Words from the New World: Adventure and Memory in Patti Smith’s Late Voice

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Introduction

Patti Smith’s late work is invariably connected by critics and fans to the work of her ‘classic’ era (the 1970s punk scene) and the extent to which recent work lives up to, develops or exceeds that on which the artist’s reputation was based. Smith herself has been no stranger to such memory work, via her involvement in biographical projects such as her book Just Kids and the film Dream of Life. Her musical output since the 1990s has been characterized by memory work, not least in a number of pieces written in response to the passing of friends and family. Much of the 1996 album Gone Again was written as a response to the loss of Smith’s husband Fred ‘Sonic’ Smith, as well as her brother Todd and her long-term friends and collaborators Robert Mapplethorpe and Richard Sohl; the album also contained the song ‘About a Boy’, an homage to Kurt Cobain. ‘Grateful’, which appeared on Gung Ho (2000) was a song that recalled the late Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead, while ‘Mother Rose’ (from Trampin’, 2004) remembered Smith’s recently deceased mother. Such work has, however, been complemented by an embrace of new beginnings and adventure, often achieved by returning to places, themes and styles Smith has explored before but looking for fresh angles and new perspectives.

This essay explores the dynamic of adventure, memory and return via analysis of Smith’s 2012 album Banga, a work that embraces adventure from its opening track ‘Amerigo’ (based on the recalled discovery and witnessing of the New World and its wonders) to the dramatic pinnacle of the album, ‘Constantine’s Dream’, a visionary account of the creative process.1 Throughout, the thrill of adventure is tempered with moments of reflection. ‘Amerigo’ describes adventure from a great spatial and temporal distance, mixing elegy, awe and the distortion of deferred witnessing. ‘Constantine’s Dream’ is immediately followed with the brooding reflection of Smith’s take on Neil Young’s paean to nature and transience, ‘After the Goldrush’. While connecting the narrative concerns via reference to Smith’s lyrics, I also discuss the music of Banga. In the reflective strings of ‘Amerigo’, the yearning guitar work of ‘April Fool’ and the ‘girl group’ harmonies of ‘This Is the Girl’, textures of longing provide an emotional counterbalance to Smith’s poetry. Smith utilises a variety of voices, ranging from the declamatory style most associated with her ‘punk’ phase to the sweeter, more melodically focussed approaches of her late work. In the second part of the essay, I consider the canonisation of Smith and her work in light of what I term ‘late chronicles’, a series of documents and events over the past fifteen years that have seen Smith’s work fixed into the rock canon and have provided further context to situate her work and her many cultural reference points. These chronicles include not only the biographies and analyses written by others, but also Smith’s own contributions to the canonisation process, in particular her books The Coral Sea and Just Kids. I finish with some further observations on Banga, filtered through the knowledge we have of Smith from the late chronicles that preceded it.

Prior to the release of *Banga*, Smith had not produced a studio album of self-written music since *Trampin’* in 2004. She had, however, been artistically productive during this period. She had engaged in some notable live performances, among them the revisiting of the entire *Horses* album during the 2005 Meltdown festival (an event for which Smith acted as curator) and an epic set to mark the closing of the legendary New York venue CBGB in 2006. The Meltdown performance celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of *Horses* and the album was reissued that same year in a ‘deluxe’ edition which featured a remastered version of the original album and a recording of the 2005 performance. In 2007 Smith released a collection of cover versions under the title *Twelve* and oversaw the selection of tracks for a retrospective compilation of her work (*Outside Society*, 2011; an earlier retrospective entitled *Land* had appeared in 2002). Smith’s literary and visual work had gained much attention during this time. *Just Kids*, her account of her long friendship with the artist Robert Mapplethorpe, was published to great acclaim in 2010 and received the U.S. National Book Award for non-fiction later that year. A new collection of poetry, *Auguries of Innocence*, was published in 2005 and the 1992 collection *Woolgathering* was republished in 2012. *The Coral Sea*, a more elliptical and poetic account of Mapplethorpe’s life and art which had originally appeared in 1996, was also reissued in an expanded edition in 2012. An audio version of *The Coral Sea* was released in 2008, consisting of two earlier recordings of Smith reciting the work over musical backing from My Bloody Valentine’s Kevin Shields. 2008 also saw the release of *Patti Smith: Dream of Life*, a revealing documentary filmed over 11 years by fashion photographer Steven Sebring. The film showed Smith not only as a subject of photography, but also as a keen photographer herself. Smith’s visual work has continued to be exhibited in recent years and her photographs have been published as separate editions and as illustrations in her books and CD booklets. Smith and guitarist Lenny Kaye also briefly appeared in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Film Socialisme*, released in 2010 and filmed aboard the cruise ship *Costa Concordia* in 2008 and 2009 (the ship was later to become famous when it was wrecked off the coast of Italy in January 2012). It was during their stay on the ship – which Smith describes as ‘a strange and fruitful voyage’ – that Smith and Kaye began writing material for *Banga*, though Smith had started planning the album the previous year.2

*Banga* was mostly well received by critics on its release in June 2012. Many drew connections between the album and Smith’s early work and noted the range of artistic and stylistic references in the album’s twelve tracks. Evelyn McDonnell of the *Los Angeles Times* referred to ‘an encyclopedia’s worth of literary, mythic, historical, religious and musical references; doo-wop ballads; epic guitars and guitar epics; quivering poems in headstand pose’, while Joseph Stannard of *The Wire* suggested that Smith’s ‘thirst for the sublime remains unquenchable’.3 Describing *Banga* as ‘an event’, AllMusic’s Thom Jurek wrote of Smith that ‘As an artist [she] embodies the highest calling of her vocation: she completely absorbs everything she encounters, then gives it back to the culture in a manner that holistically edifies it.’4 Most critics wrote about the quality of Smith’s voice, its subtle and often mellow musicality providing what many claimed to be the ‘best singing’ of her recording career. For others, however, the musical arrangements did not match the ambition

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2 Smith, liner notes to *Banga*.
of the lyrics and some reviews of Smith’s subsequent concerts made distinctions between the edginess of the live performances and the relatively ‘safe’ music on the album.

