

'An entire past comes to dwell in a new house': Topophilia and Jeremiad in Joan Didion's *Run River*

'Todo un pasado viene a habitar una nueva casa': topofilia y
jeremiada en *Run River*, de Joan Didion

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Abstract: In this paper I will analyse Joan Didion's poetics of praise and mourning in her first published novel, *Run River*, understanding the Western landscape she presents in it as an instance of Gaston Bachelard's idea of the childhood home as a felicitous, eulogised space. I will argue that Didion's depiction of the Sacramento Valley and the struggle of the families inhabiting it to accept the changing face of the landscape results in a jeremiad narrative of the West as paradise lost. Reflecting on the limitations both of Bachelard's discussion of the childhood home and of the West as a mythic space, I will conclude by assessing Didion's topophilia and her ambiguous stance as a Western writer.

Keywords: Didion; West; Bachelard; space; home; myth; topophilia.

Summary: From Bachelard's Sense of Home to Didion's Lost West. The Childhood Home as Paradise Lost: The Jeremiad in *Run River*. Conclusion: Another Dreamer of the Golden Dream?

Resumen: En el presente ensayo analizo las poéticas del encomio y el duelo en la primera novela de Joan Didion, *Run River*, entendiendo que el Oeste que Didion presenta en la novela responde a lo que Gaston Bachelard definió como el hogar de la infancia, esto es, un lugar placentero y engrandecido. Argumento que la vida incierta de quienes viven en la zona californiana del valle de Sacramento constituye una jeremiada que representa el Oeste como un paraíso perdido. Tras una discusión sobre las limitaciones del concepto bachelardiano del hogar de la infancia, así como de los problemas que plantea la consideración del Oeste americano como espacio mítico, concluiré con una reflexión sobre la ambigua topofilia de Joan Didion y su ambiguo papel como escritora de dicha región.

Palabras clave: Didion; Oeste; Bachelard; espacio; casa; mito; topofilia.



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Sumario: Del sentido de hogar bachelardiano al Oeste perdido de Didion. La casa de la infancia como paraíso perdido: la jeremiada de *Run River*. Conclusión: ¿otra soñadora del sueño dorado?

INTRODUCTION

. . . the images I want to examine are the quite simple images of felicitous space. In this orientation, these investigations would deserve to be called topophilia. They seek to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love. For diverse reasons, and with the differences entailed by poetic shadings, this is *eulogized* space. (Bachelard xxxv; my emphasis)

‘Topophilia’ was a term coined by Gaston Bachelard in his landmark *The Poetics of Space*, in which he set out to study, from a psychological and poetical standpoint, those intimate spaces that bring joy and comfort to individuals. In the introduction to his volume, quoted above, he refers to these spaces as *eulogised*. ‘Eulogy’ is defined in the Collins dictionary as “a formal speech or piece of writing praising a person or thing, esp a person who has recently died.” Bachelard attributes great importance to the childhood home, establishing it as one of the foremost experiences that are constitutive of adult life. This idea gives me the lead to begin a discussion on Joan Didion’s poetics of praise and mourning in her first published novel, *Run River* (1963). The novel’s depiction of the struggle of the Sacramento Valley’s historical families to accept the changing face of their landscape, their history and their privilege is framed in a narrative of a paradise lost, rife in literature that deals with the West as a mythographic ideal. In this paper, I will explore Joan Didion’s elegiac treatment of the West, and I will argue that her mythic construction of the Sacramento Valley, a space “that may be defended against adverse forces” (Bachelard xxxv), runs in parallel to Bachelard’s ideal of the childhood home as eulogised space.

In the first section I will begin by discussing Bachelard’s reflections on the psychological impact of the childhood home, to later explore how they might be applied to Joan Didion’s idea of the West as presented in the novel. For this purpose, I will also take into account Didion’s later non-fiction, where she reflects upon her *topophilia* as a Westerner, emphasising the centrality of space in her writing. In the next section, I will link the

concept of eulogy to the presence of a jeremiad narrative in *Run River*, claiming that the dichotomy between a golden past and a decadent present establishes the novel as a paradigmatic example of the genre famously defined by Sacvan Bercovitch. I will finish by discussing how the tragedy of the novel responds to the characters' witnessing of the disappearance of their Bachelardian felicitous space.

