

# The Underwater Narrative: Joan Didion's *Miami*

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*This essay examines Joan Didion's Miami in light of its off-stage or "underwater" narrative concerning the Iran-Contra affair and the distortions in contemporary political rhetoric that scandal epitomized.*

A few years ago, while teaching a course on contemporary narrative journalism, I took what was for me the rare step of designing a visual aid that went beyond the usual handout, graphic map, or PowerPoint. I took two standard, 8.5" X 11", head-and-shoulder Presidential photographs—one of Ronald Reagan, the other of John F. Kennedy—and glued them together, back-to-back; then I jammed a thin wooden dowel between them, so that I could spin the dowel in my palms, thereby allowing each portrait to morph into the other. In part, I hoped to provoke students into thinking about the way we often approach a work of reportage by gauging our distance from, or identification with, a fixed point on a political spectrum, or the political personage said to embody that position. But as a result, I meant to suggest, we are also flummoxed when we encounter a journalist who sees no fundamental difference between the supposed ends of that spectrum: no difference, say, between the policies of a Reagan or a Kennedy when it came to Latin America. The intended effect of my device was therefore to spin our ideological compass, and make the solid suddenly seem fluid.

Frankly, I can't honestly say whether my visual device cleared up existing confusion in the class or just added to it. But the idea had been provoked, in large part, by the considerable difficulty of the text I was teaching at that moment: Joan Didion's *Miami* (1987), the first-person narrative expanded

from four previous installments in the *New York Review of Books*. Ostensibly, Didion's central subject was White House entanglement with Miami's Cuban exile communities from the Bay of Pigs to her present, and I was teaching her in a semester that ended with texts that, like *Miami*, broached transnational or border matters. In different incarnations of my syllabus over the years, Didion has been an enduring if often perplexing pivot point: a former conservative who clearly had found her own political compass spinning in the Reagan years. For many reasons, I find *Miami* one of the most challenging books I teach: students frequently find Didion's ethnocentrism off-putting, her literary style baffling, and her politics—my desperate classroom devices notwithstanding—virtually un-locatable on any political spectrum familiar to them.

Much of that reception is understandable, paralleling as it does assessments of *Miami* coming from some of our most respected theorists, critics, and working journalists. As Sandra Hinchman has shown, despite the widespread praise the book received in the mainstream national press, many other commentators were offended by what they regarded as a nativist streak in Didion's thinking, by her fondness for conspiratorial thinking, and by her characterization of Miami as a "tropical" political zone threatening the cooler, supposedly more rational civic sphere of the U.S. Ricardo Ortiz likewise observed that *Miami* had "riled" Didion's critics, adding himself that she might well be grouped in the "Cuba-bad *juju*" school of hemispheric analysis. Nicolas Lemann, meanwhile, observed that Didion had left the "impression that Cubans are mad dogs who would resort to the Uzi as readily as you or I would blow our nose."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, negative reactions to *Miami* often merely followed the template already established by the reception of its prequel *Salvador* (1983), and by the general suspicion of Didion as a conservative, post-colonial pundit unfairly importing Joseph Conrad's dark interior into Central America.<sup>2</sup> Thus it was perhaps unsurprising that Edward Said chimed in, taking particular aim at *Miami*'s style—which, let it be said, other reviewers would find "Jamesian" at best and "arabesque" or "lazy" or "serpentine" at worst. Calling her "manerred and highly self-conscious prose ungainly and even downright ugly," Said wrote that Didion's style was a "symptom" of larger "failures in grasp and vision" that were plainly political. "Clarity here is just a word it might be nice to pronounce," he concluded. "And that is the problem with Didion's work. It offers no politics beyond its sometimes admirably crafted turns of phrase, its arch conceits, its carefully designed but limited effects."<sup>3</sup>

Of course, volatile responses like these are anything but uncommon in the reviewing business. In fact, the more surprising point was how often, whether

a critic came to praise Didion or to bury her, an implicit journalistic premium on cultural sympathy and plain-speaking clarity led so many reviewers to read *Miami* in rather unsympathetic, obfuscating, and even truncated ways. As I have been suggesting, the power of such premium was especially apparent in the ways that reviewers so frequently chose to read *Miami* as if it were simply a book profiling its title city, or its Cuban exile community as such. But this expectation, in turn, often led reviewers to downplay or even ignore the actually more newsworthy, contrapuntal elements of Didion's narrative: *Miami's* more oblique, "off stage" story about the ongoing Iran-Contra scandal, and the distortions in contemporary political speech and memory that event epitomized. In the end, ironically, by almost universally sidelining her more timely story, reviewers intent on assessing *Miami's* cultural politics overlooked Didion's most compelling cultural topic: the relation between contemporary politics and *rhetoric* which, after all, was what she said in several interviews had been her primary subject all along.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, therefore, I want to invert the more familiar approach reviewers took to *Miami*, and draw out both of these subjects: the parts of her off-stage (or what Didion calls her "underwater") narrative that were manifested in Iran-Contra; and her experimental attempt to mold her voice and syntax to the contours of that political narrative's own script. I also mean to explore what Didion's reception suggests about an interpretive impasse that often haunts current discussions of literary journalism. There are indeed many quite valuable analyses of Didion's style in existence: I think particularly of Chris Anderson's and John Schilb's seminal work in this regard.<sup>5</sup> Yet *Miami's* reception, in contrast, is also evidence of how the critical vocabularies of cultural criticism, on the one hand, and literary journalism studies on the other—whether emanating from the fields of creative nonfiction, "fourth genre" studies, or even the commentary of professional journalists—can end up talking past one another. For example, *Miami's* representation of Cuban and/or Hispanic aspirations really *was* narrow and inconsistent, and Didion's nostalgia for putatively "American" civic values quite palpable—on these grounds Said and others were surely right. For such readers, therefore, it will not do to paper over Didion's lapses—one can imagine the familiar "New Journalism" label, so ineffectively, rising to the cause—by invoking the brittle defense that her writing simply reflects her own subjectivity, creates a mood, and so on.<sup>6</sup> But by the same token, it seems equally mistaken to disqualify *Miami* as cultural analysis by an exclusive recourse to these failings, either by separating *Miami's* style from its analysis, or by implicitly holding the book to a preemptively rigid set of aesthetic or journalistic standards Didion never intended to follow in the first place.

