

Ambivalence, Detachment, Abortion: Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*

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For all the Marias

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A Note on Terminology

In recent years there has been an increase in the use of gender-neutral language when discussing pregnancy, abortion, and fertility in the United States. The shift to gender-neutral language means that when discussing reproductive politics or justice, for example, some people opt to use terms such as “pregnant persons” rather than “women.” This linguistic change has been met with contention. Some argue that gender-neutral language minimizes the rampant misogyny fueling the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (2022) and subsequent restrictions on abortion and related reproductive care in many states.

I recognize that the desire to control women’s bodies and autonomy has been a leading cause in much of our nation’s new and extreme legislature. I also recognize the importance of inclusivity. In the spirit of inclusivity, I use “women,” “pregnant persons,” and “child-bearing people” interchangeably when referring to pregnancy, abortion, and reproductivity.

Secondly, the ideological freight of using “fetus” versus “baby” has long dominated the abortion debate. In *Play It As It Lays*, Didion writes “baby” when referring to Maria’s pregnancy. In keeping with how Maria thinks of her pregnancy, I have decided to use the language of “baby” or “child” when writing about her experience. In all other parts of my thesis, I use the term “fetus.”

Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate
- Gwendolyn Brooks, "the mother"

Introduction

Abortion has been at the center of American politics since at least 1973, when the Supreme Court issued the *Jane Roe v. Henry Wade* decision (1973) recognizing and protecting a pregnant person's right to have an abortion. Nearly 50 years later in June 2022, a conservative majority on the Supreme Court issued the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision, overturning decades of precedent set forth by *Roe*. Instantaneously, new and more draconian restrictions were placed on abortion access in select states across the country. While abortion has never been a consistent and viable option for many women and pregnant persons in the US, *Dobbs* amplified the consequences of life without autonomous reproductive choice. Since *Dobbs*, the human rights violations we see and hear about in the news have exacerbated the polarity of pro-choice and pro-life arguments, making the contemporary abortion debate not only increasingly contentious, but overdetermined.

Though many advocates for and against abortion rely on the long-entrenched pro-choice pro-life arguments to validate their beliefs, the current abortion debate is too rigid to account for the multitude of circumstances and complex emotions that accompany reproductivity, choice, and abortion. I define a complex emotion as an emotion that defies distinct and discrete categories. This project focuses on two such emotions: ambivalence and detachment. The false binary purported by our abortion debate toxically flattens the emotional landscape of reproductivity, prompting one to wonder where we turn to reaffirm the emotional complexity of reproductivity. It feels like the answer should be literature, but there's one, unavoidable bump in the road – the literature on abortion is few and far between.

Thankfully, in 2020 poet Annie Finch edited and published the first major anthology on the literature of abortion: *Choice Words: Writers on Abortion* (2020). Finch divides her

anthology into five sections, each speaking to a different, often minimized dimension of abortion: Mind, Body, Heart, Will, and Spirit. In the beginning stages of this project, Finch's anthology was a valuable resource, validating my continued difficulty in finding *any* imaginative literature on abortion while simultaneously handing me what I had been searching for on a silver platter. But I still faced one key problem: the focal text for my project, Joan Didion's novel *Play It As It Lays* (1970) completely evaded Finch's anthology. This project picks up where Finch left off. Motivated by complex emotions, this project reads for ambivalence and detachment in Didion's novel and offers Reproductive Justice as a site to reclaim these neglected emotions.

Play It As It Lays is a novel about abortion. My own copy of *Play* has grown to be double its original size, wedged with post-it notes each time abortion is mentioned. *Play* follows Maria Wyeth, a struggling actress trapped in a loveless marriage with Hollywood director Carter Lang. Sometime during her marriage with Carter, Maria has an extramarital affair with screenwriter Les Goodwin and becomes pregnant. When Maria tells Carter that she's pregnant – and that it might not be his – he gives her an ultimatum: get an illegal abortion or else lose custody of their elder child, Kate. Hesitant to the idea of an abortion but unwilling to lose custody of her daughter, Maria reluctantly agrees to have the abortion. Maria's abortion anchors her persistent dwelling in ambivalence and detachment – from the moment abortion enters into *Play*, these emotions dominate and uphold the novel. Ambivalence and detachment's pervasiveness in *Play* reclaims emotions that otherwise remain minimized and muted under the pro-choice pro-life framework. Making its form out of ambivalence and detachment, Joan Didion's 1970 novel, *Play It As It Lays*, anticipates – and rejects – the rigidity of a burgeoning abortion debate in America.

American Abortion: The 19th Century through 1973

In 21st century America, we discuss abortion according to two poles: are you pro-choice or pro-life? Over time, the dichotomous abortion debate has ingrained itself into our national and cultural discourse. Despite the intricacies and innerworkings of both arguments, the American people have a tendency to assign people, corporations, works of art, arguments, etc. the broad and defining label of either pro-choice or pro-life. But abortion has not always caused such a tense divide, and the opposing beliefs about abortion have not always been so contentious.

Prior to the 19th century, abortion in America was legal until “quickening,” the phase during pregnancy when the pregnant person can feel fetal movement (Winny). During this era of legal abortion, the practice was commonly seen as an event that remained inside the women’s domain. Abortion’s confinement to the feminine and domestic realm resulted in what Annalies Winny refers to as the “cottage abortion industry” where “most providers [of abortions] were midwives” (Winny). Though the cottage abortion industry was always vulnerable to outside forces due to its nature as a female driven industry, the establishment of the American Medical Association (AMA) – a professional association for white male medical practitioners – in 1847 amplified the industry’s vulnerability.

Prior to, and even some time after the AMA’s formation, medical professionals were not held in high esteem. In his book *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, Paul Starr cites a professional journal from 1869 which declared that in “all American colleges” medicine remained “the most despised of all the professions which liberally-educated men are expected to enter” (Starr 21). Due to the perceived inferiority of the medical profession, hardly any doctors were able to “scrape together a respectable living” before 1900 (Starr 21). The AMA was established, first and foremost, to remedy the persistent demeaning of the medical profession and

instead, transform the medical field into a respectable profession (Johnson 18). However, the transformation of medicine into an esteemed field entailed restricting who was allowed to practice. In an interview with PBS, Dr. Aletha Maybank, the AMA's current chief health equity officer, spoke about her process of researching and writing an 83-page report on the AMA's racist and misogynistic history. Dr. Maybank found that the AMA is "rooted in white patriarchy and affluent supremacy" with a history of excluding Black physicians on the basis of race, "shutting down five of the seven Black med schools and all of the women[']s med schools" (Alcindor & Mufson). Through excluding physicians on the basis of race and gender, AMA membership resulted in a homogenous assemblage of white, affluent men who saw themselves as "gatekeeper[s] of the medical profession" (Winy).

In 1857, ten years after the AMA's establishment, medical "gatekeepers" wishing to keep the practice of medicine exclusive turned their attention towards "unregulated abortion providers" in a campaign pioneered by Dr. Horatio Robinson Storer, a graduate of Harvard Medical School and a specialist in gynecology and obstetrics (Johnson 15). Dr. Storer's campaign medicalized abortion, thrusting the practice out from the sphere of feminine domesticity and into a male dominated public, marking the beginning of the abortion debate. The campaign was a perplexing combination of genuine belief that abortion was immoral, paired with an egotistical guardianship over the medical profession. A closer look into Dr. Storer's report on "criminal abortion" verifies this claim.