1. FROM BACHELARD'S SENSE OF HOME TO DIDION'S LOST WEST

Bachelard's original contribution in his much-celebrated *The Poetics of Space*, published in 1957, revolves around the idea of a topoanalysis, defined as the "systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (8). Bachelard's study addresses the psychology of certain spaces as varied as a house, a nest or a drawer. I will stick to his discussion of the house as an intimate space that is accessed through remembrance. Bachelard seems to situate the *idea* of a house always in the past, accessible only through the act of recalling, or dreaming. The "house we were born in" is set in the irretrievable past, although it is still present in our later life: "To inhabit oneirically the house we were born in means more than to inhabit it in memory; it means living in this house that is gone, the way we used to dream in it" (16). In the act of remembering, the house feels like a shelter: "A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability" (17). Bachelard attributes values of comfort, order and peace to the idea of home he presents. The utmost expression of the idea of home as shelter is the house we inhabited as children, since it is "the entity that is most firmly fixed in our memories" (30). Memories are indeed central to Bachelard's poetics of space, as he attributes great importance to the workings of memory and the imagination and the imprint they leave in our identities, claiming that "[s]pace that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination" (xxxvi).

Even though it is presented as a universal experience, Bachelard's understanding of "home as shelter" is highly partial. His references to "housewifely care" (69) or to "the recollections of a father or a grandmother, of a mother or a servant" (14) indicate a very particular idea of what constitutes a home. Bachelard presents the idea of home as homogeneous and universal, when, in fact, homes are heterogeneous, that is to say, local, as well as the peoples who inhabit them. As Ana M^a

Manzanas and Jesús Benito argue, “space is not always ‘felicitous,’ but, rather, is frequently hostile, the kind of space that Bachelard excludes from his *Poetics*” (6). He is in fact aware of this exclusion, as he himself declares: “hostile space is hardly mentioned in these pages” (xxxvi). In other words, the fact that home is very often *not* shelter-like is a reality Bachelard chooses to ignore. Bachelard’s idea of home becomes, then, quite restricted. For this reason, I will rely on the metaphoric potential of the bachelardian idea of home rather than the literal meaning that the author conveys, understanding “home” as an experience regardless of its actual materialisation. Moreover, the ubiquity of the sense of home makes Bachelard’s study appropriate for any text that, directly or not, deals with said feeling of home, for as he states: “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” (5).

Bachelard asserts that it is “reasonable to say we ‘read a house,’ or ‘read a room,’ since both room and house are psychological diagrams that guide writers and poets in their analysis of intimacy” (38). I am going to argue that the West, as depicted in Didion’s *Run River*, is indeed a study of the intimate space that the Sacramento Valley signifies for the characters in the novel, as well as for the author herself. More specifically, the chronotope of Didion’s West—literally, the particular time-space relationships presented in her novel, as per Bakhtin—will be read as the equivalent of the Bachelardian childhood home. As has been explained above, the Bachelardian home is understood metaphorically here since in the novel it is not a physical house that triggers the psychological study of the intimate space that the West signifies (topoanalysis), but rather the landscape and history of the West, which indeed function as a home to the novel’s protagonists. Edward C. Relph aptly conceptualises the idea of home along these lines, stating that “[h]ome is not just the house you happen to live in, it is not something that can be anywhere, that can be exchanged, but an irreplaceable centre of significance” (39). In this regard, Thomas Mallon has noted how “[a] number of Didion’s essays have been concerned with the idea of ‘home,’ which, after all, is the most vivid part of anyone’s personal history” (46). The West, or rather, the idealised idea of the West in Didion’s novel is, like Bachelard’s home, a sheltered realm where everything is apparently peaceful, orderly and happy, and certainly a centre of significance for Didion and her characters.

