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RECENZJE

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Oksana Zabuzhko's *Field Research in Ukrainian Sex* and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* – Constructing Collective Women's Identity through Autofiction

This paper focuses on the genre of an autobiographical novel, extensively used by women-writers in the second half of the 20th century. By analyzing two autobiographical novels (*Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* by Audre Lorde and *Field Research in Ukrainian Sex* by Oksana Zabuzhko), I will demonstrate that the use of this genre gave women-writers a possibility to redefine traditionally masculine genres and to address the specificity of the development of women's identity within the contemporary social contexts and cultures. Claimed as a space where it is possible to present women's narratives, this genre allowed a posing of the issues of national history and identity against the everyday female experience, traditionally recognized as a part of the private domain, thus opening up a space where women could define a construction of their identity as public experience.

Introduction

While autobiography was one of the few genres traditionally available to women as a means of self-expression and self-representation, in particular, in the form of memoirs, women's autobiographies rarely, if ever, found their way into what is known as a literary canon and were generally perceived as writings of minor importance. It was only in the second half of the 20th century that women claimed their ownership of this genre, which had been until then perceived as an exclusively male domain. In fact, women's autobiographies proved to be so important as a part of women's literature and heritage and as a cultural trend that they gave rise to a new critical discourse. Sidonie Smith's *Subject, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* or *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (ed. by Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith) are just two examples of the studies in this area recognizing it as a cultural and literary phenomenon.

In this paper I will argue that this genre, or rather autobiographical novel, which is its experimental and fictional form, made it possible for women-writers to address the specificity of the development of women's identity within contemporary social

contexts and cultures. Claimed as a space where it is possible to present women's narratives, autobiography (in any of its forms, be it an autobiographical novel or a 'biomythography') allowed one to pose the issues of national history and identity against the everyday female experience, traditionally recognized as a part of the private domain, thus opening up a space where women could define a construction of their identity as a public experience. To do so, I will discuss two novels, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) by Audre Lorde, a Caribbean-American woman writer and human rights activist, and *Field Research in Ukrainian Sex (Polyovi Doslidzhennia z Ukrayinskoho Seksu)*, 1996), written by the Ukrainian woman writer Oksana Zabuzhko, from the feminist perspective.

As a part of Western culture, autobiography as a genre is a means of self-representation. In his book *On Autobiography* (1998), Philippe Lejeune, a French historian and sociologist of literature, gives the following definition of autobiography:

[it is a] retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality. (Lejeune 1989, p. 5)

The most important assumption deriving from this definition is that autobiography is an exclusively male genre (*his* own existence, *his* individual life, story of *his* personality). To use Anne McClintock's words, "Western male autobiography, in its dominant form, has been seen as the unfolding heroics of a single mind" (McClintock 1995, p. 313). Another male critic, George Gusdorf, a French philosopher, in his essay *Conditions and Limits of Authobiography* (1956), claims that

autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man; a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures... (McClintock 1995, p. 313)

Thus, within the dominant androcentric discourse in literary criticism, autobiography is seen as a genre, first, belonging to the Western male world, second, unfolding the development of male self-identity, "metonymically expressed in the signature" (McClintock 1995, p. 313), and, third, conveying and reproducing the Western power of the conquering and subjugating.

This is also the space, and the genre politics, too, where women's life writings were to unfold. Today there are wide debates among feminist culture and literature theorists and critics about the core concepts of feminism, such as "Woman", experience and personal politics, suggesting that it is impossible to use them as a focus of feminist research or practice. (Grant 1993, pp. 4-5). At that, autobiographies produced by women often do focus precisely on these concepts, so that autobiography proves to be a starting point for the recognition of not only a woman's personal identity, but also collective identity and the experience of women. As Florence Howe, the American writer, publisher and human rights activist

put it, "I begin with autobiography because it is there, in our consciousness about our lives, that the connection between feminism and literature begins" (Moi 1987, p. 8).

