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# THE CULINARY BROWNS: A FILM ABOUT FAMILY

by

PHOEBE BROWN

Under the Direction of Nancy Floyd

The Culinary Browns is an experimental documentary that traces four generations of the Brown family beginning with Bob Brown, my great-grandfather, a writer of pulp fiction, modern poetry, cookbooks and social commentary. This documentary is not a linear history or purely factual document, but instead, uses personal experience as a means to generate more universal connections to the inherently dysfunctional dynamics of family, the fragmentary quality of memory, and to ultimately remind the viewer that history is relative.

INDEX WORDS: Family, Food, Writers, Cookbooks, Documentary, Experimental film

THE CULINARY BROWNS: A FILM ABOUT FAMILY

by

PHOEBE BROWN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

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2009



THE CULINARY BROWNS: A FILM ABOUT FAMILY

by

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Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

December 2009

## **DEDICATION**

To my family: in the words of Bob Brown, “We are bound together. Our family escutcheon is intertwined—interwoven—bomb-proof—worm-proof—ETERNAL”, with much love.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last several years I have been collecting the written work of my great-grandfather Bob Brown and my grandfather, also Bob Brown. Trying to detangle the Bob's, who were so very similar and yet distant, has been as complicated as their intertwined names. My grandfather Bob was in his sixties when I was born and died when I was ten. I knew at some point he had been a writer, but only in my parents' vague references; it was a thing of the past and connected to a sense of failure. My father rarely talks about his father in a personal way and when pressed becomes uncomfortable and diverts the conversation to a more general topic. When I thought about my grandfather my emotions became heavy—yet, this heaviness was unconnected to any concrete memory—it was a burden rooted in other people's pain. We could have gone on like most families, keeping our dead buried with the darker and complicated emotions connected to them, but what writers leave behind is a trail. Michel Foucault remarked that “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity”<sup>i</sup>. This disparity between what I remember, the stories told, the gaps of silence, and what I've discovered in the texts of my grandfathers Brown spurred this project. Instead of being comfortable in the fallacy of my own narrative, I decided to go to the root of these formerly held truths and look at the contradictions.

The totality of history—the idea that there is one true account of events—has long been shattered in our Post (or is it Post-Post?) Modern world. The validity of our memories is less important than the *belief* in what we remember as true. These truths—real or imagined—construct our reality regardless of their actual validity. I don't remember the entire year I was six—or if what I remember happening when I was six really happened when I was eight. Like most people I have a series of punctuating events that make up “when I was six”. In the film I

treat memory in this way: using single images, words and sentences to carry the weight of years. My history is a muddle, and instead of neatly clarifying the story for the viewer, I want to give them the challenge of making meaning with me.

*The Culinary Brown's* is not a linear exploration: a cause and effect history. Instead, it works as a poetic film. This approach is in part a nod to my poetic grandfathers, but it is also a continuation of my own explorations in creating and expanding a film language of my own. In “This Is Called Moving: A Critical Poetics of Film” Abigail Child uses the word *poetics* to describe her questioning process in using film as an expressive medium

Questions such as how meaning is made, how elements join together, how far elements can stand apart and still “connect”, how resonance and meaning are created, how putting together fragments of the world can create new forms, new ways of thinking...when do elements fall apart? How does that look and act and mean? How might these questions reflect on social process and social community, on the public space and collective imagination we mutually inhabit?<sup>ii</sup>

In this same vein, I am working with the fragments of text, of image and sound to push at the boundaries of narrative construction while still working within a solidly approachable form. My film is a narrative film in that it tells a story, but it is poetry in the loose connection of ideas that weave together to leave an emotional impression. I use the word *impressions* in all of its meanings: a pattern, an image, a lasting effect, an idea, and the printed copy of a book. Like other artists working with experimental self-reflection (e.g. Sadie Benning, Stan Brakhage, Su Friedrich, Jonas Mekas) my concerns mirror what Michael Renov describes as an interest that “lies not so much in recovering time past or simply chronicling daily life—there is little illusion of a pristine reveal—as in seizing the opportunity to *rework* experience at the level of sound and image.”<sup>iii</sup> This is my story but it is also an exercise in retelling and reworking. By taking the narratives that my grandfathers left behind and working them into my own I am creating a new

history: shifting the medium, the message and the mode of reception I am taking the work they left behind and turning an archived history into a living history.



## HISTORY

My great-grandfather's cookbooks are filled with anecdotes about his travels, his friends, and crackle with irreverent, erudite humor and an evident love of language. Bob Brown could best be described as a *bon vivant*: a man who loved experience, was interested in people, the world, and ideas. He was a minor figure in the New York avant-garde literary scene, but he kept company with some of its luminaries counting William Carlos Williams, Stuart Davis, and Kay Boyle among his dear friends. But his relationship with his son--my grandfather--was distant. The oppositional pull of his feelings about his father plagued my grandfather. My grandfather wrote professionally as Carlton Brown—in an attempt to separate himself from his father—but slippage between the two occurred regularly and in his personal life my grandfather was Bob. In his autobiographical book “Brainstorm” my grandfather Bob writes

An estrangement between [me] and my mother had begun to set in. [I] was already launched on a double life whose hidden side must be kept secret from her. Tentatively, guiltily [I] had begun to follow in the footsteps of [my] father, who my mother had led [me] to believe, was thoroughly immoral. Some of [my] condemnation of [my] father remained, but now [I] shared in it to the extent that he had shared in the “sinful” pleasures of Bob's way of life. Though the picture had lost its sharp black and whites, [I] was still torn between the “good” of [my] mother and the “evil” of [my] father; [I] could not resolve the gradations between the opposing impulses within [myself], nor maintain a balance between them.<sup>iv</sup>

I've insert first person pronouns here because the book is written in the third person. The first lines of the book read, “This is a true story. It is about a close friend of the author's who went out of his mind a few summers ago and spent two months in a city and a state asylum”.<sup>v</sup> There is no “close friend”; the stories and the breakdown belong to my grandfather. Changing the distance of the third person, to the immediacy of the first, is one way I am shifting our history.



Figure 1: Film Stills 1 and 2—Cookbooks and Phoebe Cooking

It's easier on the page—or on film—for these feelings to belong to someone else. I don't know if cloaking his identity in fiction was born out of shame or more of a symptom of the attitudes surrounding mental illness at the time. We certainly still attach a stigma to mental disorders, but now we've become a culture of acknowledged neurotics, a "Prozac nation"—in the 1940's spending time in Bellevue wasn't cocktail party conversation.

