portrays herself as unreliable because she is mentally unstable. At the same time, she is little concerned about how the reader might regard her. Personal perception for her is of the utmost significance, allowing her to maintain a level of disconnection from others. After reading her evaluation, Didion concludes, "By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968" (15). Didion places her reaction in the context of the time period, the summer following the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also marked by the Tlatelolco Massacre, in which an unknown number of Mexican students were murdered only ten days prior to the Olympics in Mexico. Didion assumes her reader is a contemporary with a background on current events. Furthermore, the author, diagnosed as a highly depressed woman in the process of a breakdown, succinctly concludes that her condition is relatively normal given this time of upheaval. She implies that if one were to compare her psychosis to the social environment it would not seem at all out of the ordinary. The experiences that Didion is exposed to relate directly to who she is as an individual. The Rorschach test asks patients to describe their perceptions of a variety of inkblots. Here Didion emphasizes the way she physically sees the world, as well as the way she conceptualizes it. As the collection continues, she rationalizes her utterly depressive, "fatalistic" consciousness, which is said to underlie her responses during the test.

Didion's mental health remains at the fore throughout *The White Album*. In another excerpt from the same essay, the author writes about a moment of "fright" when she attempts to drown out the words of Ezra Pound's poem, "In a Station of the Metro:" "*Petals on a wet, black bough*" (36). In this moment in November of 1968, Pound's words resonate with Didion, but she does not explain why they are so powerful for her. Perhaps it is the utter contrast of images within this line. Pound writes of petals, a beautiful part of a flower, on the background of a wet, dark tree branch. The petals suggest beauty and color, which are contrasted with rainy bleakness, as conjured by the ominous "black" of the bough and the "wet" from a storm. The contrast could be illustrative of Didion's background. The author grew up in the 1950s, a period of relative calm and stability, to be rudely awakened by the tumult of the 60s and early 70s later in her life, when she fears societal and personal collapse. As she attempts to overcome the sound of Pound's words ringing in her ear she writes,

> I closed my eyes and drove across the Carquinas Bridge, because I had appointments, because I was working, because I had promised to watch the revolution being made at San Francisco State College and because there was no place in Vallejo to turn in a Budget Rent-A-Car and because nothing on my mind was in the script as I remembered it. (37)

Didion's nihilism is perceptible, the writer accepting this ideology in mind but not in action. She has responsibilities and promises to keep so she drives. She follows the rules as she is supposed to, yet in doing so she senses an underlying meaninglessness. Didion notes that she closes her eyes while she drives across the bridge, demonstrating a lack of concern for her safety and the safety of others. She concludes that "the script" of her life

as she once remembered it has drastically changed. To combat her fear of the new and unknown, she adopts a futile perspective so that such changes and confusion will not cause her such dread.

As her work progresses, she seems to accept the meaningless of her existence more readily. In a later essay, "In the Islands," Didion discusses the time her family vacationed in Honolulu, Hawaii, when she and her husband attempted to mend a strained marriage. A tidal wave is expected to hit the shores of the island as a result of a nearby earthquake. Rather than fear remaining on the island, Didion is seemingly unmoved. When she learns that a wave is no longer expected she writes, "The bulletin, when it comes, is a distinct anticlimax. . . . In the absence of a natural disaster we are left to our own uneasy devices" (133). Didion accepts disaster, waiting passively for her life to change instantly. When this fails to occur she feels a sense of disappointment. From her depressive view of existence, the absence of worldly disaster means that personal disaster will once again take precedence: "I am a thirty-four-year-old woman with long straight hair and an old bikini bathing suit and bad nerves sitting on an island in the middle of the Pacific waiting for a tidal wave that will not come" (135). Didion cites personal traits: her age, her hair, her old bathing suit, and her wavering mental health, highlighting herself as a focal point in an unpredictable world. She demonstrates the insignificance of these characteristics. It does not matter whether she is young or old or depressed or healthy, the writer realizes that either way she cannot predict the "narrative" of her existence. It is as if she looks in the funhouse mirror, and despite her material existence nothing reflects back at her. She cannot understand her place in society so she denies she has one.

Didion offers anecdotes that explicate her fatalistic viewpoint. She focuses on people and the choices that they make, touching on what she perceives to be the decline of ethical society. In her dissertation, Felton notes that Didion specifically looks at "outsiders" in her work: "Through a depiction of outsiders, readers come to understand by implication what Didion considers the ideal from which the outsiders deviate. . . . Didion examines and portrays the existential concept of 'intersubjectivity,' which states that the individual, as a result of his choices, establishes values for his society" (Felton 81). Yet, more than outsiders, Didion's subjects in *The White Album* are individuals that deviate from the norm. She is most interested in the fact that these counterculturalists, however extreme they are in their actions, have been somewhat accepted by society as a result of intersubjectivity. That is, society has become desensitized to the extraordinary. In some sense, deviation has become normalized.

In "The White Album," the author returns to the culture of the time period. She discusses The Doors whom she meets when they were recording their third album:

> On the whole my attention was only minimally engaged by the preoccupations of rock-and-roll bands (I had already heard about acid as a transitional stage and also about the Maharishi and even about Universal Love, and after a while it all sounded like marmalade skies to me), but The Doors seemed unconvinced that love was brotherhood and the Kama Sutra. The Doors' music insisted that love was sex and sex was death and therein lay salvation. (21)

Didion contrasts The Doors to other popular bands and cultural icons of the era, notably Maharishi, a Hindu leader known for developing the Transcendental Meditation technique, and The Beatles, whose lyrics in "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," released a

year before she published "The White Album" essay, include the psychedelic image of "marmalade skies." Didion rejects the "preoccupations of rock-and-roll bands," which she associates with the counterculture in general. She feels that these "preoccupations," or modes of thinking, paint the world in an all too free and optimistic light. Yet she has hopes for something entirely different to come out of meeting with The Doors. She favors their skepticism of free love and peace: the notion that "love was brotherhood and the Kama Sutra." Didion connects better with their more extremist perspective; they choose to accept danger rather than live in a fantasy world.

But when Didion gets into the studio, she realizes that The Doors are not exactly as she had hoped they would be. Front man Jim Morrison, who shows up to the studio "a long while later," is Didion's greatest concern. The author emphasizes the amount of time that she and the band wait for Morrison to arrive. She mentions that her leg has fallen asleep and that "unspecific tensions seemed to be rendering everyone in the room catatonic" (23). Didion's depiction of Morrison reveals that, although they differ, she and Morrison ultimately maintain the same nihilistic outlook. She describes the rock icon as "a 24-year-old graduate of U.C.L.A. who wore black vinyl pants and no underwear and tended to suggest some range of the possible just beyond a suicide pact" (22). Morrison exudes an outward malaise but still retains the ability to function. His extreme outlook is "just beyond a suicide pact," signifying a rare ability to overcome his own fatalistic viewpoint and use this perspective to make music. Although Didion initially favors Jim Morrison and The Doors, who she describes as "missionaries of apocalyptic sex," the author soon realizes that Morrison and his band are merely a symbol of societal deterioration (21). A paradoxical commonality appears between Didion, a woman in her

30s wrought with "obsessive-compulsive devices," and the 24-year-old Morrison whom she describes as a self-absorbed front man (20). As Didion observes, no one addresses her, nor does anyone comment on her presence in the studio:

> I counted the control knobs on the electronic console. There were seventy-six. . . . Morrison sat down again on the leather couch and leaned back. He lit a match. He studied the flame awhile and then very slowly, very deliberately, lowered it to the fly of his black vinyl pants. (25)

The writer comments on her own neuroses, the obsessive impulse to count the control knobs, as this compares to Morrison's lethargy: two unique reactions to a shared anxiety. After showing up late, the musician sits down and attempts to light his fly afire, silently rejecting the fact that recording is supposed to take place and unconcerned that Didion is recording her own material for a piece on the band. Didion concludes, "It would be some weeks before The Doors finished recording this album. I did not see it through" (25).

She finds the paradox of the utter inertness of the band and their chart-topping success to be a kind of symbol of the era. Her experience with The Doors leaves her with a sense of hopelessness about people and the decisions that they make, as well as the implications of these decisions. Furthermore, Morrison embodies a nihilism equal to hers, which frightens her even more about society. On the final page of "The White Album" Didion writes, "I have known, since then, very little about the movements of the people who seemed to me emblematic of those years. . . . I know that Jim Morrison died in Paris" (47). Although she does not follow The Doors after the recording of their third album, she cites Morrison's death as a kind of conclusion to her previous anecdote. The author seems to foresee the musician's untimely death based upon Morrison's tardiness

and scornful attitude during their one short meeting. She sees the deterioration of culture in the excesses of the rich and famous, but also finds that even celebrities experience feelings of disconnectedness as she does. It is generally believed that Morrison died of a drug overdose, which echoes the depression and alienation that Didion insinuates throughout her work. The author suggests the effects of glorifying such cultural icons on society as a whole, a society with which she feels she can no longer associate herself. The experience with Morrison forces Didion to recognize further both her discontent with the current state of society and her individual feelings of despair.

In addition to celebrities, Didion cites the reports of lesser-known individuals as evidence of the growing meaninglessness of her world. For example, she cites a story she read in the paper about a twenty-six-year-old mother named Betty Fouquet who left her child on interstate 5 and drove away. Didion recalls, "The child, whose fingers had to be pried loose from the Cyclone fence when she was rescued twelve hours later by the California Highway Patrol, reported that she had run after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister for 'a long time'" (13). Painful glimpses like this one haunt Didion, forcing her to call into question the existence of a moral code. She wonders what it means for a mother to abandon her own daughter and whether there can be any explanation for such behavior.

Her feelings are echoed in the essay "On the Road." She is on tour promoting a new book and finds that she is continually asked the same question: "*Where are we heading* [?]" (173, emph. orig.). Didion avoids writing a direct response to the recurring question to demonstrate her inability to respond. She has traveled all over the country, yet she has not found any concise answer for the interviewers to hold on to. "There were

opinions in the air and there were planes in the air and there were even people in the air: one afternoon in New York my husband saw a man jump from the window and fall to the sidewalk outside the Yale Club." A photographer from the *Daily News* who is taking her picture responds: "'You have to catch a jumper in the act to make the paper. . . . They're all over town. . . . A lot of them aren't even jumpers. They're window washers. Who fall'" (178). Didion offers this anecdote as her response to demonstrate the lack of compassion between individuals. Furthermore, she reveals the ambiguity between personal choice and inevitability. Jumpers may be those who choose to take their own lives, but they might also be those who do not, which exemplifies how random and unordered our universe is.

In her conclusion to the chapter, Didion voices her fatalistic viewpoint when she responds to one of the interviewers, "I don't know where you're heading, I said in the studio . . . my eyes fixed on still another of the neon FLEETWOOD MAC signs that flickered that spring in radio stations from coast to coast, but I'm heading home" (179). She cannot define the ways of the world, nor can she fully understand her place within it. The lack of morality she sees around her and the confusion between fate and choice leads to her nihilism. All that the writer can do is go home to escape, if only for a moment from the disorder that surrounds her. Ultimately, the only narrative that concerns Didion is her own.

History as Memoir in Armies of the Night

While Didion's "reporting" functions as a philosophical reflection on the self, Norman Mailer's work in *The Armies of the Night* acts both to create and preserve his

iconic identity. As noted in the first chapter, Mailer writes *Armies* using third-person

narration, a choice that separates his past self, as character, from his present self, as

narrator. He formulates a work based upon different layers of personal identity that

identifies more closely with memoir than journalism, autobiography, or even history.

Mailer is a war veteran and an ex-political candidate. The March of the Pentagon plays

upon these different aspects of his identity, making it deeply personal. Furthermore, his

participation in the march shapes his public persona. His involvement in the action

reveals that *Armies* is not really so much about the event in history as it is about the

event's impact on Mailer as well as his on the event. Looking at *Armies* through the lens

of memoir allows us to understand the overwhelming importance of him as an individual

in the work and our inability to associate his work with traditional journalism.

There are a few aspects of *Armies* that distinguish Mailer as a memoirist.

Memoirists write to document specific moments or time periods that changed or shaped

them in some meaningful way. Through memoir, a reader can develop an understanding

of the author from these glimpses into his or her life. In *Armies,* Mailer emphasizes

political identity, as this is the identity he embodies during the period of the march. On

the surface we see him begging for public attention for his unwavering protest during the

march. Kenneth Tynan notes, "Mailer has described these events in . . . a masterpiece of

guarded narcissism. While thousands die in Vietnam, we are invited to study the private

agony of Mailer, faced with the threat of a five-day sentence" (Simon 542). Mailer's self-

importance during the march overshadows the importance of the proposed subject of his

book, the march itself. From the title, it certainly does not appear that Mailer's intent is to

understand who he is as a person. He does not write the work with the goal of memoir as

a product, but rather, falls into the role of memoirist as a consequence of his own egotism. About memoir Thomas Larson explains, "The person writing now is inseparable from the person the writer is remembering then. The goal is to disclose what the author is discovering about these persons. But such a goal can arise only in the writing of the memoir, a discovery which then becomes the story" (20). This is apparent in *Armies* in that Mailer is unable to distance himself from his intended subject. "These persons" Larson refers to are the identities of the narrator, the character, and the author, all of whom are affected differently by time and place. Mailer's position as author is one of wisdom compared to the character he portrays in the march, and his role as narrator a fusion between these two roles. Because the narrator is the one undergoing the process of discovery, *Armies* is much more a journey than it is an intentioned history.

Armies is affected by memory insofar as the details of past events may become skewed or lost in their transmission to paper. As a result, memoir is an inherently fictive writing style. Personal slant, as explored in the previous chapter, may also become a factor in memoir writing. Albert E. Stone defines *The Armies of the Night* as "self-consciously an experiment in factual fiction" (288). The quality of self-consciousness, which is so common to Mailer, is precisely what makes his work so reminiscent of memoir. It is a conscious attempt to understand one's own existence, yet as a consequence, one's ego may supersede an accurate depiction of reality. Larson notes, "With autobiography, we think there is only one life—the person lives it, then writes it. Boom, done. But the memoir feels prey to (or is it desirous of?) immediate emotional memory, almost as if the point it to preserve the evanescent" (18). This need for

"immediate emotional memory" is apparent in *Armies*, published in 1968 only a few months after the March on the Pentagon.