In 1857, Dr. Storer was appointed chair of the Committee on Criminal Abortion, a position that required drafting the AMA's official stance on abortion. In 1859, the AMA adopted Dr. Storer's report as the association's official stance against the practice. In 1860, J.B Lippincott

& Co published the report as the book, *On Criminal Abortion in America* with Dr. Storer as author (Venkatraman). In the beginning of his report, Dr. Storer lays the foundation for his stance against abortion by making claims about the paternalistic role of doctors while simultaneously outlining what “types” of abortion count as criminal. In the introductory section of the report, Dr. Storer begins by justifying the medical profession’s investigation into abortion, claiming that “medical men are the physical guardians of women and their offspring” (15). Not only guardians over the medical profession, “medical men” now assumed the role of guardian over the female body. The introductory section ends with moralizing language, as Storer declares that it is the “duty of the [medical] profession” to work toward “[abortion’s] general suppression” (15). These sentiments reappear in one of the final sections of the report, titled “The Duty of the Profession” (108). From start to finish, then, egotistical duty-based language pervades Dr. Storer’s report.

In the first official section of the report, titled “Is Abortion Ever A Crime?” Dr. Storer’s beliefs on abortion’s immorality become exceedingly clear as he distinguishes between what “types” of abortions count as criminal. Dr. Storer defines abortion as “the violent and premature expulsion of the product of conception, independently of its age, viability, and normal formation” (15). Any abortion that aligned with these conditions was criminal. Alternatively, any abortion that was “the result of accident, or from natural causes, or justified by the rules of medicine, whether to save the mother or her child” was not (15). By Storer’s definition, a “criminal abortion” referred to any abortion that resulted from the pregnant person’s desire to end the pregnancy because they did not want a child.

The same year that Dr. Storer’s report on criminal abortion was published as a book for the public, governors of every state in the US received a letter from the president of the AMA

decrying abortion. The letter, which was later revealed to be ghostwritten by Dr. Storer, further solidified abortion's criminality by claiming that life began at conception, not "quickening":

The moral guilt of criminal abortion depends entirely upon the real and essential nature of the act. It is the intentional destruction of a child within its parent. And physicians have now agreed from actual and various proof that the child is alive from the moment of conception. (Abdelfatah)

Dr. Storer's campaign against abortion left a legacy of what has come to be known as "pro-life" sentiments. Eventually these beliefs manifested into legislation, with 40 anti-abortion bills becoming law between 1860 and 1880 (Winny). By 1910, "every state had anti-abortion laws, except Kentucky whose courts judicially declared abortion to be illegal" (Lewis & Shimabukuro 2). Nearly 60 years later in 1967, "forty-nine states and the District of Columbia classified the crime of abortion as a felony" (Lewis & Shimabukuro 2).

Though these laws restricted abortion, the need for abortions didn't disappear. With abortions and the practice of them now classified as criminal offenses, underground abortions became a common, yet deadly occurrence. According to Planned Parenthood, an illegal abortion was the cause of death for nearly 2,700 women in 1930 ("Historical Abortion Law Timeline: 1850 to Today"). Mourning the mass amount of deaths ensuing from illegal abortions, Planned Parenthood, founded in 1916, held a conference on abortion in 1955, publicly calling for abortion law reform ("Historical Abortion"). The beginning of the 1960s saw an even greater nationwide effort to reform abortion laws with the inception of Second Wave Feminism. Second Wave Feminism advocated for women's social and economic rights and autonomy, including – but not limited to – equal pay, freedom from the threat of physical violence, and the right to choose to have a safe abortion. In 1969, the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion

Laws (NARAL) was founded and became the first “national group created solely to campaign for the legalization of abortion” (“Historical Abortion”). By the early 1970s, “pro-choice” became the unifying term for identifying individuals who fought for and believed in women’s reproductive autonomy (“pro-choice”). Following NARAL’s formation and the popularity of Second Wave Feminism, the US saw a series of abortion reformation laws. Most notably, in 1970, New York legalized abortion. The day after the law took effect, a Planned Parenthood in Syracuse became the first Planned Parenthood to “provide abortion services, and the first free-standing abortion center nationwide” (“Historical Abortion”). Amidst a revolutionary year for abortion reform in 1970, Joan Didion published her second novel, *Play It As It Lays*. By 1973, the Supreme Court issued the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision, ruling that the Constitution protected a person’s right to choose to have an abortion.

Joan Didion on Abortion

Joan Didion had been writing on abortion since 1963 when she published her first novel, *Run River*. A pointed and thoughtful meditation on the land, culture, and history of Didion’s home of Northern California, *Run River* follows Lily Knight and Everett McClellan, ranch owners and the grandchildren of pioneers, between 1939 and 1959. After a few years of marriage and two children, Lily and Everett’s relationship becomes fraught when Everett leaves their ranch to serve in World War II. During Everett’s absence, Lily becomes sexually involved with Joe Templeton, a neighbor and fellow ranch owner. Similar to Maria’s circumstances in *Play*, Lily becomes pregnant with Joe’s child as a result of the affair. After his father’s death, Everett comes home from the war, and Lily decides to confess her pregnancy as she and Everett lie in their dark, humid bedroom. Finally, Lily tells her husband, “I’m pregnant. I’m pregnant and I

don't think by you" (Didion, *River* 139). The words "I'm pregnant" are the clearest way for a speaker to state that they are with child, but the words do not necessarily reveal what happens next. In the most basic sense, the statement "I'm pregnant" is technical, revealing that a sperm has fertilized an egg. Though the result of this fertilization might result in a child, the possibility of miscarriage and the option of abortion produces the potential of not every pregnancy resulting in a birth. Thus, Lily's statement "I'm pregnant" contains uncertainty: she does not state that she will be carrying the fetus to term. The morning after Lily tells Everett that she is pregnant, she secretly leaves town and heads to San Francisco for an abortion. Unlike Lily in *Run River*, Maria declares that she plans to carry the fetus to term in *Play*. Coming back from Helene and BZ's house – a married couple that Maria and Carter are friends with – Carter and Maria get into a fight that ends with Maria declaring that she is "having a baby" (Didion, *Play* 48). As opposed to Lily, Maria's statement reveals both a conception and what Maria expects as a result of the conception: a baby.

Though the women protagonists in both *Run River* and *Play* have abortions, *Run River* elides an abortion scene. The reasoning is simple: unlike *Play*, *Run River* is not a novel about abortion – *Run River* is a novel about marriage. Knowing that she has broken the promise of marital fidelity, Lily gets an abortion in an attempt to restore the broken trust between her and Everett. After piecing together that Lily has left town to get an abortion, Everett discovers a note which solidifies himself and marriage as the driving force behind Lily's abortion. The note reads, "Everett darling, I'll try to make everything all right. Please. L" (*River* 162, emphasis in original). Even years after Lily's trip to San Francisco, mentions of her abortion throughout *Run River* only appear in the context of marital arguments: "[t]he August day [Lily] went to San Francisco by herself had become, in its manifold evidence of mutual error, the heaviest weapon

in both their arsenals” (*River* 233). Although abortion makes an explicit and durable appearance in *Run River*, its context is more marriage dependent than it is in *Play*.