To put the matter more directly: *Miami* is not, despite the apparently locatable, empirical, geographic place-name of its title, an exercise in either cultural or journalistic immersion that means to capture an ethnicity or city or even an exile community whole. Rather, it is a book built on what we might call an “inferential” technique that explores the rhetorical structures of competing political *stories* in a transnational ground. And rather than being an exposé unearthing previously unseen documents, *Miami* re-looks at the structures of such documents (memoirs, political position papers, investigative reports from Congress) that come to represent and memorialize historical events. I call this technique “inferential” because by repeatedly pointing to her “underwater narrative,” Didion means to draw out currents of belief and political portent that flow underneath supposedly solid or empirical architectures of ethnicity, policy, and place. Like my classroom device, she aims to plumb currents that make seemingly fixed things fluid, transposable, or even reversible. Miami is thus present in Didion’s analysis, but not in the ways we have suggested. Rather, her primary approach is to see Miami both as a junction point between Caribbean and Central American politics and U.S. foreign policy, and yet also as a cultural-rhetorical zone where the memories, speeches, and testimonies—the expressive ways of recording and remembering such encounters—are constantly rewritten.

To unpack these dimensions of Didion’s work, I will first try to sift out the legitimate and, alas, often conventional expectations of which *Miami*’s literary and journalistic practices frequently ran afoul. Then—in part, by comparing her work to another Iran-Contra exposé, Theodore Draper’s encyclopedic *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (1991)—I will discuss how Didion’s insinuation of that scandal, along with her attention to rhetoric and especially syntax, helps us decipher the rationales behind her own techniques.<sup>7</sup> In closing, I want to suggest a few ways we might rethink Didion’s cultural-rhetorical analysis, including its limitations, in light of the subjects that even her most sympathetic reviewers often kept underwater.

## I

From the above, it should be clear that Didion’s detractors, like her supporters, read *Miami* as a mixture of travel narrative and political exposé: a story about political corruption emanating from a border city in the American tropical zone. Even a cursory look at Didion’s footnotes showed that she drew considerably upon the muckraking zeal (and satirical venom) of local Miami columnists and reporters like Carl Hiaasen and Alfonso Chardy, the latter of the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Miami Herald* team on Iran-Contra.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Didion’s argument that tropical, authoritarian politics now permeated the

U.S. political right, even so far as to ghostwrite Reagan policy statements (181), often seemed to echo long-standing, sensationalist fears of the Spanish “Black Legend.”<sup>9</sup> Didion thus seemed, to many, trapped in the conventions of Victorian travel correspondence, where the role of the journalist had often been to sift, judge, and even lecture foreign nationals on the meaning of U.S. democracy.<sup>10</sup> *Miami* did discuss strife between rival factions within the exile-Cuban community, and it did mock local ignorance of the Cuban cultural traditions that Miami’s Anglo elites preferred to regard as the stuff of exotic “color” (61). But otherwise, Didion depicted the cause of “*la lucha*,” a cause she casts as politically ambidextrous, as reflecting a style of politics “indigenous” (13) to the Caribbean and Central America: prone to operatic gesture, overvaluing personal honor, and characterized by extremist intolerance of dissent or dialogue. Whether she was right or not about intolerance in these exile groups, Didion’s dichotomy between the “tropics” and the U.S. political tradition surely reflected the implicit ethnocentrism long present in the tradition of muckraking exposé.<sup>11</sup>

Didion will certainly never disappoint those who would continue to read her as a moralist and (failed) muckraker. Yet what was interesting was how even divergent opinions of her work testified to surprisingly firm, shared assumptions about what made for more effective journalistic and cultural analysis in the first place. Said’s response to *Miami*, in fact, was particularly striking because it seemed as if his own frequent crossovers into public reviewing had, in this instance, led him to dispense with academic positions he might have otherwise adopted. Here we had a leading literary theorist disavowing a work on the grounds that its “literariness” was precisely what disqualified it from being good journalism—and moreover, acting as if plain-style “clarity” and journalistic forthrightness were incontestable goods in their own right. Intentionally or not, Said’s assumptions echoed standards in the journalistic mainstream that often found Didion’s departures from longer, deeply documented exposé—again Draper’s book is a fitting counter example—as indicative of her supposed indifference to legwork and in-depth reporting. Since Didion made no apologies for reexamining documents other investigators had already found, she was also accused of offering “nothing new.”<sup>12</sup> Didion’s style thus had a decided proof-in-the-pudding place in responses like Said’s: substantiating her supposed rejection of “deep” cultural reporting, her overly stylized prose seemed to testify to a dual failure of journalistic and ethnographic insight.

I use the word “ethnographic” (rather than, say, “cultural” or “social”) quite intentionally here, to flag a particular set of preconceptions about the *writing* of narrative reportage that *Miami* repeatedly thwarts. That is, our

default setting to reportage has long been not only to put feet-on-the-ground, direct witnessing at a premium, or to privilege “distance from” personal subjectivity or political extremism (the rituals of objectivity, balance, or impartiality famously delineated by scholars like Gaye Tuchman).<sup>13</sup> Mainstream norms have also venerated, usually, the creation of a three-dimensional, holistic portrait of a given cultural milieu or habitat, or “a people” under journalistic scrutiny. Under these expectations, journalists are supposed to balance sympathy for their in-cultural informants against professional, empiricist skepticism. Even as countercultural as immersion journalism can claim to be, the method can actually be tailored to suit these mainstream norms quite easily. Immersion writing typically values a process of cultural initiation, where the participant-observer claims to break through into the culture or sub culture about which she or he writes. This is a style, to use a term James Clifford has coined, of “ethnographic realism”: a style which breaks through illusion or hype or simplistic judgment in favor of the detachment, roundedness and completeness that commonly replicates the experience of reading realistic fiction. In the long-form book, journalists therefore prefer even-incidental details of setting, the use of omniscient or third-person perspective, and the reconciliation of divergent testimonies or dialogue into a consensual view, often of retrospect.<sup>14</sup>

