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"We Make Our Own Familia" – The Transfer of Memory in Patricia Nell Warren's *Billy's Boy* (1997)

Abstract: This paper aims at analyzing Patricia Nell Warren's 1997 coming-of-age novel *Billy's Boy*. Using the concept of the family as a social framework for memory (Halbwachs), as well as highlighting the role of objects (Olsen, Pomian) and photographs (Hirsch) in the process of memorizing William's late father, the author demonstrates the traumatic impact his death has on the protagonist's biological *and* chosen family. The paper shows that in *Billy's Boy*, the third volume in her *Harlan's Story* trilogy, Warren presents the experience of marginalized youth in the 1990s and interweaves it with her own life experience. Having previously written about the difficulties of being pushed to society's margins in the early 1970s, in this novel, Warren familiarizes the readers with the representation of the life of the LGBTQ+ community in the early 1990s. By doing so, she shows the social changes that have happened and points to the ongoing social inequalities and homophobia. Notably, while Warren writes about the individual experience of William, the novel can become the source of next-generation memory for contemporary young readers, familiarizing them with the history of American LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: trauma, memory, coming-of-age, chosen family, queerness, LGBTQ+, American literature

Patricia Nell Warren captured headlines with her novel *The Front Runner* (1974) which quickly became the first bestselling work of contemporary gay fiction in the United States. The novel, written while Warren was ending an abusive marriage to a Ukrainian poet and coming out as a lesbian, has been translated into thirteen languages. Still, despite Warren's fascinating literary links to her husband's homeland, it has not become the subject of interest of Ukrainian translators[1]. The story about Harlan Brown, a running coach, and

[1] Known to the Ukrainian readers as Patricia Kilina, Patricia Nell Warren was first introduced to Ukraine in the early 1950s, when she "had already felt the first mysterious heartthrob for this great Slavic country" (Warren 1997b: 30). While exploring the Ukrainian neighborhood in downtown Manhattan, thanks to her college friend, she quickly fell in love with the photographs of the distant land of Ukraine, so similar to her homeland Montana. Captivated by both its culture and its people, Warren recalls the moment she was introduced to Yuriy Tarnawsky by calling herself "a dyke in denial, looking for

his star athlete, Billy Sive, reveals the protagonist's past in the form of flashbacks and displays homophobia in sport in the 1970s. Having overcome many obstacles, Billy wins the gold medal in a race in Montreal. When he is within meters of winning another one, he gets shot dead by a radical homophobe. Unfortunately, such tragic narrative is not uncommon within LGBTQ+ literature. Known as the *Bury Your Gays* trope, Haley Hulan identifies it as "a literary trope which originated in the late 19th century, gained traction in the early 20th century, and which persists in modern media" (2017: 17). At the same time, Warren manages to leave *The Front Runner* with an open ending. Because Harlan and Billy considered parenthood before, after the latter's death, Harlan and Betsy, Billy's best friend, resort to in vitro fertilization to keep the memory of their loved one.

The novel's two sequels both focus on significant LGBTQ+ issues. *Harlan's Race*, published twenty years after *The Front Runner,* chronicles the onset of the AIDS epidemic, whereas *Billy's Boy* (1997), a coming-of-age story, reveals the personal struggles of William, Billy's teenage son growing up in the 1990s (Świetlicki, Mętrak 2019), and social challenges such as the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The reader is accompanied by a distinct impression that even though it was published more than twenty years ago, the book illustrates a very up-to-date issue. This paper aims at analyzing *Billy's Boy* in the perspective of memory studies. Using the concept of the family as a social framework for memory (Halbwachs), as well as highlighting the role of objects (Olsen, Pomian) and photographs (Hirsch) in the process of memorizing William's late father, I demonstrate the traumatic impact his death has on the protagonist's biological *and* chosen family. Moreover, I explore how in *Billy's Boy*, the third volume in Warren's *Harlan's Story* trilogy, she presents the experience of marginalized youth in the 1990s and interweaves it with her own life experience. Having

