

## THE AUTHENTIC AND THE SYNTHETIC: AN ANALYSIS OF RELATIONSHIPS IN THE BASKETBALL DIARIES AND CHELSEA GIRLS

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### INTRODUCTION

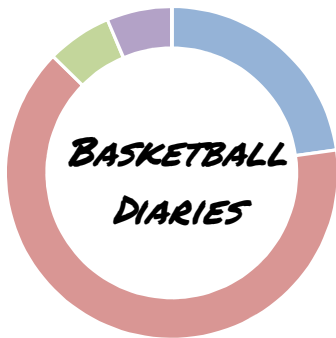
In both *The Basketball Diaries* by Jim Carroll and *Chelsea Girls* by Eileen Myles, relationships are important in shaping and defining the narrator's identities. For e.g. many of Carroll's relationships are integral in leading him down his long, dark path of heroin addiction and many of Myles' relationships are essential in helping them to learn about their own personality and sexuality. But, the reality is that the relationships characterized in the novels are vastly different.

Authentic relationships are those containing sentiment and they do not exist to serve only a physical purpose or gain. Most often, the narrator is sacrificial and their description of the other party is not superficial. Synthetic relationships are those formed to serve a specific purpose. They are characterized by objectification of the party and nonmutual gain typically for the narrator.

Due to the blunt, drug-fueled nature of Carroll's novel, most of the relationships he engages in are presented as shallow and synthetic. Contrary to Carroll, Myles' relationships provide a much more emotionally revealing presentation of their interpersonal interactions.

As we will explain below, both synthetic relationships and authentic relationships are crucial in the formation of the narrator's identities.

■ Sex ■ Drugs ■ Art ■ Emotion ■ Love



These two circles show the proportions of motivations for relationships in *The Basketball Diaries* and *Chelsea Girls*

### Timelines of the Novels' Relationships

#### THE BASKETBALL DIARIES



Friend Lover Family Stranger

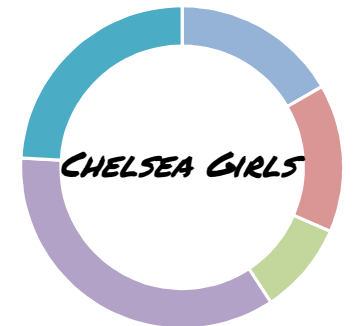
The length of the block represents the approximate number of those types of relationships. Above the timeline are the authentic relationships. Below are the synthetic. Although *Chelsea Girls* isn't arranged chronologically, how these relationships are placed next to each other shows a thematic order.

#### CHELSEA GIRLS



The clear difference in motivations for relationships between the books reflects the likelihood of synthetic or authentic relationships for the respective narrator.

■ Sex ■ Drugs ■ Art ■ Emotion ■ Love



### THE BASKETBALL DIARIES

Drugs are the most prominent feature of Carroll's relationships, as seen in the donut chart. From the very first story, the only thing he and his friends do, other than play basketball, is drugs. In the case of his childhood friends, drugs could merely be seen as a bonding experience that solidifies pre-existing authentic relationships, but they eventually become the main motivation for Carroll's relationships.

Though Carroll's lack of authentic relationships does not necessarily equate to his personality being less authentic, it makes it appear that way. Throughout the novel, Carroll forms many relationships for the sole purpose of two things: drugs or sex. This makes his personality seem less genuine as he appears to have little qualms about manipulating people. However, the things that Carroll does, do not define him as he repeatedly finds himself going against himself because he "just want[s] to be pure" (Carroll 140).

Synthetic relationships are just as important to the formation of author's identity as authentic, sometimes not in a positive way. For instance, in Carroll's case, his lack of authentic relationships, as evident from the timeline, only serves to do him long-term harm because the abundant number of synthetic relations, often reciprocally manipulative, merely encouraged his downward spiral into addiction and left no room for genuine understanding and vulnerability. He felt that he "couldn't tell anybody in the neighborhood [that he wanted to be a poet] because it meant that you were a sissy" ("Catholicboyweb"). It is in his relationship with Ted Berrigan (outside the book) that Carroll finds a peer with whom he can share himself and his craft, a genuine melding of his actions and emotion. For Carroll, it was finally seeing who he was in the synthetic that flamed his desire to be authentic and pure.

### CHELSEA GIRLS

In *Chelsea Girls*, Myles uses love, sex and drugs as a means in their authentic relationships and mainly sex and drugs in the zenith of their synthetic ones (as evident in donut chart and timeline). As seen in their relationship with Alice Notley, Myles uses pills to become friends with someone who shares in their passion for art and poetry. In their teenage relationships, the extent of the common interests with those people was drug use and sex.

Although *Chelsea Girls* does recount many stories of synthetic relationships, this does not make the narrator's personality less authentic. The way in which Myles can have authentic relationships with synthetic ones speaks true to the duality of humans.

Synthetic relationships are important to the author's identity because they are mirrors in which the narrator looks into to decide who their authentic self is. Myles is effectively alienated from others when they are placed in social settings and decide that they are not meant to be there. Their breaking of synthetic relationships creates alienation which Myles claims is the identity of a poet. For them, "being an artist...is this combination of being lonely and being really social" ("Glasstire TV"). These two paradoxes work with the idea of synthetic relationships—being surrounded with people but being unable to connect past ulterior motive or objects; these synthetic relationships shapes Myles' definition of poet, and therefore their identity. She says in *Chelsea Girls* "I was a great poet and I would always be alone" (Myles 131).

### AUTHENTIC, SYNTHETIC, AND PERSONALITIES

In *Chelsea Girls*, the narrator has more authentic relationships than the narrator of *The Basketball Diaries*, which is especially ironic considering that Carroll's novel is formatted as a diary, a medium that asks its creator to confide within its pages sentiment and vulnerability. The different type of relationships contribute to the formation of Carroll's identity in numerous ways. Because he barely had authentic relationships in the book, there are few relationships that provided him with meaningful reflection. Eventually, Carroll comes to reflect upon the monolith of his toxic synthetic relationships and makes the choice to pursue authentic ones with other artists. He says that "poetry really gave me an identity and that kinda redeemed me by the end of the book" ("Catholicboyweb"). His failure to reflect on toxic synthetic relationships in the moment shows the immaturity and short sightedness of Carroll's young narrator versus the maturity displayed by Myles through the constant reflection on their relationships in the book.

### CONCLUSION

From synthetic relationships, reflection on identity can come either directly through that relationship itself or indirectly from an authentic one stemming from it. For both Myles and Carroll, their most important identity, that of artist, came directly from the alienation that they felt from different communities. Indirectly, these synthetic relationships developed what the narrator's wanted in authentic ones that they found mostly in other artists. Both narrators identified that their authentic selves lay with those who could share in authentic relationships which were not held together through sex or drugs but art, a relationship in which they could expose themselves in their craft and be accepted rather than alienated. Like how the synthetic goes with the authentic, alienation and acceptance plies both of our narrators' identities. For Myles this happened through a balance of authentic and authentic relationships and for Carroll a slew of synthetic ones followed by important reflection and authentic relationships.