Several accounts of the album made special mention of the opening track ‘Amerigo’, the lyrics of which describe the feelings of Amerigo Vespucci as he recalls the voyage to the continent that would be named after him. The track makes for a dramatic opening to the album with its single, resonant piano note and Smith’s spoken line, ‘We were going to see the world’. From here, ‘Amerigo’ evolves into a medium-paced song, with Smith alternating between a smooth vocal style on the melody and gently narrated spoken word sections. The spoken word adds drama, edginess and a certain gravitas while the sung melody moves the song forward in a more easy listening style. The interaction also calls to mind the way voiceover is used in film and television, a connection that is strengthened by the content of the narrative. We quickly come to hear the speaker as a storyteller voicing a tale of grand adventure but with an awed and elegiac tone that hints at lessons learned, experience and nostalgia for the recalled voyage. The mixture of dramatic forward momentum and reflective backwards glances are emphasised by a string section which alternates between urgent rhythmic pulsations and slower, wavering figures.

‘April Fool’, the second track on Banga, was released as a digital download ahead of the album. The date chosen for the release was 1 April, a ‘coincidence’ which would not have come as a surprise to Smith’s followers, familiar as many will be with her fascination with significant dates and anniversaries. ‘April Fool’ is a highly melodic pop song and contains some of Smith’s seductive vocals. McDonnell describes the track as ‘an invitation to writerly romance’, a reference to Smith’s explanation of the song’s inspiration, the writer Nikolai Gogol (born, according to some accounts, and when using the Gregorian calendar, on 1 April). While the song may not be as adventurous as some of the others on the album, there is a subtle exploration of the sea of possibilities that a melody can entail when Tom Verlaine starts playing what Stannard calls ‘seagull-like guitar licks’. As he traces out the possible trajectories the song might take were it not being reigned in for pop perfection, Verlaine takes on a greater authorial role than Smith herself, unfolding the pleas and longing expressed earlier in the lyrics and suggesting ways to ‘break all the rules’ (a lyric from the song) while staying steadfastly within the norms of the pop format. The guitar work provides a sense of adventure that the song itself does not quite live up to, Verlaine hinting at what might be possible. His clipped emotionality, meanwhile, underlines the impression of a ruthless efficiency found in the whole band, one which emphasises experience and knowledge of craft over adventure.

‘Fuji-san’, written as a response to the Tohoku earthquake of 2011, is more adventurous musically, as Smith adopts an angrier declamatory style against heavier, darker guitar tones and more ferociously rocking drums. Where ‘Fuji-san’ channels anger as a response to grief and loss, ‘This is the Girl’ returns to Smith’s now familiar gentler side, using a 1960s girl-group style to lament the loss of the singer Amy Winehouse. In case the object of its attention were not clear (if one had not read Smith’s accompanying notes or heard her introduce the track in concert or interview), the lyrics offer clues through typically Smithian wordplay: ‘this is the blood that turned into wine’, then ‘this is the wine of the house’. As well as being a ‘girl group lament’ – the retro style appropriate for the remembrance of a singer drawn to 1960s soul styles – ‘This is the Girl’ is a song of transformation, mixing the religious imagery

5 McDonnell, ‘Review’.
6 Stannard, review, p. 64.
of transubstantiation with reflections on the transformations of the self, not least those brought about by celebrity and the music business.

Following the pattern of alternating rough and smooth textures, the album’s title track finds Smith resurrecting her trademark chanted/declaimed style on an edgy piece that fits into a lineage of references to punks and dogs. Smith took the title from the name given to Pontius Pilate’s dog in Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel *The Master and Margarita*, a work she had been sent by a Russian friend and which inspired this track and the Gogol-referencing ‘April Fool’. Both songs were elaborated during a subsequent visit to Russia. Smith’s voice leads the music on ‘Banga’, the chant followed by the drums and guitars even as it relies on them for momentum. Recalling tracks from Smith’s early albums, ‘Banga’ acts as both memory work and continuation. It also carries a touch of pathetic humour, not least in its closing section, which serves to deconstruct what has gone before and, in the final drawled lines – ‘night is a mongrel / believe or explode’ – to offer a parody of Bob Dylan (albeit Dylan via Joan Baez). Smith once referred to Dylan’s voice as ‘like a motorcycle through a cornfield’ and it is that attention-grabbing sonority she seems to be channelling here.7

Contrasting the brief ferocity of the title track, ‘Maria’ is slow and elegiac, built around three prominent opening chords in a manner that recalls ‘This is the Girl’. Described by Smith as an elegy for her friend Maria Schneider, the song also presents a longing for the time of the two women’s youth. When listening to the album as a whole, this track is the first to offer obvious echoes of those that preceded it. The line ‘at the edge of the world’ summons up the adventure of discovery hymned in ‘Amerigo’, while ‘you were the girl’ recalls the Winehouse tribute. Here, adventure is life itself, and in particular the possibilities of youthful ambition. Age and death bring exile from that world, leaving the still living singer in a strange alliance with the friend she is mourning. Smith’s use of a spoken word elegy and the way in which her lyrics dwell on the past tense echo the remembered past of ‘Amerigo’, the idea that such things were possible, that the world was once filled with wonder and that one had a purpose and a place in the world. There is the sense, too, of how quickly it could all fade, as Smith sings ‘We didn’t know the precariousness of our young powers.’