a man" (1997b: 32). Marrying Tarnawsky allowed her to immerse herself in the world of Ukrainian literature and interweave with the émigré society. Initially she learned the language to communicate with her husband's family and friends. However, as her fascination with Ukraine grew, Warren became fluent in Ukrainian and helped form the avant-garde The New York Group of Poets (Нью-Йоркська Група) (Świetlicki 2020a). Warren easily fit within the immigrant community with her "half-native rage" (1997b: 34) about repressions against Native Americans. During her marriage to Tarnawsky, which lasted for sixteen years, she dreamed of openly writing about her desires and gradually began to challenge her queerness. Her first book of Ukrainian poetry (*Трагедія джмелів*) came out in 1959 and explored her search for truth: "I want to live without reds and without blacks, night without shadows, motion without wind," she states in one of her early poems (1997b: 33). Although writing in Ukrainian became Warren's escape, she eventually found the answers to her internal dilemma in anglophone fiction. In her English poetic drama, *The Horsemen,* an androgynous protagonist Kah-Lee faces an internal conflict regarding both their gender identity and queerness, and eventually dies by suicide (1997b: 35). Unable to fit within the heteronormative society, Kah-Lee (similar to her penname *Kilina*) is arguably Warren's reflection of self, as well as her first queer character who aroused suspicion from her homophobic husband (Świetlicki 2020a).

previously written about the difficulties of being pushed to society's margins in the early 1970s, in this novel, Warren familiarizes the readers with the representation of the life of the LGBTQ+ community in the early 1990s. By doing so, she shows the social changes that have occurred in the USA and points to the ongoing social inequalities and homophobia.

Marianne Hirsch's seminal concept of postmemory revolves around the acquired knowledge having a chance of becoming a myth (thus, cultural memory). Hirsch justifies using the prefix *post-* as it does not indicate the aftermath of a particular era but the consequences of the trauma's constant return. She argues that trauma is part of the identity of the descendants of both the victims and the oppressors and associates postmemory with the process of growing up with the idea of horrendous memories instead of the returning past (2008: 103–128). While Hirsch focuses on the family memory of the Holocaust, her concept can be used to describe other historical traumas. Building on Hirsch's theory, other scholars have proposed the use of terms like prosthetic memory (Landsberg) in the analysis of popular culture, and second-generation memory (Ulanowicz) in the examination of children's literature. Adapting the latter notion, Mateusz Świetlicki notes that next-generation memory "better reflects the potential of the transfer of memory, both described in children's books […] and the one that can potentially occur between young readers and mnemonic narratives" (Świetlicki 2020b: 86). Analyzing Warren's *Billy's Boy*, I explore the novel's mnemonic potential. While Warren writes about the individual experience of William, I believe the novel can become the source of next-generation memory for contemporary young readers, familiarizing them with the history of the American LGBTQ+ community.

LOOKING FOR THE FATHER

Billy's Boy is a first-person story about John William, a teenager raised by his single mother Betsy. Throughout the novel, the boy tries to get to know more about his mysterious late father, whom he was named after, and simultaneously find his own identity. William knows no details about his father except for his name and the cause of death, which was an accident with a gun. He is not aware that the man was a famous gay athlete brutally murdered in Montreal by a homophobe. Aunt Marian lets William know that his father was a good man, but losing him was so devastating that it has become the source of trauma for his entire family. Remarkably, it is also the cause of William's melancholia. While the boy knows almost nothing about Billy, finding out more about him becomes his goal. He becomes interested in astronomy, which is his greatest passion, only because his mother suggests that stars could be the spirits of dead people.

It is said that some children mature faster due to trauma often synonymous with irrevocable loss (Tribunella 2010: xi), as it has distressing effects

on an individual's psyche. Hence, it is no doubt that the loss of his father is the main factor of William's early maturation. After all, as Dominick LaCapra notes, similarly to memory, trauma can be transmitted to next generations as "post-trauma" inducing post-traumatic symptoms (cf. 2011: 50–95). William seems not only traumatized by the absence of his father but also the post-traumatic reaction of his mother. Working through trauma depends on parents' support, and its absence has damaging effects on a young person's mental state (van der Kolk 2005: 374–375). William holds onto the imagination of his father and is unaware of how remembering and forgetting Billy directs his family's life. What is more, the boy is conflicted about whether he should stay alive or commit suicide to join his father in the afterlife. The topic of suicidal ideation is not unknown to Warren herself, who attempted to end her life twice (1997b: 34).

