

# The Serial Mythology of a Non-Representative Self: Rebecca Brown's Life Writing

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**Abstract:** In this article, I will point to several striking parallels that can be drawn between the I-narrators in Rebecca Brown's oeuvre. These parallels add up to create a personal myth, and they allow us to read the work of this contemporary lesbian author as a serial autobiography. Tracing her autobiographical voice, we can see how Brown's work upsets generic conventions through the narrators' namelessness, through the implication that there is no end to autobiography, or through the insight that the truth about one's self and one's past is hard to capture because it is inevitably perspectival. The impossibility of attaining this kind of truth ties in with what I see as Brown's distinctive way of handling a problem of representation that other life writers with marginalized identities tend to deal with rather differently. After all, when Brown's lesbian self-referential narrators make no effort to hide the difficulty of relating personal recollections and resort to their own idiosyncratic ways of commenting on the unreliability of memory, they upset certain expectations about a narrator's authority and representativeness that continue to be prompted by autobiographical texts of authors who work from a marginal subject position.

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## 1. Introducing Rebecca Brown.

The oeuvre of the contemporary American author Rebecca Brown has largely escaped critical interest so far, even if her award-winning and widely translated book *The Gifts of the Body* (1994) has been popular with an international reading audience. The reviewers who do devote attention to Brown's work frequently address its typical minimalist style. For instance, Amy Boaz thinks *Annie Oakley's Girl* (1993), a collection focusing on power imbalances in mainly lesbian love relationships, displays "economy and precision" (18), while Valerie Miner labels Brown's 1996 collection *What Keeps Me Here* "reserved and contained" (28). Hinting at Ernest Hemingway's famous principle of the iceberg, Brown herself has affirmed that, in her work too, "there's so much beneath the surface that you don't see" (interview by Lewis n.p.). My article aims to draw attention to a narrative ingredient that conspicuously escapes being relocated "beneath the surface" of Brown's minimalist texts—i.e., the author's own presence and thus the specifically *lesbian* subject position from which she speaks. This feature sets her work apart from the classic instances of literary minimalism that are typified by authorial invisibility (Hovis 493). Yet Brown's oeuvre is in many respects equally atypical of the

literary tradition of life writing in which it can also be situated,<sup>1</sup> thereby allowing us to delineate a new approach to autobiographical representations of minority identities.

This article is mainly concerned with self-representational narrators who are set apart from the (heterosexual) majority because of their sexuality, yet I will also draw comparisons with life writing by racial and ethnic minorities. Although confrontations with discrimination because of identity markers like one's skin color obviously cannot be completely equated with those triggered by one's homosexuality, Brown's fictionalized essay "Invisible" from the 2009 collection *American Romances* does point to the shared experience of being socially unacknowledged and "invisible" when you are "queer (or colored or weird or different)" (127). Moreover, the marginal subject positions of colored and queer authors generate similar expectations in terms of the type of narrator the mainstream reader thinks she or he will encounter in the autobiographically inflected works of such authors. Because my article will focus on Brown's presence in her writings in order to reveal her opposition to the authoritative and representative autobiographical self that has tended to be affirmed by authors who are—like her—writing from the margins, I will start by providing a few biographical facts about this lesser-known novelist and short story writer.

Brown was born in San Diego in 1956. Her father was a navy pilot and a naval officer, so the family moved every three years depending on where he was stationed. Brown has now settled in Seattle with her lesbian partner but, due to her peripatetic youth, "the idea of travel" remains "hugely important" to her (interview by Eldaly n.p.). Her parents' marriage was unhappy—"our home got volatile from time to time," Brown admits ("On Living Long Enough" n.p.)—and her mother and father eventually divorced. In newspaper articles as well as in her fiction, Brown has expressed gratitude for the fact that

they got to get through their crazy years and live long enough to be happy. Now when I try to imagine them, I do not think of the hard things from the past, I think of them in the last years of their lives. I think of my mom in the garden in the little house she was able to buy when she retired. ("On Living Long Enough" n.p.)

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will preserve the basic theoretical division between fictional and nonfictional autobiographies by discussing Brown's work as "life writing" or "fictional autobiography," yet I would like to point to the caveat of such a terminological distinction. "Life writing" is frequently offered as a more inclusive term than "autobiography," as it is for instance said to leave more room for all kinds of *fictional* autobiography (see e.g. Henke 1998 or Kadar 1992). Yet I believe that reserving the term life writing for "personally inflected fictional texts" which are allegedly excluded from the category of autobiographical works (Henke xiii) threatens to preserve the illusion that the latter *do* correspond directly and accurately to reality. The distinction between life writing and autobiography loses some of its usefulness when we keep in mind that constructedness and fabulation are inevitable, even in a supposedly "straightforward" autobiography. John Paul Eakin, too, maintains that "fictions and the fiction-making process are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life" (5). So even if life writing like Brown's cannot be equated with autobiography pure and simple, we should bear in mind that processes of narrativization are inherent in the latter type of self-representational work too.

