

“The Things I Touched Were Living”: Autotopography, Memory, and Identity in Patti Smith’s *M Train*

“Todo lo que tocaba estaba vivo”: Autotopografía, memoria e identidad en *M Train* de Patti Smith

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Abstract: In 1995, Jennifer A. González coined the concept of “autotopography” to refer to those collections of objects which contain autobiographical information and may therefore become “museums of the self.” This paper analyzes Patti Smith’s *M Train* as an autotopographical narrative in which the author displays (through text and photography) the many objects that connect her to the past, acting as triggers for her memories and as repositories of identity. This article stresses that looking into the nature of autobiographical objects, and their links to the different ways of remembering, will allow us to further understand how lives are constituted on the page.

Keywords: autotopography; memory; life writing; *M Train*; Patti Smith.

Summary: Introduction. Autotopography: How Objects Tell Our Lives. *M Train*: Patti Smith’s Museum of the Self. Conclusions.

Resumen: En 1995, Jennifer A. González acuñó el término de “autotopografía” para referirse a aquellas colecciones de objetos que contienen información autobiográfica y que pueden llegar a convertirse en museos de identidad. Esta propuesta analiza *M Train*, de Patti Smith, como una narración autotopográfica en la que la autora expone (a través del texto y de la fotografía) aquellos objetos que la conectan con el pasado, actuando como desencadenantes de recuerdos y depósitos de identidad. Estudiar la naturaleza de los objetos autobiográficos y sus vínculos con las diferentes maneras de recordar, nos permite entender más a fondo cómo se constituyen las vidas sobre el papel.

Palabras clave: autotopografía; memoria; autobiografía; *M Train*; Patti Smith.

Sumario: Introducción. Autotopografía: Cómo los objetos cuentan nuestras vidas. *M Train*: El museo de identidad de Patti Smith. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Patti Smith was, from a very early age, fascinated by the power of words. Always a voracious reader and, for more than five decades now, a poet and singer-songwriter, it was not until 2010 that she officially embarked on prose writing—more specifically, autobiographical prose writing. With four autobiographical works in the market—three prose narratives written in the form of memoir (*Just Kids*, 2010; *M Train*, 2015; and *Year of the Monkey*, 2019), and a photobook (*A Book of Days*, 2022)—Smith's has become one of the most powerful and far-reaching female voices in popular culture. Her first memoir, *Just Kids*, won her not only the National Book Award for Nonfiction but also numerous accolades from critics, contemporary musicians and artists, and the general reading public. Her love for the magic of words has certainly got her far, but words are not the only ones that hold such power for Smith. In her second autobiographical work, *M Train*, the writer unveils her strong interest in—almost fetish for—objects and their ability to trade on sacredness and ordinariness, past and present, remembrance and forgetfulness. This essay intends to analyze the autobiographical role performed by objects in Patti Smith's *M Train* through the lens of autotopography and its connections with memory, the past, and identity construction.

There is a long tradition of viewing objects as repositories of memories, stories, and even identities. The power of objects may transcend life, as happens with grave goods buried along with someone's body for them to use in the afterlife, or with heirlooms passed down to the younger generations of a family by those older relatives who might wish to be remembered. Objects are inextricably linked to identity and its construction; they are often seen as extensions of the self (Belk), provocations to thought (Turkle), carriers of past into present (Pearce), or triggers for autobiographical memory (Berntsen). It is no wonder, then, that objects play such a fundamental role in life writing, itself being mainly concerned with the recording and shaping of selfhood. Essentially, objects encapsulate autobiographical information that, when arranged into a story, take on a new significance.

1. AUTOTOPOGRAPHY: HOW OBJECTS TELL OUR LIVES

In 1995, Jennifer A. González coined the concept of “autotopography,” an approach now crucial when examining objects as autobiographical artifacts. In her definition, González argues that “just as a 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). According to her, objects such as photographs, souvenirs, or heirlooms function as “prostheses of the mind” or “physical extensions of the psyche” in that they represent different intangible memories of our past experiences, thus performing an autobiographical role. This is also the case for more serviceable objects (that may or may not still be in service) which are no longer valued for their utilitarian purpose but instead are treasured because they have become representative of the self (133).

