

**Understanding, Explaining and Interpreting the  
Process of Shaping a Woman's Subjectivity on the  
Example of Bell Hooks Autobiography. A Study of  
Women's Autobiographies in the Context of  
Thomas and Znaniecki's Research**

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*Understanding, Explaining and Interpreting the Process of Shaping a Woman's Subjectivity on the Example of Bell Hooks Autobiography. A Study of Women's Autobiographies in the Context of Thomas and Znaniecki's Research*

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**Abstract**

The aim of the paper is to reflect on bell hooks' autobiographies in the context of women's process of self-empowerment. Following the principle of the humanistic coefficient (Znaniecki) and recognizing autobiography as a significant source in social research (Thomas, Znaniecki), my focus is to understand, explain and interpret the process of shaping a woman's subjectivity by analysing bell hooks' autobiographical essays. I am interested in her autobiography as a life story of a black woman, whose experiences have been shaped by racial segregation and desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s in the USA and for whom writing autobiography has been a manifestation of speaking with her own voice.

Keywords: autobiography, subjectivity, women

**1. Introduction**

The greatest merit of William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki was escalating personal life-records (biographical sources) to the status of empirical material in social research. The five-volume work entitled *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-1920) – the result of Thomas and Znaniecki's research – continues to be a model for social researchers and sociologists.

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Following Thomas and Znaniecki's position on the importance of autobiographical materials in social research, I have conducted a biographical research dedicated to bell hooks, the Afro-American intellectual, writer and feminist. My thesis is that, in her autobiographical books, bell hooks reconstructs the process of shaping her subjectivity. By analysing her autobiography, we can trace how the author reconstructs herself. (B)ell hooks' biography is a story of a black woman, whose experiences have been shaped by racial segregation and desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s in the USA. At the same time, it is a biography that fits into a well-recognized model of a career, namely social advancement achieved through education.

## **2. Thomas and Znaniecki's research**

Florian Znaniecki was the first sociologist in Poland who used autobiography, or more precisely, autobiographical materials (letters, diaries, memories) as material for sociological analyses. In the work entitled *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, published jointly with William I. Thomas, personal documents such as an autobiography and letters of Polish immigrants in the United States were used as objects of research.

The autobiography analysed by the researchers belonged to Władysław Wiśniewski, a Polish immigrant who, before coming to the United States, lived in Lubotyń near Konin. The autobiography was commissioned by Thomas and Znaniecki (for the promise of a fee). It had over 300 pages. Its content was published in the third part of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* entitled *Life Record of an Immigrant Group*. In addition to the autobiography, Thomas and Znaniecki used letters, which were their primary source. There were 764 letters written and received by Polish immigrants and their families. Other materials included information collected in the archives and files of union organisations and social welfare institutions, as well as texts from the Polish diaspora press and parish documentation.

The reason for using autobiography in Thomas and Znaniecki's research was their belief in the value of this type of material for sociological analyses. According to the researchers, autobiography makes it possible to show the interrelationships between an individual and a social group. Autobiography enables uncovering social awareness, along with the attitudes, values and its social determinants. According to Znaniecki, personal, subjective relationships are the most accurate source for research into public awareness:

For a sociologist and a psychologist, an autobiography is a record of the author's personal, conscious life, an expression of their subjective experiences [...]. Its immense direct value as a life document is due to the fact

Aneta Ostaszewska

*Understanding, Explaining and Interpreting the Process of Shaping a Woman's Subjectivity on the Example of Bell Hooks' Autobiographies. A Study of Women's Autobiographies in the Context of Thomas and Znaniecki's Research*

that it expresses a considerable amount of diverse and related experiences of the individual, which complement and illuminate each other, enabling the researcher a far better understanding, analysis and correction than when dealing with individual, isolated statements, such as in a questionnaire, interview or letter [...]. The more numerous and diverse autobiographies are available from a particular human population, the more accurately and comprehensively we can reproduce those systems and social patterns that exist in it, and the changes that occur in it (Znaniecki, 1984: XI).

