

Remo Verdickt and Pieter Vermeulen

# (Im)personal Style: James Baldwin, Joan Didion and the Inscription of the Universal

**Abstract:** This essay interrogates the contemporary fascination with the personal dimension of non-fiction writing by returning to two precursor figures who are, in the US context, reliably celebrated for allowing personal experience into their reportage – James Baldwin and Joan Didion. Photogenic celebrities who carefully crafted their public images in the literary marketplace, Baldwin (in the context of the Civil Rights struggle and Black Internationalism) and Didion (as part of the New Journalism, chronicling the unravelling of the 1960s counter-culture) make room for the personal, but not without, this essay argues, simultaneously asserting an *impersonal* dimension in their writing. Through close textual analyses of some key texts – Didion’s *Slouching towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979), Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Nothing Personal* (1964) – this essay unearths a shared investment in strategies for resisting empathy and relatability and for situating social analysis in contexts that, to the extent that they transcend particular (trans-)cultural horizons, index universal notions of justice and truth. By linking Didion’s and Baldwin’s impersonal style to their only-ever reluctant affiliations with the particular socio-political projects they engaged in their writing, the essay argues for the potential of literary style to revoke identification and evoke the universal.

**Keywords:** impersonal style, American literature, James Baldwin, Joan Didion

## Writing Against the Personal

Literary value today is firmly anchored in the personal. Across the genres of memoir and autofiction, and under the more inclusive rubric of creative non-fiction, literary writing has increasingly – and increasingly routinely – become a staging ground for the personality of its producer. Merve Emre has diagnosed the twenty-first-century popularity of the personal essay as a mode of indulgent self-reflexive writing that elevates its own stylistic indirections and affective “messiness” as hallmarks of ethical seriousness;<sup>1</sup> under the label of creative non-fiction,

---

<sup>1</sup> Merve Emre, “Two Paths for the Personal Essay”, *Boston Review*, 22 August 2017, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/merve-emre-two-paths-personal-essay/>.

MFA programmes and textbooks have codified a mode of writing that shuttles between hyperspecific and relatable microscales and more neutrally informative larger contexts; and, in what Pascale Casanova has baptized “world literary space”, Annie Ernaux won the 2022 Nobel Prize in literature for uncovering “the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory”.<sup>2</sup> This formulation links personal experiences with collective ones and underlines the social constitution of individual experience. It puts forward a tension between the social and the personal that does *not* open up *beyond* the social sphere – to something like, for instance, the universal (if we understand the universal as a normative claim for justice and equality that necessarily escapes full realization in the social sphere).<sup>3</sup> Laying bare the social formations that give rise to individual personhood does nothing to break the illusion of a stable identity – indeed, the hectic performance of self-scrutiny, as Emre notes, often “only intensifie[s] the enchantments of subjectivity”.<sup>4</sup>

How, then, to undo that enchantment? How to disrupt the closure of the personal and the social and open literature up to a universal dimension – a dimension that escapes from the relations between the particular and the general, the individual and the collective?<sup>5</sup> In this essay, we trace stylistic strategies of impersonality in the work of two key precursors of the contemporary writing of the personal in US literature – Joan Didion and James Baldwin. When contemporary US literary culture is considered, Didion and Baldwin appear as the two main survivors of the literary 1960s (with only Truman Capote as a close contender). Both consciously cultivated their public image in the new (tele)visual regime of the 1960s, and their central posthumous positions in contemporary literary culture combine celebrity status (codified in iconic photographs that continue to circulate in popular culture) with literary acclaim. For both, that continued acclaim is linked to the personal dimension of their writing; Didion’s two grief memoirs, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011), achieved accolades (including a National Book Award) that few of her novels ever did, while Baldwin’s voice as a witness of racist brutality was amplified in the context of Black Lives

---

2 “Press Release”, The Nobel Prize, 6 October 2022, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2022/press-release/>.

3 For this understanding of the universal, to which we adhere throughout this essay, see Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 100–212; Todd McGowan, *Universality and Identity Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 10.

4 Merve Emre, “The Illusion of the First Person”, *New York Review of Books*, 3 November 2022, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/11/03/the-illusion-of-the-first-person-merve-emre/>.

5 McGowan, *Universality*, 6.

Matter and as the (somewhat reluctantly) avowed model for Ta-Nehisi Coates's National Book Award-winning memoir, *Between the World and Me* (2015).

Didion's and Baldwin's literary non-fiction from the 1950s to the 1970s, we show, complicates their acclaim as avatars of the personal. While Didion was enlisted as part of the New Journalism that is credited with bringing personal experience to bear on reportage, her most famous collections of essays, *Slouching towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979), we show, are marked by strategies that resist relatability and insistently displace the first person as a point of orientation. This is very different from the much more unproblematically confessional ways the grief memoirs stage Didion's personality. Baldwin, for his part, operated in the tradition of the Black essay, which fused political writing with religious tradition in ways that qualify the embrace of personal experience.<sup>6</sup> As Emre notes, this tradition shows that "personhood was, from the outset, an unequally distributed resource" and something Baldwin, as a poor African American in a segregated country, could not take for granted in the way a privileged white Californian like Didion could.<sup>7</sup> We posit that Baldwin's characteristic cinematographic pans, cryptodialectical inversions and manipulation of pronouns operate in ways not dissimilar from those at work in Didion's strategic evasions of centred personhood.<sup>8</sup>

Critics like Deborah Nelson, Daniel Worden and Stephen Schryer have analysed Didion's "aesthetics of moral hardness" – the studied avoidance of cheap emotion in her early non-fiction – as a strategy for resisting liberal sentimentality or the enchantments of centred personhood.<sup>9</sup> A comparable commitment informs the young Baldwin's case against the propagandistic fiction of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Richard Wright, which he dismisses for their "sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion".<sup>10</sup> Baldwin and Didion inhabited very different milieus (which occasionally overlapped in Hollywood): there is Baldwin's childhood poverty against Didion's quasi-aristocratic pedigree; his transatlantic

---

6 Cheryl Butler, *The Art of the Black Essay: From Meditation to Transcendence* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

7 Emre, "Illusion".

8 Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, *Harlem Is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), 107.