This view that the more ordinary or mundane objects that surround us in our everyday lives can perform as powerful an autobiographical role as those objects whose purpose is precisely that of representing a part of ourselves (e.g. photographs) is generally accepted among theorists. Joanne B. Karpinski notes that “any personal possession can be considered an auto/biographical artifact” (55). These might fall, according to Karpinski, into one of two categories: “objects that physically encode auto/biographical information”—among which she distinguishes between those that are literally part of the subject’s life and those that are merely representative of that life in a pictorial or graphical way—“and objects that have been preserved due to their auto/biographical associations” (55). Along the same lines, Petrelli et al. observe how “everyday objects become mementos by virtue of what the owner has invested in them, be it time or emotion” (56). They argue, however, that these objects are not as directly related to the original memory as photographs or artwork can be (57). Similarly, Sherry Turkle’s work on *Evocative Objects* draws attention to those items which seem intrinsically evocative because of the vividness of the memory they bring back, as opposed to those objects whose significance stems from the moment or circumstance they entered the person’s life (8). Richard Heersmink, too, acknowledges these two categories, making a distinction between “representational objects” and “non-representational objects.” According to Heersmink, the main difference lies in the fact that the latter leave room for more interpretation: “A photo or video of a past holiday exactly shows what a certain event was

like, but a souvenir of the same holiday has no isomorphism to a past event and so provides more room to the imagination of the user” (1836). Nuances aside, there seems to be agreement among theorists on the distinction between those objects which literally depict a particular memory and those which are merely reminiscent of such memory—and, perhaps more importantly, they all acknowledge the autobiographical power held by the latter. Representational or not, whenever several of these auto/biographical objects are arranged or gathered into a collection, however neat or messy, we can then speak of an autotopography, as is the case with Patti Smith’s *M Train*.

2. *M TRAIN*: PATTI SMITH’S MUSEUM OF THE SELF

The story in Patti Smith’s *M Train* opens as the year 2011 is coming to an end. Smith, a 66-year-old widow living in New York, goes about her daily life while reflecting on loss, self-awareness, and the passing of time. In a book so connected to memory and the past, autotopography plays a significant role not only in highlighting the ability of certain objects to enclose autobiographical information, but also in revealing how these act as triggers of Smith’s memories. Although *M Train* is chiefly understood as a narrative in which Smith writes about herself (as in an autobiography or memoir), it is also a space in which she displays—both in writing and through the photographs that illustrate the text—many of the objects that link her present self to the past by means of the memories they evoke (as in an autotopography). Through this “museum of the self” that the author crafts narratively and visually, an identity is constructed both for the reader and for the writer herself.

“Museum of the self” is a phrase coined by Jennifer González as a synonym for “autotopography” which she explains arguing that “the material world is called upon to present a physical map of memory, history and belief” (134). Autotopography is inextricably linked to the concept of identity, so much so that Pearce thinks of objects as external souls: “external because physically distinct and separate, but souls because the meaning projected on to them brings them into the interior of our personal lives” (45). For her, the connection between object and identity, then, lies in the exercise of attributing meaning to the items we own. Belk, nevertheless, goes one step further and regards possessions as parts of an extended self. This self may continue to exist beyond death by virtue of the objects which create, enhance, and preserve our sense of identity

(“Possessions” 150). Likewise, Heersmink considers that “the self is partly constituted by the web of evocative objects in our lifeworld” (1830). To a certain extent, we are made of the possessions which hold a special place in our hearts, objects which are probably more representative of our identity than any narrative of ourselves we may produce (Pearce 55). This museum of the self that we (consciously or not) curate over time, ultimately becomes a physical autobiography, that is, an autotopography, which “provides stability and continuity for our autobiographical memory and narrative self. By interacting with these objects, we construct and reconstruct our past and by doing so also our personal identity” (Heersmink 1846). Objects that link us to our past selves thus help us reflect on our future selves and end up shaping our identity, and by extension, shaping us.

