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ON THE MOTION & MEANING
OF HUMOR IN POETRY

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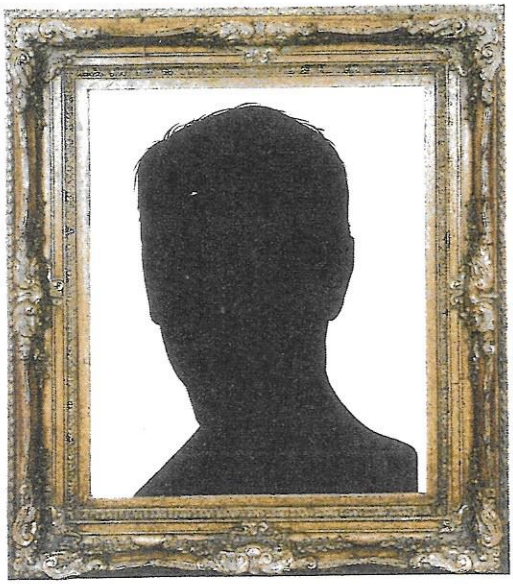

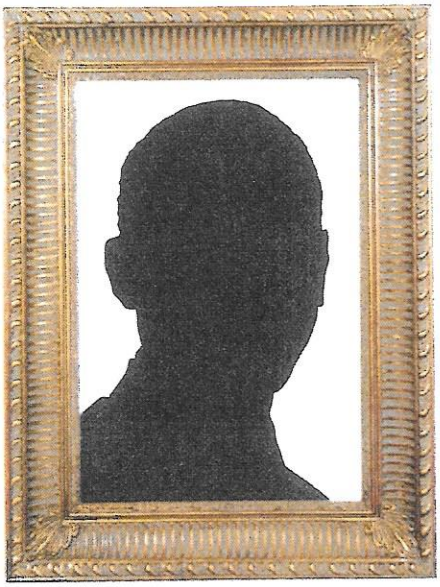


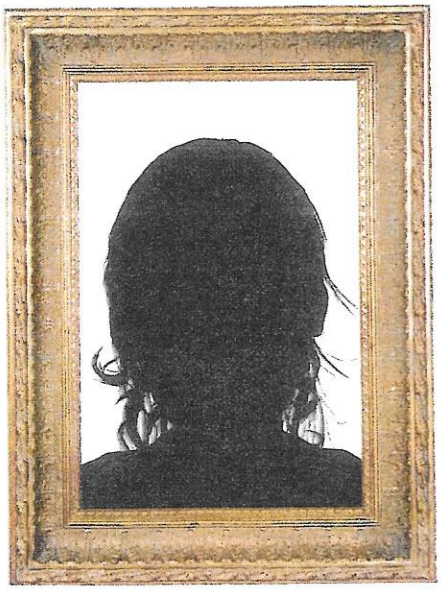
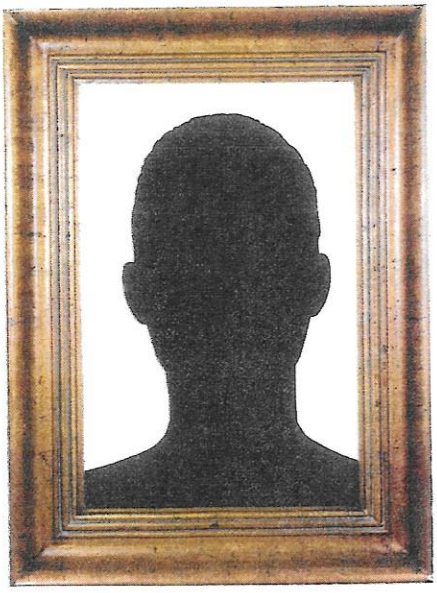


MAKING IT PERSONAL

RECENT TRENDS IN GROUP BIOGRAPHY

by Kathleen Stone

"It was [once] assumed that the raison d'étre of a portrait was to communicate the appearance and personality of the sitter." Then came Picasso and everything changed. As William Rubin, director of the Museum of Modern Art, wrote to introduce a Picasso retrospective, a portrait became a record of "the artist's personal responses to the subject. He transformed the portrait from what had long been considered a primarily objective document into a frankly subjective one."[1]

The turn toward subjectivity came about early in the twentieth century. Picasso and other avant-garde artists rejected objective realism in their painting and instead looked inward to find something more real. Literature, too, became more subjective. Biography, literature's twin to portraiture, began to show the writer's personal imprint, notwithstanding Lytton Strachey's pretense in Eminent Victorians to be dispassionate and impartial. Now, a hundred years later, writers freely incorporate elements of their own lives into biography.