Apart from the direct references to my grandfather's relationship with his father, there are other less obvious places where this thinly veiled tension bubbles to the surface. I came upon one "recipe" donated by my grandfather, as Carlton Brown, in the cookbook *10,000 Snacks* that is a two page ramble on how food and life are scrambled for the Browns. Here's a taste

Theirs not to reason why, the Browns took me along to Africa and China and Japan, and all along we snacked with a will. In Ceylon, Bob lured me into a native market and fed me molten curry. He ate what looked like the same dish, but I think he had bribed the waiter to slip a little brimstone into mine. I couldn't eat anything for a week after, but Bob went around with a grin of smug satisfaction defacing his otherwise blameless map.<sup>vi</sup>

Using the forum of a cookbook to take a mild jab at his father revealed for me the depth and constancy of these feelings. This could be exacerbated by my grandfathers struggle with bi-polar disorder, perhaps he was on a mild upswing and starting to feel the paranoid sense of persecution that often arises in a manic episode, but what also intrigued me was his father's inclusion of this anecdote. It points to either an openness to bear the somewhat deserved critique of his absentee parenthood or an inability to read between the lines. Since Bob the elder delighted in that later type of reading, it seems the former is more likely.

This sense of my great-grandfather's flawed magnanimity made me want to know him more. What was startling and exciting as I began to investigate both Bob's was where I saw traces of myself. My grandfather Bob wrote a book about his own mental illness and I made a

film about my experience with cancer. He loved photography and I work behind a lens, also. My great-grandfather Bob loved travel and food and so do I. When I look at his handwriting I am struck by the similarity of our lettering, the connection of our hand in the physical marks.

*The Culinary Browns* focuses on the immediate Brown's in my family circle. My great-grandfather Bob Brown and my grandfather Bob Brown serve as the catalysts for the conversation and the source of much historical information. Chris Brown, my father, makes a brief enigmatic appearance. His silence about familial matters is one of the reasons for this convoluted approach to our history, but I am not interested in cracking the code. I never wanted to lay blame—find a simple cause and effect trajectory—but look for ways to shift long-standing patterns and loosen the paralyzing grip of the unsaid. Eamon Brown, my brother, is two years younger than I. Eamon is an artist, a thinker and quietly introspective. This led him to be silent for his first two years while I did all his talking. Our experiences of childhood were closer than our youngest brother Rory, but we carry it in vastly different ways. Rory Brown is my youngest brother; he is eight years my junior and lives in Chicago where he is a Chicago Public Librarian. He never met his grandfather Bob and also never lived with our father. For several years, when I would tell people that Rory was going to be a librarian they would assume I was joking; he is the loudest mouth in the family and dropped out of high school, but he's always had an encyclopedic mind.

Most people looking for some genealogic distinction want to claim ownership of their illustrious pasts: to claim decadence from some royal lineage or tell stories of how their hard-scrabble peasant clan worked with bent backs from the potato fields to the comfortable suburbs. We want to believe in the progress narrative—that these connections are direct and real and coded in our DNA. What I was looking for was the dysfunction. I wanted to trace why my

family struggles with emotional distance, how we've perpetuated a legacy of divorce and a deep holding of tangled feelings. Without the writing I would not have direct access to any of this.

What my grandfathers have left my family and I as a legacy, written in poetry, cookbooks and letters, is a code to our familial anxieties and--with some deciphering--perhaps a way to change these patterns.



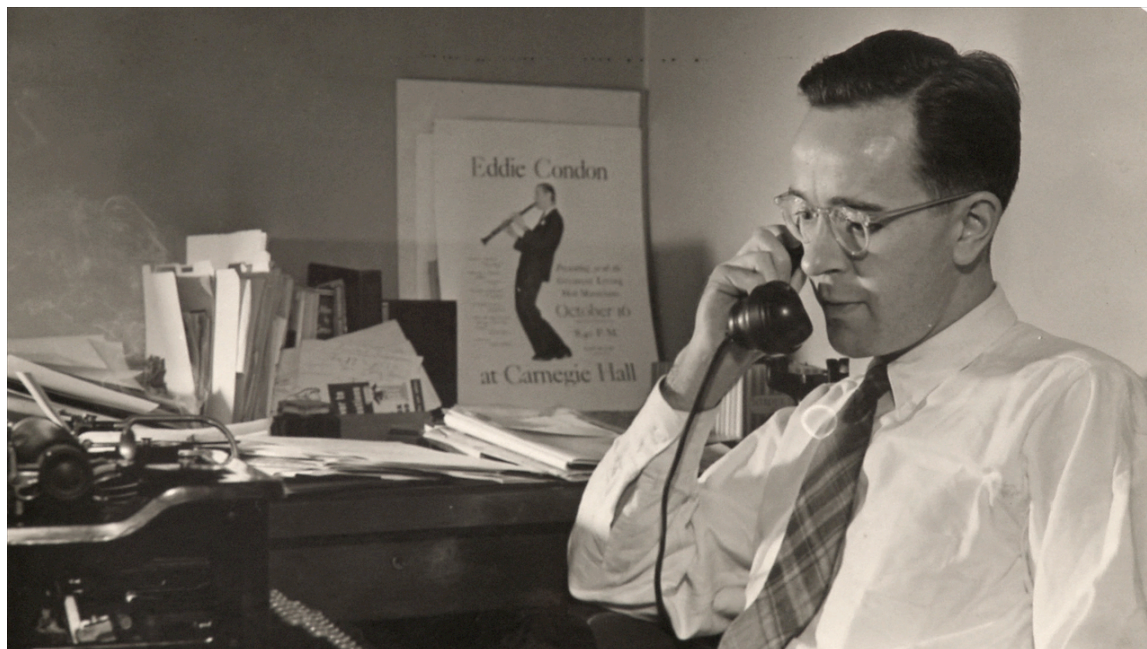


Figure 2: Film Stills—My Grandfather Bob and My Father





Figure 3: Film Stills---Rory and Eamon

## TRUTH AND EXPRESSION

When making personal narrative work, either photographically or in film, the question of how the personal and the public intersect is unavoidable. Airing my family's dirty laundry is either brave or self-indulgent depending on the reading and I'm hoping for the former. I struggled with this same dilemma in my documentary *99 to 1: Ovarian Cancer and Me*. In that film I wanted to create a narrative around cancer that was neither victim making or falsely Pollyannaish. I understood cancer as I had experienced it and did not want to claim to be an expert beyond that bodily understanding. What cancer—and its treatment--*feels* like is something I wanted to know when I was first diagnosed but most of what I could find was very clinical or rather obvious—I think we all understand that being diagnosed with cancer might very well lead to depression. I wanted to make a film that operated at the gut level, not coincidentally, right where my scar is.