M Train works as autotopography, or museum of the self, on two different levels. On the one hand, embedded in the text are countless references to objects which disclose autobiographical information. Whether only mentioned or extensively described, every one of these items reveals something about the author’s identity. On the other hand, the book also contains a personal museum made up of more than fifty Polaroids taken by Smith which complement the narrative. These photographs may be analyzed from different perspectives when it comes to autotopography. Let us focus first on the Polaroids as actual (material) objects. Sontag describes photographs as “miniatures of reality” (2), privileged moments turned into objects (12), objects of fascination (17), inventories of the world (16), “unpremeditated slices of the world” (54). Thinking of photographs as actual objects is relevant because, while we tend to engage in their content alone, the pictures themselves already carry some sort of meaning. As any other object, they may deteriorate or get lost; they may be gifted or arranged into a collection. All these possibilities grant photographs a status of their own. This is particularly true of Polaroids, regarded as “image-objects” by Peter Buse, who argues that “[t]he Polaroid image is stubbornly attached to its material support in a way that even conventional negative-based photography never was” (85). “Every photographic print,” Buse concludes, “is a material object, but a Polaroid is somehow more so” (228). The absence of a negative, as well as its characteristic white border, make Polaroids singular artifacts (Buse 228). Smith seems to acknowledge that her Polaroids are not only images representing a particular moment in time, but also artifacts that can be

stacked, collected, or lost. In *M Train*, she describes pictures as sacred pieces that adorn her “Polaroid rosary” (168):

Spanish pilgrims travel on Camino de Santiago from monastery to monastery, collecting small medals to attach to their rosary as proof of their steps. I have stacks of Polaroids, each marking my own, that I sometimes spread out like tarots or baseball cards of an imagined celestial team. (200–02)

Similarly, in *Year of the Monkey*, when Smith comes across a manila folder containing Polaroids of her various trips, she writes: “One after another, each a talisman on a necklace of continuous travels” (123). Photographs are, for Smith, magical objects containing memories, scraps of life.

Interesting, too, is photography’s inherent connection to the past: a moment photographed is a moment gone, a moment that will never take place in exactly the same way. “All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt” (Sontag 11). Photography’s link to nostalgia, then, is perhaps more evident than any other object’s; holding a picture is like holding an actual piece of the past. When speaking about items that elicit from us an emotional response connected to the past, the photograph is the evocative object *par excellence*. Photographs call for a distinct analysis, for although they may fall into the category of evocative objects, and despite the fact that they sometimes function as souvenirs, they are essentially different.

Because of their representational character, photographs bear a direct relation to the memory they depict. Hence, they make our stories more believable. When combined with a written text, however, this is not photography’s only function. Timothy Dow Adams points to a “common sense view . . . that photography operates as a visual supplement (illustration) and a corroboration (verification) of the text—that photographs may help to establish, or at least reinforce, autobiography’s referential dimension” (xxi). Yet he argues that “the role of photography is far from simple or one-dimensional,” noting how the combination of text and image “may intensify rather than reduce the complexity of each taken separately” (xxi). This is not to say that photography does not serve the purpose of authenticating text, only that it does more than that. In her article “Photo-as-Thing,” for instance, Julia Breitbach examines how

pictures (as physical objects) serve as slices of the past which help us make sense of our present:

Bringing the past into the present and transforming absence into presence, photographs of younger selves, long-lost friends, or unforgettable vistas become cornerstones to the narrative edifice of one’s life story. By way of their sheer materiality on the one hand, and their seeming transparency of a bygone reality on the other, photos seem to lend a vicarious stability and substantiality to fickle memories, providing structural support, factual evidence, and narrative coherence to human biographies. They are convenient biographical props to be (re)appropriated by human subjects and put into the context of their lives in the present tense. (37)

Photographs’ connections to memory and identity, then, prove to be more complex than those of objects with no isomorphism to the moment, place or person they represent.

Photography anchors people, places, and objects to particular moments in our timelines, therefore making them (and the memories associated with them) more easily reachable—and yet, never entirely reached. When taping a photograph of Schiller’s table in Jena above her desk, Smith reflects: “Despite its simplicity I thought it innately powerful, a conduit transporting me back to Jena” (104). Still, while the photograph may bring the past closer to us, it can also make the gap between past and present more evident. As Belk notes,

[w]hereas possessions like furniture, houses, and clothing may act as unchanging objects proving the security of the familiar in our lives, photographs remind us of who we once were in a way that invites comparison and highlights how we have changed. (“The Role” 670)

Photography attests to change and we are not always ready to accept it. Similarly, Breitbach points to photography’s silence and its consequent need for a narrative as a quality linked to nostalgia, for the accompanying narrative will be inevitably rooted in the past (138)—a past that itself is irrecoverable. The embedding of photographs is therefore particularly fitting for a narrative like *M Train*, which is, as we will see, mostly guided by nostalgia.