For Znaniecki, autobiographical materials were a type of perfect sociological material, a source of social facts, presented from a subjective point of view, i.e. from the point of view of the participating individual and in accordance with their individual perception and understanding of these facts. The subjectivity of the author of an autobiography constitutes its basic asset. The contents of an autobiography are a source of 'authentic' knowledge because such knowledge stems from everyday experiences of people describing them.

Znaniecki introduced specific methodological principles for including personal documents in sociological research. One of them was the principle of the humanistic coefficient (Znaniecki, 2008). This principle states that the researcher should look at social phenomena 'through the eyes of their participants', trying to understand the meaning and motivations of human behavior. Without referring to the meanings that people give to their experiences and feelings, or phenomena and situations in which they participate, it is impossible to understand and explain human behavior. In research involving personal documents, the principle of the humanistic coefficient is necessary.

Following the principle of the humanistic coefficient and recognizing the value of autobiography, I undertake an analysis of bell hooks' autobiographical texts. In carrying out the analysis, my goal is to understand, explain and interpret the process of shaping a woman's subjectivity, as exemplified by bell hooks' autobiographies. However, before I proceed to the analysis itself, I will outline bell hooks' biography.

### **3. bell hooks**

(B)ell hooks, also known as Gloria Jean Watkins (GJW), was born in 1952 in Hopkinsville, Christian County, Kentucky, United States of America. Her early childhood and the first stage of school education fall into the segregation era (1950s and 1960s) and racial desegregation (1960s) in the United States. (B)ell hooks recalls this period of life as difficult mainly due to the experiences of racism. Everyday life of the African-American population was filled with

challenging living conditions and social exclusion, manifested, among others, in the territorial division of the city and its surroundings. Separating the black (poor) residents of Hopkinsville from the white (rich) ones had led to the creation of closed communities. GJW grew up in such a hermetic community, which was focused on intra-group integration and separation from the whites.

As a child, she attended an elementary school where black teachers taught black children. When racial segregation was officially abolished, GJW went to an integrated school. There, because of her skin colour, she experienced a sense of dehumanization. She discovered very early that books were her deepest passion. From the age of ten she dreamed of becoming a poet. However, this dream was not approved by her relatives. Her parents did not share her intellectual ambitions, they wanted their daughter to get married or take a job as a teacher.

During childhood and adolescence, poetry was for GJW a strategy to deal with difficult experiences, primarily with the sense of loneliness and with violence. Reading books made GJW discover a different world, better than the one she experienced every day. However, following her dreams meant disobeying her parents. As bell hooks confesses: 'I was mapping a different destiny' (1997: X). Wanting to decide her own future, she opposed the plans and will of her parents.

To pursue her vision of life, GJW went to study in the remote state of California. She chose to study English at Stanford University in Palo Alto. Leaving home turned out to be a difficult experience not only because of parting with the family. The 'new world' was not without inequalities. As a student, GJW repeatedly experienced a sense of loneliness, as well as racial, sexist and class oppression. It was then that the idea for her first book *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* was born.

After completing her undergraduate studies in 1973, she changed her place of residence several times, first moving to Oakland and then to Madison, Wisconsin. There, at the state university (University of Wisconsin-Madison), she took a master's degree in English literature, which she completed in 1976. After graduating, she returned to California. She started working as a lecturer at the University of Southern California (1976-1979). In 1978 she made her debut as a poet with a volume of poems entitled *And There We Wept*. The book was published under the pseudonym bell hooks. In 1981, after many years of effort, her first non-fiction book *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* was released. Then, in 1983, she defended her doctorate at the University of California in Santa Cruz. During the 1980s, GJW developed her academic and writing career: she published the book titled *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (1984) and worked at the Yale University (1985-1988). She described her experiences at Yale in the essay titled *on being black at yale: education as the practice*

Aneta Ostaszewska

*Understanding, Explaining and Interpreting the Process of Shaping a Woman's Subjectivity on the Example of Bell Hooks' Autobiographies. A Study of Women's Autobiographies in the Context of Thomas and Znaniecki's Research*

*of freedom* (1989). It was a critique of one of the oldest and most prestigious American universities belonging to the *Ivy League*.