9 Deborah Nelson, *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 152 (quotation); Daniel Worden, *Neoliberal Nonfictions: The Documentary Aesthetic from Joan Didion to Jay-Z* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020); Stephen Schryer, "Writers for Goldwater", *Post45* 20 January 2020, <https://post45.org/2020/01/writers-for-goldwater/>.

10 James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 12.

exile in France and Turkey against her residence in Hawaii, New York and California; his fugitive cosmopolitanism against her bicoastal metropolitanism – but also Baldwin’s participation in the Civil Rights struggle in the years leading up to 1964 against Didion’s frequent contributions to William Buckley’s conservative *National Review* between 1959 and 1964.<sup>11</sup> This essay insists that, in spite of these differences, there is an unmistakable stylistic affinity between their work, and that this affinity can be described as a refusal of the personal that opens their writing up to a universal impulse that necessarily escapes the interplay between the personal and social formations.

By situating Didion and Baldwin as stylistic siblings, we locate their early work in a shared political horizon. Didion’s and Baldwin’s contemporaneous campaigns against sentimentality, against centred personality and against representativeness and affiliation, we argue, index a crisis of liberalism that resonates with the ongoing reorganization of the globe in the long 1960s. In the case of Baldwin, this involves his gradual reconsideration of his early dismissal of pan-Africanism as the disappointments of the Civil Rights struggle informed a (however reluctant) appreciation for internationalism and a more appreciative and productive relation to Africa.<sup>12</sup> Without explicitly affiliating himself with this internationalism, Baldwin became increasingly aware that the focus on Civil Rights was hindering “a surging Black human rights movement” that targeted the United Nations and the Pan-African Congress rather than the Supreme Court.<sup>13</sup> Baldwin’s resistance to the stability of the personal in its relation to the collective gestures to an internationalist horizon that served as a better placeholder for universal notions of justice and equality than the United States, which Baldwin, as he saw the aspirations of the Black liberation struggle evaporate, found increasingly unreconstructable.<sup>14</sup>

Baldwin’s refusal of liberal anti-racism – the dominant liberal conviction in the 1950s and 1960s that education and literature would, with a little patience and effort, eradicate racist prejudice – resonates with Didion’s critical examination of the mythical dreamwork underlying the US’s fundamental optimism about its own

---

11 Schryer, “Goldwater”.

12 Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 142–44. This refusal was based on what Baldwin saw as the fundamental difference between African American and African experience, Africans having “not yet endured the utter alienation of [themselves] from [their] people and [their] past”. *Notes*, 89. Baldwin’s account of the first International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in 1956 insists on the gap between different Black experiences. “Princes and Powers”, in *Collected Essays*, 143–69.

13 Joseph Darda, *The Strange Career of Racial Liberalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 17.

14 For an account of Baldwin’s increasingly apocalyptic outlook, see Dan Sinykin, *American Literature and the Long Downturn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 30–35.

future.<sup>15</sup> If Baldwin opposed a “culture of racial solutionism”, Didion eviscerated a reigning mentality that “treat[s] any social problem as solvable”.<sup>16</sup> Didion’s critique pertains to engrained habits of “creative and self-serving redescription, the invention of neologism and the eloquence of rationalization” and replaces them with principled practices of analysis and enquiry.<sup>17</sup> If Didion identified as a conservative in the early 1960s – noting later that “had [1964 Republican presidential candidate] Goldwater remained the same age and continued running, I would have voted for him in every election thereafter”<sup>18</sup> – her perspective matured into one that dismissed both liberal and conservative forms of self-delusion, most famously those associated with the counter-culture whose unravelling she so influentially chronicled. What John McClure calls Didion’s “program of strong resignation” also pertained to Didion’s engagement with international politics, for her novels, McClure notes, resist the consolations of “redemptive romances of development” as they “unmap” the global order of the Cold War period.<sup>19</sup> If for McClure, Didion’s novels offer up the individual as a compensatory site of spiritual redemption, her non-fiction’s refusal of the personal displaces even this illusion. For Didion, also, justice remains an un-mapped exterior to all territories, most clearly that of the individual person.

If in both Didion’s and Baldwin’s non-fiction, a stylistics of impersonality served to intimate a universality that by definition escapes centred personhood or any social formation, neither of them translated that intimation into a sustained commitment to a robust new universalism; Didion’s position was always one of resignation, while for Baldwin, the 1960s saw a shift from an increasingly outspoken anti-liberalism and a tentative internationalism to an outright refusal of the hope of a solution to American racism.<sup>20</sup> Yet what is equally remarkable is that they both resolutely refused to abandon that dejection for a recourse to identity politics, which, in the past half century, have been tempting destinations for Black radicals and disgruntled conservatives alike.<sup>21</sup> As we argue in our conclusion, their relentless stylistic commitment to opening up the closures of the personal and the social

---

15 Joel Alden Schlosser, “Joan Didion and the American Dream”, *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 37, no. 4 (2018): 28–51.

