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# ‘I HAVE LIVED IN MY OWN BOOK’: PATTI SMITH AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HER PUBLIC PERSONA IN LIFE WRITING

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**ABSTRACT:** In 2010, Patti Smith published her first memoir, *Just Kids*, winning the National Book Award for Nonfiction. The book recounts Smith’s relationship with avant-garde photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, as well as her involvement in New York City’s burgeoning bohemian downtown scene. Five years later, she published a second memoir, *M Train*, a much more experimental narrative that goes back and forth in time and mixes dream and reality in an attempt to convey her nostalgic recollection of the past. This paper examines Patti Smith’s memoirs as a space where different genres of life writing converge, thus enabling the development of a multilayered, richly constructed narrative self whose identity is intimately connected with loss, self-discovery and the making of art. The analysis of her autobiographical prose works allows us to regard life writing as a way for women to devise a public image of their own.

**RESUMEN:** En 2010, Patti Smith publicó su primer libro de memorias, *Éramos unos niños*, ganando el Premio Nacional del Libro en la categoría de no ficción. El libro relata la relación de Smith con el fotógrafo vanguardista Robert Mapplethorpe, así como su involucramiento en la incipiente escena bohemia de la ciudad de Nueva York. Cinco años después, publicó un segundo libro de memorias, *M Train*, con una narrativa mucho más experimental que combina presente y pasado y mezcla sueños y realidad con la intención de verbalizar su nostálgico recuerdo del pasado. Este artículo estudia las memorias de Patti Smith como un espacio en el que convergen diferentes géneros autobiográficos, permitiendo así la construcción de un personaje narrativo con múltiples dimensiones cuya identidad está íntimamente ligada a la pérdida, al

descubrimiento de uno mismo y al arte. El análisis de su trabajo autobiográfico en prosa nos permite entender la escritura autobiográfica como una forma en que las mujeres pueden concebir su propia imagen pública.

## INTRODUCTION

We live in a society where people are eager to share their stories and learn about others' by means of a screen. In the literary world, personal stories have come to the fore, too, resulting in a rise in the production of life writing. Authors are turning increasingly often to auto/biographical forms and both readers and scholars are showing more interest than ever for this kind of literature. We speak today of "the age of memoir" in particular, with this genre enjoying the greatest success. Throughout the last two decades, writing memoirs has become a common endeavor among the celebrities as well as among the "nobodies." Especially notable is women's more and more frequent choice of life narrative as a means of expression. Interestingly, Couser has described memoir as "a threshold genre in which some previously silent populations have been given a voice for the first time" (12). Similarly, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in their comprehensive study of autobiographical genres, have noticed that "the form of the Bildungsroman has been taken up more recently by women and other disenfranchised persons to consolidate a sense of emerging identity and an increased place in public life" (189). Women seem to have found in memoir a medium where they can assert themselves and (re)construct their multiple selves in an attempt to move away from the assumptions and roles that have been imposed upon them for so long. One of the trends that has lately drawn a great deal of attention is that of the female rock memoir. Their accounts are now "the latest craze in the Anglophone publishing market, frequently outnumbering the print runs of its male counterpart" (Sawczuk 71). Certainly, there is something intriguing in the reading of accounts by these female subjects, since they have traditionally been regarded as tough women who never feared self-expression or agency, even when theirs was a particularly male-dominated world. Although Patti Smith is no pioneer in life writing, the publication of her first memoir has much to do with the upsurge of this literary phenomenon. In 2010, her memoir *Just Kids* became the winner of the National Book Award for Nonfiction and,

from then on, the names of other rock star women have started taking up more and more space on the bookstore shelves. This first narrative was followed in 2015 by a second autobiographical account, *M Train*, earning Patti Smith definitive recognition for her work as a memoirist.