This essay is not the place for a wholesale critique of these journalistic assumptions—even though, as I have argued elsewhere, their impact on even celebrated examples of narrative nonfiction has not always been as uniformly beneficial as we think.<sup>15</sup> The narrative illusion of novelistic wholeness can obscure, for instance, the absence of out-migrants from a cultural scene; it can create sentimental attachments to native informants while demonizing unnamed social and economic forces; for all its beneficial attention to concrete detail, empirical witnessing cannot always illuminate less visible matters like institutional racism, economic power lines, or privately held or unspoken beliefs. Novelistic seeming dialogue or even third-person narration can obscure fundamental questions of journalistic sourcing and evidence. But really, the pertinent point here is simply that *Miami* flies in the face of just about every one of these expectations. For example, Didion emphasizes her own estrangement from, rather than her initiation into, her Miami milieu; she seems fully at ease relying upon the local reporting of others rather than foregrounding her own direct witnessing; and she tends to present her historical documents not as evidence that allows the reader to see behind events, but as rhetorical illusions that stand between the journalist and actual knowing. (She even sometimes confesses that her stories may be “intrinsically impossible to corroborate” [201]—to some, a startling admission for a writer of journalistic exposé).

These and other elements make plain why *Miami* can frustrate those readers expecting a fuller ethnographic account and even, I think, the conservative moral critique commonly attributed to Didion herself. As I have suggested, *Miami* instead prefers to make the ground move underneath us. It is not only that Didion writes about Miami's historical epilogues coexisting with its prologues (12); that a character like Bill Novo, a local CIA agent (or is he?), is given the gift of "materializing and dematerializing sideways" (154); that JFK is made to sound like Ronald Reagan ("We may well be . . . well, none that I am familiar with . . . I don't think as of today that we are" [96]); or that real-life characters turn out to have surreal names like Commander Zero or Orlando Bosch. It is also that Didion's syntax seems to spin her own history with many of the same dizzying results. Plain speaking declarations are replaced by fragments, dropped clauses, moments when key terms are left stranded (or abandoned) at the ends of sentences; journalistic attribution collapses in on itself, imploded with scare quotes and hyper-qualifications; metaphors are mixed wildly, making paragraphs seem like labyrinths. Take this passage on the spirit of *la lucha*:

In the passion of *el exhibo* there are certain stations at which the converged, or colliding, fantasies of Miami and Washington appear in fixed relief. Resentments are recited, rosaries of broken promises. Occasions of error are recounted, imperfect understandings, instances in which the superimposition of Washington abstractions on Miami possibilities may or may not have been, in a word Washington came to prefer during the 1980s, flawed. (14)

Here, Didion transmutes what reviewers often anticipated as colliding cultures (again, an ethnographic reading) into colliding fantasies, while the faith of exile politics is measured out like stations on the cross, or beads on a rosary. Didion's imagery, meanwhile, is displaced by deeply passive sentence structures—and above, by the byplay of superimposed "abstractions" (no word itself is more abstract) upon "possibilities" (unnamed), the ambiguity of "may or may not have," and having the keyword to the entire summary ("flawed") arrive, as if abandoned, at the end of its sentence.

Didion's rendering of her journalistic "backgrounding" can seem equally complicated. For example, she recounts the moment when, after the failure of the Bay of Pigs, Cuban exile leaders had been flown to Washington, where they met with John Kennedy at the White House. Beyond putting everything at a second or third remove—we can't tell if the scare quotes below signal Didion's own disbelief, direct quotation, or a fictional invention by her main source—she also puts the past tense right alongside the present, and then jumps ahead in time. Her verb tenses, as well, seem intended to repli-



cate an ongoing “script” or plan, something prior to the historical actors and wholly inauthentic. In D.C., she tells us,

[the exiles ] would sit by the fireplace and hear the President speak of the responsibilities of leadership, of the struggle against communism on as many fronts and of his own commitment to the “eventual” freedom of Cuba; a meeting which in fact took place, and at which, according to Schlesinger, the President spoke “slowly and thoughtfully” (“I had never seen the President more impressive”), and the members of the Cuban Revolutionary Council had been, “in spite of themselves,” “deeply moved.” (168)

Again, one can appreciate how these passages could baffle reviewers accustomed to exposés that debunk or demystify. Here Didion’s use of the future tense and indirect quotation, instead, make the fireside-chatting President speak only in artificial clichés of second hand scripts; she then uses a scare quote to qualify “eventual”; then, she follows her historical reconstruction by what is apparently another qualified attribution (“according to Schlesinger”). Arthur Schlesinger, in the meantime, is made to trot out ridiculously general honorifics that are, we assume, not direct quotations of the players themselves. These quotes are themselves interrupted by the historian’s own parenthetical asides that seem absurdly hollow, especially since they are followed by what seem like third-remove attributions of the exiles’ emotional state, which Schlesinger cannot have possibly known. In such a rendering, Didion’s single observation of fact, that this was “a meeting which in fact took place” seems—well, out of place itself.