But how is it possible for women writers to claim this androcentric genre as their own and, moreover, to use it to discuss their experience within androcentric cultures? This need, an attempt to give voice to what was, until recently, a realm of silence, forced women writers both to master such familiar categories as memoirs, *Bildungromans* (a literary genre describing psychological and moral growth of its protagonist from young years to adulthood focusing on changes in his/her character) and old-fashioned autobiographies and also to work around them by extending their boundaries. It is useful to introduce here the term 'autobiographic novel' (or 'autofiction', offered by Serge Doubrovsky, the French writer and critical theorist, in 1977 to define his novel *Fils* and to describe the merging of autobiographic material with that of fiction). This is precisely the method that was used by many women writers, particularly by Audre Lorde and Oksana Zabuzhko, whose novels shall be discussed further on.

Subjugation Inserted into the Body, or Autobiographical Novel

Field Research in Ukrainian Sex, first published in 1996, had, and still has, a highly scandalous reputation and was generally overlooked by the mainstream academic discourse in Ukraine. From the very moment it appeared, the novel was regarded by the public as a complete account of one of the author's love affairs. The main reason for viewing the text as an autobiographic novel was the fact that its protagonist, Oksana, was seemingly named after its author, Oksana Zabuzhko, thus suggesting a strong link between them. Besides, other points that went unnoticed was the novel's form, highly unusual for Ukrainian literary tradition. In particular, it is all the time playing with the forms of an autobiography, a confession, and a public speech concerning an academic research project.

Field Research in Ukrainian Sex transgresses all the norms of the autobiography as a literary genre and transforms it into an autobiographical novel. For instance, there is no clear *sujet* in this writing. The prosaic narrative is constantly interrupted by the inclusions of poems. Besides, there is no stable narrator: the narration constantly shifts between the first, second and third person narrators, who all seem to have different identities and who all seem to address different issues. Global perspective, issues connected with Ukraine and the Ukrainian nation, for example, are always presented by the first person narrator who is very self-conscious and self-critical. Passages discussing the 'Ukrainian' issues are usually preceded by the phrase emphasizing that the text is actually a public speech dedicated to a research project ("[...] the topic of my speech today, ladies and gentlemen, as it is stated in the program, is «Field Research in Ukrainian Sex», and before turning to it, I would like to thank all of you, present and absent, for your attention, that is justified by nothing, to my country and my humble person [...]") (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 29) – with a bitter taste of irony to it ("Ladies and gentlemen, I feel a bit uncomfortable touching this

topic since, of course, it fits a sermon better than a serious academic speech, and I already see that you are – one by one – leaving the room, sarcastically curling your lips: *crazy stuff, typical Slavic mysticism [...]*) (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 98). Second and third person narrators are retelling the personal stories of Oksana and her lover, Mykola, and the story of their relationship. But however intimate the tone of the story might be, there is always an ironic undertone in it concealing rage, or a feeling of humiliation, or helplessness.

From my point of view, the separation of the narrative voices in the novel is necessary to distance the protagonist from her personal experience and the personal experience of the author. Through the second and third person narration, Oksana still once again relives her relationship with Mykola, bringing it together with her family experience. The first person narration opened up a fictional space for the female perspective of the community she lived and is living in, a fictional space where Oksana's personal experience became a representation of a communal experience.

The personal comes into *Field Research in Ukrainian Sex* with sex, namely, with 'painful intercourse' (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 25), as referred by the protagonist herself. Pure sexual relations, the whole discourse on female sexuality, that had never been a female literary topic in Ukrainian literature before, and which are introduced in this novel, are related here to a number of issues that are still not only sensitive, but painful: the Famine of 1932–33, the purges, family relations within a society affected by the fear of purges. On the one hand, such approach depathosizes the history of the community. On the other hand, in Spivak's terms, it can be seen as an attempt on the part of an intellectual to voice a 'non-literary' experience of a female in Ukrainian society, silenced within and by Ukrainian culture.

