



The Truth of Desire: Imaginative Revisions of the Past in Rebecca Brown's Oughtabiographies

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the “oughtabiographies” of the contemporary lesbian writer Rebecca Brown, which function as imaginative vehicles with which the author (re)writes her own past the way it should have been. Thus her work will be seen to extend the realm of longing – usually reserved for the future – into the past, thereby highlighting the role of desire and the value of “narrative truth” in personal history writing. Moreover, Brown's active reworkings of her personal past allow for a critical reappraisal of the concept of nostalgia, which is usually dismissed as conservative or passive.

ABSTRACT IN DUTCH

Dit essay bespreekt de “oughtabiographies” van de hedendaagse, lesbische schrijfster Rebecca Brown, waarin deze auteur haar eigen verleden herwerkt tot wat het had moeten zijn. Zo toont Browns werk de invloed van verlangens op (het denken over) het verleden, en benadrukt het belang van “narrative truth” in de context van persoonlijke geschiedschrijving. Bovendien laat Browns actieve herwerking van haar verleden een kritische herwaardering toe van het concept nostalgie, dat vaak wordt afgeschilderd als conservatief of passief.

INTRODUCTION

“Description of a Struggle,” a story from Rebecca Brown's autobiographical collection *The End of Youth* (2003) opens with a paragraph in which

the narrator warns the reader about the unreliability of what she will be recounting: “because I needed to, as I have always done, I misremembered” (p. 110). Self-referential and misremembering I-narrators typically crowd the writings of Rebecca Brown, a Seattle-based lesbian author who has mainly escaped critical notice, despite the popularity of, for instance, her award-winning book *The Gifts of the Body* (1994). In this essay, I will read some of Brown’s works as creative variations on the genre of the “oughtobiography,” a term coined by Chon Noriega in personal communication with Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, and widely disseminated by the latter two theorists. The oughtobiography refers to an autobiographically inflected story of “regret about all the things one should have done” (Smith and Watson 2001, p. 258).

Applying the genre of the oughtobiography to Brown’s work means relating it to a corpus comprised of fictionalized autobiographical material rather than to autobiography pure and simple – even if the mere possibility of such a “pure and simple” autobiography is disputed in panfictionalist theories that insist on the fictionality of *all* statements (Ryan 1997). While the cover of Brown’s most recent collection *American Romances* (2009) promises the reader “Essays by Rebecca Brown” though its contents are actually fictionalized,¹ we will see that this strategy is inversely mirrored in many of the author’s other books. Brown complicates the status of her fiction through striking intratextual parallels in her oeuvre, which in turn can be traced to autobiographical material via epitexts² such as interviews and newspaper articles. These epitexts are obviously no guarantee of factual accuracy, but they are nevertheless of an entirely different order than Brown’s literary fiction. The distinction Brian Richardson introduced in his 2011 discussion of the conflation between author and narrator in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister* is relevant here: Brown’s epitexts, like Nabokov’s introduction to *Bend Sinister*, “are written [or spoken] by the author, and falsifiable in theory, while the novel is a work of fiction, articulated by a narrator, and not falsifiable” (Richardson 2001, p. 82). In other words, the former texts are “constrained by rules of authentication” that do not pertain to the latter text type (idem, p. 88). By infusing her fiction with autobiographical information from epitexts which are (at least theoretically) constrained by these “rules of authentication,” Brown invites the reader to regard her anonymous I-narrators not merely as fictional characters, but also as embodiments of a living author in the empirical world. In “The ‘I’ of the Beholder,” a 2005 book chapter focusing on the role of the reader in the construction of the “I” of ambiguous first-person narratives, Susan Lanser uncovers a similar narrative “I” in a short story by Ann Beattie. The unidentified first-person narrator of “Find and Replace,” Lanser claims,

is an "I" who "is not always the singular 'I' of a fictional speaker but the 'I' of an author as well" (Lanser 2005, p. 208).

A certain combination of factuality and fictionality is inherent in Noriega's generic concept, too. Though Smith and Watson note that "a sustained study [of the genre] has not yet been undertaken" (Smith and Watson 2001, p. 199), it is nevertheless clear that the specificity of the oughtabiography lies in its oscillation between a speculative and a factual approach to telling the story of one's life. The focus is on what one *ought to have done*, which inevitably also involves a contrast with what one *has actually done*. In one of the very few articles evoking the concept, theatre scholar Louis Patrick Leroux describes the oughtabiography as a "speculative testimony," "an exercise in existential speculation led by the choices one has not made, thus also including an evaluation of those one has made" (Leroux 2004, p. 79; my translation). Yet Brown's oughtabiographical fictions do more than regretfully revisit the author's own past: they serve as imaginative vehicles with which Brown's self-referential narrators improve their personal history and (re)write their past the way it should have been.

