

“Safe underneath the Story of My Life”: Completing the Circle in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*

Karla Kovalová

Abstract

The paper discusses Phyllis Alesia Perry’s novel Stigmata (1998) and demonstrates how Perry interrogates the meaning of traumatic memories and remembering in relation to one’s (in)sanity and wholeness. Binding the past to the present, I argue, Perry’s novel probes the issue of historical authenticity and access to historical truth, while establishing a distinct Africana womanist consciousness that validates African heritage and black female subjectivity. Building upon the art of quilting, the novel offers a way in which traumatic memories can be overcome to foster recovery and healing: personal, cultural and national.

Keywords: Africana womanist, black female body, history, insanity, memory, remembering, pain, slave trade, trauma, wholeness

When Eva, an old black woman in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s novel *Stigmata* (1998), tells her great-niece Lizzie, “‘The past ain’t never really gone, is it?’” (115), she succinctly summarizes what cultural critics and African American writers have been articulating for years: that the legacy of slavery continues to affect the American collective consciousness. Indeed, recent fiction by African American writers indicates that slavery has been far from forgotten; rather, it has become a significant trope in African American literature, giving birth to a new genre of contemporary slave narrative, one that redefines both the historical and literary constructions of American slavery.

Rejecting traditional historiography and employing various, often non-realistic literary techniques, numerous African American women writers have created alternative histories based on subjective representations of slavery with the aim not so much of settling the score and/or filling in the gaps, but of bearing witness in order to provide healing for the ever-present wounds wrought by the traumatic past. As Keith Byerman argues in his study *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2005): “Contemporary

[slave] narratives are trauma stories in that they tell of both tremendous loss and survival; they describe the psychological and social effects of suffering. More important, perhaps, they tell of the erasure of such history, and, as a consequence, its continued power to shape black life” (3). In this respect, Perry’s *Stigmata* could serve as a model narrative.

Presented as a psychological thriller, this text tells the story of an ordinary young black woman, who, thought to be insane, has spent fourteen years in several mental hospitals trying to come to terms with her family past, manifested outwardly by metaphysical episodes, embodied visions, and haunting reincarnations. Binding the past to the present, the novel interrogates the meaning of traumatic memories and remembering in relation to one’s (in) sanity and search for wholeness, while probing the issues of historical authenticity and access to historical truth. Moreover, it establishes a distinct Africana womanist consciousness that validates African heritage and, more specifically, the history and culture of African women.¹ In this essay, I explore how Perry negotiates the delicate line between physical and spiritual wholeness when the past becomes alive, inscribing pain onto one’s body, forcing it to keep remembering. In doing so, I also examine the ways in which traumatic memories can be overcome to foster recovery and healing: personal, cultural, and national.

When Lizzie DuBose,² the protagonist, turns fourteen, she inherits her grandmother Grace’s trunk with all of its mysterious contents: a stack of papers; some jewelry, gloves, and handkerchiefs; a small doll; two stones; “a very old bit of a blue cloth”; a quilt Grace had made; and a diary, written by Grace’s mother Joy, much of it recording her grandmother’s history (Perry 16,17). Opening the trunk to feed her childhood curiosity about the treasures it might hold, she notices how “an old smell, a sigh, a breath escapes from the past” (16). Unaware that the past has just come alive to claim its rightful place in her life, Lizzie reads a page from the diary, at first without comprehending a word of it:

We are forever. Here at the bottom of heaven we live in the circle. We back and gone and back again.

I am Ayo. Joy. I choose to remember.

This is for those whose bones lay in the heart of mother ocean for those who tomorrows I never knew who groaned and died in that dark damp beside a me. You rite this daughter for me and for them. (17)

This passage foreshadows five of Perry’s major concerns in the novel—history, identity, memory, the trauma of the Middle Passage, and the healing power of a testimonial narrative. To understand the passage will require twenty years, during which Lizzie will undertake a difficult and dangerous journey that will eventually enable her not only to find a place in her eternal ancestral circle, but also to make herself both whole and “safe underneath the story of [her] life” (24).

