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# Confronting Loss when ‘Life Changes in the Instant’: Ageism and Successful Aging in the ‘Case’ of Joan Didion

## Introduction: ‘Ageism’ and ‘Successful Aging’ as social and cultural constructs

From a social perspective, human aging is embedded in “social contexts and is shaped by social factors.” (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer 2018, 1) When we over-generalize our “explicit and implicit assumptions about older people” to the extent that we ignore individual differences and “treat older people, ageing, and old age in a stereotypical manner,” we participate in the discriminatory practice of ‘ageism’ (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer 2018, 1). First introduced by the American psychologist Robert Butler, ageism was defined by him in analogy to racism as “a systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old.” (Butler 1989; quoted in Achenbaum 2015, 11)

From a cultural perspective, ageism can be related to the ambiguities inherent in narratives about the aging process itself, theorized in concepts such as the “dualism of aging” encompassing the two poles of a normative and healthy, self-reliant old age set against a decrepit, dependent old age, which emerged in American cultural narratives of the late nineteenth century (Cole 1992). As an aspect of the narrative construction of a culturally conceived age identity, ageism has been analyzed by Margaret Morganroth Gullette as a “decline narrative” that she distinguishes from age-related “narratives of progress.” (1988, 2004) More recently, she has focused exclusively on the decline system of “ageisms, in the plural,” (Gullette 2017, xviii) arguing that the concepts of aging and ageism are being conflated in contemporary American society to the degree that aging is seen as the “*process that serves as the trigger for ageism.*” (Gullette 2017, xiv [emphasis in original])

In order to analyze the relationship between aging, old age and ageism, I consider two different cultural age narratives that can be seen to interact in the instructive ‘case’ of the American writer Joan Didion. In the first of these narratives, Joan Didion was featured in 2015, at the age of 80, as ‘the face’ of the Parisian luxury brand Céline. This campaign, which is related to a recent in-

crease in women in beauty advertisements belonging to the fourth age<sup>1</sup>, builds on Didion's cultural authority as a journalist and writer, and on the glamour of the younger Didion. As a media icon in her eighties, Didion's 'case' can be seen as exceptional and as counteracting the "visual ageism"<sup>2</sup> of the media with their avoidance of the frailty of oldest age (Loos and Ivan 2018, 171). However, Didion's case also embodies the contradictions inherent in the discourse of successful aging, since she represents the positive age stereotype of the resilient older woman who is "allowed a certain visibility to tell us how to grow old gracefully." (Segal 2015)

Whereas the stereotypes on which ageism relies can be positive, they are more often negative images, even more frequently so when the focus is on older women. The positive stereotyping that is an aspect of the discourses of 'successful' or 'active aging,' available to the 'young old' or the 'third age,' turns predominantly negative when the focus is on the 'oldest old' or the 'fourth age.' While the gerontological concept of "successful aging" was introduced in postwar America as an active aging paradigm set against "traditional narratives of decline" in old age, its primary focus on "individual adaptability and adjustment in later life" has been criticized as socially exclusionary, since "[b]oth access to the means of success, however defined, and the very definition of success itself are matters of social inequality." (Katz and Calasanti 2015, 27, 31) Thus, both ageism as a harmful decline narrative of old age and successful aging as an optimistic narrative of positive aging are based on ambiguities that come to bear on cultural images of aging. I will explore these ambiguities with reference to the second cultural age narrative of loss and grief that comes to bear on Joan Didion as the writer of two bestselling memoirs based on the devastating losses she experienced. Didion examines her grief after the sudden death of her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), a text of "discovery" written against the insanity of grief (Fay-Leblanc 2018

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1 For other examples, see Jerslev 2018, 350: "The past couple of years have seen a number of not-so-young and elderly celebrities and models figure prominently in campaigns for luxury fashion brands; among these are Leslie Winer for Vivienne Westwood (spring/summer 2014, including the ageing designer herself), Catherine Deneuve for Louis Vuitton (spring/summer 2014), Joni Mitchell for Saint Laurent (spring 2015), Julia Roberts for Givenchy (spring 2015), Bernadette Peters for Kate Spade (autumn 2016), Helen Mirren for L'Oreal (2015) and Jessica Lange for Marc Jacob's fragrance Beauty (2014)."