Interestingly, this exact same fantasy is enacted in Brown's 2003 collection *The End of Youth*. The book opens with an evocation of the narrator's mom in a "Heaven" that resembles the one Brown has imagined for her own mother: "heaven is a garden, not Eden, but a great, big vegetable garden" and "[t]here's an old lady in the garden," "stooping down over [her] plants" (1). Although Brown also asserts her identity as the creator of her work through metafictional intrusions or self-conscious winks at her other writings, I focus here on her tendency to go even further in this narrative self-insertion by adding autobiographical elements to her oeuvre.

Thus I will first point out the parallels between Brown's various first-person narrators that add up to create a kind of personal mythology—or, as Brown herself puts it, an "auto-myth-o-graphy" ("RE: Translations continued..." n.p.)—and opt for the critical lens of the serial autobiography to show that the self-referential quality that might logically be expected in, for instance, Brown's memoir of her mother's dying process, also contaminates her explicitly fictional and absurd works. Tracing her autobiographical voice allows us to see how Brown's work upsets generic conventions through the narrators' namelessness, through the implication that there is no end to autobiography, or the insight that the truth about one's self and one's past is hard to capture because it is inevitably perspectival. The impossibility of attaining this kind of truth ties in with what I see as Brown's distinctive way of handling a problem of representation that other life writers with marginalized identities tend to deal with rather differently. After all, when Brown's lesbian self-referential narrators make no effort to hide the difficulty of relating personal recollections and resort to their own idiosyncratic ways of commenting on the unreliability of memory, they upset certain expectations about a narrator's representativeness and authority that continue to be prompted by autobiographical works of "minority authors" (Metta 14).

## **2. The Unifying "I".**

To establish the autobiographical quality of Brown's writing, let me first point out the striking resemblances that most of her I-narrators bear to each other, despite the fact that they populate works that vary widely in terms of genre, theme, atmosphere, internal cohesion, and time of publication. The first-person narrators of *The Evolution of Darkness* (1984), *The Children's Crusade* (1986), *The Haunted House* (1989), *The Dogs* (1998), *Excerpts from a Family Medical Dictionary* (2001), *The End of Youth*, and the collection of fictionalized essays *American Romances*, all experience or mention having experienced a parental divorce, often against a backdrop of constant relocation due to the father's profession. These narrators' dads, moreover, are generally military men rather than family men. Brown's narrators in *Woman in Ill-Fitting Wig* (2005), *The Last Time I Saw You* (2006), *What Keeps Me Here*, *The Dogs*, *The End of Youth*, and *American Romances* all have suicidal thoughts, and the I-narrators of the latter three collections are joined by the narrator of *The Haunted House* in their struggle with alcoholism.

Some of these experiences can be traced back to Brown's own life, since the author has written numerous reviews and opinion pieces for the Seattle weekly *The Stranger*, commenting for instance on how her "parents were unhappy with one another" and eventually got divorced, or even on the fact that at one point she "thought seriously about killing [her]self" (in "On Living Long Enough" and "Why Not Die" respectively: n.p.). Despite Brown's general refusal to provide a concrete spatial setting in her narratives, she has the narrator of the penultimate story of *Annie Oakley's Girl* reside in her own hometown, Seattle (118), and she mentions the city as one of the "exotic places" the I-narrator of *The Children's Crusade* visits in search of her lost brother (51). Interviews with Brown are another valuable source of autobiographical information. The author has, for instance, talked about how she worked as a "Xerox girl" while writing her first novel (interview by Stadler 6), and this same job is taken up by the narrators in "A Good Man" from *Annie Oakley's Girl* and in "Lady Bountiful" from *The Terrible Girls* (1990). Finally, there is one last incident that we know derives from Brown's own life, namely her mother's death from cancer, which is dramatized in *American Romances*, *The End of Youth*, and especially *Excerpts from a Family Medical Dictionary*.

Brown, who once defined writers as "people who overdramatize and exaggerate their fucked-up lives in order to tell a story" ("Why Not Die" n.p.), has explicitly commented on the autobiographical character of two of her works, namely *The End of Youth* and *The Terrible Girls*. She referred to the thematically linked short stories of the former collection as "the autobiographical pieces" (interview by Eldaly n.p.) and she called the latter book—which Carolyn Allen describes as a "lyrical narrative of obsession, loss, power, and emotional difference between women lovers" (82)—"an emotional autobiography" ("Page to Stage" n.p.). Yet given the recurring character traits of Brown's narrators as well as their similar life experiences throughout her oeuvre, a remarkable comment in one of the stories from *Annie Oakley's Girl*, published three years after *The Terrible Girls*, may begin to gain added meaning. The narrator in "The Death of Napoleon," the fifth tale of the collection, imagines that she used to be Napoleon's lover even though the latter has "been dead for a hundred and fifty years" in the narrative present (72). This strange illusion helps the narrator come to terms with her past relationship with someone called Jerry or her ending relationship with the addressee (both suggestions are entertained in the beginning of the story). Because of these fantasies, the nameless addressee understandably suspects the equally anonymous narrator of "mak[ing] up this mythology about [her]self" (89). When I asked Brown if this remark might describe her own writing as well, the author replied,