In 1988-1994 she worked at Oberlin College (Ohio) at the Department of Women's Studies and American Literature. During this period, she published several books. In addition to the aforementioned *Talking Back* [...], the list included *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990), *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (1993) and *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994). She received the *American Book Award* from the *Before Columbus Foundation* (1991) for her book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. For lifetime achievement she was honoured with the *Writer's Award* from the *Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund* (1994).

In 1995, she took the position of professor of English literature at City College of New York, where she worked until 2004. In 1995, she began cooperating with the publishing house Holt, which released her book *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. In subsequent years, Holt published her two autobiographies: *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996) and *Wounds of Passion* (1997), as well as essay collections, including *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000) and *Teaching Community: a Pedagogy of Hope* (2003).

In 2004, she returned to Kentucky and began working with Berea College in Berea as a *Distinguished Professor in Residence*. Also in Berea, in 2014, the *bell hooks Institute* was founded.

#### 4. Analysis

In this paper, I discuss and analyse bell hooks' three books:

- *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist. Thinking Black* (1989);
- *Bone Black. Memories of Girlhood* (1996);
- *Wounds of Passion. A Writing Life* (1997).

##### **4.1 *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist. Thinking Black***

As bell hooks mentions in her introduction, writing this book took her a long time. Writing about herself did not involve the fear of revealing herself and making the private public, rather it involved the fear of being punished for revealing something from the lives of her loved ones, which they themselves would not want to reveal in public. (B)ell hooks admits that many black people were brought up in the belief that not everything can be told in public or even in private (1989). For her, however, talking about what is private was and is a political issue. It serves to heal wounds inflicted by racism, social exclusion, sexism and social inequalities. Talking about one's experiences has important

functions – it allows one to incorporate reflection into everyday life; to look consciously at one's social standing, origin and history.

In the story about herself, bell hooks refers to the history of more than two centuries of slavery, discrimination, persecution and oppression of African American men and women in the USA. In her opinion, the experiences of black people should become an open topic of discussion, especially among African Americans themselves, who despite knowing their history, consciously reject it. In *Talking Back [...]*, she repeatedly tackles the topic of African American cultural heritage and the need to remember it. It is not without reason that she recalls the sentence from the *Freedom Charter* declaration: 'Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting' (1989: 4).

The book *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist. Thinking Black* consists of 25 essays. It is not the testimony-chronicle type of autobiography, neither is it possible to define bell hooks' essays as purely intimate confessions. The author reconstructs autobiographical experiences to use them to reflect on more general topics such as racism, discrimination and social exclusion, education, upbringing and school, as well as emancipation and feminism.

(B)ell hooks begins each essay by recalling a specific memory from her biography. Childhood memories are intertwined with memories from the period of studying and working as a lecturer at Yale University (1980-85). The first essay is devoted to the titular *Talking Back [...]* She explains what lies behind the words *talking back*: 'In the world of the southern black community I grew up in, "black talk" and "talking back" meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion' (1989: 5). In the black community, it was mainly men who had authority. For children, it was parents. Children, in turn, did not have the right to speak out at all. Speaking out when you are deprived of such a right seems not so much an act of courage as a risk. This is because it entails a threat of punishment.

In the case of the author of *Talking Back [...]*, the experience of being deprived of the right to speak out turned out to be so significant that she used it to create the central idea of her book. The courage to speak out and speak with one's own voice, i.e. to express one's own opinion, is a recurring idea in all of bell hooks' texts. It is also her pedagogical *credo* and a kind of *idée fixe*.

In *Talking Back [...]*, bell hooks describes her memories of the American society of the 1960s, 1970s and even early 1980s. It is a turbulent story, taking into account the changes in the law and customs of American men and women. In my opinion, two events play a significant role in the life of bell hooks: the abolition of racial segregation and the emergence of feminism. They enable her to take up education at the university of her choice.