The novel revolves around the ill-fated destinies of two families of the Sacramento Valley, the McClellans and the Knights, both of which proudly descend from a pioneer past. Lily Knight and her husband, Everett

McClellan, spend most of the novel lamenting that the idealised Valley of their younger times is now disappearing. They struggle with the discomfoting sense of a loss of control over their destinies, which were secured in their childhood: "She wanted now only to see her father, to go back to that country in time where no one made mistakes," Lily laments (RR 95). This sentence points to the mythologising of the past at stake in Didion's novel, and in much of her work in general. According to Eva-Sabine Zehelein, "The West-as-myth, with all the positive connotations attributed for decades, is employed by Didion to reminisce about her childhood and youth" (8). Lily's infantile recollection of an impossible "time where no one made mistakes" (RR 95) is only a sign of the tendency towards idealising a golden past triggered by an uncomfortable present. The landscape of the Sacramento Valley, and by extension, of California, appears as a refuge for the character's bleak quotidian life. However, instead of providing appeasement and comfort, it only accentuates the anxieties they feel in the face of a changing present: "What do I want. A nice ordered life right here on the river just like we've always had" (RR 121). As readers, we guess that there was never a "country where no one made mistakes" nor a "nice ordered life right here on the river." Rather, this points to a construction not dissimilar to Bachelard's perfect, ideal childhood home, in which all sign of distress is erased by memory. Ultimately, the characters are building up a narrative that provides comfort, something which critic Zehelein suggests Didion is doing herself: "For her own personal story, the West of her mental and psychological landscape needed/needs an icon of order and stability in view of observed disorder and loss" (10).

Bachelard acknowledges the indelible presence of the childhood home, as for him it is "the entity that is most firmly fixed in our memories" (30). Further, he seems to attach a determinism to the first inhabited house: "[A]ll the other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme" (15). He even considers the physicality that the childhood home imprints in us: "[O]ver and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits" (14). Indeed, this fixation haunts the character's existence. For Bachelard, the childhood home is a provider of protection and comfort. For the characters in *Run River* it performs that protective function too, to a certain extent. However, at the same time, their idealised childhood home becomes a lingering presence in their everyday lives. It acts as a reminder of everything that no longer works, as opposed to the blissful days of childhood. The West, for the

characters, is not a sign of relief but of impending doom and decadence, somehow resembling a Faulknerian narrative,¹ as H. Jennifer Brady has noted: “[T]he characters of this story and of *Run River* are imprisoned in the memory of things past” (463). Such decadence is felt by the characters in their disintegrating quotidian surroundings, as Everett remarks when observing the McClellan riverfront:

... the light on the dock was gone, burned out he didn't know when. *Remind Liggett*, he thought, abruptly alarmed about the dock light. (A dock light first, a torn fence next, maybe the pump goes off and loses its prime: before long the whole place would come crumbling down, would vanish before his eyes, revert to whatever it had been when his great-great-grandfather first came to the Valley). (*RR* 13)

The decay the families perceive stands in stark contrast to their *perfected* recollections of their past, blissful days. These constructed, comfort-giving recollections can arguably be said to constitute the drive of the novel itself and, crucially, of Didion's own nostalgia and craving for a feeling of home. Didion's topophilia, understood in its simplest definition as the *love* we feel for a place, entails an idealisation of the West of which she was well aware, for as she confesses in *Where I Was From*:

This story, the “plot” of the novel, was imagined, but the impulse that initially led me to imagine this story and not another was real: I was a year or two out of Berkeley, working for Vogue in New York, and experiencing a yearning for California so raw that night after night . . . I sat on one of my apartment's two chairs and set the Olivetti on the other and wrote myself a California river. (156–57)

Didion's narration in *Run River*, then, stems from a psychological need for reassurance. The (re)construction of the childhood home is an act of memory that entails an idealisation, both in Bachelard's and in Didion's case. Bachelard's concept of home is as partial as Didion's recollection of the West is. His evocation of a very specific type of household is limited

¹ Several critics have noted the resemblance between the decaying worlds of Didion's California and Faulkner's Mississippi. For instance, C. Barry Chabot defines *Run River* as “a Faulknerian story of the inner dissolution of landed California families” (53), whereas Samuel C. Coale writes: “As in Faulkner's fiction, doom, decay, and corruption stalk favored agricultural lands. Old agrarian cultures shatter before the fiery assaults of a postwar boom” (182).