Didion’s thinking on abortion also appeared in her non-fiction writing. In 1972, *The New York Times* published Didion’s essay “The Women’s Movement,” which was later incorporated into her book of essays, *The White Album*. In the essay, Didion critiques a popular, commercial version of Second Wave Feminism that does not change a system, but rather, enables middle class white women to behave in a self-serving, complacent manner.

Second Wave Feminism (SWF) began in the early 1960s, spurred by the publication of Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In her book, Friedan explored “the problem that has no name” – a shared unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life amongst white, middleclass American housewives (Friedan 15). Through interviews and personal anecdotes, Friedan proposed that the unhappiness plaguing American women was two-fold: American housewives were unsatisfied with their confinement to the domestic sphere, and well-educated women were woefully underemployed. With Friedan’s words echoing in their ears, middle-class women across the nation began to organize and advocate for women’s social, political, and economic equality.

The triumphs of SWF were extraordinary, but they didn’t necessarily extend to all women. Prominent Black Feminist bell hooks criticized SWF for its lack of intersectionality and its failure “to generate in-depth critical analysis of the black female experience” (hooks 12). Loretta Ross, one of the twelve minds behind *Reproductive Justice*, echoes hooks’s sentiment when she observes that while revolutionary, *Roe* – a major triumph for SWF – did not ensure that all child-bearing people, especially those of color, would be able to *access* an abortion: “*Roe v.*

Wade and its legalization of choice had guaranteed nothing to women who could not pay for reproductive options. These women remained dangerously vulnerable” (Ross & Solinger 121).

Questioning SWF herself, Didion faulted the Women’s Movement for its lack of a clear goal and its dependence on vague, self-affirming concepts of “‘fulfillment’ or ‘self-expression,’ a yearning absolutely devoid of ideas and capable of engendering only the most *pro forma* benevolent interest” (*White* 110, emphasis in original). According to Didion, the individualistic, self-regarding slogans of “fulfillment” and “self-expression” compromised the potentially revolutionary aims of the feminist movement. Popular Second Wave Feminists were no longer engaging in deep feminist philosophy like their predecessors. Instead, they vapidly suggested that the first step towards liberation entailed a “marriage contract”: an equal division of household chores and childcare among husband and wife. Mulling over this cooptation, Didion observes that

[i]t was a long way from Simone de Beauvoir’s grave and awesome recognition of woman’s role as ‘the Other’ to the notion that the first step in changing that role was Alix Kates Shulman’s marriage contract (‘wife strips beds, husband remakes them’), a document reproduced in *Ms.*, but it was toward just such trivialization that the women’s movement seemed to be heading. (*White* 113)

For Didion, the trite feminists who suggested that the path towards freeing woman from her position as “other” entailed splitting up household chores failed to make any real political change, failed to make “that inductive leap from the personal to the political” (*White* 114).

Although Didion’s essay predates *Roe*, her ideas about abortion throughout the essay did not align with mainstream SWF beliefs about abortion. At the time Didion wrote this essay, 1972, SWF continued fighting for the right to abortion; *Roe v. Wade* became a legal

manifestation of that fight in 1973. Though Didion did not deny choice, she was ambivalent about abortion, refusing to gloss over the complexity of abortion and reproduction. Her ambivalence makes a few appearances throughout the essay, making “The Women’s Movement” a challenging read. In dissecting the key issues of SWF, such as its stance on abortion, Didion parodies the rhetorical devices used by Second Wave Feminists, making it difficult to discern Didion’s own politics in some of the essay’s key moments. For instance, in her critique of the “ubiquitous” Everywoman – SWF’s conception of the woman as a perpetually victimized individual – Didion takes advantage of the movement’s use of hyperbole. Listing three examples of her own, Didion writes that the Everywoman “needed contraceptives because she was raped on every date, raped by her husband, and raped finally on the abortionist’s table” (*White* 115). Deliberately blending her own politics and beliefs against SWF’s hyperbolic claims, Didion’s stance on abortion becomes quite ambivalent.

In another moment just one page later, Didion accuses SWF of being “a rationale for denying” the reality of womanhood (*White* 116). Didion finds that under SWF, “the transient stab of dread and loss which accompanies menstruation simply never happens: we only thought it happened, because a male chauvinist psychiatrist told us so. No woman need have bad dreams after an abortion: she has only been told she should” (*White* 116). According to Didion, some women actually *do* have nightmares after abortions and any attempt to tell them not to reduces the real pains and reality of womanhood. In the face of SWF’s reduction of feeling, Didion encourages women to feel.

The crux of Didion’s argument takes shape in the essay’s final four pages. Didion argues that SWF, with its trivial hyper-fixations, transformed *every woman* into a perpetual victim (*White* 115). Insofar as SWF professed that every woman was a victim of society writ large, the

movement enabled and encouraged a feeble version of self-empowerment. Such a version of self-empowerment deluded women – specifically privileged white women – into believing that making *their* lives better and freeing *themselves* from domestic unfairness was enough to alter the long-entrenched and problematic position of woman as a subordinate “Other.” Further, these cosmetic, individualistic changes allowed women to avoid adulthood and reality:

All one’s actual apprehension of what it is like to be a woman, the irreconcilable difference of it – that sense of living one’s deepest life underwater, that dark involvement with blood and birth and death – could now be declared invalid, unnecessary, *one never felt it at all*. (*White* 117, emphasis in original).

In Didion’s account, SWF not only erased but invalidated the emotional complexity of womanhood – the blood, birth, and death of it all. By deluding women into believing that these elements of adult womanhood were nonessential, the Women’s Movement took women, riddled them with a dim notion of self-empowerment, and transformed them into “perpetual adolescents” (*White* 117). Throughout her critique of SWF, Didion posits that the movement encourages a shallow, commercial version of Feminism that does little to nothing to address the institutions, systems, and ideas keeping women in subordinate positions: it’s all personal, with no political.

The Moodiness of *Play* and the Novel Form

Though Maria’s abortion is the crux of *Play*, and though Didion’s novel arrived at such a crucial moment in the fight for reproductive rights, few of the novel’s first reviews mention Maria’s abortion beyond an element of plot summary. Anthony Paul’s review for the *Financial Times* includes Maria’s abortion as merely one of the things she does in the novel. He writes, “[Maria] visits her daughter in the clinic, goes through with a shocking abortion, spends much

time driving aimlessly on the freeway” (Paul 14). Even more bleak is the review by Lore Segal in *The New York Times*. Segal simply writes, “[T]here is an abortion,” and then quotes a paragraph from the novel’s abortion scene (Segal). Segal’s review, like Paul’s, fails to grasp Maria’s abortion as the crux of the novel. Patrick Marnham’s review in *The Sunday Telegraph* begins to move towards a more complete understanding of Maria’s abortion as something beyond a discrete plot point. After a general summary of the trauma that Maria experiences, Marnham writes that Maria “suffers an abortion” and following the procedure, “sees herself more and more as a used object, less and less as a person” (Marnham 21). Unlike the previous reviews, Marnham’s review begins to pick up on the larger consequences of Maria’s abortion.