2 See Loos and Ivan 2018, 164: "We coined the term 'visual ageism' to describe the social practice of visually underrepresenting older people or misrepresenting them in a prejudiced way. [...] Visual ageism includes older adults being depicted in peripheral or minor roles without positive attributes; non-realistic, exaggerated, or distorted portraits of older people; and over-homogenized characterizations of older adults."

[2006], 126–127). She explores the subject of her own aging in her reflections on her only daughter Quintana's illness and death in *Blue Nights* (2011), maintaining that "like aging, Quintana's death wasn't supposed to happen." (Ulin 2018 [2011], 145) I will analyze these literary texts in order to show how Didion reflects on and counteracts aspects of American age ideology, encompassing both 'successful aging' and 'ageism', in the context of loss and grief.

## Joan Didion for Céline: The 'Cool' Look and the 'Youthful Structure of the Look'

In the spring of 2015, Joan Didion featured in a campaign for the French luxury brand Céline. The photograph of her was shot by fashion photographer Jürgen Teller in his typically realist manner. Didion's aged face is frontally focused on and casts a shadow on the upper part of the wall. She is depicted in a domestic setting. She is wearing large black Céline sunglasses, a tight black dress and a large golden pendant necklace. The photograph can be linked to other previous media images of the younger Didion circulating on the internet which were taken in 1968, when the *Time* magazine commissioned photographer Julian Wasser to take photographs of Didion after her first essay collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) was published.

In these photographs, taken at the beginning of her writing career, the young Joan Didion is represented as 'cool,' 'detached' or 'tough,' initiating a style that has also been regarded as characterizing her writing (Daum 2015; Nelson 2017). The dark eyeglasses in the earlier photograph become her signature mark and recur – as a kind of quotation – in the Céline ad. In this way, the fashion photograph is situated in the life history of the well-known writer. According to Anne Jerslev, "[t]he fashion photograph constructs an unsentimental, edgy clash between a temporality of time passed inscribed in the ageing face and body, and a temporality of cool presence." (Jermyn and Jerslev 2017, 221) In choosing the 80-year-old Didion as the subject for their advertisement, Céline apparently resists the more prevalent association of beauty with youth in fashion photography. As Jerslev points out, youthful beauty is replaced in this ad for "a look of coolness, which is inscribed not only across the writer's ageing appearance but also across the whole ad through its invisible web of references to Didion's history and iconic portraits from her from the past decades." (Jerslev 2018, 355)

The fashion advertisement thus puts the aging face at the center emphasizing rather than hiding Didion's real age and her frailty. If the 'cool look' replaces the focus on youthful beauty to constitute a "kind of free space in old age, where

ageing is neither made invisible nor hypervisible,” the question remains whether this representation of a cool aesthetic “expresses a subtle form of ageism, a new way of denouncing the signs of an ageing body and face by masquerading as young and trendy.” (Jerslev 2018, 359)

Jerslev’s analysis of the ‘cool look’ in its age ambiguity recalls Kathleen Woodward’s notion of the ‘youthful structure of the look’ which she defines as “the culturally induced tendency to degrade and reduce an older person to the prejudicial category of old age.” (2006, 164) Woodward links this concept closely to the ageism of visual mass culture and argues that the youthful structure of the look is further inflected by gender in that “the older female body [is rendered] both hypervisible and invisible.” (2006, 163) She argues that in this structure the spectator is positioned as both younger and superior to the older person seen in an image or on the screen. In order to counteract this ageist structure of the look, Woodward highlights age performances by older women artists who focus on the difficult performance of ‘psychic’ age, which makes it possible to “contain different age-selves” within the aging process (2006, 166). Whereas Didion’s performance of the ‘cool look’ in the Céline advertisement may be said to transform the normative and binary youth-old age system, I will now examine how this relationship is configured within Didion’s own narrative style.

## **Joan Didion’s Approach to Narrative: Ironic Detachment and ‘Toughness’**

Didion’s agency in the context of ageism and successful aging is related to her own narrative interventions and the style for which she has become known: her cultural ‘capital’ as a well-known writer, journalist and public icon. The definition of ‘cool’ which Jerslev gives in the context of fashion defines it as “an attitude of detachment and aloofness that expresses a thought-out position on the edge. Cool is a public appearance, an expression of individualism, detachment and a certain superiority.” (2018, 357) The aspects of detachment and aloofness in this definition are attributes often ascribed to Didion as a writer. Didion even keeps her ‘coolness’ in the face of the devastating losses she experienced, becoming a kind of role model of ‘cool aging’: “[W]e needed her to grow old before us and, even amid unthinkable personal tragedy, show that it’s possible not only to remain visible and vital but also to remain unimpeachably, ineluctably cool.” (Daum 2015) Didion’s biographer Tracy Daugherty associates her coolness with her crafting “another persona, not entirely at odds with the Joan Didion in her formal writing but not completely consistent with it either” and regards this as

a strategy of creating a “brand” that was “first promoted by Didion herself.” (2015, xxii)