One of such experiences is becoming a female, a process already painful in itself, which is further complicated by a mother-daughter relationship in a situation when the traditional family gender roles are reversed. Oksana does not construct her own identity in a void, for Oksana's heritage, both personal and communal, is embedded in every moment of her life. Besides, Oksana does not have control over the construction of her identity, her sexuality; it is constructed for her, on the one hand, within her family, by her parents, and, on the other hand, by the society she lives in. According to Elizabeth Grosz's interpretation of Lucy Irigaray, "she sees the female body (like male body) as sites for inscription of social significances. Here it is not that female body is silenced, but rather that it is 'spoken through', produced as such, by a wide variants of forces of social representation" (Grosz 1999, p. 271).

In her novel, Zabuzhko demonstrates how the national collective experience is inscribed in the body in the culture of the protagonist. The story of Oksana's parents, presented through the prism of Oksana's enraged perception of her own childhood, her own teenage years and her own family life, can serve as a direct illustration of Grosz's claim. The protagonist claims that her mother "was altogether frigid [...] what else could she be, if not frigid, – a child of hunger [...]" (Zabuzhko

2000, p. 106–107) From the protagonist's point of view, her mother's generation knew nothing but hunger, which they were trying to overcome all their youth. For her, women of that generation did not possess sexualized body; they did not exist bodily but through food. And her anger is her refusal to identify with her mother's generation, particularly, with women from that generation.

In the world of her 'frigid' mother there is no space for her daughter's sexuality and sex. Moreover, her mother seems to be so ashamed by the body, that she altogether gives up on her daughter as a woman submitting her to the hands of Oksana's father, who transforms her body into a map of control. It is first fully controlled and subdued by him ("she will manage to lose [virginity] only after her daddy's death [...]") (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 105). Later, when she becomes a woman, this control transforms all of her sexual relations into some form of incest, created on the level of her feelings: "[...] and later, each time, – the same feeling of daughterly *submissiveness*, completeness of patrimonial intercourse, from which men, not even getting where it comes from, of course, go crazy" (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 105). From my point of view, it is the same feeling of control that disables her to view herself as a subject, as a human being of full command over her life: "You are a woman. This is your limit" (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 20). Therefore, she conceptualizes herself as an object of male control and male desire, viewing her body through the prism of the masculine gaze only.

Oksana tries so hard to break away from this control, and yet submits to it so deeply, pledging allegiance to men from her own culture, that she fails to separate herself and her sexuality from that of her father at the same time scissoring her mother out as somebody to whom she could relate. In her words, she was "the only woman in his life – the one he himself gave birth to" (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 108). From the first glance, it seems that this is yet another point of reversal of family gender roles: it is her father who fulfils the mother's functions explaining to her, for example, what menstruation is. But here such reversal serves as a tool of controlling the development of her sexuality and thus her identity through her sexuality. Oksana describes her painful attempts to break out from that control (mascara, stolen from an open bag of the older girl, rock bands, and first attempts to make out in the school, the only refusal to undress in front of the father) – admitting at the same time her inability to do that ("[...] but she came back, she was always obediently coming back, because there was no place to run away to [...]") (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 106). This inability to break out from "the cemented family nest, locked from inside" (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 104) as well as the constant demand for submission from her father, from my point of view, produced in the protagonist the necessity to submit, which she clearly recognized in herself:

...why the hell should I have been born as a woman (and in Ukraine, what is even more) – with this... *subjugation*, inserted in the body [...], with this dependency, necessity to kindle into wet, squelching clay, beaten into the surface of the earth... (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 18)

The only time that the bodily slips away from some form of control, when the bodily, both male and female, has a chance to speak up, is through sickness. From the point of view of Susan Sontag, “the diseases around which the modern fantasies have gathered – TB, cancer – are viewed as forms of self-judgment, of self-betrayal” (Sontag 1990, p. 40). It is through the sickness of her body that Oksana can actually express her internal discomfort with the painful, violative relationship with Mykola. And it is exactly through cancer of his sexual organs that her father was able to express “his panicking fear of [his daughter’s] unstoppable growth” (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 111) – his fear of the inability to control his growing daughter.