Julia Watson, professor of comparative studies of literature and culture, defines *Just Kids* as a "relational memoir" and states that Patti Smith "crafts a voice for navigating seemingly incompatible autobiographical genres –the artist's coming-of-age tale (*Künstlerroman*), the story of grief and mourning (autothanatography), and the socially oriented account of a cultural moment (autoethnography)" (132). On the basis of Watson's considerations, I will now further develop how these autobiographical forms find their way into *Just Kids* and I will then proceed to do the same with *M Train*, borrowing the selected genres from Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's extensive list appended to *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. This will allow me to analyze how both memoirs lend themselves to the convergence of different genres of life writing, helping the author devise a narrative with multiple layers of significance and allowing her to (re)construct her public persona.

## **JUST KIDS**

Eschewing the "celebrity memoir" label, *Just Kids* does not revolve around Patti Smith's attainment of the "Godmother of Punk" nickname. It is rather the story of the years she shared with Robert Mapplethorpe, the one person who helped her become a "Frida to Diego, both muse and maker" (12). Although Smith does make reference to some of her and Mapplethorpe's achievements in the art world, a large number of events which are significant for Patti or Robert as individuals but not essential for their story as life partners are omitted. As William L. Randall and A. Elizabeth McKim write, "despite stereotypes of memoir as snooty bragging about one's achievements in the public realm, memoir can be the road to genuine self-discovery and self-creation" (207). This is the case with *Just Kids*. Not only that, but it is also an act of generosity –towards Mapplethorpe as well as towards the reader–, for Smith decides to give preference to a story that revolves around another character too. Ultimately, Patti Smith is providing us with a narrative that no other biographer can attempt to write.

In Thomas Couser's proposal of a continuum where autobiography is at one end and biography at the other—in the sense that the first focuses on the life of the person who is writing and the latter on the life of another individual—, *Just Kids* would be towards the middle, somewhere in the grayscale, not being entirely about Patti Smith nor entirely about Robert Mapplethorpe but rather about each of them to the same extent. It is not *his* or *her* story that matters, but *theirs*. Watson's view of the story as "relational" is therefore justified, since the narrative "arises from, and is primarily concerned with, an intimate relationship" (Couser 20). At times lovers, at times friends, at times artist and muse, at times siblings, at times all of these, Smith and Mapplethorpe came to develop such a strong connection that many of their acquaintances could not conceive of them as separate entities. The same happens with the characters impersonating Patti and Robert in the book. Although Smith begins the narrative drawing two parallel lines as she depicts Patti and Robert's respective transitions from childhood to their teenage years, soon after she provides the reader with this context she proceeds to join these two independent lines. Right at the end of the first chapter, the narrator makes a statement which already suggests the magnitude of what is about to happen: "And in the shifting, inhospitable atmosphere, a chance encounter changed the course of my life. It was the summer I met Robert Mapplethorpe" (31). Henceforth, the stories Smith has previously narrated start falling into place. Fourteen-year-old Patti "dreamed of meeting an artist to love and support and work with side by side" (12). Six years later, enter Robert Mapplethorpe.

In *Reading Our Lives: The Poetics of Growing Old*, Randall and McKim note that lives are coauthored and intertwined, arguing: "Between the story of me and the story of thee is the story of us" (55). This is precisely what happens in *Just Kids*, where Patti Smith portrays her intimate bonding with Robert Mapplethorpe in such a way that, sometimes, one's words seem to flow into the other's. The most illustrative example may be found in the "note to the reader," where the lack of punctuation and quotation marks in Patti and Robert's last conversation leaves the reader the task of discerning their voices: "Will you write our story? Do you want me to? You have to he said no one but you can write it. I will do it, I promised, though I knew it would be a vow difficult to keep" (287). Along these lines, Watson suggests that Robert's voice is there "as a co-presence, and it creates a shared 'third' voice" (133) —that is, apart from Patti and

Robert's voices as individual characters, there is an intersubjective voice that seems to result from their union. Just like Smith and Mapplethorpe sometimes seemed to embody two sides of the same person—they were often referred to as doppelgängers of one another—, Patti and Robert's voices seem to merge into one in the narrative.