Brown indicates that nostalgia for (enhanced) scenes from the past is a main motive in, and motivation for, her writing. She explains that "[s]ome of the work I've written lately, and some of my early work – actually all of it when I think of it – is about the past, about nostalgia" (Stadler 1999, p. 6). Nostalgia has been variously theorized as "illusory or repressive" (Sharpe 2002, p. 252), "passive" (Bounds 1997, p. 104), "reactionary" (Elam 1992, p. 15), "neoconservative" (Hutcheon 1988, p. 222),³ "antifeminist" (Greene 1991, p. 296), or "regressive" (Anderson 2000, p. 71). Such adjectives may apply to a nostalgia for traditional institutions like the biological family. This type of nostalgia is state-controlled and encouraged by the media – and, as I have argued elsewhere,⁴ Brown is well aware of it. What the sociologist Judith Stacey has labeled "a popular nostalgia for ... breadwinner-homemaker nuclear family life" (Judith Stacey 1996, p. 9) is, for instance, not very helpful to the narrator's parents in "A Child of Her Time" from *American Romances*. In her work, Stacey opposes campaigns that advocate traditional "family values," which often draw on feelings of nostalgia for a mythical past in which these values were supposedly still natural. "A Child of Her Time" dramatizes the social pressure that thus ensues, as the narrator explains how her parents' decision to stay married was dictated by a desire to conform to the conventions of the happy family. Despite the fact that by the time of the narrator's birth, her quarrelling "parents had pushed each other as far away as they could" (Brown 2009, p. 34), "they stayed married because they didn't want to have failed – at love, at family, at doing what you were supposed to do."

The narrator's parents knew that, "if you were married, you were supposed to pretend you were happy" (Brown 2009, p. 38).

Growing up in what we might call a dysfunctional family, the narrator was "nostalgic for somebody else's childhood" (Brown 2009, p. 39), for the one she knew from Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books – which contrasted painfully with the reality of her own family life. Yet Wilder's series was, tellingly, marketed to play on a public feeling of nostalgia for "the days of yore" that prevailed during the economic depression of the inter-war period. Brown suggests that the family vision that exerts such a powerful pull on her narrator was manipulated by Wilder's daughter Rose. Critics agree that the latter's role in the realization of the *Little House* series was "aggressive" (Thurman 2009, n. p.). Brown's narrator concedes that Rose "edited, rewrote or added to her mother's first person accounts" because she "recognized that her mother's story would appeal to poor, Depression-era Americans who longed for a more innocent time" (Brown 2009, p. 41). The widespread nostalgia for normative versions of kinship that is stimulated by books like Wilder's predictably creates unrealistic expectations about family life (as illustrated by the behavior of the narrator and her parents in "A Child of Her Time"). Moreover, the family we are encouraged to "remember" nostalgically is always reproductive and heterosexual. Thus the heterosexual family is presented as the only livable option; in other words, the kind of family that is the subject of nostalgic reflections becomes another one of those institutions directly involved with underwriting the heterosexual assumption. A nostalgia for this kind of family might therefore indeed be judged "illusory or repressive" (Sharpe 2002, p. 252).

Yet the type of nostalgia that mainly concerns us here belongs to the personal level of characters' individual pasts. In this more intimate context, I argue for a positive reading of the many nostalgic returns in Brown's work. Svetlana Boym's helpful distinction in *The Future of Nostalgia* between "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia also pivots on the difference between individual and "national" nostalgia. "Restorative nostalgia," Boym argues, "is at the core of recent national and religious revivals; it knows two main plots – the return to origins and the conspiracy." "Reflective nostalgia," by contrast, is less dogmatic and less useful or manageable on a national scale in that it

does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones; it loves details, not symbols. At [its] best, reflective nostalgia can present an ethical and creative challenge, not merely a pretext for midnight melancholias.

This "typology of nostalgia" provides us with a means to differentiate the constructive and "individual memory" of reflective nostalgia from an oppressive or more large-scale "memory that is based on a single plot of national identity" (Boym 2001, p. xviii), such as the state-sponsored ideal of an intact nuclear family unit consisting of a breadwinner husband and a homemaker wife that is questioned in "A Child of Her Time." Boym underlines the contrast between the public character of the latter type of nostalgia and the private level at which the former type should be situated: "Restorative nostalgia evokes national past and future," while "reflective nostalgia is more oriented toward an individual narrative" (idem, p. 49).

In a personal interview with the author, Brown herself has expressed doubts about the intrinsically passive nature or reactionary quality of an orientation towards the past: "What is actually really interesting is: is there an inherent conservatism in interest in the past, does that preclude or does that shortchange the forward movement? I don't know..." Her hesitation is understandable; after all, as we will see, the wish to return to the past shared by many of her narrators rather corresponds to an active revision of scenes from their personal history. In spite of the illusory nature of such reworkings – a trait that Brown's narrators are clearly aware of – I argue that they are anything but "regressive" (Anderson 2000, p. 71). The critic Anthony Vidler objects to nostalgia on the grounds that, "despite a yearning for a concrete place and time, the object of desire is neither here nor there, present nor absent, now or then" (qtd. in Sharpe 2002, p. 251). Yet we will see that, in the hands of Brown's narrators, nostalgia becomes a means to retrieve an aspect from the past with which to bridge the gap between "now and then": it allows these characters to return to, and get hold of, the feeling of unrestrained opportunity they knew in the past. This obviously does not mean another "return to the past as a time of simpler or more worthy values" (Hutcheon 1988, p. 230) like we saw earlier in the context of normative and idealized family arrangements. Rather, when Brown's characters – like the narrator of "Consolation" from *The Last Time I Saw You*, who mourns for the loss of a friend – want "for what happened to have not happened," their storytelling allows them to go back to, and thereby to learn from, a time when "things" could still "be different" (Brown 2006, p. 89).