From the point of view of the protagonist, it is not simply her up-bringing that produces the necessity for subjugation in her. For Oksana, the feeling of subjugation, closely tied with the feelings of fear and humiliation, come from the feelings of fear, subjugation, and humiliation that her community experienced. She relates her own growth, her own sexual relations to the social patterns, arguing that it is not simply patriarchal order in family and society that results in dependency “poured into blood” (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 20), but the slavery and subjugation experienced by this society.

Rethinking the history of her nation, Oksana regards that history as a struggle of those humiliated and subjugated – i.e. men (for, as Anne McClintock proves, it is always men only that are conceptualized as representatives of the nation) (McClintock 2000, p. 360–368) – to establish themselves as victors. And the only space they could achieve it in was the sphere of familial relations where they could gain control over the only ‘other’ they could find – women. Such necessity results in violence, which can be either violence in relations between a father and a daughter or violence within the sexual relations. Thus, humility and slavery turn into sexually transmitted disease (“Slaves should not have children [...] Because it is inherited.”) (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 56) and punishment, serving as a tool to ensure the subjugation of women.

Besides, the male necessity to dominate transforms the female body into the battlefield for power struggle: “You are screaming for you are being ravished, and they think that your scream is because of pleasure, but maybe they don’t think this way, maybe it is your pain that they are coming from?” (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 103). In the novel, this is the only way for the body, besides illness, to express itself – in the scream of pain. But at the same time, for the protagonist it is impossible to reject the existing form of relationship with Ukrainian men because it is the only way to swear loyalty with them:

[...]we were raised by the men that were screwed by everybody in every possible way, that later the same very men fucked us, and in both cases they were doing with us what *other* men did to them? And that we accepted and loved them the way they were, because not to accept them meant to take the side of those men, of the others? That our only choice, therefore, was and still is – in between the victim and executioner: in between non-existence and existence-that-kills? (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 113)

For the protagonist, the world is constructed along the line dividing the victim and the executioner, where the victim is always a Ukrainian man and, in the end, it is her – as a Ukrainian woman, thus carrying a double burden of subjugation within a subjugated society. Oksana, living and experiencing such subjugation, which starts on the level of the family where she has been silenced in her bodiliness, views herself as doomed to choose between non-existence, which is everything Ukrainian for her, and the existence-that-kills, which is everything that subjugated her community.

The only place that she claims as her own – the only home Oksana finds – is her language. Accepting the Ukrainian language as her own, Oksana accepts this heritage of being not as much different as being something that is not the dominant. On the other hand, she accepts the Ukrainian language as a collective memory and “a struggle of memory against forgetting”, in bell hooks’ words (hooks 1990, p. 146). But, like her choice in the ‘non-existence/existence-that-kills’ dichotomy, her choice of a language becomes a choice imposed on her:

[...] you do not have a choice [...] you were sworn – to be loyal to the dead, to all those, who could write no worse – in Russian, in Polish, some even in German, and live a totally different life, but instead were throwing themselves, like firewood, into the fire of Ukrainian that was burning down [...] (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 34)

Besides, taking into consideration “the general idea of the interdependence of language and identity” (Ashcroft et al. 1989, p. 54), by accepting the Ukrainian language, Oksana defines her own identity as Ukrainian.