Oh, absolutely. It's about a small person trying to see their life in a bigger context. It is partly seriously, as if I'm asking myself, "what is the meaning of my life," but it also involves a certain ridiculousness. Because I feel like I'm very often really close to the ridiculous, which I hope to be. It

corresponds to some kind of self-mythologizing, yes—and mythologizing of others, certainly. (personal interview)

Brown has addressed the mythological and autobiographical quality that she feels lies at the heart of her oeuvre also on other occasions, for instance calling her work an “emotional/ spiritual auto-myth-o-graphy” in an email interview (“RE: Translations continued...” n.p.).

The evocation of a nameless I-narrator and an anonymous addressee that we saw in “The Death of Napoleon” characterizes almost all of Brown’s work (her debut is a notable exception: the first-person narrator of *The Haunted House*, who also shares several traits with the author, is called Robin Daley). The addressees in Brown’s oeuvre typically figure as the recipients of the narrators’ life stories: these tales are usually provoked by the presence of a “you”<sup>2</sup> and the desire of Brown’s narrator to explain herself to this familiar other, to set the record straight, to express her anger, regret, or gratitude. The continuity that is created by these recurring personal pronouns also pertains to Brown’s attempts to mythologize her own life. She added,

almost all the “I’s” are in some or many ways me. And obviously the more I’ve written, the specifics of the “you” have changed from this specific woman or that specific woman or my father. Recently it has been much more Beckettian—similar to ambiguous figures such as Godot—or God-like. (personal interview)

So the author’s self-referential “I” can be said to create a connection between her generically diverse writings. While readers are probably not surprised to encounter an autobiographical voice in works that draw directly on Brown’s own life (such as *Excerpts from a Family Medical Dictionary*, which deals with her mother’s death from cancer), such a voice can also be seen to spill out into more explicitly fictional writings as varied as a “modern bestiary” (*The Dogs*), a “novel in stories” (*The Terrible Girls*), a collection of fictionalized essays (*American Romances*), or prose poems that accompany visual artwork (*Woman in Ill-Fitting Wig*). Brown’s typical evocation of a nameless addressee fulfills a similar unifying function: “A couple of girlfriends later the ‘you’ referred to someone else, but for the purposes of mythologizing my life into writing, the name in the fictions remained ‘you’” (interview by Stadler 7). This shows how strategic Brown tends to be in her choice of narrative devices to develop her personal mythology.

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<sup>2</sup> This kind of address evidently generates reader identification, as it exploits an automatic reaction Marie-Laure Ryan describes as “to think *me* when we hear *you*” and thus “to feel personally concerned by the textual utterance” (138). Yet the “you” in Brown’s work mainly refers to another “well-individuated character in the textual world” (Ryan 138) with whom the narrator typically has a mental conversation (rather than talking to an addressee who is *physically* present in the textual world).

Yet such a deliberate use of personal pronouns also means that Brown's life writing contains no personal names to fulfill a referential function.<sup>3</sup> This is remarkable given that the proper name is exactly what is supposed to reassure readers that they are reading autobiographically inflected work—an insight that forms the basis of Philippe Lejeune's theory of self-referential writing. "What defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name. And this is true also for the one who is writing the text," he influentially argued (19). The reader of Brown's work is offered no such immediate guarantee. The addressee, for instance, has no clearly identifiable real-life counterpart, as her or his identity shifts throughout the oeuvre, despite the constancy of the label "you." An identity contract of sorts regarding the "I" in Brown's writing is established only tentatively, through the *serial* character of the mythology of her self—in other words, through its intratextual references<sup>4</sup> at least as much as through its extratextual links. Readers are tempted to identify Brown's "I's" only after familiarizing themselves with several of her writings and encountering similar experiences or preoccupations throughout, as well as traits the narrators share. Using Charles Mauron's psychocriticism, we can then read those recurring traits and experiences as ever so many "images whose combination result[s] in the emergence of a *personal myth* specific to [an] author" (Roudinesco 388; my italics), where "personal myth" refers to the unity "which appears when one super[im]poses the works of an author," as I am doing here for Brown (Mauron 251).<sup>5</sup> Though there are clearly also important and verifiable differences between the various I-narrators, the elements these narrators have in common add up to "form a representational figure capable of signifying beyond any single text" (Gilmore 97-8). So the *context* in which readers encounter this "figure"—from a memoir such as *Excerpts* to a "book of stories" like *What Keeps Me Here*—will affect how they interpret Brown's recurring "I." As Brian Richardson has argued with regard to Vladimir Nabokov's "First Love," a story that occurs both in the author's fictional work and in his autobiography, "The figure who says 'I' either is Nabokov or is merely a fictitious narrator, depending on the way we contextualize the work" (79).