Undoubtedly, art becomes one of the driving forces behind the "relationality" in *Just Kids*. The idea of the narrative of artistic growth or *Künstlerroman* proposed by Watson is almost inseparable from that of the relational story—"our work was our children" (274), says Robert looking back on his relationship with Patti as the end of his life approaches. Throughout the story, each character individually experiments with different art forms until they each find the medium which best fits their quest for self-expression. It is their shared commitment to art, however, that enables them to keep working through the difficult times and blossom hand in hand with their creations. What is more, not only do they work side by side, but they also become an inspiration for one another, constantly interchanging the roles of artist and muse. Like the twosomes explored in Chadwick's and de Courtivron's *Significant Others: Creativity & Intimate Partnership* (1993), Patti and Robert challenge both the traditional understanding of artistic accomplishment as an individual endeavor and the stereotypical image of heterosexual arrangement, devising instead more flexible models which suit them better at artistic and affective levels. Their collaboration reaches its climax with the *Horses* photograph, shot by Robert Mapplethorpe for Patti Smith's debut album and still considered by many to be the ultimate proof of their intimate understanding. In her analysis of the portrait, Elizabeth Wolfson highlights "how essential the closeness of Smith and Mapplethorpe's relationship and their empathy for each other's creative vision was to the formation of the particular image" (7). And that is precisely what Smith conveys in her narration: "We never talked about what we would do, or what it would look like. He would shoot it. I would be shot. I had my look in mind. He had his light in mind. That is all" (250). The image, like the book, does not speak of one or the other, but of both, hence Smith's observation from the present perspective: "When I look at it now, I never see me. I see us" (251).

Truth be told, Patti and Robert do go through periods of estrangement marked by misunderstanding on her part and mistrust on his. As they each embark on relationships with different partners and entirely devote themselves to the paths they wish to pursue, the

line that has kept their stories together threatens to split into two separate lines. As Watson writes, “the narrative of filiality linking the two young artists [...] is challenged when their life choices –in artistic media, sexualities, and lovers– and ways of cultivating fame start to shift” (140). However, even when their understanding of life starts to be increasingly opposed, they continue to encourage one another, for they can still count on their common ground, that is, their work. “I was attracted to Robert’s work because his visual vocabulary was akin to my poetic one, even if we seemed to be moving toward different destinations,” confesses Smith (56). Watson therefore concludes: “However dissimilar their lifestyles, art forms, and career trajectories, in Smith’s narration they remain linked as mirror selves” (141). Their stay at the Chelsea Hotel, probably the most fruitful period of their lives, proves to be particularly crucial for the strengthening of their relationship as artist and muse. Despite Robert’s increasing interest in the S&M world, Patti remains the subject with whom he feels the most comfortable. As with every other facet of their relationship, they each assume their role without much negotiation. Smith thus writes: “Observing his swift progress was rewarding, as I felt part of his process. The creed we developed as artist and model was simple. I trust you, I trust in myself” (189). Robert, for his part, tells her: “With you I can’t miss” (192). *Just Kids* can be therefore read as the coming-of-age tale of two struggling artists who unflinchingly trust in each other’s vision.

The third form that Watson mentions in her analysis of *Just Kids* is autothanatography, a narrative that usually deals with illness and death. Although the particle “auto” in this concept sounds conflicting, for one cannot relate his/her own death, there are narratives in which its use is justified. In this case, the idea of autothanatography is again closely linked to the concept of “relationality” discussed above. Since the subject of the story is not Patti or Robert, but Patti and Robert as a whole, we can argue that there is a partial death of the subject, for there is no longer an “us” when Robert dies. With Mapplethorpe gone, Smith is left with the task of narrating this death. Besides, given their strong sense of attachment, Robert’s passing also implies that Patti loses a part of herself, therefore accounting for the reading of *Just Kids* as “autothanatography.” Even if it is not Patti herself who dies, the fact that someone so close has died inevitably leads to a reconstruction of her self and a renegotiation of the roles she has assumed so far. Particularly significant to the understanding of *Just Kids* as

autothanatography is the fact that the foreword opens with Patti waking up to the news that Robert has died. Although it is not the focus of the story, death is present right from the beginning and it has an influence on the way the reader approaches the narrative.