The literary critic William Sharpe, too, detects the *future* in the past the nostalgic mentally returns to. In his essay "Nostalgia and Connection in the Postmodern Metropolis," he argues that we are nostalgic not for earlier times as such, but for "the future which we had in the past," consequently defining nostalgia as "a recollection of the past's perceived potential" (Sharpe 2002, p. 252). Svetlana Boym's ideas are close to Sharpe's even if their focus differs, as Sharpe also acknowledges. While

he concentrates on American culture, Boym mainly works in a European context. Like Sharpe, Boym thinks nostalgia pertains to “the present perfect and its lost potential” (Boym 2001, p. 21). Such a rethinking of nostalgia inevitably has repercussions in the present: “Now becomes the past moment of potential, for nostalgia can show us not only the moment lost, but what we hoped would come out of it” (Sharpe 2002, p. 264). “Reactionary” and “progressive” nostalgia, to evoke Sharpe’s useful theoretical distinction, differ precisely in this respect: the passive absorption in the past that typifies the first stance is superseded by a healthier concentration on “the expectations such a moment seemed to make possible” in the second. The contrast, in other words, lies in a concentration on “the *loss* of what’s gone” versus “the *promise* of what might have been” (idem, p. 264). Despite Brown’s awareness of the danger of mentally going back to missed opportunities and her refusal to idealize the power of nostalgic re-imaginings, her writings nevertheless show the possibility of nostalgia to be a productive or constructive stance. We find a similar belief in the productive quality of nostalgia in the work of Sharpe, who argues for a “thinking ahead via memory” that he terms “prospective nostalgia” (Sharpe 2002, p. 255). When I asked Brown about this aspect of her oeuvre, she observed that “a lot of [her] narrators regret their decisions and think ‘oh, I should have done something different’ or ‘I could have’ or ‘what if that terrible thing had not happened to me.’” She went on to add, “I absolutely think nostalgia or an appreciation of the past can be hugely helpful.” Thus I will argue that Brown’s work provides an important counter-voice to the contemporary demonization of nostalgia as “illusory or repressive” (Sharpe 2002, p. 252).

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL QUALITY OF BROWN’S WORK

Despite the fact that Brown recognizes the paradox inherent in a longing to evoke previous periods – i.e. despite her realization that “part of the nature of childhood is to be, to have been un-captured” (Saterstrom 2006, n. p.) – she doubtless shares her desire to use literature to “recaptur[e] what was lost” with more traditional autobiographers (Stadler 1999, p. 6). Certain situations and experiences recur all through Brown’s work, and many of them can be traced back to the author’s own life thanks to epitexts such as interviews and newspaper pieces. Brown’s father characters are typically uninvolved in the family’s daily activities, devoting their time and energy to their jobs as military pilots rather than to their father roles – a situation that often involves the family’s moving from home to home depending on where these men are stationed, and that inevitably

culminates in the exchange of divorce papers. Brown's own father was a "navy pilot and a naval officer" (Xhonneux 2012, n. p.). Brown describes what this meant for her family in an article for the Seattle newspaper *The Stranger*, "On Living Long Enough: Reaching Middle Age, Despite Myself." This article is categorized under the "news" rather than the "books" section where Brown's fiction tends to be prepublished. In "On Living Long Enough," Brown explains that her family "lived in rentals, military housing, or apartments," and had to move every couple of years. Eventually, her parents got divorced after what Brown calls their "crazy" and "miserable years" (Brown 1999a, n. p.). In the same article, Brown also talks about caring for her mother in the last months before her death from cancer (idem, n. p.). This process is narrated in her book *Excerpts from a Family Medical Dictionary* (Brown 2001), which is dedicated to "Barbara Ann Wildman Brown 1928–1997."

In addition, the principles of "singularity," "anonymity," and "identity" are met in Brown's fiction. These are three out of the five criteria that, according to Lanser, tempt the reader to "make attachments between the author and a textual 'I.'" "Identity" refers to "all (perceived) social similarities between a narrator and an author," such as their "biographical background." The principle of "singularity" dictates that "readers are significantly more likely to attach an 'I' to the author when there is only one 'I' to attach." Lanser's criterion of "anonymity" corresponds to the assumption that "it is easier to attach an unnamed than a named 'I' to its author" (Lanser 2005, p. 212).⁵ The other two criteria, which are less useful in the context of Brown's work, are "reliability" and "nonnarrativity." The former relates to "a reader's (complex) determination that the narrator's values and perceptions are consistent with those of the author." The latter builds on the idea that "readers are more likely to make attachments between narrators and their author when the narrating 'I' is not reporting or enacting *events*," but instead is conveying "atemporal speech acts" like opinions (idem, p. 213; my italics). To return to the first three criteria: that of "identity" is fulfilled in Brown's works by the biographical details that the above-mentioned parallels were concerned with. Second, Brown's fiction is characterized by the presence of only one narrative voice at the highest level of narration, which readers are tempted to equate with the author according to the principle of "singularity." Lastly, Brown's I-narrators typically lack a name. Such an "absence of a proper name for the textual speaker" further facilitates the reader's identification of a narrator with the author (idem, p. 212). Thus first-person narratives like Brown's "taunt... us with the possibility that the 'I' of the fiction has some relation to the author's 'I,'" as Lanser posits with regard to Beattie's "Find and Replace." Lanser argues that this type of fiction "requires us to

read referentially [and] fictionally ... at once" (idem, p. 207). So, in addition to the autobiographical data (gathered from Brown's articles and interviews) that recur in scenes from her fiction, the two in-text signals of "anonymity" and "singularity" invite Brown's readers to link the narrative voice to Brown's own, thereby lending further legitimacy to a reading of her work as autobiographical.