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<sup>3</sup> I should add here that the gender of Brown's narrators is usually not made explicit either. Carolyn Allen argues that Brown thereby succeeds in "destabilizing [...] sex and gender identifications" or expectations (17).

<sup>4</sup> Gérard Genette explains intratextuality as "several texts that refer in some way to one another" and that are "signed by the same name" (207).

<sup>5</sup> In the context of Brown's work, the term "mythology" carries additional significance because of the traditional definition of myths as stories of "the deeds of superhuman beings such as gods, demigods, heroes" (Don Cupitt, qtd. in Coupe 6). After all, the autobiographical material that Brown tends to use in her writings is frequently embellished to some extent. The author's wish to mythologize her past comes out of an "affection for wanting to *aggrandize* lives": "Mythologizing your life is like saying 'my life is grand,'" Brown argued, adding that "mythologizing other people" is an equally important aspect of her fictional project (personal interview). For instance, she can be seen to turn her own father, a navy pilot, into a war hero in *The Haunted House*, *The End of Youth*, and *American Romances*.

### 3. A Life Revisited: Serial Autobiography and Unreliability.

As products of a mythology she created out of her own life, Brown's writings clearly also upset other generic requirements. Her oeuvre can be said to extend the limits of the classical autobiography, usually considered a "one-shot deal" (Gilmore 96), and may be aptly theorized by means of a notion Robert Fothergill introduced in the context of diary writing, namely "serial autobiography." Since its inception, Fothergill's concept has been used more broadly to encompass "series of autobiographical works, usually published over a number of years, in either chronological or topological order" (Winslow 61). Jamaica Kincaid's work, to give just one example, has repeatedly been read in such terms (see, for instance, Gilmore [99-105]; Snodgrass [220]; and Kohlmeier). In the case of more conventional autobiography, which is often dubbed a "genre of last words," one work traditionally suffices to carry out the "contractual obligation to tell the truth. Its summary dimension, its claim to fullness and even accountability, militates against reenactment" (Gilmore 96). Serial—thus potentially endless—life writing like Brown's, by contrast, recognizes that such finality is unattainable and undesirable. It is much better suited to capture the insight that truth in autobiography, rather than being a yardstick for judging the "reality value" of self-representational work, is unachievable, in part because it is perspectival and thus subject to change. After all—and perhaps contrary to Donald Winslow's definition of serial autobiography, with its focus on "chronological or topological order"—the individual works comprising a serial autobiography do not always correspond to neatly delineated and successive stages of a life. In Brown's life writing, too, certain key episodes or relationships are continually revisited and reworked.

The attitude of Brown's various I-narrators towards their fathers, for instance, can be seen to evolve throughout her oeuvre. In Brown's very first collection, *The Evolution of Darkness*, the narrator recalls "her father putting the dog into the car and driving away as she rode her bike home from school," along with herself "shouting 'Daddy! Daddy!' and the car going" (156). But the narrator of Brown's latest collection, *American Romances*, is much more down-to-earth, admitting that such a dramatic and climactic scene of separation never took place because her father was gone most of the time anyway: "There was no time that I or anyone yelled after him, 'Come back! ... Come back!' He was already gone" (136). Moreover, while the narrators in Brown's works from the mid-eighties are embittered by their fathers' neglect, by *The End of Youth* from 2003 the narrator seems to have forgiven her father. Robin in *The Haunted House*, for instance, still blames Mr. Daley: "Your promise came to nothing, Dad. My foolishness is I believed that you'd come back" (60). She dramatizes her shock at being left by drawing parallels with the "true story" of her dad's rather cruel method to teach her to swim by abandoning her in a pool:

I remember the drop of his hands from mine, my desperate lunge for his suddenly distant body. ... I knew that I was drowning and I couldn't reach my dad. Then, with the last drop of strength I had, I stretched to where I thought he was and scraped against the rough edge of the concrete. (61-2)