My cancer narrative as a lived experience was reinforced by the use of unusual camera angles and a somewhat rough *do-it-yourself* aesthetic--an attempt to visually put the viewer in my subjective position. I wanted the film to have my hand very visible while simultaneous creatinmoments of symbolic visual impact. For instance, to evoke the feeling of chemotherapy, I had a shot of running water pouring into my open mouth. Here water is both a life giving and a life taking substance: it could be sustaining me or drowning me. The use of expressive aesthetics in documentary is a tool Michael Renov in *Theorizing Documentary* calls on non-fiction filmmakers to consider. He reminds readers (and viewers) that the powerful potential to evoke “emotional response or induce pleasure in the spectator by formal means, to generate lyric power





Figure 4: Film Stills *99 to 1*—Belly Scar and Water in Mouth

through shadings of sound and image in a manner exclusive of verbalization, or engage in the musical or poetic qualities of language itself must not be seen as mere distractions from the main event.”<sup>vii</sup> Even as documentary films have pushed beyond the conventions of realism for realism’s sake, there is still skepticism and a general mistrust of artifice in non-fiction. The question of whether aestheticism distracts from truth brings up the essential problem of objectivity in a non-fiction films. What is true and do we know it when we see it—or have we just been conditioned to recognize the tropes of “true” fiction.

My intent in filming the *Culinary Browns* was never to tell a “true” story. As with my cancer narrative, the film is motivated by my subjectivity. Even when I make the pretense of bringing in objective voices to counter my position—I am still in the role of the maker. My camera and my cuts determine these other voices. My authorial control is present and should be questioned at all times. When I appear on camera it is to perform cooking feats of dubious consumption. This play between absurd and authoritative, absent and visible, truth and imagination serve to undermine my role as a reliable source. Like filmmaker Trinh T. Minh Ha I see decentralizing the voice of authority in documentary as a way to complicate the viewer’s response to narratives based in experience. She writes

To compose is not always synonymous with ordering-so-as-to-persuade, and to give the filmed document another sense, another meaning, is not necessarily to distort it. If life's paradoxes and complexities are not to be suppressed, the question of degree and nuance is incessantly crucial. Meaning can therefore be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilized, and when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but, rather, empties or decentralizes it.<sup>viii</sup>

When you see my brothers and my father on camera the style of the shooting is “documentary” based. On one hand you can believe that what they have to say is more truthful; these must be the true voices. However, my father delivers no information and my brothers contradict one another. They may look like bearers of real knowledge but there position is as unstable as the

truth. With no reliable narrator the viewer has to decide on their own version—and ultimately question whether, as my brother Rory says, “getting to the bottom of things” is never really possible within the dynamic of family.

I would argue, in agreement with Linda Williams that, “an overly simplified dichotomy between truth and fiction is at the root of our difficulty in thinking about the truth in documentary.” The oft-repeated adage that “the truth is stranger than fiction” points to the narrative—and perhaps fictional—quality of our recounting of everyday existence. More often than not, the average story becomes richer in the telling. Williams goes on to say, “the choice is not between two entirely separate regimes of truth and fiction. The choice, rather, is in strategies of fiction for the approach to relative truths.” If the truth-value of documentary can be enhanced by aesthetic qualities borrowed from fiction or experimental film—filmmakers should be unconstrained in their ability to use the structural and aesthetic tools that best enhance the story to be told. “Documentary is not fiction and should not be conflated with it” Williams concludes, “But documentary can and should use all the strategies of fictional construction to get at truths.”

<sup>ix</sup> And I would reiterate, that what truths the filmmaker is after, can traverse a wide spectrum.

Another trope of documentary truth I exploit for more expressive possibility in *The Culinary Brown's* is archival footage. Using found 16mm and 8mm home movies as a stand-in for my own personal footage, I complicate the personal narrative of the film by adding a layer of characters that relate to the story as *a family* not my family. These random fragments of unmoored histories reinforce how impermanent our relentless documenting can be in its fixed meaning. Rodger Odin looks at the reception function of home-movies as functionally different from filmic images, “Home movie images function less as representations”, he writes, “than as *index* inviting the family to *return to a past already lived*. The home movie does not

communicate. Instead, it invites us to use a double process of *remembering*.”<sup>x</sup> What happens, however, when the home movie is removed from home reception? When we see “family dinner”, it is not *our* family dinner, but the markers of what kind of family this is—the indications of class, race, location, time—surface in a way that can create an association for the viewer with their own memories or their own assumptions of what constitutes the ideal family. In using this footage my intent is not one of easy comparison; instead, the home movie footage works against the narrative to visualize the family unity we lacked but imagined.

In his critique of the sublimation of amateur film to the repetition of dominant cultural ideals, Odin writes, “The home movie refuses to represent anything shocking and embarrassing (the intimate), to reveal a pessimistic view of family life (illness, suffering, misery), or too threatening to the image of the ideal family (household scenes, parent-child conflicts, familial dramas). The home movie constructs a euphoric vision of family life.”<sup>xi</sup> However, home movie footage—unlike Hollywood representations of the ideal family—disallows the kind of suture that a seamless narrative invites, problematizing what Odin describes as “a euphoric vision”. Home movies transport the viewer into the world of the ideal family: but one whose specificity disallows complete knowledge. While we frequently recognize the rituals, we are left to figure out the relationships: is this a father, a grandfather, a family friend? Through the eyes of a different era the mother’s martini and cigarette take on new significance. Instead of looking at



Figure 5: Film Stills---Found Footage Boy and Found Footage Family Meal

the “ideal family” we are looking for the flaws. But, is either version, truer? We can critique these films for their utopian view of family, and for their reification of the patriarchal system, or look for the historical clues of the nuclear family’s eventual rupture, but the happy moments the camera captures are happening—at least in that moment.

Most of the footage I use was filmed during the height of 8mm home movie popularity between the 1950’s (some as early as the 30’s and 40’s) and 1970’s. These films are a time capsule of what the American family thought they should be documenting. Only in rare instances can you find uses of the camera to document anything besides what the camera manufactures suggested: the “Kodak Moments”. But, the more recent tendency, since the advent of cheap and easy to use home video in the 1980’s is a shift in both the producer of the video and the frequency of documentation.

Patricia Zimmerman traces the history of the amateur film—both home movie and narrative explorations—and looks at the potential for films that transcend “nationalist representations of sameness”. He writes, “although colonized by Hollywood, trivialized as a toy, and imprisoned within the nuclear family, amateur films insist on the importance of everyday people within different communities and nations. Amateur films represent the psychic tracings of diaries and dreams.”<sup>xii</sup> A compelling example of a power shift in control of the family narrative, the film *Tarnation* shows the liberating potential of self-documentation.