and limiting, in the same way as Didion's West represents a very specific experience of the West that reduces the idea of 'West' and 'Western' to a very restricted set of peoples and experiences. Mainly, the idea of the West presented in *Run River* virtually erases the trauma that the westward advances meant, in particular for Native American peoples, as Katarzyna Nowak-McNeice has noted:

If we think of Joan Didion's vision of Californian identity, then the crucial omission of any other agent of history than white and Protestant —such as Californios, non-white settlers or Native Americans— so strikingly at odds with historical reality, guarantees the centrality of white American identity. (95)

The idea of home, then, conveys a mythologised version of whatever that home actually is. The difference is that the tragedy in Didion's *Run River* indicates that she is very much aware of such partiality, again resembling Bachelard's argument that space is inevitably lived "with all the partiality of the imagination" (xxxvi), as quoted above.

Often, in the act of idealisation, the childhood home is presented as an Edenic space, as Bachelard suggests: "When we dream of the house we were born in, in the utmost depths of reverie, we participate in this original warmth, in this well-tempered matter of the material paradise" (7). Bachelard's idea of the home as a "material paradise" ties in with the archetypal narrative of the West as Eden, an idea presented tragically in *Run River*. The traditional representation of the West as the Edenic, pastoral realm where endless possibilities of happiness can take place is not absent from Didion's writings. Throughout the novel, there are several pastoral images that the characters indulge in, like Lily's recollection of her childhood happy memories: "summer evenings driving downriver to auctions, past the green hops in leaf, blackbirds flying up from the brush in the dry twilight air, red Christmas-tree balls glittering in the firelight, a rush of autumn Sundays. All gone, when you drove through the rain to visit the great-aunts" (*RR* 46). Didion, on discussing her first novel, provides a heavily pastoral recollection of her childhood home and landscape: "The 'stuff' of the novel, then, was the landscape and weather of the Sacramento Valley, the way the rivers crested and the way the tule fogs obscured the levees and the way the fallen camellias turned the sidewalks brown and slick during the Christmas rains" (*WIWF* 157). The river, concretely, has an overwhelming presence in the novel, carrying a

heavy symbolic pastoral meaning. Comer identifies it as “the palimpsest upon which Didion articulates a longing for the heroic western past” (*Landscapes* 74). Jan Goggans has argued that the river is the most prominent signifier in the novel, carrying both the pastoral meaning and the tragic drive, as most, if not all, of the tragic events in the novel happen in or around the river Sacramento.

The Bachelardian childhood home we encounter in *Run River* is not, however, only made of a pastoral landscape; it also has to do with history:

My great-great-great-great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Scott was born in 1766, grew up on the Virginia and Carolina frontiers, at age sixteen married an eighteen-year-old veteran of the Revolution and the Cherokee expeditions named Benjamin Hardin IV, moved with him into Tennessee and Kentucky and died on still another frontier, the Oil Through Bottom on the south bank of the White River in what is now Arkansas but was then Missouri Territory. (3)

Thus begins Didion’s memoir, entitled *Where I Was From*. In a volume that is meant to explore the writer’s origins, the very first sentence is aimed at establishing the pioneer ancestors that conform her heritage, populated with images of pioneer expeditions and the moving westward of the frontier. This comes as no surprise, for, as Brady states, “Didion is very much a child of the frontier promise” (454). If we have taken the West as the Bachelardian home understood in spatial terms, we could argue that Didion’s childhood home is, understood in *historical* terms, the western pioneering experience. All characters in the novel, in one way or another, participate in the eulogy of their pioneer history. The characters’ attitude towards their past and their land embodies the idea of eulogy as praise and lament. On the one hand, they celebrate their past and their ancestors, who they view as role models for “the American way”:

I said you play the game, you make the rules. I said if a lot of people a long time back hadn’t said what they wanted and struck out for it you wouldn’t have been born in California. You’d have been born in Missouri maybe. Or Kentucky. Or Virginia . . . What I mean is you come from a people who’ve wanted things and got them. Don’t forget it. (*RR* 34–35)