Intimacy is another aspect that sets memoir apart from other forms of writing. Whereas autobiography is defined by numerous events and moments that make up a lifetime, memoir is defined by the personal details about a specific moment. Mailer's level of intimacy in *Armies* may more be more aptly described as a candidness that results from his neuroses. He presents himself as a character ready to defend his political beliefs at any cost; yet as the narrator, he proves fearful of critique or disparagement. His contemporary, James Breslin remarks, "Mailer's [use of] self-irony is to allow him to make criticisms of himself before we can make them, and thus to ward them off. *The Armies of the Night* is a book whose style of attack (style as attack) leaves the reader very little freedom of response" (168). I agree that Mailer writes defensively alienating his reader whose possible thoughts and opinions are both anticipated and constantly countered but he also attempts to build a relationship with his reader. He wishes for them to share in his inner thoughts (or at least believe that they are) so that he can defend his public self with his more private self. He attempts to justify his actions by giving readers access to his inner thought processes.

Mailer writes, "Once History inhabits a crazy house, egotism may be the last tool left to History" (54). Though he realizes that his reader may critique his presence in what he deems a "History," the author defends his focus on the self as a means to delineate an "ambiguous event" (53). He exaggerates, it "may be the last tool left to History," attempting to reveal that this style of writing is not for the benefit of himself but for his audience. *Armies* may be described as his ongoing battle between egotism and self-doubt.

According to John Simon, "fiction and autobiography are inseparable for Mailer, and autobiography is a demented Waring blender churning away at sexual, political, and literary power fantasies, [a] sadomasochistic day-dream" (545). Simon notes the influence of Mailer's subconscious, which the author intimately exposes to the reader and calls his writing "demented" due to its outrageous psychological banter. This may be so but I also contend that *Armies* is cathartic for the author. As much as Mailer is known for his egotism, it is clear in *Armies* that he craves reassurance. Exposing himself to the reader, he is gaining a kind of personal support. By revealing all of his inner thoughts and ideas under the backdrop of the march, Mailer is able to relieve himself of the pressures of the time and also deconstruct his personal reaction to the era. For example, when he offers his reason for participating in the march, his explanation is long-winded and largely devoid of political motives:

> On a day somewhat early in September, the year of the first March on the Pentagon, 1967, the phone rang one morning and Norman Mailer, operating on his own principle of war games and random play, picked it up. That was not characteristic of Mailer. Like most people whose nerves are sufficiently sensitive to keep them well-covered with flesh, he detested the telephone. . . . The reason Mailer did not wish to speak to [author, Mitchell] Goodman was that he knew that (1) Goodman had better character than he did and (2) was going to ask something which would not be easy to refuse but would be expensive to perform. (4, 6)

Mailer looks upon his anxieties in the past tense and returns to this moment as a somewhat changed individual. He reveals his unease while speaking with others on the phone and his poor self-image as compared to that of other authors whom he both

respects and fears. Here Mailer focuses more on identity than on a genuine desire to participate in the march.

Toward the beginning of the book, Mailer describes the protestors gathering for a number of speeches and it is clear that he yearns for a leading role in the protest. He admits to this fact as he looks back upon the weekend's events and notes that his contemporaries are the greatest threat to his reputation, or more importantly, to his ego. After Mailer listens to Robert Lowell recite his poetry to the audience, the author writes,

> Mailer discovered he was jealous. Not of the talent. Lowell's talent was very
>
> large, but then Mailer was a bulldog about the value of his own talent. No, Mailer
>
> was jealous because he had worked for this audience, and Lowell without effort
>
> seemed to have stolen them: Mailer did not know if he was contemptuous of
>
> Lowell for playing *grand maître*, or admiring of his ability to do so. (45)

Here he measures his abilities and his shortcomings against his contemporary. By explaining his feelings of self-doubt to the reader, he attempts to work through such concerns. Now that he has the attention of an audience that he does not have to share with Lowell (the reader), he is able to voice his feelings of self-doubt. He defends his work, stating that he is not jealous of Lowell's talent, but, rather, is jealous of his ease at conveying such talent. Mailer's diction contrasts with this statement. The author accuses Lowell of having "stolen" the audience, suggesting wrongdoing on Lowell's part. He writes paradoxically that he "did not know if he was contemptuous of Lowell…or admiring," revealing the spectrum of his emotions and the disdain he attempts to fight through. Finally, the author calls Lowell the "*grand maître*," or the Grand Master, exaggerating his position as speaker to the point of mockery. By using a French term

often related to someone in ruling power, Mailer connotes that Lowell is the epitome of refinement and sophistication, particularly with regard to his position in the march. Through this exaggeration of Lowell's role in the event, Mailer intentionally discounts the poet's credibility and authority in speaking. It is apparent that Mailer's writing is a constant battle between understanding his emotions and upholding an image for the public.

As we have seen, in looking back on the march, Mailer must negotiate between his different identities as character, narrator, and author. He projects himself differently as a narrator than he does as a character, which leads to a sense of unreliability. When he calls Lowell "*grand maître*," for example, he is doing so as narrator. As a character though, Mailer portrays himself differently to the public, labeling himself a "left-conservative" in his attempts to negotiate between distinctive roles. As narrator, Mailer outwardly expresses that he does not fit the mold of the typical liberal protestor and clashes with fellow protestors as a result of their differing political ideologies: "His deepest detestation was often reserved for the nicest of liberal academics, as if their lives were his own life but a step escaped" (15). He senses that he does, in fact, share many qualities with the people he is surrounded by during the march. Nonetheless, he cannot support such people. Mailer does not want to be grouped into this single-minded ideology and allows this bias to infiltrate his writing. This distinguishes his narrative identity within the work. He is intent upon upholding his individuality and cannot be typecast by any single characteristic.

In contrast to this narrative role is Mailer as a character—the protestor himself. He notes that he "lie[s] like a psychopath" to his liberal counterparts. He continues,

"Since he—you are in on the secret—disapproved of them far more than he could afford to reveal (their enmity could be venomous) he therefore exerted himself to push up a synthetic exaggerated sweetness of manner" (17). Mailer makes a point to mention that his disapproval of the liberals is furtive attempting to build a sense of intimacy between himself as narrator and his audience and also separating himself as a character from the reader. Yet, his contradictory roles actually alienate the reader who must negotiate the confusion between the author's differing identities. Mailer, who exaggerates "his sweetness of manner" to the liberals, likewise exaggerates his dislike of these people to the reader: "shuttlings of mood became most pronounced in their resemblance to the banging and shunting of freight cars when he was with liberal academics" (17). He describes that even just conversing with these people is like the noisy commotion of train cars, bouncing angrily between each other. This is ironic in that he is willing to spend a great deal of time with "the liberals" throughout the book, from the organization of the march to the event itself. The fictive quality of *The Armies of the Night* becomes clear from Mailer's hyperbolic descriptions and contradictory voices, which force the reader to question how truthful the work is, not only with regard to the march, but also with regard to who Mailer is as a person.

As narrator, Mailer attempts to justify his character's nonsensical actions under the guise of sarcasm. The writer weaves between comical one-liners and overblown descriptions, constantly fending off critique. He focuses his appeal to two distinct readers, likely a conservative who would disapprove of him joining the liberals, and a liberal to whom he disparages his poor participation in the march. Following a night full of drinking and speeches, Mailer remarks, "Revolutionaries-for-a-weekend should never

get hangovers" (56). He recognizes that he is not a revolutionary by nature and by association he is not a typical liberal. Mailer's comment may also target a more leftist reader though, in that he underscores his flaw of being a kind of bandwagon activist through the use of humor. With reference to his arrest, he writes,

> He was still in an indecent hurry to be arraigned, fined, lectured no doubt, and released. . . . If he were out by eight o'clock, he could get back to his hotel, change, and catch a ten o'clock plane to New York, still make the party—if it were later, he might go by the Pentagon—there had been pleasure at the thought of returning to the battle. But not if he were to be arrested. The value of the first arrest would be spoiled altogether. There was an aesthetic economy to symbolic gestures—you must not repeat yourself. Arrested once, TV land would accept him (conceivably) as a man willing to stand up for his ideas; get busted twice on the same day, and they would view him as a freak-out panting for arrest. (Mailer's habit of living—no matter how unsuccessfully—with his image, was so engrained by now, that like a dutiful spouse he was forever consulting his better half). (160, 161-62)

Mailer highlights the irony of his symbolic arrest during the march, noting his "indecen[cy]" for hoping to celebrate his actions only a few hours following. He intends to appeal to the protestors he could be offending with his actions, as well as the conservatives, to whom he reveals that his participation is far from radical. Mailer presents himself as wrestling with his plans for several lines, continuing to balance between his readers' interests. His main goal is to uphold a reputation, whether he is celebrating his bravery at a party in New York or continuing his symbolic protest at the

Pentagon. The march has become much more of an image booster than a political statement. He justifies this fact stating defensively that the "habit of living…with his image, was so engrained by now." Mailer feeds off the politics associated with the march to support this image and it is clear that self-consciousness suffocates him. He expresses worry about his TV image because it is a medium through which he cannot defend himself. Television leaves him exposed. He is in the hands of others who can edit him (and his image) as they wish, while he utterly lacks control over this depiction. Paper is the only medium for the author to create a version of reality and formulate an idealized self. On paper, Mailer maintains the role of editor, but even more significantly, he has a gift for writing that he can use to his advantage. In contrast, he lacks experience as a speaker or performer, a fact that produces controversy in his later career.

Mailer presents his plan as if thinking out loud to the reader. This technique undermines the aspect of "memory" within the work by suggesting that he writes from a perspective that is very much in the moment. He demonstrates the need to recreate the march, or "preserve the evanescent" as Larson writes, thereby attempting to justify his reliability in documenting what truly happened (18). As we have seen, *Armies* presents an outward rejection of the authentication that traditional journalists aim to uphold in their writing. Here Mailer tries to reclaim the level of objectivity and truth, which is questionable within his work. Although he tries to gain credibility, he remains unreliable in his attempt to appeal to multiple readers simultaneously. His personal agenda guides the work.

As he states, Mailer is constantly "consulting his better half." Ironically this "better half" refers to the superior part of his identity, rather than his wife, as would be

assumed upon first reading. In this sense, Mailer is his own "wife," or support system; therefore, he does not need a partner to better himself. Consequently, Mailer portrays his actual spouse rather impersonally as more a symbol of his own identity than a unique individual. In one moment he speaks to her on the phone while he is in jail:

> He felt a calm sweet pleasure at the sound of his wife's voice at the other end. She had a charming voice on the phone, crisp but soft, with a tone of someone just awakened, or pulled from the shower, innocent but flustered—actually she had been on the phone the last hour, for word had been broadcast of his arrest, and friends had been calling. (166)

At first it appears that Mailer is taken with the sound of his wife's voice, remembering this moment with the same emotional detail as when it happened. He describes her voice as "crisp but soft," "innocent but flustered." But these tender adjectives are overturned quickly when Mailer reverts back to a discussion of his own self-importance, revealing that her tone is actually the result of discussing his arrest on the phone with friends and her concern for his whereabouts. Mailer also undermines his pleasure from speaking with his wife when he clarifies that "She had a charming voice on the phone." It is only when he is away from his wife that he can truly appreciate her, revealing that their relationship benefits from being apart rather than together. Mailer subtly reveals the underlying problems in his marriage, showing that his egotism has had an effect on his personal relationships. For the author, everything relates back to his own importance and his wife merely reminds him of this fact.

Mailer goes on to describe his wife as a kind of political symbol. He begins by stating preemptively, "We will remember that Mailer had a complex mind of sorts," to

give himself leeway to continue his inner-dialogue and feed the reader a slew of paradoxes and contradictions:

> He would have considered it irretrievably heavy-handed to have made any direct correspondence between his feelings for his wife, and the change in his feelings toward America (which tended to change a little every minute from the truth he had detected in the last face he saw) but he would also have thought it cowardly to ignore the relation, and dishonest to assume that none of his wife's attractiveness (and unattractiveness) came from her presence so quintessentially American. . . . Let him treat her as a symbol, and he was out of it—which is why perhaps she was so American. (171)

The author notes that the comparison of his wife to America is not subtle, preempting criticism by announcing this quality outright. Since Mailer maintains strongly mixed feelings about the country and its government, he reveals through comparison his mixed feelings toward his wife. Rather than using her to elucidate his sentiments about America, he uses the symbol of America to further highlight the problems in his personal life. Once again though, the wife is merely a tool for portraying his opinions. She is a symbol but "he was out of it," revealing both that he considers her to inherently represent him but also that she maintains negative qualities, of which he is not a part. In other words, he does not wish to associate himself with metaphor because he considers America to be a symbol wrought with negative connotations.

The character of Mailer's wife is never fully developed, nor is her presence significant to the intended plot; yet the author goes on to mention her at other times throughout the work. In one instance Mailer recalls a speech he makes after the march in

which he proclaims, "Today is Sunday, and while I am not a Christian, I happen to be married to one. And there are times when I think the loveliest thing about my dear wife is her unspoken love for Jesus Christ" (213). Because the narrator remarks that he never really discussed his wife's religiosity with her, this contrast is merely a way to connect his political viewpoints back to the personal. He uses sarcasm to criticize America's unquestioning religious faith, and his spouse symbolizes such devoutness. Furthermore, he wrestles with the "unspoken" within his relationship, signifying a lack of communication in his marriage. He delves into his personal problems through this symbol of his wife and under the guise of discussing the march. This technique of saying one thing and meaning another comes to define the work as a whole.

Although *Armies* is not identified explicitly as a personal account, Mailer's writing illustrates that for him the personal is inescapable. The author is prompted by the emotions of the march to look back on the event and, in turn, understand more about who he was, who he is, and how he has changed as a result.