Starting when he was around eleven, filmmaker Jonathan Caouette, began documenting himself and his fractured family. He uses the camera as an escape, a distancing device, as a therapeutic tool to re-enact and perform the trauma of his abuse, and to break his family’s control over the narrative of his mother’s—possibly induced—mental illness. The film is also a map of the subject and creator’s queerness. Queerness is the site of Jonathan’s liberation and what

radicalizes the film. His campy performances directed at the camera become a way for him to perform and synthesize his mother's madness and experience. In one scene, in the earliest years of his filming, he transforms himself with a kerchief on his head and with controlled hysteria becomes a woman who relives what drove her to murder her abusive husband. Jonathan has already disclosed the incident that removed him from his mother and placed him in a series of abusive foster homes; his mother—during a delusional episode—ran away to Chicago and was raped in front of baby Jonathan. My becoming—literally—his mother, young Jonathan creates for himself a narrative of control and redemption.

While motivated by less severe familial trauma, my aim is also to liberate myself from destructive patterns. By rewriting my narrative I hope to show my audience that patterns created by family dysfunction aren't doomed to repetition. With a new script and a new expression—our histories are also capable of providing hope for possibility and growth. Allowing history to be static, authoritarian and monolithic dooms us to repeat it.



## PERFORMANCE AND VOICE

The debate over the use of voice-over in documentary films began as a reaction to what is commonly discussed as “The Voice of God” style narration that became prevalent in documentaries from the 1940’s to today. Associated with the dry, informative and educational films that long associated *documentary* with *tedious* the presence of voice-over still generates debate. In his canonical essay on the shift from documentary films that subjugate the viewer to a position of receiver of knowledge disseminated by an authoritative (usually colonizing and patriarchal) voice, Pascal Bonitzer describes a “militant” cinema that “begins where classical documentary ends, in which the latter smothers and erases: the speaking subject.”<sup>xiii</sup> His essay suggests that documentaries that allow, “the images [to] speak for themselves”, unmediated by an authoritative voice, is the site of political power. In an equally influential response, Mary Ann Doane, discusses the “overemphasis upon the isolated effectivity of a single signifying material—the voice” and the problems inherent in both a psychoanalytic and political reading of the singular power of voice-over and voice-off. She cautions that “to mark the voice as an isolated haven within patriarchy, or as having an essential relation to the woman, is to invoke the specter of feminine specificity, always recuperable as another form of “otherness”.”<sup>xiv</sup> With full knowledge of these debates, I tend to produce films that are full of the sound of my own voice. In *The Culinary Brown’s* there are three distinct narrative voices: my voice, the subjective voices of my interviewed brothers and father, and a third professional narrator employed to stand in for my grandfathers.

The “grandfather” voice can be seen as the “authoritative voice” in that the information imparted is coming from the written archive of my grandfathers: our patriarchal lineage. Since the distinction between grandfather and great-grandfather is of little concern to me, I employ one



narrator for both characters. The break from my own voice serves both to relieve the audience from my relentless narration and—as a disruptive force—reminds the audience of the tropes of documentary making. Instead of a seamless “voice of authority” figure—the second narrator calls attention to his very “narrator-ness”.

My spoken voice over, the actual narrative of the film is filled with incomplete stories, unanswered questions and briefly spoken bits of information that are intended to leave the audience wanting more. I am trying to connect the fragments of my memory in a way that associates the distant connections I have with my ancestral past. For instance, I think about where I grew up, Cape Cod, what a picturesque place it is and how I miss the cold, salty water. This nostalgic longing for home is tempered by an inability to go back; the place is too isolated, familiar, and lacking in opportunity for me to return. For me this ties to things I know my grandfathers could never go back to: they both lost siblings very young, they each had a first marriage end badly and painfully, and ultimately—for me—they are unreachable, living only in the recess of memories that I am only now creating.

By contrast, my father and brothers are allowed “to speak for themselves” but, these are interviews and the responses are generated by my questions. I am still controlling what they say by what I ask. I complicate this in my interview with my father. My own voice as the interviewer is heard and the hesitancy and nervousness of the tentative question illustrates my lack of mastery in the role of interrogator.

Two films fueled my interest in the narrative voice: *Sink or Swim* (dir. Su Friedrich) and *The Gleaners and I* (dir. Agnes Varda). *Sink or Swim* uses a very structured narrative, adding a formal and distancing quality to the intimate personal narrative. Friedrich uses an alphabetical approach—beginning with *zygote*—breaking her film into 26 individual vignettes that primarily

describe her relationship to her father and the complexity of her emotions surrounding him. The voice over is done by a young girl—roughly the same age as Friedrich would have been when the psychological distance between she and her father started becoming apparent—and in third person. The distancing quality of the use of “the girl” as a substitute for Friedrich’s “I” allows the audience to experience the events she recounts with the same cool reserve Friedrich sees in her father. The effect of this distance is unsettling and disturbing when it collides with intensely emotional scenes from Friedrich’s childhood. In her chapter “Loss”, scenes of a first communion unfold as the narrator describes how “the girl liked to fight with her sister” and this behavior was usually the problem of her mother. In a rare instance of parental involvement her father punishes the girls for misbehaving. He drags the girls into the bathroom. The narrator’s voice becomes fast and emotional and her voice describes how “after warning them not to disobey their mother anymore he pushed their faces into the water. The girl started to scream. The screaming made her start choking.” Then the narrator shifts to the girl’s first person voice, “Let me go. I never meant to be so bad! I just get like this sometimes!” The effect of this first person shift is jarring—coupled with the images of a happy young girl in a first communion dress—ideas of innocence, punishment, memory, ritual and trauma come to the fore.

*The Gleaners and I* is more of a stream of consciousness meditation. The film looks at the modern iteration of the French practice of gleaning: when peasants would be allowed to go over a harvested field and take anything that had fallen or been passed over. However, there are continual breaks in the film where Varda digresses into dialogs about herself: her thoughts about aging, the creative process, our loss of connectivity, what we discard and whom we count in society. The charm of the film is the way it assembles these small, gleaned bits into one artfully crafted whole. Early in the film Varda describes how gleaning in painting is depicted as a group

activity but one famous painting, Breton's "Woman Gleaning" reminds her of herself. She travels to the museum where this painting is housed. "There is another woman gleaning in this film", Varda intones in voice over, "that's me". We then see a shot of her standing in between two museum guards who hold up a backdrop with a bundle of wheat on her shoulder, echoing the painting. But she is not content to be a subject, "I'm happy to drop the ears of wheat and pick up my camera", she says. Varda's declaration is followed by a montage of images of how she sees herself with her camera. We see blurry loose images of Varda and then a close up of her hair, white at the roots, as she runs a comb through, "No it's not Oh, Rage. No it's not Oh, Despair. It's not Old Age, my enemy. It might even be old age my friend, but still my hair and my hands keep telling me the end is near" she says again in voice over. By asserting herself, aurally and visually into the film, we are reminded of society's tendency to discard images of older woman, and this more abstract film about what we leave behind becomes personal and reflective.