Having unlocked the door to the past, Lizzie unconsciously invites it into her life by spreading on her bed her grandmother’s quilt, through which Grace had hoped to tell her grandmother Ayo’s story. As she later attempts to explain to one of her doctors, it was as if “the pictures there on that quilt were like some long-faded memory to me” (5). From then on, Lizzie starts having dreams and visions of her long-dead relatives. Both her grandmother Grace and great-grandmother Ayo wrap their thoughts around Lizzie’s mind so much that their pain invades her body, leaving it with raw scars. The physical

manifestations of the pain inscribed on her body assure Lizzie that she is not simply imagining the past but is actually undergoing it: she is re-living the lives of her female ancestors, "crumpling under the weight of the old African's pain" (125).

As the reader learns from the fragmented story in Joy's diary, tellingly juxtaposed with the fragmented narrative of Lizzie's journey toward recovery from her mysterious mental illness, as a fourteen-year-old child Ayo was captured and taken away from Africa in chains on a slave ship. Having survived years of brutal subjugation, she could never forget the traumatic feeling of cultural loss, or what Corinne Duboin calls "the original trauma: the forced transatlantic journey that meant separation from the mother and departure from the ancestral homeland" (287). It is precisely from this trauma that Ayo attempted to free herself after her emancipation, first dictating her story to her daughter, Joy, so that she could record it for future generations, and then invading the bodies of Grace and Lizzie, forcing them never to forget where and who they come from: "Ayo is there, *reminding us who we are*. And we can't stop the sea from rolling beneath us and we can't stop the fear" (58, emphasis mine).

While the horrors of the original trauma might render its pain unspeakable, Perry, through the re-experienced story of Ayo, insists that the past needs to be spoken, listened to, and heard. As Cathy Caruth explains in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), trauma "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). The reality that Perry's novel strives to express is the historical truth of the Middle Passage – the suffering of the unverifiable number of those who perished in the course of it, "*whose bones,*" as Ayo tells Joy, "*lay in the heart of mother ocean,*" and "*who groaned and died in that dark damp*" of a slave ship next to her (Perry 17). While the temporal distance from slavery makes it impossible for anyone in the twenty-first century to claim an experiential connection to it and/or first-hand knowledge of how enslaved Africans must have felt both physically and spiritually during their slavery, in *Stigmata*, argues Lisa Long, Perry invokes "the suffering that ordinarily cannot be conveyed ... as metonymic proof of a knowable past." Through "the bodily transubstantiation" of her ancestors' suffering, Lizzie is able both to access history and to authenticate it (460), her body becoming the site of remembering as well as a channel for recovery and healing.

Via bodily identification with her female ancestors – when Lizzie is, in mysterious ways, able to reincarnate them, seeing them as well as seeing through them, remembering what their bodies feel like while living parts of their lives – she comes to understand that her ancestors' suffering is also her own. In doing so, Lizzie also comes to comprehend that the original trauma is her legacy, a sort of "transgenerational trauma that shapes her individual self" (Duboin 289), becoming part of her – "*This is your own self talking to you. Don't you understand?*" (Perry 125) – and, in fact, being her life: "*This is my life. These people belong to me. They ... it's like they've always been there, trying to make me hear them*" (141, emphasis mine).

As Dori Laub explains in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), the act of listening to and *hearing* a testimony to trauma is of extreme significance for both the victim/survivor and the listener, as "the emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – *and heard* – is ... the process and the place wherein

the cognizance, the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to” (Felman and Laub 57, emphasis mine). According to Laub,

the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. He has to address all these, if he is to carry out his function as a listener ... so that ... the impossible witnessing [of the trauma] can indeed take place. (58)

In other words, the listener functions as more than a mere *tabula rasa* onto which one inscribes the text of the traumatic narrative. If healing and recovery are to take place, the listener must engage in the narrative by accepting the historical truth of it and identifying with it, without ever having personal, authentic access to what may seem unreal.