Three recent examples are notable: Olivia Laing's *The Trip to Echo Spring* where she combines six writers' biographies with her visits to their homes and work places;[2] Kate Bolick's *Spinster*, a memoir incorporating the lives of five women writers into her own story;[3] and *Black Gotham*, Carla Peterson's account of her journey through family mementos, archives and city streets to find her ancestors and tell the story of New York's nineteenth century black elite.[4] I focus here on how these writers deploy subject matter and structure to merge biography with personal stories.

~ ~ ~

Group biography is fertile ground for a writer's subjective inclination. From the very first task—deciding who belongs in the group and who does not—the group biographer shapes the book according to personal attitudes and interests, whether the focus is on relationships among a group of friends, or previously unseen connections among those who were strangers. Plus, the writer can mine her own life to find links to her biographical subjects. In each of the books discussed here, personal connection is fundamental to the author's conception of the book.

This is hardly surprising in today's literary marketplace. Pick up a biography in a book store and scan the prologue or afterword: more often than not, the writer reveals a personal experience to explain the reason for the book. More than an intellectual desire to study an era or a group, this is writerly motivation that comes from the heart, where writing about others and oneself adds up to more than the sum of the parts.

When writers add a personal layer to biography, they join the quest for meaning that began over a century ago, with artists and writers of the *avant-garde*. Yet each of the three writers considered here go about it differently, and create their own hybrid forms. To see how they arrive at the intersection of genres, I look first at their choice of subject, then at their books' structure.

When writers add a personal layer to biography, they join the quest for meaning that began over a century ago, with artists and writers of the avant-garde. Yet each of the three writers considered here go about it differently, and create their own hybrid forms.

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In *The Trip to Echo Spring*, Olivia Laing writes about well-known literary figures who drank heavily: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, John Cheever, John Berryman and Raymond Carver. They shared other traits as well—American, male, white, of roughly the same era—but the drinking that is common to them also affects Laing. Early on in the book she writes:

> As to the origin of my interest, I might as well admit I grew up in an alcoholic family myself. Between the ages of eight and eleven I lived in a house under the rule of alcohol, and the effects of that period have stayed with me ever since. Reading Tennessee Williams's play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at seventeen was the first time I found the behaviour I'd grown up amid not only named and delineated but actively confronted. From that moment on I was preoccupied by what writers had to say about alcohol and its effects.[5]

From this launching point, Laing tells of her writers' early steps toward drinking and the prominence it came to have in their work and family lives. She also recounts her own investigation of alcoholism: meeting a scientist to learn about liquor's effects, attending an AA meeting, visiting bars where she watches people drink their cocktails while downing a few herself.

In one episode she is back in her hotel room after an AA meeting when she has this thought: "What hadn't occurred to me, foolishly, was that spending a day listening to people talk about drinking might trigger corresponding memories of my own."[6] The memory that surfaces is of a card her mother's partner sent from a treatment facility, a note of apology as prescribed by the twelve step program. She keeps the personal details sparse, since this is not a memoir, but tells enough for the reader to know that drinking is not a matter of idle curiosity; she is engaged, in part, in an exploration of her own experience. In an interview, she talked about the balance of personal and others' stories: "I didn't want my story to be too loud in the mix. At the same time, it needed to be there to explain why I was so passionately invested in the subject, why I cared so much."[7]

~ ~ ~

In *Spinster*, Kate Bolick has written a memoir, with the stories of five female writers woven in. She starts with the premise that two questions define every woman's existence: whom to marry and when. This is not my experience of womanhood but I accept it as her literary starting point. From there, she considers those questions as she moves from girlhood to adulthood. By the time she matures, her answers are: nobody and never.

After her mother dies of breast cancer, Bolick, then twenty-three, is left with unanswered questions about love, sex and men. She gravitates toward female literary figures whose personal lives, unorthodox for their time, offer alternatives to the conventions she believes are expected of her. She calls these women her awakeners, a term she borrows from Edith Wharton, and goes so far as to recount imaginary conversations with Wharton, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Neith Boyce, Maeve Brennan and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, These are women who will, she hopes, provide the guidance her mother no longer can.