*The Gifts of the Body*, which was published eight years later, recounts the emotionally powerful experiences of a home-care worker assisting people with AIDS. Here the narrator's tone has changed drastically as she describes looking after a client like her father looked after her: "I took [Carlos's] palms on top of mine and held them loosely, the way my father did when I was afraid of water and he was teaching me to swim" (46). Almost twenty years after the publication of *The Haunted House*, Brown once more returns to the episode of a father teaching his daughter how to swim, in "An Element" from *The End of Youth* (92). Yet the narrator's anger at being left, which was an integral part of the initial scene in *The Haunted House*, seems to have dissolved like in *The Gifts* by the lapse of time and by the fact that her father has died in the meantime: "the further I get from my father's death, and the more detached I get from the impossible things I wanted from him, the more I can feel compassion for him" (99). Brown testifies to this evolution in her work, realizing, "I've forgiven [my father] at some point." Consequently, her later I-narrators are "able to see him as just a guy out there, trying to do his thing" (personal interview). Sticking to the theme of water that connects the different episodes in "An Element," the narrator realizes,

For years I hated the way [my parents] were with one another and I blamed my father. [...] But now that both of them are dead, and I no longer fantasize that my father will have some great revelation or change of heart, I am becoming able to forgive him. I am beginning to see my father as a misplaced man who didn't know how to live outside his element. (85)

Much as the I-narrators' attitude towards their father changes throughout Brown's work (with no narrative being more or less "true" than another, because the reality of their relationship varies with time), their identities shift during the almost thirty years covered by Brown's writing career. Thus Brown counters the *stasis* that characterizes more traditional instances of self-representation, a trait exemplified by James Olney's famous definition of autobiography as "a monument of the self" (35). We can discern an anti-monumental impulse in writings by Brown, whose fictional self might accurately be called "serial, multiple, and heterogeneous" (Smith and Watson 72). Discussing serial autobiographies in general, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that "such narratives composed of heterogeneous modes [...] of self-inquiry [...] enable us to see more clearly how narrated 'I's' are indeed multiple" (73). Rather than solidifying identity through depictions of a stable selfhood, Brown presents her readers with changing and sometimes outright contradictory versions of the same self or the same event, thereby dramatizing how the process of identity-formation, and thus the autobiographical

project itself, is necessarily open-ended. To quote Jessica Prinz, “the self is diffracted and refracted through various stories and voices” (395). In Brown’s serial autobiographies, identity and the truth about a person’s past are therefore inevitably plural. “Serial autobiography,” Leigh Gilmore confirms, “permits the writer to take multiple runs at self-representation, more as a way to explore the possibilities present within autobiography than to produce a single, definitive solution to the problem of representing identity” (103)—a problem that is even more pressing for authors who work from a marginal subject position.

Brown’s self-representational characters confound the possibility of getting at the truth about their personal past even further by underlining the (con)fusion between fantasy and memory that inevitably crops up when they try to recall earlier events from their life. The nameless narrator of “Description of a Struggle” (from *The End of Youth*) is one of those unreliable storytellers. In the middle of her story—which is a cryptic account of her struggle with suicidal tendencies—the narrator suggests that her imagination may have run away with her in her descriptions of former suicide attempts. She admits, “Perhaps what I remember is a lie. Perhaps I just remember what I want” (113). The inclination to blur the lines between remembering and inventing, as well as the tendency to share insights into this process with the reader, are typical of the narrators of Brown’s self-mythologies. Most of her heroines feel a similar “need” to “misremember,” as the narrator of “Description of a Struggle” puts it (110). The narrator of “Trying to Say,” for instance, also blends imagination and recollection. Her tale is the fourth in *The Last Time I Saw You*, Brown’s collection that centers on what the brain can do to haunting memories. This narrator lists her “*favorite terrible memories*” of her past relationship with the addressee, such as “the afternoon in your backyard” (21), only to end with the bold assertion that “I can remember (invent) whatever I want” (27). Thus Brown’s remembering narrators seem to refuse to strive for credibility; at the very least, they do not bother to assert the reliability of their memories vis-à-vis the reader. These observations tie in with another of their habits, namely to dramatize the general impossibility of narrating their personal histories.

Readers of Brown’s work are frequent witnesses to a narrator’s step-by-step reconstruction of past events—a position that is likely to alert them to the difficulty of such a task, and to the dubious truth value of the outcome of these processes of reminiscence. We can detect in these stories the “deliberate contamination of the historical with [...] situational discursive elements,” a practice that defies the “neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation” that is generally expected of history writing, even if only on a personal level (Hutcheon 92). For instance, the more Brown’s attentive reader gains access to the specific conditions of retrospection in the title story of *The Last Time I Saw You*, the more she or he will probably doubt the narrator’s entire account, which consists of the particulars of her last encounter with her ex-partner (continually referred to as “you”)—at least insofar as she can recall these. “I waited near the bridge near the church,” the anonymous narrator casually remarks at the beginning of the story, “though I can’t remember which bridge.” A few lines down, she is even less

sure about this spatial setting: “But maybe you didn’t come by the bridge at all” (56). Brown’s readers, then, are thrown off balance right from the start, and the narrator’s hesitations continue throughout the story.