The Mind of the Group: Social Psychology in Electric Kool-Aid

Although Tom Wolfe does not directly explore his own identity in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, the author's work is still very much about self, both psychologically and socially. The influence of sociological ideology on Wolfe's works has not gone unnoticed by critics.[1] The author is specifically noted for his fixation on "status" within his writing, which he illustrates through the meticulous description of his subjects. Status,

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[1] See Joel Best's, "'Status! Yes!': Tom Wolfe as a Sociological Thinker," Tom Kando's, "Popular Culture and its Sociology: Two Controversies," and Kevin McEneaney's, *Tom Wolfe's America: Heroes, Pranksters, and Fools*.

or one's social position within society, helps him to paint the most accurate picture of a group's culture and habits and is, therefore, essential to "reporting" on contemporary matters. He mainly subscribes to Max Weber's theory of social stratification, which posits that stratification is a product of three factors: property, prestige, and power. Wolfe explains, "Weber's entirely novel concept of 'status groups' proved to be both . . . flexible and more penetrating psychologically [than other prior theories on societal structure]" (*The Human Beast* 2006). In *Electric Kool-Aid* Wolfe sees sociology and psychology as interconnected and considers social science generally to be the most important lens for documenting the news.

Richard Kallan notes, "By his own admission, Wolfe remains a 'maximalist,' someone dedicated to putting in everything" ("Tom Wolfe"). Wolfe's "maximalist" style and overt attention to detail also highlights the influence of the social sciences on his work. He takes in a great deal of information about his subjects and then translates that information back in terms of the patterns he identifies. He is concerned with "selves" but his delivery is much more calculated than it is pensive. In this way, Wolfe distinguishes himself from Didion and Mailer. Although by training Wolfe is not a social scientist, his comprehensive approach is comparable to members of this discipline. As Robert F. Kidd notes, "If there is no agreement on an empirical basis for developing social psychological understanding, then there is probably little to distinguish us from a host of other disciplines—including fields as disparate from social psychology as journalism and literature" (236). In its most basic definition, social psychology explores the influence of other human beings on an individual. In the case of *Electric Kool-Aid*, Wolfe attempts to document individual perception under the influence of LSD. The author then relates this

to the group mentality of the Merry Pranksters, which fuels this alternative lifestyle of drugs and experimentation.

The author's greatest challenge in documenting the Pranksters is identifying the "real them." Unlike traditional journalists, Wolfe provides exposition of his subjects, giving life to that which is otherwise just a name on a page. To return to the metaphor of the funhouse mirror: distortion is inherent in Wolfe's re-imagination of the Pranksters. The author looks upon their lifestyle as if looking into their mirror. As an outsider, he can only document the altered reflection to which he has access. For example, he writes of Kesey's backyard in La Honda, California, emulating the voice of the Pranksters: "The sun came down through miles of leaves and got broken up like a pointillist painting, deep green and dapple shadows . . . stillness, perpendicular peace, wood-scented, with the cars going by on Route 84 just adding pneumatic sound effects, *sheee-oooooooooo*, like a gentle wind. All peace here; very reassuring!" (57). Wolfe paints his own perceptions as narrator through their eyes, emphasizing a focus on harmony and the beauty of nature through sensory perception. By narrating from the Prankster perspective he makes these individuals more accessible to the reader. In addition, by faking a position within the group he diminishes the perceived level of distortion in his work.

Wolfe's psychological description of "tripping" in *Electric Kool-Aid* is reminiscent of the experience in a recognized neurological state: synesthesia. Synesthesia is a psychological phenomenon in which a person experiences the blending of senses as the result of some initial sensory impulse. A person who has the condition may identify the ability to see the color of sounds or even taste sounds as a result of a kind of cross wiring in the brain. Wolfe narrates the Prankster experience under the influence of the

hallucinogenic drug DMT (Dimethyltriptamine): "And rrrrrrrrrrush those fantastic neon

bubbles rushing up out of the heart square into the human squash and bursting into—*skull*

mirrors!" (195). The sensation of touch, or feeling, is blended here with the sense of

sight, expressing this bodily sensation as visual. It seems that he is watching the neon

colors move through his body, seeing a feeling. He refers to the "heart square" and the

"human squash," likely referring to organs in his body, which he experiences or imagines

as separate from his being. Wolfe draws upon this scientifically-understood phenomenon

in order to recreate an event, which he apparently has not experienced first-hand.

Although his rendition of synesthesia is exaggerated, his comparison to a recognizable

phenomenon makes the Prankster experience more accessible to the reader.

       As an outsider Wolfe attempts to replicate the psychological experience by

breaking common writing conventions, both in mechanics and in exposition. By

describing the high on LSD as "the unspoken thing" or "the current fantasy," he shows

that the Pranksters themselves have difficulty recounting their experience to others. Chris

Anderson notes, "Throughout *Acid Test* Wolfe focuses on Kesey's attempts to explain his

vision to outsiders—the Unitarians, the Hell's Angels, reporters like Wolfe, [and] the

mundane and bourgeois populace" (12). Wolfe is fascinated by the Pranksters' lack of

language to describe their shared experience. "They made a point of not putting it into

words," he writes. "That in itself was one of the unspoken rules. *If you label it* this, *then it*

can't be that" (126, emph. orig.). Like a social scientist, Wolfe intends to elucidate the

unspoken, yet he does not want to dishonor the lack of language by inserting technical

jargon in its place. Instead, he glorifies lack of language by using typography, dialogue

and stream of consciousness to create meaning where words are deficient. In this way, he

delineates both the Pranksters' individual perceptions and their social interactions by revealing the unspoken to be an idea communicated consistently between characters.

Although the Pranksters forgo individual subjectivity for intersubjectivity, or shared experience, the group remains exclusive. Intersubjectivity is limited to members of the group, or more generally, to "the acid heads." For this reason, Wolfe must become one with his subjects in order to document them successfully. In order to identify with his subjects, both on and off the page, he works to emulate the Prankster mentality by adopting common phrases and words, and expressing their unique emphasis on particular words with the use of italics. He often writes without quotations, implying that the narration is his own thoughts. In one instance he writes, "The world *is* flat, it *is* supported by forty, or maybe four, men, one at each corner, like the cosmic turtles and elephants in the mythology books, because no one else dares" (200). From such seemingly illogical narrations, which emulate altered consciousness and hallucinations, it is unclear whether or not Wolfe must simulate the role of an "insider," or if he has, in fact, tried LSD. According to Frus, "he claims to have taken only psychedelic-LSD-once, for research purposes, and to have found it uncomfortably disorienting" (Frus 148). In contrast, Wolfe notes in an interview with *Time Magazine*, "No, I never did. LSD is too strong to take. I write about it in the book. They take it once, and for years afterward, they have these flashbacks" (O'Reilly 2008). This inconsistency in Wolfe's responses makes him unreliable in a variety of ways. If he never tried LSD then his illustration of the Pranksters is merely an imitation. If he did try it, even once, he would be positioned more closely to the experience of the Pranksters. Although he would be more reliable as a narrator in the latter case, he would likewise risk alienating the reader, particularly a

contemporary one for whom LSD is illegal and unethical from a legal standpoint. Since Wolfe's descriptions in *Electric Kool-Aid* are so detailed, the reader is left to wonder how authentic they are. The author never mentions trying the drug, forcing the reader to question why he overlooks this seemingly significant detail of his psycho-sociological role in the work.

Wolfe particularly emphasizes the group relationship that exists inside the Pranksters' clan. Each person reacts differently to his or her experience under the influence of LSD; yet, no matter how jumbled and nonsensical one's speech seems, the Pranksters all seem to understand one another. "The group mind/ Flying high, Major, but not blind/ in the moonshine" (230). Here, Wolfe's poetic discourse is used to imitate both the Pranksters rhetoric and their seemingly shared consciousness. He calls their shared mentality "the group mind" to describe the common understanding between these individuals when they are all under the influence of LSD. Although the Pranksters are "Flying high" on drugs they maintain a sense of clarity, which Wolfe attributes to their ability to communicate with one another despite their utter disconnection from reality. As a consequence of this fixation on group-mindedness, Wolfe considers each individual as part of some specified unit. For example, he refers satirically to the scientists exploring the LSD experience as "The White Smocks." The author highlights the Pranksters' notion that there are "outsiders" and "insiders" – those who understand the "experience" and those who do not. He writes,

> The White Smocks liked to put it into words, like *hallucination* and *dissociative*
> *phenomena*. They could understand the visual skyrockets. Give them a good case
> of an ashtray turning into a Venus flytrap or eyelid movies of crystal cathedrals,

and they could groove on that . . . *But don't you see?* –the visual stuff was just the

décor with LSD." (44-45, emph. orig.)

Although he does not identify a specific speaker, Wolfe clearly writes through the voice

of one of the Pranksters. According to them, the LSD experience cannot be recreated or

understood by an outsider. "The White Smocks," like other outsiders, tend to limit the

LSD experience to visual perception and overlook the realities of the Pranskters'

existence as a whole.

In order to conceptualize this unique group experience, Wolfe compares the

Pranksters to a religious sect: "I went back and read Joachim Wach's paradigm of the

way religions are founded, written in 1944, and it was almost like a piece of occult

precognition for me if I played it off against what I knew about the Pranksters" (128). He

identifies several similarities between the roots of the Pranksters' existence and the roots

of numerous religious groups from ancient Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism to

Buddhism and Christianity. Wolfe cites the leadership, the goal of transcendence, and the

shared rituals to help conceptualize the world of the Pranksters as it relates to religious

factions. He demonstrates that some Pranksters also view themselves in this way. For

example, some members of the group address Ken Kesey as "Prophet Kesey." Yet their

"leader" vehemently rejects such a comparison, stating, "'We're not on a Christ Trip.

That's been done, and it doesn't work. You prove your point, and then you have 2,000

years of war. We know where that trip goes'" (193). In much the same way that Kesey

refuses the identification, he likewise denies that the Pranksters are comparable to any

past or extant community.

As much as Kesey wants to deny that the Prankster movement is akin to or influenced by other groups, Wolfe is intent upon exposing this fact: "In all these religious circles, the groups became tighter and tighter by developing their own symbols, terminology, life styles, and, gradually, simple cultic practices, *rites*, often involving music and art, all of which grew out of the *new experience* and seemed weird or incomprehensible to those who have never had it" (129, emph. orig.). He demonstrates how undeniably similar this group is to so many other religious factions in their infancies. He highlights that the focus on "*experience*" is not a new phenomenon, nor are any of the other Pranksters practices and basic ideologies. When he discusses the development of "symbols, terminology, life styles . . . *rites* . . . music and art" he alludes to the Pranksters own set of rituals and customs. He gestures toward their eccentric clothing, Kesey's "Flag People coveralls and a ten-gallon straw hat," in addition to their bus covered in DayGlo fluorescent paint, which they have named Further, endowing it with a kind of life or character (380, 186). He also alludes to their LSD trips as both a lifestyle and a rite of passage, their reverence for the Beatles' music, and their terminology of "the current fantasy," or being "on the bus or off the bus" (209, 33, 83). His allusions to these particular symbols and practices highlight Wolfe's belief that the Pranksters can only be understood by comparing them to other groups. Through this comparison he demonstrates that the Pranksters are not quite as eccentric as people may believe. This is likewise apparent from Wolfe's inclusion of the Hell's Angels in his work, as these individuals share similar counter-cultural ideals with the Pranksters although the two groups may be readily identified as distinct. The Hell's Angels are a motorcycle club documented Hunter Thompson's new journalistic work, *Hell's Angels: a strange and*

terrible saga. This group of motorcycle aficionados shares the common values of promoting fear and aggression. Both the Hell's Angels and the Pranksters maintain untraditional values, which unite them as groups but isolate them from others. By illustrating the commonalities between seemingly disparate communities, Wolfe draws parallels between all "selves," specifically those that appear outside of the societal mainstream.

While Wolfe uses comparisons to other religions and cult communities, the Pranksters attempt to illuminate their lifestyle through film. The group films their travels across the United States while under the influence of LSD: "The Pranksters had a supra-medium, a fourth dimension—acid—Cosmo—All-one—Control—The Movie—" (232). The movie allows the Pranksters to document their "trip." In this way they can see outside the experience into "a fourth dimension": "Cosmo." Rather than specific scientific cosmic attributes, the Pranksters refer generally to that which is extraordinary, or seemingly beyond human possibilities as the embodiment of a dimension outside of our traditional conceptualization. Concurrently, "Cosmo," as a singular word, seems to denote the achievement of harmony. Wolfe's description of "The Movie" emphasizes the Pranksters' belief that their filming provides a glimpse into an experience beyond our traditional conception of reality. He reveals his subjects to be social scientists themselves, likewise documenting their habits as participant observers. At the same time, he undermines their belief that they have reached a seemingly unachievable state. He reveals the paradox of "The Movie," which weakens the Pranksters' belief that they have achieved transcendence because film creates a barrier between subject and audience. Simply put, the Pranksters cannot portray their experience of transcendence to the viewer

through "The Movie." As a result, Wolfe uses the film as an artifact in his research, asserting its shortcomings as a method of analysis. He recognizes the need to look below the surface of the Pranksters lifestyle and analyze it much more deeply as a scientist, rather than as a bystander.

"Movie" represents more than the Pranksters' documentary; it also becomes synonymous with experience: "Well that's their Movie" and "…that is her movie, it truly is" (263, 177). For Wolfe, *Electric Kool-Aid* is an attempt to take the "movie," which is entirely ambiguous (just as the Pranksters' film is only a superficial representation) and translate that idea onto paper in order to expand upon and comment on it. If "movie" signifies experience, then there is clearly a level of impenetrability associated with that experience. The individual "movie" is that which is lived by the subject, the individual whose "movie" it is. This "movie" can be seen, but not fully understood, by an outsider. Wolfe's intention is to take this ambiguous notion and unwrap it so that the reader can share in the Pranksters' individual and group consciousness. Unlike a traditional sociologist who uses technical jargon to deconstruct a particular phenomenon, Wolfe uses his subjects' terminology as a medium to paint the Prankster picture. Furthermore, he uncovers the limitations of their language, highlighting the importance of the social sciences to conceptualize phenomena that are otherwise abstract for those who are outside of the experience. This is also useful for Kesey, who is so involved in "The Movie" that he cannot distance himself enough to see how similar the Pranksters are to other social groups.