Very often, memoirists whose narratives deal with loss fall into the trap of overwhelming nostalgia and fail to convey anything beyond a yearning for the past. In her book *Writing the Memoir*, Judith Barrington states:

The tone may be serious, ironic, angry, sad, or almost anything except whiny. There must be no hidden plea for help –no subtle seeking of sympathy. The writer must have done her work, make her peace with the facts, and be telling the story for the story's sake. (73)

Granted, there is something inevitably nostalgic in looking back on the past: with Robert deceased and a whole era vanished, there is an undertone of lament and helplessness which results from Patti Smith's frustrated wish to recover those years. Yet Smith manages to write with a well-balanced blend of melancholic contemplation and narrative action. According to Sarah Mesle, "for most of the memoir's almost two hundred pages, its tone is less elegy and more picaresque fairytale." Smith's meditative narration does not prevent the action from progressing; quite the opposite, it provides the story with emotion, stirring within the readers a feeling of closeness to the writer that would be difficult to achieve with the facts alone. Not only that, but in writing this memoir as partly autothanatography, Patti Smith produces "a text that outlives the lives" (Smith and Watson 188). Towards the end of the book, she expresses her concern for not being able to write a song that would somehow make Robert live forever. Yet in *Just Kids* she provides the reader with an undying image of Robert, immortalizing his "tousled shepherd's hair" and his "Michelangelo hands." As Eve Ottenberg writes,

the book [...] brings him back to life, not just the Mapplethorpe of the obscenity scandals of the world-famous photographer of homoerotic subjects, but Mapplethorpe the young, whimsical yet driven, aspiring, and impoverished artist, who yearned for fame.

Smith thus accomplishes what she has repeatedly confessed to be her other task with *Just Kids*<sup>1</sup>: offering the reader the image of Robert as nothing more (and nothing less) than a holistic human being (an image that the media often forgot to include in their lurid accounts).

Autoethnography, defined by Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (739), is the last form mentioned by Watson. This loose application of the term, Ellis and Bochner argue, allows for a wide variety of studies to be placed under this category, from narratives of the self through autobiography to native ethnography. In the same vein, drawing on Deborah Reed-Danahay, they note that “autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphs), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto)” (740). As for *Just Kids*, its narrative is clearly focused on the self –or, as we have seen, selves– yet this self is intricately intertwined with the cultural context that frames the story. Autoethnography may be therefore understood here as the result of the author’s attempt to highlight the significance of the cultural atmosphere in Patti and Robert’s lives. Their quest for artistic realization is necessarily linked with the people and the places that made it possible –that is, with New York’s burgeoning bohemian downtown scene– and it cannot be understood independently of the social reality of the time. Indeed, so important is the cultural subtext in *Just Kids* that at times the reader might think of Patti Smith as a sort of chronicler. Through apparently unrelated historical facts, she is able to portray the dichotomous reality of the late 1960s and early 1970s or, in her words, “the duality of the summer of 1969, Woodstock and the Manson cult, our masked ball of confusion” (108). According to Edmund White, “this book brings together all the elements that made New York so exciting in the 1970s –the danger and poverty, the artistic seriousness and optimism, the sense that one was still connected to a whole history of great artists in the past.” A retrospective narration of both the richness and the decadence that the sex-drugs-and-rock’n’roll creed

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<sup>1</sup> “Patti Smith discusses ‘Just Kids’ at National Portrait Gallery.” *YouTube*, uploaded by National Portrait Gallery, 17 October 2015, <https://youtu.be/sGgYzKP72hM>  
 “Legendary Patti Smith on Her New Memoir ‘M Train’ & National Book Award Winner ‘Just Kids’.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Democracy Now!, 8 October 2015, <https://youtu.be/TseiQePbDpo>



resulted in ultimately makes *Just Kids* the memoir of a whole generation.