It is worth noting that here yet another meaning of the notion ‘language’ comes into the novel. From my understanding, for the protagonist, the Ukrainian language is not simply a systematized collection of grammatical categories together with lexis. For her, her language – Ukrainian language – is a mode of thinking and a carrier of a certain cultural experience. It is such symbolic language that draws her and Mykola together: “[...] that was the first man from your world, the first one with whom [you] exchanged not only words, but straight away all the bottomless [...] recesses uncovered by those words” (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 30). Thus, accepting the cultural heritage that goes together with the language, the protagonist accepts the fact that the fire of the Ukrainian language is dying out. Thus, she accepts the defeat that goes together with the Ukrainian language.

It is precisely this feeling of defeat and subjugation that forces her to refuse to identify not only with the Ukrainian women of the previous generation, thus leaving her without any collective experience she could hold on to, but to also refuse identification with women that are not Ukrainian. This point can be proved by the way she uses other languages in the novel – Russian and English, by the way she conveys meaning through them.

Russian and English come into the novel in what sometimes seems to be free indirect speech, violating the totality of the Ukrainian language text as they enter the text untranslated. From the point of view of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, “usage of language as untranslated words do have an important function in inscribing

difference. They signify a certain cultural experience which [post-colonial writers] cannot hope to reproduce but whose difference is validated by the new situation” (Ashcroft et al. 1989, p. 53). Thus, for example, most of the English words in the novel can be interpreted as introducing ‘estrangement’, using Victor Shklovsky’s term, into the text. Firstly, Oksana uses them most of the time ironically, mocking at the same time both the community she describes and the general, Western¹ perception of the mentality that she is a carrier of herself (Slavic mysticism, Slavic charm, for example). Secondly, English, from my point of view appears in the novel when the protagonist is trying to bring in the experience that, in spite of all similarity to her experiences, she cannot accept as her own. An example of that can be her discussion with an Afro-American woman who says that in her relations with the father of her kids she has been through the same as Oksana (“fear of intimacy, fear of frigidity, suicidal moods”) (Zabuzhko 2000, p. 36). But by bringing English into the novel at this point, Oksana refuses to accept that woman’s painful relationship is of the same kind as her own experiences and thus refuses a collective identity as Women offered by the woman of another ethnic background.

Thus, the protagonist of the novel accepts her own position within the society that controls and marginalizes her both as a Ukrainian and a woman. Yet, she attempts at voicing her experience but in that she refuses to recognize her experience as belonging to other women, too. Her position towards women – both Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian – is so hostile that it is impossible for Oksana to move beyond the patriarchal perception of “Woman”, to overstep internalized misogyny and to claim the support offered by other women thus moving away from the margins of the society. Because for her that would equal the betrayal of her only collective – national – identity.

On Women Who Work Together, or Biomythography

Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, a book of Audre Lorde describing her growing up in Harlem and the years of her youth, is a text written a decade before Oksana Zabuzhko’s. It is also a text written not only by a writer and a poet (the two facts that are probably the only similarity between Lorde and Zabuzhko), but by a black civil rights activist, a feminist and lesbian. All that experience, beliefs, roles and identities are interwoven in the book. But more than anything else it is a story of building a wide community of women working with each other and loving each other and a story of restoring matrilineage.

From the first glance, the book offers itself as a traditional autobiography, with a linear *sujet* (which, however, goes back and force along the story line), told by a reliable narrator who shares the common identity with the author (hereinafter – Lorde) and the protagonist, Audre Lorde (hereinafter – Audrey), a nearsighted girl

¹ It seems to me that the usage of the word ‘Western’ can be justified here, because the protagonist is writing her novel in the United States, firstly, and secondly, because it is precisely Americans that she is paraphrasing when using English language words.