Another sociological aspect of Wolfe's work is the theme of status. Status holds different meaning in *Electric Kool-Aid* than it does in Wolfe's other writings. Here it

does not refer to the Pranksters' position within society. These people are members of the counter-culture, and therefore remain so far outside the social norm that they cannot be ranked within society. For Wolfe, though, status still exists in the world of the Pranksters, as status refers to each individual Prankster's position within their social order. At the top of the Prankster pyramid is Ken Kesey, the perceived leader of the clan. As noted in a review of *Electric Kool-Aid* by The Psychedelic Press:

> The materialization of the psychedelic movement as part of the social becomes increasingly pronounced . . . From the individuality, the egoism, of Kesey, to the small group of Pranksters, then further forwards to the meeting with the Hell's Angels (introduced to Kesey by Hunter S. Thompson) till [sic] finally the organization of the Trips Festival. (Dickins 2010)

This "psychedelic movement" is the center from which status is defined. Yet, like the LSD experience, the Pranksters show that status cannot be readily defined. Wolfe writes, "Kesey took great pains not to make his role explicit. He wasn't the authority, somebody else was . . . He wasn't the leader, he was the 'non-navigator'" (126). Rather than considering himself an equal to the rest of the Pranksters, Kesey identifies himself as the "non-navigator," endowing his presence with significance despite denying his leadership qualities. This title implies that Kesey directs the Pranksters toward living without a plan or without navigation. He is a leader, just not in the traditional sense of the word. As much as Kesey and the Pranksters want to break the leader-follower model, Wolfe shows that these people cannot escape this social paradigm. In this way, the author demonstrates an important facet of group organization and the way that individuals react when a collective mentality is at work.

Wolfe specifically cites an instance when Kesey introduces a new game to the Pranksters. The game is called "Power" and the objective is to find a new leader, or more precisely, a dictator, who holds "absolute power" for thirty minutes (115). Wolfe explains that Kesey's good friend Ken Babbs wins the "Power" game time and time again, ordering the redistribution of "wealth" among the Pranksters. For the members of the group, wealth constitutes personal material possessions from letters to toothbrushes. "Very allegorical, this game," Wolfe comments succinctly (116). He does not further analyze the Power game but rather alludes to the politics at work within the Prankster community. Later in the work Wolfe returns to the Power game: "They're sitting around a big round table in Kesey's living room . . . playing the game of Power. Page Browning wins and he orders: Now we all take DMT and hold hands, seated in a circle around the table" (195). Wolfe chooses to highlight this particular game of Power because it illustrates the unquestioned authority that each Prankster has over the other. Through the game, other members of the group besides Kesey have the ability to obtain some sort of control. This, in turn, leads to forcible authority by one individual who determines the actions of the rest of the group. The group has immense influence over individual action. The author identifies the Prankster lifestyle as a kind of microcosm of society in general where this authority constantly exists, whether in the extreme form of a dictator, or the more implicit form of media and cultural propaganda. At the same time as Wolfe illustrates the Pranksters' dissociation from society, he demonstrates their similarities to the greater social system. In this way, he moves from a microsociological analysis of the Pranksters to a macrosociological one. At the micro level he looks at the interactions of

specific members in the group; at the macro level he looks at the way the Pranksters connect to the greater social system as an institution.

Through Wolfe's social-psychological approach he is able to connect the individual Pranksters' consciousness while on drugs with the power of group influence and shared perception. *Electric Kool-Aid* is exploratory not only as a documentation of a particular culture, but also as a study of societal phenomenon generally, and the way the self and identity is shaped so deeply by others.

As I have argued, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and Tom Wolfe are all united by their focus on the self within each of their respective works. For these authors, selfhood creates news, and they all demonstrate that without the exploration of identity/identities, journalism lacks depth. For them, conventional news writing is flat and the New Journalism dynamic as a hodgepodge of numerous disciplines. Didion reveals a philosophical quality to her New Journalism, Mailer writes as a memoirist, and Wolfe takes on a social-psychological approach to his work. The New Journalists reveal that journalism encompasses so many subjects that it cannot be limited. By breaking journalistic conventions, the three show that journalism should be revelatory rather than restricted. In the next chapter, I will examine how much these three writers retain of their New Journalistic tendencies in their later works, beyond the 1960s and 70s.

Chapter 3—

The New Journalism Beyond

In the previous chapter, I studied the exploration of the self or selves in the writing of Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and Tom Wolfe. While all three authors focus on this particular theme, each is different in approach. In order to fully delineate their goals and understand the legacy of the New Journalism movement, I will look now at their later works to evaluate the change throughout their careers and make a claim as to whether they have continued the New Journalism movement or abandoned the style over the course of changing times. In this chapter, I will focus on a variety of the authors' individual essays and collections to best compare their contemporary writing with their nonfiction works published during the 1960s and 70s.

The Ever-Enduring Ego of Norman Mailer

I begin with Mailer, an author who is so conscious of his own importance that he personally documents his changing authorial identity within writings throughout his career. Mailer's first major work, *The Naked and the Dead*, was published in 1949. From then, the author published for almost half a century until shortly before his death in 2007. In a 1982 *New York Times* article, Michiko Kakutani writes of Mailer, "Given the shape of his own career, he tends to think of his life in terms of decades, and those decades are as distinct to him as 'separate countries; the difference between the 40's and 50's is the difference between France and England'" ("Mailer Talking" 1982). Each decade is defined entirely by his own literary achievement, or in some cases, lack of achievement. Mailer is not defined by the years, rather, the author defines them himself. I will look at

three textual examples from the 1970s, 1980s, and 2000s to determine if Mailer's technique and thematic content have remained consistent over the decades.

One of Mailer's most well known collections is *Pieces and Pontifications* (1982), the first section of which is a collection of essays, and the second, a collection of interviews with the author. Mailer prefaces his work:

> So I would say to the reader that you hold in your hand the work of a divided
> man. Not schizophrenic—divided. . . . Here, then, are two sides of myself as I
> survived the Seventies—my literary ghost looking for that little refinement of
> one's art which becomes essential as one grows older, and the cry of the street
> debater, front and center, who always speaks in the loudest voice. (x)

Here he reflects on a body of work that spans from the beginning of the 1970s to the early 1980s. As in *Armies*, the author is affected by time, which, in this case, gives him a slightly different perspective on his writing. He admits to a need for "refinement" of his work, which he deems necessary as a consequence of aging, yet he notes that he cannot abandon the personality that has defined him through the decades. The two-part set up of *Pieces and Pontifications* mirrors that of *Armies*, demonstrating his inability to present just one side. His work is once again a direct reflection of self in that he considers himself a "divided man," a contradiction between two distinct parts, which paradoxically correspond in some way. He cannot separate from "the loudest voice," his own opinion and egotism, which continue to pervade his writing. Although the author claims he is looking to change, it becomes apparent in this work that he makes only a modest effort.

One of his best-known essays in "Pieces" is "The Faith of Graffiti," published in 1974. Although the work is published only five years after *The Armies of the Night*, it

provides insight into the 1970s Mailer, whom he would consider distinct from the Mailer of 1969. Like in *Armies* he includes himself in "The Faith of Graffiti," documenting his role as the reporter of the work. Mailer begins the piece, "Journalism is chores. Journalism is bondage unless you can see yourself as a private eye inquiring into the mysteries of a new phenomenon" (134). Although his presence within "The Faith of Graffiti" is far less obtrusive than in *Armies*, the author still makes his presence clear from the first sentence. This opening remark glorifies him as valiant, a journalist reminiscent of a sly detective, seemingly faced with the danger of unknown challenges. In line with this glorification is the way Mailer names himself in the work: A-I, Aesthetic Investigator. By creating a name for himself, Mailer separates his roles as narrator and character and further highlights what he believes to be his near-heroic authority. Mailer identifies himself as Aesthetic Investigator since he is assigned to write a piece on a photography series on graffiti by Jon Naar. He demonstrates that he has escaped the "bondage" faced by a traditional reporter by opening his mind to the highly subjective topic of aesthetics or "art." From the outset, he shows that a defining aspect of the graffiti movement is the nicknames, which give some insider information about the particular graffiti artist and function as his or her signature tag. He writes, "Make the name [Aesthetic Investigator] A-I for this is about graffiti" (134). Like Wolfe, Mailer attempts to adapt to the culture and language of his subjects by identifying with their naming ritual.

In typical fashion, Mailer continues his personal input within the opening of the essay. As in *Armies*, Mailer's essay uses metafiction to call attention to particular literary

characteristics of the work. In "The Faith of Graffiti," it is the title of the essay that Mailer scrutinizes:

> [He] discovers weeks later that his book has already been given a title. It is *Watching My Name Go By*. He explains to the pained but sympathetic ears of his collaborators that an author needs his own title. Besides, there is a practical reason. Certain literary men cannot afford titles like *Watching My Name Go By*. Norman Mailer may be first in such a category. One should not be able to conceive of one's bad reviews before writing a word. (135)

Although the essay is a collaborative effort with Jon Naar, Mailer insists that the work deserves the title he decides individually. Consequently, Mailer undermines the collaboration, meanwhile crying out for personal attention. The author further discredits his colleagues by mocking the title they have chosen. He initially ignores the intended meaning of the title, that is, graffiti artists watching their tag go by as they travel (or the tag does) through the subway stations. Instead, he jokingly interprets the title as signifying his own name "go[ing] by," as if the critics were watching his talent slip away. Mailer purposefully draws attention to his own insecurities to seek reassurance from his reader by noting that he "cannot afford" this title.

In these first few pages of the essay Mailer replicates his role in *Armies*. The author calls attention to himself as character, formulating a distinct persona from his narrative identity. As a character, Mailer is A-I, but as author and narrator, he is simply Norman Mailer. At first, identity appears just as significant as it is in *Armies*. What distinguishes this essay is that the author differentiates narrator Norman Mailer from character A-I, whereas in *Armies* "Norman Mailer" describes both distinct identity

positions. The writer's egotism has not diminished, but as the essay continues Mailer/A-I, both narrator and character, recede further into the background. The article becomes more of an exposé than a personal account. Meanwhile, Mailer continues to use other stylistic devices common to *Armies*.

As in *Armies* the author emphasizes two opposing ideologies: the one that he subscribes to pitted against another he does not. In this case, the author sides with the graffiti movement, whose natural foe is the New York City government. In fact, Mailer compares the relationship between graffiti artists and government officials to a war:

> Maybe it was no more than a movement which looked to take some of the excrescence left within and paint it out upon the world, no more than a species of collective therapy of grace exhibited under pressure in which they never dreamed of painting over the blank and empty modern world, but the authority of the city reacted as if the city itself might be in greater peril from graffiti than from drugs, and a war had gone on, more and more implacable on the side of the authority with every legal and psychological weedkiller on full employ until the graffiti of New York was defoliated, cicatrized, Vietnamized. (144)

Mailer's diction depicts the graffiti artists as performers rather than criminals, characterizing them as peacekeepers rather than defacers of public property. He calls graffiti a "collective therapy of grace" that takes the world's excess and projects it in paintings. He evokes images of Vietnam in reference to the New York City government, noting that they use "every legal and psychological weedkiller on full employ." The weedkiller mirrors the use of napalm in Vietnam, which literally defoliated plants but also "defoliated" people, in the sense that it could break a person down both physically

and psychologically, "cicatriz[ing]" or scarring them. He calls the graffiti of New York

"Vietnamized," as if it were a soldier, destroyed and dehumanized by war. Mailer's

rhetoric mirrors that in *Armies*, in that he is not part of the opposition (the soldiers in

Vietnam or the graffiti artists in New York), but is rather a crusader for these increasingly

anti-governmental institutions. He extends this metaphor throughout his essay,

concluding poetically, "graffiti lingers on our subway door as a memento of all the lives

ever lived, sounding now like the bulges of gathering armies across the unseen ridge"

(158). Mailer continually promotes the graffiti artists by eliciting the sympathy of the

common man or woman with the pronoun "our." The subway door symbolizes the

everyday New Yorker moving through life. Mailer demonstrates that graffiti is a

permanent fixture, whose power, like an unseen army, will someday be realized.

Mailer's conclusion is also marked by an implicit comment on the self. The writer

proclaims, "If our name is enormous to us, it is also not real—as if we have come from

other places than the name, and lived in other lives. Perhaps that is the unheard echo of

graffiti, the vibration of that profound discomfort it arouses" (158). As it pertains to

graffiti art, Mailer brings to light the significance of a name. For the artists, a name takes

on profound importance, signifying their work and legacy and implying an underlying

message. Ironically, the author notes that if a name is too big, its true significance

becomes artificial. He has created such an exaggerated image of himself that his own

name has many contradictory meanings. He notes that the valuation of a name in the

graffiti world causes "profound discomfort" as a myth outside of oneself. The name takes

on a life of its own, which can be frightening in its uncontrollability. It is clear that

Mailer not only refers to the artists' "name[s]", but to himself. His lack of solid identity, an identity that is authentic and not created, has had a deep effect upon him.

"The Faith of Graffiti," published shortly after *Armies* shows Mailer's consistency of Mailer's tone, rhetoric, and themes within his works. I will turn to one of his later essays in *Pieces and Pontifications*, "Of a Small and Modest Malignancy, Wicked and Bristling with Dots" (1980) to evaluate the change in Mailer's writing over the decade. The essay documents Mailer's experiences with television and his resulting criticism of the medium. The narrative perspective is wholly Mailer's, as the author calls himself Norman rather than a name he creates for himself, so it appears that "Of a Small and Modest Malignancy" is more self-conscious than his earlier "Faith of Graffiti" essay. An equally apparent aspect of the work is Mailer's exaggeratedly sardonic tone. He begins by labeling television as "that Christ-killer of the ages. . . . (Let us say it takes a Jew not wholly convinced of the divinity of Christ to see that is who the tube is killing)" (17). Mailer uses a highly subjective viewpoint to ridicule the immorality of television. The author takes the religious slur "Christ-killer," usually aimed at the Jewish people, and makes it into a critique of TV. A Jew himself, Mailer mocks the slur, thus revealing his own illogical aversion for the small screen. It is immediately clear that Mailer's account will be just as exaggerated and absurd as his egotism; thus, he reveals from the beginning that he is an unreliable narrator.