FANTASIZED AND "AGGRANDIZED" PASTS

Having established the autobiographical quality of Brown's fiction, we can now tackle the topic of how her self-referential narrators explicitly rework the stories of their lives. Indeed, Brown does not aim to faithfully record her own experiences in her writing. The author once confessed, "I write some thing to reconstruct history, even if it's only my emotional history, to be the way I want or wanted it to be" (Eldaly 2009, n. p.). An "affection for wanting to aggrandize lives" tempts the author to *mythologize* her past, as she avowed in a personal interview: "Mythologizing your life is like saying 'my life is grand.'" Telling the tales of their past, then, Brown's self-referential narrators resemble their creator in that they are prone to revisions and embellishments. This is obviously where the genre of the oughtabiography comes in, referring as it does to "life narratives focused on all the things one should have done" or that should have happened (Smith and Watson 2001, p. 199). However, Brown's I-narrators do not just regretfully contrast the way their life turned out to the way it should have been. They actually tend to rewrite their past in the act of looking back to recount the stories of their lives, using the narratives of their personal history – as the nameless narrator of *American Romances* puts it – "to go back, but to a different past, and do things differently" (Brown 2009, p. 112). In her wish to revisit her personal past and make it better, the narrator of *American Romances* resembles the nameless narrator of *Excerpts from a Family Medical Dictionary* and the I-narrator of "Grief" from *Annie Oakley's Girl*, (1993) a collection of tales dealing with power imbalances in love relations. The grieving narrator of the latter story, whose friend has just left the female community in which they lived, "start[s] re-enacting the past, hoping [her] re-creating can undo it" (Brown 1993, p. 151). The narrator of *Excerpts*, thinking back to her mother's final days, also acts "as if by my remembering what was not I can remake or change what happened" (Brown 2004, p. 28). As I noted above, most of Brown's narrators feel a similar "need" to "misremember" (Brown 2003, p. 110). They jump back and forth in time, adapting their recollections of past experiences to the needs they feel in the narrative present.

The Haunted House, which traces the detrimental effects on the narrator Robin of her past spent in a broken home with an alcoholic father, provides us with a more concrete example of a character who consciously revises her painful personal history in fantasy scenarios that improve family relationships and undo emotional damage. Addressing her father, Robin admits "I cannot even tell the myth from fact about you anymore. I don't even know what lies I've made myself believe" (Brown 2007, p. 64–5). One of these "myths" pertains to her father's appearance at the Girl Scouts' "Dad and Daughter Banquet." Robin hardly ever sees her dad after her parents' divorce, but "the day of the banquet, [he] mysteriously appeared" (p. 23). The experience is not an altogether positive one, as she knows he is annoyed at the "tasteless food, these useless chats with these fat boring men, the smell of all of us green-uniformed girls." Robin can tell that these "were the reasons he had left" (p. 24). Strikingly, she later alters this event in her mind: she imagines her father landing his plane on the roof of the banquet hall, and "tak[ing her] by the hand" to have some special father-daughter time over an exquisite meal at a private table (p. 27). In contrast to what happened at the real banquet, Robin is now able to marvel at the idea that he "took off precious moments from his immensely important work ... to sit with [her]" – a thought that makes her "eyes water with pride" (p. 28). The realm of desires or possibilities, instead of belonging strictly to the atmosphere of *future* opportunities, also colors the past here.

The past is then no longer "a neutral chronicle" for Brown's narrators; it has become "an object of speculation, fantasy, and longing" instead. We could argue that personal history is thus transformed into what Leila Rupp calls "a desired past" (qtd. in Love 2007, p. 130). Rupp introduced this concept in the context of queer historiography because, due to gaps in the gay and lesbian historical record – to name just one obstacle to the reconstruction of the history of homosexuality – its excavation always requires inventions or imaginings. Brown is aware of this historical absence, dramatizing the invisibility of queers in "Invisible" from *American Romances*. Wondering "Who are you when you are someone who's not been seen before?" (Brown 2009, p. 119), her narrator underscores the importance of a historical example for women and men who do not live up to the expectations of a heteronormative sexuality. Rupp's claim concerning the necessity of creating "a desired past" due to the lack of a queer historical record that is also condemned in "Invisible" reverberates Monique Wittig's well-known call to "[m]ake an effort to remember, and failing that, invent" (qtd. in Doan and Waters 2000, p. 16). Other contemporary proponents of this practice include the critics Ann Cvetkovich and Laura Doan, as well as Sarah Waters. Cvetkovich, for example, underlines

“the importance of fantasy as a way of creating history from absence” in her book *An Archive of Feelings*, which argues both for the recognition of the traumatic nature of seemingly ordinary events (for instance in the context of AIDS activism and care) and for the importance of archiving the accounts of such events (Cvetkovich 2003, p. 271). In their joint article on “Contemporary Lesbian Writing and the Invention of History,” lastly, Doan and Waters offer “fantasy and wishful thinking as legitimate historiographical resources, necessary correctives or missing links to the impoverished lesbian archive” (Doan and Waters 2000, p. 15–16). While queer history writing is thus often perked up with fantasy aspects and other inventions, Brown deems the imaginary indispensable also in the more intimate realm of personal life stories.