‘Mosaic’, built around Jay Dee Daugherty’s evocative mandocello, brings Eastern modalism to the album, an explicit reminder of the internationalism that pervades *Banga* (the Japan-referencing ‘Fuji-San’, the three ‘Russian’ tracks, the hymns to maritime exploration). The lyrics, which reference the Turkish city of Konya, are among the more abstract on the album; in interviews and promotional materials, Smith described the lyric as being about abstract love and revealed that there is a reference to the film *The Hunger Games*, which had influenced her. ‘Tarkovsky’, a track that was inspired by Smith’s visit to Russia, takes its name from the Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky and is one of the ‘artier’ tracks on Banga, not least in its title. The lyrical style is highly poetic and, where other songs on the album veer between speech, chant and singing, this emphasizes speech alone due to the language and meter employed. In her liner notes, Smith reveals that the track is ‘a response to the film *Ivan’s Childhood*, improvised over a variation on a theme by Sun Ra’. The song’s subtitle, ‘The Second Stop Is Jupiter’, is the title of the Sun Ra piece Smith and her band use as their basis. With knowledge of the poem’s inspiration, it is possible to see the lyrics as descriptions of scenes from Tarkovsky’s film, albeit that Smith’s ‘transcriptions’ are still highly allusive, a dreamlike interpretation of the film seen through the lens of improvised poetry. At the end of two of the verses comes the refrain ‘The boy, the beast and the butterfly’, seemingly a

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7 Moore, ‘Patti Smith’.
reference to the opening scenes of the film, in which we witness Ivan’s idyllic childhood experiences prior to the horrors of war. Notable throughout the recitation is the deliberation with which Smith pronounces syllables in words like ‘speed’ and ‘flight’ and the ‘b’s of the refrain.

‘Nine’ is an ‘old school’ Smith track featuring chanting and cryptic and archaic imagery; Smith is one of the few popular artists who could get away with using a phrase like ‘wherein perfection brews’. Following a brief takeover by Verlaine’s reverb-heavy guitar, Smith once again appears to channel Bob Dylan as she makes oblique reference to ‘nine blue eyed sailors’ and a cast of vagabonds, gypsies and harlequins. The album’s loud-quiet dynamic is maintained with the lilting ‘Seneca’, a lullaby written for the son of Steven Sebring (the director of Patti Smith: Dream of Life). In her liner notes to the album, Smith describes the song as ‘a prelude to adventure’, the adventure again being life itself.

‘Constantine’s Dream’ is the most ambitious and adventurous track on Banga, not only in its length (10:20), but also in its improvised edginess and its range of references. The track opens with acoustic guitar joined by a bass drum delivering brooding textures – the archetypal calm before the storm. A ‘classically’ chanted opening follows, in which a dream is recounted in the first person; this section is sung and the coding of the delivery allows us to hear the protagonist as Smith herself. After a minute, Smith switches to spoken word, also in the first person (the ‘I’ of the song still appears to be Smith, no longer dreaming). The narrative builds up, with drums, a persistent electric guitar riff and other strings all thickening the texture. The word flow quickens into a litany of religious imagery as Smith describes the basilica of St. Francis in Arezzo. From here she moves away to the theme from which the track takes its name: ‘Constantine’s Dream’, one of several frescoes in the basilica that make up the series The Legend of the True Cross by the Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca. As we are introduced to the painter and his masterwork and hear about the dream depicted in the fresco, we are still subject to Smith’s narration but the dream is now someone else’s. At one point, Constantine awakes in his own dream and is visited by an angel. By this stage the narrative is one of visions within visions: Constantine’s, Piero’s, Smith’s. By the fifth minute, the song/poem is primarily about the making of art (in the person of Piero) mixed with the making of war (in the person of Constantine). At 6:22 Smith, voicing Piero, delivers three of Banga’s most memorable lines:

All is art – all is future!
Oh Lord let me die on the back of adventure
With a brush and an eye full of light

In the next section of the track, we move to later in Piero’s life as he suffers blindness. Then, in an unexpected narrative twist that suddenly summons the subject matter of ‘Amerigo’, Smith connects the date of Piero’s death – 1492 – with Columbus’s trip to the New World (‘adventure itself’) and, in turn, the ‘beauty unspoiled’ of the newly discovered lands with the vision of St. Francis. The last section finds Columbus himself dreaming, then folds all the stories together in an apocalyptic finale that sees ‘the twenty-first century / Advancing like the angel that had come / To Constantine’. A final reference to ‘the apocalyptic night’ finds the music building into the kind of noise associated with the Velvet Underground.

Banga concludes with Smith’s version of ‘After the Goldrush’, which, coming after ‘Constantine’, invites comparison with its predecessor, the lines ‘mother nature on the run / in the 1970s’ continuing the theme of spoiled nature. Smith subsequently updates Young’s lyric
to ‘in the twenty-first century’ and uses children’s voices to repeat the refrain, a suggestion of future hope.