While each of these reviews mention Maria’s abortion, with Marnham finally considering how the abortion impacts Maria’s psyche, none of the first reviews mention *how* Maria’s abortion is arranged or *why* Maria decides to go through with it – except Mimi Alberts’ review in *Off Our Backs*, the longest running feminist newspaper in the United States. Alberts writes sharply about the complexity of Maria’s abortion, praising Didion for showing the sometimes-ugly reality of womanhood. Alberts declares that Maria does not merely have an abortion but is coerced into having one. Alberts writes that “the men with whom [Maria] has slept with do nothing but force her to get abortions” (Alberts 20). Towards the end of the review, Alberts acknowledges the pivotal role Maria’s abortion plays in the novel: “central to the theme of the book, is Maria’s abortion” (Alberts 20). Lastly, unlike the other reviews, Alberts relates the content of *Play* to the lived experience of women. In a poignant final paragraph Alberts writes:

[*Play*] deals with women intimately and truthfully... That Joan Didion, among others, is writing about the realities of the woman’s body is symptomatic of what is happening to all of us... Bleeding and pain, the problems of being had instead of having are beginning

to tumble out of the closet now with the grisly click of skeletons that have been kept there for a long, long time. (Alberts 20)

According to Alberts, Didion's depiction of women and womanhood in *Play* resonated with the larger feminist movement of the late 60s and early 70s, alerting the public to the physical complexities and burdens of womanhood – realities that were (and to some extent, continue to be) kept hidden for the sake of politeness. Alberts' review of *Play* makes the pivotal leap from concerns about the actual construction of text on the page into the text's capacity to accurately reflect the lived, but far too often ignored, experiences of women. As the "skeletons come tumbling" out of the locked closet, it is easy to imagine Alberts envisions Didion holding the key.

Play envisions a poignant picture of Maria's abortion by centralizing feeling. Through short chapters, lurid prose, and the abiding formal and thematic presence of ambivalence and detachment, Didion creates a literary aesthetic out of emotion. *Play*'s moodiness and explicit focus on emotion over plot mirrors the atmospheric backdrop of the novel: California at the end of the 1960s, a period of heightened paranoia exacerbated by the lack of a clear, narrative line. In her essay "The White Album," Didion adjoins pieces of writing from 1968 through 1978 to meditate on the chaos plaguing Americans towards the end of the 60s. According to Didion, the 60s ended on August 9, 1969, "when word of the murders on Cielo Drive traveled like brushfire through the community" (*White* 47). What Didion refers to as "the murders on Cielo Drive" marks August 8th, the day members of the Manson family drove up to Cielo Drive, murdering a pregnant Sharon Tate and four others. Reflecting on the moment she heard about the murders, sitting in the shallow end of her sister-in-law's pool, Didion remembers one key element of that haunting August day: "*I remember that no one was surprised*" (*White* 42, emphasis in original).

The communal lack of surprise Didion remembered so vividly arose from the 60s' familiarity with chaos and disorder. Between 1966 and 1971 – *Play* being published in 1970 – Didion became convinced that what she was witnessing culturally, politically, and personally “did not fit into any narrative [she] knew” (*White* 13). During these five years, Didion interviewed an imprisoned Huey Newton, founder of the Black Panther Party; had countless strange visitors appear on her L.A. doorstep; visited a divided San Francisco State College during the Third World Liberation Front Strikes; bought a dress for Linda Kasabian, the lookout and getaway driver for the Cielo Drive murders; and underwent a psychiatric report.

For Didion, the writerly narrative line created order out of chaos, allowing one to make stories out of “disparate images,” consequently providing solace in times of confusion and disorder (*White* 11). Yet, in the 60s, specifically in the years between 1966 and 1971, the imposition of a narrative line or any attempt to create order out of chaos, became not just futile, but dishonest. Musing on the absence of order, Didion compares the years between 1966 and 1971 to improvisation or creating a movie through cutting and editing various images. She writes:

I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw... In what would probably be the middle of my life I wanted still to believe in the narrative and in the narrative's intelligibility, but to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical. (*White* 13)

What Didion experienced personally and witnessed politically informed *Play*'s mood and its lack of a clear narrative line.

Play does not proceed in chronological order. Instead, *Play* looks backward. The novel begins in present tense, with Maria in a psychiatric facility informing readers that what they are

about to read has already happened. From the first chapter, *Play* wrinkles the idea of a linear narrative line. Further, from chapter 74 until the end of the book, comprising the last 14 pages of the novel, each chapter alternates between past events and Maria's present thoughts in the psychiatric facility. As *Play* rejects linear narrative, the consistent presence of ambivalence and detachment become a new through-line for the novel. In a novel about abortion, the lack of a clear narrative line subtly implies that the experience of abortion resists a straight trajectory. After her abortion, Maria doesn't come to terms with the procedure or embark on a steady journey of growth. Instead, she unravels, and the progression of the novel, with its distorted narrative line and alternations between past and present, reflect her breakdown. The content and the narratological elements of *Play* speak to one another.

Didion uses the novel as an occasion to disregard the narrative line and prioritize emotion. As a result, *Play* is a moody novel, motivated by and concerned with emotion over plot. Didion's creative choice is apt as the novel *depends on* what I call the emotional middle, where complex emotions live. Any argument maintaining the importance of the novel genre will – in some variation – proclaim that fiction reminds us what it means to be human, that the novel holds humanity. In the introduction to *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster subtly imagines complex emotions as the novel's life source:

[t]he intensely, stiflingly human quality of the novel is not to be avoided; the novel is sogged with humanity; there is no escaping the uplift or the downpour, nor can they be kept out of criticism. We may hate humanity, but if it is exorcised or even purified the novel wilts, little is left but a bunch of words. (Forster 43)

According to Forster, complex emotions are the foundation of the novel – not a clean narrative line or tidy plot that leaves all conflicts resolved. Without real, knotty human emotions and

experiences – such as ambivalence and detachment – the novel “wilts” and becomes lifeless. Through its emotional affordances specifically, Didion’s *Play* makes the novel genre essential for examining abortion’s emotional dimensions.

Tracing Ambivalence Throughout *Play*

As it stands, America’s abortion debate figures as a dichotomy, forcing an alignment with one side or the other, but never both. One can only be either pro-choice or pro-life. The rigidity of the abortion debate neglects the complex emotions that surround reproduction itself. I define complex emotions as feeling states that defy discrete and distinct categories, evading the conclusive label of a “positive” or “negative” emotion. Because the pro-choice pro-life framework forces an alignment with one argument that more-or-less coalesces with a political party, the nation’s current abortion debate has, unfortunately, become politically overdetermined. As a consequence, it becomes difficult to discuss matters of reproductivity, especially abortion, in any register that is not political – but I think it can be done. When I say “the middle” I am not referring to the political middle, but the emotional middle. Thus, my use of “the middle” shifts the register from political to emotional. The emotional middle houses a whole range of experiences that a rigid and overdetermined pro-choice pro-life framework cannot accommodate. The emotions residing in the emotional middle have not been historically regarded as “good” or “bad,” or to borrow Sianne Ngai’s language, “beautiful” or “ugly.” Instead, the emotions in the emotional middle are neutral. My creation of the emotional middle provides us ample space to reclaim ambivalence and detachment, thereby amplifying their importance to matters of reproductivity and specifically, abortion.