In carrying on imaginary conversations with her subjects, she is firmly rooted in romantic biography. Richard Holmes noted the phenomenon when he followed Robert Louis Ste-

venson's route through Europe. He experienced "the growth of an imaginary relationship with a non-existent person, or at least a dead one," engaging in "a continuous living dialogue" as they moved "over the same historical ground, the same trail of events."[8] Bolick's conversations proved key to her conception of the book. In her book proposal, she pitched the book by saying: "Here are these women I have talked to in my head for 10 to 15 years. I want to tell their stories. I will be their linking glue. They form a random group of women, and the only thing they have in common is that I became interested in them."[9]

~ ~ ~

Carla Peterson's book, *Black Gotham*, is no less romantic. It opens in Harlem with a scene of her carrying two names—that of her great-grandfather and her great-great grandfather—into the manuscript room of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. She is determined to discover the truth behind bits and pieces of family lore, stories that are only half-known, partially suppressed.

From an archival case the size of a shoe box, she pulls out cards and unfolds yellowed papers. Then:

> That's when I found them: two pages torn from an unidentified scrapbook on which newspaper clippings had been carefully pasted... I couldn't let out a whoop, so I just sat there quietly, my heart racing, and read through [great grandfather] Philip White's obituary line by line, devouring every word.[10]

Kathleen Stone

Words from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* echo in her mind. "Like Morrison's Denver, I had no memories of my own. Beyond that, I couldn't even rely on scraps I'd been told." And like the character Denver, Peterson vows to do her best "to create what really happened, how it really was."[11] It's an exquisitely described scene that allows the reader to feel the pull of Peterson's personal stake, a pull so strong it will eventually carry her through assiduous historical research, past numerous dead ends and into new leads, all to uncover her ancestors.

From her modest start of two names, Peterson pursues her research. As she does, the group of biographical subjects expands to include those on her family tree, plus their friends and associates. She discovers, in fact, an entire social class of

nineteenth century New York. As she told me in a phone conversation:

> I thought of the story I was trying to tell as four concentric circles—family, community, New York and the greater world in which they all existed. My research had to include all that.[12]

Peterson neatly balances the dual strands of personal and biographical material, allowing the personal to animate the writing. The reader turns the pages in order to find out what happens to the characters—will they graduate from school, will they recover from sickness and other setbacks, is it possible to penetrate New York's white institutions? And then there are questions about Peterson's next step: will she find the elusive answer on her next visit to city hall? Will trips to historical societies in far flung states prove fruitful? What about the regal looking woman in the family photo? The personal quest motivates her research and, for the reader, it stimulates interest in the developing story.

In contrast, Laing shares only a little of her personal experience, enough to explain why she chooses to write about alcoholism but not enough to involve the reader in her quest. For that, she uses travelogue, as discussed below. Bolick, on the other hand, weights her book heavily toward the personal, and uses a personal lens even for telling her awakeners' stories.

~ ~ ~

When subjects require the writer to cover both personal and biographical material, what structures meld the two?

Laing's visits to places where her authors spent time is the architecture that holds her story together. She bounces from one writer to another, but her travels across the country, from New York to Port Angeles, Washington, with stops in the South and the Midwest, organize the narrative. Here she explains how the travelogue relates to the biographies:

> The physical journey across America is about wanting to explore how alcoholism moves through a life and looking at the same pattern in all of them. Going to different places to explore different elements. So New York is where those early drinks happen, which is where I'm dealing with Tennessee Williams first drinking. When I get to Key West, things are much more bloated and out-of-control, and that's where I'm dealing with late-stage Hemingway and Tennessee Williams. And then the darkest part of the book, the most difficult part of the book, is [poet] John Berryman's suicide, which, by then I'd traveled up to St. Paul. And then the last part of the book is set in Port Angeles, which is very much to do with recovery stories. So you can map the trajectory of the book across America.[13]

When subjects require the writer to cover both personal and biographical material, what structures meld the two?

Starting in New York, she checks into the Elysée Hotel near Broadway, where Tennessee Williams stayed. She describes his room on the night he died: pills scattered near the body, two bottles of wine open on the nightstand. She ruminates about death and relates the story of Williams's first trip to Europe. She also describes her own stay in the hotel, including a troubling dream about a cat. When she leaves the hotel and walks through the Lower East Side, a scene on the street triggers her memory of an episode from John Cheever's life which leads to an anecdote about visiting the King Cole bar at the St. Regis Hotel, "Cheever territory, no doubt about it." She goes on to describe more of Cheever's life before finally returning to the King Cole bar.