Out of the 55 illustrations in *M Train*, 48 are credited to Smith, half of which are pictures of objects. These seem to be reproductions of Polaroid pictures taken by the author, who declares on several occasions throughout

the narrative that she rarely leaves the house without one of her trusted Polaroid cameras. The collection of pictures incorporated into *M Train* ultimately constitutes a kind of personal museum of the self, a museum displaying photographs of objects ranging from the most mundane (a table and chair from her favorite café [6], an arrangement of items on her dresser [33] or her coffeemaker [46]) to the most extraordinary (Roberto Bolaño's chair [26] Frida Kahlo's bed [106] or Herman Hesse's typewriter [248]). As Sontag notes, "to photograph is to confer importance" (22). Even though Smith's Polaroids denote ordinariness—some of them are slightly out of focus or oddly framed—they hold a special place in her memory and thus in her heart, as do the objects photographed. What is more, these photographs are not autobiographical only in terms of what the objects portrayed represent for Smith. "In one sense," Adams notes, "all photographs are self-portraits . . . in that they tell us something about the photographer's eye" (227). *M Train* is illustrated with black-and-white Polaroid photographs with a seemingly unpremeditated style. Through her choices of focus, lighting, or framing, Smith is creating an aesthetic which is ultimately revealing of herself, of the narrative she wishes to convey, of the self she wishes to represent. With each new book, Smith has moved closer to photography, feeling notably at ease with the medium—so much so that her latest publication, *A Book of Days*, is primarily photographic, with text merely present in the form of long captions—and taking more risks as far as the interplay between text and image is concerned.

2.1 Precious Possessions: The Sacred and the Ordinary

The objects we make, acquire, inherit, or keep—even the ones we lose, discard, or gift to others—play a central role in the act of reminiscence, ultimately becoming part of our autotopography. Belk observes how "[o]bjects of the past are often intentionally acquired and retained in order to remember pleasant or momentous times in one's past" and points to souvenirs and mementos as markers of memories ("The Role" 670). These often serve no utilitarian purpose other than representing a time or a place rooted in the past; they function only as catalysts for our memories. According to Bill Brown, we are then looking at things, not objects. Although for the sake of this essay I use the terms "object" and "thing" interchangeably, I wish to acknowledge Brown's definition of things as

what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems. (“Thing Theory” 5)

It is not the objects themselves, but their thingness, that really moves us. In Peter Schwenger’s words, “[t]hings are valued not because of their rarity or cost or their historical aura, but because they seem to partake in our lives . . . Their long association with us seems to make them custodian of our memories” (3). As Hoskins puts it, “it is not the physical characteristics of objects that make them biographical, but the meanings imputed to them as significant personal possessions” (195). It is our interpretation of the stories we associate with these objects that make them so special. In order to understand the thingness of objects, what they come to represent, an accompanying narrative is therefore needed for souvenirs, mementos, or photographs to bear some meaning. According to Susan Sontag, “[o]nly that which narrates can make us understand” (18). Yet, however unserviceable souvenirs may seem, the people we tell our stories to are more likely to trust our accounts when there are physical traces (photographs, mementos) that represent such anecdotes. Objects, then, authenticate our narrative, prove our story. González puts it simply when she states: “Autobiography thus becomes an act of collection, arrangement, and authentication of objects as much as the construction of narrative that accompanies these activities” (142). The object needs the narrative; the narrative needs the object.

Smith’s autobiographical work is filled with objects whose thingness pervades the narrative. Whether in the form of “an obsolete Brother word processor” (27), a copy of W. G. Sebald’s *After Nature* (66) or a nineteenth-century wishing well (273), Smith is able to see beyond objects and appreciate the magic of their thingness. In *Just Kids*, when writing about Robert Mapplethorpe’s ability to transform everyday objects into art, Smith reflects: “It is said that children do not distinguish between living and inanimate objects; I believe they do. A child imparts a doll or tin soldier with magical life-breath. The artist animates his work as the child his toys” (136). Something similar happens in *M Train*, where Smith animates the objects she encounters, to the extent that she holds conversations with a channel changer (“I changed your batteries, I say pleadingly, so change the damn channel” [32]), a fishing hook (“Hello, Curly, I whisper, and am instantly gladdened” [37]), or a bedspread (“Can

you imagine the odds of such an encounter? I say to my floral bedspread” [60]), among many others. Smith herself comes to admit: “Perhaps I should be concerned as to why I have conversations with inanimate objects” (32). In this story where dream often eclipses reality, the reader soon gets accustomed to such eccentricities. It is as if, so to speak, certain inanimate objects had a life of their own. At a given moment, she leaves her camera behind and confesses: “It was unsettling to imagine it alone in the bench without film, unable to record its own passage into the hands of a stranger” (146). This is not, however, particular to Smith. As Keith Moxey observes,