The imaginary interventions that critics like Wittig, Cvetkovich, and Doan plead for in the context of collective histories belong to a different order than the oughtabiographical inventions that Brown’s self-referential narrators come up with in a much more personal context. Yet note that Brown also invents a gay and lesbian communal history in some of her work, where she has recourse to an exaggerated fictionality to construct her own genealogy of same-sex desire. She creates this gay lineage through anachronistic queer identifications of actual historical figures, turning Annie Oakley into a lesbian in the opener of *Annie Oakley’s Girl* and – in *American Romances* – imagining Joan of Arc as a transvestite, and Jesus and the apostle John as a gay couple. Moreover, the already-mentioned story “Grief,” also from *Annie Oakley’s Girl*, makes clear that the more personal scope of Brown’s nostalgic and oughtabiographical imaginings does not preclude a politicized perspective or social relevance. In “Grief,” Brown counters a tendency to idealize the queer community that was typical of lesbian fiction especially at the time she started writing. The I-narrator of this story is inconsolable because her friend has just left the lesbian community in which they both lived. In a move that typifies Brown’s oughtabiographies, she “start[s] re-enacting the past, hoping [her] re-creating can undo it” (Brown 1993, p. 151). After all, the narrator played a striking role in her friend’s departure. Together with the other community members, the narrator “live[d] vicariously through her.” The disturbing suggestion is that they sent the girl away: the narrator recounts how they “thrust upon her” the “dubious honor of bringing us all together through our fear of departure” (p. 147). The narrator explains, “That is why we go [back] to the airport in our party clothes. Why we sing Welcome Home as we remember pushing her toward her flight” (p. 152). The situation in Brown’s story is a far cry from the common definition of the queer community as an “experience of harmony and mutuality” (Weston 1991, p. 127), which naturally tends to create unrealistic expectations

about community life. So, whereas Wittig, Cvetkovich, and Doan rightly defend the legitimacy of imaginary interventions in the context of a damaging historical invisibility for lesbian subjects, an oughtabiographical story like "Grief" is concerned with what is often seen as the flip side of discrimination, that is, romanticization. Brown's nostalgic narrative can then be read against a contemporary background where the problem of *whether* lesbians can become visible at all has evolved into the question of *how* they should become visible. After all, idealization can be as harmful as discrimination in its effects.

"NARRATIVE TRUTH" AND THE TRUTH OF DESIRE

The fantasized pasts in Brown's oughtabiographical work are legitimized and presented as containing their own kind of "truth," even if these fictions cannot be mistaken for truth in the sense of corresponding to a factual reality. After all, "historical truth" belongs to "the domain of the real," not to "the domain of the fictitious," as Freeman formulates a critical commonplace (Freeman 2003, p. 121). Here *alternative* kinds of truths become crucial then. A careful analysis of autobiographies that deliberately explore and exploit the genre's limits through a conscious inclusion of "lies" (like Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*) leads Timothy Dow Adams in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* to the conclusion that there are different kinds of truth besides "historical truth," such as "propositional truth, personal truth, psychological truth, narrative truth" (Adams 1990, p. 8). The concept of narrative truth, which is especially relevant for Brown's oughtabiographies, was coined by psychoanalyst Donald Spence (Spence 1982) and subsequently applied in the context of life writing by critics like Adams and Freeman (Adams 1990, p. 8; Freeman 2003, p. 121). Adams advises readers who are confronted with autobiographically inflected works whose exact status is unclear (like Brown's fiction) to regard the truth in these texts as "narrative": "Whatever else [such works] may be, they can all safely be called stories, and therefore they all partake of narrative truth" (Adams 1990, p. 12). Spence defined narrative truth as

the criterion we use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to our satisfaction; it depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on an aesthetic finality. Narrative truth is what we have in mind when we say that such and such is a good story, that a given explanation carries conviction, that one solution to a mystery must be true. (qtd. in Adams 1990, p. 8)

He goes on to add, “Narrative truth has a special significance in its own right. [M]aking contact with the actual past may be of far less significance than creating a coherent and consistent account of a particular set of events” (idem, p. 8). Seen in this light, storytelling becomes an indispensable part also of the way we handle the memories of our past.

To fully grasp the value of “narrative truth” and of what we might call the “truth of desire” for Brown’s oughtabiographies, it is helpful to highlight the significance of storytelling, i.e. fantasizing about one’s life or one’s past, even in her realistic AIDS-narrative “A Good Man” (the penultimate story of *Annie Oakley’s Girl*). Brown realizes that this work – together with *The Gifts of the Body*, which recounts the heavily autobiographical experiences of a home-care worker assisting people with AIDS – differs from the rest of her oeuvre, in which the narrative reality is typically tinged with metafiction, absurdities, or dark humor. Her AIDS writing, she explains, originated from a “very different impulse than in writing my ‘surreal’ things which aim to draw attention to the fact that they are verbal constructs.” Brown adds, “I wanted it to come across to a reader as ‘simple’ and ‘inevitable’” (qtd. in De Moor, n. p.). Yet many characters from Brown’s AIDS-narratives resemble the narrators from her more “surreal” works, in that the former also equate relating episodes from their personal histories with reinventing or rewriting them until they become “better.” Brown’s master storyteller Jim, the narrator’s companion in “A Good Man,” formulates this philosophy as follows: “If you tell a story for good, it’s true” (Brown 1993, p. 114–5).