#### **4.2 Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood**

Unlike *Talking Back* [...], *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* is entirely devoted to childhood memories, in particular from the period of girlhood. With this book, bell hooks draws attention to the importance of girlhood in a woman's life, as well as to the general lack, in her opinion, of similar publications, i.e. autobiographical memories of the period of girlhood and becoming a woman. (Bell hooks treats her book as a special kind of autobiography – a dialectic of fact and fiction. It is a collection of sketches of what was, but also of what 'only' seems to have been, and therefore what is imaginary or dreamed up. *Bone Black* [...] is not so much about specific events and experiences, but above all about the impressions and emotions that have survived and determine the mood of how this past is remembered today. According to bell hooks, writing an autobiography is not so much about accuracy in transmitting facts as it is about precision in sketching the state of mind, the mood of events that are being recalled and described. Memory, she claims, cannot serve to passively recreate the past or nostalgia for something that has already passed. Memory serves to transform the present (1991: 40), whereas writing has an emancipatory function – it is an opportunity to give up the position of a pariah and try to 'rewrite oneself'.

Apart from the introduction, there are no comments or digressions written *post factum*, i.e. from the perspective of an adult woman talking about her childhood. Nothing interrupts the narrative, which is sometimes written in the third person mode, as if the author wanted to distance herself from her own biography in this way.

This time, bell hooks focuses exclusively on the past. She admits that in *Bone Black* [...] fragments of her childhood memories are combined randomly and irrationally. However, there is a deliberate intention behind this: 'Without telling everything that happened, they [memories, A.O.] document all that remains most vivid. They are foundation on which I have built a life in writing, a life committed to intellectual pursuits' (1996: XIV).

For bell hooks, *Bone Black* [...] is a tale of a girlish rebellion. As she explains in the introduction, it is a story about the painful process of creating oneself. As a child, she is convinced that she is different from the world around her (especially from her family members), and at the same time she is searching for ways of belonging to this world. Therefore, it seems that the *Bone Black* [...] autobiography is primarily a story about the experience of childhood loneliness and attempts to overcome it. The theme of loneliness is dominant: 'I am a child who is sad all the time' (1996: 76). Indeed, it is loneliness to which bell hooks attributes the greatest identity potential: 'This is my home. This dark, bone black inner cave where I am making a world for myself' (1996: 183). Loneliness

prompted her to start writing. Her first autobiography ends with a confession about loneliness: 'Loneliness brings me to the edge of what I know. My soul is dark like the inner world of the cave – bone black' (1996: 181).

#### **4.3 *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life***

*Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* is the second of bell hooks' books which is autobiographical in form and content. The book has an unconventional structure. This manifests itself mainly in two elements: firstly, the lack of chronology of events, and secondly, the interchangeable use of the first and third persons to describe her own experiences. A departure from chronology may be unintentional because, as bell hooks writes, her memories of past are fragmentary: 'I do not remember the big picture of childhood, everything comes to me in small broken fragments. Even when I piece things together, the pieces never make a whole fragment. There is never a complete picture' (1997: 17). As in her previous books, the chapters are organized thematically.

The book is a continuation of the memories contained in *Bone Black* [...]. What was described there as a dream, in *Wounds of Passion* has become reality. A black girl from the South, who dreams of being a poet, now enters adult life. (B)ell hooks focuses on communicating the experience of fundamental significance for her, namely the process of self-development as a writer. In this regard, *Wounds of Passion* consists of memories that show the process of becoming bell hooks, the writer: from the birth of passion for reading in childhood, through dreams and the first attempts to create poetry, to writing the first book. The main axis of this autobiographical story is focused on the period of GJW's studies – from the commencement of undergraduate studies to the defense of the doctorate.

(B)ell hooks constructs her story in a thoughtful and purposeful way; she wants to show how from a girl aspiring to be a poet she becomes a (black) feminist, the author of *Ain't I a Woman?* In this process, she assigns an important role to the relationship with a man named Mack. *Wounds of Passion* begins with stories of their life together and ends with a chapter on separation. The relationship with Mack is an important topic of hooks' autobiography; the author describes a series of experiences that are, directly or indirectly, the aftermath of this relationship. However, the story of the relationship seems to be the background for another story – the story about the process of becoming as a writer, about becoming bell hooks.