Such are Walter Knight’s words of advice to Lily. Several pages later, Lily replicates his words: “Wanting things and working to get them. It’s the basis of the American way” (*RR* 186), proving that she has assimilated

the pioneer creed of effort and self-making. The references to their pioneer past are ubiquitous in their daily lives, and they are very much aware not only of their own ancestors but also of their neighbours: “‘Miss Rita Blanchard has lived all her life on Thirty-eighth Street,’ Edith Knight said sharply. ‘She is from an old, old family in the Valley. A family,’ she added magnanimously, ‘which crossed the Great Plains a year before my own’” (*RR* 81). On the other hand, they are painfully aware that their privileges as descendants of the pioneers are expiring, as Brady notes: “*Run River* charts the history of a lost world” (456). They are pervaded by the feeling that their childhood home, spatially understood as California, and historically understood as the pioneer legacy, is disappearing. As Lily ponders: “Everything changes, everything changed” (*RR* 46).

2. THE CHILDHOOD HOME AS PARADISE LOST: THE JEREMIAD IN *RUN RIVER*

Precisely, the changes that Sacramento is undergoing are essential to the plot in *Run River*. Krista Comer has identified the stories of transformation as a prominent feature of Didion's writing: “Didion narrates stories of western spaces on the brink of transition from older settled orders to new ones” (“New West” 249). In *Run River*, the deep socio-political transformation of the Sacramento Valley makes the characters confront their own present and miss their past lives, falling into problematic notions of a golden past that most likely will never return. “This question of ‘changes,’ involving as it does some reflexive suggestion of a birthright squandered, a paradise lost, is a vexed issue,” writes Didion (*WIWF* 170). Vexed indeed, for the “paradise lost” narrative that she deploys in *Run River* entails troublesome notions of American exceptionalism. The idea that the United States holds a *special* status in the world due to a supposed mission entrusted by God—an idea of Puritan origins—was, ever since the nineteenth century, embodied in the (idea of the) West. The Western territories, and California in particular, symbolised the geographical possibility of carrying out the national mission—an idea that would be epitomised in Frederick Jackson Turner's famous frontier thesis. Joan Didion, a prominent westerner herself, was not immune to this narrative since, as Brady points out, “[t]he belief that the course of American history—and arguably of universal history—is revealed in the frontier experience informs all of Didion's work” (466). *Run River* is no exception. The very epigraph to the novel reads: “the real Eldorado is still further on,” a quote

from John Mason Peck's 1837 *New Guide to the West*. This image sets certain expectations about the setting and the plot, and it undoubtedly acquires an ironic meaning once the novel's events have unfolded. Notwithstanding such irony, the idea of California as a promised land was still functional in the twentieth century American cultural imaginary. In *Run River* we learn how the candidate Henry Catlin, Walter Knight's opponent, accepts his "sacred burden" as the Governor of California, "the California that was promised us yessir I mean in Scripture" (RR 44). Later on, Walter Knight adds: "According to Mr. Catlin, we are starting up a golden ladder into California's great tomorrow" (45). Again, despite the irony of these utterances, this shows that the imaginary of the pioneer West was still very much present. The characters in the novel exemplify this reality, as their childhood is populated by historical references to their pioneer ancestors. Eccentrically, Martha's favourite childhood game consisted in a recreation of the Donner-Reed Party, a heavily traumatic pioneer expedition that reportedly ended up in cannibalism: "Martha's favorite game as a child had in fact been 'Donner Party,' a ritual drama in which she, as its originator, always played Tamsen Donner and was left, day after day, to perish by the side of the husband whose foolish miscalculations had brought them all to grief" (100). The mythology of the West is ubiquitous in the McClellans and Knights' everyday lives, as well as the constant reminder that they are the proud descendants of the pioneers.