And finally, there are the most vivid but difficult passages from *Miami* where Didion imparts “conceits,” as Said would term them, from architecture and the visual arts. If the title *Salvador* punned maliciously on Christ, on salvific political fantasies of Washington (left and right), and also on the surrealism of Salvador Dali, *Miami* ventures into dream-narrative forms of Chagall, the postmodern architecture of the Miami firm *Architectonica*, and the performance art of Christo. Using these aesthetic templates as her guide—and especially their blurring of depth, the shifting of foreground, the floating detail—Didion speaks of “cultures not exactly colliding but glancing off one another, at unpromising angles” (104). In other words, political abstractions (even nations) become geometric shapes, designs of shimmering surfaces, planes and fronts, and most of all “angles.” But angles and surfaces themselves dissolve into perhaps Didion’s dominant conceit, that of liquidity. She elaborates on this quality in a long meditation on Miami’s skyline:

A certain liquidity suffused everything about the place. Causeways and bridges and even Brickell Avenue did not stay put but rose and fell, allowing the masts of ships to glide among the marble and glass façades of the un-



leased office buildings. The buildings themselves seem to swim free against the sky: there had grown up in Miami during the recent money years an architecture which appeared to have slipped its moorings, a not inappropriate style for a terrain with only a provisional claim on being land at all. Surfaces were reflective, opalescent. Angles were oblique, intersecting to disorienting effect. . . . Skidmore, Owings and Merrill managed, in its Southeast Financial Center, the considerable feat of rendering fifty-five stories of polished gray granite incorporeal, a sky-blue illusion. (30)

The capitol scene of her underwater narrative, this is hardly a world of hard facts unveiled by a voice seeing behind events. Instead, like Didion's style as a whole, this landscape lingers in the provisional, evoking material superstructures that become unmoored, and surfaces only partially penetrable if at all.

## II

If we continue to read passages like the three I have selected above solely in ethnographic-realist terms—the rendering of *la lucha*, the exiles' field trip to JFK's fireside, and the city skyline—*Miami's* rather marginal reputation, even within scholarly assessments of Didion's own oeuvre, will probably persist. Yet we might begin that noticing that all three are not, precisely, “grounded” in the fixed locale so many reviewers of the book seemed to expect. The first positions el exhilo not so much as an ideology as a space where Miami and Washington fantasies collide; the second shows Cubans being dislocated to the White House, in an account itself filtered second hand through a Presidential historian; the third delineates a skyline remade by foreign capital and globally ambitious architectural firms. In a similar inversion, in the narrative arc of *Miami* itself, Didion's “prologue”-history about Cuban exiles is counterpoised against a more timely “epilogue” of Washington ambitions; her analysis, as one of her *NYRB* installments put it, is as much about “Washington-in-Miami” as Miami *per se*.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, one way of rethinking the relationship of Didion's style to her cultural analysis, as I've suggested, is to look backward from the last third of *Miami*, and to tease out the parts of her underwater narrative about Iran-Contra. Indeed, even when we turn to an account like Draper's *A Very Thin Line*, we discover how unstable the traditional grounds of political exposé had themselves become.

Like most exposés, of course, Draper's prefers to anchor us in the real. Expressing the more familiar documentarian confidence that the “facts” could “speak as much as possible for themselves” (x), Draper's book was a thoroughly documented, 670-page chronicle crafted in the chronological, long-narrative, character-driven form we respond to as realist history. It primarily traced the unraveling of the Reagan White House, by following a path from an initial and quite public moral stand against bargaining for hostages to the

extravagant measures Reagan's cohort, notably John Poindexter and Oliver North, took to insulate the President from culpability and political fallout. And true to its genre requirements, *A Very Thin Line* began by setting wider political contexts and its terminology; it always introduced key players with capsule biographies; then it marched through the institutional steps of the arms-for-hostages scheme, from planning to fund-raising and so on. Draper's account also aimed to go beyond the grainy "who told what to whom when" demands of news coverage. To offset the suggestion that the scandal was simply the work of a group of bad apples, Draper argues that the planners of Iran-Contra not only exhibited individual hubris or sheer incompetence (though there was plenty of both to go around). He also shows that their plan could not have gone forward without the cooperation or obeisance of other agencies: primarily, Casey's CIA—which built its operations around a holy trinity of compartmentalization, deniability, and secrecy, Draper argued—but also ambassadors and officials in the Department of State (notoriously Elliott Abrams) and Department of Defense, the latter having sold the CIA the missiles eventually ending up in Iranian hands (576). In other words, Draper used the power of his more three-dimensional narrative to show "persons" and "agendas" acting in concert with larger institutional forces.

Nevertheless, in the middle of this magisterial rendering—which, we might add, began like Didion's in the *New York Review of Books*—we might easily forget that one peculiarity of Iran-Contra was that it did not, to many observers' eyes, seem to be a scandal driven by the standard moral or monetary benchmarks of a more traditional corruption story. As various analysts at the time argued, Iran-Contra's Washington malefactors were not driven by a desire for financial or personal gain, but by the more nebulous goals of acquiring greater political capital and hemispheric influence. In addition, liberal exposés at the time might be said to have struggled for traction in response to a scandal in which some of the key players (Poindexter most vociferously) only gave voice to the functionalism already beginning to inhabit various academic fields: the claim that what the mainstream press saw as a violation of law—the White House circumvention of Congress—was merely a dispute between Constitutional branches of government over legitimate political differences. That functionalism, or that rationalization, or that cover-up—whatever one might call it—allowed some to regard the affair as merely a byproduct of "People with Their Own Agenda." (The phrase was Caspar Weinberger's, and it migrated right into the pages of some political-science analyses.)<sup>17</sup> In point of fact, Draper's invaluable contribution was his upending of the historical revisionism that, as a reading of *Miami* would also suggest, was already immanent *in* the scandal's cover-up as such.