Key in the autoethnographical reading of Patti Smith's memoir is the Chelsea Hotel, the setting of the story par excellence (so much so that there is a chapter titled after it). This is the place that marks a turning point in Patti and Robert's lives and careers, but also the place that seems to best encapsulate the narrative's social aspect. In what is probably the most self-explanatory passage in terms of how Patti feels about this place, Smith writes:

I loved this place, its shabby elegance, and this history it held to possessively. There were rumors of Oscar Wilde's trunks languishing in the hull of the oft-flooded basement. Here Dylan Thomas, submerged in poetry and alcohol, spent his last hours. Thomas Wolfe plowed through hundreds of pages of manuscript that formed *You Can't Go Home Again*. Bob Dylan composed "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" on our floor, and a speeding Edie Sedgwick was said to have set her room on fire while gluing on her thick false eyelashes by candlelight. So many had written, conversed, and convulsed in these Victorian dollhouse rooms. So many skirts had swished these worn marble stairs. So many transient souls had espoused, made a mark, and succumbed here. I sniffled out their spirits as I silently scurried from floor to floor, longing for discourse with a gone procession of smoking caterpillars. (113)

Present in the text are countless evidences of Patti's wish to become one not only with the people who had spent their time there but even with the foundations of the building itself. Various academics, such as Heewon Chang, prefer to distinguish between proper autoethnographies (those following the anthropological approach) and highly descriptive memoirs. However, Chang does say that "autoethnography is not about focusing on self alone, but about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through self" (48-9). And this is something that Patti Smith surely accomplishes, for although the focus is on the personal, it is at all times informed by the cultural.

## ***M TRAIN***

After the enormous success of *Just Kids*, many thirsted for a sequel in which Patti Smith would reminisce about her life following Mapplethorpe's passing. In 2015, five years after the publication of

the writer's first life narrative, *M Train* finally saw the light of day. This second memoir, however, did not come to be the work most readers were expecting. Instead of picking up the story where she had left off, Smith decided to set her memoir "in the time frame of *AF* –After Fred" (273), mourning the loss of her late husband, Fred "Sonic" Smith. Like its predecessor, *M Train* also moves away from the conventions of memoir –this time in a more experimental way, bordering on stream-of-consciousness– and it can also be approached as a crossroads of different autobiographical forms. To a great extent, it is written in the fashion of a journal, with Smith recording her everyday life making use of the present tense. Since the loss of a loved one permeates the story, we return to the idea of a narrative connected to mourning but, given the nature of her relationship with Fred, the term "grief memoir" will prove to be more accurate here than that of "autothanatography." Finally, *M Train* is closely related to the concept of "autotopography," coined by Jennifer González in 1995 and concerned with the idea that certain objects may constitute "museums of the self" (134).

In their study of autobiographical forms, most scholars choose to make no distinction between "diary" and "journal" on the grounds that both forms involve the recording of daily life. As for *M Train*, its pages are filled with images of Patti feeding her cats, watching her favorite TV shows, writing at her cherished cafés or taking short trips –that is, with images of her everyday life– thus making it possible to relate it to any of these two forms. Similar as diary and journal are, there are nevertheless a few differences which are pertinent for our analysis. As writer William Gass explains, the diary is "staccato" in style: it relies solely upon facts, and it requires meticulousness in its day-by-day recording, hence its distinctive dated entries. According to Gass, while the journal also respects a chronological principle, it is more flexible and leaves room for a more introspective narration. Here, the focus is not so much on *what* happened but rather on *how* what happened affected the person writing, thus allowing disruptions in the narrative linearity. Journal's cadence would be, to borrow from Gass's metaphor, *legato*. This contrast in narrative scope and rhythm therefore makes the term "journal" more accurate when referring to Smith's second memoir. Indeed, critics have described *M Train* as "visual stream-of-consciousness" (Lord), "kaleidoscopic ballad" (Kakutani), or "a memoir with a wavelike rhythm" (Heyward). Smith herself confesses, in an interview on the CBC Radio One show *Q*, that she wanted to