While William knows little about his father, the photos of Billy allow the boy to create a vivid vision of the father in his imagination. He keeps one picture framed on his dresser, accompanied by a candle as a form of prayer. This form of attachment to objects, which plays a significant role in the novel, brings to mind the theory introduced by Bjørnar Olsen, who studies the purpose of objects in our lives. Olsen argues that we cannot treat objects as a trace of an absent presence, as they are involved in creating or differentiating between eras and shape our history. Oddly enough, often we are not aware of objects' function as many of them become so valuable unintentionally (2018: 85–96). Hirsch also examines the importance of photographs which act as a sign of life and are directly connected to the process of postmemory. She notes that although photographs become cultural texts, their role is to restore the past while emphasizing its unchanging and irreversible dimension (2010: 251). Therefore, the things William is surrounded by let the past live on. The importance of photographs and objects is shown following the protagonist's move to Costa Mesa, where William and his mother meet the next-door conservative couple and their son Shawn. The boys easily bond, and William even shows his new friend a secret box with the photographs of his father. By showing his neighbor these objects, William shares the memory of his late father with Shawn. Warren also uses dreams to balance between the protagonist's traumatic life and escapist fantasies, as William opens up about his recent dream, in which Billy clearly stated he was alive and ready to meet him. Orik, as Shawn is called by the protagonist, witnesses William's trauma. Bearing witness, as Roni Natov argues, lessens the hold of trauma on the victim (2018: 58). The boys take secret names and start the mission to find Billy. Interestingly, their close friendship turns into the exploration of their own sexuality. The mutual fascination with each other's bodies during sleepovers becomes a thrilling secret game that they manage to associate with space, they even call themselves "space brothers" (Warren 1997a: 26). After being bullied by Shawn's abusive and suspicious father, William, alone and joyless, once again considers suicide

through drowning himself in the lake: "[m]aybe there was no other way to get to my Dad except die myself… I mean, really die" (1997a: 45). William and Shawn are eventually separated because of the latter's homophobic parents. This loss further traumatizes the protagonist.

At the end of the novel, William receives a box filled with souvenirs and photographs of Billy, which have a deep meaning to the whole family. This scene recalls Maurice Halbwachs' theory of the social frameworks of memory introduced in his seminal *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925; published in English as *On Collective Memory,* 1992). Halbwachs, mostly known for introducing the concept of collective memory, distinguishes between two types of memory frameworks: dreams and waking lives. The former type is dependent on experiences, whereas the latter is dependent on many factors, such as time or the order of particular events. Halbwachs considers how forgetting modifies memories according to experiences and how the past is not produced by individual memories but rather by the surroundings. That is why people tend to lose sight of certain events over the years, events that they cannot identify with or do not know of the historical background (2018: 269–275). Halbwachs further argues that while every family has its own history, every member of the family has their vision of that same history (cf. 2018: 272). He sees life and reality as an opposite to oneiric encounters and points out that the quality of memories is more valuable when it meets different frameworks and perspectives. Communities can only exist as one when the members' views are similar, which is why by developing new family ties, William's approach to Billy's death symbolically changes.

LOOKING FOR THE TRUTH

William finds out the truth about his father accidentally, while wandering around his aunt's tape library. His attention is brought to one called *Billy Sive*. The tape plays a significant role of a *semiophore*. Krzysztof Pomian introduces this term as a visible object endowed with meaning (2018: 116). Pomian explores the history of culture and two ways of perceiving literature. Literary works, as he notes, are invisible. He considers books a medium, something that anyone can see, but not anyone can recognize what they hold, as it requires awareness of the text's value. Therefore, the book becomes a *semiophore*, a visible object endowed with its meaning. This term can be attached to any cultural text, as they all create our culture (2006: 116). The newly found tape is a record of a talk show with six special guests, the upcoming Olympic Games athletes. The boy quickly realizes that one of the guests is no other than his biological dad. His gay dad, whom everyone seemed to adore, William "Billy" Sive, is there with his coach and boyfriend Harlan Brown, as well as their best friend Vince and his dad John. To the boy's surprise, the men are gay. Having

been only exposed to the type of masculinity presented by men like Shawn's father, William cannot accept his own father's homosexuality. Frustrated, the boy ends up throwing his telescope off the balcony, which is a symbolical decision to finish the search for him. On the day of his fourteenth birthday, instead of being happy, William is hopeless as "[e]verybody tried to make it terrific, but it was the unhappiest birthday of my life" (Warren 1997a: 213). Despite being surrounded by family and new friends, the protagonist is lonely and does not feel Billy's symbolical presence.

When William ultimately meets Harlan, his late father's partner, the boy refuses to interact with him. The only thing the teenage protagonist can think of is that Harlan, a strong, athletic man, and his late father had sex. Unable to accept the fact that his father was gay, William uses homophobic slurs and is repulsed by the behavior of Harlan's co-workers who, as he believes, are "acting like girls" (Warren 1997a: 118). It is worth mentioning that, as Raewyn Connell argues in her seminal *Masculinities*, homophobia, often displayed by equating gayness with femininity, is frequently used by men who want to achieve hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995: 78). Although William is still a child, he mimics the only male figure he is familiar with, and that is Shawn's violent father.

