

PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

Fraud and Plagiarism

Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

The most important forms of deception that affect this integrity are fraud and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the copying of another person's work without proper acknowledgement, and it is a form of fraud. The following is a detailed explanation of what is considered to be fraud and plagiarism, with a few concrete examples. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list!

If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:

- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
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- copying printed materials, such as books, magazines or encyclopaedias, without quotation marks or footnotes;
- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;
- paraphrasing (parts of) the texts listed above without proper references: paraphrasing must be marked as such, by expressly mentioning the original author in the text or in a footnote, so that you do not give the impression that it is your own idea;
- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
- copying the work of another student and presenting it as one's own work. If this is done with the consent of the other student, then he or she is also complicit in the plagiarism;
- when one of the authors of a group paper commits plagiarism, then the other co-authors are also complicit in plagiarism if they could or should have known that the person was committing plagiarism;
- submitting papers acquired from a commercial institution, such as an Internet site with summaries or papers, that were written by another person, whether or not that other person received payment for the work.

The rules for plagiarism also apply to rough drafts of papers or (parts of) theses sent to a lecturer for feedback, to the extent that submitting rough drafts for feedback is mentioned in the course handbook or the thesis regulations.

The Education and Examination Regulations (Article 5.15) describe the formal procedure in

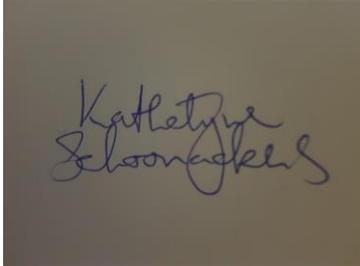
case of suspicion of fraud and/or plagiarism, and the sanctions that can be imposed.

Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse. Each individual is responsible for their own behaviour. Utrecht University assumes that each student or staff member knows what fraud and plagiarism entail. For its part, Utrecht University works to ensure that students are informed of the principles of scientific practice, which are taught as early as possible in the curriculum, and that students are informed of the institution's criteria for fraud and plagiarism, so that every student knows which norms they must abide by.

I hereby declare that I have read and understood the above.

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Date and signature: 5 July 2021

A handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored background. The signature reads "Kathelijne Schoonackers" in a cursive script. The first name is on the top line and the last name is on the bottom line, with a large flourish at the end of the last name.

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes Joan Didion's memoirs *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011) in order to gain insight into her changing relationship with her roles of wife and mother and answer the question: How does Joan Didion perform the roles of wife and mother in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and in *Blue Nights* and what does a comparison between these books tell us about her changing relationship with these roles?

A comparative close reading shows that in *The Year of Magical Thinking* Didion remains within the normative enactments of her gender roles while she moves into less normative performances of wife and mother in *Blue Nights*. A shift in focus on Didion's husband and daughter in *The Year of Magical Thinking* to herself and her experience of mothering in *Blue Nights* signifies a shift from relating to herself and her life through her identities as wife and mother to coming to relate to herself and her life through her own experiences. This also signifies a shift from a patriarchal narrative to a matrifocal narrative.

Performativity of the Roles of Wife and Mother in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*

Introduction

This thesis analyzes Joan Didion's memoirs *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011) in order to gain insight into her changing relationship with her roles of wife and mother. In *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) Didion writes about living through her grief in the year following the sudden death of her husband of forty years, John Gregory Dunne. At the time of John's death their daughter Quintana was in hospital and spent most of

the year in different hospitals. In *Blue Nights* (2011) Didion writes about the loss of Quintana, being a mother and aging.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking* Didion's focus is on her marriage, husband and daughter while *Blue Nights* her focus is more on herself. This thesis will look at Didion's performance of wife and mother in each memoir. Since the books have not been compared to each other with regard to this specific topic I will perform a comparative reading in order to answer the following research question:

How does Joan Didion perform the roles of wife and mother in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and in *Blue Nights* and what does a comparison between these books tell us about her changing relationship with these roles?