When Ayo, the victim/survivor of the original trauma, fulfills the imperative to testify and to bear witness, and when, choosing to remember, she tells her daughter to write her story down and wait for “*the girl baby ... who gon know thangs*” (Perry 34), her daughter’s response is one of disbelief: “*Mama I get tired of you talking all bout stuff that aint real*” (34). Unable to carry out the function of a listener/hearer, to recognize the truth and identify with it; she fails to re-experience Ayo’s trauma and to co-own the painful knowledge of the primal event – two acts necessary to facilitate healing and recovery. Her attitude to a large extent parallels that of Sarah, Grace’s daughter, who also has closed her ears to hearing the truth about her mother’s past, although for different reasons. Having grown up, the anticipated “girl baby”, Grace, is possessed by uncontrollable pains as Ayo attempts to inhabit her body and memory. Unable to “keep things straight in her head” (58), Grace decides to leave her family – her husband George, her twin boys Frank and Phillip, and her daughter Sarah – to spare them the shame of having their wife and mother locked up in a mental institution. Before her death, she writes a letter to her sister Mary Nell, asking her to give her haunting possessions, a quilt and Joy’s diary, to her yet-to-be-born granddaughter, thinking this act will make her daughter safe from pain and mental confusion:

Please do not show these to my baby girl Sarah. . . . She will ask questions that you cannot answer that I’m not sure I can answer. And I could never burden her with the thought that her mother is crazy. I could not curse her with these things that are happening to me. I thought getting all that down on the quilt in front of me out of me would get rid of it somehow. I don’t know about that. But I know I can’t pass it on to her this craziness. So save it but not for Sarah. Maybe Sarah will be safe. . . . Please leave these for my granddaughter. I know she ain’t here yet. (15)

However, this act of love is misunderstood by Sarah, who, feeling abandoned and hurt, carries with her the trauma of separation, in some ways not unlike that of Ayo in that it was imposed on her, a wound that she deals with by choosing not to know the truth about her mother’s life, and, by extension, about the larger ancestral history of the original trauma. Although saved from insanity, Sarah is inadvertently robbed of something far

more essential in life: the connection to her mother, without which she can never be fully whole, and the absence of which, in turn, affects her own relationship with her daughter Lizzie.³

The importance of the mother/daughter relationship in African American culture, largely informed by the cruel parameters of black mothering set by slavery, has been noted by numerous scholars. Described as protectors, nurturers (although not always affectionate in their behavior), and tradition-bearers passing down the cultural history of their people to ensure its continuity in the hostile world of white hegemony, black mothers – or *othermothers* in the case of absent mothers⁴ – have always been vital for their daughters' quests for self-definition and wholeness. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), Patricia Hill Collins describes the mother/daughter relationship as a "fundamental relationship" in which "Black mothers ... empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African American women" (Collins 96). As Lisa D. McGill elaborates, the black mother/black daughter dyad has historically been central to the daughter's identity, namely her creation of an affirmed self, for it is by "thinking back through the mother" that the black daughter comes to define herself as a subject (McGill 34).

In *Stigmata*, however, contrary to these conditions, Perry exposes the mother/daughter relationships as dysfunctional in that the mothers fail to pass down to their daughters both cultural and familial histories, thus obscuring the ancestral past and, consequently, distorting their daughters' sense of identity, which can never be accurate without their conscious acknowledgment and incorporation of the past. To provide a corrective to this failure, Perry deftly reconfigures the mother/daughter paradigm, first by replacing it with that of grandmother/granddaughter and then by reversing the roles in the original dyad so that the granddaughter (the daughter in the original paradigm), having acquired the necessary knowledge from the grandmother, can, in turn, pass it on to her mother and assist her in filling the gap in her own life to become whole. In the course of this reversal of roles, however, Perry remains faithful to the centrality of the mother's role, making Lizzie – the daughter – assume the role of her mother's mother, Grace. Therefore, it is Sarah's recognition of her mother Grace in Lizzie that heals her wound of separation and dissolves the wall of denial, enabling her to reclaim the lost connection to both her mother and her ancestral past.

Before Lizzie is able to embody her grandmother and aid Sarah in becoming whole, however, she must learn of the traumatic details of the ancestral past; she must hear Ayo's victim/survivor story without fear, accept it as part of her self, and transform it into a usable text that can be read and embraced by her mother. In other words, she must re-construct Ayo's narrative and ground it in the present, making it a source of healing, both for her mother and herself. Just as Grace feared before her, however, walking the line between (in)sanity and wholeness to find a healthy way of accommodating and living with painful memories, she faces difficulties when confronted by her environment, unwilling to believe in her supernatural powers which seem to transport her into the distant past and make her reincarnate her ancestors.