However, the fact that the novel is populated with references to the myth of the West does not mean that it endorses it. Much on the contrary, the idea of California as Eldorado, as an exceptional Edenic land of possibilities, is debunked in the novel. The characters are torn between the realisation that there is, indeed, nothing exceptional about them and their heritage, or California, and the wish for it to be so, or as per Zehelein: "[Didion's] observations illustrate that California is not—or no longer—the exceptional, the redeeming space, but bears symptoms of a universal development in American culture and society. And for Didion, that is a process of degeneration and disintegration" (3). It is for this reason that we can argue that *Run River* deals with the acknowledgment of the impossibility of California's role in the national mission. The closing of the frontier—an event which historically took place in 1890, but whose ideological consequences have been much more persistent in the American cultural imaginary—is viewed with resignation and nostalgia. Didion claims: "California is . . . where we run out of continent" (STB 172). The

ideological acceptance of the closing of the frontier meant the acceptance of the fact that California was not the eternal land of opportunities that the characters in *Run River* envision. It is in this way that the novel participates in the jeremiad genre, most notably defined by Sacvan Bercovitch as an originally puritan narrative that conveyed a sense of mission, of 'errand,' that had been assigned to the Americans as the chosen people. This sense of mission is personified by Lily, who believed "that it was America's mission to make manifest to the world the wishes of an Episcopal God" (35) when she was young. Bercovitch adds that the jeremiad's "historiographic-mythic" function was "defined by the frontier ideal," and "posited an idealized True America against the actual (but inessential, correctible) evils of the Real America" (xvi). Didion's Western childhood home would be, in the jeremiad schema, the True America, that country "where no one made mistakes," opposed to the Real America of the changing California. Bercovitch further adds that "[n]ot infrequently, [the jeremiad's] affirmations betray an underlying desperation—a refusal to confront the present, a fear of the future" (xliv). Such desperation and refusal to acknowledge a changing reality is exemplified by the characters' confusion before the changing landscape, society and economy of the Sacramento Valley.

To begin with, the economic system on which the families had relied for years is now becoming obsolete: "There was no longer any money in hops: everyone on the river was getting out of them" (*RR* 14). Didion further reflects upon these changes in her memoir:

The year Martha dies is 1949. By 1959, as presented in *Run River*, this 'true' California has been largely obliterated. The pear orchards on which Lily herself grew up are being relentlessly uprooted; her mother is selling off the acreage for development as fast as the bank will allow her to subordinate it. (*WIWF* 162)

On top of these economic changes, California was undergoing a modernisation that profoundly baffled Lily and her family:

She did not seem to realize that there were now paperback bookstores in Sacramento. She and his father would never seem to get it through their heads that things were changing in Sacramento, that Aerojet General and Douglas Aircraft and even the State College were bringing in a whole new

class of people, people who had lived back East, people who read things.
(RR 5)

Didion herself discussed how she, years later, understood that her novel conveyed a sense of distress against rapid changes in her hometown: “Much in *Run River*, as I believed when I was writing it and as I read it now, some four decades later, has to do with the ways California was or is ‘changing,’ the detailing of which permeates the novel with a tenacious (and, as I see it now, pernicious) mood of nostalgia” (*WIWF* 160). Elsewhere, Didion confesses: “In that gentle sleep Sacramento dreamed until perhaps 1950, when something happened. What happened was that Sacramento woke to the fact that the outside world was moving in, fast and hard. At the moment of its waking Sacramento lost, for better or for worse, its character” (*STB* 173). The modernising tendencies that Lily and her family witness trigger feelings of dispossession and uprootedness: the metaphorical childhood home of Didion’s fiction (the Sacramento Valley and, by extension, California) is disappearing, making “[t]he Knights and McClellans find themselves exiled from the past by irrevocable changes, both cultural and economic” (Brady 457). This makes the McClellans and Knights feel disoriented; life as they have known it has been upturned, disrupted. They no longer *possess* the valley, nor are they known in Sacramento anymore: “She and his father were going to be pretty surprised if and when they ever woke up to the fact that nobody in Sacramento any more had even heard of the McClellans. Or the Knights” (RR 5). As Goggans points out, “they are also confronting the reality of constant, irreversible change” (10). This reality fits a jeremiad narrative, in that a jeremiad constitutes a declension narrative that glorifies a golden past (the Bachelardian childhood home) and laments a bleak present. Didion herself acknowledges that the idea of “change” in the novel is coded as negative: “There are other signs of change, which, in the construct of the novel, is understood to mean decline” (*WIWF* 163).