I will show that where in *The Year of Magical Thinking* Didion remains within the normative enactments of her gender roles she moves into less normative performances of wife and mother in *Blue Nights*, which suggests that she has come to relate differently to these roles.

Literature Review

An overview of works on Didion's two memoirs shows that most analyses and readings of her work are based on ideas of opposites, such as conventional or unconventional (Kusek), patriarchal or matrifocal (Shapland), a socially recognized or socially isolating role of mother (Florescu). What is especially noted by critics is a focus on herself in *Blue Nights*.

In his article "Blue is (not) the Warmest Colour: Contradictions of Grieving in Joan Didion's *Blue Nights*" Robert Kusek claims that contrary to being a conventional grief memoir which focuses exclusively on paying tribute to the lost loved one or on testifying to the process of grieving, Didion instead places the focus on herself and addresses issues such

as ageing, loneliness, parenthood, and her own impending death, implying that this makes *Blue Nights* an unconventional grief memoir.

Jeffrey Berman, however, argues that Didion fails to characterize her husband in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. It disturbs Berman that he learns little about Dunne and this prompts him to try and characterize Dunne himself (*Companionship in Grief* 158). His later book *Writing Widowhood: The Landscapes of Bereavement* includes an analysis of *Blue Nights* as well. In both his books Berman places Didion's writings in the context of her own and Dunne's earlier work, comparing their "fictional universes" (190) and reads for themes which he tries to relate to their personal lives, such as their marriage and daughter. Berman's need and search for Didion's husband and daughter and Kusek's claim that Didion's focus on herself in *Blue Nights* moves it away from a conventional grief memoir show that there are expectations about how a wife and a mother writes about her husband and daughter in an account of her life. The word conventional points to conventions, or norms on which such expectations are based.

Didion's focus on herself in *Blue Nights* is also noted by Jenn Shapland, who explains that this feature makes it a matrifocal narrative as "the mother, rather than the child or partner, is the narrating consciousness and the protagonist" ("Mother Matter" 312). Shapland compares three matrifocal texts, including *Blue Nights*, which all revolve around a mother's loss of her daughter, but focus on the experience of the mother rather than that of the daughter. Shapland shows how matrifocal texts differ from texts abiding to patriarchal norms, which tend to be daughter-centric as they focus on the daughter instead of the mother, in order to maintain the progressive linear logic and futurity of patriarchal legacy.

Both Didion's focus and the logic of patriarchal narrative tradition are touched upon by Kathleen Vandenberg when she analyzes *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights* for their rhetorical force. Of *Blue Nights* she notes that Quintana remains elusive but that

“[i]nstead Didion composes a portrait of herself” (53-4). She finds that Didion achieves resonance “more through omission than accumulation, more through implication than explication” (39). Explication and accumulation are features of patriarchal narrative traditions of teleological and progressive order, while Didion uses opposite techniques, according to Vandenberg. This shows that writing style and use of techniques can also adhere to or diverge from patriarchal traditions or norms.

Didion’s role as a mother is analysed by Catalina Florina Florescu, who compares *Blue Nights* to David Lindsay-Abaire’s play *Rabbit Hole* in the chapter “Mother-less” (224-236) of her book *Disjointed Perspectives on Motherhood*. In her readings of these works the mothers have faced a removal from the recognized social role and function of motherhood to the isolating role of mother without a child, which implies that Didion wrote *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights* from two different social positions as mother.

From this overview it is evident that what is most often noted and considered in the works on Didion’s memoirs is whether the focus is on herself or on her husband and daughter. A comparison of her performance of her roles of wife and mother in each book will give insight into how Didion relates to herself and to her husband and daughter and what a change in those relationships can mean.

Framework

In order to investigate Didion’s changing relationship with her roles of wife and mother it is helpful to turn to Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity. Butler explains that identity and especially gender identity, is something that is enacted daily through norms (*Gender Trouble*, 23), which makes gender and gender related roles performative. This also means that people can conform to or diverge from normative performances or from their own previous performance.