Varda's appearance in her film—as both maker and subject—is reflected in my approach to filmmaking particularly in the desire to break down the wall between production and product. As a feminist, it is important for me to impart the knowledge that I am in control of the tools of production to the audience. Even today, women are acknowledged in front of the camera, far more than behind it. As a subject/maker I fully *master* my work in a way that reclaims this gendered description.

My appearances in *The Culinary Brown's* are intentionally highly performative. When I thought of how I would present the cooking segments of the film, my mind went to a hybrid combination of Lucille Ball and Julia Child—a character, born of me, that fell somewhere between skillful and absurd. In her essay on the role of performance in documentary Susan Scheibler discusses the difference between the constative and the performative

The constative can be defined by its dependence on a belief in the possibility of a knowledge that is able to guarantee the actuality and presence, the factuality, of its observations and remarks. The performative, on the other hand, is unconcerned with its relation to facticity, to truth or falsity, performing its enunciative function apart from and outside of issues of verifiability and authenticity.<sup>xv</sup>

What I am enunciating in the text of my film is the space in my personal narrative that is free from the normal confines of family narrative. By using the cookbooks to find the playful ways that I can relate to my history, I also give the viewer space to find moments of joy and visual pleasure. These performances also serve to loosen the grip of fact and fantasy. Scheibler sees the performative functioning to disrupt the generic predictability of the documentary, “when the fictional aspects and the nonfictional collide” she writes,

The structure of the document slips between and around the carefully demarcated categories of the constative and performative, enabling the text to call attention to its own generic limits. Enunciating marginality, these films are able to call attention to the limits of the documentary form as one promising a privileged relationship to the real and/or authentic.<sup>xvi</sup>

In pushing the real to the margins the audience is more engaged in the process of figuring it out the truth relationships for themselves or in realizing that “truths” are subjective and should always be suspect.

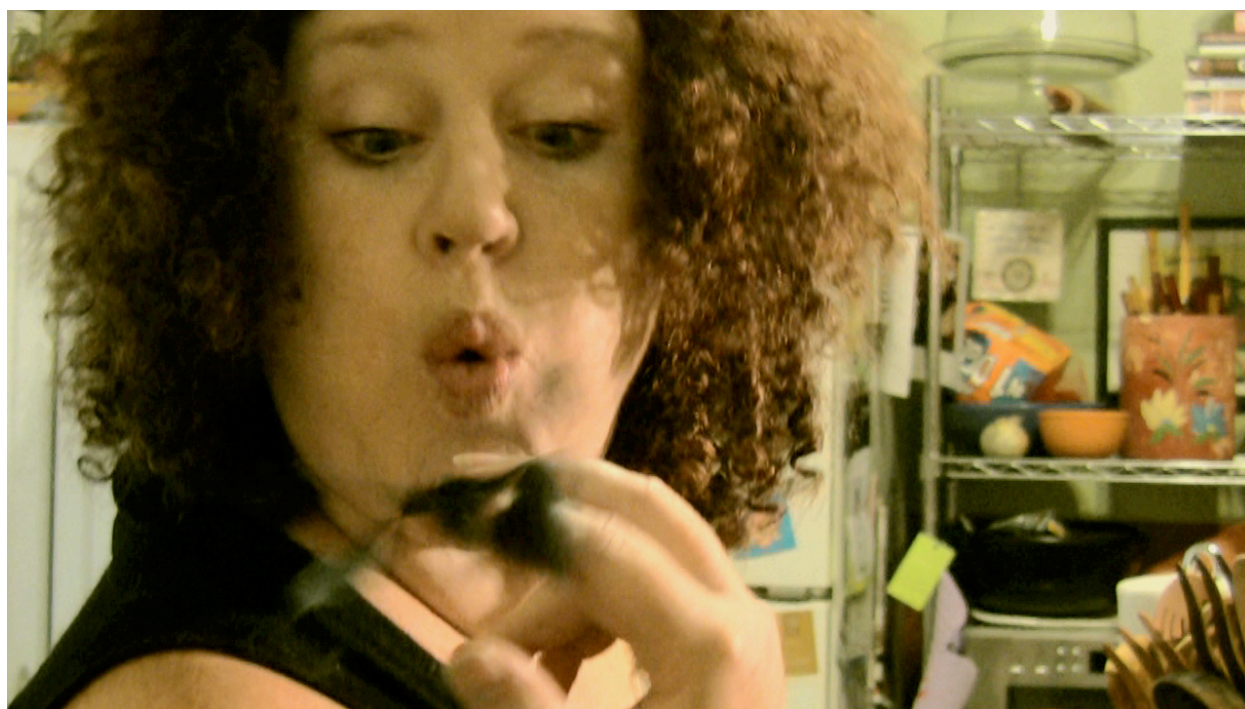


Figure 6: Film Still 6 and 7—Cooking the Browns and Cooking a Coot

## THE ARCHIVE

In this digital age, many have voiced concerns about the loss of the archive. Questions about how and if we will store emails, voicemails, and other digital ephemera have arisen as we watch the loss of public libraries and printed publications. But, the idea of knowledge as fixed and locked has been contested frequently. In her introduction to *Mining the Home Move:*

*Excavations in Histories and Memories*, Patricia Zimmerman remarks

In the popular imagination, archives are framed as the depositories of old, dead cultural artifacts. But archives are never inert, as they are always in the process of addition of new arenas and unknown objects. The archive, then, is not simply a depository, which implies stasis, but is, rather, a retrieval machine defined by its revision, expansion, addition and change.

As I opened the folders containing my grandfathers archive of letters, photographs and ephemera, the delight in the process of taking my “dead cultural artifacts” and bringing new creative life to them was tempered by the strange realization that my family history no longer belongs to me. Zimmerman continues, “The archive functions as the custodian of collective memories laced with contradictions and ambiguities. It is marked by and inscribed into power relations: who has the power to keep records of the past?”<sup>xvii</sup> My grandfather Bob’s decision to archive this material was driven by necessity: he sold most of what he could to live off of—and out of a need to legitimize his own artistic production. The archive is the official record and belonging in it sealed his literary legacy even if—in the end—it had to be attached to his father’s work to find acceptance. As much as my grandfather struggled against it, he could not escape how deeply he and Bob were knit together. He also imbued us with the power to grant access to this archive—something in the last few years we’ve been called upon to do.