[a]ffirmations that objects are endowed with a life of their own—that they possess an existential status endowed with agency—have become commonplace. Without a doubt, objects (aesthetic or not) induce pangs of feeling and carry emotional freight that cannot be dismissed. . . . Yet they also serve as . . . foci for the observation of ritual, and they satisfy communal as well as personal needs. (53)

Similarly, in his study on the possessions accumulated in different households in a London street, Daniel Miller realizes that objects do, in some way, talk: “These things are not a random collection. They have been gradually accumulated as an expression of that person or household. Surely if we can listen to these things we have access to an authentic other voice” (2). Possessions, then, might be regarded as bearing some sort of identity or, as the New Materialists would put it, agency. No longer relegated to the background, objects are now, with the material turn, regarded as active matter, capable of shaping our relations and perceptions, of generating emotional responses (Hallam and Hockey 43).

Smith’s fascination with objects is such that she draws no line between the ordinary and the sacred, both deserving of the same consideration. Among the items which, for her, are imbued with a certain holiness, we find a handkerchief sack containing stones from the Saint-Laurent prison which “manifest a sacredness second only to [her] wedding ring” (20) or an antiquated typewriter to which she claims to owe “a nagging allegiance” (27). Such is the devotion with which Smith speaks about her possessions that Anna Heyward suggests that “the many magical objects of Patti Smith” (as she titles her article in *The New York Times*) ultimately belong to the category of “hagiography,” a term which describes the writing practice concerned with the lives of saints but which may also be used,

according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, when referring to “a biography which idealizes or idolizes its subject.” Smith’s autotopography is, in a way, a biography of all the objects she worships.

The more commonplace objects also play an important role in Smith’s everyday life—beyond that of their inherent utility. The author even weighs the ordinariness of certain possessions against the extraordinariness of others:

I saunter past my coffeemaker that sits like a huddled monk on a small metal cabinet storing my porcelain cups. Patting its head, avoiding eye contact with the typewriter and channel changer, I reflect on how some inanimate objects are so much nicer than others. (36)

In *Stuff Theory*, Maurizia Boscagli analyzes the role of everyday objects in the context of New Materialism, defining the more ordinary possessions as

the satellitary system of objects that continually accompanies and never leaves us; these are the prosthetic things that fill our pockets and purses, closets and trunks with which we furnish the self and the spaces we inhabit . . . those objects that have enjoyed their moment of consumer allure, but have now shed their commodity glamour—without yet being quite cast aside. They exist brazenly as neither one thing nor the other: not quite salvable, and certainly not garbage, not monumental or important objects, but still bearing traces of the past, of desire, of life, and of the interactions between subject and object that formed them and wore them out. Not particularly useful but not useless enough to cast off, these are objects that we are not quite ready to let go of—or that are not ready to let go of us. (5–6)

To our eye, a white stone from a mountain in Monterrey might be dispensable, yet at the sight of it Smith is met with “an instantaneous affection for it” (141). A heavily marked-up copy of Murakami’s *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, stained with coffee and olive oil might be easily discarded by any of us, yet Smith describes it as her “traveling companion and the mascot of [her] resurging energy” (140). Objects not worth much for most people, objects which would fall into the category of “stuff,” are endowed in the narrative with a certain kind of sacredness, becoming indispensable in Smith’s life.