from an emigrant family from Carriacou Island, Grenada. The critics in discussing it offer the use of the categories of *Bildungsroman* and *Kunstlerroman* (a sub-genre of *Bildungsroman* describing the development of an artist) to analyze it (DiBernard 1991, p. 195). But Lorde chooses a different term to describe it – *biomythography*. In her words, “it is biomythography, which is really fiction. It has the elements of biography and history and myth” (DiBernard 1991, p. 196). Katie King describes this genre as “a writing down of our meaning of identity [...] with the materials of our lives” (Smith and Watson 1998, p. 212). As a result, this autobiographical novel moves beyond the boundaries of the genre of autobiography and is similar to what Bernice Reagon calls ‘cultural autobiography’ in her essay *My Black Mothers and Sisters on Beginning a Cultural Autobiography* (Kaplan 1992, p. 131–132). Reagon attempted to enlarge the notion of autobiography to a genre that reclaims history and constructs communities of strength and diversity. From her point of view, cultural autobiography allows inclusion of groups with opposite, if not exclusive, world-views, thus creating the border areas where communities can exist and work together “in the face of institutionalized racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of cultural violence” (Kaplan 1992, p. 132).

This is precisely what Lorde works on throughout *Zami* – reclaiming history by creating a personal myth to construct a space where a lesbian collective identity can be located. So she transforms the homeland of her parents – Carriacou Island – into a mythical land (which she herself was able to locate on the map only when she was twenty-six years old), a motherland of strong women, “dykes – in the sense of powerful and women-oriented women – who would rather have died than use that name for themselves. And that includes my momma” (Lorde 1994, p. 15). Thus the personal myth becomes a collective myth, a continuum, in which Lorde places herself and women around her to empower them, to affirm their experience and to escape loneliness.

What is interesting is that Audrey moves towards such a collective identity through the loneliness she profoundly experienced as a small (and last) child, in a family managed by a stern mother, as a schoolgirl in a racist environment, and as a young woman learning of her sexuality. The world she lived in was constructed as unfriendly, if not openly hostile: “But in high school, my real sisters were strangers; my teachers were racists; and my friends were that color I was never supposed to trust” (Lorde 1994, p. 81). Her only escape from loneliness was other girls and women of her own age: first imagining “this little female person for my companion” (Lorde 1994, p. 34), finding, only to immediately lose her embodied in a little girl Toni, later as a teenager developing a close friendship with Ginnie, only to lose her, too, and after her escape from home – Ginger, who went off to get married, Bea, the woman Audrey was with only because she actually was a lesbian, Eudora, lost to drinking.

It is her sexuality that is at the same time one of the sources of her loneliness and a way to escape from it and to build the collective identity with other women.

In her family strictly controlled by her mother, with no private space to an extent that well into her school years Audrey slept in her parents' room or shared a bed with her older sisters. In a way Audrey's body was just as much a map of control as Oksana's but that control was exercised by her mother, not her father who never directly communicated his will (unless somebody went against the mother). Her hair was a battlefield to be won over when she was a child; her 'period' was never discussed with her until it started, though Audrey's mother took her to "that endless stream of doctors" (Lorde 1994, p. 76). But in spite of the control (and her rather successful attempts to break away from it by forging notes to the librarian to gain access to the 'forbidden' books or by stealing money from her father's pockets to buy cigarettes for her classmate to learn how babies were made) these moments were also a moment of unification when she could give in to her mother and at the same time recognize her boundaries ("Her art across my shoulders was warm and slightly damp. I rested my head upon her shoulder, and realized with a shock of pleasure and surprise that I was almost as tall as my mother [...]") (Lorde 1994, p. 80).

What is also interesting here is the extent of separation between the world of women and men. Basically, *Zami* is so focused on women that all men, even her father, seem to be merely passing figures. Her father, the most important person in her mother's life, the "one human being whom she had ever entertained upon the earth as her equal" (Lorde 1994, p. 143), was distanced from the family in general, the mother being the voice for the two of them. Other men appearing in the book never stay long enough to shape the life of the protagonist though definitely changing it. For instance, Alvin, Audrey's classmate in her first school year, who knew numbers when Audrey did not, helped her become a Fairy (or a 'good student'), but only for brief periods of time. Her two-week relationship with Peter resulted in pregnancy and an ill-carried out abortion, but otherwise did not seem to have significant influence on her vision or character.