16 Darda, *Racial Liberalism*, 116; Schlosser, “Didion”, 33.

17 Schlosser, “Didion”, 34.

18 Joan Didion, *Political Fictions* (New York: Knopf, 2001), 7.

19 John A. McClure, *Late Imperial Romance* (London: Verso, 1994), 56.

20 Sinykin, *Downturn*, 32–33.

21 In Baldwin’s career, this became most apparent in the Black Panthers’ ruthless rejection of the middle-aged Baldwin as yesterday’s man – and not even a real man, as that rejection was tinged by a masculinist hatred of Baldwin’s queerness. Field, *Strangers*, 67–69. Didion’s rejection of modern conservatism developed in response to her impatience with the vulgarity of the Rea-

to a universal horizon and their concomitant refusal to seek refuge in an identitarian affirmation of difference count as what we call a “minor” universalism – a minor universalism that is arguably appropriate to an age beset by the discontents of both “major” universalisms and identitarian difference.<sup>22</sup>

## Strong Resignation: Didion’s Mic Drop

Didion’s essays in *Slouching towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album*, the volumes that established her reputation, undoubtedly count as personal essays: she brings herself into the (journalistic) picture, talks about her obsessions, relations, anxieties and neuroses. But there is also an essentially impersonal dimension to this writing: a respect for the undistorted facts, impatience with illusions and false emotions, and distrust of too much empathy and relatability. Take the 14th section of the title essay of *The White Album*, for instance, where we read a startlingly personal – and studiously trivial – revelation: “Once I had a rib broken, and during the few months that it was painful to turn in bed or raise my arms in a swimming pool I had, for the first time, a sharp apprehension of what it would be like to be old. Later I forgot.”<sup>23</sup> The section continues chronicling visual disturbances and neurological problems, before it breaks up and the 15th and final sections of the essay begin with the decidedly non-committal observation that “many people I know in Los Angeles believe that the Sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969, ended at the exact moment when word of the [Tate–LaBianca] murders on Cielo Drive traveled like brushfire through the community, and in a sense this is true.”<sup>24</sup> But only in a sense. The essay as a whole refuses to let its 15 sections, its different personal and journalistic snapshots, congeal into a narrative – her medical diagnosis, too, is “another story without a narrative.”<sup>25</sup> Just as the essay refrains from unambiguously nominating the Manson family murders as an “emblem” or “symbol” of societal decay (the terms are from Mark Muggli’s analysis of Didion’s poetics), it pointedly refuses to deliver Didion’s personal suffering as a metaphor for an ailing society. The per-

---

gans. Schryer, “Goldwater”; Casey Shoop, “Joan Didion’s Style: A Revisionist Western”, *Auto/Biography Studies* 31, no. 3 (2016): 586–88.

<sup>22</sup> Markus Messling and Jonas Tinius, eds, *Minor Universality: Rethinking Humanity after Western Universalism/Universalité mineure: Penser l’humanité après l’universalisme occidental* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 46.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

sonal, here, is neither an occasion for metonymic relatability nor an instance of metaphorical representativity.

So, if it is neither relatable nor representative, what then does Didion's rhetoric of the personal amount to? Critics have tended to read Didion's matter-of-factness and the indeterminacy of the way she articulates different snapshots as a resigned embrace of incomprehension. For Mark Muggli, for instance, the shift in her work from using emblems "that reverberate with an intensity that suggests a large world of meaning" to presenting "the uninterpreted Image" surrenders all claims to knowledge: the image "is a timeless moment of despair – it is an inexplicable part of an inexplicable world, evoking a chaos indecipherable".<sup>26</sup> The personal, on these accounts, takes its place in "a non-paraphrasable vision of a world without sense" – the Yeatsian *Spiritus Mundi* that *Slouching's* title evokes.<sup>27</sup> Such criticism faults Didion's non-fiction for the same "messiness" that Merve Emre diagnoses the contemporary personal essay with – a surrender of "aesthetic clarity" to instantiate "moral complexity", premised on "the depressing notion that words are always insufficient to the task at hand and so we may as well stop trying to choose the clearest or most precise ones".<sup>28</sup>

And yet Didion, famously, never stopped trying. However contentious and slippery her politics, Didion is unanimously celebrated as an exceptional stylist whose writing is marked by elegance, precision, deadpan irony and understatement. Something other than messiness is at stake here, as, we argue, the indeterminacy and open-endedness only pertain to the level of the overall articulation of Didion's passages and sections, *not* to the rigorous precision with which Didion introduces the distinct elements she articulates: her personal life and the world she observes – even if she refrains from combining these observations into a conclusive narrative or from transforming her notation into a sentiment the reader can share. Hers is a "rhetoric of fact", a "rhetoric of particularity" that articulates different juxtaposed particulars without making explicit the connections between them.<sup>29</sup> Didion's writing, Deborah Nelson remarks, is inductive ("the thing speaks for itself"), oblique and impersonal ("the arrangement of words' has more cognitive agency than the writer").<sup>30</sup> If this makes for a pervasive sense of impersonal-

---

<sup>26</sup> Mark Muggli, "The Poetics of Joan Didion's Journalism", *American Literature* 59, no. 3 (1987): 408–10.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

<sup>28</sup> Emre, "Two Paths".

<sup>29</sup> Muggli, "Poetics", 403; Chris Anderson, *Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 179. Both quoted in Nelson, *Tough Enough*, 154.