In her recent book on ‘tough’ women writers, Deborah Nelson defines the ‘unsentimental’ approach to suffering and the representation of a painful reality that Didion shares with writers like Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy and Susan Sontag, as a countertradition that provides an alternative to an ethics based on empathy:

They [these women writers] neither sacralized pain nor remained indifferent to it, and in this way, they constitute a countertradition that has been mistaken for heartlessness and coldness. But it is, in fact, something else altogether, something I want to call toughness. They were drawn to suffering as a problem to be explored and yet remained deeply suspicious of its attractions. It is easy to confuse their toughness with indifference or callousness, but that would be to misconstrue their project. They sought not relief from pain but heightened sensitivity to what they called ‘reality’. [...] In discourses where pain is a serious ethical and political question, as it was for them, the explanatory authority of trauma has rendered unintelligible both ordinary suffering and the *ordinariness* of suffering. (2017, 7–8 [emphasis in original])

Beginning her writing career during the 1960s, Joan Didion has been associated with the formal conventions of the ‘New Journalism.’ She shares the focus on experimentalism, the reinvention of journalistic forms, the insistence on authenticity and the emphasis on subjectivity. However, as Nelson points out, her acknowledgement of the subjectivity of the reporter leads her not to writing autobiographically but, rather, to a treatment of her own feelings as “part of the data.” (2017, 149) Depersonalizing her own experience, narrative style, for Didion, is a moral imperative, which shapes her aesthetics. In her 1965 essay, “Questions about the New Fiction”, Didion announces that “[t]o write with style is to fight lying all the way. [...] To tell something, really tell it, takes a certain kind of moral hardness.” (quoted in Nelson 2017, 153) As a moral component of her style, ‘hardness’ is introduced into Didion’s writing as an aspect of her Californian ‘roots,’ as a “coping mechanism that provides forward movement, no matter the cost.” (Nelson 2017, 166–167)

More broadly, Didion’s approach to narrative style can be seen as an interrogation of the progress narrative of the ‘American Dream.’ In a recent essay that relates Didion’s writing to interrogations of this dream as a “destructive and evasive fantasy,” Joel Alden Schlosser reads her work as “a site of struggle with and against a pervasive thought form in political life today.” (2018, 28, 29) Schlosser sees her nonfiction as confronting the delusions of this ‘dreamwork,’ while he highlights her grief memoirs as a “culminating self-examination” that “prompts a reassessment of her entire life and a recognition of the delusions

under which it was lived.” (2018, 29) Through rendering “intelligible what had been inarticulate,” (2018, 37) Didion is thus involved with the analysis and re-writing of narratives of progress and decline in the context of her writing about old age, death and grief. At the same time, she questions the redemptive power or therapeutic function of narrative.

## **The Loss of the Husband, Grief and Narrative Resilience: The Year of Magical Thinking (2005)**

Didion’s approach to American progress and decline narrative and thus, to the ambiguities of ageism and successful aging, is at stake in her particular version of the grief memoir. During the last two decades, grief memoirs have become a popular form of life writing, of which the following characteristics have been identified: First, the narratives occupy a threshold space between intimacy/private grief and public mourning. Second, they provide a testament to the life of the departed and serve the function of remembrance. Third, they function as books of consolation and guidebooks for coping with loss, thus serving a therapeutic function. And fourth, in their focus on meaning-making out of life, grief memoirs are frequently concerned with ‘anti-death writing’ and constitute, thus, a literal form of ‘life writing.’ (Kusek 2017, 175)

As the British writer Julian Barnes suggests in his review of American grief memoirs by Joan Didion and Joyce Carol Oates, a change has occurred in Western societies’ attitude towards death and grief, which entails that

we in the secularising West [...] have got less good at dealing with death, and therefore its emotional consequences. Of course, at one level we know that we all shall die; but death has come to be looked upon more as a medical failure than a human norm. It increasingly happens away from home, in hospital, and is handled by a series of outside specialists – a matter for the professionals. But afterwards, we, the amateurs, the grief-struck, are left to deal with it – this unique, banal thing – as best we can. (2012, 216)

