The Freeway Fix: Infrastructure, Affect, and the Politics and Aesthetics of Distance in Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays*

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Abstract This essay reconsiders the many scenes of freeway driving in Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1970) through the critical lens of infrastructure to argue that the novel finds in the built environment a model for its own distanced narrative style. The novel's engagements with everyday infrastructure like the freeway encourage us to imagine a personal "affective fix" operating alongside David Harvey's theory of the "spatial fix," which describes how large-scale mid-century infrastructure projects both manage and replicate capitalism's crisis tendencies. The fix that Maria gets while driving on the freeway is a dynamic process of performing radical self-reliance amidst society's connective and constraining structures. The text itself strives for a similar fix in its form, which can be said to be infrastructural in the way that it maintains its various levels of textual distance to enact a profound impersonality.

Keywords Affect, Automobility, Distance, Self-Reliance, Infrastructure.

Cited Names Joan Didion, David Harvey, Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Introduction

1 What can we learn about everyday infrastructure—freeways, pipes, electric grids, broadcast networks—from a novel, like Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays*, that is obsessed with it? In turn, what might this particular novel's obsession have to teach us about literature?

2 Critics of the "infrastructural turn" have focused on textual representations of infrastructure to theorize literary form alongside expansive systems and flows of capital, people, and meaning.[1] Patricia Yaeger has written that literature is uniquely positioned to interrogate how infrastructure operates because of the complex topographies that define the literary in the first place. But how might we read a resistance to this textual and textural richness as being nevertheless an infrastructural quality? This is exactly the kind of question that *Play It as It Lays* begs. Didion's novel appears to find in everyday infrastructure the aesthetic potential for its own cold and distant narrative style.

3 First published in 1970, *Play It as It Lays* offers a bleak vision of American life in the postwar period via a character study of a Hollywood actress undergoing a personality crisis. Over nearly ninety hyper-short and often fragmentary chapters, Didion relates the events leading up to Maria Wyeth's assistance (or failure to intervene) in the suicide of her friend BZ, a closeted gay film producer. While suspicious of the prosperity emblematized in its mid-century Southern Californian setting, the novel is neither an outright condemnation of bourgeois society nor a countercultural rejection of the system. Protagonist Maria makes her way through a life that fails to add up by practicing her own version of detached Hollywood cool that marks her as distant and even unstable in the eyes of her peers. She has a habit of repeating back to people what they say—"You think you'll buy a Camaro," or "this is a bad day for you" (79, 101)—an off-putting neutrality that leads her ex-husband Carter to claim that he should have predicted her involvement in BZ's death. Likewise, in her depictions of Maria's thoroughly modern milieu, Didion eschews colorful detail, instead portraying the Los Angeles metropolitan area as a stark wilderness where one has no choice but to rely on one's pluck and wits. The only joy Maria gets comes from the miles of asphalt that she navigates every day as an Angelina: the massive infrastructure project of the Southern California freeway.

4 *Play It as It Lays* sets itself apart from the hotbed political years during which it was written. In the novel, Didion foregoes any comment on the issues and social movements that defined the late 1960s. Moreover, she resists a clear-cut interpretation of Maria and her troubling circumstances. At the end of the story, Maria—"pronounced Mar-*eye*-ah" (4)—winds up in a psychiatric institution following BZ's death, and rather than integrate the novel's many short scenes into an account that either redeems or implicates her heroine, Didion lets them stand, unsettlingly, on their own. As at least one critic has

argued, Didion's deployment of the "Hemingway style" "renders the moral starvation of a society that has dispensed almost entirely with the freight of ethical intention" (Wolff 483). A more recent reappraisal in *The New Yorker* sees in Didion's terse, masculine, modernist prose a rejection of "the postwar idea that women writers were obliged to be either mini Virginia Woolfs, mincing abstractions from the parlor, or Shulamith Firestones, raging for liberation" (Heller). I argue that the style of *Play It as It Lays* is not merely a poetics of social ills nor can it be reduced to a self-distinguishing gesture. Rather, Didion's apparently aloof style can be understood as part of a dynamic process of engaging with and disengaging from one's circumstances, a process that the text means to model. In order to grasp this possibility in the levels of spatial and affective distance that the novel is intent on maintaining (between Maria and her peers, narrative and reader, Didion and her sociopolitical context) we have to examine the charged spaces that the text returns to again and again—namely, those of infrastructure.

5 Geographer David Harvey has argued that infrastructure can be thought of as part of a "spatial fix"—that is, as part of capitalism's strategy to resolve its inherent crisis tendencies of overaccumulation by opening new markets, tapping new labor sources, and so forth. For Harvey, the word "fix" in the term "spatial fix" has an equally useful meaning to that of an addict's "fix," and it is this added connotation that I want to focus on. The idea that infrastructure might supply temporary-yet-intensifying relief of a craving begs an interrogation of what other needs infrastructure satisfies, beyond consumer cravings for commodities and capitalism's need to perpetuate itself. Infrastructure, specifically automobile infrastructure, certainly supplies a "fix" for Didion's protagonist Maria. At the beginning of the novel, Maria has separated from her husband Carter, who has placed their young daughter, Kate, in an institution, against Maria's wishes. To cope, Maria spends hours each morning driving the freeways of the greater Los Angeles area, going wherever they lead her and rarely anywhere in particular. Although she has nowhere to be, she hurries through her morning routine as if she were a commuter, because, Didion tells us, "it was essential (to pause was to throw herself into unspeakable peril) that she be on the freeway by ten o'clock. Not somewhere on Hollywood Boulevard, not on her way to the freeway, but actually on the freeway. If she was not she lost the day's rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum" (15). This strict regimen that Maria holds herself to shares in the circular, compulsive logic of anxiety: Maria is neither headed anywhere nor consciously fleeing anything. Nevertheless, in just one month, she puts seven thousand miles on her Corvette.