In life writing, gender roles can be performed through the actions of the narrated or remembered “I”, how they behave, what they say and do, but also through the narrating “I”, who remembers and comments on their memories from the moment of writing. To understand the relationship between performances of identity, the narrated and narrating “I” and memories and remembering, Smith and Watson explain that the meaning of the past is actively created in the act of remembering by the person who remembers, the narrating “I”, and that “remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present” (*Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* 22). They further explain that “the memory invoked in autobiographical narrative is specific to the time of writing and the contexts of telling” (24). This means that the moment and context of remembering but also the interpretation or meaning given to a memory in the present can influence or change performances of identity in life writing.

I will analyze and compare Didion’s performances of wife and mother by looking at how her remembered or narrated “I” is portrayed, how her narrating “I” relates to her narrated “I”, how a number of the same memories are remembered in each book, how the moments and contexts of remembering may play a part in the creation of meaning or in the (re)evaluation of a memory.

A Comparative Reading of *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*

In what follows I will read for and compare Didion’s performance of wife and mother in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*. First Didion’s performance of wife in both books will be analyzed and compared through close reading, showing how Didion shifts from relating to herself mostly through the “we” she used to form with John to relating to herself as an individual. Next her performance of mother in both books will be analysed and

compared through a close reading, showing a shift from a mother who foregrounds her daughter both in narrative and daily life to a mother who foregrounds her own experience as a mother.

Didion's Performance of Wife in *The Year of Magical Thinking*

In *The Year of Magical Thinking* Didion often starts her sentences with "I remember saying" (10), "I remember thinking" (16, 18), "I remember trying" (12) or later "I recall recognizing" (110). This is the narrating Didion recalling or observing herself during the past year, the period of time in which for the first time in forty years she has been by herself instead of with her husband John. She realizes towards the end of the book that she has seen herself through John's eyes for forty years (197). Her "I" often becomes "we" or "John and I" as soon as she thinks further back than the past year. "One summer when we were living in Brentwood Park we fell into a pattern ...". Over the next page she repeats "we would" in order to list and detail their daily routine during that summer (23-4). When she tries to clear out John's clothes from a closet she begins as "I", the I she has become after John's death: "I began. I cleared a shelf on which John had stacked sweatshirts, T-shirts, the clothes he wore when we walked in Central Park in the early morning", then she becomes a "we" when she recalls their morning walks: "[w]e walked every morning. We did not always walk together because we liked different routes but we would keep the other's route in mind and intersect before we left the park"(36). In most of her narration of her life with John, they are an inseparable unit into which her individuality and identity is absorbed. Because the narrating Didion's focus is on remembering John and their life together, there is not always a clear individual narrated "I" in those recollections. Instead there is often a narrated "we". The focus on John and on "we" conforms to the performance of a wife who foregrounds her family, but makes it difficult to

find instances of Didion writing about her own experience of being his wife and how she performed this role.

An example of Didion performing the role of a wife who takes care of her husband can be found when she and John have just come back from visiting Quintana in the hospital and though both are devastated at the state she is in, John sits down to read while Joan builds a fire in their fireplace, makes John a drink, brings it to him, cooks dinner and sets the table for them (9). They had discussed whether to go out for dinner or eat in and Didion offers to build the fire and to cook so that they can stay in. Whether they can eat at home seems to depend on Didion's willingness to organize dinner. About taking care of the household she writes: "[A]fter I married and had a child, I learned to find equal meaning in the repeated rituals of domestic life. Setting the table. Lighting the candles. Building the fire. Cooking. All those soufflés, all that crème caramel, all those daubes and albóndigas and gumbos. Clean sheets, stacks of clean towels ... " (191). She sums up tasks, but there is a rhythm to the list which imitates the ritualistic quality these tasks had for her. To her these rituals gave meaning to domestic life, through which she found her role as wife and mother. By identifying with these roles through household tasks she performs these roles within the patriarchal norm of the woman who is responsible for the household.