Listening to her explanations of the mysterious wanderings in the past, Lizzie's parents, especially her father – a medical doctor – question her sanity, ascribing her behavior to delusions, psychosomatism, and/or denial. Although Lizzie knows that she is not insane

no matter how unreal, surreal, and/or irrational her experiences may sound, when she is forced to attend sessions with a psychiatrist, she is unable to explicate what she has not yet fully grasped herself: why this “communication between then and now is going on” (83) and why her dead ancestors keep coming back to haunt her. Describing their visitations, she is certain that she is not just hearing voices: “‘*these are memories*, that’s what they feel like. And when the ... conditions, I guess ... are right, they’re more than memory, they’re events. They’re replays of things that have already happened” (141, emphasis mine, omissions in the text). However, “chosen” by her ancestors to take an active role in them, Lizzie has no control over their course.

During one of her memories or “replays,” Lizzie experiences the raw pain of being dragged off and chained on the slave ship, which leaves her with bleeding cuts all over her body. Her parents, interpreting the wounds as evidence of a suicide attempt, and afraid for her mental health, see no alternative but to have her institutionalized. Grace’s fear of how her immediate family might have reacted to her own odd behavior years before comes full circle: Lizzie is “stigmatized” as a lunatic in the eyes of society. Her psychiatrists do not understand why and how Lizzie keeps hurting herself because she does not know of any *rational* way to articulate her (and Ayo’s/Grace’s) pain, the rawness of which, according to Perry, cannot be described adequately in words but must be experienced: “Surely, if they knew, if they heard and smelled and saw all, they’d understand how speech ... has become inadequate” (159). Lizzie thus resorts to silence, which the psychiatrists misinterpret as a sign of her being a “mental vegetable” (191). They subject her to all sorts of medication and therapies aimed at restoring what they consider a mental state of wholeness.

Having set up the binary opposition of logos/rationality versus silence that defies rational explanation, Perry exposes the inadequacy of Western medical science to assess Lizzie’s behavior, i.e., her African “rememory,” which, in the words of Timothy Spaulding, “asserts the ability of the past to maintain its surface traces in the physical world of the present” (66). While Lizzie dreams of Africa and wakes with burning scars, her body becomes a site of memory: “The maze of scars, from neck to waist and beyond, [being] permanent remembrance of the power of time folded back upon itself. Proof of lives intersecting from past to present” (Perry 205). Her experience resonates with the African concept of understanding life, in which the past and the present are intertwined: the dead maintaining contact with the living, serving as mediators between the physical (present) and spiritual (eternal) worlds. As John Kuada and Yao Chachah explain in *Ghana: Understanding the People and Their Culture* (1999): “Ancestors communicate with their descendants in many different ways” which may not appear rational, logical, or clear (43). Engaging in communication by listening to/hearing one’s ancestors is presented not as a sign of illness or insanity but rather as an imperative to seek what the ancestors are trying to communicate and why.

Unlike African culture, however, Western culture, with its tradition of empirical science, refutes the possibility of communication with an ancestral, spiritual world, as well as the idea that the past is alive. As Perry reveals in her haunting narrative, those who do not conform to the belief in Western, objective “truth” can be stripped of their freedom and agency: they are proclaimed unfit for the world, regarded as “insane,” and put out of sight of the society to be cured of their mental “illness.” Lizzie’s friend, Ruth, comes close to understanding this pattern when she declares that sanity “is a mutual agreement between

folks trying to control their world” (193). For Perry, the twentieth-century United States of America in which *Stigmata* is set is a world ruled by white, male, Western rationality that maintains its inalienable right to decide who is sane and who is not. Just as in the nineteenth century, when men had power over the lives of women and whites over the lives of blacks, in Lizzie’s world, the agency and freedom of black women are restricted by male dominance and “a gendered Cartesian discourse that tends to ‘hystericize’ rather than ‘historicize’ the uncontrollable black female body that remembers” (Duboin 285). It is against this world that Lizzie has to reclaim her right to rememory and assert the subjectivity of her African great-grandmother.