6 It might seem that the freeway is simply what Maria's anxiety has latched onto. The novel is filled with characters seeking their next fix: gamblers, housewives

hooked on overprescribed barbiturates, bored adulterers, pill users, alcoholics, even psychiatrists, who appear in Maria's mind to be addicted in their own way to cause-and-effect explanations for their patients' problems. Somewhat more innocently, Maria has persistent cravings for Coca-Cola. However, in *Play It as It Lays*, infrastructure offers more than another fix for addictive personalities. The specific fix that infrastructure stands to offer Maria (but, as we shall see, Didion as well) is a way to keep pace with an existence that has been "precariously imposed."

7 In this essay, I argue that infrastructure emerges over the course of *Play It as It Lays* as a dynamic site where individuality gets reasserted amidst the social. The novel encourages us to imagine an "affective fix"—a combination of fixing oneself and getting one's fix—operating beside the "spatial fix" provided by the new, impersonal public spaces that proliferated in the postwar period. I begin by situating Harvey's notion of the "spatial fix" within other accounts of infrastructure to argue that capitalism's corrective interventions in the built environment draw subjects into a dynamic geography of constantly shifting personal crises and solutions. I then reconsider the many depictions of driving in Didion's novel as instances of a "freeway fix" that offers its protagonist a more durable (and exhilarating) fix within this turbulent environment than the other fixes available to her, namely games of chance and chemical sedation. Finally, I read the novel's form alongside its engagements with infrastructure to argue that, through its careful maintenance of various levels of textual distance, *Play It as It Lays* strives to become *infrastructural*, making the novel itself a formal enactment of the affective fix that Maria seeks throughout. Indeed, Didion's novel transforms the intense impersonality of infrastructure into something radically personal and, as such, helps us to think through what Dominic Boyer calls the "epistemic infrastructure" (235) that has brought us to the brink of ecological catastrophe.

Infrastructural Fixes

8 In his work on the geography of capital, David Harvey frequently examines how the contradictions inherent in capital accumulation have manifested in the production of space. As capitalism seeks to open up new markets and cheaper sources of labor, it resorts to ever-grander and now-global spatial strategies, which Harvey terms "spatial fixes." These fixes are not durable means of overcoming problems of accumulation and circulation; rather, they avert crises by expanding and restructuring the coordinates of capital flow, in the process replicating capitalism's self-destructive tendencies on a new scale. This dynamic is captured by the two distinct and opposed meanings of the word "fix" in "spatial fix." The first, "fixity," refers to the fixing in place of certain quantities of capital—in the form of machinery but also highways,

railways, airports, shipping ports, and other infrastructure projects—that allow other quantities to circulate freely. The other meaning of "fix" is "solution," as in a fix to the dilemma of having later to overcome that same fixity in order to enable even faster and more abstract circulation. With this second meaning, Harvey also means to invoke an addict's "fix,"

> in which it is the burning desire to relieve a chronic or pervasive problem that is the focus of meaning. Once the 'fix' is found or achieved then the problem is resolved and the desire evaporates. But, as in the case of the drug addict, it is implied that the resolution is temporary rather than permanent, since the craving soon returns. ("Globalization and the 'Spatial Fix'" 24)

9 For Harvey, the government intervention and technological progress characteristic of the postwar period are crucial forces in the development of this chronic need for fixes. Following World War II, governments in the West pursued large-scale renewal projects that fixed massive amounts of capital in the built environment. In the United States, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 led to the creation of the American Interstate Highway System, the largest infrastructure project in American history, which supported the mass suburbanization that helped reabsorb surpluses of previously city-bound labor and capital. Subsequent fixes further increased the pressure on capital "[to shift] rapidly (and often with considerable volatility) from one location to another," all while requiring that "massive amounts of capital and labor [be] invested in the sorts of immobile fixed capital we see in airports, commercial centers, office complexes, highways, suburbs, container terminals, and the like" ("Globalization and the 'Spatial Fix'" 28). The globally intertwined infrastructural situation that we find ourselves in in the present results from this slew of fixes undertaken to reschedule capitalism's self-destruction indefinitely; meanwhile, the exponential demand for mobility makes the neoliberal state reluctant to commit to more fixity. The much-debated trillion-dollar infrastructure bill passed in November 2021, which has been held up as a central achievement of Joe Biden's first-year agenda as president, is intended to address the persistent underfunding of decades-old infrastructure (while also ostensibly setting aside money for modernizing carbon infrastructure, which is necessary to avert climate catastrophe). The controversy surrounding its legislation illustrates infrastructure's slippery status as capital. Infrastructure in its very nature is "as yet incompletely commodified" (Robbins 26): Despite being profitable in the sense of allowing other forms of capital to circulate, infrastructure itself is rarely profitable to construct.

10 This present, contradictory situation is also maintained by a deep-seated ideology propagated by infrastructure itself. According to Dominic Boyer, infrastructure not only organizes our built environment; it also organizes how we think of the built environment. By "reinforcing the naturalness and inevitability of carbon infrastructure," Boyer argues, postwar infrastructural networks

of electrification and transport serve to legitimize and maintain the status quo—an operation Boyer terms "epistemic infrastructure" (235-36). Lauren Berlant has expressed similar misgivings about infrastructure's epistemic force, writing that "in the situation tragedy of the present, . . . [m]id-twentieth century forms of expansive world building toward the good life have little or unreliable traction" (409). Indeed, the version of the "good life" that first-world infrastructure both enables and represents cannot be separated from the late-capitalist world system that requires such networks in the first place. To expand existing forms of infrastructure even toward utopian ends is ultimately to extend capitalistic, petrocultural logic. In concrete terms, an infrastructure project like the interstate might come to serve the common good only if it were not entangled with problems of automobility, accessibility, and fossil fuel extraction—in other words, if it were nothing like a highway network at all.