Now, when we return to *Miami* itself, it seems less surprising that the Iran-Contra dimension was so often underplayed by Didion's reviewers. Leaving aside the obvious point that Didion locates us outside the Beltway, she also does not track the more prominent Bay of Pigs veterans, exiles such as Rafael Quintero and Felix Rodriquez, who were so crucial to the illegal contra-supply network. Indeed, the initial sections of *Miami* leave the scandal virtually unmentioned, only allowing off-stage details to peek through. We might barely notice, for instance, that divisive political rallies in Miami were over contra funding (70-71); it is mentioned merely in passing that Southern Air Transport, again so central to the affair, was the CIA's Miami airline (91); or that one local exile authored an article attacking Sandinista agitprop (118). Collaterally, Didion also chooses to radically background or eliminate the prevailing place-holders that, particularly inside the Beltway, had proved so riveting to the public eye: telegenic personalities like Oliver North, the melodrama of Congressional testimony, and the specific policy disputes over separation of powers, violations of first or second Boland Amendments, and so on. Again suspending the character-driven plot of exposés like Draper's, in *Miami* the "protean" (195) North is mentioned only three times; Richard Secord and Robert McFarlane only once; John Poindexter not at all. Meanwhile, acronyms like SAVAK (the Iranian secret police), or bit-player names like Eugene Hasenfus, brush by us, as if they are phantoms of some other storyline we are not really following. Just as, we might say, the CIA resonance of seemingly-tropical, hydraulic, financial terms like "channeled" (32) or "diverted" (32), or the PR term "floated" (86), remain just out of hearing. *Miami* thus becomes, for Didion, a kind of political *Pentimento*, in which a potential first-draft exposé is deeply subordinated, or has superimposed upon it, a longer history of hemispheric folly extending back to JFK.

Conversely, however, Didion's broader historical tale spins several aspects of the more familiar, conventional Washington-Beltway framing of Iran-Contra on their axes. Even my own resorting to the label "Iran-Contra affair" recalls the way that mainstream journalists more typically chose to "balance" the story. While this default catch-phrase served to connect two different international fronts, and follow the illicit money trail, it also frequently left local angles like Miami's out of the story. (Didion's title, we might say, broaches one missing domestic terrain within the hyphen of Iran-Contra.) Rather than foregrounding the "Affair," a word suggesting a hidden body of players, or perhaps only a scandal of the moment, Didion's longer-historical view also embeds this offstage narrative in structural relationships that Draper himself documented. *Miami* asks us, for example, to make inferences that connect Walt Whitman Rostow's "track two philosophy" (94) in Vietnam to

William Casey and Oliver North's notion of "The Enterprise" (the private-funding network that North called, in his Congressional testimony, "a really neat idea"). In a similar linking of global fronts, North himself dematerializes from Iran-Contra, only to reappear as the "briefer of choice" in the Outreach group that addresses helping the muhajadeen in Afghanistan (190-191, 195). Didion's more fragmentary, oblique narrative form does all this while still playing ingeniously upon the quite-peculiar characteristics of Iran-Contra as such: a political scandal built upon layers of obfuscation, diversions of funds and private players; staff over-reaching and the resorting to plausible deniability; the destruction of evidence, and (ultimately) failed prosecutions—all of this, while exhibiting what Didion calls the "autointoxication" (189) of a White House fixated on its own political mythmaking. And perhaps most of all, Didion's experimental account of the affair captures the elusiveness of a President whose own mastery or memory of events seemed "detached" (as his defenders kindly put it)—or worse yet, downright aphasic. Quite appropriately for Didion's own syntax, Reagan's claim to have originated the whole Iran-Contra mess (a claim he contradicted on other occasions) is left abandoned, as if we are in one of Didion's long sentences, to a nonsensical last line-phrase of her book as a whole. An unmoored, provisional, perhaps misremembered historical prologue is thereby made into the ultimate epilogue of Didion's book: "My idea to begin with" (208).

Indeed, Reagan's infamous inversions of idea and action, memory and Hollywood scripts, tell us much about the synergy between *Miami's* interest in political rhetoric and its own style. By "rhetoric" as such, Didion seems to have meant primarily two things. On the one hand, she focuses on what scholars commonly call "the rhetorical Presidency": broad rhetorical flourishes and symbol-making, and the moral or political "poetry" such flourishes express.<sup>18</sup> On the other, she investigates the vocabularies of what elsewhere she calls "insider politics," the informal, "wink wink" of everyday strategizing and political gamesmanship so dominated by the art of public relations, and its languages of "signals," relevant "audiences," and so on.<sup>19</sup> It will hardly surprise scholars of political rhetoric to say that John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan are regarded as the two mainstays of the first line of inquiry—or, conversely, that what scholars call (in a more flattering formulation than Didion's) the "administrative" dimensions of rhetoric are, on a second front, often counterpoised against the more grandiose forms of the first.<sup>20</sup> In part, Didion herself means to show what happens when these two dimensions converge or coalesce—especially, I think, in moments when domestic public relations and political audience management intersect with geopolitical symbol-making. But mostly, Didion is interested in the mismatching (or, again, "collisions")

created by these two dimensions of rhetoric: moments when, for instance, an audience like the Cuban exiles mistakes Presidential poetry for a literal promise, or when they skim over the rhetorical qualifications that, inside the Beltway, expresses administrative nuance, evasion, or cynicism. Even more to the point, Didion is interested in how these various rhetorical strategies and miscues leave what she likes to call “residues”: traces in *syntax*, in what rhetorician Richard Weaver describes as the “net effect” of the “accumulation of small particulars” between speakers’ intentions and the language they use.<sup>21</sup> In *Miami*, Didion’s goal is to mirror, retrace, make us feel the effects of these historical and political residues in her *own* syntax—and thus to capture their enduring, or recursive impact on future hemispheric follies and even on history writing about such events.

Let me cite three main stylistic strategies in *Miami* that reflect these complex intentions. First, although of course Didion’s notoriously long and over-qualified sentences and paragraphs appear in the rest of her work, here they are neither simple expressions of an idiosyncratic personal style, nor solely reflections of “tropical” malaise. Rather, they are adroitly plotted to fit the labyrinthine contours of scandals of which Iran-Contra was but the most recent manifestation. That is, *Miami*’s syntax follows the grain of interlocking stories in which original, colliding intentions of collaborators so often led to blind alleys: feelings of abandonment by former co-conspirators, evasion of Congress, and lying to the press. Rather than, say, making the angst of Reagan’s inner circle the center of a singular realist portrait, *Miami* allows us to see the recurrent structures of these groups’ rhetorical evasions—both in a specific moment and in histories past and future. We also see residues (of distrust, or political disillusionment) that often follow upon such evasions.