In *Stigmata*, Perry also draws parallels between African spirituality/way of life and Western Christianity by associating Lizzie with a Christlike figure who has been chosen to suffer in order to bring about healing and recovery from the painful collective history of the African Diaspora. As the title of the novel suggests, there is a striking correspondence between Lizzie’s scars and stigmata, symbolic marks that the Catholic Church has come to regard as authentic experience of the Savior’s torture. Although stigmata are, as Lizzie understands, “generally associated with devout religious persons” (Perry 215), among whom she would not belong, Perry underscores the connecting element between the two kinds of wounds, in Lizzie’s words: “Remembering something unbelievably traumatic” (215). While Lizzie’s “stigmata” do not elevate her to the status of sainthood or martyrdom, they clearly function as reminders of the original suffering of African Americans that one can access only through faith and collective memory.

Lizzie spends fourteen years in various mental institutions, during which she comes to understand much of her ancestors’ experience and slowly learns to polish her “story of redemption and restored mental health” (5) to gain release. Unlike her medical doctors, who believe in objective science that can provide a cure for her mental condition, Lizzie knows that “there is no cure for what I’ve got” (6), because she is neither physically or psychically ill. Playing the game of those in power, however, she persuades them to believe in her mental wholeness (sanity) and physical wholeness (lack of fresh scars), although she fools neither herself nor her ancestors, who still follow her wherever she goes. Her journey toward genuine wholeness must continue, and Lizzie seems now more fully equipped for the next leg of it. As she admits to herself, “Psychotherapy, psychiatry and long-term residential treatment really cured me of something. Cured me of fear. Made me live with every part of myself every day. Cured me of the certainty that I was lost” (47).

Lizzie’s development, however, can be credited not simply to Western science but also to the uninterrupted *time* that she has had on her hands in the mental institutions to accommodate her long-dead relatives in her life and to comprehend why they keep coming to her and what they are trying to communicate. For it is through the numerous visits of her ancestors that Lizzie comes to understand their stories and, unafraid, accepts them as part of herself – feeling, for the first time in her life, *grounded*, as opposed to being lost, and also, perhaps more importantly, *free to remember* without being wounded by her painful memories. As Lizzie realizes, going through her grandmother’s possessions once she is back home: “These things can’t hurt me anymore. The story on those diary pages belongs to me, but they don’t own me. My memories live somewhere spacious now; the airless chamber of horrors has melted into the ground” (47).

While Perry exposes the damaging effects of a traumatic collective past that returns to seek reconciliation in the lives of future generations and that, if unattended to, can paradoxically wound the living, physically and/or mentally, she also suggests that despite the risks involved, conscious amnesia – the cutting off of the hurt and the building of a wall against it – is no solution for dealing with the traumatic past. As Ron Eyerman contends in *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001), slavery “has left scars and thus *must be dealt* with by later generations who have had no experience of the original event” (74, emphasis mine). This is what Lizzie tries to explain to her friend Ruth, who wonders why her relatives keep hurting her: the past hurts because it demands to be heard. It wants to be remembered (Perry 194). Yet the memories alone are not sufficient to bring about healing; as Lizzie comes to know: “It’s how you *feel* about them” (210, emphasis mine). Here lies the difference between Grace’s and Lizzie’s attempts at dealing with Joy’s/Ayo’s repeated visits from the past. Unlike Grace, who interprets Ayo’s imposition as a curse that precludes one from being safe and sane, Lizzie feels instead that it is a gift: “‘*The gift of memory... That’s all that sets me apart, really*’” (205, emphasis mine). Indeed, Lizzie’s approach to the memory sets her so far apart from the rest of her people that she becomes an intermediary or bridge between the past and the present worlds, enabling others to access the past through her.