“A Good Man” focuses on the anonymous lesbian narrator’s close kinship tie with her gay friend Jim, who has AIDS, and concludes a few days after Jim passed away, with a moving episode in which the narrator mourns the death of her friend. This scene deserves our attention for a moment, as the narrator uses it to rewrite a painful incident from her and Jim’s recent past, when they wanted to get back to his room after his “faggot break” at Rex’s, the café across the street from the hospital where the two friends always went for coffee and smokes (Brown 1993, p. 113). After one of these outings, a traffic jam prevented them from returning to the hospital, and Jim was faced with his fear of dying: he broke down because waiting for the traffic to clear reminded him of how he was waiting for his impending death. Unable to get out of his wheelchair, Jim was helpless throughout the incident: “He kicks the blanket awry and tries to find the ground with his feet. ‘I’m walking.’” When the narrator protests that he cannot, Jim retorts, “So what am I supposed to do. Fly?” (p. 126). Strikingly, in the narrator’s imaginative reworking of the episode, flying away is exactly what Jim does. Addressing her friend throughout her version of the event, the narrator is once again telling Jim he has to wait for

the traffic to break, when “*You stand up alone, not needing to lean on anyone. You’re tall as you used to be.*” In the narrator’s fantasy, Jim tells her “*I’m going for a ride*”: “*Your feet lift off the sidewalk and you rise. Above the crowded street, the hospital, above us all, you fly.*” In addition, the physical contact with Jim that the narrator, fearing contamination, had started to avoid is reestablished in this imaginative scene, which presents us with what the narrator “ought to” have done. In an earlier passage, readers were witness to her refusal “to kiss [Jim’s] forehead, which shines with sweat” (p. 122). The narrator makes up for her shameful behavior at the end of “A Good Man” by letting Jim kiss her, “*like a blessing that forgives me.*” Her creative rewriting of a past experience she shared with Jim provides her with a beautiful way to say goodbye to and honor her “true brother” (p. 145). The creation of a fantastical past in this farewell scene is thus one more illustration of the “equation of good and true” that Katrien De Moor detects in “A Good Man” (De Moor, n. p.) or, in the words of this article, of the value of “narrative truth” (Adams 1990, p. 8) and the “truth of desire.”

THE PAST AS ENABLING FICTION

Brown’s oughtabiographical works – both her “surreal things” in which narrators look back on painful experiences and enhance these in imaginative scenarios, and her AIDS-story in which the narrator likewise embellishes her past with the help of narrativization and her imagination – illustrate the value of “narrative truth” as theorized by Spence in a psychoanalytic context. My observations on the truth of good stories or fantasy histories, valid even for Brown’s realistic care narrative, tie in with Spence’s idea that “[o]nce a given construction has acquired narrative truth, it becomes just as real as any other kind of truth” (qtd. in Adams 1990, p. 12). Next to underscoring the relevance of narrative truth, Brown’s works reserve an important role for what I have called the “truth of desire.” Her narrators demonstrate its value whenever they return to scenes from their personal past to transform these into what they *wanted* to have happened or to do what they should have done in the past. Rather than passively resigning themselves to their imperfect pasts, Brown’s self-referential I-narrators write themselves into a lineage of oughtabiographical stories “focused on all the things one should have done” or that should have happened (Smith and Watson 2001, p. 199). Their versions of the “oughtabiography” then become “enabling fictions.” After all, their embellished life stories are what allow them to go on despite the painful incidents that *did* happen in their past. For instance, in “The House,” the narrator broke up with her lover; in *The Haunted House*, Robin realized

that her dad did not like to be around her; and in “A Good Man,” the narrator became painfully aware of her failure to provide physical comfort in the face of Jim’s impending death. What Brown said about fellow writer Jerome Gold in her review of *Prisoners*, Gold’s collection of thematically linked short narratives on violence and trauma, might also be valid for her own writing: “Sometimes, Gold illustrates, we alter or eradicate the memory of the awful things that we have done, that have been done to us, to survive” (Brown 1999b, n. p.).

A FORK IN THE ROAD

Brown has explained that a feeling of nostalgia frequently provides her with an incentive to write (Stadler 1999, p. 6). I argue that her narrators’ active reworkings of their personal history allow for a critical reappraisal of the concept of nostalgia, which is generally dismissed as “passive” (Bounds 1997, p. 104) or “reactionary” (Elam 1992, p. 15). As I noted in the Introduction, Brown’s writings display an astute awareness of the harmful qualities of a state-controlled or media-induced nostalgia for traditional institutions like the biological family. Yet they also illustrate that more intimate or personal returns to the past provide her nostalgic heroines with occasions to learn from history. Nostalgically revisiting scenes from their personal history allows them to regain the feeling of unrestrained opportunity that closed off as their future, or even their present, mercilessly turned into the past. With historian Reinhart Koselleck, we can then describe this past as “a superseded former future” (Koselleck 2004, p. 4).

Sharpe posits that “if nostalgia returns us to a specific moment, it is that in which the choice was yet to be made” (Sharpe 2002, p. 253). In Brown’s writings, the potentiality of the past with its opportunities that are closed-off from the standpoint of the narrative present is articulated especially in her heroines’ interest in the image of “the fork in the road.” This image highlights the contingency of history and typifies nostalgia. “Rather than take us back to old familiar roads, nostalgia is about the road *not* taken,” Sharpe maintains (*idem*, p. 253). In his evocation of Robert Frost’s famous poem, he echoes Brown’s protagonist in “Trying to Say,” a story from *The Last Time I Saw You* in which an anonymous I-narrator continually tortures herself with her “[f]avorite terrible memories” of the time she spent with her ex-lover (Brown 2006, p. 21) and tries to understand what exactly she wants to tell her (“It isn’t – oh, it couldn’t be, not after all these years – *I love you?*” [p. 20]). This nostalgic narrator conspicuously reworks a line from the last stanza of “The Road Not Taken”: “I shall be (trying to) tell (ing) this with a

sigh" (Frost 2010, p. 28) – her revision of Frost's "I shall be telling this with a sigh" again pointing to a typical lack of resignation or passivity in the act of remembering. The rest of Frost's well-known stanza reads: "Somewhere ages and ages hence: / Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference" (Frost 2010, p. 10). Brown's interest in this topic of "diverging roads" also speaks from her review of *This Tranquil Land*, an exhibition of Hudson River painters at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle. In "Romantic Propaganda: God's Country, on Glorious Display at the Frye," she vividly describes Jervis McEntee's painting *Fire of Leaves*, which portrays the indecision of two children who have come to a fork in the road:

We're in the woods and there are two paths, but you can't tell where either of them lead. At the fork in the path, two children dressed in city clothes are hovering over a small fire. ... These two kids are lost in the woods with dark coming on, and though there may be a path to lead them out, they don't know which it is. (Brown 2000, n. p.)

The symbolism of life as a journey along "forking paths" or "untaken roads" recurs in Brown's "Pilgrim," a prose poem from *Woman in Ill-Fitting Wig* (Brown 2005, p. 8), and the idea of having to select one such metaphorical path out of many more options in life occupies several of Brown's protagonists. They retrospectively reflect on the choices they made, thinking "what if" (or "if only") they had taken another path. In this "tension between experience and expectation" "new resolutions" emerge (Koselleck 2004, p. 262). Thus the apparent inevitability of the present is disrupted, and the past is rethought in terms of the "future possibles" it once held. These "possibles" are defined by Edith Wyschogrod in *An Ethics of Remembering* as "not those [possibilities] that can be realized but those that could have been realized" (Wyschogrod 1998, p. 173). (Such possibles play an important role in the "heterological history" for which she pleads. In this kind of history, the writer of historical narratives of marginalized subjects – those who have been "de-signed or silenced" (idem, p. 37) – has an ethical responsibility towards her subject and is attentive not only to what has been, but also to what could have been.)

It should be noted that the narrators of *Excerpts from a Family Medical Dictionary* and *The End of Youth* illustrate that trying to rethinking history as a "future possible" may not always be so harmless or easy. The narrator of *Excerpts*, for instance, mentally revisits her mother's slow dying process, retrospectively wondering if she could "change what happened" and thinking "what if –," "what if –," "if only –." The narrator concludes that "in retrospect she dies over and over again" (Brown 2004, p. 28). The

reworking of Frost's line "I shall be telling this with a sigh" by the tentative narrator of "Trying to Say" already suggested that pondering "the road not taken" with a calm sigh of resignation may not always be possible. Such thought experiments can be painful, as the narrator of "Description of a Struggle" also finds out in *The End of Youth*. Attempting to overcome her suicidal state after the death of both her parents, she tries to think "like this: *It's autumn! The leaves are changing! They're colorful! They're beautiful! ... If only I were a painter! Or a photographer! If only – If only – That was a bad idea. If only If only If only*" (Brown 2003, p. 117). The narrator thereby reminds readers of the danger of mentally going back to missed opportunities. Yet despite Brown's awareness of these evident risks, the nostalgia of narrators who return to decisive moments from their personal pasts mainly plays a constructive and productive role in her work, as I will demonstrate by means of two more extensive examples from *The Children's Crusade* (Brown 1989) and *The Last Time I Saw You*. In these stories Brown seems to ask, like Sharpe, "What's wrong with nostalgia as a means of putting things to rights?" (Sharpe 2002, p. 251).

The Children's Crusade relates the acrimonious divorce of a nameless narrator's parents, a traumatic event that – seen through the eyes of an imaginative girl – acquires a fantastic character: the domestic turbulence is creatively transformed into a not-so-civil war between the two walled-off kingdoms of His Highness and Her Highness, which the narrator has to travel through to look for her lost brother Stan. The narrator, who in the beginning of the book is jealous of her baby brother and regards him as a means "to deflect some of the punching-bag energy [her fighting parents] had [previously] aimed at [her]" (Brown 1989, p. 40), manages to reconnect to Stan by nostalgically returning to episodes from their shared past. In an earlier scene mixing war symbolism and the reality of her parents' divorce, the narrator abandoned Stan among the violent "sounds of civil war" (p. 30). Afterwards, she imagines what would have happened if she had not. "*If I'd not left, it would have been a different night.*" In this scenario, she would be able to call her brother – "*Staaan-leeey*" (Brown 2009, p. 61) – and to hear him run up to her to hug her close: "*I feel his moist skinny arms around my back, his heaving chest. I feel the flutter against my stomach, my brother's beating heart*" (p. 62). Though it is noteworthy that Brown refrains from idealizing the power of such nostalgic re-imaginings (the narrator's newly found affection for Stan wanes again at the end of the book), they do lead her heroine to briefly rediscover her love for her lost brother. In keeping with the war imagery that pervades *The Children's Crusade*, the narrator's parents ask her "What were the casualties?" and "How many lost?", at which point she thinks "First one, dear Stan, then all of us. For every war is a civil war, and every love

denied is a double death" (p. 69). Such scenes illustrate how "nostalgia ... can bring people together," or how "[t]he feeling that something (really or imagined to be) past is lacking in the present" can serve as a "stimulus for constructive action" (Sharpe 2002, p. 261; 252) – even if only temporarily, as in the case of Brown's heroine.