<sup>30</sup> Nelson, *Tough Enough*, 154.

ity, even in Didion's ostensibly personal observations, this impersonality does not, we argue, amount to a surrender of knowledge and values, but instantiates a universal horizon of justice (which, for Didion, is a moral, rather than a political, category) that transcends the contexts her writing explicitly engages. Existing criticism of Didion blames her for deploying "narrative breakdown" as an occasion for "existential quietism" about national narratives and "also about any viable alternatives to them";<sup>31</sup> we instead read her resistance to closure and shared sentiment as an index of a commitment to universal moral and epistemic values.

For Didion, confronting evil is a moral obligation for the writer. That confrontation, typically, takes the form of undoing the "dreamwork" that sustains American life and that makes up what Joel Alden Schlosser describes as "a shared sentimentality".<sup>32</sup> Didion's approach replaces habits of self-delusion with "practices of self-conscious inquiry and analysis".<sup>33</sup> Didion's staging of the personal is primarily a marker of such self-consciousness, of her perspective and its limitations ("the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable 'I'"), and not an occasion for relatability.<sup>34</sup> As Deborah Nelson remarks, for Didion, "to acknowledge the subjectivity of the reporter was . . . not so much to write autobiographically as to limit the perspective on the events in question".<sup>35</sup> Take, as an example, Didion's 1965 essay "Notes from a Native Daughter". The essay begins by marking the difference between New York (or Los Angeles, or San Francisco) and the California she hails from – not the California of the hippies, but that of the provincial and conservative Sacramento Valley. This is "the California where it is possible to live and die without ever eating an artichoke, without ever meeting a Catholic or a Jew".<sup>36</sup> "It is very easy to sit at the bar in, say, La Scala, in Beverly Hills, or Ernie's in San Francisco, and to share in the pervasive delusion that California is only five hours from New York by air. The truth is that La Scala and Ernie's are only five hours from New York by air. California is somewhere else."<sup>37</sup> What may initially appear as an authenticity-conferring specific detail (a writer at a bar) that opens the reader's perspective onto something bigger (the real California, "somewhere else") is, in fact, no such thing: the bar, it transpires, is not that specific at all, as it does not matter whether we are at La Scala or Ernie's or any other metropolitan place; and moreover, this

---

31 Shoop, "Didion's Style", 587.

32 Schlosser, "Didion", 33.

33 Ibid., 44.

34 Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (London: Flamingo, 2001), 117.

35 Nelson, *Tough Enough*, 148.

36 Didion, *Slouching*, 3.

37 Ibid., 149.



cosmopolitan location is marked as a site of “delusion” – the delusion that the real California is accessible in fancy bars. In a characteristically dry and short declarative sentence (“California is somewhere else”), Didion assumes the duty to correct that delusion. Didion does not inscribe herself in the essay to be relatable; she does so as someone whose responsibility it happens to be to correct misconceptions, as it is simply her journalistic duty to render the facts. It is her job to undo illusions, not to tell consoling stories.

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live.”<sup>38</sup> While the opening sentence of “The White Album” is undoubtedly Didion’s most famous one, it is often misunderstood as an expression of our all-too-human need for art and literature. The rest of the essay – and of Didion’s non-fiction more generally – develops a different understanding: telling stories, adding interpretations, looking for emotional release or moral summation are so many ways of falling short of reality. The essay describes a period between 1966 and 1971 when Didion sees the stories she had bought into collapse (in the 1970 essay “On the Morning after the Sixties”, Didion discovers that, when “talking about being a child of [her] time”, that time is the 1950s rather than the 1960s).<sup>39</sup> It is a period of mental exhaustion and psychiatric consultations, but these are no reason for complaint. For Didion, this psychological dissociation makes it possible to recalibrate her perceptions and sensibilities and exchange “stories” for a less consolatory approach: “I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no ‘meaning’ beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience.”<sup>40</sup> The essay, then, and the volume as a whole, offers a series of juxtaposed snapshots that are not streamlined into a coherent story or a moral takeaway. This is not, as some critics have argued, a strategy for offering “subjective arguments veiled by a false objectivity” but a principled reduction of the writerly subject to a mere perspective that allows the reader access to a less distorted reality.<sup>41</sup> It reflects the scruples and conscientiousness of a writer who held that “to juxtapose even two sentences is to tell a lie, to distort the situation, cut off its ambiguities and so its possibilities”, but who submitted to the need for the minimal juxtaposition nevertheless.<sup>42</sup> Complexity and disarticulation are not, as in the case of the contemporary personal essay, affectations that parade as moral seriousness; they are the reality

---

38 Didion, *White Album*, 11.

39 *Ibid.*, 205.

40 *Ibid.*, 13.

41 Sam Diamond, “Getting the Story: Joan Didion’s Aesthetic Transformation”, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 6, no. 1 (2018): 2.

42 Joan Didion, “Questions about the New Fiction”, *National Review* 17, no. 48 (1965): 1101, quoted in Schryer, “Goldwater”.

that a scrupulous registration of self and world lay bare, and from which the personal provides no refuge.

Didion's resolute impersonality, then, is not only a psychiatric affliction or a composition technique; it is also a particular ethos. In "The White Album", it reveals the moral failure of hiding behind consoling stories: a Black Panther spouting revolutionary clichés (which resonates with Didion's dismissal of the Haight Street crowd in *Slouching* when she notes that "their only proficient vocabulary is in the society's platitudes"); a self-declared revolutionary student who is comfortably middle class; rock bands who believe that "love was brotherhood and the Kama Sutra".<sup>43</sup> Didion dismisses all these as forms of "industrious self-delusion" that fail the task of observing oneself *without* self-pity, *without* sentiment. Didion's toughness, then, is not only a style but also a moralized epistemology: in a period when stories are losing their hold on reality, it requires a meticulous dismantling of the personal from within to restore the world to an objectivity where new mandates even become thinkable at all.