Descriptions of John implicitly show Didion's role in their marriage, when John is described as performing the role of the man as head of the family, who often assumed a position of authority, who decides and allows things. An example of this is when John asks Didion to drive them home: "I could count on my fingers the number of times I had driven when John was in the car. ... There had been no previous time when he asked me to drive home from dinner in town: this evening on Camino Palmero was unprecedented" (25). At the end of the drive he "pronounced it 'well driven'". It becomes clear that John was the one who drove the car as a rule and Didion needed to be asked by John before she could drive them

somewhere. When she writes that John “pronounced it” well driven, she describes John as declaring his approval from a position of authority. Other examples show that she values him in this position and leans on him for his approval and support. Just before John dies he re-reads one of her books and tells Didion: “[d]on’t ever tell me again you can’t write. That’s my birthday present to you”. Despite being by then a long established and successful writer his approval brings tears to her eyes. She calls it the birthday present no one else could give her (166). At some point after John’s death she accepts a journalistic assignment and realizes that “[i]t was the first piece I had written since 1963 that he did not read in draft form and tell me what was wrong, what was needed, how to bring it up here, take it down there” (213). By listing the things John used to help her with when writing a piece and showing how involved he was, his absence and the nature of his absence become more clear now that he is not there to help her along in her writing process anymore. She can only finish the assignment and make her deadline by imagining John’s faith in her: “[w]hatever I finally did to finish this piece is as close as I have ever come to imagining a message from him. The message was simple: *You’re a professional. Finish the piece*” (214). After his death she still needs his belief in her to be able to work. This shows how dependent on him she was and still is at that moment, needing John to be able to believe in herself as a writer and relating to her work through John.

Another way in which John assumes the role of head of the family is in how he has the final say in big decisions of their marriage and overrules Didion on a couple of occasions, for instance when he wanted to move from California to New York and she resists this for a while, but they end up moving there after Didion finally concedes: “I said maybe he was right, we should spend more time in New York” (131). However, when she is the one who wants something similar he seems immovable. She had wanted to buy a house in Honolulu, Hawaii, where they often vacationed and worked, and despite taking John to many house

tours, he never agreed (73). About a trip they took to Paris she recalls: “I did not want to go. I said we had too much to do and too little money. He said he had a sense that if he did not go to Paris in November he would never again go to Paris. I interpreted this as blackmail. That settles it then, I said, we’re going. He left the table. We did not speak in any meaningful way for two days” (79–80). He counters her rational and important reasons for not wanting to go with an emotional claim that her refusal to go to Paris takes away his last chance to see Paris. She recognizes this as emotional blackmail, yet her reaction is to angrily agree to go, not wanting to carry John’s blame. While Didion is clear to John about what she wants or does not want in these examples, John presses his own interests or plays on her emotions until Didion gives in or gives up. In the end John was the driving force behind big decisions or life changes and has the final say in matters, while Didion often conceded to John.

This dominant-submissive dynamic can also be found when John is described as not appreciating being challenged by his wife. He frequently questions her behavior when she challenges him, by asking her why she always has to be right, or cannot let things go (138, 141, 174, 214). “It was a complaint, a charge, part of a fight” (138). This question seems to haunt her during the writing of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, while “I should have listened to John” is repeated throughout the book as well (111, 186, 214). Didion and her husband occupy traditional and culturally recognizable places within their marriage when Didion describes John as the dominant husband and herself as the submissive wife who depends on her husband. By remembering and characterising their marriage mostly through descriptions of John the focus of the book is not just on their marriage but almost exclusively on John, with which Didion’s own experience of her life and her own identity are missing. However, a self effacing relation to husband, children and others over relation to self is a typical expectation of women in patriarchal society (Rich 42).