write "unfettered by direction, by responsibility and by any particular chronology or plot" ("Patti Smith says 'M Train' is the roadmap to her life," 1:16–1:26). Continuity is constantly interrupted by interspersed dreams or memories of the past which make Smith travel in time (if only in her mind) but which always end up bringing her back to present time.

Clearly, diaries and journals are meant to be private and one does not approach these as one would approach a narrative which is meant to be published. However, *M Train*, while being a published account, still displays a number of features which are characteristic of forms like the diary or the journal. In fact, this memoir is probably the result of a two-step process involving a phase of unrestricted, creative writing first, and an editing phase second. That is, its first drafts might have been closer to what we understand as a private narrative. As she reveals in the *Q* interview, she did not have a book contract when she began: "I just wrote," she says (20:58-21:05). One of the results of this lack of parameters is the creative freedom that allows Smith to ride her *M Train*, which she defines as "mental train", "mind train", or "continual train of thought" ("Legendary Patti Smith on Her New Memoir 'M Train' & National Book Award Winner 'Just Kids'," 0:27-0:40). This takes us back to the book's stream-of-consciousness quality; as we read through its pages, we almost feel as if we were eavesdropping on Patti Smith's internal dialogue –on her dreams, on her memories, on her confessions– as she comes to terms with her sense of self. This, again, is typical of diaristic accounts. Besides letting us in on her ruminations, she also narrates her adventures on the different trips she makes around the world and attaches pictures of these and other mementos, resulting in *M Train* being part memoir, part travelogue. This not only draws it closer to journaling, but even to scrapbooking, a form of arranging memorabilia and writing together. All in all, the book becomes a record of the person Patti Smith was while writing it –"the book pretty much tells you the kind of person I am," she declares ("Patti Smith says 'M Train' is the roadmap to her life," 2:26-2:29).

As for the second genre, if we were to read *M Train* as autoethnography, we would encounter again the problem of a contradictory term, this time accentuated by the fact that this is not a relational memoir in the style of *Just Kids*. With the story set in Smith's present, Fred's character only appears insofar as Patti revisits her memories of him. While the idea of Patti losing a part of her self is still present, this is not the story of Patti and Fred, but

rather the story of how Patti copes with Fred's death. There is, however, an autobiographical form, now the focus of much scholarly attention, that *does* work for the analysis of *M Train*: grief memoir. Ever since the publication of Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* in 2005, a considerable number of books have been placed under this category, making it possible to speak of grief memoir in terms of a genre or, at least, sub-genre of life writing. Of the many situations we may grieve over, it seems that spousal loss has become a consistent topic among memoirists, particularly women. With Fred gone, Patti is left in a world where she feels like she does belong and she repeatedly tries to seek comfort in the memories they made together. Although Fred's passing and the publication of *M Train* are separated by a decade, Patti is still immersed in a "light yet lingering malaise [...] like a fascination for melancholia" (25). And, while the loss of her husband is not the only loss she has had to cope with, it seems to be at the center of her grief, even if, as she explains in her interview *Democracy Now!*, she never intended for this book to be about Fred in the first place ("Legendary Patti Smith on Her New Memoir 'M Train' & National Book Award Winner 'Just Kids,'" 11:15-11:55). Watching the movie *Master and Commander* on a plane to Tokyo, for instance, she finds herself mentally summoning him: "Captain Jack Aubrey reminded me so much of Fred that I watched it twice. Mid flight I began to weep. Just come back, I was thinking. You've been gone long enough. Just come back. I will stop traveling; I will wash your clothes" (171). As the narrative evolves, we get to see how Patti deals with this grief in the different situations that arise in her present life.