11 A concept like epistemic infrastructure demonstrates how the fixes that infrastructure provides capitalism in its expansion and self-preservation also operate on the level of ideology and perhaps even imagination and affect. The ideological and affective underpinnings of infrastructure become especially apparent when considering the infrastructural networks of mass media. Fredric Jameson and other Marxist scholars have described mass media's manifestation of "social and political anxieties and fantasies which must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text in order subsequently to be 'managed' or repressed" (Jameson 141). Because of the unique experiential dimensions of driving a car, roads are a compelling example for thinking about this mediatic function of infrastructure. In fact, early planners of the Interstate Highway System imagined superhighway driving as being an activity akin to watching television: "The driving experience can now be described as being a sequence played to the eyes of a captive, somewhat fearful, but partially inattentive audience, whose vision is filtered and directed forward," states one study published in 1964 by urbanists at MIT (Appleyard et al. 5). Similarly, pop media theorist Marshall McLuhan also likened modern, automobile infrastructure to television, both of which he viewed as "cooling" media that would rein in the "hotter" cultural forces that predominated in the years leading up to World War II.[2] Here, McLuhan's notoriously clunky hot-cool schema helps illuminate the corrective ideological function of both media and infrastructure alike: The "hot" experience of power and speed that one might get behind the wheel offers a potent mirage within a rigid system of ramps and exits that, through a combination of political and engineering decisions, always dictates where you can go and when.

12 To an extent, *Play It as It Lays* addresses these illusions at the heart of the mid-twentieth-century "good life." The freeway, the ultimate infrastructural symbol

of postwar prosperity, feeds Maria promises of escape that remain all too persuasive even after being revealed to be false. Maria's affective attachment to the freeway might be said to result from epistemic infrastructure, and as we will see, Didion's own investment in the freeway as a technology of modern-day individualism carries its own ideological freight. But, I argue, the novel does more than unmask one ideology only to fall prey to another. Reading *Play It as It Lays* alongside Harvey's theory of the spatial fix illuminates a different commitment to infrastructure: Infrastructure in Didion's novel becomes a propulsive site where one can fix oneself and get one's fix at the same time. Didion's vision of infrastructure in *Play It as It Lays* is far from utopian, nor does it advocate for acquiescence to social (infra)structures that individuals are powerless to overcome. Rather, in a society on the verge of crisis, Didion turns to the built environment for a model of radical and dynamic impersonality; a form of affective and spatial distancing necessary to survive, and thrive, in a perilous world.

The Secular Communion of the Freeway: The Political is Personal

13 Throughout *Play It as It Lays*, Didion pays special attention to the infrastructures that monumentalize American prosperity: the freeways of Southern California; the Hoover Dam; the air-conditioning that makes the desert habitable; and even more primitive technologies like indoor plumbing. A good deal has been written about automobility in *Play It as It Lays* (see Seiler; Carver; and Alworth), and while the freeway is the most prominent infrastructural site in the text, I want to insist that viewing the many scenes of driving through a wider lens of infrastructure—instead of merely thinking of the novel as a road narrative—gets us closer to the novel's concerns. Maria's version of the road isn't *open*: it is a closed circuit that brings her from and back to familiar locations, all within the same metropolitan area. The freeway in *Play It as It Lays* shares in "the inherent boringness of infrastructure" (Rubenstein et al. 576), and the mechanics of driving that so thrill Maria—merging, exiting, changing lanes—do so because of how rote they have become. Didion's pessimism about life in the sixties notwithstanding, infrastructure in *Play It as It Lays* is never a simple stand-in for what is "structurally" wrong with American society. Didion is interested in the dysfunction of a society whose systems, institutions, and infrastructures function as intended, and it is within those functional systems that she finds the potential for a profound personal fix.

14 A few years before the publication of *Play It as It Lays*, Didion had likened the late 1960s to the end-times in her famous essay "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." Written about her time among the hippies in San Francisco in the spring of 1967, in the months leading up to the Summer of Love, the essay opens with a sweeping indictment of American life. The hippies, in Didion's

analysis, were "children who were never taught and would never now learn the games that had held the society together" (84). "Maybe we had stopped believing in the rules ourselves," she adds later (123). This breakdown was most evident in the gulf between national fortune and individual fulfillment. Despite the "brave hopes" and "national promise" of a steady stock market and high GDP, American society was headed toward catastrophe: "All that seemed clear was that at some point we had aborted ourselves and butchered the job" (84-85).

15 Didion's diagnosis of the sixties in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" foreshadows the political concerns that also subtly underpin *Play It as It Lays*. In the novel, the essay's metaphorical references to games and abortions become literalized as events in Maria's life. In the opening chapter, Maria addresses the reader in the first-person mode from within the psychiatric institution, where she has been consigned. She tells us that she spends her days answering doctors' questions, "trying again to be an agreeable player of the game" (4). Of course, what she's really doing is playing along, providing just enough information so that she might one day be released and reunited with her young daughter Kate, who has also been institutionalized for reasons that are never made quite clear. The significance of Maria's self-description as an "agreeable player of the game" becomes evident toward the end of the novel, in the events immediately preceding the book's nonchronological introduction. Right before he overdoses on Seconal, BZ tells Maria, "You're still playing . . . Someday you'll wake up and you just won't feel like playing anymore" (212). Both Maria and BZ belong to that generation, identified in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," that "had stopped believing in the rules" ("Slouching" 123). Each has come to realize in their own way that the ideal of the "good life" does not make them happy. But whereas BZ quits the "game" (or *rat-race*, or *daily-grind*, or life under late capitalism), Maria never stops "playing." In fact, she becomes a different kind of player, approaching the social game with the sang-froid of a seasoned craps player. Maria divests from her emotional attachment by rejecting cause-and-effect explanation. Both the psychiatrists in the institution and Maria's friends and family outside all want to know *why* BZ killed himself, *why* Maria didn't stop him, and ultimately how such an act is possible among wealthy people in sunny California. But Maria prefers facts, and facts, she implies, are isolated events like dice rolls: No matter how much compulsive gamblers, like her deceased father, want to believe that the next roll has to "be better than what went out on the last" (5), each is independent of the other. When we first encounter her in the institution, Maria is not interested in recouping the bad things that have happened to her into any kind of explanation; instead, she has come around to *playing the odds as they lay*.