Didion's Performance of Wife in *Blue Nights*

In *Blue Nights* she does not identify herself with her marriage or with John in the same way she does in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. While *The Year of Magical Thinking* revolves around John and their life of forty years together, the focus of *Blue Nights* is on Didion herself. John is barely mentioned and sometimes only implied through her use of “we” when she describes memories, for instance when she describes living in Brentwood Park, California in the 1980s for almost five pages and she mentions “the house [...] in which we lived”, “when we bought it”, “[w]e closed the deal and moved”, “everything we then owned” (7-12), but John himself is not mentioned once. In contrast to *The Year of Magical Thinking* when Didion’s “I” disappeared into her and John’s inseparable “we”, in *Blue Nights* John is the one rendered invisible while her narrating and narrated “I” are much more prominent. Of living in California and moving to New York she says for instance: “Where I have lived again since 1988. Why then do I say I lived much of this time in California?” (9), foregrounding herself and ignoring John and Quintana, who lived and moved with her. After Quintana died Didion remembers thinking of her friend Diana “who had talked to Blake Watson so that I could bring the beautiful baby girl ... home...” (161), where again John is left out of her memory when she says “so that *I* could bring the beautiful baby girl home” (emphasis added). In *The Year of Magical Thinking* this same event is described multiple times as “[the house] to which John and I had brought Quintana home from St. John’s Hospital” (118, 191). John’s absence in most of her memories means that she does not relate to herself through her marriage or John but also that she barely performs the role of wife and so this part of her identity that was so prominent in *The Year of Magical Thinking* is not fulfilled in *Blue Nights*.

One of the main themes of *The Year of Magical Thinking* is Didion’s magical thinking, of which an important part was that she could not give away John’s shoes and

clothes, because those were needed if John came back (35-7). At the end of the book she writes: “I realize as I write this that I do not want to finish this account. [...] I know why we try to keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us” (224-5). Didion tried to keep John close and dreaded life without him by her side. In *Blue Nights* she offers an almost opposite view:

In fact I no longer value this kind of memento. I no longer want reminders of what was, what got broken, what got lost, what got wasted. [...] A period during which I believed that I could keep people fully present, keep them with me, by preserving their mementos, their ‘things’, their totems. The detritus of this misplaced belief now fills the drawers and closets of my apartment in New York. There is no drawer I can open without seeing something I do not want, on reflection, to see. There is no closet I can open with room left for the clothes I might actually want to wear. (44)

Her relationship with mementoes has changed, instead of making her feel like the people these things belonged to are close or present they now represent their absence, “what is lost”, which she does not want to be reminded of or hold onto. She calls their things “detritus” which “fills” up space that she needs for her own life. The need she had for John’s memory has changed and is replaced by a realization that she cannot at the same time hold onto the past and also have enough literal and emotional space left to live her life for herself. Adrienne Rich explains that women learn “selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self” (*Of Woman Born*, 41-2), especially in their roles of wives and mothers. When Didion wrote *Blue Nights* she had been living without John for seven years and has shifted her focus from her remembered, past life with John to her present life on her own. By centering herself in *Blue Nights* and by not relating to herself through John first, even by leaving him out of her memories of her life and thus out of the narrative, Didion establishes herself as an individual who navigates her memories and experiences through a

focus and self relation independent from standard norms through which women are expected to relate to themselves and to others.

Didion's Performance of Mother in *The Year of Magical Thinking*

In *The Year of Magical Thinking* Didion meticulously chronicles Quintana's illness, hospitalisations, progress and setbacks, giving medical facts, information and references to literature and research (62-70, 83-5). For the entire year she remains by Quintana's side in different hospitals and flies from New York to California to be with her for over a month when Quintana falls ill again on a trip to Malibu with her husband (89-106, 122-142). She performs the mother who effaces herself to foreground her daughter, both in her mothering and in the focus of her writing. During Quintana's rehabilitation in New York after returning from UCLA Medical Center Didion writes that she feels that there is "very little" she can do for Quintana apart from visiting her on most afternoons (142), which suggests that she wished there was more she could do. She lists the things that she does manage to find to do for Quintana:

For as long as she was at Rusk I could water the plants on her windowsill, I could find the marginally different sneakers her therapist had decreed, I could sit with her in the greenhouse off the Rusk lobby watching the koi in the pond, but once she left Rusk I would no longer be able to do even that. She was reaching a point at which she would need once again to be, if she was to recover, on her own (142-3)

Didion is preoccupied with finding and being able to do things for Quintana and worried about the moment when she will not be able to do those things anymore, when she has to let go of taking care of Quintana, who will at some point be able to take care of herself again.