In her analysis of how women deal with loss in contemporary memoir, Amy-Katerini Prodromou coins the expression "memoirs of textured recovery" to refer to a sub-genre of grief memoir (4). These narratives, rather than offering a categorical definition of what loss should mean, advocate a multi-layered understanding of recovery in which healing is not necessarily immediate nor unattainable (4); sometimes it is both, sometimes it is none. As for Patti, she finds herself oscillating between the sense of helplessness that results from the futility of trying to recover what's lost: "nothing can be truly replicated. Not a love, not a jewel, not a single line" (202)– and the certainty that our loved ones, although long gone, still accompany us in some way "we can't draw flesh from reverie [...] but we can gather the dream itself and bring it back uniquely whole" (251). Her understanding of loss is therefore nuanced, making it

difficult to determine whether her recovery is complete or not. Besides, there are other losses, both personal and material, which Patti has to face and which complicate matters even more. This memoir, while written as an elegy for Fred, also laments losses such as that of her brother Todd, that of her mother, and even that of a coat or an envelope containing pictures of Sylvia Plath's grave. Losing a cherished object is, for Patti, synonymous with losing part of oneself, for there are material things which ultimately become an extension of one's identity. Hence Patti's disappointment as she wonders: "Why is it that we lose the things we love, and things cavalier cling to us and will be the measure of our worth after we're gone?" (242). This preoccupation with objects and their connections to memories is precisely what takes us to the last genre proposed for the analysis of Smith's second memoir.

Autotopography, a much less studied concept in the field of literature, is key in the understanding of *M Train* as a work of memory. In her definition of this term, Jennifer González argues that "just as written autobiography is a series of narrated events, fantasies, and identifications, so too an autotopography forms a spatial representation of important relations, emotional ties, and past events" (134). While *M Train* is chiefly considered a narration in which Patti Smith writes about herself (as in an autobiography or memoir), it is also a space in which she "displays" many of the objects that link her present self to the past by means of the memories they evoke (as in an autotopography). Smith constantly makes reference to objects which are sacred for her and which she fears to lose. She writes, for instance, about a handkerchief sack containing stones from the Saint-Laurent prison as an object which "had manifested a sacredness second only to [her] wedding ring" (20) or about stacks of Polaroids "that [she] sometimes spread out like tarots or baseball cards of an imagined celestial team" (102). Writer and editor Anna Heyward goes as far as to suggest that "the many magical objects of Patti Smith" (as she titles her article) ultimately belong to "hagiography". Most of the time, these possessions act as carriers of memories, operating as portals to people and places no longer traceable in the present and becoming inseparable from the stories they are connected with, eventually adding up to Smith's museum of the self. This is closely linked to what professor Sherry Turkle calls "evocative objects," possessions with which one comes to develop an emotional tie because of their connection to a personal past experience (5). The memories these objects carry become the

basis for the narrative in *M Train*. By revisiting her past memories, she is able to gradually make sense of her present self.