As the custodians of this legacy we have been granted the dubious distinction of releasing or retaining material rights. In the spirit of creative commons, all requests are granted, and yet, I find myself struggling with whether the material I accessed in one archive is *right-fully* mine. So my new production—my archival expansion—is a way to claim ownership and simultaneously assert my belief in the free circulation of images and ideas.



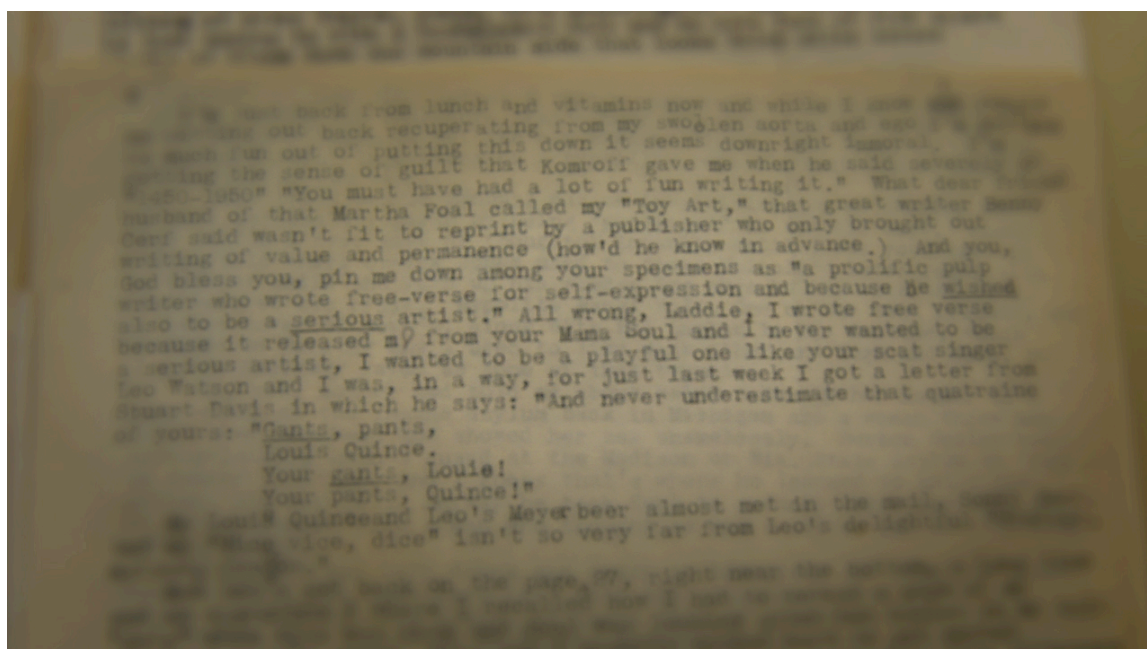
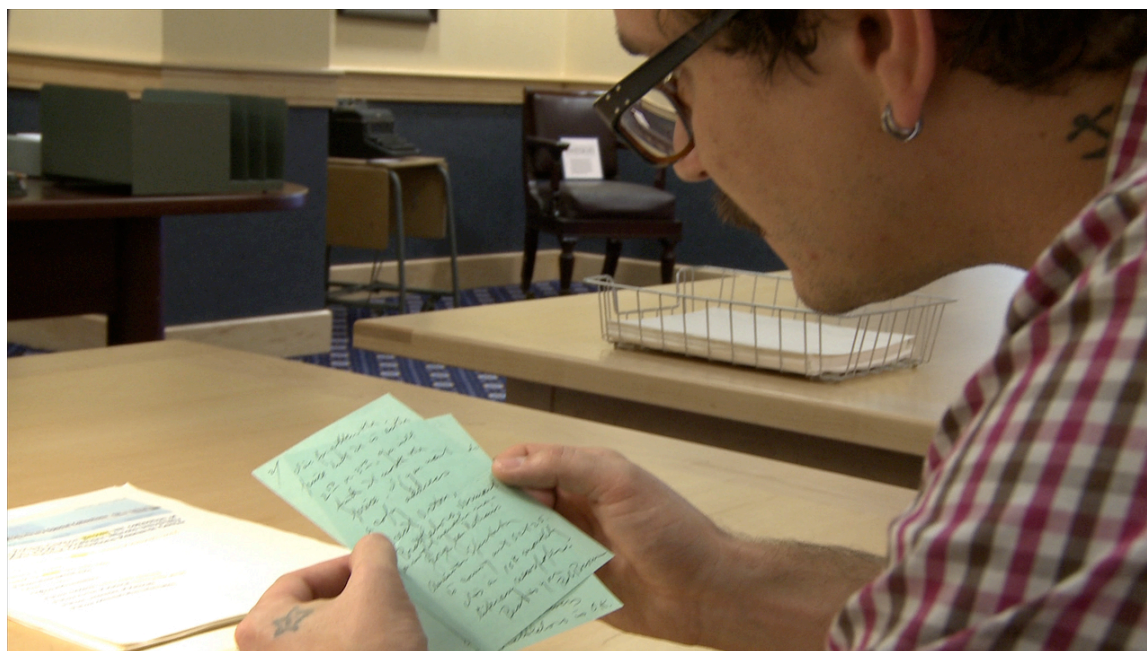


Figure 7: Film Stills 8 and 9—At the Archive and Letter



## CONCLUSION

The perennial debate on documentary film's adherence to the most "real" treatment of reality is one that has never been of great concern to me. As a storyteller, when my narrative is based in my personal experience I look for the most compelling visual means to bring that story to life.

To again quote the provocative Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Reality is more fabulous, more maddening, more strangely manipulative than fiction. To understand this is to recognize the naïveté of a development of cinematic technology that promotes increasingly unmediated access to reality." <sup>xviii</sup>

The notion of "unmediated" access is one that has been unmoored time and time again. The functional act of recording rarely challenges the audience to think beyond what they are seeing—if they are challenged to think at all. I frequently tell my own story because I can be assured of the authenticity of my lived experience, but as an artist I want to give people access to the world of my imagination—not an easy transcription of the facts and just the facts. The development and creation of this project has been frustrating, illuminating, joyful, painful, suffocating and liberating—in other words—as much like life as anything can be.