When thinking about Quintana being on her own again Didion writes: "I determined to spend

the summer reaching the same point” (143). She has not been on her own in forty years and caring for Quintana is familiar to her, while being on her own again is something she needs to work on, like Quintana. She has neglected her own life while taking care of Quintana (143) and realises the span of time in which her sole focus was on taking care of Quintana: “I had passed an entire season during which the only words I allowed myself to truly hear were recorded: *Wel-come to U-C-L-A*” (143). Jenn Shapland explains that “under the confines of natalist, heterosexist narrative traditions, most mother-daughter stories are daughter-centric” (312). In giving Quintana much of the focus of *The Year of Magical Thinking* and in describing herself as a mother tending to her daughter daily for almost a year the narrative is daughter-centric.

Didion’s Performance of Mother in *Blue Nights*

In *Blue Nights* Didion moves away from the daughter-centric narrative when the focus of the book is mostly on herself. Quintana features only superficially in the book, which can be explained in part by a changed relationship with memories. Similar to no longer wanting to hold on to mementos of John, Didion expresses the same sentiment about memories of Quintana: “‘You have your wonderful memories,’ people said later, as if memories were solace. Memories are not. Memories are by definition of times past, things gone. ... Memories are what you no longer want to remember” (64). Whenever Didion does describe memories and events involving Quintana they often function as a way to bring the focus to a subject Didion will discuss for the next pages. For example, after a foreword about blue nights Didion opens with a memory of Quintana’s wedding (5-7), moves on to a memory of living in Brentwood Park in the 1980s and then goes on to write for six pages about the life and recent death of family friend Natasha Richardson (18-23). This pattern continues

throughout the book, when Quintana features in Didion's thoughts or memories but serves as a trigger for Didion to write shorter and longer essay-like chapters on topics. She writes three pages on mementoes (44-46), six pages on Quintana's mental health and on borderline personality disorder (47-52), parenting in the 1940s versus now (93-102), adoption (118-130), aging (134-150) and so on. Quintana features in some of these essays, but the focus is on the narrating Didion, what she thinks about these topics in her present life, as she is writing about them. This means that from *The Year of Magical Thinking* to *Blue Nights* the focus of Didion as mother has shifted from Quintana to herself.

The shift from foregrounding Quintana to foregrounding her own experience is also evident in how she writes about Quintana's illnesses and hospitalisations in both books. While she meticulously chronicled Quintana's medical journey for large parts of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in *Blue Nights* the final part of Quintana's medical journey is not narrated and her death is left unexplained after she had been in recovery at the end of *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Didion understands Quintana is dying though the reader does not: "In other words she was dying. I now knew she was dying" (159). The focus of this scene is on how Didion feels and not on Quintana's experience or on explication of Quintana's illness and death. She leaves Quintana behind in the hospital and walks through Central Park with Quintana's husband Gerry and cries (160). She describes who and what she is crying for:

I was crying for the tiles, the Minton tiles in the arcade south of Bethesda Fountain, Sara Mankiewicz's pattern, Quintana's christening. I was crying for Connie Wald walking her dog through Boulder City and across Hoover Dam. ... I was crying for Diana who had talked to Blake Watson so that I could bring the beautiful baby girl he had delivered home from the nursery at St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica. Diana who would die in the ICU at Cedars in Los Angeles. Dominique who would die in the

ICU at Cedars in Los Angeles. The beautiful baby girl who would die in the ICU in the Greenberg Pavilion at New York Cornell. (161)