In turn—and here is the second effect I would isolate—much like her spatial analogies, Didion’s syntax asks her readers to experience the “gaps” and “angles” within political abstractions and rationalizations when they are imposed upon hemispheric conflicts. Quite often, a Washington nuance, a policy rationale, a word like “flawed”—arrives too late for the show, or proves insufficient to modifying (in both senses) the explosiveness of a structurally flawed engagement between parties with very different interests. Iran-Contra, we come to see, was but one of many situations where clandestine plots had superimposed upon them certain abstractions, geopolitical plans or rationales (like Reagan’s preferred “freedom fighters” upon the contras themselves). Accordingly, it is misleading to complain that Didion’s documentation contains “nothing new.” The point is that she treats her documents as second-order acts of rhetoric and memory: she assumes, from the start, that such documents are often only posing as records, of what were often clandestine opera-

tions to begin with. Indeed, this last technique also suggests why Schlesinger's memoirs about the Kennedy clan, texts that Didion characterizes as "essentially antihistorical" (89), become the locus of her ire. If Draper's narrative was the periodical complement to Didion's more oblique exposé, Schlesinger's might well be said to be the primary foil to her theory of history.

All of the above allows us, thirdly, to reexamine Didion's complicated use of tenses, as in the exiles' White House field trip I cited earlier. Rather than writing a history exposé as such, Didion instead takes a past event and asks us to look closely at the rhetorical structure of its memorialization, primarily because she knows such events will later be turned into yet another justification for ill-advised policy.<sup>22</sup> In her view, in other words, Washington's memory usually only compounds its past mistakes. In the field trip passage, for example, the exiles are being chaperoned into a story of democratic aspiration and tragic death that, of course, Schlesinger implicitly folds into the larger JFK legend. The passage has the feel of ritual and reiteration, again like a rosary. On the one hand, the moment of memorialization is actually part and parcel of a cover-up, in its own moment. ("We have a disposal problem," as Didion quotes Allen Dulles so ungracefully putting it after the Bay of Pigs fiasco [83]). And yet, by then being transposed from cover-up to Presidential history, the event is turned once again into a promise or article of faith that can breed another cycle of betrayal or abandonment. *Miami* is full of such Janus-like moments, events, storytellers: the paired Orange Bowl speeches of JFK and Reagan, who make future promises to the exile community, both by looking back at the failure of the Bay of Pigs; the arrival of Washington congressmen "fresh from the continuing debate" over Contra funding (16), to memorial celebrations in Miami; and finally in the entire contemporary entanglement of that former Bay of Pigs battalion, the so-called 2506, members of which end up fighting alongside the contras in Nicaragua. In Didion's view, the earlier mission of the 2506 unwittingly provides the "narrative bones" of the entire D.C. gambit of designating surrogates as freedom fighters but ultimately abandoning them (141).

In moments when exiles read themselves into what White House communications director David Gergen calls Presidential "folk art" (158), much is often lost in translation. Take this emblematic moment, which Didion cut-and-pastes from a prior time-frame, and from a report by the House Select Committee on Assassinations:

"... There is a third point, which was not directly made by any of those we interviewed, but which emerges clearly from the interviews and from reviews of files. The point is that of frequent resort to synecdoche—the mention of a part when the whole is to be understood, or vice versa. Thus,

we encounter repeated references to phrases such as ‘disposing of Castro,’ which may be read in the narrow, literal sense of assassinating him, when it is intended that it be read in the broader, figurative sense of dislodging the Castro regime. Reversing the coin, we find people speaking vaguely of ‘doing something about Castro’ when it is clear that what they have specifically in mind is killing him. In a situation wherein those speaking may not have actually meant what they seemed to say or may not have said what they actually meant, they should not be surprised if their oral shorthand is interpreted differently than was intended.” (qtd. on 95).

The inner rhetoric of this report, we might notice, might well have been written in Didion’s own syntax; comically and tragically, it also seems itself pasted in from a decidedly different subculture, that of the American Mafia (of course, deployed in plots against Castro). But in *Miami*’s fluid canvas, if this is yet another instance of “the superimposition of the Washington dreamwork on that of Miami” (95), it also shows us the “angle of deflection” (96) in that superimposition. In other words, the gap between. (By looking ahead to a “Free Havana,” one exile notes bitterly, perhaps Kennedy was referring to a bar in Miami [98].) The report leaves us hanging, rather than providing what we are accustomed to calling finality, illumination, or exposure. “Plausible deniability” becomes not just a cover story or political tactic after the fact; it becomes a description of the failed political grammar with which *Miami* tries to come to terms.

### III

One cannot, of course, completely account for particular reviewers’ responses to an individual writer’s style, nor extricate Didion’s syntax from every legitimate charge of obfuscation or over-reaching. And while I have suggested that we need to account for Didion’s inferential rhetorical technique in any evaluation of her cultural analysis, that technique certainly has its own limitations. When, for instance, she writes that “Miami stories were low, and lurid, and so radically reliant on the inductive leap that they tended to attract advocates of an ideological or a paranoid bent” (202)—well, one only becomes aware of how dependent Didion herself forces her reader to be, *on* such inductive leaps. While it is invaluable for Didion to trace, as she does in *Miami*, the syntactical residues linking radically different historical moments or political crises, the technique also leaves open the task of describing the substantive *differences* between those events. Moreover, it leaves unanswered what political powers, economic interests, or social groupings *outside* the immediate political players benefited from Cuban-Miami-Washington transactions, or from the bigger geopolitical script such players hope to foment. In this particular sense, the “tropical” trope again leaves too much unsaid. On the other



hand, those readers who remain legitimately uncomfortable with Didion's use of this trope might also look back at *A Very Thin Line*, where one can also discover references, for instance, to a "junta-like cabal" inside the Presidency. The conclusion that Reagan's aides "made themselves into yet another guerrilla force [and] adopted a guerrillas' [sic] attitude when dealing with Congress and its demands," or that "Secret Governments" had taken over the Presidency, were actually commonplaces in media coverage and political critique of the time.<sup>23</sup>