Retrospection

Having offered this initial account of *Banga*, in which I placed a certain amount of emphasis on articulations of adventure, I now wish to consider retrospection, memory and the past in relation to Smith’s life and work more broadly. Although my main interest here is Smith’s twenty-first century work, I also want to briefly discuss the moment in the 1970s that cemented Smith’s reputation. That event was, of course, the release of *Horses*, and, while I do not discuss that album in any great detail here, it is essential to note its inescapability, the way in which everything Smith has done in her post-*Horses* career has seemed to refer back to that ‘semital’ album in one manner or another. This particular form of retrospection has occurred partly due to, partly in spite of Smith herself, who continues to emphasize her other artistic practice and her ambitions for future projects. More consistently, mention of her pioneering debut album is never far from other commentators’ accounts when describing current work. A second reason for mentioning retrospection in reference to *Horses* is that I wish to emphasise how, for all its ambition, Smith’s debut album was a work grounded in its creator’s own fascination with looking back, elegising and paying tribute to the past. It is in the Janus-faced combination of future and past, of the merging of adventure and memory, that one finds the most continuous thread of Smith’s art.

As mentioned earlier, the 2000s has been a fruitful period for Smith in terms of artistic production across a range of media. It has also been a time for others to critically evaluate and re-evaluate her work and to canonise it. There have emerged a number of biographies and critical analyses that have presented variations on the theme of the Patti Smith story, especially that leading up to and surrounding the release of her debut album. Published shortly before the millennium, Victor Bockris’s biography of the artist takes the story up to 1998 in an account that was, in many ways, also a memoir of Bockris himself; a biographer of Andy Warhol, William Burroughs and Lou Reed amongst others, Bockris had been a participant in the New York poetry and punk scenes in which Smith had first found fame. Bockris’s biography joined an earlier one by Nick Johnstone, which has subsequently been updated; Dave Thompson’s 2010 biography is similarly up-to-date, bringing the story up to the *Dream of Life* film and *Just Kids*. Joe Tarr’s 2008 book *The Words and Music of Patti Smith* offers a more academic account of Smith’s life and work and contains some of the most detailed and convincing interpretations of Smith’s art to be published to date. Two books ostensibly about *Horses* have also appeared; both contain extensive biographical material covering the period before and, in one case, after Smith’s landmark album.\(^8\)

All these texts, along with the other canonising processes mentioned earlier, have contributed to the re-creation of *Horses* as an event. To a certain extent, the album had always been greeted as an event but more recently this has been retroactively reinforced through the discourse created around Smith’s entire career. Even *Just Kids*, while ostensibly about Smith’s relationship with Mapplethorpe, reads partly as a teleological account of the creation of her first album. Paytress, despite claiming not to be writing a biography of Smith, spends

half of his book setting up a context for the arrival of *Horses* that requires a great deal of biographical and other cultural and historical information, making Smith’s early life one that led inevitably to *Horses*. Shaw, despite his book appearing in a series devoted to individual albums, spends more time on the context of *Horses* than on the ‘text’ itself, a process that only intensifies the ‘eventness’ of the album. Tarr, while covering a broad range of Smith’s work, also posits *Horses* as an event. The eventness of *Horses* is such that it has become a culmination of what led to it and a point of continual reference after its appearance, as Paytress makes clear when describing the 2005 Meltdown as ‘a celebration of an alternative tradition where all roads led invariably to *Horses*, the inspirations that lay behind it and the imprint it has left.’

The weight that *Horses* must bear means that, for some critics, little that Smith has done since the 1970s can really compare. Going against those critics who praised *Banga*, Jim Farber found the album compared poorly to its 1975 predecessor:

> While “Horses” presented a new-fangled wild child, full of sex, attitude and danger, “Banga” suggests a self-styled Mother of Us All, out to nurture, savor and memorialize anything she can get her hands on. Nearly every song on the CD salutes or eulogizes someone who’s either imperiled, lost or, in Smith’s mind, worthy of canonization [...] It’s a slog of overawed images, bloated by angels, gods, devils, oracles, baptisms, salvations, laurels, saints, icons, and sisters of mercy.

What Farber seems to miss in this account, however, is the extent to which *Horses* was itself a memorialising event and Smith an elegist from the start of her career. As Tarr observes, ‘Much of Smith’s work has been a tribute to artists and musicians who have inspired her, building on their ideas and work, interpreting their classics, mourning their loss, imagining their epiphanies and dark moments’ and this is as true of *Horses* as of subsequent work. The album opens with references to death and resurrection, its infamous first line – ‘Jesus died for somebody’s sins but not mine’ – acting as a prelude to a piece of rock and roll archaeology as Smith and her band tap the 1960s classic ‘Gloria’ for unexploited treasure. As Mark Paytress comments, if Smith’s religious references work as a method for ‘putting her own martyrs, those who’d died in the name of rock’n’roll, to rest’, then the act of musical revival serves as a thrilling new-for-old moment, up there with Presley’s baton-passing routine with the old hillbilly boys, and the Stones’ trade-off with the bluesmen of Chicago’s South Side. And, like both Elvis and Jagger, Smith possessed a voice that lifted the material out of the grave and into the future now.