Didion's style manifests itself not only in the declarative style, the deadpan irony, the rhythmic parallels and repetitions, but also in the striking opening and closing sentences of her paragraphs. It is precisely because she rigorously removes sentiment from her observations and refuses to impose an interpretive framework that she deploys the two locations within the paragraph that *automatically* provide resonance – as a new beginning, or a statement followed by a pause readers themselves have to fill. These places provide an almost gnomic force without going against the proscription of cheap sentiment. A paragraph in an essay on the painter Georgia O'Keeffe (but it could as well be about Didion's own poetics) begins with "Some women fight and others do not" and ends with "She had not before heard how the Impressionists did trees and she did not much care."<sup>44</sup> Such observations are both entirely objective and infinitely suggestive, and they are typical for what we could call Didion's poetics of the mic drop, in which a final chord leaves the reader no other choice than to agree and admire. In that way, the mic drop creates distance again, as the reader can no longer simply look over the writer's/reporter's shoulder, but is also compelled to watch the writer's performance. This is what Didion's "aesthetics of moral hardness" amounts to:<sup>45</sup> it reflects a moral commitment that is too stylish and stable to impose itself in other than impersonal ways – through description, observation and montage, not through story, as "in this light all narrative was sentimental".<sup>46</sup> Refusing both personal affirmation and social clo-

---

<sup>43</sup> Didion, *Slouching*, 105; Didion, *White Album*, 21.

<sup>44</sup> Didion, *White Album*, 129–30.

<sup>45</sup> Nelson, *Tough Enough*, 152.

<sup>46</sup> Didion, *White Album*, 44.

sure, Didion's impersonal style provides an opening to universal moral and epistemic values it finds lacking in the world as it is.

## Nothing Personal: Baldwin's Pronouns, Baldwin's Jimmy

That Didion could deploy literary style to perforate her personality with an impersonal dimension goes to show that she, as a white writer of privilege, could rely on a stable form of personhood to depart from. As an impoverished African American, the young James Baldwin could not take such centred personhood for granted, and this explains why his stylistics of the impersonal extends rather than erodes the personal. Baldwin's first essay collection, like Didion's two famous collections, starts with personal elements: "I was born in Harlem thirty-one years ago. I began plotting novels at about the time I learned to read."<sup>47</sup> Baldwin's early persona is much more transparent, much less stylized than Didion's, and it is so for a reason: *Notes* is an explicitly politically inspired collection by a young, proletarian Black writer addressing the white mainstream in a segregated country. His own desolation, frustration and aspirations are all the symbolic capital he can invest. These personal experiences remain present throughout the book – whether it talks about Harlem, the relation between literature and politics, or Baldwin's stays in Switzerland and Paris. Near the beginning of *Slouching*, Didion writes that her "only advantage as a reporter is that [she is] so physically small, so temperamentally unobtrusive, and so neurotically inarticulate that people tend to forget that [her] presence runs counter to their best interests"; for a loud and opinionated Black man, such a disappearing act is not an option.<sup>48</sup> The persistent confessional strain in Baldwin's non-fiction is, as D. Quentin Miller notes, an index of "vulnerability and strength at the same time" – and it is Baldwin's willingness to display his personality that converts the former into the latter.<sup>49</sup> The "I", Miller notes, "opens up space for his own story, told and retold, to anchor, validate, and substantiate the broader political points he makes".<sup>50</sup>

As with Didion, however, this extension from the personal does not take the form of relatability or generalization, but of a stylistic grammar that resists collec-

---

<sup>47</sup> Baldwin, *Notes*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Didion, *Slouching*, xiii.

<sup>49</sup> D. Quentin Miller, "Baldwin and the Rhetoric of Confession", in *James Baldwin in Context*, ed. D. Quentin Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 222.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

tive closure and introduces an impersonal dimension. Baldwin's essays are marked by a studious choreography between impersonal pronouns (especially "one"), "I" and "we" that brings into play different positions and affiliations without fully coinciding with any one of them.<sup>51</sup> Already after three pages, moreover, *Notes of a Native Son* introduces a character who complicates the initial personal angle: "the Negro".<sup>52</sup> Baldwin invariably folds his own story into that of the "Negro problem" or the "Negro in America". For Baldwin, the Negro is a quintessentially American creation, as Africans, even if they have "endured privation, injustice, medieval cruelty", have not had to experience "this depthless alienation from oneself and one's people" which is "the American experience".<sup>53</sup> Baldwin insists that the Negro is an American problem – which is to say, a problem for white America. The last essay in the collection, "Stranger in the Village", recounts Baldwin's experience as the first Black man the villagers in the Swiss village of Leukerbad laid eyes on. The (merely) passive racism of the Swiss peasants contrasts with the brutality through which white America professes its racial superiority. In a cryptodialectical inversion that is typical of Baldwin's (im)personal style, this aggression is decried as evidence for the untenability of the belief in white superiority: the brutal excess of American racism provides evidence for white America's deep uncertainties. The Negro problem, in short, is a white problem: "At the root of the American Negro problem is the necessity of the American white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself."<sup>54</sup>

If it initially seems like Baldwin's "I" is an *instance* of the category "Negro", the cryptodialectical assertion that the Negro is a white pathology destabilizes that facile identification. To compound the complexity of Baldwin's position game, he often shifts to the first person plural when discussing the Negro – as if he joins his (implicitly white) audience in observing the objectified Negro (a category to which he *also* belongs) from without: "we do not know what to do with him in life"; "our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves"; "in our image of the Negro breathes the past we deny".<sup>55</sup> The shuttling between pronouns and subject positions exemplifies a refusal of intimacy and a pursuit of impersonality not all that different from those at work in Didion's essays. As with Didion, these stylistic choices underwrite a particular ethical injunction: these shifts undergird Baldwin's conviction that addressing the Negro problem re-

---

51 For a different reading of Baldwin's essay style, see Monika Gehlawat, *In Defense of Dialogue: Reading Habermas and Postwar American Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 128.