16 Most of the novel is told in third-person mode, as if Didion were taking over for Maria in establishing the "facts." One crucial fact is Maria's botched abortion. Since the abortion was performed illegally, Maria is left with few avenues for redressing her physical pain and emotional distress. Although *Play It as It Lays* is deliberately not a second-wave feminist novel, as I discuss below, the topic of abortion is an important one for Didion, who sees in abortion legislation a fundamental problem of personal liberty. In "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," she describes a society doomed to "butcher" itself amidst its arbitrary rules about what it means to prosper. By contrast, in *Play It as It Lays*, Didion imagines an emancipatory process of self-abortion. In a late chapter, told again in the first-person from inside the asylum, Maria talks about how annoyed she is with Carter and Helene, BZ's widow, paying her visits only to pry for more details as to why she let BZ kill himself. "Fuck it, I said to them all, a radical surgeon of my own life," Maria recalls. "Never discuss. Cut. In that way I resemble the only man in Los Angeles County who does clean work" (203). This idea of becoming a radical surgeon of one's own life points to a desire for absolute autonomy, a shedding of all reliance on others, who are fated to "butcher the job." As I will show in the remainder of this section, this self-reliance is exactly what Maria achieves aboard the freeway.

17 Both *playing it as it lays* and the fantasy of self-abortion are acts of abstracting oneself from society's mores and laws. Maria is constrained by the gender trappings of her time—and, unfortunately, of ours. She is relegated to dull film roles because of her age, while her eventual ex-husband Carter is set to attain auteur status in middle age; her only resources for dealing with her pregnancy are the pushy Carter, a backroom abortionist, and other doctors who refuse to take her pain seriously; and her way of *playing it cool* in Hollywood marks her in the eyes of others as frigid and unstable. But the novel puts the lie to any notion that Maria is the victim of a system. In fact, she does manage to excise herself from her surroundings, and not just by adopting an aggressive indifference to the "game." Throughout the novel, Maria exercises surprising and complex forms of agency—from behind the wheel.

18 The freeway offers Maria a space in which to be radically self-reliant in the Emersonian sense, and as she drives around the Los Angeles area, she learns to withdraw from society spiritually if not physically. When the third-person narrative begins, Maria is fully enthralled in her freeway fix. Separated from both Carter and Kate, she has taken to driving the freeway every morning, and this peculiar ritual is the first "fact" Didion gives us in the account of the events leading up to BZ's death. Unlike the other motorists hitting the freeway in the morning, Maria has nowhere to be. The gratification she gets by driving the freeway comes not from getting somewhere in particular but from going wherever it leads. "She drove it as a riverman runs a river, every day more

attuned to its currents, its deceptions, and just as a riverman feels the pull of the rapids in the lull between sleeping and waking, so Maria lay at night in the still of Beverly Hills and saw the great signs soar overhead at seventy miles an hour, *Normandie 1/4 Vermont 3/4 Harbor Fwy 1*" (16). She is particularly attracted to the dangerous lane maneuver required to change from the Hollywood branch to the Harbor and returns to it again and again on her drives. "On the afternoon she finally did it without once braking or once losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly," Didion writes (16). A move that countless drivers execute flawlessly every day is for Maria an exhilarating, life-threatening event. At the wheel of her private automobile—"the organism which absorbed all her reflexes, all her attention" (17)—Maria holds her own fate in her hands. While it is other motorists who pose the greatest danger to her, they hardly register in her awareness, traffic having become a force like a current rather than the sum of discrete actions by thousands of other individuals.

19 With its riverlike wildness, the freeway exists apart from the rest of the city as a kind of post–Manifest Destiny natural frontier, situated not at the edges of the continent but running through it. Its ecology of lanes, interchanges, and signifiers enchants because of how precisely unenchanting it is meant to be. The names and numbers printed on the great signs shake off their semantic meaning in Maria's dreams, and the destinations and distances that they signify are mere "facts" that do not add up to any greater truth. Meanwhile, the constant risk of injury or death becomes a test of one's mettle in a world that has been made all too safe. Like any pastoral wilderness, the space of the freeway in *Play It as It Lays* is constantly under threat. Even in her car, Maria cannot outrun the expectations put on her as an actress, and she keeps a hardboiled egg on the passenger seat, which she shells and eats at seventy miles an hour: "Crack it on the steering wheel, never mind salt, salt bloats, no matter what happened she remembered her body" (17). One day, she drives all the way to Baker, within the range of the radio stations broadcasting from Las Vegas, where Carter is making a movie, and she is thrown into a dilemma over whether or not to call him from a payphone. Although she tells herself it is a coincidence, the freeway has brought her closer to the source of her woe. "[T]o clear her head of Carter and what Carter would say" (32), she swallows two tablets of the headache medicine Fiorinal and heads back to L.A. She finds the freeway dismal: "the traffic was heavy and the hot wind blew sand through the windows and the radio got on her nerves and after that Maria did not go back to the freeway except as a way of getting somewhere" (33). The sudden corruption of the freeway reveals the problem that was there all along: the intrusion of other people into Maria's own private automobile Eden.

20 Despite being thoroughly infiltrated by society's trappings, the space of the freeway continues to hold empowering potential for Maria, who eventually cultivates an imaginative relationship to the freeway. As I will describe in the next section, Maria starts to fantasize about driving right when other fixes come up short, the roadways in her head more idyllic, closer to what she wants the road to be. Ann Brigham has observed how female-centered road narratives of the Cold War reflect the growing awareness in the sixties and seventies that the "personal is political." In these post-Friedan narratives, "there is a textual ambivalence about the road, which materializes when a character has a revelatory experience" about the forms of power that limit their lives (112), usually following a moment when domesticity has pursued them out onto the "open road." But another way of thinking through Brigham's claims about the personal being political is to think of the collapse between public and private spheres as an occasion for radical individuality. Unlike other road narratives, especially those in the tradition of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), *Play It as It Lays* does not offer a vision of merry sociality out on the road; in fact, it is free of any redeeming vision of human sociality at all, as David Alworth observes. The space of the road in *Play It as It Lays* "provides an opportunity to be antisocial," and "[p]art of Didion's ambition, in painting such a bleak picture of late-1960s Hollywood, is to depict a sort of autophilia, to envisage a compensatory, even redemptive, love between one woman and her car" (Alworth 75).