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**NOTES**

- <sup>i</sup> Burgin, 181
- <sup>ii</sup> Child, xxi
- <sup>iii</sup> Renov, 25
- <sup>iv</sup> Brown, Carlton 130
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid, 3
- <sup>vi</sup> Brown, Bob, Cora and Rose
- <sup>vii</sup> Renov, 35
- <sup>viii</sup> Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 89
- <sup>ix</sup> Williams, 20
- <sup>x</sup> Odin, 259
- <sup>xi</sup> Ibid, 262
- <sup>xii</sup> Zimmerman, 276
- <sup>xiii</sup> Bonitzer,
- <sup>xiv</sup> Doane,
- <sup>xv</sup> Scheibler, 140
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ibid, 145
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid, 19
- <sup>xviii</sup> Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 89

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## APPENDIX: NARRATION SCRIPT FOR THE CULINARY BROWNS

### The Culinary Browns Written by Phoebe Brown

Some families store their pictures in albums—faces fading in Kodachrome and cracked Polaroid—but pictures only tell a fraction of the story. It's up to us to remember that Aunt Sally gave up a baby; why Uncle Frank never came to another Thanksgiving after that one; and whatever happened to Debbie?

My history begins in a cookbook. My great grandparents wrote cookbooks but we didn't have any of them. I'm looking for answers somewhere between soup and dessert.

What if my grandfather had had a dash more of his father and a pinch more of his mother? Was his father's new wife Rose too salty or too sweet?

The back of one of the cookbooks gives me a brief biography of my great-grandparents. Bob Brown, born in Chicago in 1908, published twelve books plus seven cookbooks with his wife Rose and his mother Cora. Together they traveled to Japan, France, China, Germany, etc, becoming familiar with foreign customs and kitchens and collecting recipes. My great grandfather, Bob Brown, contributed verse and fiction to practically all the leading periodicals and traveled with his wife and mother to practically every corner of the world.

It's not mentioned in the text but sometimes my grandfather Bob was with them. But, he really felt like he was not.

When his father died, Bob, my grandfather, packed his father's letters into boxes and he sent this history off to the archives and we might have talked about him, although I was really too young to remember, but if we did I don't...remember.

*Trailing the culinary triumvirate of Brown's to Brazil at the age of eight I sunk my teeth into the cook's calf which had been fatted for my homecoming, despoiled the garden of its exotic fruits and drained the dregs of goldwasser and Napoleon brandy from the glasses after every party. Back in rough, tough and nasty public school in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, I regaled my schoolmates by holding live frogs in my mouth and eating poison ivy, quite apart from my regular recess diet of a hot fudge sundae and/or a dill pickle.*

When I was 7 I set my hair on fire in the kitchen. We had to light the stove with a match. It was an old stove, but nice. My dad found it at the dump.

In my imagination, I traveled with my great-grandparents who lived in Brazil. Who sailed on ships and rafts and ate caviar and wild boar; who sat with Gertrude Stein in Paris drinking out of long thin glasses and repeating themselves and ate sardines with William Carlos Williams in his flat in Greenwich Village. It seemed so close to me and so very far away.

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A tablespoon of depression and a dash of alcoholism never mixes well. We try to cut these things out of our diet with minimal success. A scant teaspoon of cynicism and a quarter cup of dry humor goes down deliciously.

My brothers and I wait in the backseat of my mom's old Pontiac for sheets to dry at the Laundromat on a freezing day in February. When the sun was shining in August tanned children of privilege smacked of surprise when we say we live here, "No one lives here in the winter." No one lives here in the winter, but we do.

*Cod is a very lean dry fish so it needs rich stuffing, plenty of butter and buttery sauces and the flavor is improved by the addition of seafoods like oysters, shrimp, scallops, etc. The habit of boiling it in plain salted water and serving it with a tasteless white sauce is deplorable.*

My mother's family can't cook. They make meals without distinction; they make family meals. We fill three tables, but nothing tastes beyond what it is, maybe a dash of salt and a sprinkle of already ground pepper. But, everything about them is on the table. We know all of their stories. They never stop repeating the same ones.

If I leave out the nervous breakdowns but double the happiness will it still turn out right? If I mix it just right, maybe it will turn out perfectly.

*Take one large grassy field, one half-dozen children, two or three small dogs, a pinch of brook and some pebbles. Mix the children and dogs well together and put them in a field, stirring constantly. Pour the brook over the pebbles. Sprinkle the field with flowers. Spread over all a deep blue sky and bake in the hot sun. When brown remove and set away to cool in a bathtub.*

I find out I can transport space and time with cooking; I get cookbooks from around the world and decades past. "The Brown's wrote cookbooks", somebody says. We don't have any of them, that's all I know.

My grandma Jane and grandpa Bob are divorced like my parents. It's amazing how much distance two people can create...on the same street.

My grandfather dies before I really get to know him but I remember his apartment, his avocado tree and his photographs. My grandmother has cats and a sadness I can't place because my heart hasn't been broken, yet.

We don't have the ingredients for most of the recipes I want to make, but I imagine we do.

*Crisp bacon, tomato, liver-paste with truffles, meat-jelly and horseradish)—Beef marrow, toasted rye bread and butter—goose liver paste, homemade—ditto on toast---Roast duckling and cucumber salad—roast pigeon, jelly, bread and butter—roast lamb, cucumber salad—raw scraped filet of beef—ditto, and pickles—ditto and egg—ditto and anchovies in oyster sauce, I*

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*egg yolk, chopped onion—crisp onion on toast with camembert cheese—poached egg, mushrooms and fresh lobster on toast with truffles.*

My great-grandparents wrote cookbooks, but we didn't have any of them.

So what did we have?

It was the 70's we had a big garden and goats. My father built our house and the barn. We never got to painting the walls. My brother and I would draw on them instead or play a game where we would hurl steak knives into the soft sheetrock.

My grandfather Bob and my father were both born in NYC. Then they moved to Hastings on the Hudson when my dad was little. My grandfather took the train to his job as an editor of a magazine and my father and his friends published a newspaper in someone's garage.

*Hastings Feature by Chris Brown*

*At 65 Edgars Lane, the home of the Schaeffer family, a strange odor may be smelled at times, coming out of a small attic window. This is the home of the Brown-Schaeffer laboratory, which boasts of being the best-equipped laboratory in Hastings-on-Hudson.*

*The main job of the lab (as all the members call it) is dissecting. This can be called the process of opening up plants and animals and taking out the inner organs, etc. It is defined in the dictionary as "the cutting apart of plants and animals in a systematic way for purposes of examination. Archeological excavation is planned for the summer. If you want to see this wonderful laboratory first hand, admission may be gained for five cents.*

I have two vivid memories of my father from childhood. I remember that I would pick the lint out of his belly button and he told me if I saved up a whole pillowcase full and sent it to the government they would give me money.

And I remember the birthday I had in Florida. I had to call him on the payphone. He sent me yellow roses and told me they were for remembering.

Even when we came back the threat of leaving stayed and was often more of a promise than a threat.