Born to well-respected, middle-class parents, Lizzie has lived most of her pre-institutionalized life in a comfortable cocoon of hypocrisy and pretense. Educated in a parish school of “lukewarm Catholicism” (32) and raised as a single child in a house that “is a shrine to middle-class order. Not just neat, not just clean, but true to *the standards demanded by our position* in this little belch of a town” (30, emphasis mine), she has never questioned the hegemony of those in power or pondered the absence of African heritage in her family tree. Unlike underclass blacks who may, in fact, look upon contemporary American society as a reincarnation of slave society, Lizzie can afford to revel in the fruits brought by the 1960s and forget the costs paid by those who experienced the original trauma. Her story thus functions as Perry’s attempt at a constructive criticism of the persisting amnesia of members of the black middle class who “have made it” in American society by conforming to the rules of the world of white supremacy, denying their roots and ties to Africa, and/or reclaiming them only superficially through a blind adherence to Afrocentrism, without ever probing the significance of their African slave past and its place in their lives.

To avoid such a mistake and to deal with the “left-over scars” from slavery, Lizzie must come “home” in the true sense of the word. She must re-discover her origins, in the sense of both the African homeland and the original trauma, and enable her kin to do so as well. In this process, she is assisted by her grandmother’s sister, Aunt Eva, who guides her toward an understanding of what needs to be done. In Perry’s narrative, Aunt Eva functions as the wise ancestor who, although devoid of any magical powers, is able to help others by passing on traditional African wisdom. She is the one who understood what her sister Grace was going through; the one who gave Grace’s possessions to Lizzie after Mary Nell died before fulfilling Grace’s request to pass them to her yet-to-be-born granddaughter; and the first one to recognize in Lizzie the reincarnated Grace, who has returned to ensure that the healing – the completion of the circle – will take place.

Aunt Eva elucidates for Lizzie the true meaning of the past, which is, in the traditional African understanding, seen not as a separate segment of one's life preceding the present but rather as an extension or continuation of the present: "The past – *that's what you call it* – is a circle. If you walk long enough, you catch up with yourself" (Perry 119, emphasis mine). Having always been exposed to the Western worldview, in which the past is regarded as the first of the three distinct steps on the ladder to the linear progression toward the future, Lizzie seems initially confused by the African cyclical understanding of life because to her, one "can't make progress that way" (119). In the traditional African understanding, however, as Perry depicts it, one's development is not measured by spatial (upward or forward) mobility; rather, it is determined by one's destiny, which one receives from the Supreme Being together with the breath of life (Kuada and Chachah 41). The ultimate goal of each person is thus to comprehend his/her place in the circle of life and the role he/she is to play in it: what purpose his/her life has in the larger "scheme of things" where nothing happens randomly. Accordingly, Lizzie's task is to find out where she fits in the circle of the eternal lifetimes to which her ancestors, through the pages in the diary and the images on the quilt, unlocked the door, and where, as Ayo describes it in the diary, "*We are forever. Here at the bottom of heaven we live in the circle. We back and gone and back again*" (Perry 17).

Aunt Eva gives Lizzie only a small clue to put her on the right path when she tells her: "You done already been here" (119), addressing her as her own sister, "*Grace*" (120). Her impromptu means of address, collapsing two generations into one, signals that Grace has been reincarnated in Lizzie so that she might return to finish what Ayo has started: the task of completing the circle and recovering the original wholeness. To attend to the "unfinished business" (96), Lizzie sets about piecing her memories into an appliqué quilt that would evoke "the lifetimes layered one on top of the other" (213). As Duboin explains, Perry's use of a quilt is doubly significant here in that it functions "as an overarching metaphor for the legacy of the past" and a "gendered expression of a shared cultural memory," for quilting, she elaborates, "has roots in African history and culture; it ties up the past with the present, the old with the new. It facilitates female bonding and bridging across generations and continents" (293,4).