Aneta Ostaszewska

*Understanding, Explaining and Interpreting the Process of Shaping a Woman's Subjectivity on the Example of Bell Hooks' Autobiographies. A Study of Women's Autobiographies in the Context of Thomas and Znaniecki's Research*

## 5. Writing an autobiography

(B)ell hooks treats writing an autobiography as a self-development tool, it is her strategy of emancipation (1989: 159). In her texts, she reflects on the very process and goals of her autobiographical writing. She admits that writing an autobiography was associated with the need to organize biographical experiences and give coherence to her own life. She began the process of writing her autobiography several times, and each time she discontinued. At the same time, she felt the need, a kind of longing, to tell her story. She sees a developmental potential in the story-telling process. It is her way to reconstruct the past and to reconstruct herself.

The longing to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release. It was the longing for release that compelled the writing but concurrently it was the joy of reunion that enabled me to see that the act of writing one's autobiography is a way to find again that aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part of one's life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present. Autobiographical writing was a way for me to evoke the particular experience of growing up southern and black in segregated communities. It was a way to recapture the richness of southern black culture (1989: 158).

Writing the autobiography enabled her to understand herself:

it was also interesting to read the narrative in its entirety after I had completed the work. It had not occurred to me that bringing one's past, one's memories together in a complete narrative would allow one to view them from a different perspective, not as a singular isolated events but as a part of a continuum. [...] Writing the autobiographical narrative enabled me to look at my past from a different perspective and to use this knowledge as a means of self-growth and change in a practical way (1989: 158).

While writing, she discovers that she does not have to negate her past and who she was, namely Gloria Jean Watkins:

It was clearly the Gloria Jean of my tormented and anguished childhood that I wanted to be rid of, the girl who was always wrong, always punished, always subjected to some humiliation or other, always crying, the girl who was to end up in a mental institution because she could not be anything but crazy, or so they told her. She was the girl who sat a hot iron on her arm pleading with them to leave her alone, the girl who wore her scar as a brand marking her madness. Even now I can hear the voices of my sisters saying 'mama

make Gloria stop crying.' By writing autobiography, it was not just this Gloria I would be rid of, but the past that had a hold on me, that kept me from the present. I wanted not to forget the past but to break its hold. This death in writing was to be liberatory (1989: 155).

(B)ell hooks organizes and unscrambles her experiences in a reflective way. She gives them a certain narrative and temporal structure, thanks to which they gain a biographical coherence.

## 6. The process of shaping one's own subjectivity

How does reflection on one's own biographical experience becomes a tool for shaping one's own subjectivity?

For bell hooks, reaching for experiences from her biography plays an important role, namely '[it] serves to illuminate and transform the present' (1991: 147). In less metaphorical terms, formulated by Peter Alheit (1995), it means nothing more than biographical learning. According to Alheit's thesis, people are in a continuous learning process, covering all stages and aspects of life. Alheit (2018) uses the term 'biographicity' (*Biographizität*) to refer to the capacity to develop or, in other words, to a developmental potential. It consists of 'key qualifications'.

In the case of bell hooks, the key qualifications are, above all, strategies for dealing with difficult experiences, which she developed in the course of her life. During her childhood and adolescence, the passion for reading and writing poetry was such a strategy; it enabled GJW to go beyond the family and community restrictions and objections. Over time, this passion turned into her main life plan – to become a poet. To this end, she commenced her studies. Going to college also had a different motive – it was a literal and symbolic escape from a home where she felt not only misunderstood, but where she also experienced violence. Being one of a few black students at Stanford University, she experienced symbolic violence too. Then the feminist awareness became the immunizing factor. Feminism becomes her political choice, a gesture of her resistance to the oppression she experienced at home and during her studies. She described it in her first book *Ain't I a Woman [...]*. Through writing – initially poetry and then feminist theory – GJW becomes bell hooks; the woman she always wanted to be, a writer.

The emancipatory potential in the case of bell hooks is constituted by the stories about her own ancestors, passed on to her by her grandmother. While talking about her great-grandmother (Bell Blair Hooks), she conveyed to her granddaughter a specific vision of femininity and an emancipation strategy. It consists in 'speaking with own voice', which in some situations may even mean

Aneta Ostaszewska

*Understanding, Explaining and Interpreting the Process of Shaping a Woman's Subjectivity on the Example of Bell Hooks' Autobiographies. A Study of Women's Autobiographies in the Context of Thomas and Znaniecki's Research*

*talking back* (verbal disobedience). However, the most visible legacy of the ancestors is the pseudonym bell hooks, adopted in honour of her great-grandmother.