Among the ordinary items mentioned in *M Train*, the presence of a black coat particularly stands out. Unexceptional as a piece of clothing may be, the fact that there is a whole chapter in the book dedicated to it is rather noteworthy. “Vecchia Zimarra,” titled after Giacomo Puccini’s aria *La Bohème*, opens with Smith narrating what seems to be a dream. All of a sudden, the narrative shifts in tone and Smith introduces the said coat: “I had a black coat. A poet gave it to me some years ago on my fifty-seventh birthday” (160). From the moment she first mentions it, one already expects the coat to become part of Smith’s sanctuary:

Every time I put it on I felt like myself. The moths liked it as well and it was riddled with small holes along the hem, but I didn’t mind. The pockets had come unstitched at the seam and I lost everything I absentmindedly slipped into their holy caves. Every morning I got up, put on my coat and watch cap, grabbed my pen and notebook, and headed across Sixth Avenue to my café. I loved my coat and the café and my morning routine. It was the clearest and simplest expression of my solitary identity. (160)

This last statement conveys the idea that certain objects take on a new significance when they become extensions of the self: the coat becomes synonymous with the pleasant moments Smith has enjoyed while wearing it; it becomes synonymous with her comfort, her confidence, her identity. As Brown states, “enmeshed as we are in the object world, we can’t at times differentiate ourselves from things . . . those things (however actively or passively) have somehow come to resemble us” (*Other Things* 9).

What cannot be anticipated is the relevance the coat will acquire throughout the remaining chapters—or, rather, we should say that it is the absence of the coat that becomes relevant. When Smith loses her beloved black coat, it inevitably enters what she calls the “Valley of the Lost” (164), together with the many belongings she no longer possesses. “Lost things,” she reflects, “claw through the membranes, attempting to summon our attention through an indecipherable mayday” (161). Although she reasons that the loss of her coat is “such a small thing in the grand scheme” (164), she cannot help but go back to it again and again. In his volume on *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice*, Stephen Ahern reasons that

when things fail us, we find ourselves in an ontological crisis . . . where the things that held our existence in logical and seemingly secure structures

revolt against us and turn us inside out, forcing us to venture into the world to take a closer look. (50)

We are, Ahern concludes, dependent on things—on the things we own as much as on the things we lose. Towards the end of the book, in a chapter precisely titled “Valley of the Lost,” Smith brings up the coat in a meditation on the nature of loss:

Do our lost possessions mourn us? . . . Will my coat, riddled with holes, remember the rich hours of our companionship? Asleep on buses from Vienna to Prague, nights at the opera, walks by the sea, the grave of Swinburne in the Isle of Wight, the arcades of Paris, the caverns of Lucray, the cafés of Buenos Aires. Human experience bound in its threads. How many poems bleeding from its ragged sleeves? I averted my eyes just for a moment, drawn by another coat that was warmer and softer, but that I did not love. 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)

With this last rhetorical question, Smith introduces the idea that one may be survived by her belongings and that these come to define us, to define “the measure of our worth.” *M Train* can be understood, then, as a compilation of the objects Smith wishes to be remembered by, the actual book being one of them. Ultimately, the coat is not simply a coat, just as *M Train* is not simply a book.

2.2 Material Memory Landscape: A Willful Nostalgia

Integral to autotopography is the concept of memory, so much so that, as Hallam and Hockey note, in our material culture we speak about memories as if these were possessions: “we ‘keep’ and ‘preserve’ our memories almost as though they are objects in a personal museum. We choose when to disclose or display memories to others . . . we imagine ourselves to be responsible for, or ‘in control’ of, our memories” (3). Our focus here, however, is on the objects which seem to hold these memories. According to Russell W. Belk, “[a] sense of past is essential to a sense of self. . . . Possessions can be a rich repository of our past and act as stimuli for intentional as well as unintentional recollections” (“The Role” 674). This intentional/unintentional dichotomy is essential in the examination of the act of recollection. In her study of autotopography, González discusses two ways in which one may access the stories objects bring to mind:

“remembering” and “memory.” The main difference, she states, lies in voluntariness: whereas remembering results from “a [voluntary] retrogressive movement from the present into a reconstruction of the past,” memory is “an [involuntary] intrusion of the past into the present” (136). Likewise, Dorth Berntsen argues that some memories are generated through an active search process which is goal-oriented while others result from an associative process that most often occurs subconsciously when the individual is not focused on anything in particular (21). For González, the voluntary search into the past has much to do with nostalgia, which she defines as a “way in which the past is produced from a present yearning” (137). This longing for the past, however, must be futile; it “cannot be satisfied because it is the longing itself that structures this desire” (González 137); as Stewart notes, “[n]ostalgia cannot be sustained without loss” (145). The act of recollection, however, is not only determined by the person who is revisiting the past; we must analyze other devices involved in this exercise in order to fully understand its intricacies.