In her analysis of autotopography González argues that there are two main ways in which one may access the stories objects bring to mind: *remembering* and *memory*. The difference between these two, according to González, lies in voluntariness: whereas the first results from “a retrogressive moment from the present into a reconstruction of the past” (i.e. voluntary), the latter is “an intrusion of the past into the present” (i.e. involuntary) (136). As a work which reflects the mind’s response to the evocations of the past, *M Train* contains examples of both voluntary and involuntary acts of recollection. Most of the time, Patti readily accepts the manifestation of past souvenirs. What is more, she seems to actively seek reminiscence and to derive pleasure from revisiting the unaltered past. She therefore writes: “Sighing, I meander around my room scanning for cherished things to make certain they haven’t been drawn into the half-dimensional place where things disappear” (32). This is explained by González as a willful immersion in nostalgia that comes from our wish to experience the feeling of longing for something that cannot be recovered (137). In other words, we wallow in our nostalgia. There are times, however, when Patti is caught by surprise by the images that start to appear in the back of her mind. This is when memory (as opposed to remembering) comes into play. Perhaps the clearest example can be seen when she tries to visualize her copy of *Ariel* and is immediately met with a different –yet connected– image: that of the previously mentioned envelope containing some prized Polaroids she had taken of Sylvia Plath’s grave. In her attempt to *voluntarily remember* something, she is stricken with an *involuntary memory*. Smith writes: “As I fixed on the first lines, impish forces projected multiple images of a white envelope, flickering at the corners of my eyes, thwarting my efforts to read them. This agitating vision produced a pang, for I knew the envelope well” (197). As we keep reading, we realize that the envelope which materializes in her thoughts is long gone, and so are the Polaroids. Her sorrow results not from being reminded of the photographs themselves but rather of the fact that they have vanished. As we can see, autotopography in *M Train* is often linked with loss and, by extension, grief. Genres therefore intermingle enriching one another and holding together the themes that run through the narrative.

## CONCLUSION

On the one hand, approaching Patti Smith's autobiographical prose work as a place where she navigates various genres negotiating her identity enables us to understand life writing as a tool for women to take control of the construction of their public image. According to Estelle C. Jelinek, "[t]he writer who displays himself or herself in print claims the authority of individual experience, asserting unique knowledge of the unique subject, the self" (112). In this sense, even if Smith does not overtly reject or challenge the image that has been thrust upon her for decades, the mere fact that she has put pen to paper *and* that she has chosen memoir as the medium to do so, implies that there is a desire to devise an image of her own. She need not state whether the identity that others have created for her is legitimate or not, for it suffices with her claiming the right to tell her own story and (re)creating her public image. Memoir writing, then, becomes a declaration of intent per se. This is especially true in the case of female writers, since they are challenging the traditional notion that women's writing should remain part of their private lives and that they should not engage in public matters. As Morwenna Griffiths notes, "autonomy is often thought to present a problem for women because (1) it is a desirable quality; and (2) women don't have it" (135). Hence the importance of female writers turning to genres like memoir: the personal becomes political and the object becomes subject. Women's stories can finally be told by women themselves.

On the other hand, the fact that *Just Kids* and *M Train* can be read from the perspective of different autobiographical forms provides us with a better understanding not only of the memoirs, but of the author too. An in-depth analysis of the persona Smith is trying to present reveals that, in the process of creating an identity, she draws from the different aspects that inform her life –be it the cultural atmosphere, the death of a significant one, or a recurrent dream. Blurring the boundaries of life writing –as she already did with the boundaries between poetry and music back in the 1970s– enables Patti Smith to construct a richer narrative as well as a richer self. As Thomas Couser states, life writing can be seen "as a means by which selves are constituted [...] It helps to develop and define them" (25). In her memoirs, Smith challenges the limits of genres in life writing as well as the image of her public persona conveyed by the media ever since her first poetry reading at St. Mark's Church in 1971. She invites us to look beyond the dazzling stage lights in an

attempt to shun the slightest possibility of being pigeonholed as just another self-absorbed celebrity writing about her all too important existence. Life writing allows her to devise a public persona which matches her private self, one that feels no shame of showing vulnerability or dependence on her loved ones, yet at the same time is still able to project a voice of her own. In making use of her powerful and far-reaching voice to portray a reality that would otherwise be unknown, Patti Smith highlights the importance of the female construction of a public self which may not necessarily correspond to societal expectations. The media and the fans took the liberty of creating an image for her because she was a public figure. Society insisted on instituting the roles she was supposed to perform because she was a woman. For a long time, it seemed that anybody could have their say in who Patti Smith was or how Patti Smith should be leading her life –save Patti Smith herself. “In time we often become one with those we once failed to understand” (170), Smith writes in *M Train*. Through life writing, she becomes one with those parts of herself society once failed to understand.

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