Another significant aspect of Mailer's narrative identity is his emphasis on what he attempts to hide from the public eye as a character. In *Armies*, the author writes of his dislike for the "liberal ideologues," meanwhile revealing his outward "sweetness" toward them. In "Malignancy," Mailer notes that at one point in his television career, "He was

catering to TV addicts" (53). Much like his demeanor among the liberals, Mailer intends

to impress the TV audience members, since he knows this will benefit him. As much as

he tries though, the author cannot repress his disapproval of these people:

> he attacked this country up from the sewer, and went on to describe America as a
>
> huge drunk staggering down a road while covered with his own vomit. The studio
>
> audience began to hiss with real anger; he looked back in equal anger and said:
>
> 'Did you all go to high school?' The remark came out faster than his mind, and it
>
> was cruel: it went to the heart of the secret. (53)

As the narrator looks back upon his remarks, he recognizes their maliciousness. As a

character he must uphold an image. He outwardly exposes his "secret" dislike of the TV

addicts as if to shift his appeal from his television viewers to his readers. Mailer may

expect that his reader is more educated than "These lumpy, dull-necked, dead-eyed

people with their flower print blouses and acetate shirts" (53) so he can reveal his secret

through the medium of the essay. His somewhat calculated commentary reinforces his

unreliability as narrator. This tactic also appears within both *Armies* and "The Faith of

Graffiti." As we have seen, Mailer has a bias toward one side or another in his works.

Paradoxically, Mailer targets various audiences, namely the television viewers and a

more scholarly audience, while voicing his manipulations to them. This technique is used

as a form of apology, insofar as Mailer's egotism rules out any sincere confession of

guilt.

Although "Of a Small and Modest Malignancy" was published in 1980, it

presents Mailer's television experiences from 1959 through the early 1970s. As the work

is almost entirely about the author's publicity on television, it becomes clear that this

time period was a kind of golden age in Mailer's career. To the extent that Mailer is

sarcastic, he is likewise nostalgic as he dwells on his television moments in great detail.

As in *Armies*, Mailer measures his success against that of his contemporaries. Whereas in

his earlier work, Mailer is concerned with Robert Lowell's talent in this essay it is author

Truman Capote whom the author makes his adversary. In one moment of the essay,

Mailer focuses on his interaction with Capote on the television program *Open End*:

> He laughed encouragingly at Truman's remarks; he offered attention. Truman was
>
> so tiny that something gallant came to you from the fact of his existence itself.
>
> Mailer felt generous indeed. Few moods are as charitable as this sensation of
>
> being physically superior to everyone in the room. (38)

Rather than acting stifled by Capote's success, as he had by Lowell in *Armies*, Mailer

feels superior. He happily recalls his initial emotions in his early days on television when

he believed his grandeur could not only be read about but also viewed. He discusses a

time when he believed his physical stature symbolized his immense talent. He continues,

"The kinescope caught him as he was making a point, and his face looked forceful, his

language was good, yes, he appeared even better on TV, he thought, than in the mirror"

(39). Mailer's initial perspective on television can be deconstructed by the metaphor of

the funhouse mirror. Television increasingly skews the writer's projection of himself.

Watching himself on the screen is equivalent to looking into the distorted mirror. Yet

Mailer takes this altered reflection seriously as an authentic reflection of self. Watching

himself leads to his eventual distaste for television and the act of projecting oneself so

candidly to the general public. He especially fears the reflection of the funhouse mirror as

it dictates his public identity. Not only is he exposed through television; he is also

rendered distinct from the man he believes himself to be. While he can carefully manipulate his image on paper, he demonstrates repeatedly that he is vulnerable in other media.

As the essay continues, Mailer's cynicism comes to the fore. The author is shocked to learn from friends and other viewers that Capote overshadowed him during their episode on *Open End*. Mailer describes his utter dismay at learning that he did not perform as well as he thought during the taping. He writes, "Mailer, stunned as any confident contender who has been abruptly knocked out, now felt, measure to measure, weaker" (43). The author compares himself to a boxer who is taken down in one punch by Capote. This is one major moment that the author uses to portray the negative qualities of television. As in both *Armies* and "The Faith of Graffiti," Mailer's opinion contends against another; in this case, his belief that television is detrimental challenges the growing popularity of this medium. The author complains that television is at fault for his failings in the public eye.

> He learned that the pioneer days of TV were indeed over . . . Now, every show was taped, which is to say ninety-nine out of a hundred shows were taped, and the others were either early in the morning, or news shows, and the anchor men read their texts. It meant that you were usually recorded at ten in the morning or six in the evening for a show that might go on at midnight that night, or on a night next week, or in half a year, and so you were skewed out of time. (49)

Mailer's writing is a rant, marked by long sentences and repetitive lists. The author expresses that television distorts its subject by falsifying time. Although he initially bewails live television— "In later years, when everything was taped, he would not often

feel the sensation that everyone was listening as the sounds came out of his throat"

(29)—he paradoxically claims that it is taped TV that reflects poorly upon his image.

Time is very significant for Mailer. In *Armies*, for example, Mailer looks back upon the

March of the Pentagon. The fact that his experience is based upon memory leads to

inherent distortion within the work. In many ways, the Norman Mailer presented in

Armies is "skewed out of time." He seems to grow increasingly conscious of the effect of

time on his image. As we have seen, "he tends to think of his life in terms of decades"

("Mailer Talking" 1982). Time is an essential factor for Mailer in developing his identity.

Not only can time define different aspects of one's life, it also leads to new modes of

thinking or renewed beliefs. For example, Mailer's reader may change their opinion of

him over the decades just as Mailer himself will change to a certain extent. By

documenting his experience with distortion through the lens of a camera, Mailer reveals

that whether due to the effects of time, personal involvement, or political bias, distortion

is a fundamental aspect of all experiences.

In 2003, Mailer published one of his final works, *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*. Here he addresses his writing career head on, attempting to justify his

decisions over the decades. As is to be expected, Mailer splits the work into two parts.

Part I includes sections on "Lit Biz," "Craft," "Psychology," and "Philosophy," which

focus on Mailer's own writing. The second part includes only two sections: "Genre," and

"Giants," which provide Mailer's ideas on writing in general, his outside influences, and

his thoughts on his contemporaries. Like *Armies* and many of his other pieces, *The Spooky Art* becomes a testament not simply to Mailer's career, but to the man himself.

As one of his later publications, *The Spooky Art* is more of an extension of Mailer's authorial tendencies than it is a work based on memory. He continues his obtrusive egotism and rejection of traditional convention. For example, in the introduction Mailer warns his audience that he will exclusively use the pronoun "*he*" to speak of a writer and never she: "I do not know if the women who read this book will be all that inclined to forgive me, but the alternative was to edit many old remarks over into a style I cannot bear—the rhetorically hygienic politically correct" (*Spooky Art* xv). Mailer's contempt for the politically correct is a common thread throughout his works, and one that he will not forgo, even upon looking back on his career. The author's refusal to adjust to current usage in the wake of feminist advances demonstrates the lack of change within his writing. It is clear from this remark about pronoun usage that he recognizes his more contemporary audience. Mailer once again attempts to deflect criticism by justifying his actions to the reader.

He also touches upon the techniques of the New Journalists explored in the first chapter: the defiance of ethics and authenticity, and the use of blurred genre. The author calls attention to his distinctive style rather than allowing it to speak for itself. He emphasizes his New Journalistic tendencies, as if to bring them into the next generation. In his chapter entitled "Legend and Identity" Mailer writes,

> I've always been fascinated with spies and their spiritual associates—actors. The few times I've acted, I've been struck by how alive you can feel during the impersonation, sometimes more real than in your own life. When a spy feels friendship for someone he is going to betray, the friendship is still real. The average journalist is, in that sense, a spy. (117)

Mailer is suggesting that all journalists are faced with ethical quandaries, not only the New Journalist writers. He explains that the average journalist is playing a role, and in that sense, he (or she) is fraudulent toward his (or her) subjects. Through his comparison to spies, Mailer demonstrates that a journalist's job is to present a story, whether it is disloyal to the subject or not. In fact, he seems to revel in this deceptive behavior, as is clear from his glorified spy-like position as "Aesthetic Investigator" in "The Faith of Graffiti." He echoes Didion's comment that "Writers are always selling somebody out" (*Slouching* xiv cited in Kraus 286), revealing even further his utter rejection of ethical boundaries and placing the reader in a position to discredit him.

In another moment, Mailer highlights the problems of authenticity, an issue inherent to all journalism but exaggerated through the New Journalism. In the same chapter, "Legend and Identity," the author writes, "If I place a large emphasis on the word, it is because our identity on a given day or year is the seat from which we speak to the world" (113). Mailer highlights the subjectivity that guides all forms of writing. It is the self that guides the writing of Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe in their respective works. Here, Mailer seems to argue that identity is the center for all writing: "I realized that one could literally forge one's career by the idea you instilled of yourself in others" (115). Mailer continually emphasizes the importance of the self, as if to undermine the respect for objectivity in the journalism of today. He is even more concerned, though, with his audience's reaction to his work. Mailer demonstrates that it is his egotism that has paved the way for his entire career. Not only does he present his own projection of self, but he also presents one that he feels his readers will find distinctive and more memorable.

While his subject matter has changed through the years, his highly subjective focus on personal identity has remained consistent.

In *The Spooky Art* Mailer presents his opinion on mixing elements of different genres. Once again, the author undermines conventional journalism, stating, "I . . . had a literary heritage to remind me that the world is not supposed to be reassembled by panels of prefabricated words. Rather, I was a novelist. It was expected of me to see the world with my own eyes and my own words" (178). In the final years of his career, Mailer emphasizes that his work was that of a novelist, rather than a journalist. He criticizes the prototypical structure that objective journalists use in their work, such as their employment of "prefabricated words" refusing identification with traditional journalism. Mailer goes on to note, "It's disturbing to read a novelist with a good style when you're in the middle of putting your work together. . . . So while I'm working on a book I rarely read more than *The New York Times*—which could have the long-term effect of flattening my style" (100). It is apparent that the author reveres novelists much more than he does journalists, even fearing that reading a journalistic publication like *The New York Times* too often could hinder his style. Rather than allowing his writing to tell the story, Mailer feels it necessary to spell it out for the reader, as if to clarify his intentions. He believes the reader cares about his process of writing and the inner-dialogue he constantly wrestles with when putting words on the page. Like Wolfe, Mailer sees the New Journalism and his writing in particular as a redefinition of the novel rather than a redefinition of journalism. *The Spooky Art* is not about redefined genre though; instead his testament to writing acts as more of a tribute to himself. From 1968 to 2004, very little has changed.

Joan Didion Overcoming Narrative

Joan Didion's legacy has far outlasted the 1960s and 70s. While Mailer is

especially noted for his work during this particular time period, Didion has left an imprint

far beyond her early writings. Like *The White Album* and *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

many of Didion's later nonfiction works are essay collections revealing a consistency in

form throughout her career. The writings that I will look at specifically span between

1989 and 2003, all of which are reprinted in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live:*

Collected Nonfiction. The title of Didion's collection reflects the common thread in all of

her nonfiction works. That is, Didion's writing is a means to make sense of the world

around her, no matter what the subject. It is apparent from this title, which is taken from

the first line of her essay "The White Album," that this belief has resonated with Didion

throughout her life.

One of the works published in her collected nonfiction is *After Henry* (1992),

which was composed following the death of her longtime editor Henry Robbins and

presents the author trying to find her footing on what she believes to be shaky ground. I

specifically look at the essay "Pacific Distances," which offers a series of reflections on

Didion's experiences in different geographic spaces. Another work in the collection is

Political Fictions (2001), which documents the political scene in Washington from

George H.W. Bush to the elections between George W. Bush and Al Gore. I will focus on

"Vichy Washington," an essay dedicated to the political scandal and impeachment

process of former President Bill Clinton. The most unique of the works that I analyze in

the collection is Didion's memoir *Where I Was From*, which details her experience with

California, including the state's history and her own history growing up there.

"At nineteen I had wanted to write," remarks Didion in "Pacific Distances." "At forty I still wanted to write, and nothing that had happened in the years between made me any more certain that I could" (*After Henry* 596). A sense of despondency, which pervades *The White Album*, continues to influence Didion's later works. Here it is Didion's writing in which she is not entirely confident. To a larger degree though, Didion feels a sense of uncertainty about the world in general. In his introduction to *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live* John Leonard writes, "She seemed sometimes so sensitive that whole decades hurt her feelings, and the prose on the page suggested Valéry's 'shiverings of an effaced leaf,' as if her next trick might be evaporation" (ix). Paradoxically, it is Didion's unobtrusive criticism as opposed to Mailer's dominant presence, which has allowed her to remain an important voice throughout the decades. Despite her quiet discomfort, she continues to document the world around her. Although she notes that "nothing" has motivated her to write, she is nonetheless driven to do so. In *The White Album* Didion notes that she "began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself" (11). In her later writings she solidifies her belief that life is without an essential narrative line and without a grounded meaning. This acceptance allows Didion to write both as a result of and in spite of meaninglessness.