21 Indeed, Didion's politics in *Play It as It Lays* are profoundly, defiantly personal. Albeit a kind of social critique, the novel is reluctant to identify its main character with any political group. Didion herself was a skeptic of the Women's Movement, writing in the July 30, 1972, issue of *The New York Times* that Second Wave Feminism was "Maoist" and "Stalinist" in its insistence that middle-class women "play the proletariat" ("Why I Write" 1). Didion's political views earned her harsh criticism from peers, who likewise identified an aesthetics of self-interestedness and quietism in the face of injustice in Didion's fiction. Barbara Grizzutti Harrison accused Didion of being a reactionary "who lives somewhere in Ayn Rand country" and detected a disturbing lack of empathy in Didion's penchant for disconnected narratives and "aimless revelation." "To pretend to carry no mental baggage at all makes one a voyeur at the party, a detached onlooker at the execution," she wrote (online). Today, Didion's readiness to distance herself from political affiliation and condemnation alike might be understood as a form of privilege rather than as a lack of empathy, which remains a problem only insofar as we insist on reading a novel like *Play It as It Lays* as feminist or anti-capitalist, which it is decidedly not (Didion passed away in December 2021, although many writers have been reappraising her complex body of work, especially her nonfiction, since well before her

death). To better understand the novel's political project, we need to approach it as a text that attempts to clear out that supposed "mental baggage" and not necessarily as a text that has as its origins an already-assumed pose of detachment.

22 For Didion, power derives from a practice of self-reliance, of being able to move about and think for one's own, and modern superhighway infrastructure offers a far more meaningful empowerment than identification with an underclass. In an essay published in *Esquire* in 1976, Didion calls driving on the freeway "the only secular communion Los Angeles has" ("The Diamond Lane Slowdown" 36). In the essay, Didion distinguishes between those "commuters" who just use the freeway and the "participants" who experience it. "Actual participation requires a total surrender, a concentration so intense as to seem a kind of narcosis, a rapture-of-the-freeway," she writes. "The mind goes clean. The rhythm takes over" (36). As an example, she points to a particularly difficult exit off the Santa Monica Freeway, which requires crossing two very dicey lanes and effectively entrusting your life to your own ability to find your way through the swirling mass of drivers. "The moment is dangerous," Didion writes, before adding, in a turn of phrase that aligns her unmistakably with Maria: "The exhilaration is in doing it" (36). For Didion, as for Maria, the freeway is a site of struggle for personal liberty. That this struggle takes place in a space produced through public policy and government investment is of no consequence. Architect Reyner Banham, a contemporary of Didion's, described driving on the Los Angeles freeway as a "willing acquiescence in an incredibly demanding man/machine system" that functions thanks to citizens' "approved mixture of enlightened self-interest and public spirit" (199). Cultural critic Cotton Seiler reads Didion's moment of freeway rapture through the lens of this idealized American liberal subject, which, he argues, gets increasingly molded by postwar institutions, like the freeway, that deliberately make possible "the symbolic and spectacular performance of individual will and choice . . . [through] practices that are unlikely to transform established arrangements of power" (131). Seiler argues that Didion's representations of rapturous driving, in both her fiction and nonfiction, are indicative of an ideal of self-abstraction prominent in what Christopher Newfield terms the "Emerson effect" in the discourse of twentieth-century liberalism. "[T]he great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude," Emerson wrote (9-10). In the second half of the twentieth century, this intense withdrawal from the public in the midst of the public becomes a way of maintaining an illusion of liberty despite a growing awareness of one's entanglements with others. In other words, self-reliance becomes the perception of "freedom as an uncontrollable system's flexibility" (Newfield qtd. in Seiler 141).

23 It is clear that Didion sees the freeway as a system that can be repurposed like this. Whether the freeway is "flexible" for others is irrelevant, and it is telling that other motorists figure in her literary engagements with the freeway only as hypothetical "commuters" and "users." Reconsidering Didion's secular communion of the freeway as an affective fix, we can see how highway infrastructure serves two fixing functions for her: first, to fix herself as a distinct, autonomous individual in a flow of other individuals, while secondly providing a narcotic, self-annihilating "fix" in the form of a "total surrender" to the collective, emergent rhythms of a system that exceeds individual comprehension. At the same time, we might side with Seiler and say that this affective fix is part of an illusory performance of individualism that the freeway not only provides for but encourages as part of its corrective ideological function, its epistemic infrastructure. The space of the freeway reabsorbs surplus affect—"hotness," as McLuhan called it—before it becomes disruptive. While such criticisms get at crucial aspects of Didion's project, they do not quite account for the complex operations of *Play It as It Lays*, which, as I will show in the remainder of this essay, strives to be *infrastructural*.

"White Space. Empty Space.": Literary Infrastructure and Infrastructural Literature

24 The "secular communion of the freeway" explored above provides a compelling way for thinking about Didion's craft. The ability to enter dangerous situations, and safely extract herself from them, also describes Didion's journalistic methodology and the New Journalism more broadly. As Louis Menand has observed, Didion "gave readers the sense that she was putting herself at risk by reporting" the story that became "Slouching Towards Bethlehem"—"that she might get sucked into the Haight abyss and become a lost soul, too" (Menand online). The many scenes of freeway driving throughout *Play It as It Lays*, more of which will be discussed below, encourage us to negotiate the rapid succession of short, disjointed chapters the way a driver negotiates perilous traffic, jarring lane changes, and confounding interchanges aboard the freeway. Furthermore, Didion's engagements with other infrastructures outside of the freeway suggest a fascination with an infrastructural aesthetics that comes to be reflected in the novel's form.