LOOKING FOR BIOLOGICAL FAMILY AND FINDING CHOSEN FAMILY

William gets closer to Billy when he befriends Harlan's biological son, Michael, who studies blood and diseases. The protagonist, who is a science geek, states that he would like to see Billy's chromosomes. Harlan confesses that Billy's semen is frozen in a Californian cryobank (Warren 1997a: 241), as the boy was conceived by artificial insemination. It is only when they go there together, William gets to see a material part of his dad: "[s]ome people go crazy about getting to hold a glass that Madonna drank out of. I went crazy holding that tube with my Dad's sperm in it. My hands were shaking" (1997a: 244). This moment is very moving for William, as he has always dreamed of seeing a living part of his father. He realizes that Billy's DNA is where all of the traits he hates about himself come from. When he later sees Michael joking with Harlan, he gets melancholic: "I felt sad, and put my eye back to the microscope, staring at those sperm on their 2-inch voyage to nowhere. It was exciting to see them, but not exactly as fun as the living Dad that I wanted to bring back from the stars" (1997a: 248). Still, witnessing his dad's DNA is one of the best days of the protagonist's life: "[a]mazing how much stuff was still left from my Dad's life. Today was the day I'd felt closest to him," he says (1997a: 249).

William's joy is not long lasting. A few days later Harlan shares the news that Billy is not the boy's biological father as the in vitro clinic used another donor's

semen (1997a: 251). The boy is devastated, as it is not only a complete shock for him but yet another proof that his whole life has been built on lies. William's shock deepens when Harlan informs him that most likely he is his father: "[t]he only O carrier in the picture is… me," he says (1997a: 253). Saying so, Harlan is overflown with guilt, as Billy "wanted a kid on his own" (1997a: 253). Nevertheless, he reassures William that the DNA does not change the fact that he will always be Billy's kid. Still, William once again becomes melancholic, feeling that "everything got sucked into this black hole, and came out different on the other side" (1997a: 254).

Because of the lies he has been told, William finds it difficult to understand the dynamics within his newly met family. Shared history of similar experiences, that he is not familiar with, allowed them to create a sense of belonging. In fact, chosen families were a common practice within the LGBTQ+ community and gained attention with the premiere of the 1990 documentary about the ball culture of New York, *Paris Is Burning* (directed by Jennie Livingston). Rejected by their biological parents, marginalized individuals were often forced to form family bonds with other outcasts. What is worth mentioning while analyzing Warren's trilogy is the history of the terminology of queer families. *The Front Runner* covers events taking place in the 1970s, when the activists of the modern LGBTQ+ movement would rather consider themselves "sisters" and "brothers" than "families," as the term was widely associated with heteronormative values (Donovan et al. 2001: 16). Since then, the rhetoric had changed by the 1990s, when both activists and theorists came to the conclusion that there are types of families "differentiated by class, ethnicity, geography and simply lifestyle choices, but in the main, fulfilling the basic purposes of family" (Donovan et al. 2001: 17). This distinction is also visible in Warren's sequels written two decades later, as the relations between the characters are no longer referred to as "friendships."

Chino, Billy's bodyguard, once explains to William that they were alone until they found their own community: "[s]o we've all kind of adopted each other… we make our own *familia*" (Warren 1997a: 100). Having been forced to grow up alone and traumatized by the absence of his father, William struggles to connect with his *familia*. The atmosphere in the house gets tense as William decides that he does not have a family anymore (1997a: 269). His mother finally comes to the realization that the suffering he has been put through was the entire family's fault, as they never let the dead leave them:

> All these dead people hanging around us… they're not haunting us. We asked them to be here. We won't let life happen. Chino… 20 years of marriage to some bones in the jungle. Marian here, handcuffed to Joe's coffin. Me with my hammerlock on Marla's ghost. And Harlan, after 15 years, you *still* don't let Billy go. […] You've tried, I know… but you're still wearing Billy around your neck like a goddam gold medal. (1997a: 271)