The two emotions structuring and upholding *Play* – ambivalence and detachment – live in the emotional middle. By definition, ambivalence indicates a feeling state consisting of “profoundly opposing emotions, beliefs, attitudes, or urges” (“ambivalence” n.l.a). Contingent upon opposition, ambivalence is *the* complex emotion – the epitome of emotional multiplicity. Ambivalence’s cousin, detachment, is equally durable throughout Didion’s novel. In this project, detachment refers to a dissociative mental state that is neither negative nor positive, hovering between the domain of a positive or negative emotion. Neither ambivalence nor detachment align with one clear experience or feeling state, rendering any consideration of them under a dichotomous debate impossible.

My work with ambivalence and detachment derives from Sianne Ngai’s work in her book, *Ugly Feelings* (2005). Positioning her work in what has come to be known as the affective turn in literary studies, Ngai reads for emotions with negative valences (ie: anxiety, envy, irritation, paranoia). According to Ngai, these emotions have gone unrecognized in the Western literary tradition and her work seeks to reclaim them as sites of political importance. As I read for ambivalence and detachment – emotions that have also forgone a definitive emotional valence – I situate myself in literary studies’ affective turn. Ngai defines her title term as feelings that are “explicitly *amoral* or *noncathartic*, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release” (Ngai 6, emphasis in original). However, ambivalence is somewhat different than Ngai’s ugly feelings. Ambivalence itself is not polar: it is a feeling without a clearly positive or negative, beautiful or ugly valence.

In the 21st century, feminist scholars have sought to reclaim ambivalence, recognizing the aesthetic modes that represent and produce it. In her study of vulnerability politics, Katie Oliviero praises ambivalence for its generative power against binaries writing “if ambivalence

captures the ‘oscillation’ between opposite or multiple forces, it can generate movement toward the something else of yet-unknown possibilities” (Oliviero 249). Oliviero’s examination of ambivalence alerts us to the notion that the binary structures dominating our social lives – such as the pro-choice or pro-life framework– aren’t as binary as they seem. Ambivalence, then, is the first step out from under rigid and overdetermined binaries. Lauren Berlant’s study of sentimentality focuses on what they term “women’s culture” – the space wherein texts and ideas that express women’s “core interests and desires” circulate (Berlant 5). Sentimental fictions are but one example of these circulatory texts. Berlant suggests that sentimental fictions afford women a temporary emotional release, while also keeping women in subjective states. These texts are “critical...sentimental, and therefore ambivalent” (Berlant 2). Caught between two worlds of criticism and sentimentality, sentimental fictions become ambivalent, granting women “permission to live small but to feel large; to live large but to want what is normal too; to be critical without detaching from disappointing and dangerous worlds and objects of desire” (Berlant 3). One challenge of bringing forth these political rewritings of ambivalence is that their notions of ambivalence hold political potentiality for a *collective*. However, in *Play*, the trajectory of Maria’s ambivalence leads her toward detachment and isolation, not community. Maria is *alone* – and she knows it. Sitting in a psychiatric facility at the start of the novel, Maria thinks, “I see no one I used to know, but then I’m just not crazy about a lot of people” (*Play* 10). Dwelling in detachment – physically and mentally – Maria’s ambivalence is much more claustrophobic than the version of ambivalence that Oliverio and Berlant theorize.

Maria’s claustrophobic ambivalence structures *Play It As It Lays*. Just from the title, *Play* exudes ambivalence. For instance, we might use the phrase “play it as it lays” to refer to a situation one does not have much control over. Thus, to play something as it lays requires

accepting the circumstances you cannot change and optimizing the options you currently have. Accepting fixed circumstances, especially when those circumstances are suboptimal, elicits negative, or at least not completely positive, emotions. Alternatively, optimizing current options seems likely to inspire positive feelings, restoring the loss of control we feel when we accept what we cannot change. To play something as it lays, then, whether it be a game of cards or the “game of life,” suggests that opposing attitudes, feelings, and beliefs can occur simultaneously. To play something as it lays is to be ambivalent and often, in colloquial use, realistic: this is just what has to get done.

Maria’s ambivalence takes the shape of pre-natal ambivalence. Soon after Maria confesses her pregnancy to Carter, he calls her up and orders her to write down the telephone number of “the only man in Los Angeles County who did clean work” (*Play* 54). After hearing Carter’s orders Maria replies, “I’m not sure I want to do that,” *that* referring to the act of terminating the pregnancy (54). Upon hearing Maria’s hesitation, Carter gives his wife an ultimatum: “All right, don’t do it. Go ahead and have this kid. And I’ll take Kate.” Kate is Maria and Carter’s elder child, institutionalized for what the novel alludes to as cognitive and behavioral differences (54). Wanting to keep the pregnancy but horrified at the prospect of losing Kate more than she already has, Maria concedes, asking her husband, “Listen, if I do this, then you promise I can have Kate? You promise there won’t be trouble later?” to which Carter coldly answers, “I’m not promising anything. I said we’ll see” (55). Despite the ambiguous, cold-hearted answer from Carter, the threat of losing Kate again looms over her head and Maria, playing it as it lays, reluctantly agrees to have an abortion.

After agreeing to the abortion, Maria's ambivalence takes root. In the seventeenth chapter of *Play*, Maria simultaneously imagines continuing the pregnancy and having the baby, yet hopes for a miscarriage or menstruation. Didion writes:

Although the heat had not yet broken she began that week to sleep inside, between white sheets, hoping dimly that the white sheets would effect some charm, that she would wake in the morning and find them stained with blood. She did this in the same spirit that she had, a month before, thrown a full box of Tampax into the garbage: to be without Tampax was to insure bleeding, to sleep naked between white sheets was to guarantee staining. (63)

In another superstitious feat to end the pregnancy and induce miscarriage, Maria "pretend[s] to herself she [is] keeping the baby, the better to invite disappointment, court miscarriage" (63).

One day, Maria goes to Saks to buy a bassinette. The parking-lot attendant and Maria struggle to fit the bassinette into her Corvette, but to no end:

"I'm having a baby," [Maria] heard herself telling the parking-lot attendant at Saks as they tried vainly to get a wicker bassinette into the Corvette. When it became clear that she would have to leave the bassinette for delivery she sat in the driver's seat of the Corvette and cried. (63-4)

"Vainly" in this excerpt works two ways. In one sense, it refers to the difficult struggle of making a bassinette fit into a Corvette. Yet, "vainly" also elucidates Maria's futile attempts to induce miscarriage. Deep down, Maria knows buying a bassinette won't miraculously cause her to menstruate – this is just a desperate, useless attempt at trying to maintain a sense of control over her life. And yet, when the bassinette doesn't fit, she cries. The bassinette's incompatibility with Maria's car is a physical manifestation of the impossibility of continuing this pregnancy.