To say all of that, of course, is not to minimize Didion's own failures on this count, many of which were structural to *Miami*, not incidental. In her tropical excursions, Didion only invites what ethnographers and sociologists call a "primordial" notion of ethnicity, especially when she calls the exile style of politics "indigenous" (13) to the Caribbean and Central America. Indeed, she seems to have departed from her own work in *Salvador*, which in its most striking moments had analyzed El Salvador's authoritarian politics not by reference to temperament or ethnicity. Rather, *Salvador* pointed to a failed state, and to an evacuated indigeneity, largely due to U.S. patronage of violent, fascist surrogates for its own hemispheric ambitions.<sup>24</sup> (As one exile reminds us in *Miami*, Cuba grew sugarcane, not C-4 [207]). By the same token, it is easy to forget that complaints about *Miami's* "condescension" or ethnocentrism came from the right wing as well as the left—for example, from those who took offense at Didion's explicit mockery of Miami's Anglos. Or, from those who would have preferred that she had heralded the "Cuban success story" as proof of U.S. ethnic harmony. Similarly, those who complained about *Miami's* "conspiratorial" thinking avoided the rather tricky complication that a conspiracy—one in a series, in fact—had just taken place.<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, I have also meant to suggest, *Miami* itself offers paths around the impasse that often occurs when a working literary journalist departs from the implicit expectations of ethnographic realism. Of course, any number of important, and justly venerated, nonfiction narratives partake of that realist tradition, as the recurrent "top 100" or "century's best nonfiction" lists attest. But the point is that books like *Miami* ask to be read quite differently: not because they are mood experiments, but because they represent different *journalistic* approaches to social conflict, power, and even ethnicity itself. As I've said, Didion certainly does view her border zones partly as a clash of "cultures" as we customarily understand this term—as reservoirs of value, belief, or practice that we usually regard as bounded wholes. But when she moves into the political realm, Didion is usually intent on depicting these conflicts more as a series of glancing collisions between *discourse communities*—and it is here where often tragic results, both domestic and hemispheric, repeatedly

arise. Indeed, if we grant *Miami's* central interest in syntax, rhetoric, and ritual, then Didion's account of Anglo, Cuban, and "Washington-in-Miami" conflicts might bear comparison with those of recent ethnographers, for example, who see ethnicity not as primordial at all, but as transacted within particular policy contexts and fought over in the U.S.-domestic sphere. In this sense, "unmoored" ethnicities actually become, to many citizens on the ground, competing realities with real-world consequences.<sup>26</sup> In *Miami's* retelling, for example, a *majority* culture remains virtually unseen even in Miami's famously muckraking newspaper (the *Herald*).

As such, *Miami's* recourse to second-order documents—from the *Herald* itself, to Schlesinger's Kennedy memoirs, to Senate Committee memos—also bears reconsideration. The technique reflects not only her argument that on-the-ground cultural or political encounters are eventually incorporated into media mythologies, spin-doctoring, and political self-aggrandizement. She also shows how *quickly* they are incorporated, in crises where the scandal and the cover-up are practically simultaneous events, and thus inextricable from each other. No wonder that one of Didion's favorite words is "angle," a term connoting both the partiality of journalistic storytelling and the inevitable influence of power games, illusion-making, and public relations upon any task of representing such events. Even exposés like Draper's, after all, necessarily become retrospective histories and second-order accounts themselves, making choices about chronological bracketing, narrative point of view, cause and effect, and change over time—that is, stories with their own angles. It would be unfortunate, I think, if the current journalistic veneration of "narrative" or "storytelling"—or, as I have argued in Didion's case, "in-depth reporting"—turns out to be a way of *not* facing up to the interpretive choices that are embedded even in the seemingly most commonsensical or realist of forms.

Moreover, it is hardly that Didion would disagree with Draper's conclusions. If anything, *Miami's* inferential canvas might be said to offer its own complement to Draper's, in the way that Didion traces the longer, but equally flawed institutional histories behind the specific news frame of Iran-Contra. In Didion's hands, the domestic policy advisors, CIA operatives, and exile allies of the Imperial Presidency certainly do work together, as Draper demonstrates. But they often do so, in *Miami*, only to create absurdly incoherent results: to collide and glance off one another, rematerialize inside each other's identities, go into cover-up mode, create new schemes that aim to redress the failures of old ones, only to fail again. Didion asks us to re-see the rhetorical signals and scripts dispersed by the amalgam of interests competing for insider power in Washington, and to reexamine the rhetorical transactions

that have resulted in botched communications with both enemies and friends abroad.

Ultimately, *Miami* may even ask us to confront the serial betrayals forced upon U.S. collaborators outside the Miami-Cuba axis *per se*: democratic forces in other countries who read themselves into our domestic “folk art”; exiles who are chaperoned on field trips to scenes of political theatre by politicians who do not have their interests, *pace* Schlesinger, at heart. Or, at a more obtuse angle, terrorists who claim U.S. betrayals are as catastrophic as those of their authoritarian rulers at home. Sadly, as *Miami*’s own residue reminds us, the muhajadin of Afghanistan *were* just around the bend, waiting for audience in Washington. Or Iraqi exiles named “Curveball.” Or Presidents who would remain convinced that it was their idea to begin with.<sup>27</sup>

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## NOTES

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1. Sandra K. Hinchman, "Didion's Political Tropics: Miami and the Basis for Community," *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*, ed. Sharon Felton (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), note 3, page 239. Ricardo L. Ortiz, "Café, Culpa, and Capital: Nostalgic Addictions of Cuban Exile," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 10 (1997): 63-84. Nicholas Lemann, "The Mirage of Miami," *New Republic*, 23 November 1987, 37-42. All citations of *Miami* in text are from the Pocket Books (New York: 1988) edition.