For the nameless narrator of "Trying to Say" from *The Last Time I Saw You*, nostalgic returns to scenes from her past prove to be useful as well. She is fixated on her ex-partner – she even provides a dictionary definition of "obsess" (Brown 2006, p. 28) – and brings "what if"-accounts into play to gradually overcome her unhealthy preoccupation with her ex, whom she addresses throughout the story. The narrator wonders if not being allowed to contact her is what prevents them from establishing a normal relationship like the narrator has with her other ex-lovers, whose holiday cards make her feel "snottily superior," as is apparent from a few of her reactions: "What on earth did I ever see in her?" or "When is she going to realize she is no longer the hot young thing?!" (p. 30). The narrator consequently asks herself

if we had been able to keep in touch, would we have turned into the same old hum, ex-what-ers the rest of them do? Like, if we'd stayed in touch, would we be actually slightly embarrassed that we'd actually been whatever we had been? Instead of being, as we are now fixated/obsessed/rendered senseless by it. (p. 30-1)

The neurotic narrator, who calls herself a "regular old nut case" (p. 29), has trouble dealing with the break-up. She mentally goes through her ex's house, picturing walls to beat her head against and trying to figure out where she could do "a really rousing, bloody, nose, lip and/or eyeglass splitting wallop" (p. 24). She is still a long way from attaining a sane approach to her ex-lover, a fact that is effectively transported into her language, which has gone out of control as well in parts of the story where she obsessively piles on (often near-synonymous, emotionally charged) words. For instance, when she fails to speak up, she calls her tongue "developmentally disabled moronic stupid blithering" (p. 20). Yet nostalgically pondering the road she was forced to take – i.e. "I have been forbidden to talk to see hear from you" (p. 29) – and envisioning the alternative may actually be the path to "get[ting] over it." After all, the narrator's habit of "going back to this stuff" (p. 31) is what makes her realize that, *if* she had stayed in touch with her ex, they would probably have the same "good old boring" bond the narrator has with all of her ex-girlfriends (p. 30). This insight may eventually allow her to overcome her idealization of, and fixation on, her former lover. Indeed, the

narrator suspects that “maybe [she is], at last, beginning to think [she] might get over it” (p. 31).

So Brown’s work, in which nostalgic heroines put the supposedly static or “escapist” (Elam 1992, p. 15) attitude of wanting to return to the past to good use, can be read as a vivid illustration of Sharpe’s idea that “we will be able to look at the present much more clearly if we admit the role of the past in shaping that perception and reality” (Sharpe 2002, p. 256). Brown’s narrators, who typically desire to go back to an idealized and explicitly fictionalized version of their personal history, manage to unite with others in their current social environment due to contemplations of “what should have happened,” as well as deriving other valuable lessons from their past. They demonstrate that it is in nostalgic “fantasies and potentialities that the future is born” (Boym 2001, p. 351). Brown’s characters consequently communicate the insight that “events might have turned out differently, and if interpreted differently, might still be capable of changing the subject’s understanding of her life and her self” (King 2000, p. 23). Moreover, the author’s fascination with the road not taken avoids the retrospective and fatalistic illusion that the present was unavoidable. It reveals how “what could have but did not happen” is an integral and valuable part of people’s personal histories. A rethinking of nostalgia as it figures in oughtobiographical fiction like Brown’s, we can thus conclude with Boym, allows for the creation of a “nonteleological history that includes conjectures and contrafactual possibilities” – a helpful “alternative” (Boym 2001, p. 351) that can affect present ways of looking at one’s life, identity, or relationships.

NOTES

- 1 For example in “The Priests,” which deals with the fate of the Cathars during the Albigensian Crusade, Brown’s narrator intersperses historical facts (e.g. about the siege of Béziers in 1209) with fictionalized information like invented etymologies for the names of those French towns the Cathars fled to: thus Quéribus, Montsegur, and Foix become “Queer Town,” “Mountain Man Town,” and “Fag” (Brown 2009, p. 61).
- 2 The terms “intratextual” and “epitextual” are Gérard Genette’s. Works are “intratextual” when they are “signed by the same name” and “refer in some way to one another” (Genette 1997a, p. 207). The label “epitextual,” in turn, refers to the material that influences the reading of a text and is related to it, but not directly part of it (Genette 1997b, p. 344).
- 3 In her famous study of postmodern fiction, Hutcheon focuses on the interest in the past that is apparent from the metafictional works of her corpus (e.g. John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor*), which she defines as historiographic metafiction. Nostalgia comes up in Hutcheon’s discussion of irony, which, according to her, “rescues” historiographic metafiction from nostalgia despite its orientation toward the past.

- 4 In "Queer Kin in the Oeuvre of Rebecca Brown: De-naturalizing Biological Kinship and Performing the Family" (forthcoming from *Women's Studies*), I offer a more thorough analysis of nostalgia for the traditional family and its influence on Brown's writings.
- 5 The obvious exception to this kind of facilitation, as Lanser points out, is a narrator with the same name as the author, who is perhaps even more easily attached to the author (Lanser 2005, p. 212).

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BIOGRAPHY

Lies Xhonneux wrote her doctoral dissertation on the oeuvre of Rebecca Brown at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. Her first book (on homonormalization and identification Brown's writings) is forthcoming from Cambria Press. She has previously published on the coming out novel; the intertextual relationship between Rebecca Brown and Samuel Beckett; gender performativity; linguistic skepticism and reader identification in Brown's minimalism.