25 In *Play It as It Lays*, Didion tells Maria's story in a series of fragments and scenes, and the more the story progresses, the more Didion and Maria come to resemble one another in their commitment to disjointed "facts," even as author and protagonist diverge in key ways, such as in their ability to be self-reliant. In the second half of the novel, the action jumps regularly between L.A., Las Vegas, and the desert in between, with Maria's reason for going from one place to the other unexplained. Much about her character is left to

the reader to infer, the inferences not always positive: for example, we have no evidence that Maria is not a *bad* actress, despite the temptation to read into her character a tragedy of being misunderstood. This elusiveness of the novel's topography is what makes it an auspicious case study for tackling the problems motivating the "infrastructural turn" in the humanities. Patricia Yaeger sees a number of theoretically rich overlaps between literature and infrastructure: "The intertwining of codes; the habit of overdetermination; the multiple mapping that accompanies condensation and displacement; the layering that comes with the use of compound plots, points of view, tonality, atmosphere, and meter; and the dense range of figurative speech" (21). In the case of *Play It as It Lays*, I would qualify Yaeger's claim to insist that Didion's novel strategically deploys these various *infra* literary spaces to affect a kind of blank, infrastructural impersonality. Despite its protagonist's frequently flat affect, the novel itself is not stylistically "flat" in the way that postmodern fiction is sometimes said to be, as when writers, in one critic's words, "withdraw into a kind of shell-shocked, blasé, or exhausted silence and . . . bow down before the overwhelming sense of how vast, intractable, and outside any individual or even collective control everything is" (Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* 350). Rather, representations of infrastructure in *Play It as It Lays* are closer to those of earlier modernist literature, in which, as another scholar has argued, "public utilities are often figures for a desired political minimalism" (Robbins 31). And yet, as we have seen, *Play It as It Lays* seeks out those moments of bold, individual action that are still possible within "vast, intractable" systems, and, as I will go on to show, the novel's distinct form can be understood as a similar act. Indeed, *Play It as It Lays* rebukes what some have called "depth hermeneutics" (Love 375) in the way that it functions as a kind of infrastructure that manages, remediates, and harnesses meaning and affect. Instead of dwelling in deep significance or plumbing psychic depths, Didion relegates events and emotions to nonnarrative space in pursuit of a powerful, individual fix.

26 Didion wrote that she began *Play It as It Lays* with no ideas about its plot or characters, only an image in mind of "white space. Empty space" ("Why I Write"). From there, she set out "to write a novel so elliptical and fast that it would be over before you noticed it, a novel so fast that it would scarcely exist on the page at all" ("Why I Write"). To an extent, Didion's statement invites readers to reconstruct what exists off the page, the chapters standing as glimpses into a world of relations that is the real subject of the novel. But Didion goes on to state that her intention was to write "a 'white' book to which the reader would have to bring his or her own bad dreams" ("Why I Write"). With this oblique analogy to a Rorschach test, Didion makes clear that she meant to discourage readers from approaching the text convinced that she

had suppressed and ironized the most important information. More pointedly, this blankness Didion aspired to is not at odds with the fact that the majority of the action in the published text would be related through the novel's central character, Maria. Maria is hardly an everywoman in whom readers might see something of themselves, and Didion's tightlippedness around many of the specifics of Maria's life actively interposes the textual distance that ultimately turns *Play It as It Lays* into a "'white' book." More than a formalization of Maria's distanced demeanor, the white empty space of the novel describes the poetics of the affective fix that both Didion and her heroine derive from infrastructure, in which "[t]he mind goes clean. The rhythm takes over" ("Diamond Lane Slowdown" 36).

27 Throughout the novel, Maria has plenty of fixes at her disposal, none of which prove as durable as those she procures for herself. Nothing in this milieu is to be taken too seriously, not even the institutionalization of one's daughter, and the emotional control necessary to succeed in Hollywood can be chemically induced when the posture of cool is not enough. Over the course of *Play It as It Lays*, Didion name-checks Seconal (which kills BZ), Nembutal, Dexedrine, Edrisal, Darvon, Fiorinal, Librium, and Sodium Pentothal, as well as a number of unbranded substances like methylphenidate hydrochloride, aspirin, and marijuana. Drugs crop up everywhere except where they would be most useful, such as in the abortion scene, which forms a turning point. At Carter's insistence, Maria makes an appointment with a doctor in Encino who performs abortions illegally (the novel being set in the pre-Roe sixties). As he is preparing Maria for the procedure, the doctor tells her that it is best not to think about what is happening because that only makes the pain worse. He opts only to use a little local anesthetic. "[A]naesthetics are where we run into trouble," he tells her before commanding her to "*relax*" (82). Here, chemical sedation gets cast aside. The doctor, a figure of authority and a pharmaceutical gatekeeper, implies that physical sensation can be managed through emotional control—i.e. relax now or you will only make it worse for yourself. Maria does not exactly follow his instruction. Although she manages to "relax" enough to undergo the procedure, she does so by thinking about the pain. In her mind, what is being done to her is a series of discrete events, more facts that are prevented from adding up to something greater: "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 television in the living room of this house in Encino" (82). Mentally breaking up the steps of the procedure, in the way she thinks of dice rolls at the craps table, she recedes into a dissociated intellectual space.

28 During the abortion, the doctor admonishes Maria more than once not to scream: "I said don't make any noise, Maria" (83). Like Maria herself, Didion

also leaves Maria's body behind on the table to react on its own, refraining from reintroducing into the narrative the details of the physical pain Maria experiences. Those details get consigned to the narrative's *infra* space, present and absent at the same time and *signifying nothing beyond themselves*. This active shedding of signification, which is the task of the astute gambler, is also already present in the very workings of infrastructure—in fact, I would say that that quality defines infrastructure. Didion resists ascribing traditional psychological depth to Maria, and often what lies in the pockets of her protagonist's psychic infrastructure is infrastructure itself. After the abortion, Maria starts having nightmares about the pipes in her house stopping up with "hacked pieces of human flesh" (97). Whereas the specific fear of body parts subsides, the mere thought of pipes becomes unbearable, as if the "unspeakable peril, in the everyday" (100) were circulating all around her like water. She flees her house in Beverly Hills for an apartment on Fountain Avenue, and when Carter calls to ask why she has moved, she allows herself to be distracted by a joint and a news report about a house on the verge of sliding into the Tujunga Wash. She hangs up the phone and continues to watch TV, where news about the landslide is followed by a report of a small earthquake centered near Joshua Tree and an interview with a preacher who predicts that the earthquake is the beginning of the end of the world. "The notion of general devastation had for Maria a certain sedative effect . . ., suggested an instant in which all anxieties would be abruptly gratified," Didion writes (104). And indeed, by the end of the news report, Maria feels calm. However, the next morning, "when the shower seemed slow to drain she threw up in the toilet, and after she had stopped trembling packed the few things she had brought to Fountain Avenue and, in the driving rain, drove back to the house in Beverly Hills. There would be plumbing anywhere she went" (104).