Indeed, as Margot Anne Kelley reminds us in "*Sisters' Choices: Quilting Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Fiction*," one of the major qualities of quilting is "the promise of creating unity among disparate elements, of establishing connections in the midst of fragmentation" (176), the promise that Lizzie hopes to achieve as she connects her ancestors' stories with her own and involves her mother in the project. To design her quilt, Lizzie first draws vignettes of Grace's life to construct her story in the hope that they will enable Sarah to recognize her lost mother and accept her as the missing element in her life: "I have to continue the story, and maybe, please God, Mother will understand in the process" (Perry 61). Lizzie portrays Grace in all her complexity, as a loving yet desperate mother who abandons her family, leaving for the North, only to come back home as a dead body in a casket. Tellingly, she assembles the cut pieces of the story "like a horseshoe" (153) – a shape suggestive of an unfinished circle – having used both *old* scraps of cloth and some *new* cloth she has bought for the binding, thus symbolically ensuring both connection and continuation. Asking her mother to help her sew them together, Lizzie engages her in the healing process of reclamation as she invites her to look at her past in order to

be able to move forward in life. With this assistance, Sarah is eventually able to overcome her repressed sense of loss and, having recognized Grace in her own daughter, she “picks the needle [Lizzie] had put down and finishes the stitching. The circle is complete... and the gap finally closed” (230).

As Duboin points out, “The completion of the quilt, with its elements that form a unified whole, means the completion of the circle and the recovery of wholeness” (298). Sarah has reclaimed her mother and thus has been able to acknowledge the long-denied ancestral past that Lizzie has incorporated in her project by inserting into her own quilt a “tiny replica” (Perry 72) of Grace’s quilt with Ayo’s story, eternally connecting the lives of all of them.⁵ By doing so, Lizzie has also completed her task and found her place in the eternal circle of ancestral lifetimes. Yet, the completion of the quilt is also significant in other ways. While Sarah’s final act of stitching Ayo’s indigo-blue scrap around Grace’s neck – “the very old bit of a blue cloth” (Perry 17) that Lizzie found in the trunk and kept with her – signifies transgenerational connection as well as a sense of belonging, it also, and perhaps more importantly, highlights the connection to African origins and aesthetics, for the indigo-blue scrap refers to the West African tradition of dying cloth—a tradition of which Ayo, as Lizzie learns in one of her memories, was a master. Moreover, Sarah’s looking back at the past in order to move forward in her life is reminiscent of the West African philosophical concept of *sankofa* (go back and take), which, as Adolph H. Agbo explains in *Values of Adinkra Symbols* (1999), “teaches the wisdom in learning from the past” (3).⁶

As noted earlier, the distinct point of view that Perry brings into her novel has much affinity with Africana womanist aesthetics, defined by Clenora Hudson-Weems in *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (1993). According to Hudson-Weems, Africana womanism connects continental Africans and Africans in the diaspora while emphasizing the ancestry and locale of both: Africa (22). In her narrative, Perry never loses Africa as her focus; her firm intention to reclaim it in its original, pre-colonial condition is evident from the beginning of the novel when Ayo, the symbol of Africa and true to the nature of an Africana woman,⁷ asserts her right to self-definition: “*My name mean happiness she say. Joy. That why I name you that so I don’t forget who I am what I mean to this world*” (Perry 7).⁸ By highlighting Africa’s original humanity, Perry strives to override a current attitude that prevents many American blacks from reclaiming their ancestral roots: the equation of Africa with poverty, disease, and death. Moreover, she attempts to challenge “the Eurocentric *status quo*” (Hudson-Weems xviii) that seems to permeate mainstream feminism, prioritizing gender as the key issue on its agenda.

As Daphne Williams Ntiri explicates in her Introduction to *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, while there is no doubt that women on all continents suffer from sexist domination and exploitation, “the discourse involving Africana women cannot escape the historical realities of hegemony and ethnocentrism by western cultures and *the accompanying atrocities of slavery*, colonialism and oppression. The status, struggles and experiences of the Africana women... remain typically unique and separate from that of other women of color, and of course, from White women” (in Hudson-Weems 3, emphasis mine). Consequently, unlike a mainstream white or black feminist who prioritizes gender, an Africana womanist must prioritize race and “embrace the concept of a collective struggle for the entire family in the overall struggle for liberation survival” (Hudson-Weems 44). Accordingly, although Perry chooses to tell the story of the Middle

Passage primarily through fragments of stories of four generations of women, she firmly binds them with a fragment describing Grace's memory of being forced to witness a scene in which white people on a slave ship throw a small black *boy* overboard. In doing so, she firmly establishes that the traumatic event, together with the heritage of "the unspeakable things unspoken," applies not just to black women but the entire black race.⁹

In addition, Perry engages men in her project of healing and wholeness, making them part of the ancestral circle. Lizzie's father, initially an embodiment of Western rationality, eventually comes to understand how important and meaningful the quilting experience is and decides to make a contribution to it. As Lizzie realizes, buying a frame to make the quilt a *permanent* fixture in their home "seems to be his way of finally getting in the game" (197), an attempt suggestive of a need to provide a sort of grounding for the uprootedness of the black diaspora. Furthermore, Lizzie's black lover, Anthony Paul, has also had dreams of Ayo, which he is able to transform into a painting and which make him open to trust Lizzie's interpretation of her familial history.