What does my father remember about his father?

My dad doesn't like to revisit the past. He is comfortable in his present. The missing pieces of my family narrative aren't missing because the questions haven't been asked.

I remember a man with wild white hair and a camera. I remember the Saturday afternoons in his apartment that he sometimes wouldn't leave, the empty bottles of beer between him and my dad, drawing on the floor. I would draw pieces that interlocked and color them in.

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This is a picture of my grandfather at his desk. This is not the grandfather I knew. He had long retreated from that life. He had had his “Brainstorm”.

*That was a good spring and summer to go crazy in, if any period in the last few years has been better or worse or more disturbing than any other. Craziness was so commonplace in the daily affairs of that office that it would have taken something really spectacular like frothing at the mouth to bring more than a lifted eyebrow or a stern memo. I don't know of a place where a man approaching insanity would have been safer from detection.*

The Brown's moved to Wellfleet on Cape Cod after another of Bob's nervous breakdowns. It's where I was born and raised.

Every summer we'd have to give the place up to the tourists--both a necessity and a nuisance--but the locals always knew this was OUR place, only begrudgingly loaned. When I come back the beauty hits me in the gut--but then I remember the isolation and the struggle for work--and the impossibility of this being always and no longer home.

Both my grandfather and my great grandfather knew about missing things. My great grandfather had two siblings who died as children in separate tragic accidents. My grandfather had a sister who died in her 20's and they both married women they would leave.

Here's one of my great-grandfather Bob's articles inscribed to Sylvie from my grandfather Bob: “this is your other grandfather,” it reads. Bob Brown is my great-grandfather's name and my grandfather's name. Writers both, they are indistinguishable in many ways. Sylvie is the beautiful girl in these photographs. She grew up much like my grandfather: shuttled between relatives, distant.

Sylvie is my father's half-sister but I always thought she was his aunt. She lived in Wellfleet too. I used to see her walking around town dressed in black but that was more than 20 years ago. She slowly disappeared into herself.

The threat of mental illness was something else we also always had. Manic-depression on both sides. My grandfather Bob wrote about his push over the brink in his book “Brainstorm”. My mother's mother just sometimes didn't get out of bed...for two or three months. When we were young we knew the symptoms but we didn't know the details. My Aunt Laura, my dad's sister tells me she always knew when Bob was going into a manic episode when he started walking barefoot.

For any sort of imbalance my great grandfather Bob humorously espoused the beer cure. *Let There Be Beer*, he wrote

*It is the ideal thing to do in this era of depression. If the thought of too much or too little work wearies you; if you have gloomy visions of the present and future and are about to end it all, you will be saved by the Beer Cure. You feel instantly elated, you don't mind being out of a job, you have exalted visions of getting one, you laugh at suicide as long as the beer lasts. You are kept*



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*so busily interested in bending your elbow you haven't time to think of your symptoms or wail about your complaints.*

This did not work for his son and though my father tried it—it wasn't a sustainable choice for anyone in the end.

I dig into this history thinking there is some inherent truth here-- some solid explanation in these things written down. But even as I start to unravel fact from fiction I realize that this new history is yet another interpretation. My narrative is only one perspective. I wonder where my motivations converge and convex with those of my brothers.

My brother Eamon lives in Providence. He is an artist and professor. He has some very rare Brown family artifacts in his collection.

He is also having a baby boy Brown. He is the next father. I spend a week with Eamon and his wife Kate getting their new house ready for the baby and celebrating with their friends. I keep asking for an interview but every day we run out of time. We finally make some in the car on the way to the airport and my flight home.

My grandfather liked to photograph his young twin sons, my Dad and Uncle Steve. I can tell them apart, but just barely. Now my Uncle Steve is my father's West-Coast beardless double. They still kick each other under the table at our rare family gatherings.

Here is a photograph of Bob visiting my grandfather and his grandsons toward the end of his life. He looks small and awkwardly formal. He squints at the sun. He doesn't smile. A thin line of tenuous support. Sometimes that's all we get.

My brother Rory lives in Chicago where Bob Brown was born. He's a librarian. Perhaps you've seen him in this advertisement.

We go to find Bob's childhood home. Looking for some kind of trace.

The house is nice but Bob dismissed River Forest as a "smug suburb", a place that stifled his more modern impulses. His dream early on was to find adventure far and wide finding delight in the new and bizarre.

*Here is a Swiss Family Robinson menu catering to every member of the clan just in case you get stuck on a desert isle--it runs from Alligator to Zebu.*

*Coot Stew: To stew a coot, place the bird in a kettle of water with a red building brick free of mortar and blemishes. Parboil the coot and brick together for three hours.*

*Pour off the water, refill the kettle, and again parboil for three hours.*

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*For the third time throw off the water, add fresh water and let the coot and the brick simmer together overnight. In the morning throw away the coot and eat the brick.*

Bob's main contribution to modern writing was his "Readie" a reading machine that was never manufactured but was certainly real in Bob's mind and texts for it were made-- "The Readies for Bob Brown's Machine"—were supplied by his friends William Carlos Williams, Nancy Cunard, Paul Bowles, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and others.

*"Writing must become more optical, more eye-teasing, more eye-tasty. Books are antiquated word containers .... modern word-conveyors are needed now, reading will have to be done by machine; microscopic type on a moveable tape running beneath a slot equipped with a magnifying glass and brought up to life size before the reader's birdlike eye, saving white space, making words more moving, out-distancing the flatulent winded ones and bringing the moment brightly to us"*

With my archivist in tow, I go to look at the collection of Bob Brown papers at the University of Southern Illinois. There is a larger collection at UCLA, hundreds of boxes, but I'm not ready for that challenge just yet. Besides this collection lists some papers of my grandfathers and I'm hoping for some direct correspondence between he and Bob.

At the archive I find out that everything I've said up to this point is both true and false. My grandfather did feel abandoned and his father did leave—but not in his heart. In letter after letter Bob asks for a return letter from my grandfather, for his granddaughter's address, for a visit-- When he read his son's categorization of him in *Brainstorm*, Bob was both proud and profoundly hurt. Proud to see the words on the page. Pained by their very articulation.

I struggled with these same feelings when I started this piece. Would this investigation hurt the family that I love? What is the cost of revealing the dysfunction that lots of families hide?

So the work has begun but is hardly finished. We found ways to connect to our past through these words written down and improved on some of the recipes, but still struggle with the present. This process of discovery brought us closer in the moment, but it is so easy to drift apart

My great-grandparents wrote cookbooks, but that's just the beginning.

*I have written out of my heart  
I have written my heart out  
It looks now as though I wear it on my sleeve  
That means nothing  
It is only a saying  
An expression*