In the situation Barnes depicts, – the isolating experience of dying in modernity and the privatized response towards grieving – the imaginative writer’s narrative response to grief can become a substitute guide to fellow sufferers. In support of this, claims have been made that we are living in an age of the memoir, in which personal narratives written not only by established writers proliferate. In terms of their truth value or the possibility of truthfully representing the self or the other, however, biographical memoirs have been read critically, for instance, by Sigmund Freud: “Anyone turning biographer commits himself to lies, to conceal-

ment, to hypocrisy, to flattery, and even to hiding his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth is not to be had.” (quoted in Berman 2012, 11–12) In response to Freud’s pessimistic view, Jeffrey Berman, who has written extensively on the grief memoir and what he calls ‘the end-of-life memoir,’ argues that the specific form of biography that focuses on the death of a person close to the writer offers truthful revelations, albeit mainly on the writing subject herself (2012, 12).

As we have seen, Joan Didion regards her writing style as a moral imperative to “fight lying all the way,” which also determines her approach in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Dwelling on the phrase “life changes in the instant” as the first words she wrote after the event, Didion describes the book as her attempt to “find the meaning” in the meaningless event of her husband’s death (2006, 3, 8). While she is skeptical of the therapeutic function of narrative, she is concerned with telling the story of the first year after this death in order to restructure the perspective on life that has been disrupted by it. This disruption affects “any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself.” (2006, 7)

At the beginning of this memoir Didion thus depicts the event of her husband’s sudden death as triggering a loss of beliefs about life and the security of accumulated ideas about it throughout the life course. As a writer she resorts to narrative in order to recover this loss. In doing this throughout the memoir, Didion analyzes and rejects a number of familiar narratives she has employed throughout her life to construct her self identity. These narratives transport ideas of both decline and progress. They contain aspects of an American ideology of success concerning both age and death. These narratives include the personal dualism of “magical thinking” and “the question of self-pity;” family narratives of resilience and self-reliance as a form of progress narrative; the (American) narrative of success, management and control; and personal narratives of self identity which are linked to Didion’s narrative style that encompasses chronology, repetition and attention to detail.

The connection between what Didion refers to repeatedly as “magical thinking” and “the question of self-pity” is their significance, even inevitability, in the context of her grief. “Magical thinking” refers to the “initial (and overwhelming) madness of grief” (Gilbert 2006, 553) and concerns Didion’s “slippage from right reason” (Wood 2006) during her first year of grieving. It is also a kind of narrative that disputes facts and makes them rewritable. Didion describes how she rejects the idea of an obituary for John, regarding it as a kind of narrative that would inscribe the fact of his death. Instead she wonders, considering the time differ-

ence between New York and Los Angeles, whether they could have had “a different ending in Pacific time.” (Didion 2006, 31)

She compares her thought processes to those of small children: “as if my thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome.” (2006, 35) While Didion refers to this form of alternative thinking pejoratively as “disordered” or “delusionary thinking,” “craziness” or “fund of superstition,” (2006, 22, 35, 125) this strategy is also characterized by a sense of (narrative) agency and given a curative function in the context of grief. In an interview titled “Seeing Things Straight,” Didion describes the writing process of this book as “discovery”: “In retrospect, it is about a search for my own sanity and the discovery that I have it.” (Fay-Leblanc 2018 [2006], 127)

By contrast, self-pity is repeatedly dismissed as a negative form of self-indulgence and set against narratives of resilience and self-reliance.<sup>3</sup> Self-pity is intimately linked to grief, but as something to be avoided at all costs. It is described by Didion as “the most universally reviled of our character defects, its pestilential destructiveness accepted as given.” (2006, 193) While Didion dismisses and guards against the reiterated “question of self-pity,” she nevertheless analyzes her shift from a relational to a singular self through the loss of her husband as a ground for self-pity: “We are repeatedly left [...] with no further focus than ourselves, a source from which self-pity naturally flows.” (2006, 195)

Self-pity as a configuration of this narrative of grief can be seen as a form of internalized decline narrative, similar in its punitive results to (self-)ageism<sup>4</sup>. Although Didion analyzes grief as a natural source of self-pity, she remains aware of its negative attributes. If self-pity is part of a decline narrative Didion writes against in her memoir, narratives of progress she invokes include a family narrative of resilience and the American narrative of individual self-reliance. While the family narrative is drawn upon in times of crisis, – for instance, when she recalls her childhood training: “read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information was control.” (2006, 44) – the American progress narrative is questioned by the inevitability of the crises which envelop Didion.