Moreover, there is no visible hostility in Audrey's response to the world she lives in, in particular to women. Even her difficult, bloody – "frequently I woke up to find my pillowcase red and stiffened by gushing nosebleeds during the night" (Lorde 1994, p. 83) – struggle with her mother to break free of her control, thick with anger, even rage, did not make the protagonist hostile to the women around her. Estranged from her family after she left it, unable to comply with what was considered right and correct, she nevertheless manages to build relationships with other women and through one of such relationships – with Afrekete – to find the changes, or prints, in herself that they caused. Through the relationship with the women, she could see these prints as "some invaluable piece of myself apart from me – so different that I had to stretch and grow to recognize [them]" (Lorde 1994, p. 255).

Seeing herself as a continuum of such prints, Audrey succeeds in establishing the matrilineage for which she longs with Afrekete, who is here also a symbol of *home* merging all the experiences of Black women into one, which helps her recognize her experience and integrate it not only as her personal experience but also as

communal experience. This is stressed by the word which is a part of the title of the book: *Zami*. "A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (Lorde 1994, p. 255). There are numerous inclusions of foreign languages in *Zami* (*patois* that her parents used to discuss serious issues, Spanish, inevitable in her travels in Mexico), and this is one of them. These inclusions serve a different purpose than in Zabuzhko's *Field Research*. While Zabuzhko uses foreign words as a tool of estrangement to mark the impossibility of creating any collective identity, but that of general patriarchal identity of Woman and ethnic (Ukrainian) identification with men, for Lorde they are the markers of a world inhabited by women, which she can claim as her own through the women who speak it.

Conclusions

Zami and *Field Research* are the texts that come from different cultural backgrounds and represent different approaches to biographical content and to the figure of a narrator. They raise different issues (the focus of Zabuzhko's novel is the post/imperial discourse in Ukrainian culture, while the focus of Lorde's novel is the development of the personal identity of a Black lesbian living in a racist country). But there is one thing in common: both texts rely heavily on the biographies of the writers.

I believe that the approaches to autobiographical novel selected by both authors are very important. The term suggested by Lorde, *biomythography*, allows her to bring her own life experience into the public domain, as a part of the collective identity shared by Black lesbians in the US and outside. It gives legacy to her claim that her life is a part of a much wider context enveloping generations of women. On the contrary, the way the genre is used by Zabuzhko demonstrates how a woman's body becomes a map of social inscriptions disabling her from establishing nurturing relations with other women, but prescribing her to stand by their men and thus to pledge allegiance to Ukrainianness. As a result, while in *Zami* we see women, raising their voices within their relations and becoming the imagined community that voices its experience, in *Field Research* we see women represented as a part of a wider imagined community, which is the nation, and thus with no place to speak up or to build their collective identity.

I have attempted to discuss the notion of autobiography in its different forms and the norms that are transgressed in these two novels for "autobiographical strategies offer another example of ways of breaking with the chain of invisibility" (Trinh 1991, p. 191). Besides, such usage of these genres allows for the personal and the bodily to be brought in as the political and historical, which 'normative' genres would not allow. But from my point of view, it is exactly the personal and the bodily that enable the texts discussed to bring in a specifically female perspective on national history, heritage, identity, and language.

While writing this paper I kept asking myself: so what? Why autobiographies? Would it really matter to me as a reader if I knew the texts were pure fiction? I think

it would. As a feminist I do believe in the personal experience of Woman and in the support which we as women can receive from each other. Understanding that behind the text there is a real person – a woman – makes it possible for me to relate both to the text and to the author in a way I would not be able to otherwise. And not least important is that such knowledge helps me restore or confirm the broken connection with women due to the misogyny of the society in which I grew up and to begin thinking about it differently – seeing how other women struggled with it, winning or losing their battles, and sharing this experience with me, their reader and successor.

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