52 Baldwin, *Notes*, 7.

53 *Ibid.*, 89.

54 *Ibid.*, 127.

55 *Ibid.*, 19–20, 20, 22.

quires white America to get its act together so African Americans can stop suffering the violent effects of white dysfunctionality. Baldwin himself said that “he wouldn’t write from the perspective . . . of the victim” but “had to use ‘we’ and let the reader figure out who ‘we’ is”.<sup>56</sup> The malaise of Black America does not require Black introspection; nor does it require, as the then-dominant reformist liberalism codified in Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* held, the moral heroism of white America to accept Black Americans as equal participants in the national adventure.<sup>57</sup> What is required instead is a sober and unsentimental recognition of the systemic way Black lives are distorted by white pathologies. We argue that Baldwin’s essays achieve that sobriety by a calculated extension of the personal dimension that never comes to rest in any one identity position – what Marianne DeKoven identifies as “the multiple, contradictory fluidity of the subject positions Baldwin uses”.<sup>58</sup>

In 1961, Irving Howe praised Baldwin’s essays for their combination of “vivid reporting, personal recollection, and speculative thought”.<sup>59</sup> The traffic between personal pronouns is Baldwin’s key speculative strategy for placing the personal experience in which his interventions are necessarily anchored alongside other histories and experiences. In this way, the essays generate a perspective that transcends all-too-particular experience and unlocks the impersonality and abstraction that allows the American racial scandal to come into focus. This combination of an insistence on the complexity of lived experience on the one hand and relentless objectivity on the other sustains Baldwin’s non-fiction, which is informed by the conviction that good intentions and sentimentality (“the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion”) threaten to erase genuine tensions.<sup>60</sup> This conviction is formulated most explicitly in “Everybody’s Protest Novel”, Baldwin’s famous indictment of literary sentimentality, where he notes that “the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart”; instead, writing needs to assert the complexity of personal experience and situate it in “this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness”.<sup>61</sup>

---

56 *Conversations with James Baldwin*, ed. Fred. L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 275.

57 Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 143–51; Darda, *Racial Liberalism*, 46–51.

58 Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 234.

59 Irving Howe, review of *Nobody Knows My Name*, by James Baldwin, *New York Times*, 2 July 1961, quoted in Brian Norman, “The Protest Essay Tradition”, in Miller, *Baldwin in Context*, 204.

60 Baldwin, *Notes*, 12.

61 *Ibid.*, 12–13.

As for Didion, sentiment and consolation are hopeless investments, as the complexity of experience demands a clinical approach. Didion urges “realistic and critical sense making” in her exploration of American self-delusion by staging the personal as a marker of perspectival limitation;<sup>62</sup> Baldwin’s critique of American myth, for its part, introduces the personal as the anchoring point for speculative extensions – through pronoun shifts, through cryptodialectical inversions, but also through a third particular rhetorical device that diffuses the personal. Baldwin’s 1964 essay “Nothing Personal”, written to accompany photographs by Richard Avedon, is one of his most explicit discussions of American mythology; it explicitly revisits the mythical foundation of the nation at Plymouth Rock, only to immediately counterpoint it with the reality of a shared “unspeakable loneliness” and “despair” in the contemporary United States.<sup>63</sup> The diagnostic essay operates through gentle diffusions of the “I”. In the second section, there is an anecdote about being arrested on Broadway with a European friend that, through a vertiginous array of pronouns (in which the European friend’s outside perspective adds another pivot to the more familiar choreography of “I”, “we”, “Americans” and “one”), arrives at a condemnation of the United States as “a loveless nation”.<sup>64</sup> The first section begins with the scene of Baldwin “pressing the television remote control gadget from one channel to another” before getting out of bed in the morning (a moment that the third section will endow with both near-suicidal dread and miraculous hope). After the first two sentences, the personal makes way for a concatenation of snippets of American visualized life (“blondes and brunettes . . . relentlessly smiling”, “children’s bones knit strong by the foresight of vast bakeries”).<sup>65</sup> This catalogue amounts to Baldwin’s effort to “distract [him] self”, a distraction that transcends the personal and generates a perspectival diffusion from which the essay can then go on to analyse American myth – not unlike the disruptive scene-hopping at the heart of Didion’s “The White Album”.<sup>66</sup> Teju Cole has remarked on the pervasiveness of this sudden “widening of focus” in Baldwin’s essays.<sup>67</sup> He quotes Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts’s analysis of this “literary sleight-of-hand so particular that, if he’d been an athlete, sportscasters would have codified the maneuver and named it ‘the Jimmy’”: as Rhodes-Pitts notes, “I

---

62 Schlosser, “Didion”, 44.

63 James Baldwin, “Nothing Personal”, in *Collected Essays*, 693–94.

64 *Ibid.*, 696, 699.

65 *Ibid.*, 692.