She describes a progress narrative of privilege with reference to the “habit of mind usually credited to the very successful,” (2006, 98) namely their absolute belief in their management skills. This is an attitude she has shared, while questioning it at the same time even before her experience of loss. Didion reflects upon another facet of this progress narrative when she considers the limits of

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<sup>3</sup> As Jeffrey Berman points out in his book on spousal grief memoirs, Didion’s memoir is, compared to those by other writers’ books about their dead spouses, the one that is “the most self-blaming.” (2010, 13)

<sup>4</sup> On the concept of self-ageism or “implicit ageism,” see Levy and Banaji 2002.

her ability to cope with grief. She ponders her self-narrative when she begins to feel physically “fragile, unstable” (2006, 167) and realizes “that my impression of myself had been of someone who could look for, and find, the upside in any situation.” (2006, 171) That she is no longer able to do so again brings up for her the “self-pity question.” (2006, 172)

Finally, the American narrative of progress is questioned in its punitive effects concerning death, when Didion dwells on “how open we are to the persistent message that we can avert death.” This attitude towards death as an “anomaly” (Wood 2006) is linked by Didion to “its punitive correlative, the message that if death catches us we have only ourselves to blame.” (Didion 2006, 206) Didion counteracts this ambiguous ‘progress narrative’ with her own narrative strategies.

Most concretely, she places the autopsy report against the punitive effects of the American narrative of success. Since the autopsy report names the heart condition that would eventually kill John Gregory Dunne, it serves as a kind of curative narrative, which allows Didion to “begin to believe” that she could not have prevented his death (2006, 206).

More generally, Didion’s writing strategies serve to counteract the punitive aspects of “the question of self-pity” and the progress narrative of success in the context of grief. First, she identifies her own approach to narrative when she highlights the positive effect which the reading of Emily Post’s 1922 book on funeral etiquette has on her: “This tone, one of unfailing specificity, never flags. The emphasis remains on the practical.” (2006, 58)

Second, Didion resorts to her strategy of detailed and detached description to counteract a reflection on the meaninglessness of grief. In this passage towards the end of the book Didion rejects the expectation of healing or forward movement in grief memoirs to emphasize the extremity of grief in “the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.” (2006, 189) Against this pessimistic statement she places a narrative of the search for meaning and its recovery in earlier life stages, as a child, a wife and mother, finding meaning, for instance, in “the repeated rituals of domestic life.” (2006, 190) This encompassing view of aging across the life course recalls what Kathleen Woodward terms ‘psychic age’: a more differentiated, complex form of age identity that allows for the simultaneous enactment of different age-selves that may counteract the pervasive cultural ageism.

Third, as Didion has pointed out in interview, she has tried “to write without style” and to keep the narrative “raw” rather than “polished” in her grief memoir. Even though she realizes that this is not entirely possible – “Then it became clear to me that it was written as opposed to not written. I had thought I was not

writing it” (Fay-Leblanc 2018 [2006], 127) – the style of the book in its rhythmic repetition of short, bare sentences is subdued.

Fourth, a strategy that Didion uses repeatedly in her memoir is a resort to chronology in her return to the scene of her husband’s death.<sup>5</sup> This strategy seems to provide a minimal form of narrative in the chronology of events, which she can return to and rewrite, thus enacting the magic that keeps her close to her dead husband. In his analysis of the forms of historical writing, Hayden White has defined the chronicle, in contrast to the annals, a list of events, and the history proper as a fully realized story, as representing real events “to human consciousness in the form of unfinished stories.” (1987, 5) Like the chronicle, Didion’s memoir resists closure. Dwelling on her unwillingness to finish the memoir, Didion provides a scenic ending to it, which shows her swimming with her husband in and out of a cave on the coast of Southern California. Swimming with the tide entails, as her husband tells her, “to go with the change.” (Didion 2006, 227) The closing image thus provides the possibility of consolation in a memoir that deals with progress and decline narrative by questioning both and providing an alternative narration of fragments that reconcile the contradictory tendencies coming to bear on grief.