> I was jolted out of this line of thought by a man in the bar saying distinctly *Ossining*. How strange. Ossining is a small town in Westchester County, forty miles up the Hudson River from Manhattan. It's still best known, years after his death, as Cheever's adopted hometown... Coincidentally, it's also where Tennessee Williams's mentally ill sister Rose spent most of her adult life... I looked up. The Ossining man was sitting with the woman whose blouse I'd coveted... I folded a few dollars on the table and left the King Cole then, spinning through the revolving door and escaping, a little tipsy myself, into the cold, illuminated air.[14]

She has created a densely packed combination of travelogue, biography, literary analysis and personal anecdote. To parse it, I had to create a visual representation of what I was reading, six concentric circles on my sketch pad, like moons around a planet, with Laing in the center. To each ring I assigned a strand of her narrative. The most personal material I assigned to the inner ring and, moving outward, I arranged progressively more objective material on the remaining five rings. The least personal, what other critics said about her writers' work, was on the outermost circle.

Laing's childhood encounters with alcoholism ended up on the second ring, one remove from the center. One might assume this was the most personal material but because she writes about her childhood sparsely and at a remove, it lacks a truly personal quality. On the other hand, for the travel material she uses present tense and a confidential tone to describe the beds she sleeps in, travelers' conversations that she overhears and the dreams that wake her at night. In comparison to her childhood experience, this feels more personal, almost intimate. And while it has little to do with the biographies, she writes well and uses the travel material to draw the reader along the path of her research.

She revels in the mix of material. "Hybridization comes naturally to me," she says. "Writing a straight biography or mem-

oir would feel very unnatural." [15] Plus, mixing material was a way to handle a group of authors whose lives and work have already been keenly studied. Her approach—a hybrid genre, with alcoholism as frame for the group and travelogue providing structure—was a novel approach to familiar territory.

~ ~ ~

Bolick had a different problem to solve. Some of her writers were well known (Wharton, Millay), others less so (Boyce, Brennan, Gilman). They wrote in different genres—fiction, nonfiction and poetry—and covered a wide time span, their birth dates separated by sixty years. While a group biography anchored by something other than independent female life might have been possible, that clearly was not on Bolick's agenda. Her book grew out of an article she had written for *The Atlantic* about the recent uptick in the number of single women.[16] Primarily a factual piece of journalism, the article included a few references to her experiences with men, but no mention of her awakeners. When it came time to write the book, she expanded the story. A memoir of her own life would not suffice—the market for straight memoir was flooded, and most memoirs are too self-involved, she told an interviewer—so writing about her awakeners was a way to give her own story heft and add historical literary interest.[17]

When Bolick spoke at a conference of Biographers International, she handed out the chart she used to keep track of various threads as she wrote the book. Across the top of the page are five categories: a highlight of the awakener's life, her historical context, the narrative theme Bolick would use, a visual image, and a personal connection between Bolick and awakener. Down the left side of the page are the five names.

Edith Wharton is a good example of how the chart works. Wharton's creation of the Mount, her home in Lenox, Massachusetts, was the highlight of her life, according to the chart. Bolick sees her historical context as the continuing evolution of women's relationship to the home. The narrative theme is the art of living alone, and the Mount itself is the visual image. Finally, a common interest in home design connects Bolick to Wharton.

We usually think of Wharton's legacy as literature, but Bolick makes a convincing case for design as a strong second. Wharton educated herself on the subject of home design and, in 1897, cowrote *The Decoration of Houses* with architect Ogden Codman before they tackled the Mount together. On a vastly more limited budget, Bolick picks up used furniture on the street and arranges it artfully in her rental apartment. She also works as an editor at a glossy shelter magazine. "At the magazine, a lot of my time was spent looking very closely at the rooms of a house, decoding why one room felt dramatic, say,

and another calming, and translating these visual equations into words." She comes to understand a system of design, like Wharton's, "that when properly understood and applied, has the ability to shape our moods and how we think."[18]

When Bolick first visits the Mount, she is struck by its intimacy. It is a large and gracious spread, surrounded by well-tended gardens, but its thoughtful configuration makes even the large space seem livable.