What is at stake, ultimately, in the process of “changing” that California is undergoing is the loss of privilege of the families that ruled the place. The entitlement they feel to their land, due to their status as descendants of the pioneers, evaporates as the frontier is no longer a reality and as the demographic and economic evolution of the region displaces them as privileged agents. The entire history of the pioneering movement westward is now dwelling in facing a modernised Sacramento, where the McClellan and Knight families are no longer popular. The characters in

the novel do not grasp Sacramento in all its heterogeneity and complexity, but rather rely on the "historical Sacramento, a mythic construct in which the daughter of a pioneer can rule this small world" (Goggans 12). Just as the Bachelardian home is a mythic construct, with its caring housewife and its faithful servant, the Sacramento valley is mythologised as well in the novel, and it acts as a repository of "the pioneers' expectations and beliefs concerning the land they settled after the harsh overland crossing" (Brady 456).

Such mythologisation entails troublesome consequences for the characters, as they hold notions of property and belonging that do not match the economic reality of present-day Sacramento. Rather, they rely on a primeval code of rights whereby they feel they have a right to their surroundings due to their historical ancestry. The fact that the Valley is the childhood home to the protagonists makes them feel entitled to it: "Sometimes I think this whole valley belongs to me" 'It does, you hear me?' Walter Knight said sharply. 'We made I'" (RR 85). Their ideas of ownership, akin to a problematic pioneer creed, are permeated by history and family rather than economy and property rights. For them, the legitimacy of land ownership springs from historical and kinship rights, as Walter Knight tells Lily: "I think nobody owns land until their dead are in it" (84). Everett McClellan shares this tacit code, when he insists in burying his dead sister Martha in the ranch: "she's my sister, I'm going to bury her, and I'm going to bury her on the ranch" (220). As proud descendants of the pioneers, the Knights and McClellans feel entitled to their territories in a way that is problematically exclusionary. Accordingly, those whose dead are *not* in those lands appear as illegitimate strangers, with no right to them. This explains the racism we encounter against the "Okies," a derogatory way of referring to people who emigrated from Oklahoma and its surroundings during the Great Depression, most famously exemplified by John Steinbeck's Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Lily's father, after losing to Henry Catlin in the California gubernatorial election, tells her: "we'll beat them at their own game. You know why? . . . Because you've got in your little finger more brains and more guts than all those Okies got put together" (45). Immediately after, he refers to Lily as "Lily-of-the-valley," as if to emphasise the idea that she belongs there, whereas the "Okies" do not. In the face of profound economic and social change, it is no surprise that those perceived as "foreigners" make the scapegoat for the natives' frustration. The Edenic landscape, as the McClellans and the Knights understand it, is evaporating

before their eyes, becoming filled with intruders and illegitimate inhabitants. The praiseworthy elements of the childhood home that constitute Didion's eulogy give way to the mourning for both a history and a space that are indefectibly changing for good, as the characters realise: "Everett saw that what Lily had said was true: everything was falling apart" (133). The idea that *Run River* represents the depiction of a paradise lost is rife among critics: "What Didion traces so eloquently in her novels, then, is the history of paradise lost, betrayed, forfeited-that, and the ultimate obsolescence of the lives of frontier children who have 'run out of continent' and purpose" (Brady 453). Ultimately, Didion's declension narrative is the inevitable consequence of an acceptance of change, of loss of privilege, and of the acknowledgment that the Bachelardian childhood home is only accessible through memory.

CONCLUSION: ANOTHER DREAMER OF THE GOLDEN DREAM?