Little by little, she casts doubts on all those elements she so carefully and convincingly introduced, until practically none remain intact. After the bridge in the previous quote, the topic of what kind of drink they had is tackled and—as might be expected by now—disputed. “We had coffee,” the narrator explains, “mine black, yours with a touch of white, as usual. Wait—I would have had coffee [...] but you wouldn’t have because you weren’t doing coffee anymore.” After tentatively settling on “mineral water” for the addressee, the narrator starts on a compelling description of the café where they sat down for their last talk (57), only to interrupt it after four pages with the dry comment “But maybe we didn’t meet there” (61). The time of the day is the next fact she starts doubting (62), and still more examples might be given here. These recollections are obviously presented as highly unreliable, and rightly so. The idea that “memories are passive or literal recordings of reality” is, after all, just another “long-standing myth” (Schacter 5). Some contemporary self-representational works therefore leave “a residue of ‘uncorrected’ details and false clues” to warn the reader that “memory is always provisional” (King 132-3). Yet this narrative strategy does not entirely correspond to what happens in “The Last Time I Saw You.” What is remarkable is that Brown’s story paradoxically stirs up the reader’s suspicion precisely in those detailed passages that signal an excessive preoccupation with “remembering right.” These scenes are exactly what draws attention to the impossibility of such an aspiration.

Brown develops this emphasis elsewhere in her work as well, for instance in “A Child of Her Time,” an essayistic story from *American Romances* that looks back on the narrator’s past: her relationship with her sister (31-2), her father’s absence (33-4), and the family’s move to Spain (36-8). The narrator, rather than simply informing the reader about her and her sister’s age when they each got a doll for Christmas, reasons as follows: “My sister is seven years older than me, and if she was still young enough to have been given a baby doll, she couldn’t have been more than nine or ten, which would have made me two or three” (34)—after which she elaborates on her thoughts of guilt over her parents’ failing marriage at the time. As if such openness regarding the process of retrieving information were not enough to alert readers to the possibility of misremembering, the narrator adds, “I started off this essay by saying I didn’t remember how old I was when I got that doll and then I tried to work that out. But if I don’t remember something as simple as how old I was, how can I remember what I thought?” (35). Such comments probably alert readers to their dependency on traditional literary guides in order to achieve narrative closure, as well as making them realize how risky this habit becomes when engaging with Brown’s work.

In addition, these quotes show the narrator’s awareness of the inevitability (and the inevitable fictionality) of embellishing memories with emotions or thoughts that are retrospectively attributed to one’s younger self. In other words, she realizes that past experiences are “out of reach forever,” and can only be “conjured up by way of [...]

impressions, and endowed retrospectively with a pattern and a significance which [they] rarely, if ever, [...] possessed at the time” (Coe 3). Later on in “A Child of Her Time,” Brown’s narrator cautiously relates what she thought when she stopped believing in Santa Claus: “*I think* I suspected, even then, that my mother had purposely left the price tag on” (36; my italics). Her hesitancy is understandable given her insight, throughout the story, that it is impossible to recall such thoughts with certainty: “I’m assuming there was some kind of ‘reasoning’ in what I did or felt, but I don’t know that. I look for causes in retrospect but I bet at the time I didn’t think like that at all” (35). This character is representative of Brown’s I-narrators in that she, rather than smoothing over the imprecision of her account, interrupts her descriptions of childhood memories to explicitly draw attention to the gaps in her narrative. As she concludes, “The child we remember is the child we invent / to tell us who we thought we were” (43).

The fickleness of their memory encourages some of Brown’s characters, like Robin’s mother in *The Haunted House*, to obsessively record everything, for instance in photographs which then become “the punctuation of [their] history” (137-8). Yet snapshots do not guarantee the unproblematical availability of personal recollections, as illustrated by Robin’s imaginative reinventions of the family scene in a picture of her parents at a banquet:

Though in this picture [my father] is leaning over my mother, watching her put food on her plate, I never think of this scene in this way. I think of this picture in a way that it is not. I imagine his clear face looking directly into the camera, and to me. I imagine that he is smiling. (25)

Another example is the narrator’s realization in “My Western,” a fictionalized essay from *American Romances*, that she may be inventing (rather than recalling) a scene from her past based on a picture she once saw. The narrator, who likens her wandering father to some of the most famous cowboys in movie history, provides a lively portrayal of going on a duck hunt with her father when she was little. She expounds on what she wore, saw, felt, and heard. To provide just a fragment of the scene she sketches, “We were in a brown field and the air was cold and the sun was coming up. There was the sound of mens’ [sic] and boys’ and my boots on the crunchy, almost frozen ground.” Yet then she adds, “I think I remember this, but maybe I don’t. Maybe I only think I do because I saw a photograph of me in such a field on such a day, holding my father’s gun” (135).