One aspect of Didion's writing, which has gone largely unchanged through the decades, is the significance of memory. Whereas for Mailer time becomes an element of distortion within his work, Didion treats memory as a means to underscore particular moments throughout her essays. In "Pacific Distances," Didion thinks back to 1975 and recalls the Telegraph Avenue of the time. Telegraph Avenue, located at the very southern

edge of Berkeley's campus, was a location characterized by upheaval and rioting during the 1960s. She writes,

> I remember spending considerable time, that spring of 1975, trying to break the
> code that Telegraph Avenue seemed to present. . . . I remember trying to discuss
> Telegraph Avenue with some people from the English department, but they were
> discussing a paper we had heard on the plotting of *Vanity Fair*, *Middlemarch,* and
> *Bleak House*. I remember trying to discuss Telegraph Avenue with an old friend
> who had asked me to dinner, at a place enough off campus to get a drink, but he
> was discussing Jane Alpert, Eldridge Cleaver, Daniel Ellsberg, Shana Alexander,
> a Modesto rancher of his acquaintance . . . and the movement for independence in
> Micronesia. I remember thinking that I was still, after twenty years, out of step at
> Berkeley, the victim of a different drummer. (596)

The repetition of "I remember" is common to many of Didion's works including *The White Album* and *Where I Was From*. Yet Didion's memory does not seem so distant from her work. Although her memories are fragmentary in exposition, they are nonetheless presented with utter vividness, as if she never truly stepped outside of the moment. She recalls a variety of instances of her fixation with Telegraph Avenue, presenting these moments as if part of an index. She flips through the index of her mind to note each and every time she discussed this street. These moments, pieced together through the efforts of memory highlight the illogicality of her world. The author is living in a society so intent on its own preoccupations that its citizens completely disregard the problems in their own backyard. These people emphasize the significance of academia and the politics of other countries. They flaunt a progressive outlook but Didion reveals

their lack of action within the immediate community that surrounds them. Rather than criticizing her friends or colleagues though, the author recalls thinking of herself as "the victim of a different drummer." By changing the idiom "marching to the beat of a different drummer," to call herself a "victim" rather than a "marcher," Didion reveals her otherness to be a kind of malady. Her feelings and beliefs are not quirky and unique; rather, they are torturous and alienating. She maintains a continued wariness, particularly regarding the actions of others, which separates her from the Berkeley community.

In *Where I Was From*, Didion presents another expressive memory to weave together the past with the more contemporary. In one moment, Didion recalls two of the Los Angeles riots, triggered by a number of similar factors including racial tension and discrimination, as well as economic downturn:

> I remember being told, by virtually everyone to whom I spoke in Los Angeles during the few months that followed the 1992 riot, how much the riot had 'changed' the city. Most of those who said this had lived in Los Angeles, as I had, during the 1965 Watts riot, but 1992, they assured me, had been 'different,' 1992 had 'changed everything.' The words they used seemed overfreighted, ominous in an unspecific way, words like 'sad' and 'bad.' (1038-39)

Didion connects these two instances, twenty-seven years apart, as if to show that the 1960s was not the only era of tumult. The author links the riots in her memory, recognizing the seemingly repetitive nature of the Los Angeles community. She undermines the discussions of those who claimed that the riots of 1992 were dramatically distinct from those of 1965. For the author, who lived through both, the destruction during both riots is equivalent. By connecting the two, she reveals the recurrence of chaos

in the same places for some of the same reasons. The "overfreighted" words, which she hears from fellow Californians, are so heavy with connotations that they mean nothing. "Sad" and "bad" cannot truly reflect the death, looting, and destruction of property that occurred during the riots. Didion once again feels disconnected from her community, which considers these instances of societal upheaval to be distinct. She notes that "virtually everyone" told her about being changed by the 1992 riots, thus highlighting her feelings of estrangement from the community's shared consciousness. She subscribes to a nihilistic viewpoint toward painful events that she experiences. Didion continually presents her personal experience as wildly different from that of others.

In "Pacific Distances," however, the author paradoxically revels in her own disconnectedness. "A good part of any day in Los Angeles is spent driving, alone, through streets devoid of meaning to the driver, which is one reason the place exhilarates some people, and floods others with an amorphous unease. There is about these hours spent in transit a seductive unconnectedness" (*After Henry* 591). Didion's distrust of others leads her to derive some comfort from solitude—"a seductive unnconnectedness." The author feels a separation from society as she moves through different spaces. This is apparent in *The White Album* when she drives across the Carquinas Bridge with her eyes closed (37). Throughout Didion's works, driving symbolizes a kind of middle ground between reality and inner-consciousness. In the car the author is enclosed, safe from the outside world but distressed by her inner thoughts. This alone time allows Didion to think too much. The car, like the funhouse mirror, fosters a warped conception of self. She may be disconnected in a literal sense but she cannot distance herself from the neuroses that consume her. Didion's driving image is particularly interesting in the way that it

redefines the traditional American trope of travel, which glorifies the freedom of the "open road." By using the recurring motif of driving, Didion places herself within this literary tradition, meanwhile undermining the sense of autonomy it often conveys. Didion further alienates herself from traditional American sentimentality and society at large.

Her notions of disconnectedness, feeling at once alienated from and suffocated by society, are clarified in her focus on geographic spaces. Both "Pacific Distances" and *Where I Was From* describe the significance of location. This reverence for places is common in *The White Album* and likewise echoes the American trope of travel. Travel itself does not give Didion a sense of freedom, rather the spaces she is in reflect her different moods and sentiments:

> I spent what were for me the usual proportions of time in Los Angeles and New York and Sacramento. I spent what seemed to many people I knew an eccentric amount of time in Honolulu, the particular aspect of which lent me the illusion that I could any minute order from room service a revisionist theory of my own history, garnished with a vanda orchid. (*White Album* 13)

California is often designated as home, New York is where she goes to work, and Hawaii is, in her imagination, an escape. She wants to believe that in Hawaii she can take a step back from her life. Didion has the hope that on an island, separated from the rest of the country, she can look at her life and her identity with better perspective and accept disconnectedness. In "Pacific Distances" she writes, "only Honolulu is fated to remain [remote], and only in Honolulu do the attitudes and institutions born of extreme isolation continue to set the tone of daily life" (*After Henry* 604). Hawaii is not simply a location; it is an ideology and clearly one that Didion subscribes to. As with driving, Didion wants

to believe that she can separate herself from the difficulties of reality. She sees the more relaxed "tone of daily life" to be a direct effect of Hawaii's location on the map and hopes that by embodying this space she can develop a similar mentality. Her "eccentric amount of time in Honolulu" is a kind of antidote for her inherent feelings of claustrophobia in society. It is apparent that locations constitute symbolic meaning just as much as any story she can offer to the reader.

In addition to Hawaii, Didion endows New York and California with symbolic meaning. In "Pacific Distances," for example, she offers an anecdote akin to those in "The White Album," about a mother that drives herself and her daughter off a cliff. The child survives and recalls her mother's last words: "'I'm sorry I have to do this'" (592). Didion writes of this story based upon her own geographical experiences, distinguishing between her reactions to the anecdote based upon where she had been living:

> When I first moved to Los Angeles from New York, in 1964, I found this absence of narrative a deprivation. At the end of two years I realized (quite suddenly alone one morning in the car) that I had come to find narrative sentimental. This remains a radical difference between the two cities, and also between the ways in which the residents of those cities view each other. (592)

This anecdote follows Didion's discussion of "the seductive unconnectedness" of being in transit. Here the driving motif portrays depression, the most extreme kind of disconnectedness. She can sympathize with this sentiment. Yet, just after leaving New York, Didion is disappointed by the lack of background regarding the woman's suicide. She is shaped by the sentiments of the city. In her opinion New Yorkers stress explanations and meaning. In *The White Album* she states, "In New York the air was

charged and crackling and shorting out with opinions" (177). New Yorkers, she reveals, have their own opinion or sense of the world. While the islands of Hawaii represent a haven for Didion, the island of Manhattan symbolizes enclosure. Unlike Hawaii, which is marked by isolation, New York is overpopulated and claustrophobic. She is conditioned by the millions of others around her to live her life with purpose, an ideology to which she cannot adhere. Her nihilistic attitude clashes with the fast-paced lifestyle and intentioned attitudes of those living in New York. After she lives in Los Angeles for two years, Didion sees the distinction between the two locations. She realizes this when recalls the anecdote of the woman and her daughter and recognizes that narrative does not resonate with reality. Rather, narrative is characterized by emotion. According to Didion, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live" (*White Album* 11). Stories are more of a defense mechanism than a reflection of truth. The author faults New York, which shields its people, including herself, from the harsh realities of existence. Meanwhile, California is where Didion is most grounded. In *Where I Was From*, Didion highlights this fact. She writes about a passage from her novel *Run River* that reflects the comfort California provides her:

> I was a year or two out of Berkeley, working for *Vogue* in New York, and experiencing a yearning for California so raw that night after night on copy paper filched from my office . . . I sat on one of my apartment's two chairs and set my Olivetti on the other and wrote myself a California river. (1058)

Vogue is an emblem of high society associated with New York City. Writing for *Vogue* is work, a fact that adds to the anxiety of city living. Writing outside of work about her home in California provides her with refuge. She creates a Californian space so that she

may escape into the page. Paradoxically, it is Didion's acceptance of California's unrestrained and free flowing nature, as opposed to a need to restrain it, which grounds her and fuels her writing. Although California is where Didion *was* from, the space continues to affect her no matter where she is located.

Concurrent with Didion's focus on disconnectedness and geographic spaces is the use of gaps common throughout Didion's writing. By gaps I refer to both the disjointed quality of her content and also the existence of white space in the layout of words on the page. Like geographic spaces, gaps highlight the feeling of disconnection that continues to pervade Didon's later works. Like her use of the first person, the use of gaps in content contributes to her subjectivity. She cuts between anecdotes and makes allusions, without giving the reader background. In *The White Album*, for example, Didion speaks of Linda Kasabian, Sharon Tate Polanski, and uses "jingle-jangle morning" as an adjective. In these moments the author clearly plays upon a 1960s reader who is familiar with the Manson Murders and has a lyrical knowledge of Bob Dylan. Yet going back and forth between these different allusions her work takes on a jumbled quality even for an ideal reader who can sort out the pieces.

The lack of clarification and the use of seemingly unrelated anecdotes are apparent in Didion's later works as well. For example, in "Pacific Distances" the author's essay weaves between six segments beginning with her experience moving from New York to Los Angeles. She notes the aforementioned story of a woman driving off a cliff with her daughter in the backseat, just one of the "lurid, but . . . rarely personalized" headlines in the Los Angeles newspapers (*After Henry* 591). Didion moves on to describe speaking at her daughter's Los Angeles school about her career as a writer. She looks

back to her time as a writing student, as well as her experience as a guest lecturer at Berkeley. She then discusses Berkeley's Department of Nuclear Engineering and "the atomic age" followed by an anecdote about visiting the University of California's Lawrence Livermore Laboratory where she explores their high-power infrared laser beams. Next she identifies the culture of Honolulu and finally, concludes with a visit to Kai Tak East transit camp for Vietnamese refuges in Hong Kong. Didion finds meaning through links between seemingly distinct moments of her life. Her writing is associative, rather than logical. She connects seemingly opposing themes of isolation and personal growth, societal progression and risk, and the Hawaiian culture of leisure and the political upheaval not far away. The "Pacific" spaces she discusses possess a significance that cannot be understood separately. Taken together, each moment represents a part of the complexity of life experience: a kind of radical memoir. For the author, it is impossible to understand moments as connected because she sees the reality of her own life as disjointed and illogical. Thus, there is no conclusion to her essay, "Pacific Distances," only conclusions to each section. She shows us that with each conclusion comes a new beginning. Life cannot conform to traditional narrative but there is hope that she can overcome her nihilistic viewpoint to live without narrative. Whether it is the 1960s or 1979 (when the essay was first published in partial form), for Didion the world is consistently unstructured and nonsensical yet she begins to reveal that she does not need a narrative to live her life.

There are a number or gaps in Didion's *Political Fictions* as well. In "Vichy Washington" Didion writes her own version of Clinton's impeachment. The title alludes to Vichy France, the Northern region of France occupied by the Germans from 1940 to

1942 during the Second World War. During this time, Germany created the illusion that the French had a level of control over Northern France despite the occupation. Vichy France then was controlled by this regime and other German propaganda. Through this allusion Didion relates Vichy France with the political situation in Washington as focused on propagandistic illusion. Although the author's intent is to overthrow the "Fictions" asserted by both the politicians and the media, her essay is chiefly a tapestry of quotations from politicians and journalists. Didion weaves together these quotes to highlight the deceptiveness of the narratives that she believes were fed by these individuals to the public during the Clinton scandal. Most of the gaps in "Vichy Washington" result from a lack of exposition as is common in *The White Album*. She mentions numerous figures significant during the impeachment process, which assumes a contemporary, politically aware readership. In this way she endows her reader with power. By including *Political Fictions* in her nonfiction collection she assumes that her reader can switch gears from a work like *After Henry* to this starkly distinct collection, marked by political themes that she has not necessarily discussed in prior works. "Vichy Washington" stands apart from Didion's earlier essays in that she creates trust in her reader. She sees beyond her nihilistic viewpoint to reveal the problems that she believes continue to plague society.

Didion further empowers her reader by including a variety of quotes where politicians denigrate the intelligence of the American public: "'The attention span of Americans,' [Sentator] Simpson said, 'is "which movie is coming out next month?" and whether the quarterly report on their stock will change" (*Political Fictions* 893). She undercuts such public disparagement with gaps in exposition to highlight the absurdity of such remarks. With regard to Didion's 1994 account, *Salvador*, Mark Muggli notes,

"Very often the emblem ends a section of a story and is therefore given a white space in which to echo. Even the organization of Didion's collections has affected the impact of certain emblems, since the final stories in her subsections gain this same echoing white space" (408). This use of white space is likewise apparent in "Vichy Washington" in the form of an ending quotation rather than an emblem (such as the emblem or image of a "wall" in *Salvador*). In "Vichy Washington" the author concludes both paragraphs and entire sections of her essay with meaningful quotations, leaving out any significant explanation of such quotes and creating a gap between the quotation and the following paragraph. This white space functions to underscore these quotes to the reader. As with geographic spaces, Didion is concerned with location. Even the placement of words on the page is significant to their symbolic meaning. By concluding a paragraph with a quote and then leaving a gap between that dialogue and the subsequent paragraph, Didion takes other people's words and gives them additional significance. In this particular essay, she chooses quotations that are technically accessible to the public but which resonate differently with the reader in the context of her critique as well as their location on the page, isolated from other dialogue. Didion's seemingly most objective work is actually just as subjective as her other writings, insofar as she weaves together dialogue in a particular way, imbuing it with different importance based upon its placement on the page.