The first part of this quote consists of references to the celebration in honour of Quintana's christening, described earlier in the book (73-9), a celebration of the beginning of Quintana's life but also of the beginning of Didion's life as a mother, which she touches upon when she specifically remembers bringing Quintana home from the hospital, which for her as an adoptive parent was her first moment as Quintana's mother. Right after this memory she thinks of how Diana, the person who set in motion Quintana's adoption, has since died, as well as John's niece Dominique and now Quintana, with which that part of Didion's life has now ended. *Blue Nights* is a matrifocal narrative, in which the mother is the narrating consciousness and the protagonist (Shapland 312). An important concept in matrifocal narratives is simultaneity, which contrasts with the teleological progression of patriarchal narratives (311), of which an example is the way Didion experienced feelings and memories of birth and death, beginning and end simultaneously in the scene after Quintana's death. "For the mother, these events happen simultaneously through affect, impression, and imagination. The stories themselves move between material and emotional planes and proceed by a fluid and impressionistic logic, rather than by teleological order" (Shapland 315). This can be seen when Didion's memories after Quintana's death may seem unconnected but to her are fluidly associated memories which form her impression of the day of Quintana's christening, when she remembers the Minton dinner plates used that day, Sarah Mankiewicz's house she lived in at the time, the people who were there, the story Connie Wald had told her. The shift from daughter-centric to matrifocal narrative places the focus on Didion's own experience of the loss of Quintana instead of on Quintana's experience or on exactly what led to her third illness and death.

Some of Didion's memories of mothering which served as happy memories in *The Year of Magical Thinking* are given a different meaning in *Blue Nights*. Throughout *Blue Nights* Didion wonders if she has failed Quintana as a child. Adult Quintana struggled with mental health issues and alcoholism (47-50) and almost every memory of Quintana leads Didion to question and examine her mothering and wonder whether she may have contributed to Quintana's struggles in adult life. "Was I the problem? Was I always the problem?" the narrating Didion asks early on in the book (33), while looking at photos of Quintana at age five. "What remained until now unfamiliar, what I recognize in the photographs but failed to see at the time they were taken, are the startling depths and shallows of her expressions, the quicksilver changes of mood. How could I have missed what was so clearly there to be seen?" (36). The narrating Didion, the "I" in the first sentence believes that her past "I", the "I" in the second sentence, has failed to notice something obviously troubling about Quintana. Since Didion only realizes this at the time of writing *Blue Nights* this had not influenced her memories of Quintana while she wrote *The Year of Magical Thinking*. This becomes clear when the same memory has a different meaning in each book: "We had placed her bassinet next to the wisteria in the box garden of the gate house at Portugese Bend" is repeated in *The Year of Magical Thinking* as a meaningful and happy memory of bringing Quintana home from the hospital (118, 191), but stands symbol for what the narrating Didion now thinks was unprepared and naive mothering in *Blue Nights* (57, 58) because she had not thought about what she would need for the baby until someone tells her she needs a bassinet. "It was a time in my life during which I actually believed that somewhere between frying the chicken to serve on Sara Mankiewicz's Minton dinner plates and buying the Porthault parasol to shade the beautiful baby girl in Saigon I had covered the main 'motherhood' points" (74). Her critical comment on her remembered "I" as new mother who confuses having material things for the baby with mothering shows that in *Blue Nights* the narrated or remembered

Didion and the narrating Didion who thinks back to being a new mother, are in very different places, with the narrated Didion unburdened with the doubt and self criticism that the narrating Didion experiences.