Throughout *Horses*, Smith displays what we might call early, or anticipated, lateness and this is evident in a number of factors. First, she entered the public sphere at the time of rock’s lateness, a period when, according to both contemporary and subsequent accounts, rock and pop had entered a period of maturity following the ambitious experiments of the 1960s (Tarr and Paytress, not untypically for writers looking back on this period, make much of the sloth

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of rock in the early to mid 1970s). Second, Smith was (and remains) a ‘subject’ to rock inasmuch as she started as a fan of 1960s rock stars, came to understand her own artistic subjectivity in ways made possible by rock music and, furthermore, was committed to an open display of ‘critical fidelity’ to the possibilities of rock.14 Third, and closely related to this issue of critical fidelity, Smith began her rock career via various acts of mourning for rock’s ‘martyrs’ (Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison). Fourth, Smith herself was older than was typical for new and emerging pop/rock stars and carried with her a sense of urgency, which she made vocal in interviews of the time.

Smith shared some of these aspects with her contemporary and occasional collaborator Bruce Springsteen. While the latter was born later than Smith and therefore did not enter the public sphere at such a ‘mature’ age as she, he nevertheless embodied, in musical style, lyrical preoccupation and performative zeal, a sense of critical fidelity to rock that could only have come about through a second or third generation subjectivity. Smith and Springsteen, both rock archaeologists, were seen as heralds of rock’s future possible directions. Both embraced a sense of adventure, voiced in references to escape, giving oneself up to the body, in infinitely unfolding freefall poem-songs married to electric guitars and propelled by rock machinery. Paul Williams captured this twofold nature when he wrote of Smith as being

the herald for a new moment in rock and roll, third generation. She quotes Chuck Berry by quoting the Rolling Stones; lights candles to Hendrix and Jim Morrison; writes crazed brilliant anarchic poetry using “land of 1000 dances” as a lyrical and spiritual reference point.15

I have used the terms ‘archaeology’ and ‘treasure’ deliberately because I believe they provide a useful way of thinking of this ‘looking back’ as a kind of adventure, a quest for something buried, nearly forgotten, perhaps not yet known, but remembered or imagined by the archaeologist herself. Smith brings past and future together in ‘field work’ which lays out a plot, demarcates reference points, and posits possibilities based on existing knowledge and guesswork (a process equally true of improvisation).16 Archaeology is also about time travel, moving from classical times to the sixteenth century to the nineteenth or twenty-first. Furthermore, it is useful to consider what Siegfried Zielinski, drawing on the work of Rudi Visker, calls ‘anarcheology’, a process Zielinski identifies as a search for certain sources that leads us along unexpected paths:

A history that entails envisioning, listening, and the art of combining by using technical devices, which privileges a sense of their multifarious possibilities over their realities in the form of products, cannot be written with avant-gardist pretensions or with a mindset of leading the way. Such a history must reserve the option to gallop off at a tangent, to be wildly enthusiastic, and, at the same time, to criticize what needs to be criticized. This method describes a pattern of searching, and delights in any gifts of true surprises.17

16 Smith and her band would themselves use the term ‘fieldwork’ to describe the simple rock templates they used as the basis for extemporization. See Tarr, Words and Music, p. 23.
Zielinski’s account of the anarcheological process and the gift of surprise calls to mind improvisation again, while its nod to ‘anarchy’ recalls the punk scene that Patti Smith helped foster in the 1970s. It also fits well with Sandy Pearlman’s description of Smith’s first album:

> If poetry like music is born of invention, adventure, of paradoxical limitless individuation, then the first principle of Patti’s excellent adventure [with] Horses was to bet the ranch on a poetic language that directly transforms itself by means of clearly counterintuitive unstaged leaps of word faith, that wind up being perceived at the other end of the combinatorial wormhole as inevitable intuitive logic. 18

Such ‘leaps of word faith’ can be found throughout Smith’s work, with Banga being no exception. One example would be the inclusion in ‘Constantine’s Dream’ of the ‘coincidence’ of Piero dying in the same year that Columbus reached the New World. A verbal leap at this point allows Smith to indulge her fascination with significant dates while setting up a narrative shift and ‘1492’ becomes a portal through which musicians and listeners travel to a new stage in the track’s development. This can be seen and heard as anarchaeology, a willingness to be distracted, to take new routes based on emerging possibilities.

In his account of Smith’s work, Tarr frequently uses the term ‘landscape’, which again seems pertinent to archaeological processes in that it establishes the notion of a field, of something to be peopled or filled with (or emptied of) objects. The canonisation and remembrance of people and the fetishization of objects have been important factors in Smith’s work. We might conceive of that work and its field as representing an ‘iconscape’, a perspective upon the world seen from iconographic reference points, be they religious figures (religion understood broadly enough to include the ‘saints and martyrs’ of rock and roll) or magical relics. Walter Benjamin also reminds us of ways in which memory can be thought of as ‘archaeological’ when he writes that ‘Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried.’ 19 We have to dig through memories and it is the site of the digging (and hence the archaeological process) that is important:

> Epic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives us an account of the strata which first had to be broken through. 20

This, again, is a process which takes place in poetic and musical improvisation, the shamanic breaking-through to the other side hymned memorably by Jim Morrison, one of Smith’s influences.