In *Where I Was From*, Didion's writing is marked by an overarching gap: a self-proclaimed obliqueness (962). Didion considers the work to be a memoir, yet she avoids a direct exploration of self. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of California as a means to identify the background that has shaped her. She writes of extremely personal

events, but she can only recall the weight of her feelings as related to or as a product of something else. Most often, that something is California. In one moment, Didion writes, "In the aftermath of my mother's death I found myself thinking a good deal about the confusions and contradictions in California life, many of which she had herself embodied" (1090). Didion, it seems, can only confront her mother's death in relation to California. By attempting to delineate the significance of her home state, the author is really searching to give other aspects of her life meaning. She cannot directly confront the most difficult events so she attempts to control of the uncontrollable. She uses California as a way to safely approach her difficult and at times, painful history, formulating a kind of gap in her discussion of the personal.

Didion uses gaps more explicitly between her distinctive chapters. At the conclusion of Part IV, Chapter 1 Didion writes, "'The Nor'easter of the Century' closed every airport and highway north of Atlanta. I remembered this abandonment the day [my mother] died" (1098). To begin Chapter 2 she states, "I also remembered this one. Sacramento, July or August, 1971 or 1972" (1099). The link between chapters does not occur elsewhere in the book and so it produces a jarring effect. Didion's fragmentary structure makes it is clear that she cannot fit her life comfortably into a narrative framework. She is unsure of the month or the year, retaining only certain parts of the past in her memory. These fissures become an elemental part of the story itself, reflecting Didion's message. To conclude the next chapter, she writes, "Later it seemed to me that this had been the moment when all of it . . . the entire enchantment under which I had lived my life—began to seem remote" (1100). Like the gaps in her writing, Didion's life experiences begin to feel more and more distant.

In Part IV of the memoir, Didion employs more frequent paragraph breaks, giving sentences on their own lines and contributing to an increased feeling of choppiness. These last chapters are marked by the deaths of several people she is close to. She remembers that during this period she put everything that she did not want thrown away into a box. After she finds out about the death of her friend Nancy she writes, "I closed the box and put it in a closet." The following line reads: "There is no real way to deal with everything we lose" (1103). These individual sentences are set off as their own paragraphs. Didion reveals, that while these short sentences defy traditional narrative form, they say enough to be their own paragraphs, and then some. In fact, these short lines summarize her later career. She has accepted meaninglessness and realizes that there is "no real way to deal" with it. She simply must continue to live her life. The box that she puts in the closet of "letters, photographs, clippings, folders and envelopes" are her attempts to hold on to a life story or narrative (1101). By putting it away in a closet she seals this desire for meaning away. She finally portrays an attempt to move on despite meaninglessness, as she accepts that she will never be able to ignore the innate cracks in the outline of her existence.

Wolfe and the Continuation of a "Novel" Form

Much like his counterparts, Tom Wolfe's career is built on both fiction and non-fiction. Wolfe is defined by his work during the 1960s and 70s, yet the writer remains a force in both the spheres of literature and journalism today with a novel projected for publication in 2012. Wolfe's eccentric style and eye for detail continues to influence his later essays. While Didion's and Mailer's later works are mostly published in book form,

Wolfe has continued to publish in magazines, as was most common during the New Journalism era.

The three Wolfe essays I will explore here are "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" from a 1989 issue of *Harper's*, "Pell Mell," featured in a 2007 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and "The Rich Have Feelings, Too" featured in a 2009 issue of *Vanity Fair*. While "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" and "Pell Mell" are both characterized as nonfiction, "The Rich Have Feelings, Too" is considered a fictional work although the essay is based loosely on actual events. In the latter Wolfe satirizes the perspective of a high-powered commodities trader whose business is forced to accept a bailout from the government, a clear nod to the auto-manufacturers bailouts in 2009. Although this essay is fictional, the work maintains the techniques of the New Journalism, further overthrowing traditional notions of reportage. "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" is an article marked by Wolfe's reverence for the realist novel and the author's call to re-adopt this style in the American literary tradition. Finally, "Pell Mell" returns to the days of George Washington, when, as Wolfe explains, America developed a level freedom unknown in most other societies. He explains that during this period, our ancestors effectively dismantled traditional notions of aristocracy ingrained in British society. From these three distinct essays, one can see that Wolfe maintains a continued attention to the lives and habits of people, as well as an emphasis on the multi-faceted quality of reportage. Wolfe's own voice comes through much more strongly in his later essays than in *Electric Kool-Aid* where the author strives more thoroughly to study and emulate his subjects.

The most obvious disparity between Wolfe's earlier style and that of his more recent works is his more obvious authorial presence. Whereas in *Electric Kool-Aid* Wolfe attempts to blend into the landscape as a compatriot to his subjects, in all three of his later works the author makes his presence known, particularly through his unique voice. While Wolfe's writing does not command quite the same attention as Mailer's third-person narration, the author nonetheless creates a particular authorial persona. In "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," for example, Wolfe writes,

> I had just written [a nonfiction novel], *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test . . .* [and] I had begun to indulge in some brave speculations about nonfiction as an art form. These were eventually recorded in a book called *The New Journalism*. Off the record, however, alone in my little apartment on East Fifty-eighth Street, I was worried that somebody out there was writing a big realistic fictional novel about the hippie experience that would blow *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* out of the water. (45)

He begins his essay with a chain of self-promotions for two of his earlier works, *Electric Kool-Aid* and *The New Journalism*. Since the article is published in 1989, it appears that Wolfe is attempting to relive his earlier years in the writing business. He continues to take pride in the fact that he not only wrote *The New Journalism*, but is also a founder of The New Journalism movement. He notes his "brave speculations about nonfiction as an art form," highlighting his bravado for probing a kind of unknown of literature. He goes on, "For a serious young writer to stick with realism after 1960 required contrariness and courage" (48). In many ways, he views himself as a "serious young writer." At the beginning of his essay, Wolfe notes that his model for a nonfiction work about New York

was William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, a realist novel. Wolfe seems to compliment indirectly his writing abilities by continuing such a literary tradition into the 1960s. This is particularly interesting in that Wolfe's objective to emulate realism runs counter to the culture he aims to document. He writes, "By the mid-1960s the conviction was not merely that the realistic novel was no longer possible but that American life no longer deserved the term *real*" (49, emph. orig.). Wolfe's own belief though, is that America should return to realism. "I was convinced then—and I am even more strongly convinced now—that precisely the opposite is true. The introduction of realism into literature in the eighteenth century . . . was like the introduction of electricity into engineering" (50). Wolfe's realism is clearly distinct from the naturalism he draws upon in his discussion of the "realistic novel." In contrast to the naturalist novel, marked by both objectivity and pessimism, Wolfe is most concerned with reporting as a means to portray "reality." He does not focus on the conditions of working or lower classes as naturalism often does, nor does he aim for objectivity within his work. "Consciously, I wanted to prove a point," he writes. "I wanted to fulfill a prediction I had made in the introduction to *The New Journalism* in 1973; namely, that the future of the fictional novel would be in a highly detailed realism based on reporting, a realism more thorough than any currently being attempted" (50). Like Mailer, the author sees the novel as the highest aspiration for a writer and his writing is continually a means to "prove a point" that the blending of genre is not only possible, but also desirable.

Similarly to Mailer, Wolfe also undermines his confidence in his style with a self-deprecating comment about himself as an author. He notes that after he wrote *Electric Kool-Aid*, he feared someone else would soon publish a work far superior to his own. Yet

his comment also presents an air of confidence. He is so sure of his subject that he believes others will attempt to steal it from under him. Similar to both Mailer and Didion, Wolfe privileges his reader with his secrets. Ironically, the author exposes his feelings as "off the record," meanwhile publishing this information about himself in his own article. He admits a secret about himself as a character to himself as a reporter clarifying that the comment is "off the record," yet as a journalist he reports this secret, therefore breaking a cardinal rule of journalism. Unlike *Electric Kool-Aid*, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" makes clear Wolfe's attempts to connect with his readers by taking them behind the scenes of his writing. While *Electric Kool-Aid* runs the risk of alienating the audience as a result of its uncommon language and descriptions, "Stalking" creates a kind of dialogue between author and reader.

In his 2009 essay, "The Rich Have Feelings, Too," he returns to some of the stylistic techniques he employs in *Electric Kool-Aid* as well as the blurred genre he discusses in "Stalking." The author uses numerous italics and exclamation points to emphasize particular phrases and create a unique tone of voice. In *Electric Kool-Aid*, the reader might assume that such techniques approximate the Pranksters' inner psyche, which is otherwise inaccessible to readers. In this essay, typography is likewise used to emphasize character. Wolfe writes from the voice of a wealthy commodities trader: "How many ordinary people have woken up in the middle of the night, eyes popped open—*swock!*—like a pair of umbrellas, stark raving terrified by the possibility that they have just blown *$7.4 billion* on [. . .] a weather forecast?" ("The Rich" 1). Here Wolfe assumes the narrative voice of a trader under C.E.O. "Robert J. 'Corky' McCorkle." Wolfe exaggerates this character's speech with emphatic italics, in addition to his

invented word: "swock." The inflated jargon of the businessman does not reflect a man in a position of great economic power. One would assume this character's speech would portray his powerful position. He is a symbol of the corporate world and the ruling class but his embellished dialogue runs counter to this high-ranking position. Still, this essay is the closest of the three works to realism in that it is admittedly fictional, yet based upon actual events. The overstated speech of the businessman shows Wolfe's bias against such a character. It might be implied that the "fictional highflier" narrating the article is a representation of Wolfe himself:

> All right, so we *did* blow the $7.4 billion when oil dropped from $145 a barrel last July to less than half that—$70—in October and less than half of that—$34.60— four months later. And we *did* have a total of almost a trillion dollars' worth of bets out on the board when the market crashed. And we *were* foolish enough to feel it was a miracle when the Treasury Department dangled its billions before us.
>
> (1)

Wolfe uses the fictional account as a cover to voice his personal opinions about the characters' excessive spending in spite of an economic downturn. Once again, he uses a tactic frequently employed by Mailer. He hides behind a character in order to voice a potentially unpopular opinion, yet distancing himself much further than does Mailer, who hides behind a character of himself rather than of another man entirely.

Wolfe's continued attention to self is visible in his return to "status." In "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," Wolfe attributes the importance of status to his reverence for realism:

Lionel Trilling was right when he said, in 1948, that what produced great

characters in the nineteenth-century European model was the portrayal of 'class

traits modified by personality.' But he went on to argue that the old class structure

by now had disintegrated, particularly in the United States, rendering the

technique useless. Again, I would say precisely the opposite is the case. If we

substitute for *class*, in Trilling's formulation, the broader term *status*, that

technique has never been more essential in portraying the innermost life of the

individual. (51)

No matter his subject, Wolfe finds status to be a defining factor in documenting people. It

is clear that he continues his social-psychological approach, or more specifically, his

attention to sociology. Here the author notes that status is a contemporary U.S. version of

class, which allows individuals to understand one another within the greater societal

structure. Whereas for Mailer memory is of defining significance and for Didion places

hold meaning, for Wolfe no human being can be described aptly without looking at the

way his or her actions and characteristics echo the changing norms and values of a

particular group or society.

In his essay, "Pell Mell," Wolfe examines status by going back in time to a dinner

at the White House in 1803. At the opening of the essay, Wolfe describes British

ambassador, Anthony Merry: "he shows up at the White House wearing a hat with a

swooping plume, a ceremonial sword, gold braid, shoes with gleaming buckles—in short,

the whole aristocratic European ambassadorial getup—for his formal introduction to the

president of the United States" (1). The author focuses his attention on Merry's "getup,"

insofar as it generates symbolic meaning not only about the time period but also about the

man's position in society. Wolfe outwardly states that the combination of the hat, sword, hair, and shoes emblematizes the aristocracy. By noting the symbolic dress of early Americans so distinct from contemporary apparel, Wolfe reveals that very little has changed in regard to the symbolic meaning of our clothing. We continue to emphasize dress, accessories, and even hairstyles as representations of our status.

He goes on to note how our emphasis on "class" transformed into the importance of "status." Wolfe attributes the exact transformation to "approximately 5 p.m. on Friday, December 2, 1803, the moment Thomas Jefferson sprang the so-called pell-mell on the new British ambassador, Anthony Merry, at dinner in the White House" (1). He intends to document the move from a determinate class structure in England to a socially mobile one, which he claims exists in the United States. The author labels this transformation in structure "the American idea." He continues,

> [Merry] was part of an undifferentiated haunch-to-paunch herd of the titled, the untitled, the eminences, and the not-muches entering the doorway. They had no choice but to take their seats pell- mell … *any* seat—first come, first served. Literally *pell-mell* referred to a confused, disorderly crowd in a headlong rush, and that was exactly what it felt like to His Majesty's Ambassador Merry. (1)

Wolfe distinguishes this particular event as a kind of overthrow of class and subsequent birth of a new structural understanding of society. Jefferson undermines Merry's royal standing that goes entirely against the American ideal of rising to power through hard work, rather than privileged blood. Wolfe notes, "It has been recorded that Jefferson insisted on round tables for dining because they had no head and no foot, removing any trace of the aristocratic European custom of silently ranking dinner guests by how close

to the head of the table they sat. 'That certain class' does not exist here psychologically"

(2). Instead of portraying distaste for American politics, as both Didion and Mailer do,

Wolfe glorifies our system, which he believes allows people to rise in the ranks and

achieve success. Wolfe's strikingly subjective political stance in illustrating this event is

comparable to Didion's in *Political Fictions*. While Mailer voices his political beliefs the

most obtrusively, both Didion and Wolfe have become more overtly political in their later

works. The political slant featured in Wolfe's later works is his way of continuing the

New Journalism in that the political zeal of the 1960s and 70s finds its way into these

later essays.

In "The Rich Have Feelings, Too," status is everything. Here Wolfe show how

this idea has evolved over the years to produce fantastical egos for those in power. In one

moment, he illustrates the irony of status as it is strictly defined by a series of symbols.