> I've never been to a house so grand that, once you're inside, feels so intimate. The spacious entry hall, dining room, drawing room, and library are big without being cavernous, and they are convivially interconnected with copious doors. Wandering through and between them, you feel Edith's presence not in a ghostly, hair-raising sort of way, but in the particularity of the layout and details, and how they allow you to physically experience the inner workings of a unique mind.[19]

The house is well suited to a woman who has removed herself from the confining expectations of upper class society. It is:

> a rejection not only of conventional standards, but also of the 'flat frivolity' of her upbringing, particularly her nearly two decades of dutifully playing society wife. Unlike the massive mansions of Newport, intended for show and big, garish parties, The Mount is designed for seclusion, work, and quality time with close friends and colleagues (most famously, Henry James). For the first time in her life, Edith was free to spend her time as she wished [20]

Bolick hopes to mimic Wharton's life, or at least this aspect of it, and hunker down with her work and colleagues, leaving social distractions behind. She employs this idealized version of Wharton to break off a relationship with an intelligent man, son of a wonderful family, with whom marriage seemed to be the next step. "I saw that I'd crossed into an entirely new country," she says, confident and happy to follow Wharton's lead.[21]

As for Wharton's literary legacy, Bolick tackles it from a similar perspective of female independence. In the thirteen year span between publishing her first book of fiction and divorcing her husband, Wharton created well over a hundred female characters, eighty-two of them single. Perhaps, Bolick speculates, Wharton used her single characters as a way to imagine her own life beyond marriage. She concludes that:

> to live happily alone requires a serious amount of intentional thought. It's not as simple as signing the lease on your own apartment and leaving it at that. You must figure out what you need to feel comfortable at home and in the world, no matter your means (indeed, by staying within your means), and arrange your life accordingly—a metaphorical architecture.[22]

And this—to know what a woman needs to live comfortably in the world—is the quest that propels Bolick throughout the book.

On the prosaic level, the question might be put this way: would these books have been published without the material each writer draws from her own experience? My best guess is no. The personal layer is integral to each book, in different degrees.

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Peterson's quest is to fill the voids in her family history. Much is unknown, and the silences leave her feeling empty and unsettled. She wants to put the unease behind her, so she undertakes the research and writing of the book.

Peterson uses an essentially chronological sequence to tell the stories of her ancestors, after setting the stage with her visit to the Schomburg Center. She presents the research in similar fashion, as though she began at the earliest point of the family tree and worked her way forward. But that seems too neat. Research is usually more convoluted so I talked to Peterson about her method.

> Research does not unfold in predictable ways. Sometimes I had a section written but then I would uncover new facts and have to go back and add them. Or they would cause me to reinterpret material already written. Sometimes I located a primary source that was even more powerful than what I had at first, and that allowed me to amplify the point I was making.
>
> One time I was at the Brooklyn Public Library, reading old newspapers on microfilm. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed the shape of the letter "G." I wasn't, at that moment, looking for material about my great-grandfather Peter Guignon, but when I looked back at the "G" I realized the article was about him. That was a serendipitous find, and often my research was like that. But when it came time to write the book, I had to tell a chronological story that would make sense to readers. I presented it as a detective story, with me uncovering facts. As an academic, I rarely write in first person, but here I did, in order to tell this story.[23]

I have already mentioned the opening scene at the Schomburg Center, a branch of the New York Public Library. Later, Peterson goes to the opulent map room at the central library on 42nd Street and we readers follow the unfolding mystery.

> Without explanation, I handed three Manhattan home addresses to a young librarian in the Map Room at the New York Public Library. He tracked them on his map, looked at me and commented: "This is a story of social ascent!" and then added, "a map tells more than a thousand words."[24]

She had given the librarian addresses where her great-grandfather had lived and the librarian's reaction confirms her feeling that he was professionally and socially ambitious.

With this in mind, Peterson starts to imagine her great-grandfather on his way to work. "I want to imagine my great-grandfather going about his work, errands and visits in Lower Manhattan one day in the early 1850's."[25] She thinks of him walking past squalid tenements full of Irish immigrants, contemplating the future of his pharmacy and deciding that, with business improving, it is time to take on an apprentice. Peterson is guessing, but it's not much of a stretch. By combing through city directories and newspapers, she has found the locations of his home and business. Plus, Charles Dickens wrote about the neighborhood after his visit to New York, and she draws on his description to fill in the scene. She has, therefore, a solid basis for her speculation. Importantly, readers never feel betrayed: she is scrupulous in signaling when she dips into imagination, and in giving the facts that underlie her thinking.