When Didion questions whether she has failed Quintana and reevaluates her memories of mothering Quintana she touches on the subject of the abject mother. While taking Quintana with them on work trips and to work meetings was part of their close family life in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (50, 72-3, 165, 176), in *Blue Nights* this becomes a source of doubt for Didion, when she believes Quintana's needs may have been neglected. In *The Year of Magical Thinking* the family is on a work trip to Honolulu, to crash rewrite a screenplay, and Didion describes that their room is festive for Christmas and New Year's Eve, they have eaten, John is asleep and Quintana is amusing herself in the hotel. "I remember having had on that particular New Year's Eve a sense of well-being so profound that I did not want to go to sleep" (164-5). In *Blue Nights* Quintana is instead portrayed by Didion as being trailed after her parents as they travel the world while they never think to offer her a more stable home life (88-92). "So much for keeping our 'private' life separate from our 'working' life. In fact she was inseparable from our working life" (90). In the same passage Didion wonders "[w]hen we noticed her confusions did we consider our own?" (92), asking herself whether she and John ever considered whether Quintana's precocious behaviour stemmed from her and John's parenting. Didion also wonders whether Quintana had implied that she was an absent mother (39), accuses herself of raising her like a doll (73), of not taking her fears and confusion seriously (63, 92), of not listening to her or seeing her (36, 41, 50-1, 86, 132-3), of not having thought adoption or motherhood through (74). Her summing up throughout the book of what she sees as her failures in mothering is something that goes against the ideal of the "good mother" whose mothering is intuitive and happens naturally (Rich 42). She creates the antithesis of the "good mother" and of her own previous

performance of devoted and self-effacing mother in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, but by doing so she narrates an honest account of her experience of looking back at her mothering and experiencing doubt and confusion. Bad mothering or failed motherhood are considered abject in patriarchal society and are usually not openly discussed by mothers themselves. By addressing her doubts openly she ignores norms of idealized or good mothering.

Conclusion

A comparative close reading of *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights* has given insight into how Didion performs the roles of wife and mother in each book and how her relationship with these roles has changed from one book to the other. The memoirs were written from different life situations and living in these different life situations has changed Didion's relationship with her roles of wife and mother and with her memories of them. The shift in focus on John and Quintana in *The Year of Magical Thinking* to herself and her experience of mothering in *Blue Nights* signifies a shift from relating to herself and her life through her identities as wife and mother to coming to relate to herself and her life through her own experiences.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking* the narrating Didion had just lost John and still sees herself as part of the "we" she was with him for forty years. In her memories of her life but also in the moment of writing Didion's focus is on John or the loss of John. Her memories of their marriage show John position himself as the dominant head of the family and Didion as the submissive wife who leaned on John and who took care of him and the household. Such a dominant- submissive relationship is valued in traditional notions of marriage. Quintana's illness is foregrounded and explained in detail, while Didion describes being by her daughter's side daily throughout her illness, which shows her to be a devoted and caring mother; a normative parenting ideal for mothers. This makes the narrative daughter-centric,

which is a patriarchal narrative tradition. The focus on John and Quintana, her identification with “we” rather than “I” and the traditional positions she and John take up in their marriage conform to a normative performance of a wife and mother who foregrounds her family, effaces herself and who relates to herself through her family.

When Didion wrote *Blue Nights* she had been living without John for seven years and without Quintana for five and has come to relate differently to herself and her memories of her life. The Didion who is narrating in *Blue Nights* is much more an individual “I” who also remembers herself as an “I” instead of as a “we”. She does not try to hold on to the memory of John as she had in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. John is mostly an implied presence in her memories and the narrating Didion does not bring him up a lot. This means that she does not perform the role of wife in *Blue Nights* and has also moved on from her performance of grieving widow which was so central in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. The focus is instead on her experience of living and navigating her present life and on her experience of remembering her life and role as mother from a moment in her life in which she is faced with doubt about this role. Remembering Quintana leads her to contemplate whether she has been a good mother. Failed motherhood is considered abject in patriarchal society and by writing about this Didion moves away from her previous performance of idealized and normative mother. However, by foregrounding her own experiences of motherhood the narrative becomes matrifocal, and less performative.

Due to limitations in word count some themes were left unexplored, such as a shift from teleology and linearity in *The Year of Magical Thinking* to simultaneity and a-linearity in *Blue Nights*, a preoccupation with rationality over emotionality in *The Year of Magical Thinking* that is not present in *Blue Nights* and the theme of aging and frailty in *Blue Nights* which in *The Year of Magical Thinking* Didion still sees as a temporary grief related fragility, which all signify a shift away from patriarchal narrative traditions in *Blue Nights*. Future

research into these themes can give more insight into these themes in the books and into the shift.

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