He cites a quote from a CNN article on the Auto Bailouts:

> A congressman from New York, Gary Ackerman, upon hearing that this impudent
>
> trio had treated themselves to private planes to come to ask for the American
>
> taxpayer's money, said his constituents would be appalled, shocked to the point of
>
> disbelief: 'It's almost like seeing a guy show up at the soup kitchen in a high hat
>
> and a tuxedo. Couldn't you all have downgraded to first class or jet-pooled or
>
> something to get here?' (1)

Wolfe emphasizes the overwhelming significance that we attribute to status symbols. He

reveals the volatile public reaction Ackerman anticipates, or maybe even incites by

pointing out the actions of the CEOs on the record. For the public, a private plane

signifies great wealth. These men are asking the taxpayers for money to save their

companies while simultaneously parading their tremendous affluence. Wolfe

demonstrates that image is not necessarily reality. One can mask a changing status, in this

case, financial troubles, with a symbol of dominance. Status is entirely socially-

determined, but it is a determination that we rely on to structure our reality. If, as

Ackerman notes sarcastically, the men had "downgraded to first class," or in some way

presented themselves more modestly, the public response would likely have changed

dramatically. Wolfe reveals that it is not reality but perception that defines status, and

thereby defines our understanding of the world. As in *Electric Kool-Aid*, sociology

remains a notable aspect of his writing. In this case, he supports the theory of symbolic

interaction, which posits that humans construct reality through the exchange of social

objects, or symbols. Interaction between individuals then is based upon a series of

patterned interpretations.

Wolfe employs one particular status motif in a variety of works throughout his

career. Specifically in "The Rich" essay, *Electric Kool-Aid*, and his later novel *I am*

Charlotte Simmons Wolfe uses the borrowed term "tarantulas" to represent the equalizers

of society. In using this term Wolfe alludes to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a

philosophical work in which "tarantulas" spread the poison of justice and equality,

stealing away the possibility for individual success. Wolfe's philosophical allusion often

seems out of context but the motif tells us a great deal about the writer's work. The

tarantula reveals the sociological and political undertones underlying all of his writing. In

Electric Kool-Aid he discusses Ken Kesey's novel *Sometimes a Great Notion* in which

"the union leaders, the strikers, and the townspeople were the tarantulas" (*Electric Kool-*

Aid 51). These people, for the most part, desire social change and equality. He adds, "It

was a novel in which the strikers are the villains and the strikebreaker is the hero" (51). The book intrigues Wolfe in that it reverses his expectations about a societal phenomenon. Kesey's fictional strikebreakers, the Stamper family, defy an entire group of unionized workers. Wolfe is surprised by Kesey's book, especially because he considers group mentality to hold overwhelming power over individualized action. In order to explain this surprising phenomenon he employs the motif of the tarantula, which reveals that our society is marked by an inescapable inequality. Rather than drawing on the work of a sociologist, here Wolfe refers to Nietzsche's philosophy that people who attempt to progress beyond societal inequality are pests and must be squashed.

Another instance of the tarantula motif occurs in "The Rich" essay when the narrator writes of the government officials: "the tarantulas had arrived—only, we didn't know that yet" (1). Here Wolfe conveys the perspective of the businessmen who believe the government officials are wrong in their attempts to promote equality. The author satirizes this Marxist belief that the ruling class promotes a certain ideology as a means to stay in power. Here the businessmen call the officials "tarantulas," attempting to suggest that the government bailouts are actually manipulative and cruel. Rather than saving them, the government has diminished these high-powered men to "beggars" (1). Here Wolfe's motif functions to mock the belief that the government is at fault for these men's damaged reputation and status. They don't recognize the officials' "Trojan horse:" the government's underlying intention to weaken the men's authority (1). Through the tarantula, Wolfe argues his belief that as long as there are men like his fictional businessmen, there will never be equality within society. These people support the

tarantula: the idea that inequality is permanent. Furthermore, the tarantula emblematizes the commonalities, namely the sociological undertones, found in all the author's works.

"The Rich" essay not only exemplifies Wolfe's concern with status, but also his blurring of fiction and nonfiction within his writing. Wolfe fictionalizes a current event, altering the perspective from that of the journalist to that of the subject. Although he uses a fictional perspective, he also employs pieces of a direct quotation from Gary Ackerman, featured in a CNN article from November of 2008. The blurring of reportage and literature coincides with Wolfe's definition of realism in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" where he states the importance of interviewing and deeply researching one's subject. Didion and Mailer suggest that fiction pervades all genres while Wolfe asserts that the best writing is based on reporting, and thus it must maintain a quality of nonfiction. He inverts the notion of false objectivity by emphasizing the importance of creating the most realistic depiction. Yet, the Ackerman quote he employs in "The Rich" essay is not his own, undermining the truth in his reportage and actually supporting the doctrine of panfictionality (the idea that fiction extends through all genres). Even if this quotation is accurate, Wolfe takes it from another news source, diminishing his authority as an investigative writer. If the author can create a fabricated tale using direct quotations to support it, we can only wonder what the media does on a daily basis. Clearly, simple reporting does not get to the heart of "truth," which the New Journalism reveals to be a fallacy. In this regard, we must continue to question Wolfe's reporting style and the authenticity of *Electric Kool-Aid* as a work of nonfiction. In the end the only genre that Wolfe adheres to is "Wolfeian writing" and for him, this is what matters above all.

Close analysis of Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe's later writings reveals that these authors have maintained a similar style throughout their careers. Mailer's work is still egotistic. His attention to self as a kind of memoirist in *Armies of the Night* is in large part emblematic of the author's entire body of work, rather than exclusively that of the 1960s and 70s. Mailer continually portrays himself as a character in his work, often broadcasting his concern for his public identity. Nearly all of his writing presents his opinion in opposition, leading to an inflated subjectivity. Mailer continues to challenge other tenets of journalism, notably those discussed in the Chapter 1: ethics, authenticity, and blurred genre. While Joan Didion's body of work is slightly more varied than those of her counterparts, her overarching values remain very similar throughout the years. Like Mailer, Didion is concerned with memory and excavating her past. Her work is continually characterized by a reverence for geographic spaces, a feeling of disconnectedness, and the use of narrative gaps, which reflect this sentiment. Didion's subjects change but her sense of meaninglessness remains, a fact that she accepts more fully in her later writings. Wolfe's later work places him closer to Mailer as his authorial presence becomes more pronounced. His attention to status and other sociological concerns as well as the continued emphasis on blurred genre reveals the consistency between his earlier and later works. The three authors are not limited to the period of the 1960s and 70s as their New Journalistic tendencies continue to be important in their later works.

Conclusion

From a study of *The Armies of the Night*, *The White Album*, and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, it is clear that Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe all break with traditional conventions of journalism in their unique works. These authors are grouped together insofar as their writing differs from traditional reportage. In this sense, the New Journalism movement provides a great deal of room for freedom of expression and growth. Each writer goes against ethical norms, undermines the importance of authenticity, and revels in the freedom of blurring genre. The liberation of the New Journalism has fostered a specific kind of writing for the aforementioned authors: writing focused on identity and self. Although this subjective approach goes entirely against conventional journalism, which stresses the importance of objectivity, the New Journalism makes room for other disciplines. Didion introduces philosophical thinking into her work, Mailer writes about the march on the Pentagon as memoir, and Wolfe rewrites the experience of the Merry Pranksters under the influence of social psychology.

If we regard the work of Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe as emblematic of the New Journalism, it is clear that this genre has persisted through the generations. Thus far, these authors have produced work spanning four decades, proving that the New Journalism is marked by authorial influence, rather than time period as critics often argue. Much akin to their liberated writing style, Mailer, Didion, and Wolfe are not constrained by the 1960s and early 70s. All three of these authors have maintained their unique styles throughout their careers. Mailer's later work remains laden with egotism. He continually uses himself as a character, often broadcasting his concern with public identity. Nearly all of his works present his personal ideology opposing another ideology; thus, there is an

inflated subjectivity. As in *The Armies of the Night*, his later works challenge other tenets of journalism, notably those discussed in the Chapter 1: ethics, authenticity, and blurred genre. These facets of Mailer's writing are clear in his essays "The Faith of Graffiti" and "Of a Small and Modest Malignancy, Wicked and Bristling with Dots," as well as in his book, *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*.

Didion's body of work is slightly more varied than Mailer's, yet her overarching values remain very similar through the years. Like Mailer, Didion is concerned with memory and reminiscing about her own past. Her work continues to feature a reverence for geographic spaces, a feeling of disconnectedness, and the use of narrative gaps, which reflect this sentiment. Didion's subjects vary but her attention is consistently focused in on her own place in the world. This is particularly visible in her essays "Pacific Distances," "Vichy Washington," and her memoir, *Where I Was From*. While her works reflect the time period in which they are written, her style remains largely consistent although in her later writings she seems to accept the meaningless she discusses in *The White Album* more readily.

Finally, Wolfe's eclectic style is equally unaffected by the decades. His attention to status and other sociological concerns resembles his past work. Like his counterpart, Mailer, he continues to emphasize the significance of blurred genre in this later writing. Whether he is discussing the acid trips of the Pranksters in *Electric Kool-Aid*, the lifestyle of the "Big Three Auto CEOs" in "The Rich Have Feelings, Too," or our American ancestry in "Pell Mell," the author retains a focus on people and the way in which they provide a glimpse into our society. Furthermore, in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," Wolfe voices the advantages of breaking convention through blurred genre.

Consequently, rather than a generational phenomenon, the New Journalism appears to be far more an authorial tradition—a response fueled by the upheaval of the 1960s but by no means diminished through the years.

"*Where are we headed,*" wonders Joan Didion's essay, "On the Road," in *The White Album* (179, emph. orig. punctutation orig.). This question is an important one, specifically with regard to the New Journalism movement. Technically speaking, the emergence of the 1980s rendered the "New" genre an old one. While the New Journalism endured the two decades it defined, the question remains whether this style will continue once the careers of the New Journalist writers have come to an end. Norman Mailer passed away in 2007 after publishing his final novel, *A Castle in the Forest*, and his final nonfiction work, *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*. His legacy endures, as does the work of his counterparts, Didion and Wolfe, who continue to write. But will their influence infiltrate journalism and nonfiction circles of today? To what extent will the New Journalism movement continue when the founders of this movement are gone? Only partial answers to these questions exist. A few writers have attempted to tackle the subject, most notably Robert S. Boynton, in *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft* published in 2005. Boynton writes, "In the thirty years since Wolfe's manifesto, a group of writers has been quietly securing a place at the very center of contemporary American literature for reportorially [sic] based, narrative-driven long-form nonfiction" (Boynton xi). Like Wolfe in *The New Journalism*, Boynton goes on to list a number of writers that are a part of this "New New" genre. Boynton's introduction leads one to question how similar these writers

really are to the New Journalists defined by Wolfe in his anthology. By "quietly securing a place," these writers are inherently distinct from writers like Mailer and Wolfe, for instance, who possess colossal egos and highly recognizable identities within the literary world. Furthermore, Boynton explains that these New New Journalists are more concerned with "the *way* one gets the story" as opposed to the experimental blurring between fact and fiction (xiii, emph. orig.). According to Christopher Sterling, "The so-called new new journalism is characterized by the journalists' new depth of reporting. The books are written after living for years among their subjects and in some cases attempting to assimilate into their subject's culture" (Sterling 174). While it is clear that the focus of this later New Journalism is somewhat distinct in its methods of reportage than the earlier New Journalism, there are a variety of similarities that are overlooked. While Sterling considers the assimilation of the reporter into his or her subjects' culture to be a unique approach, this technique clearly emulates Wolfe's reportorial role in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Likewise, Didion and Mailer remain wholly a part of their subject, as their subjects are often themselves. According to Stephen Vaughn, full-length literary journalism is by no means a thing of the past either:

> where once reporters at the end of the day and on breaks used to have a novel going in the desk drawer, today's journalists frequently have a book-length work of literary journalism in their computer that they try to work on in their spare time. This, too, says something about the institutionalization of literary journalism today as a distinctive genre in its own right. (271-72)

Yet these literary journalists, like the New Journalists of the 1960s and 70s, remain distinguished from the mainstream. As Wolfe aspired to writing the novel, it is clear that

these literary journalists aspire to a similar goal of long-form writing. Such writers as Eric Schlosser, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, and Lawrence Weschler, among others, have worked as either staff writers or contributors to journalistic publications; yet, these writers' careers are defined, for the most part, by their nonfiction books, rather than particular essays or articles.

Like the New Journalists, these contemporary authors continue to write for particular publications that are often considered to be more literary than other lifestyle or subject-based journals or magazines. For example, writers continue to publish lengthier essays in magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *The Village Voice*, *New York Times Magazine*, and *Esquire*. Although these publications have retained their "literary" quality to an extent, they have likewise gained new reputations over the years. For example, *The Village Voice* has become increasingly mainstream since Mailer helped to launch it in 1955, while *Esquire* has developed a more lowbrow reputation over the decades. Magazine articles have become more of a supplementary aspect to the writing of these New New Journalists, as the esteem for such magazines, once considered to be more intellectual, is slowly diminishing.

Most significant to the changing face of contemporary magazines is the move from the print age to the digital age. This fact may contribute to the growing number of literary nonfiction books as opposed to essays published in magazines. Magazines are rapidly moving from the printing press to the Internet in an attempt to keep up with its rapid growth. Paradoxically, the Internet with its seemingly boundless spatial capacity, has fueled shorter, rather than lengthier stories. With its focus on speed and efficiency, it fosters a get in and get out approach wildly distinct from the New Journalists' writing

style. The glossy feel of the magazine page is becoming a thing of the past. As print

publications become more rare, digital media continues to grow exponentially. Blogs are

fostering the same kinds of wit and genre blurring common to the New Journalists,

likewise allowing a more liberating approach to nonfiction writing. The influence of the

New Journalist writers on popular media today is indisputable. Just as the early realists

like Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and John Steinbeck, along with the Yellow Journalism

produced by William Randolph Hearst proved influential to the movement, the New

Journalists will inevitably influence their successors. Will the New Journalism be the

same without "The" New Journalists? It will not, but like many other literary genres that

have seemingly fallen by the wayside, the influence of this movement will live on in

other media. The New Journalism and its rebellion against convention will continue to

play a role in the future of literature and the ways in which we think about reportage.

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