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20 Ibid.
Age, experience and narrative self

Reviews of Banga and the concerts that came in its wake frequently mentioned age, either expressing surprise that Patti Smith was more alive than ever or comparing her, in generally favourable ways, to contemporaries. Although I do not wish to dwell here on age specifically, it is relevant to this essay to note that, due to Smith’s age and the longevity of her career, the ever-expanding discourse around her allows for an ever greater intertextuality based on various reference points in that career. Equally, Smith herself promotes an intertextuality based on age, time and experience with her interests across the arts and her many reference points, while we as listeners and interpreters of her work are able to make more connections, even if they are not ones the artist intended or would necessarily sanction.

For Victor Bockris the ‘late’ Patti Smith went through a number of personas: in the mid-1990s ‘there were elements of the rebellious punk poet, the grieving widow and sister, caring single mother and committed (a)political activist’, and ‘by 1996 she had metamorphosed from an entertainer into that position Richard Hell had prophesied in his 1974 essay on “celebrity as an art form”. Such a character is a living piece of American history, a walking icon’. What we can take from this is the notion that Smith provides an exemplary case of life narrative as adventure and of the self as an open work. Smith emphasises this with the notion of ongoing art projects and a connection to tradition. The continuation of mourning and her continued fascination with memory objects, talismans and magic numbers can be seen as ways of maintaining a chain of experience and affect that stretches from the remembered past through the reflections of the present to the ambitions of the future. Ageing and the accumulation of experience can be seen as a continuation of the adventure of life, something that Smith hints at in the subtitle to the book Patti Smith Complete 1975-2006: ‘Lyrics, Reflections & Notes for the Future’.

Episodes of Smith’s life and the lives of those close to her reverberate through the late chronicles – those accounts authored by Smith and others mentioned earlier – and such episodes come to shine like the objects she collects and treasures. A particular story about Smith holding her baby sister Kimberly while witnessing a barn fire features in some of the late chronicles and in a piece from Woolgathering called ‘Nineteen Fifty-Seven’, while the poem ‘Kimberly’ which first memorialised this event also became a song on Horses, thus marking a continuation of certain (auto)biographical features over the long range of Smith’s oeuvre. The focus on particular moments and images – a notable feature of Just Kids, The Coral Sea and many of Smith’s poems and songs – calls to mind Roland Barthes’s notion of the ‘biographeme’. In Camera Lucida (a book partly ‘about’ Robert Mapplethorpe in that the latter’s photographs and Barthes’s comments on them appear in it), Barthes notes his fondness for ‘certain biographical features which, in a writer’s life, delight me as much as certain photographs; I have called these features “biographemes”; Photography has the same relation to History that the biographeme has to biography’. Smith, in turn, follows a similar line of thinking when refracting such moments through the perspectives of fashion and style:

21 Bockris, Patti Smith, p. 213, 231.
The pursuit of style has always been a spirited part of the work process. Images that inform the work or the movement of the work. Baudelaire’s cravat. June Christie’s careless ponytail. A raincoat a la Camus. Bob Dylan’s snap tab collar. Black capris like Ava Gardner.25

In her writings, Mapplethorpe becomes immortalised (frozen) as the boy who loved light and placement, while Kimberly remains the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.

The transience of adventure

The fact that Banga, though steeped in loss, elegy and mourning, does not merely present retellings of the tales told in other late chronicles, suggests that Smith is finding new ways to look forward. If critics in the late 1990s wondered, as Bockris noted, when Smith’s ‘professional mourning’ would end, Banga shows the wealth of other interests the artist has for her writing.26 That said, I would argue that Banga is still infected by Smith’s earlier life writing when heard through the filter of the late chronicles. Smith’s ‘real’ lateness must be seen as an intensification or ‘thickening’ of her life story, as a combination of the anticipated lateness of her early work and the arrived-at maturity and proven ability to be singer, rock star and icon.27 We can read some of Banga’s key moments in a similarly infected manner, hearing ‘Amerigo’ perhaps as a rock and roll narrative, or ‘Maria’ as an elegy for Robert Mapplethorpe. The latter figure certainly saturates much of Smith’s work, past and present. In the ‘deluxe’ edition of Banga – designed as a book containing text, photography and sound (the CD almost an extra at the back) – references to Mapplethorpe are made not only in Smith’s liner notes, but also via the addition of a bonus track entitled ‘Just Kids’, based on material from Smith’s memoir. There are also less explicit references, such as the way in which the description of the boat voyage undertaken by Smith and Kaye while preparing the album calls to mind that undertaken by the character M (Mapplethorpe) in The Coral Sea.

The memory project of Banga can be broadened further, however, to include references Smith may well not have had in mind; such is the nature of the intertextuality she herself invites. ‘Amerigo’, as previously reported, is ‘about’ the discovery of the New World and it communicates its debt to adventure by the slowing and quickening of pace, altering the dynamics of the string accompaniment at key points to move from ‘full sail’ acceleration (2:06) to complete lull (2:25), as if the song were becalmed like a ship after a storm. The lull brings near silence, broken only by the thin keening of a violin string, then Smith’s urgently whispered imperative: ‘Hey, wake up, wake up’. Rising in wonder, the song gears up again, gathering wind behind its sails once more. On arrival at his unexpected destination, Smith has Vespucci express his awe at the people he witnesses – ‘such a delight to watch them dance, free of sacrifice and romance […] free of all the things that we hold dear’. But the narrative is not free of romance, for it carries the romantic overtones of many observers of the New World who saw only innocence or noble savagery. In this aspect, Smith has crafted a lyric that is reminiscent of the tone of voice found in many of the narratives of the voyages left by sailors, priests and others involved in the navigation and subsequent conquest of the Americas.