29 The various forms of sedation at play in the passage cited here—marijuana, television, even "general devastation"—are temporary fixes powerless against the peril that Maria feels is pursuing her in the form of sewer infrastructure. Pipes and sewers manage human waste, and in performing this function in *infra* spaces, such as inside walls and under the streets, they manage our feelings about waste, too. To be disturbed by sewers is to be disturbed by the convenience they offer by design. Kate Marshall has argued that the motif of blocked pipes in literary fiction tends to "suggest a nightmarish quality to functioning communication, but their inverse, unblocked flows and unbounded connectivities, often appear threatening as well, as they too reveal the infrastructural workings of communication" (105). While I find Marshall's method persuasive—reading the eruption of infrastructure in literature as moments of textual self-reflexivity—I believe that the "always-on" (Marshall 105) property of sewers in *Play It as It Lays* indicates more than an anxiety

about the novel form's status in the modern media ecology. The nightmarish quality of this omnipresent infrastructure stems from the impersonality with which it steadily executes its purpose. In many ways, this is also what Didion's novel seeks to do. As we will see below, Maria's fear of pipes temporarily turns into awe toward the end of the novel, when she visits the Hoover Dam and finds there the ultimate model for being in the world.

30 None of the forms of narcosis that Maria undergoes over the course of the novel approach the narcotic rapture of the freeway, and automobile infrastructure returns in the narrative just as other fixes fail, even sometimes in place of other therapies. Maria begins seeing a hypnotist, who, during one of their sessions, attempts to get a hypnotized Maria to recall when her mother bathed her as a baby. But Maria only regresses as far as a moment in the not-too-distant past when she was driving on Sunset Boulevard. Not long after the episode with the hypnotist, Maria has a one-night-stand with an actor, whose Ferrari she steals and drives not toward her home in Beverly Hills "but toward the Valley, and the freeway" (153). She drives until dawn, into the desert of Nevada, with no destination in mind, just as she does at the beginning of the novel. She is eventually stopped for speeding, and the highway patrol discovers that the Ferrari has been reported stolen. Maria's agent flies out in a jet to do damage control, and on the flight home to L.A., he tells her, "I mean there's something in your behavior, Maria, I would almost go so far as to call it . . . Almost go so far as to call it a very self-destructive personality structure" (156). Maria prepares a retort but instead just falls asleep. Didion's mistrust of deep psychological meanings is on full parodic display in these sequences. The agent's armchair analysis touches on a truth about Maria—that she is addicted to the feeling of self-annihilation that she gets while driving—but what he fails to lay hold of is the full workings of Maria's affective fix, the way in which temporary self-annihilation is actually a means to a radical reassertion of the self.

31 What Maria soon comes to understand is that the fix she gets on the freeway is not limited to the physical space of the infrastructure. The affective management she performs behind the wheel can be self-induced, off the road, and here we come to see both how the freeway is a training ground for radical self-reliance and how its affective fix can be translated to other, imaginative forms. After witnessing a violent row between BZ and Helene, Maria tries to block out the memory by imagining "a needle dripping sodium pentothal into her arm." "When that failed she imagined herself driving, conceived audacious lane changes, strategic shifts of gear, the Hollywood to the San Bernardino and straight on out, past Barstow, past Baker, driving straight on into the hard white empty core of the world. She slept and did not dream" (162). This scene of Maria's "audacious" driving—happening entirely in her head—displaces what Maria has seen and is trying to forget: the possibility that BZ assaulted

Helene the night before when they got back to the house. Maria is not actually on the freeway: her moves are not improvised in response to real dangers (although it could be said that, by being in the same house as the possible abuser BZ, she is at risk), but rather are cognitive "changes" and "shifts." The nightmarish out-of-sight-out-of-mind quality that earlier defined plumbing meets its inverse in Maria's fantasizing of the freeway—an out-in-the-open infrastructure that becomes a private means of keeping unpleasant truths out of mind, and thus out of sight.

32 The imagined relationship to the freeway that Maria comes to cultivate in the final third of the novel offers a much more durable fix than the one she pursues on the freeway in the novel's opening chapters. At last, Maria has for herself a freeway that leads directly to "the hard white empty core of the world" (*Play* 162). This sublime blank mental landscape, more potent than Sodium Pentothal, resembles what Jean Baudrillard called "astral America": a vanishing point of signification present in, among other places, "the America of empty, absolute freedom of the freeways" and "the marvelously affectless succession of signs, images, faces, and ritual acts on the road" (50). "Astral America" starts to rephrase in aesthetic terms the sociopolitical dynamics of Emersonian self-abstraction discussed above, and the exhilaration that *Play It as It Lays* locates in the freeway once again becomes inseparable from a political project of distancing the self from society. Historian Eric Avila has tracked a trend in mid-century photographic and visual engagements with the freeway, such as those of Ansel Adams, in which highway structures like cloverleaves and overpasses get depicted from a "soaring angle, unhinged from the landscape of daily life, divorced from the social context of homes, streets, markets, sidewalks, pedestrians and even cars" (135), a point-of-view that Avila juxtaposes with the on-the-ground perspective adopted by Chicano artists and other artists of color from the barrio of East Los Angeles, which was carved up by freeway construction in the 1950s and 1960s. Like those photographers and painters who assume the top-down, planners' perspective, Didion too revels in the impersonality of the infrastructure she portrays throughout *Play It as It Lays*, seeing in it the possibility for radical self-abstraction. In this context, the "whiteness" of Didion's "'white' book" takes on an additionally complex racial connotation.