Sometimes, Peterson speculates about her ancestors' psychology as well. For instance, she pieces together facts about her great-grandfather's childhood from obituaries, a eulogy and census records. His father came from England, his mother from Jamaica and he was designated "colored" on his birth certificate. From the eulogy she learns that his father was an invalid who consequently spent a great deal of time at home with the children. "Reading into this scant written record," Peterson says, "I believe the presence of both parents was fundamental to [great-grandfather] Philip's development and later sense of identity." Then she ranges into more speculation. "Even without concrete evidence, we have a sense of how instrumental black mothers were in the rearing of their mixed-race sons."[26] These words seem very personal. She opens a window into her own world view, of rightful pride in the woman's role, but it is more than wishful thinking. It is based on facts pieced together from historical records.

When she reaches the Epilogue, Peterson comes full circle, back to Toni Morrison.

> On a balmy June day several years ago, I boarded the J train to Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn. Armed with a map provided by the front office, I went searching for the graves of my forbears and their friends.[27]

With this visual image of a cemetery, she returns to a Toni Morrison quote that sums up the void she has been trying, for all the book's pages, to fill: "the 'unwritten interior lives' of nineteenth century black Americans have been buried with them."[28]

~ ~ ~

Having looked at the subjects and structures of Laing, Bolick and Peterson's books, I come to the question of significance. On the prosaic level, the question might be put this way: would these books have been published without the material each writer draws from her own experience? My best guess is no. The personal layer is integral to each book, in different degrees.

Laing could have written a book about six alcoholic writers, even without having encountered alcoholism as a child. She could have written an account of their lives, a critique of their work and a travelogue without that personal connection, and she could have added information on the science behind alcoholism. Still, I think, readers would miss something. Her brush with alcoholism brings a sense of purpose and authority to the book. Then there is the travelogue, with all the details about hotel rooms, meals and walks through her writers' locales. While it fails to add much insight into the lives of the writers, it does serve to knit their disparate stories together.

For Bolick, I have to reverse the question: would *Spinster* stand up as memoir, without the group biography? As interesting as Bolick's life is, and as good a writer as she is, it is hard

to see how a pure memoir would have been a success. The biographies engage the reader more than her story alone could do, and invite the reader to imagine a different life for herself.

The personal layer makes Peterson's story eminently more readable. Right from the outset she comes across as someone who is curious, diligent and persistent, as any scholar should be, but she also reveals her emotional core. We become invested in the story of her ancestors because she cares. If she presented a strictly historical account, without the personal layer, the book would be drier and more abstract, a difficult approach for figures who are not well known. Plus, her quest has broad impact. It carries us back to people whom we would otherwise overlook, without her as our guide.

Beyond these considerations, though, I want to suggest a deeper answer. Its origins lie at the beginning of the twentieth century, when artists, musicians and writers of the *avant-garde* turned away from traditional realism. In *The Banquet Years*, Roger Shattuck's group biography of the era, he offers profound insight about the turn toward subjectivity.

> Twentieth-century art has tended to *search itself* rather than exterior reality for beauty of meaning or truth, a condition that entails a new relationship between the work of art, the world, the spectator, and the artist.[29]

In other words, artists and writers were to be the font of meaning. The result, in literature, as we have seen throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, was the publication of thousands of memoirs, and even books about the writing of memoir.

Popularity notwithstanding, such inward looking literature has not been entirely fulfilling, at least not for everyone. Now, contemporary writers like Laing, Bolick and Peterson are attempting to find something more satisfying in hybrid forms, each coming to a different balance of biography and personal stories. As they search others—esteemed writers, awakeners and ancestors—for meaning, they reveal themselves. AWP

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Popularity notwithstanding, such inward looking literature has not been entirely fulfilling, at least not for everyone.

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22. Ibid., p. 231.

23. Peterson, phone conversation with the author, May 2, 2018.

24. Peterson, *Black Gotham*, p. 178.

25. Ibid., p. 178.

26. Ibid., pp. 143–144.

27. Ibid., p. 385.

28. Ibid., p. 393.

29. Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-garde in France - 1885 to World War I* (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 326.