This is also a tone that has been utilized by writers of fiction attempting to recall the wonder of that time, such as Alejo Carpentier and Juan José Saer, who have been drawn to what

25 Smith, liner notes to Horses/Horses, p. 5, also printed in Patti Smith Complete, p. 25.
26 Bockris, Patti Smith, p. 234.
27 On ‘thickening’, see Randall and McKim, Reading Our Lives.
Smith calls ‘Words that have not been written / Words from the New World’, albeit with rather more playful and less romantic visions of the colonial encounter. In *The Harp and the Shadow*, his fictionalised account of Columbus’s voyages of discovery, Carpentier’s Columbus is asked to describe the world he has discovered but can find no words to do so due to the total difference between all he sees here and all he previously knew. Part of him believes that ‘things that have no names cannot be imagined’, yet he feels equally convinced that things come before their description but that ‘the words would not reveal the thing, if the thing were not already known’. Saer’s novel *The Witness*, meanwhile, plays with the standard accounts of the colonization of the New World by having a sixteenth-century Spaniard caught and kept prisoner by a South American tribe solely so that he can be released and act as witness to the tribe’s existence and destruction:

They wanted me to reflect like water the image they gave of themselves, to repeat their gestures and words, to represent them in their absence, and, when they returned me to my fellow creatures, they wanted me to be like the spy or scout who witnesses something that the rest of the tribe has not yet seen and retraces his steps and recounts it, meticulously. Threatened by everything that controls us from the dark and keeps us outside in the open until the day we are plunged by one sudden capricious gesture back into the indistinct, the Indians wanted there to be a witness to and a survivor of their passage through this material mirage; they wanted someone to tell their story to the world.

Saer’s point seems to be to challenge those romantic notions of the New World that had seen it as a lost Eden and its inhabitants as innocent or naïve beings with no desire for fame or permanence. It is also a useful connection to Walter Benjamin’s work in that it is through the medium which allows the (re)discovery of the past – in this case, the text – that we come to know the past and its ‘meaning’ for us in the present. The text becomes the real witness, the medium that allows the time travel. As Barthes writes:

Death, real death, is when the witness himself dies. Chateaubriand says of his grandmother and his great-aunt: ‘I may be the only man in the world who knows that such persons have existed’: yes, but since he has written this, and written it well, we know it too, insofar, at least, as we still read Chateaubriand.

If the witness as medium is so crucial, then, in returning to ‘Amerigo’, we should consider the role that Smith’s voice plays in the narrative. While it may be possible, for much of the song, to follow the ‘film voiceover’ illusion of conflating voice with character rather than actor (allowing here for the additional forgetting of gender difference), the illusion cannot be maintained when the track moves from Vespucci’s address to the king to ‘I gotta send you just a few more lines … from the / new / world.’ Here, Smith’s Americanisms shine through, from the anachronistic ‘gotta’ to the way she drawls the lines in her best ‘Dylanesque’. Suddenly, ‘new world’ takes on a different meaning as we are shifted back to the familiar tones of Patti Smith, a voice from the ‘new world’ of twentieth century rock music.

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The aforementioned points about memory and witnessing can also be applied to other aspects of Banga. As Barthes notes, the act of writing is crucial and words can act as keepsakes of the departed. At the conclusion of Just Kids, Smith recalls the difficult decision of which of Mapplethorpe’s possessions to hold on to and which to auction. She breaks into this recollection with a startling observation about writing:

Why can’t I write something that would awake the dead? That pursuit is what burns most deeply. I got over the loss of his desk and chair, but never the desire to produce a string of words more precious than the emeralds of Cortés. Yet I have a lock of his hair, a handful of his ashes, a box of his letters, a goatskin tambourine.31

Remembrances of those who have died serve as reminders that they once lived and that the world in which they lived once existed. This is partly the point of Just Kids and at least partly the point, it seems, of Smith’s many elegiac songs. ‘Maria’ can be heard as an elegy for a world that no longer exists and those who peopled it; it may therefore be as much about Robert Mapplethorpe as it is about Maria Schneider. Once the connection is made, the line ‘white shirt black tie’ can be heard as a reference to Mapplethorpe’s famous picture of Smith on the cover of Horses. The song could equally be heard as a companion piece to the foreword Smith wrote for her collection Early Work in 1994:

Youth untested, unbridled. Our hustling smiles.
Our lively limbs. We were as innocent and
dangerous as children racing across a mine field.
Some never made it.32

These lines in turn echo those found in the opening section of Hart Crane’s poem ‘Voyages’:

O brilliant kids, frisk with your dog,
Fondle your shells and sticks, bleached
By time and the elements; but there is a line
You must not cross nor ever trust beyond it
Spry cordage of your bodies to caresses
Too lichen-faithful from too wide a breast.
The bottom of the sea is cruel.33

The sea is too loud and the children too far away for the narrator to deliver this message (‘could they hear me I would tell them’, he says); all he can do is recall the seduction of the ocean with its promises of ‘caresses’ (a seduction that was only too familiar to Crane himself, whose own sea voyage culminated in a suicidal leap from the deck of a ship into the Gulf of Mexico on 27 April 1932).