Great images have both a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly. Indeed, every great image has an unfathomable oneiric depth to which the personal past adds special color. Consequently it is not until late in life that we really revere an image, when we discover that its roots plunge well beyond the history that is fixed in our memories. In the realm of absolute imagination, we remain young late in life. But we must lose our earthly Paradise in order actually to live in it, to experience it in the reality of its images, in the absolute sublimation that transcends all passion. (Bachelard 33)

Bachelard's quotation is useful to wrap up our exploration of Didion's "great images" of the West, which are indeed a blend of memory and legend, a mediated version of whatever the West actually is. Bachelard recognises the need to "lose our earthly Paradise in order actually to live in it," something which the characters in *Run River* struggle to accomplish. The Bachelardian childhood home reveals itself as the construction of an idealised, Edenic past that we necessarily lose in the present, but which remains a mental place of comfort and shelter for the remainder of our lives. However, this felicitous, eulogised space comports a degree of idealisation that often acts as an entrapment in that it haunts us, as it haunts the characters in *Run River*, against the face of an uncomfortable present. *Run River* emphasises how the Bachelardian home is an ideal entity more

than a reality: to a varying degree, it always entails a mythologisation of the childhood realm we are eulogising. This is why some critics have seen Didion as, indeed, a mythographer of the West. And, I would add, as a writer concerned with the topoanalysis of the places she loves, that is, with the psychological study of the West as her own intimate, felicitous and eulogised space.

We may conclude by wondering whether Didion is, too, a dreamer of the golden dream. It is not easy to unravel the ideology at work behind *Run River*.² Does it endorse the mythic reading of the West, or does it unveil it as pernicious and false? Didion identifies herself, to a certain extent, with the attitudes of the characters in *Run River*. "All that is constant about the California of my childhood is the rate at which it disappears" (*STB* 176), Didion reminisces. Her writings let us know that she, too, struggled with the nostalgia for her childhood home, and her Californian history and landscape. However, that does not mean that she was not well aware of the problematic consequences of relying on the myth of the West, since as William Handley asserts, "the golden land has rarely been rendered more bleakly" (195). Didion revised *Run River* decades later in her memoirs, finding that, to her view, she had conveyed a message that she no longer believed in as it entailed the aforementioned "tenacious (and, as I see it now, pernicious) mood of nostalgia" (*WIWF* 160). Her topophilia —her love for what "one might call the 'sense of place' and the 'spirit of place'" (Zehelein 2)— is combined with a critical eye, more interested in exploring the personal consequences of accepting the changing scene of California than in fruitlessly mourning for a past that will never come back. This critical stance advances the destabilisation of meanings about the West that would dominate in subsequent texts like *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, a volume which according to Comer marks "the arrival of . . . the New West" ("New West" 249). What we can assert without a doubt is that space plays a central role in her writing, not only in a novel like *Run River*, where the characters seem to be somewhat determined by the space they inhabit, but in her writings in general, as a constant preoccupation tackled both through fiction and non-fiction.

² See Kenneth Millard's article "Vanishing Point: Joan Didion and the Horizons of Historical Knowledge" for an exploration of the question of Western origins in Didion's memoir and her difficulty to escape mythic structures. He also delves into the question of how Didion's work, notwithstanding its ambiguities, might be included in a feminist Western canon.

California “resembles Eden” (*STB* 176), Didion asserts. However, are her writings not the proof that California is actually *not* Eden? Didion plays with ambiguity. She is not a naïve believer in “the golden dream” —hence the tragedy in *Run River*. She is aware of the contradictions and problems derived from the myth of the West, and shows a critical eye when revisiting her childhood home: “Didion uses the myth of the West with all its canonized connotations, to debunk the reality it has become” (Zehelein 6). Similarly, Comer argues that “like canonical westerns, even as she invokes the pioneer legacy, she deconstructs it” (*Landscapes* 70). But that does not make her less of a Westerner. Much on the contrary, her writings radiate a Bachelardian tophophilia that makes Didion the “West's contemporary mythographer through her stubborn love for and memory of its mythic past” (Brady 470). Even though the California of her early writings as a childhood home is presented as evanescent, fading, and tragic in her texts, it ultimately remains one of those eulogised felicitous spaces that Bachelard discusses. As Didion herself asserts: “I am at home in the West” (*South and West* 126).

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