33 However, I do want to put forward the possibility that *Play It as It Lays* sees its political-aesthetic project to be more generous than is suggested either by Maria's solipsistic retreat to her imaginary freeway or by these very important criticisms of privilege. Indeed, toward the end, the novel offers another infrastructure project that it asks to be compared against: the Hoover Dam. While in Las Vegas, Maria takes a tour of the dam, the mother of all infrastructure projects, which she feels nearly compelled to do:

> She began to feel the pressure of the Hoover Dam there on the desert, began to feel the pressure and pull of the water. When the pressure got great enough she drove out there. All that day she felt the power surging through her own body. All day she was faint with vertigo, sunk in a world where great power grids converged, throbbing lines plunged finally into the shallow canyon below the dam's face, elevators like coffins dropped into the bowels of the earth itself. With a guide and a handful of children Maria walked through the chambers, stared at the turbines in the vast glittering gallery, at the deep still water with the hidden intakes sucking all the while, even as she watched; clung to the railings, leaned out, stood finally on a platform over the pipe that carried the river beneath the dam. The platform quivered. Her ears roared. She wanted to stay in the dam, lie on the great pipe itself, but reticence saved her from asking. (171–72)

Even before she arrives there, Maria resonates in sympathy with the dam's electric throbbing, sucking, and quivering. The dam attracts her almost as intently as the freeway and commandeers her senses in much the same way, overwhelming her with its vast gallery of turbines and roaring machinery. Her fear of plumbing evaporates as she confronts the sublimity of the infrastructure, and she finds herself longing to lay "on the great pipe itself" and go on vibrating with its power. After being institutionalized, Maria admits, "I try not to think of dead things and plumbing" (10); but in this moment at the Hoover Dam, the great pipes promise a whole new fix that she finds uncannily arresting.

34 The Hoover Dam, often understood as a triumph of labor and ingenuity in the harsh terrain of the American desert, suggests a different infrastructural aesthetics than the freeway. Its crucial powering and watering function, which makes the region habitable, is not readily evident but instead subsumed within the massive, blank edifice, which stands at the center of a convergence of connections that plunge underground and stretch out across the land. Its monumentality registers as a presence of the systems that it exists within and that it enables rather than as any kind of negation. Despite the ideal of self-abstraction I have been tracking in the novel's scenes of freeway driving, I would argue that this robust presence, in the end, is the challenge that Didion sets for herself in writing *Play It as It Lays*. The novel's blank, distanced structure is not a retreat from, but an assembling of, the systems that constrain its protagonist. Like the Hoover Dam, *Play It as It Lays* is forbidding, but it demands to be approached, entered, and resonated with.

Conclusion: Radical Distance

35 In its many engagements with infrastructure, and in its own infrastructural form, *Play It as It Lays* imagines how the negative affects of everyday life, from pain to terror, might be managed through head-on confrontations with danger, at least those pockets of danger that have persisted in a society intent on suppressing them. While playing craps provides one such confrontation,

the risk inherent in gambling is not as edifying as the potentially-fatal freeway, which exhilarates and soothes more than any drug. Literature, while rarely fatal, can also open up similarly instructive pockets of danger, precisely by asserting itself against a reader's need for narrative. The novel does not set out to expose the truths propping up American life from the twentieth century into the twenty-first, nor does it advance an unequivocally redemptive vision of agency within the structures that constrain us. While the book's celebration of self-reliance and its accompanying narrative distance can read as politically disengaged, it also cannot be denied that Didion's book is a document of desperation borne from social circumstances.

36 At the risk of foisting on the novel the kind of feminist reading it resists, I want to suggest another way of understanding its preoccupation with infrastructure—that is, as a fascination with systems operating more or less as intended, and more or less in public view. Our infrastructural situation has changed drastically since 1970, and today, the massive infrastructures that defined American life in the first half of the twentieth century are crumbling, and bold replacements are a political pipe dream. But in other political realms, we have come full circle. More than fifty years after the publication of *Play It as It Lays*, the United States feels as close as it has ever been to overturning Roe and recriminalizing abortion. This fact does not validate Didion's skepticism about the efficacy of the Women's Movement, but it does call attention to how disturbingly intractable a force like misogyny is. Self-reliance does not square well with the kind of collective organizing on which progress undoubtedly depends, but this does not mean that distance cannot be deployed to radical ends. If *Play It as It Lays* proposes any kind of solution, it is in the form of the novel itself: a practice of intense scrutiny and self-scrutiny that regards the world with suspicion and seeks out opportunities where it can be made to work otherwise.

Notes

[1] In an essay from 2018, Dominic Boyer provides an overview of the "infrastructural turn," a term used to describe a growing interest in infrastructure in the last fifteen years among humanists and social scientists, which he sees as part of a larger "anti-anthropocentric" turn in the academy that includes theoretical interests in posthumanism, actor-network theory, and object-oriented ontology. Founding statements in the field of literary studies include Yaeger (2007) and Robbins (2007).

[2] In 1964's *Understanding Media*, McLuhan wrote explicitly about cars and TV, arguing that the private automobile was emblematic of a phase of modernity that was being supplanted by a new techno-social regime whose primary medium would be television, or television-like. For McLuhan, television was the "cool" counterpart to the "hot" experience of automobile driving: whereas the car "had become the ultimate expression of Gutenberg technology" (220)—that is, of a modernist linearity—the television promised a social organization that was lateral, or as we might say now, networked. Thanks to the advent of television, mass media in the late twentieth century would cease to amplify passions, as it had leading up to the Second World War, and become instead a tool for a peaceful, productive society of nuclear families and polite neighbors. The car, once the symbol of an earlier, reckless modernity, would likewise "cool off," and in some ways, McLuhan's prophesied hot-cool stabilization depends on the reabsorption of "hot" automobiles into new, "cool" transportation and communication networks, the infrastructure of the suburban ethos.

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Biography

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