Taking on this pseudonym was a conscious decision of GJW; a gesture of respect and memory of one's own origin:

I must be kin to bell hooks – a sharp-tongued woman, a woman who spoke her mind, a woman who was not afraid to talk back. I claimed this legacy of defiance, of will, of courage, affirming my link to female ancestors who were bold and daring in their speech. [...] bell hooks as I discovered, claimed, and invented her was my ally, my support (1989: 9).

To distinguish herself from her great-grandmother (the adopted name from the name of her great-grandmother), the pseudonym is written in lowercase.

In the process of writing the autobiography, bell hooks (re)constructs her life-story and her identity. The following played an important role in this process:

- the family message, especially the historical account, including those about her own ancestors. This message emerged from the close ties with her mother and grandmother;
- belonging to an African-American community and a strong sense of bond with the African-American culture, expressed not only in her interest in the history and culture of the group of origin, but also in her vision of identity, (using the category 'black woman' to define herself);
- personal experiences, both positive and negative events and life moments of a transformational and significant nature including experiences of violence and oppression.

The family history, which is transmitted to GJW since early age, implies a moral message. It is a message about the values of a particular social group. This message is not only about what is glorious, worth cultivating and remembering, but also about what can be described as humiliating (the slave past of the ancestors). GJW's family are African-Americans living in times of racial segregation, residents of the poor district of Hopkinsville; often illiterate or semi-illiterate, like her beloved grandmother. (B)ell hooks' ancestors had a slave past. Her grandparents, even in elderly age, continued working as servants in the homes of middle-class white Americans. Their memories of difficult experiences related to racial discrimination and violence, like the memories of other African Americans about the slave past, constitute a silent part of the intergenerational and intra-family transmission. Humiliating experiences were not verbalized. However, this does not mean that memories of discrimination based on skin colour do not exist. On the contrary, they took the form of

resentment and anxiety. They became the reason for social self-exclusion. Silence about one's own history does not mean that this history is not there. The parents' silence about their own history is not without significance in the process of raising children. Instead of a particular proposal or strategy for dealing with difficult experiences, children receive a non-verbal message about powerlessness and lack of driving force that would allow them to alter their identity, i.e. change their way of thinking about themselves: from a powerless, stifled victim into a subject of control over their memories (Delcroix, 2009).

## **7. Conclusion**

The process of writing an autobiography is a special way of shaping one's own destiny. It is long-lasting and does not happen in a straightforward manner. Although it is not trajectorial in nature (Riemann, Schütze, 1991), it is subject to some dynamics. The example of bell hooks' autobiographies shows that the process of shaping one's subjectivity is dynamic and related to work on identity. This process consists of not only self-reflection, but also critical awareness, both in relation to oneself and in relation to the environment and other participants of everyday social and family life.

'Speaking with one's own voice' turned out to be the trigger for bell hooks. This is what autobiography is for. The process of writing an autobiography is an emancipatory process – writing ('speaking with one's own voice') enables changing one's identity, and thus shaping one's own subjectivity.

It follows from bell hooks' essays that writing an autobiography makes it possible to take control of one's past and ultimately to communicate with oneself. In reconstructing her autobiography, she recalls numerous violent experiences – from being a child victim of domestic violence to the decision to end her relationship with a long-term partner and leave California. Recalling various experiences, 'sometimes paradisaical and at other times terrifying' (1996: XI), serves not only reconciliation with one's own past, it also serves subjectivation/self-empowerment. In her opinion, 'pain could be a constructive sign of growth' (1989: 103). As she says, 'there is no healing in silence' (1993: 16).

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Aneta Ostaszewska

*Understanding, Explaining and Interpreting the Process of Shaping a Woman's Subjectivity on the Example of Bell Hooks Autobiographies. A Study of Women's Autobiographies in the Context of Thomas and Znaniecki's Research*

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