The abortion is impending, but she wants to keep the baby. Maria's desire to continue the pregnancy becomes clearer with the next line, "when she was pretending to herself that she could have the baby, she was wondering where and when it was going to happen" (64). Maria no longer imagines having the baby in the abstract but fantasizes about the birth, solidifying her genuine desire to have the child.

Maria's ambivalence about the pregnancy and the consequential abortion follows Maria throughout the novel, even after the abortion. Walking out of a dirty bedroom in Encino after a harrowing abortion, Maria feels a sense of serenity: "The late sun seemed warm and benevolent on her skin and everything she saw looked beautiful, the summer pulse of life made manifest. As she backed out of the driveway she smiled radiantly at her companion" (83).¹ But the serenity is fleeting and soon enough, Maria begins to unravel. Nightmares about death and dying children plague her dreams; she thinks about her mother; and she worries about Kate. One day, Maria pulls over her car to sob, and everything comes rushing forward. Sitting in her car with her head on the steering wheel, Maria "crie[s] for her mother and she crie[s] for Kate and she crie[s]...because this was the day, the day the baby would have been born" (141). In striking contrast to the benevolence she felt after the abortion, Maria mourns the loss of the baby she wanted.

With Maria's ambivalence about her pregnancy and her abortion suffusing through the novel, *Play* itself becomes ambivalent. *Play* is not a pro-choice novel, nor is it a pro-life novel. *Play*'s resistance to a pro-choice categorization is tricky – not impossible, but tricky. Most notably, Maria has a series of nightmares all including murder and the death of children following her abortion. In one nightmare, Maria dreams that she is "in touch with a member of a

¹ The "companion" refers to the nameless man who accompanied Maria to her illegal abortion.

shadowy Syndicate” (96). Sometimes the member would be an “F.B.I man” and sometimes it’s Maria’s manager Freddy, but the member always “explained that he was ‘part of that operation’” (96). The man asks Maria to provide “certain information: the condition of the plumbing, the precise width of the pipes, the location and size of all the clean-outs” making her an accomplice in whatever business they have planned. Suddenly, the man who drove Maria to her abortion and the doctor who performed the abortion materialize, crystallizing that the “operation” is abortion. Eventually the men leave, Maria is left alone, and “hacked pieces of human flesh” come bubbling out of the plumbing (97). In Maria’s dream, abortion is murder, and she is an accomplice.

In another nightmare following the procedure, abortion is linked to the inhumane murder of children specifically. Maria dreams of leading children to a gas chamber, collecting “their lockets and baby rings in a fine mesh basket” and “whisper[ing] a few comforting words to those children who cried or held back, because this was a humane operation” (126). In both dreams, “operation” does heavy lifting. “Operation” refers to the literal practice of abortion as a medical “operation” while also being used to refer to the underbelly of abortion access in a pre-*Roe* world. In each dream, Maria figures as an accessory to the cruel, murderous practice of abortion.

Play equally thwarts being labeled as a “pro-life” novel. Early on in her pregnancy, Maria *wishes* for a miscarriage, applying a particular pressure to pro-life beliefs. Pro-life arguments regard miscarriage and abortion as distinct because, generally speaking, a miscarriage is unintentional, and abortion is intentional. Yet, Maria’s superstitious attempts at inducing miscarriage blur the definitional lines between abortion and miscarriage. In the case of pro-choice and pro-life labels for this novel, both seem “not to apply” – one of Maria’s preferred turns of phrase throughout the novel.

A little over halfway into *Play*, the novel itself recognizes its incompatibility with pro-choice and pro-life narratives. Following the abortion, Maria tries to distract herself from wondering what the doctor did with the pail that held what he referred to as her period, but what Maria knows was the baby in her womb. In order to divert her thoughts, Maria thinks about a reunion with her daughter Kate and buys herself a new “silver vinyl dress” (115). In each instance of distraction Maria tries “to stop thinking about *what* [the doctor] *had done with the baby. The tissue. The living dead thing, whatever you called it*” (115, emphasis in original). The fetus isn’t living nor is it dead – it’s *both*. This sentence marks the first and *only* moment in the novel where the pattern of referring to the fetus as a baby breaks. The book itself surrenders to the language used on both sides of the abortion debate and occupies an ambivalent middle by simultaneously invoking pro-choice and pro-life terminology.

Discerning Detachment

Detachment proves equally durable in *Play It As It Lays*. Some of detachment’s durability owes to *Play*’s series of maternal frames. Chief among these frames are the death of Maria’s mother and Maria’s abortion. These two events produce a quality of detachment that extends across the novel. Swallowed whole by grief following the death of her mother, Maria already enters into the novel in a detached state. In the introductory chapter written in Maria’s voice, Maria passively says, with little emotion, “The night my mother ran the car off the highway outside Tonopah I was with a drunk rich boy” (8). Maria explains that she learned of her mother’s death in a letter written by her father. Alluding to detachment, Maria says that she deliberately avoids “read[ing] [the letter] unless [she is] drunk, which in [her] current situation is never” (9). Further, Maria claims that her extreme grief left her so detached from reality that she

can no longer say for certain what year her mother died – all she knows is that “after a while [she] had a bad time” (9). The death of her mother produces the initial force behind Maria’s detachment.

As the novel unfolds, mentions of Maria’s mother appear sporadically throughout the text, but after the abortion, mentions of her mother become more frequent. There are three chapters in a row following the abortion that mention Maria’s mother. Chapter 27 begins, “Silver Wells was with her again. She wanted to see her mother. She wanted to go back to the last day she had spent with her mother” (86). In Chapter 28, Carter urges Maria to visit a friend’s mother, to which Maria responds, “She’s not my mother” (89). In Chapter 29, when it becomes clear that Maria has suffered a botched abortion, a poignant final sentence closes the chapter: “[Maria] wanted to talk to her mother” (90). Reeling from a tragic abortion that deprived her of the child she wanted, Maria yearns for her mother.

Beyond thinking about her mother, Maria’s abortion causes her to think about her own fertility. In one scene, the novel alludes the possibility that Maria’s abortion has left her infertile, unable to become a mother ever again. As Maria gets her hair done, a woman walks in and greets the hairdresser. The nameless woman tells the hairdresser that she recently had an operation for “[p]elvic abscess[es]” which were “all through [her] tubes” (120). Pelvic abscesses are caused by the collection of “infected fluid in the pouch of Douglas, fallopian tube, ovary, or parametric tissue” – all of which are internal body parts associated with the female reproductive system (Khaliq, et.al). Recovering from a botched abortion that left her hemorrhaging for a handful of days, Maria has the startling suspicion that she, too, might be infertile. Close to a woman who has been touched by the risk of infertility, Maria tries to distract herself from the woman’s voice, deliberately putting her attention elsewhere: “[Maria] fixed her attention on the mounds of used

wrappers and damp towels and tried not to hear whatever it was the girl would say next. *The girl was a presentiment of something*” (Play 121, emphasis mine). For Maria, her path crossing with the unnamed girl is a premonition of what her future might hold: infertility and the loss of motherhood. Though the novel never reveals whether Maria has been left infertile or not, the threat of it causes Maria to detach, solidifying the relationship between maternity and Maria’s detachment.