66 *Ibid.*

67 Teju Cole, “Black Body: Rereading James Baldwin’s ‘Stranger in the Village’”, *The New Yorker*, 19 August 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/black-body-re-reading-james-baldwins-stranger-village>.

think of it in cinematic terms, because its effect reminds me of a technique wherein camera operators pan out by starting with a tight shot and then zoom out to a wide view while the lens remains focused on a point in the distance.”<sup>68</sup> Baldwin’s literary pan shot, like his pronoun gymnastics, serves to extend the personal perspective to other realities. This operation is oriented by “a point in the distance” that itself remains obscure – a normative dimension that resists foregrounding, that none of the realities captured can fully embody, but that silently connects them. In “Nothing Personal”, Richard Avedon’s eclectic selection of portraits amplifies this silent connection. Joshua Miller identifies the collaboration as problematizing “literary and national forms of belonging through a visual and textual performance of mobility”, while Brian Norman finds Avedon and Baldwin’s joint effort emblematic of “a desire to cross lines of difference, but not to erase them”, “underscor[ing] the failure to achieve a seamless unity”.<sup>69</sup> As with Didion, an impersonal and universal dimension is only generated through the refusal to find closure in the personal or the social.

Baldwin’s most famous essay remains “Letter from a Region of My Mind” from 1962, which appeared a year later as (the bulk of) *The Fire Next Time* (1963). We again find the combination of politically informed psychosocial analysis on the one hand and personal reflection and anecdote on the other; and, as the personal story concerns Baldwin’s difficult relation to religion, the essay imports an apocalyptic dimension that was missing in *Notes* and that already resonates in the book’s title: there is not only “we, Negroes”, or “we Americans”, or even “we, the black and the white”, but now also “we human beings [who] now have the power to exterminate ourselves; this seems the entire sum of our achievements”.<sup>70</sup> Baldwin reports on a journalistic visit to Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, and the essay borrows Muhammad’s uncompromising anti-white vitriol to sharpen the provocations that remained implicit in *Notes*. While Didion’s texts politely decline to make their point explicit by simply juxtaposing different excerpts in an undetermined montage, Baldwin’s essay sharpens its points by weaving several personal and impersonal threads together to finally arrive at conclusions that sound as impersonal as they sound unavoidable: “It is now absolutely clear that white people are a minority in the world – so severe a minority that they now look rather more

---

68 Rhodes-Pitts, *Harlem*, 107, quoted in Cole, “Black Body”.

69 Joshua Miller, “A Striking Addiction to Irreality”, in *Re-viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*, ed. D. Quentin Miller (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 155; Brian Norman, “Baldwin’s Collaborations”, in *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Michele Elam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 137.

70 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, in *Collected Essays*, 337.

like an invention – and that they cannot possibly hope to rule it any longer.”<sup>71</sup> This is again no call for empathy or sensitivity on the part of the white reader; it is much more a pressing injunction to adopt a more ruthless mental flexibility and an unsentimental perspective on the race relations that keep Black and white constituencies hostage. In an ominous remark near the end of the essay, Baldwin notes: “The only thing white people have that black people need, or should want, is power – and no one holds power forever.”<sup>72</sup> Which is undeniably true, from whichever perspective one considers it. Paradoxically, it is by so explicitly putting his own personality on the line that Baldwin’s impersonal truth hits home. For Baldwin, as for Didion, affects and affectations hinder a lucid perspective on a complex reality. Both mobilize a personal dimension to develop an impersonal perspective that does not lose itself in facile sentimentality or fake reconciliations. Their critique of the world they live in takes a necessary detour through the impersonal. If this detour prevents them from embodying the universal values they pursue, it also prevents them from taking refuge in the difference of a particular personal or collective identity.

## Impersonal Style, Minor Universality

In the third section of “Nothing Personal”, Baldwin oracles how “we go under”, victims of “universal cruelty”, “universal indifference” and “universal fear of love”.<sup>73</sup> This malaise is countered with a cryptic and uncertain prophecy: “one day, perhaps”, we will accept “that human beings are more important than real estate”, as Baldwin persists in believing “that we can build Jerusalem, if we will”.<sup>74</sup> Universalism is understood here as an exclusively negative force, an extension of the “loveless nation” which Baldwin seeks to disrupt through the invocation of a transcendent (and decidedly impersonal) idea (“Jerusalem”). We argue that such rejections of “major” universalisms – embodied most emphatically, for Baldwin, in the US’s self-congratulatory exceptionalism – through the irruption of the impersonal constitute a “minor” mode of universality in both Baldwin’s and Didion’s non-fiction.

This essay has traced how two of the main avatars of the personal essay stylistically unworked personal experience to introduce an impersonal dimension in

---

71 Ibid., 326–27.

72 Ibid., 341–42.

73 Baldwin, “Nothing Personal”, 704.

74 Ibid.



their writing. It might seem counter-intuitive to read this stylistics of the impersonal as an inscription of universality. After all, the period we highlight (the mid-1950s to the 1970s) is customarily marked by the demise of the grand emancipatory promises of Enlightenment universality, as their universalism was decried as a front for concerns that were all too Western and all too white, if not as an alibi for the continued workings of empire.<sup>75</sup> What Mark Greif has analysed as the post-war “age of the crisis of man” saw the universal aspirations of humanism explode in multiple affirmations of difference.<sup>76</sup> Baldwin’s and Didion’s positions cannot be conflated with either an Enlightenment universalism or an affirmation of difference; their shared opposition to liberal self-delusion (what Joseph Darda calls a “liberal solutionism”) amounts to a resistance to what Adom Getachew refers to as “liberal universalism” – a universalism that sees change and emancipation as an extension of Western conceptions of nationhood and personhood.<sup>77</sup> But while they share this critique, neither fully embraces what Getachew identifies as “another universalism” powered by a postcolonial “robust vision of internationalism”, in spite of Baldwin’s recalibration of his initially antagonistic relation to international Black solidarity.<sup>78</sup>