2. See, for instance, the famous dissection of *Salvador* in Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 225-27; compare the dismissal of Michael Massing, "Snap Books," *New Republic*, 4 May 1987, 21, 24-25.

3. Even more remarkably, Said did not make the inductive leap I discuss in my conclusion, writing that Didion acted "as if the Cuban exiles of Miami were the only such group with émigré interests at work in the US government . . ." Compare footnote 27 below. Said, "Miami Twice," *London Review of Books* 10 December 1987, 3-6. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v09/n22/edward-said/miami-twice>. For similar characterizations of Didion's style, see the following book reviews: Ruth Walker, "Didion's 'Miami' and Multiple Realities," *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 November 1987; Geoffrey Moorhouse, "Miami Voice," *The Guardian* 25 March 1988; Don Anderson, "The Miami Jungle Screams Beneath," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 May 1988; R. Z. Sheppard, "Books: Urban Razzle, Fatal Glamour," *Time* 28 September 1987.

4. In an interview with James Chace, Didion said one of her main goals was to write a comparison of "the rhetoric of the Kennedy Administration and the rhetoric of the Reagan administration." "Betrayals and Obsessions," *New York Times* 25 October 1987. In a *Paris Review* interview with Hilton Als, "The Art of Nonfiction No. 1," Didion describes her growing interest in political rhetoric this way: "I started to get [at] this [point] in *Salvador*, but not fully until *Miami*. . . . I could get the overall picture, but the actual words people said were almost unintelligible to me. . . . I realized that the words didn't have any actual meaning, that they described a negotiation more than they described an idea. But then you begin to see that the lack of specificity is specific in itself, that it is an obscuring device." <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5601/the-art-of-nonfiction-no-1-joan-didion>.

5. Chris Anderson, *Style as Argument* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 133-173; John Schilb, "Deconstructing Didion: Poststructuralist Rhetorical Theory in the Composition Class," *Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, Pedagogy*, ed. Chris Anderson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 262-286.

6. Even Anderson's incisive work, to which I am indebted, runs the risk of discounting Didion's work as *reportage*, arguing that it is primarily a point of departure for personal reflection (142).

7. Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1991). All further citations in text.

8. See *Kick Ass: Selected Columns of Carl Haiszen*, ed. Diane Stevenson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999); see also Alfonso Chardy's article from the 5 July 1987 *Miami Herald*, "Reagan Aides and the Secret Government," [http://thereaganyears.tripod.com/martial\\_law.htm](http://thereaganyears.tripod.com/martial_law.htm).

9. Citing the literary antecedents of that Legend, Didion connects the exile obsession with "*la lucha*" (the struggle) back to José Martí, and from Martí back to the Spanish Inquisition (75). Didion focuses on the so-called Santa Fe Document, also known as *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties*, published by the Council for Inter-American Security in 1980. On the Black Legend, see Maria DeGuzmán, *Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.)

10. I discuss these conventions in "Plotting the Border: Pancho Villa, John Reed, and *Insurgent Mexico*," *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*, ed. Donald Pease and Amy Kaplan (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 340-64.

11. On this Achilles' heel, see James J. Connolly, "The Public Good and the Problem of Pluralism in Lincoln Steffens's Civic Imagination," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 4 (April 2005): 125-47.

12. See Lemann. Moorhouse called *Miami* "lazy" because instead of offering the expected "well-rounded account," the book putatively focused *only* on Cuban exile politics; another called it less a book than a failed film treatment: Geoffrey James, "In the City of Exiles; *Miami*," *Maclean's* 9 November 1987.

13. Gaye Tuchman, "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of News-men's Notions of Objectivity," *American Journal of Sociology* 77 (1972): 660-79.

14. James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 21-54.

15. See my "'Out There': Transnationalism and the Other America," *Through the Looking Glass: American Studies in Transcultural Perspective*, ed. Hans Krabben-dam and Jaap Verheul (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1999). 244-257.

16. Didion also added: "'Miami,' its title notwithstanding, is mainly about what I think is wrong with Washington" (interview with Chace).

17. On this score, see especially Peter DeLeon, *Thinking about Political Corruption* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993). DeLeon's own chapter title on Iran-Contra draws from Weinberger's assessment.

18. See, for instance, Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

19. Joan Didion, "Insider Baseball," *Political Fictions* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 19-59.

20. See, for example, Vanessa B. Beasley, "The Rhetorical Presidency Meets the Unitary Executive: Implications for Presidential Rhetoric on Public Policy," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 13 (Spring 2010): 7-35.

21. The idea that rhetorical structures provide a ground for the creation and exchange of symbols is a commonplace in rhetorical studies; see, for instance, David Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press). On syntax as a "net effect," see Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1953), 116.

22. Cf. Ortiz on the "two-way toxin" depicted in Miami's account of the Cuba-Washington relationship (77-78).

23. See the assessments quoted in DeLeon 193; and Chardy.

24. Cf. *Salvador* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983), 52-56, 75-76.

25. For one critique on this score coming from the right, see the review in *Commentary* by George Russell, "Mooning over Miami," January 1988, 69-72.

26. See Sheila Croucher, *Imagining Miami: Ethnic Politics in a Postmodern World* (Charlottesville, NC: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

27. "Curveball" was the code name given by German and U.S. handlers to the Iraqi exile who claimed he knew of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. See "Curveball Deserves Permanent Exile for WMD Lies, Iraqi Politicians Say," *Guardian* 16 February 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/16/curveball-exile-wmd-lies-iraq-politicians>. Didion's account of Iran-Contra certainly bears comparing, for example, with the final pages (210 ff.) of Frank Rich's account of the Iraq war's origins, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006). Cf. Dexter Filkins' portrait of Ahmad Chalabi in *The Forever War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