Far from incidental, Maria’s detachment throughout the novel rewrites the sexist belief that women are incapable of rational detachment – a belief that finds its roots in Kant. German philosopher Immanuel Kant heavily influenced scholarship and thought in the fields of ethics and aesthetics. His philosophical inquiries into the sublime and aesthetic judgement have greatly impacted the way both terms are conceptualized and used today. Beyond aesthetics, Kant’s writing on ethics has earned itself an entire subcategory in the field of ethics. Generally speaking, Kantian ethics regards an action as morally good if the motive or intention behind said action is morally good (Shafer-Landau 171). Kantian ethics, with its prioritization of intent over consequence, views detachment as a precondition for reasoning and ethical decision making.

Kant excluded women as creatures capable of detachment, believing that women were ruled by feeling over reason, consequently casting reason as an exclusively male capacity and feeling as a female disposition. He wrote that women “do something only because it pleases them and the art [of moral education] consists in making only that please them which is good...I hardly believe that the fair sex is capable of principles” (Kant qtd in Mikkola, 90). Kant’s exclusion of women from the realm of rational figures has, unsurprisingly, been met with feminist critiques. In her essay about Kant and detachment, Marcia Baron cites three major criticisms of Kant which “all involv[e] the notion of detachment: that [Kant’s theory] requires us

to be detached from other persons...; that it requires us to have a sort of detachment from our own projects; that it requires detachment from feeling” (Baron 61). Didion’s characterization of Maria fractures Kant’s belief that women are incapable of detachment.

Yet, as Maria’s detachment pervades *Play*, Didion presents readers with a feminist rewriting of detachment: Maria does not detach in the name of reason and rationalization, but in the name of autonomy and protection. Cleo Mikki traces the presence of the “post wounded dissociative female archetype” in two novels from the last six years: Raven Leilani’s *Luster* (2020) and Ottessa Moshfegh’s 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (Mikki 2). In both novels, the women protagonists numb themselves to the pain of living. They “lie, cheat, and entertain masochistic relationships, doing so with a detachment that allows the cycle to repeat with minimal friction” (Mikki 4). The unnamed narrator in Moshfegh’s novel abuses prescribed narcotics in an attempt to sleep for an entire year following the death of her parents. In *Luster*, Edie, a “deeply emotional” 23-year-old Black woman, continually minimizes her own emotions for the sake of white people’s comfortability (Mikki 10). For the dissociative women protagonists of these fictions, Mikki proposes that “detachment offers a potential avenue for individual autonomy – the dissociative feminist chooses who and what may affect her, not the inverse” (Mikki 4). By choosing who and what may affect her, the dissociative female archetype character intentionally detaches from particularly harmful forces and experiences, consequently protecting herself. These women detach, not for reasoning and rationalization as Kant would have it, but for autonomy. Didion leans into this archetype of the dissociative or detached female character with the creation and characterization of Maria.

Didion’s novel begins where it ends: with Maria in a psychiatric facility. Though the rest of *Play* is focalized through a third-person narrator, the first three chapters of the novel are first

person accounts from three of the novel's four main characters: Maria, Helene, and Carter. The memorable opening line of Didion's novel conveys Maria's intentional detachment from preoccupations of the wider world. Maria states, "What makes Iago evil? some people ask. I never ask" (*Play* 3). Maria remains unconcerned with discerning the forces that make one evil – and she remains rather unconcerned with discerning or uncovering anything at all. While not necessarily acts of protection, Maria's initial declarations of detachment and disinterest at the start of the novel introduce a larger pattern of detachment that spans across it. Maria rejects Kant's conception of detachment as a precursor for reason when she passively declares "I am what I am. To look for 'reasons' is beside the point" (3). Maria's decision to "never ask" paired with her disdain for looking for "reasons" is a deliberate choice to be uninvolved, to remain detached from occurrences or questions that preoccupy others. Further, sitting in the psychiatric facility, Maria notes other forces, thoughts, and experiences she tries not to think about, creating what can only be described as a radical detachment from particular environments and experiences. Choosing "who and what can affect her" Maria says, "I try not to think of dead things and plumbing. I try not to hear the air conditioner in that bedroom in Encino. I try not to live in Silver Wells or in New York or with Carter. I try to live in the now and keep my eye on the hummingbird" (10). In order to move on with her current life, Maria radically detaches from her past.

Following Maria's revelation of pregnancy, her moments of detachment transform into specific acts of protection. Sitting in the car as she answers a series of questions Carter poses after he learns of her pregnancy, a removed Maria distantly wonders about the importance of this particular moment in the grand scheme of her life. Focalized through Maria, the scene is narrated as an act of detachment: "[Maria] paused. It came to her that in the scenario of her life this would

be what was called an obligatory scene, and she wondered with distant interest just how long the scene would play” (50). Detached from the chaos of the moment, Maria’s mind wanders, simultaneously offering insight into her modes of detachment and solidifying the importance of her pregnancy and eventual abortion to the novel. *Play* is, after all, a “scenario of [Maria’s] life.”

Soon after Maria agrees to the abortion, a peculiar pattern in the text emerges: Maria’s speech begins to end in dissociative speech tags such as “heard herself saying” or “heard herself telling.” Five key moments across the span of the novel contain this dissociative speech tag, and air of chaos and discomfort accompanies each instance. Thus, each time Maria “hears herself” signals a moment when Maria detaches from reality in order to protect herself. The first moment where Maria hears herself speaking occurs when she tells the parking lot attendant she is having a baby: “‘I’m having a baby’ she heard herself telling the parking-lot attendant” (63). Nine pages later, when Maria visits her daughter Kate in a medical facility, the speech tag reappears. As Maria arrives unannounced to visit her daughter, the nurse becomes agitated, telling Maria she should call before she visits due to Kate’s new medication. Upon hearing this, Maria becomes upset: “‘What new medication,’ Maria heard herself saying. ‘You keep talking about the new medication, I mean *what is it*’” (72, emphasis in original). The pattern occurs again when Maria sits in the car with the man accompanying her to the abortion (78), during a fight with her husband (93), and when a young hotel employee flirts with her, much to her dissatisfaction (173). In each of these five distressing moments, Maria speaks, but the speech tag makes it appear as though in that moment, Maria is not fully there. Instead, she remains detached from the distressing experience and environment, viewing her life from the outside. These moments of detachment provide insight into Maria’s characterization while also creating a

distinct literary aesthetic. Detachment is no longer contained within the character of Maria, but levels of detachment infiltrate into the novel's prose.

On the day of the abortion, Maria follows orders to meet a man in the parking lot of a Thrifitmart under a "big red T" one cannot help but associate with "termination" (76). From the parking lot, the unnamed man and Maria drive to Encino for the abortion. During the drive, with Maria behind the wheel, she and the man talk solely about Camaros and Cadillacs. Similar to her detached and removed state when she told Carter about her pregnancy, Maria looks at her life from an outside perspective:

In the past few minutes [the man] had significantly altered [Maria's] perception of reality: she saw now that she was not a woman on her way to have an abortion. She was a woman parking a Corvette outside a tract house while a man in white pants talked about buying a Camaro. There was no more to it than that. (79)

Though illustrative of detachment, this passage is also the first time the word "abortion" appears in the novel, and the only time "abortion" is explicitly used in connection to Maria. Other times, Maria's abortion makes its appearance under the guise of a metaphor (such as "humane operation") or by way of its emotional fallout. The only other time "abortion" appears in the text occurs in Chapter 43, when the novel muses on abortion accessibility: "[i]t seemed that it was a hard time for abortions in New York, there had been arrests, no one wanted to do it" (117). Thus, the only time the novel invokes the word "abortion" in relation to Maria occurs during a moment of detachment. Maria's detachment allows the novel to explicitly name the event anchoring its plot.