More often than not, we find ourselves unconsciously reminiscing about a particular time in the past. These moments when we are overcome with an unintentional memory are frequently triggered by elements external to the self, and what Sherry Turkle calls “evocative objects”: items which are connected to our emotional lives and are able to catalyze thought and self-creation (5). Objects with a highly evocative power may be on display or concealed. Those which still serve a utilitarian purpose in our everyday lives or whose sight we are accustomed to catch belong to the first category, whereas those more unserviceable and fragile or symbolizing a more poignant memory belong to the latter. Richard Heersmink describes these as active or passive objects (1843). Active objects which are integrated into our everyday activity allow for the memories they encapsulate to become part of our day to day, “signaling continuity between past and present” (Petrelli et al. 60). On the contrary, passive objects tend to be stored away in what Petrelli et al. call “boxes of memory” which are only accessed on rare occasions (59). When rediscovered, these act as “time capsules” which take the owner back in time, therefore accentuating “the contrast between the past world and the current one, triggering a world of nostalgia when brought to light” (Petrelli et al. 60). Voluntary remembering and involuntary memory, then, are at work in this exercise; while we intentionally seek to dust off these evocative objects, the memories they evoke in us may not be anticipated.

In her definition of autotopography, González uses the phrase “material memory landscape” arguing that the arrangement or collection of certain objects “form[s] a visible and tactile map of the subjectivity” and “create[s] a metonymic link with past events and absent persons” (134). This notion is key in our analysis of *M Train*, for objects and memory are inextricably intertwined in the narrative (as they are in life). Most of the time, Smith’s cherished possessions act as carriers of memories and operate as portals to people and places no longer traceable in the present. Particularly interesting is the fact that Smith holds on to certain belongings that she seldom dusts off but that she does not bear to lose:

I slowly advance toward my desk and lift the top. I don’t open it very often, as some precious things hold memories too painful to revisit. Thankfully, I need not look inside, as my hand knows the size, texture, and location of each object it contains. Reaching beneath my one childhood dress, I remove a small metal box with tiny perforated holes in the cover. I take a deep breath before I open it, as I harbor the irrational fear that the sacred contents may dissipate when confronted with a sudden onrush of air. But no, everything is intact. . . . I feel the warmth of recognition, memories of time spent fishing with Fred in a rowboat on Lake Ann in northern Michigan. (37)

Smith is referring here to stored-away objects that, for Heersmink, would fall into the category of passive evocative objects. These possessions which she keeps inside her desk ultimately become the only traces of a past that is “too painful to revisit.” This explains why Smith avoids glancing at these possessions yet at the same time is comforted by the mere knowledge that they remain where she last placed them. The angst she is met with at the thought of losing these objects, reminders of her loved ones that are now gone, may be comparable, to a certain extent, to the feeling she experienced when she lost these people. After all, not having these objects would be tantamount to being deprived of the memories they contain and, as a result, losing all that is left of her loved ones. In Sara Ahmed’s words, “[w]e move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them” (32). In her analysis of the relationship between objects and happiness, Ahmed explains that the objects which make us happy tend to be placed near our “bodily horizon,” thus determining our “horizon of likes.” By the same token, we usually keep the things we do not like away from this horizon: “Awayness might help establish the edges

of our horizon; in rejecting the proximity of certain objects, we define the places that we know we do not wish to go . . . those things we do not want to keep within reach” (Ahmed 32). In this case, it is not so much Smith’s likes what determines the nearness of certain objects, but rather the memories attached to these. We could therefore speak of a “horizon of memories” whereby what determines the closeness of an object is the way Smith is affected by the memories it evokes.

Smith’s strong emotional attachment to certain objects can be further explained by the concept of “autobiographical dependency”: one’s inability to remember a past experience save through the interaction with an evocative object (Heersmink 1839). “How could I have forgotten our hours of sweet divination?” (37), Smith protests right after opening the metal box and (re)discovering its contents (and therefore the memories attached to them). Losing an object could therefore mean losing a memory, hence the weight attached to certain items. In fact, Belk goes as far to state that “an unintentional loss of possessions should be regarded as a loss or lessening of the self” (“Possessions” 142). But we may also borrow the phrase “autobiographical dependency” to refer to a different need: Smith’s efforts to cling to her evocative objects reveal that she is not able to conceive of her present without a constant connection to her past. Not only that, but she sometimes admits to experiencing “a longing for the way things were” (164). These objects which come to stand for people or moments that cannot be brought back may become, in Hallam and Hockey’s words, “pathologized”:

Profound attachment to an object may be perceived as an overevaluation of a material item, which exceeds “acceptable” limits through its estimation over and above the lost person with whom it is associated . . . [R]elationships with powerful objects can be pathologized if their importance for the individual becomes overwhelming and a “dependency” is suspected. (19)

Smith’s difficulty in cutting loose from the memory of missing things and missing people, however, seems to have more to do with a tendency to romanticize the past and to engage in a willful nostalgia. This is probably best illustrated in the following excerpt:

We want things we cannot have. We seek to reclaim a certain moment, sound, sensation. I want to hear my mother’s voice. I want to see my children as children. Hands small, feet swift. Everything changes. Boy grown, father

dead, daughter taller than me, weeping from a bad dream. Please stay forever, I say to the things I know. Don't go. Don't grow. (209)

Here lies the key to her dependence on those possessions that bring back her precious memories: they come to be the only way to revive what has been lost. While Smith may still be able to recall a considerable number of events, evocative objects are the shortcut to her past—a past that she does not wish to part with.

The concepts of autotopography and recollection are so intertwined in *M Train* that they cannot be explained independently. This book, as a work which reflects the mind's responses to evocations of the past, contains examples of both voluntary and involuntary acts of recollection. More often than not, Smith readily accepts the manifestation of past memories. What is more, she sometimes intentionally seeks reminiscence, deriving pleasure from the ability to revisit the past. At the beginning of the story, Smith confesses: “Without noticing I slip into a light yet lingering malaise. Not a depression, more like a fascination for melancholia” (25). The fact that she calls it “fascination for melancholia” already points to something that seems to be self-willed. In fact, a few pages later she finds herself meandering around her room “scanning for cherished things to make certain they haven't been drawn into the half-dimensional place where things disappear” (32). Smith seems to be willing to immerse herself in nostalgia precisely because she wishes to experience the longing for something that cannot be recovered.

There are times, however, when Smith is caught by surprise by the images that start to appear at the back of her mind. This is when memory (as opposed to remembering) comes into play. When Smith tries to visualize her copy of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, for instance, she is met with a different—yet connected—image. In an attempt to voluntarily remember something, she is stricken with an involuntary memory: “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 visitation produced a pang, for I knew the envelope well” (197). The envelope that materializes in her thoughts is one that used to contain a handful of Polaroids she had once shot of Sylvia Plath's grave which had ended up getting lost. Smith remembers: “Heartsick, I went over my every move but never found them. They simply vanished. I mourned the loss, magnified by the memory of joy I'd felt in the taking of them in a strangely joyless time” (198). We thus realize that her sorrow results not

from being reminded of the pictures themselves but rather of their loss, for they were the only evidence of such a treasured moment. She then recalls two other visits to Plath's grave and her failed attempt to take similar pictures, concluding: "Nothing can be truly replicated. Not a love, not a jewel, not a line" (202).

CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing *M Train* as autotopography allows us to determine the extent to which objects are significant in the construction of a life narrative. A fishing hook, a black coat, or a handful of Polaroids enjoy the status of characters in Patti Smith's autobiographical book, acting as triggers for her memories and as repositories for different parts of her identity. These and other items connect Smith to the past, helping her make sense of her present self. On the one hand, autotopography becomes the common thread of an account which is guided by objects and the stories they encapsulate. On the other hand, it helps to shed light on the way memory works in life (writing). The presence of artifacts in *M Train*, then, is not arbitrary; quite the opposite, it helps establish connections among the different narrative themes: loss, self-awareness, and the passing of time.

Smith's *M Train* turns out to be, on some level, a Museum Train where she displays, both in writing and through photography, the many objects that shape (or have shaped) her identity, while disclosing the experiences attached to them. The photographs in particular end up forming a sort of exhibition catalogue whereby one can get to know the author, both through the objects portrayed and through the pictures as objects themselves. Ultimately, *M Train* (the material book in the reader's hands) becomes itself one of the objects that make up this museum. Not only does it tick all the boxes of autotopography but, as an autobiographical artifact that is bound to survive Smith, it seems to provide quite a decent measure of her (literary) worth.

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