#### **4. “Truth ... and blah blah blah”<sup>6</sup>: Authority and Representativeness.**

By commenting on the fallibility of their memory or by laying these failures out to the reader in meticulous descriptions of their thought processes, Brown’s autobiographical narrators may not be voicing radically new insights. After all, “the questioning of the ontological and epistemological status of historical ‘fact’ or the

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<sup>6</sup> The quotation in this title is taken from *The Terrible Girls* (77).

distrust of seeming neutrality and objectivity of recounting,” to quote Hutcheon, are hardly innovative (88). Yet Brown’s way of handling personal historiography gains added significance when we compare her lesbian heroines to those “minority subjects” (like other lesbians, or people of color) who *are* in full possession of their life stories. Conventional autobiography has always been related to truth-telling, or to convincing readers of the illusion that “honesty lies in personal revelation where one assumes that testimonial transparency is not only necessary and desirable but possible” (Gilmore 24). This attitude of claiming to “have nothing up their sleeves, nothing in the cards,” which Timothy Dow Adams thinks autobiographers share with conjurors and sports managers (8), has been exemplified especially in life writing by subjects set apart because of identity markers such as skin color or sexuality.

To them, self-representational projects have often been emancipatory, and the idea of finally being able to make a mainstream reader see their experiences, lives, or selves from *their* perspective has been a strong motivation to start writing autobiographically (Adams 11). Several critics explain the “enormous proliferation of autobiographical works from members of minority [...] groups” by arguing that such works can “help correct wrong views about the writers and their communities” (Chait and Negash 247). Moreover, in the face of repeated charges of being somehow “less” than majoritarian subjects,<sup>7</sup> minority writers have typically felt the need to affirm an *authoritative* autobiographical self. Gail Y. Okawa stresses that society’s others draw on autobiography to “talk back” and to assume the stance of “agents rather than [...] objects” (305). Their consequent insistence on narrative authority and agency is understandable given that certain key aspects of the practice of writing and reading autobiographical work cannot be taken for granted by authors from marginalized groups—think of the author’s power to speak, or the reader’s belief in the author’s “authority of experience.” As the notion “category of experience” turns out to be “culturally, historically, and politically negotiated,” such authors find that it is crucial to trick readers into accepting the narrated events as true, and to make them see the general “‘truth’ of narrative” too (Smith and Watson 28).

This insistence on veracity, authenticity, and authority diverges markedly from the invitation in Brown’s work precisely *not* to trust or to believe the narrator. Yet Brown’s narrators differ in still more respects from the remembering subjects that are typical for life writing at the margins of the field. While the former are highly recognizable due to the idiosyncratic workings of their memory—as well as their explicit and obsessive reports on the topic—the latter are commonly representative of the subculture they (have to) identify with. Leigh Gilmore detects a general convention of portraying “the self as [...] able to stand for others” in all kinds of “contemporary self-representation” (19), yet it is useful to stress the added significance of this notion for life writers who

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, too, realizes that “a lot of [her] work comes out of this deep, underlying experience of having been [...] considered less – less intelligent, less ‘universal,’ less able to construct or make form, and having less ‘right’ to engage with the literary canon” as a lesbian author (“RE: Translations continued...” n.p.)

have historically been “othered.” In Caren Kaplan’s words, life writing that features a spokesperson-narrator aims to “challenge Western critical practices to expand their parameters” by changing “the subject of autobiography from the individual to a [...] collective entity” (214). Stephen Butterfield, in an analysis of black authors’ life writing, argues that a “history of victimization” generally inspires such writers to assume the role of “representative of the people” and to accentuate “communal identification rather than individuality”—even if this role has not always been taken up voluntarily (Smith 110).

Several contemporary lesbian authors, too, are considered “representatives” of their subculture, and many have deliberately embraced this particular role. Alison Bechdel, who famously drew (on) her own life in writing the best-selling graphic memoirs *Fun Home* (2006) and *Are You My Mother?* (2012), has been called “the representative Genie/Genius for those of us growing up lesbian” (McPherson n.p.). Bechdel herself, in turn, “went through a stage of bemoaning the dissolution of [the queer] community” because, as she put it, “if there is no community I cannot be representative of it” (interview by Zander n.p.). Brown’s writing colleague Jeanette Winterson, another lesbian who has famously published self-representational works—*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011)—is even thought to provide “the archetypical representative history of lesbian women at large” in the former book (Onega 147). The New York author Sarah Schulman can be said to evoke, and to inflate, this typical spokesperson character of lesbian authors in her preface to the republished *Girls, Visions and Everything* (1999), in which she claims that she has always “tried to assert that a lesbian can be the emblematic American, the character through whom American life is measured and evaluated” (viii)—even if her comment does not concern an explicitly autobiographical oeuvre.