Maria's detachment reaches its pique during her abortion. The abortion scene is the novel's longest scene, running across five pages without any breaks – a peculiarity in a novel

like *Play* that favors quick chapters over long, drawn-out scenes. Upon entering into the bedroom for her abortion, Maria notices that newspapers cover the floor, making her think of her deceased mother's *American Red Cross Handbook*. With the image of the handbook in her mind Maria thinks "There, that was a good thing to think about" (80). Immediately, during the moment where her potential to be a mother for the second time is to be taken away from her, Maria thinks about her own mother, amplifying the maternal frames of the novel. Maria realizes that if she can think about those moments, if she can distract herself from what's happening, then "those were two minutes during which she was not entirely party to what was happening in this bedroom in Encino" (81). Detachment, even for two minutes at a time, offers Maria autonomy, an avenue for her to not be complicit in an abortion she does not want. During the procedure, Maria continues to think about her hometown, childhood, and mother. Eventually, Maria notices the wallpaper in the bedroom and imagines that the person who previously owned the house would have also liked maple furniture and had an affinity for "Audubon prints" (81). But as Maria strives to detach from her environment, she can't help but notice that the maple-wood table had been transformed into a "doctor's table" with "two hardbacked chairs with pillows" fitted as stirrups (82). As the reality of the environment sets in, all attempts of detachment are futile. Maria knows exactly where she is and what she is enduring.

Immediately following Maria's acute awareness of her environment, the doctor speaks. The "haggard" doctor's clinical and directive language dominates the remainder of the scene as he repeatedly imposes his opinions on the emotions (or lack thereof) Maria ought to be having – even in trivial matters of air-conditioning (82). The doctor, wearing a haunting rubber apron, asks Maria if the air conditioning is too high, saying, "[t]ell me if it's too cold. Tell me now because I won't be able to touch the air conditioner once I start" (82). Maria answers that no, it is

not too cold, but the doctor disregards her decision saying, “[n]o, it’s too cold. You don’t weigh enough, it’s too cold” (82). Once the abortion begins, the doctor’s voice silences Maria’s:

“This is just induced menstruation,” she could hear the doctor saying. “Nothing to have any emotional difficulties about, better not to think about it at all ... just a little local on the cervix, there, relax, Maria, I said *relax*” ... “Hear that scraping, Maria? The doctor said. “That should be the sound of music to you ... don’t scream, Maria, there are people next door ... I said don’t make any noise Maria, now I’ll tell you what’s going to happen, you’ll bleed a day or so ... and then a month, six weeks from now you’ll have a normal period, not this month, this month you just had it, it’s in that pail.” (82-84, emphasis in original)

The doctor’s forceful instruction to “not think about it at all” anticipates Didion’s critique of Second Wave Feminism in her essay “The Women’s Movement” wherein she writes, “no woman need have bad dreams after an abortion: she has only been told she should” (*White*, 116). Thus, the abortion scene marks an explicit moment where Didion’s fiction and non-fiction writings on abortion merge, almost seamlessly.

Despite the doctor’s domineering presence throughout the abortion scene, there remains one quick moment during the procedure focalized through Maria. As the doctor speaks, Maria tries to convince herself of the unimportance of the abortion – an interesting antithesis to Maria claiming that her confession of pregnancy to Carter was an “obligatory scene” in her life (50). As the doctor scrapes her uterus, Maria – still musing on the scenes of her life – thinks, “No moment more or less important than any other moment, all the same: the pain as the doctor scraped signified nothing beyond itself, no more constituted the pattern of her life than did the movie on

the television in the living room of this house in Encino” (82). Once again, Maria’s detachment allows her to feel a sense of control over her life, creating a path toward autonomy.

In one of the final chapters written in Maria’s own voice, she draws a striking comparison between herself and the abortionist. Finally drawing a clear connection between her modes of detachment and her claim to autonomy Maria says, “*Fuck it, I said to Helene. Fuck it, I said to them all, a radical surgeon of my own life. Never discuss. Cut. In that way I resemble the only man in Los Angeles County who does clean work*” (203, emphasis in original). Finally, Maria is in control, and yet the control is still ambivalent as Maria remains institutionalized in a psychiatric facility.

Conclusion: Reproductive Justice’s Reclamation of Ambivalence and Detachment

Rooted in Black Feminist thought, Reproductive Justice (RJ) blends reproductive rights and social justice to produce a versatile and inclusive framework for discussing reproductivity. In their book *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (2017), Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger set forth a comprehensive and thorough description of RJ’s origins and goals. At its core, RJ has three core tenets: “(1) the right *not* to have a child; (2) the right to *have* a child; and (3) the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments” (Ross & Solinger 9, italics and numbers in original). The pro-choice pro-life framework pits opposing perspectives on abortion against each other, requiring one to align themselves with one side – an all or nothing situation. RJ, acutely aware of the various experiences of reproductivity supersedes such rigidity, recognizing that the right to have a child *and* the right to not have a child, two opposing perspectives, coexist. Just by way of its definition, RJ “goes beyond the pro-choice / pro-life debate” (Ross & Solinger 9).

However, RJ's expansion of and recuperative framework for reproductive rights still centers around *rights*. But RJ has the potential to move beyond the legal sphere. RJ's correction of the pro-choice pro-life framework creates a useful, yet unexplored theoretical space in which feeling, specifically ambivalence and detachment, may be discussed. Such a theoretical space rectifies the minimization of emotion perpetrated by an overdetermined pro-choice pro-life framework. As a framework, RJ favors the language of "and" over "or." Under RJ one doesn't have to choose whether they are pro-choice *or* pro-life. Instead, RJ proposes that one has the right to not have a child *and* the right to have a child, and to feel however they may about exercising these rights. This linguistic shift creates ample room for complex emotions. By their very definition, ambivalence and detachment defy "or-ness." For instance, ambivalence refers to a feeling state that is comprised of opposing emotions. In *Play*, Maria does not want the baby *or* want the pregnancy to end, but instead, has moments where both desires occur simultaneously, accumulating to her ambivalence. Further, Maria's detachment is not positive *nor* negative but rather something she does to survive the scenarios forced upon her.

Play It As It Lays endures. Even a generation into the RJ debate and amidst navigating life in a post-*Dobbs* world a little over 50 years after *Play*'s publication, Didion's novel continues to alert us to the complex dimensions of abortion. As we find our footing in a new world with the loss of *Roe*, as we enter into another election cycle, and as we continue the fight for reproductive rights, we cannot allow ourselves to lose sight of all the Marias, nor can we disregard all the messy, complex emotions that accompany reproductivity. As we fight for reproductive freedom – once more – let us remain committed to the cause without sacrificing its emotional complexities. Let us be guided by ambivalence and detachment.

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