## Old Age, Frailty and the Loss of a Daughter: Blue Nights (2011)

Whereas *The Year of Magical Thinking* focuses on the early stages of grief rather than on coping strategies, it has been received as a ‘successful’ grief memoir seen in the context of literary elegy (Kelleter 2012, 542), the “[brilliant] elegy of a family,” (Gilbert 2006, 556) turning, in its formal restraint, “grief into literature.” (Pinsky 2005; McCrum 2016 [2005]) While the book ends on a hopeful note, the 2011 memoir dedicated to Quintana, *Blue Nights*, is characterized by darker undertones. Since both books were bestsellers, the memoir on Quintana’s death has been measured against the earlier, unanimously praised book. Frank

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5 In addition to this focus on time and chronology, Didion also introduces what she describes as “the vortex effect,” (2006, 107) places that conjure up memories of the time before her husband died and her daughter became seriously ill. These memories often have painful effects, which she depicts as hitting “more dangerous water.” (2006, 110) For a more extended analysis of “the interrelated concepts of grief as spatialized experience, place as preserver of and trigger for memories, and remembering as a crucial aspect of the mourning process” in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, see Bladec 2014, 935–952, here 940.

Kelleter, for instance, highlights questions of taste when he asks whether there is not something indelicate about one single writer producing two 'classics' of grief literature (Kelleter 2012, 545). On a more serious note, he points out that there is a pervasive sense of Didion's retreat from life and of her fight against the urge to commit suicide (2012, 546), a topic that is introduced in the book's second chapter. Various reviewers emphasize the fact that the book focuses more on Didion's own experience of old age, frailty and the closeness of death than on the loss of her daughter Quintana. Didion's intensely self-questioning stance in the book has been perceived as an instance of "staging herself." (Wilmers 2011) Pointing out that the two books describe widely different events, – the death of a husband as a common aspect of human experience is set against the tragic loss of a child as "unmitigated chaos: which writer could ever hope to exact order from it?" (Cusk 2011) – Rachel Cusk ultimately dismisses *Blue Nights* as Didion's failure to master her material, which instead manifests her "fragility, the dwindling and fading of the artist's ability to create order out of the randomness and chaos of experience." (2011)

*Blue Nights* has two beginnings as well as two topics: Didion's loss of her only child Quintana and her sudden awareness of her own aging and frailty. Although it is linked to the focus on loss, the narrative does not deny its autobiographical impulse. Rather than seeing the memoir as a failure, I would argue that it addresses both mourning, old age and frailty in unorthodox ways, which are represented in an intensely ambiguous narrative.<sup>6</sup> While the first chapter is descriptive and sets the tone of the memoir in its use of second-person narrative, – the 'you' that can be both an address to the reader and a kind of soliloquy – the second chapter as a second beginning introduces Quintana in a dramatic visualization of her wedding day as a memory of Didion's of exactly seven years ago. The descriptive first chapter evokes the distinctive atmosphere of the 'blue hour,' in characteristic detail, as a material phenomenon before turning, at the end, to a definition of the title that remains ambiguous: "Blue nights are the opposite of the dying of the brightness, but they are also its warning." (Didion 2012, 4) Thus the beginning of the book presents a paradox in its dual concern with illness, aging and death, on the one hand, and the more positive associations of the blue nights, on the other hand, which are then qualified by the warning at the end of the sentence.

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<sup>6</sup> For a reading that stresses the contradictions and dualism in Didion's memoir, see also Robert Kusek, who defines the text as a paradigmatic form of autobiography that is, in the words of Nancy K. Miller, an act of "writing against death twice: the other's and one's own." (quoted in Kusek 2017, 171)

The dramatic second chapter provides a scenic description of Quintana on her wedding day, presenting her “sentimental choices,” a phrase that is repeated throughout the chapter (Didion 2012, 6, 7), for her special day, linking them, both to Quintana’s and to Didion’s own memories of earlier family scenes. Other phrases that are rhythmically repeated throughout the chapter, reinforcing the trope of memory, are “This was like yesterday” and “Time passes.” (Didion 2012, 8, 13, 16, 17) Thus the second chapter provides a detailed and positive image of Quintana on her wedding day, which at the same time sets the frame for Didion’s experience of loss. It also includes many of the stylistic elements and themes of the memoir: the interrelation of memories of daughter and mother; abrupt changes of focus like the topic of Didion’s feelings of loss in relation to places, to her moving from California to New York; the indirect introduction of the topic of suicide with reference to a psychologist’s book on people’s very ordinary reasons for doing it; a return to the topic of the loss of a child, which introduces another sentence that is repeated throughout the memoir: “When we talk about mortality we are talking about our children.” (Didion 2012, 13, 16, 54)