The adults come up with the idea of going to Chino's secret place, The Launch Pad of the Spirits, which recalls Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, a place of remembrance where "memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora 2001: 37). Chino often visits it to think about his dead boyfriend, who, similarly to Billy, was murdered by homophobes. He believes that a shared prayer will allow everyone to finally move on from the past. In fact, the trip turns out to be life-changing: "[w]e don't need to call our spirits in. They're here… they've been here for years, even though we haven't seen them. We just want to handle things with them" (Warren 1997a: 285). William, however, does not want to participate. He feels as if him thinking about his father for all those years was just a waste of time, since he is not his biological father: "[t]wo years of remembering Billy and trying to reach him didn't matter now, and he was the only spirit I had" (1997a: 285). Marianne Hirsch mentions three significant elements of the intergenerational structure of postmemory: memory, family, and photography (2008: 103–128). It is no wonder why William, who has no individual memories of his late father and was separated from his family, is not eager to take part in the ritual. He listens carefully to their stories and watches them burn their photographs one by one. The emotional attachment to the objects allowed them to imitate the dead's presence among the living. William pays special attention to Chino's speech to his late boyfriend: "[a]fter I lost you, I let your memory become something that almost killed me" (Warren 1997a: 287).

The boy decides to move away from the group until both a literal and metaphorical wave hits him. A dark silhouette comes into his view and he recognizes Billy immediately. William is embarrassed about the things he had said before, but he can feel the love in his eyes. The hologram of his father talks to him about an upcoming decision, as he can either leave with him or decide to stay. He chooses to stay alive and wakes up at the beach. William and Harlan finally manage to build a father-son relationship as he seems to understand William: "you don't have to kill yourself to get to your dad" (1997a: 299). The boy experiences a strange feeling, genuine happiness which feels fragile, he is scared of losing it.

CONCLUSIONS

Writing about children's literature, Eric Tribunella notes that "American culture, relies on the contrived traumatization of children – both protagonists and readers – as a way of representing and promoting the process of becoming a mature adult" (2010: xi). While Warren's *Billy's Boy* is a coming-of-age YA novel, it is also an example of a narrative in which dealing with trauma and loss is crucial in the protagonist's maturation. Warren uses the memories of her generation and constantly brings up the issues of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. As Monica B. Pearl notes, although the experience was not exclusively

queer, even an association with AIDS could make one seem queer enough to be discriminated against (2015: 59). Therefore, initially, the HIV-related stigma stops William from respecting the affected people. The boy's worldview gets crushed multiple times though, for instance when he gets to know that his friend Ana's heterosexual stepdad is HIV positive and a different member of her family died of AIDS. In fact, the novel's plot intertwines with historical events. During one of their rides, William hears Chino's story about the Vietnam War. They visit a cemetery together, where Chino puts roses on his mother's and boyfriend's headstones. William wonders if Chino ever talks to his boyfriend, but he "never had the guts": "[b]ecause I know he'd tell me to let go, and I never wanted to let go" (Warren 1997a: 140). His pain after losing him is so strong that he is unable to face reality without him.

Notably, *Billy's Boy* contains references to the method of conversion therapy, as Orik becomes a victim of his parents' beliefs in a private clinic in northern California, which would masculinize him back. Studied by Kenji Yoshino, the cruel practice can be divided into three periods: the Freudian period (1870–1938), the age of conversion therapy including the Holocaust practice (1938–1969) and the post-Stonewall period (2002: 789–790). Importantly, as Anastasia Ulanowicz notes, the relationship between a young reader and a book is never one-sided (Ulanowicz 2013: 4). Hence, semiophores like *Billy's Boy* have the potential to enable the growth of self-awareness and can allow contemporary readers, especially representatives of the LGBTQ+ community unfamiliar with their history, to identify with the protagonists and become the receivers of memory.

LGBTQ+ individuals experience various forms of difficulties, but, as studied in this paper, the most challenging one is preserving their memory, especially when there is little to no memory. After all, collective memory can only exist due to reference points and the recreation of events within social frameworks (Halbwachs 2018: 271). Often left alone, LGBTQ+ people are not able to feel the sense of community and face discrimination on their own. Warren manages to uncover the struggles of growing up through the eyes of a lost teenager and includes various problematic issues connected to the queer discourse. Despite coming out in her late thirties, Warren was aware that "every writer's work is a layered archeological site of personal anguish and growth" (1997b: 30) and hers was no different. Starting with the exploration of William's sexuality and finding his own self in the world of adults, through the presentation of a queer family's dynamics, and finally, by introducing historical events, Warren sheds light upon the different levels of memory and mechanisms of preserving it among the marginalized community. The conscious mention of historical events shows that even communities marked with trauma can try to overcome the pain and, honoring the dead, let the memories of them live.

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