On our reading, Didion’s and Baldwin’s “minor universality”, to adopt Markus Messling’s term, is situated elsewhere. For Todd McGowan, universality names a call for change that derives its power from its resistance to full incarnation – in any particular, in any person or in any collective. In this way, universality is an “internal limit” for every social constellation; it is what prevents any particular from fully coinciding with itself, as it “gives me distance from my ideologically given identity”.<sup>79</sup> Baldwin’s and Didion’s writing unworks the illusion of self-identity and of the elements that make up the world without restoring them to a new composition; in this way, we argue, their (im)personal writing makes room for the call of the universal that finds the world as it is insufficient. For McGowan, “universality is an interruption in the socially authorized field of perception . . . . Universal freedom and equality exist in what interrupts the social terrain, in the fact that this terrain always has an absence within it.”<sup>80</sup> Recall Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts’s description of Baldwin’s literary pan shot: “starting with a tight shot and then zoom[ing] out to a wide view while the lens remains focused

---

75 Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

76 Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

77 Darda, *Racial Liberalism*, 204; Getachew, *Worldmaking*, 28.

78 Getachew, *Worldmaking*, 28.

79 McGowan, *Universality*, 6, 9.

80 *Ibid.*, 10.

on a point in the distance”. For McGowan, “the universal plays a necessary role in constituting the field of perception, and yet at the same time, it disturbs this field”.<sup>81</sup> It is tempting to identify Baldwin’s unnamed “point in the distance” with this universal promise. That that promise so easily tips over into hopelessness (in the late Baldwin) and in resignation (throughout Didion’s career) might be a measure of how minor the prospects of the universal are in the wake of universalism.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, Chris. *Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.
- Baldwin, James. *Collected Essays*. Edited by Toni Morrison. New York: Library of America, 1998.
- Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. In *Collected Essays*, 291–347.
- Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. In *Collected Essays*, 1–129.
- Baldwin, James. “Nothing Personal”. In *Collected Essays*, 692–706.
- Baldwin, James. “Princes and Powers”. In *Collected Essays*, 143–69.
- Butler, Cheryl. *The Art of the Black Essay: From Meditation to Transcendence*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Cole, Teju. “Black Body: Rereading James Baldwin’s ‘Stranger in the Village’”. *The New Yorker*, 19 August 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/black-body-re-reading-james-baldwins-stranger-village>.
- Conversations with James Baldwin*. Edited by Fred. L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989.
- Darda, Joseph. *The Strange Career of Racial Liberalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022.
- DeKoven, Marianne. *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Diamond, Sam. “Getting the Story: Joan Didion’s Aesthetic Transformation”. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1–22.
- Didion, Joan. *Political Fictions*. New York: Knopf, 2001.
- Didion, Joan. “Questions about the New Fiction”. *National Review* 17, no. 48 (1965): 1101–2.
- Didion, Joan. *Slouching towards Bethlehem*. London: Flamingo, 2001.
- Didion, Joan. *The White Album*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979.
- Emre, Merve. “The Illusion of the First Person”. *New York Review of Books*, 3 November 2022. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/11/03/the-illusion-of-the-first-person-merve-emre/>.
- Emre, Merve. “Two Paths for the Personal Essay”. *Boston Review*, 22 August 2017. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/merve-emre-two-paths-personal-essay/>.
- Field, Douglas. *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Gehlawat, Monica. *In Defense of Dialogue: Reading Habermas and Postwar American Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2020.

---

81 Ibid.

- Getachew, Adom. *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.
- Greif, Mark. *The Age of the Crisis of Man*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Howe, Irving. Review of *Nobody Knows My Name*, by James Baldwin. *New York Times*, 2 July 1961.
- Karatani, Kojin. *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2003.
- McClure, John A. *Late Imperial Romance*. London: Verso, 1994.
- McGowan, Todd. *Universality and Identity Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.
- Messling, Markus, and Jonas Tinius, eds. *Minor Universality: Rethinking Humanity after Western Universalism/Universalité mineure: Penser l'humanité après l'universalisme occidental*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023.
- Miller, D. Quentin. "Baldwin and the Rhetoric of Confession". In Miller, *Baldwin in Context*, 221–32.
- Miller, D. Quentin, ed. *James Baldwin in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Miller, Joshua. "A Striking Addiction to Irreality". In *Re-viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*, edited by D. Quentin Miller, 154–89. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000.
- Muggli, Mark. "The Poetics of Joan Didion's Journalism". *American Literature* 59, no. 3 (1987): 402–21.
- Nelson, Deborah. *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Norman, Brian. "Baldwin's Collaborations". In *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by Michele Elam, 135–49. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Norman, Brian. "The Protest Essay Tradition". In Miller, *Baldwin in Context*, 201–10.
- "Press Release". The Nobel Prize. 6 October 2022. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2022/press-release/>.
- Rhodes-Pitts, Sharifa. *Harlem Is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011.
- Schlosser, Joel Alden. "Joan Didion and the American Dream". *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 37, no. 4 (2018): 28–51.
- Schryer, Stephen. "Writers for Goldwater". *Post45*. 20 January 2020. <https://post45.org/2020/01/writers-for-goldwater/>.
- Shoop, Casey. "Joan Didion's Style: A Revisionist Western". *Auto/Biography Studies* 31, no. 3 (2016): 586–91.
- Singh, Nikhil Pal. *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Sinykin, Dan. *American Literature and the Long Downturn*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Worden, Daniel. *Neoliberal Nonfictions: The Documentary Aesthetic from Joan Didion to Jay-Z*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020.