The way in which the chapter introduces different topics, times and places by juxtaposing scenes rather than developing them in narrative sequence is characteristic for the memoir. Didion links the wedding day to the two other events that happened later that year, – the sudden death of her husband and her daughter’s illness – and highlights their unconnectedness, how “utterly unprepared” she was for them, measuring the twenty months during which her whole life changed against the rhetorical questions she addresses to herself or to the reader. This strategy of repetitive sentence structures, questions or short declarative sentences or paragraphs, underlines the unexpected aspects of her experience, which lends the prose at the same time a dramatic or lyrical quality. Furthermore, this rejection of developmental narrative fits with Didion’s view of aging. At the end of the chapter she dwells on the idea of time passing to describe her own experience of aging as something that happens in a similarly sudden way as her experience of loss. Rather than perceiving aging as a gradual development she becomes old and frail in an ‘instant’:

Could it be that I did not figure in either the general nature or the permanence of the slowing, the irreversible changes in mind and body, the way in which you wake one summer morning less resilient than you were and by Christmas find your ability to mobilize gone, atrophied, no longer extant? [...] The way in which your awareness of this passing time – this permanent slowing, this vanishing resilience – multiplies, metastasizes, becomes your very life?

*Time passes.*

Could it be that I never believed it?

Did I believe the blue nights could last forever? (Didion 2012, 17)

The end of the second chapter thus reveals the specific relationship to 'time passing,' to her own instant awareness of old age (rather than aging) and frailty, as ways in which Didion in *Blue Nights* approaches also the topic of loss.

In her analysis of the many meanings Didion attaches to frailty in her memoir, linking it to "the death of her daughter as well as to her own body," Kathleen Woodward argues that frailty is also a kind of turning point in this narrative that resists notions of development: "Frailty is the word that marks a *before* and an *after* in her life, a definitive sea change." (2015, 351) As Woodward points out, research in the social sciences has revealed that older people usually avoid describing themselves as frail, since frailty is still perceived as a stigma. Didion's directly addressing and foregrounding "this issue of frailty" in *Blue Nights* can be seen as courageous (2012, 106), since she has been accused, in an ageist review of the book by Caitlin Flanagan, of the "'crime' of getting old." (quoted in Woodward 2015, 355) While frailty is an important issue in Didion's awareness of old age in *Blue Nights*, her resilience also remains an important part of this narrative endeavor. As Jeffrey Berman points out: "It takes resilience to survive the death of one's husband and daughter, to give interviews and lectures, and to write about frailty. She has always written with power and conviction, and her creativity shows no sign of failing her." (2015, 167)

## Conclusion

Didion's performance of the 'cool look' in the 2015 Céline campaign is placed against her frail old age and serves to transform the normative youth-old age system. In her grief memoirs, Didion challenges aspects of American age ideology in the context of grief in her narrative strategies. Exploring the ambiguities of ageism and successful aging, *The Year of Magical Thinking* analyzes and rewrites the narratives of progress and decline in the 'magical' invocations of her dead husband and the self-examination of her grief. In the first memoir, these narrative strategies encompass the search for meaning and its recovery in earlier life stages, thus promoting an age identity that focuses on the simultaneity of psychic age rather than on developmental models of aging. Resisting closure, *The Year of Magical Thinking* provides a minimal form of narrative, the chronicle, that lists events without narrative conclusion. In denying the notion of development that invokes narratives of either progress or decline, Didion creates an alternative narrative structure to make sense of her loss. In *Blue Nights*, she extends this strategy of alternative narration into a performance of frailty. As another way of counteracting the ambiguous American progress narrative of suc-

cess, she rewrites aging into an instant occurrence, drawing on a narrative style of rhythmic and lyrical repetition.

As a prolific writer and media icon, Joan Didion's is, of course, a privileged case, in which the contradictions of the decline narrative of ageism are qualified by her easy access to the means of success. Nevertheless, the ambiguities of both ageism and successful aging shape her narrative engagements. If the 'cool look' replaces the focus on youthful beauty in the Céline campaign by highlighting Didion's fragile old age, her writing style of ironic detachment and 'toughness' provide her with agency and serve to reveal the contradictory tendencies of decline and progress narrative as they come to bear on loss and grief.

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