The enduring cultural and social authority of the idea that life writing by lesbians should present readers with an account that is valid for an entire subculture also speaks from Brown’s entertaining anecdote on the stage adaptation of *The Terrible Girls* by About Face Theatre, a gay theatre company from Chicago:

In one of the scenes, a character’s arm was cut off,<sup>8</sup> and the way they cast that was hilarious: off stage you heard a loud chainsaw and people who were familiar with the work knew, “it’s the arm scene!” Then the reviews came out, and one of them was written by a really old, conservative, white man. Commenting on the arm scene, the reviewer said that the play was about “the lesbian lifestyle.” So Chris [i.e. Brown’s partner] and I always joke about “the lesbian lifestyle”: let’s be lesbians and cut each others’ arms off with chainsaws! (personal interview)

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<sup>8</sup> In the fourth story of *The Terrible Girls*, “Forgiveness,” Brown works with a literalization of the expression “to give your right arm.” Carolyn Allen compares the “comic literalness of a lover’s sacrificing her limb, and her accompanying ironic observation (“It is an old saying after all”)” in this story to the more famous “commentaries on clichés” that we typically find in the work of Winterson (81), who was Brown’s editor at the start of her career.

The reviewer's interpretation<sup>9</sup> is remarkable especially in the case of this collection, where heroines receive their own body parts in the mail ("Junk Mail"), where they operate on other women's chests only to discover candy hearts that change colors ("Dr. Frankenstein"), and where gangs of girls try to compensate for a period of extreme drought in their city by sucking other girls' limbs dry ("The Ruined City")—as can be gathered already from these brief summaries, Paulina Palmer is right to count Brown among those authors who focus "on representing [...] fantasy and examining the darker reaches of lesbian desire" (17). Although works such as *The Terrible Girls* are clearly too idiosyncratic to be able to speak for lesbian women in general (if that would even be possible) or to be read mimetically, even such fiction cannot escape the forceful interpretative mold of realistic representativeness. The reviewer Brown talked about was only able to comment on "the lesbian lifestyle" that is supposedly embodied in her work by glossing over the narrative eccentricities Brown had introduced precisely to avoid being seen as "the prototypical lesbian," a predetermined identity assigned by mainstream heterosexual readers unfamiliar with other lesbian (literary) voices.

The continuing relevance of Brown's rejection of the spokesperson role by peopling her autobiographical work with idiosyncratic and unreliable narrators is obviously underscored by her amusing anecdote about the remarkable review of the stage adaptation of *The Terrible Girls*. But Brown's narrative strategies gain additional significance when we remember that the trappings of representativeness are frequently ignored in theories on life writing, which mainly focus on the genre's positive or emancipatory potential for minority subjects. Julia Swindells' opinion may serve as an example of this optimistic critical tendency:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness [...] have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a "personal" voice, which speaks beyond itself. (7)

However, the predicament of being "other" remains intact in such literary projects, even if the autobiographical subject is momentarily granted the dubious right to be the spokesperson for an entire group (the other members of which, obviously, have no chance to contribute to the conversation). In addition, precisely because she is a representative, the autobiographical individual is forced to disregard what sets her apart from the group that she is supposed to embody. From a multitude of identity markers (such as class, gender, sexuality, or race), *one* is selected in terms of which the

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<sup>9</sup> The culprit is probably Richard Christiansen, who writes for the *Chicago Tribune*. His review is tellingly titled "Celebration Of A Lifestyle: Sleek, Slick 'Terrible Girls' Focuses On Lesbian Love" (2001), and it describes Brown's works as "celebrations of the lesbian lifestyle" (n.p.).

representative subject will mainly be read. This may impede productive identifications with other markers of identity and prevent crossings among subcultures.

So, in their awareness that narrating their personal histories may be a project doomed to failure, and in their subsequent challenges to the reliability of memory (that founding principle of autobiography), Brown's self-representational narrators deviate from certain codes, such as the authority and truthfulness of the narrator, and her spokesperson status, that have come to be associated with life writing, by minority subjects in particular. The peculiar strategies of personal history writing—or telling—undertaken by Brown's autobiographical characters show that we have come a long way from the “innocent or neutral historical representation of queer identities” (Bravmann 108) that used to be produced by, or expected from, lesbian life writers and their narrators. Brown's heroines, by contrast, show that processes of recollection inevitably distort the reality of the past, which consequently becomes very hard to retrieve. Rather than being “innocent or neutral,” the memories of these characters, like that of the narrator in “Other” (from *The Last Time I Saw You*), are “at best, selective” and “in fact [...] a mess.” Wrapping up with a complaint by this same narrator allows me to return to something like the arctic image with which I started this article: “I have these ridges, these ruts, these craters in my brain from where the glaciers move so slowly,” she sighs. “I can't get out of them” (18).

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