In following such anarcheological traces, I am reflecting a practice of association that Smith herself frequently uses, the experience of art mixing sometimes uneasily with the experience of life. Immediately after reporting Mapplethorpe’s death in Just Kids, Smith writes of listening ‘to the aria from Tosca with an open book on my knees’, which can be read as a way of aestheticizing a key moment (something that Smith’s critics accuse her of doing too

readily) or of looking to art for comfort (or both). Soon after this passage, Smith describes a trip to the coast to try to work through her mourning:

Up and down the deserted beach I walked in my black wind coat. I felt within its asymmetrical roomy folds like a princess or a monk. I know Robert would have appreciated this picture: a white sky, a gray sea, and this singular black coat [...] I stood looking at the sky. The clouds were the colors of a Raphael.

This recalls a passage in *The Coral Sea*, in which Smith describes the sea as being like a Rothko painting. Here, art comes before nature, a theme echoed elsewhere in the book and presented by Smith as an attitude adopted by M himself: ‘Art, not nature, moved him’. This and other passages can, furthermore, be connected to an oft-quoted observation by André Malraux:

An old story goes that Cimabue was struck with admiration when he saw the shepherd boy, Giotto, sketching sheep. But, in the true biographies, it is never the sheep that inspire a Giotto with the love of painting; but, rather, his first sight of the paintings of such a man as Cimabue. What makes the artist is that in his youth he was more deeply moved by his visual experience of works of art than by that of the things they represent.

Malraux also refers to musicians tracing their inspiration back to a concert they witnessed when young and writers to poems, books or plays they encountered at an impressionable age. Smith narrates a number of such experiences in *Just Kids*, including a visit to the Museum of Art in Philadelphia, the sight of the Rolling Stones on television and the discovery of Rimbaud’s poetry.

We should perhaps be wary of attributing to Smith an over-reliance on art over ‘reality’, for there is plenty of real life to feed into her story. As she told Thurston Moore in a 1998 interview, in response to a question about realistic depictions of life, ‘I’ve lived reality, so why go see it on the movie screen?’ Yet she seems drawn to recognising an aestheticisation of life in others and to highlighting ways in which art is itself an adventure. M’s voyage on the Coral Sea, learning about light and space and the magic of objects, also concerns the desire to fix transience (a favourite theme of Malraux’s), to capture the beauty and fragility of an autumn leaf or a blooming flower in, and for, art.

When, in ‘Constantine’s Dream’, we reach the plea ‘Let me die on the back of adventure’, it is tempting to hear it as Smith talking to us, her listeners. The rendering invisible of the author via the narrator does not work the same way in song as it tends to in film and literature. It may frequently and convincingly do so in folk music, but not in the medium in which Smith works, for rock and roll has always placed great emphasis on the conflation of the ‘I’ of the narrative and the performer. Lines about dying on the back of adventure and

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35 Ibid. p. 277-8
37 Ibid. p. 41.
40 See, for example, Smith, *Coral Sea*, p. 48.
bringing words from a new world thus become Smith’s visions, pleas and wishes as much as they do Piero’s, Vespucci’s, or Columbus’s. Metaphors of adventure, even when applied to conquistadors and fifteenth century artists, may ultimately be about the adventure of rock and roll. Or, if that is too grand, rock and roll can be seen as the late twentieth century artistic vehicle par excellence for Smith and her fellow navigators to pursue the adventure of creation and discovery. Certainly, for Smith, rock and roll was the next logical step for poetry in the twentieth century. Poetry had long been a leap of faith for many; in the hands of modernists such as Crane and Huidobro, it became an exercise in free-fall; for Smith it was a stage dive.

Malraux’s observation on the relationship between life and art can be transformed into one about adventure and chronicle. Perhaps what thrills is not only the sense of adventure in its immediacy but the siren-like pull of the chronicle of adventure, the lure of the elegiac tone that we find in the best told tales. When we read, at the start of Saer’s The Witness, the line ‘What I remember most about those empty shores is the vastness of the sky’, whose voice are we hearing?41 Is it the unnamed witness, hardened by years and softened by nostalgia? Or is it Saer, the master storyteller, offering a lure to his readers to enter the sweet sea of his prose? Piero della Francesca, in the words of André Malraux, ‘might be symbol of our modern sensibility, our desire to see the expression of the painter, not that of the model, in his art.’42 The artist’s expression comes to the fore often in Smith’s work, as in the following passage from the closing sections of Just Kids, where innocence is filtered through experience and an elegiac, almost pathetic tone overwhelms any neutral, ‘objective’ account of lives led:

We were as Hansel and Gretel and we ventured out into the black forest of the world. There were temptations and witches and demons we never dreamed of and there was splendour we only partly imagined. No one could speak for those two young people nor tell with any truth of their days and nights together. Only Robert and I could tell it. Our story, as he called it. And, having gone, he left the task to me to tell it to you.43

We can read into this a critique of the numerous biographies that have told and retold the story of the years leading up to Horses. We can read the testimonial imperative: I was there, Smith tells us, and the story will resound through my voice. Mapplethorpe had asked Smith to tell their tale to the world and she waited to find the voice with which to do so. Witnessing, Smith reminds us, is not only the taking-in of experience; it is also a process of carrying – of literally bearing witness – and finally, when the time comes, of unburdening. But we can also read – and, more importantly, hear – the voice of the seducer, the voice that, in its most beguiling tone, invites us to adventure, to set sail upon a sea of possibilities and, like April fools, to ‘ride like writers ride’.

References

Barthes Roland, The Rustle of Language, tr. Richard Howard, Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1989,


42 Malraux, Voices, p. 94.
43 Smith, Just Kids, p. 288.