Indeed, although written from the perspective of a black woman, *Stigmata* does not suggest that only black women have access the historical truth. While Lizzie is the "chosen" one to mediate between the past and the present worlds, to enable the completion of the circle, and to re-experience the original trauma, she is not the only character to have access to the historical legacy of African Americans. And, interestingly enough, neither is the black race. Coming to terms with her past, Lizzie meets in the Montgomery "nut-house" a mysterious white woman who is able to see both Ayo and Grace, and thus testify to the historical reality. By including in her narrative this character, without abandoning her project of giving voice to the African women brought on slave ships to America, Perry deftly extends the boundaries of the Africana perspective to suggest that African American history is not just personal, familial, or exclusively black but it is the history of us all if only we choose to acknowledge it.¹⁰

Notes

¹ I define Africana womanist consciousness in accord with Clenora Hudson-Weems' concept of Africana womanism, described in *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (Troy, MI: Bedford Publishers Inc., 1998. c. 1993). I return to the concept in more detail at the end of my essay.

² The last name DuBose brings to one's mind the name of W.E.B. DuBois, associated with the concept of double consciousness. Perry's playfulness with names is evident throughout the novel. The name Lizzie resonates with Lissie from Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), who, just like Lizzie, is also "the one who remembers everything," and Leesy from Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1965), who is also somehow connected to the supernatural. For more details about the spiritual dimension of other names in the novel, see Duboin 301, note 1.

³ Paradoxically, while Sarah is not cursed with insanity, she curses her own mother for choosing Lizzie to inherit it (Perry 46).

⁴ The concept of othermothers is key to the centrality of women in African extended families. As Patricia Hill Collins explains in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), "Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins act as othermothers by taking on child-care responsibilities for one another's child.

When needed, temporary child-care arrangements can turn into long-term care of informal adoption” (119-120).

⁵ Lizzie is, of course, connected to Ayo/Joy from the very beginning. Besides feeling her pain on her own body, she was fourteen years old when she inherited the trunk with the haunting possessions, the same age as Ayo at the moment of her separation from her mother and Africa.

⁶ Perry’s use of a quilt works on other levels, too. First, the art of quilting – through which Lizzie and her mother achieve wholeness by sewing together the scraps of the lives of her ancestors – is replicated in the structure of the novel, where Perry pieces together the fragments of various written narratives. Second, just as Lizzie finds her place in the eternal circle of ancestral lifetimes by sewing her quilt, so Perry, with her literary quilt, establishes her place in the circle of African American women authors creating an alternative history in their writing.

⁷ The self-definition corresponds, according to Hudson-Weems, to the second of eighteen features of the Africana womanist, who is: “(1) a self-namer and (2) a self-definer, (3) family-centered, (4) genuine in sisterhood, (5) strong, (6) in concert with male in struggle, (7) *whole*, (8) authentic, (9) a flexible role player, (10) respected, (11) recognized, (12) *spiritual*, (13) male compatible, (14) respectful of elders, (15) adaptable, (16) ambitious, (17) mothering and (18) nurturing” (143, emphasis mine). Due to lack of space and given the focus of the article, I do not discuss how all the features pertain to the lives of female protagonists in the novel, a fertile topic that would certainly deserve an article of its own.

⁸ Ayo’s reference strongly resonates with Alice Walker’s novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), which also suggests that Africans are inextricably linked to joy.

⁹ The concept comes from Toni Morrison’s essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (Eds. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting: *The Black Feminist Reader*, Malden, MS: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001, 24-56).

¹⁰ This idea is further underscored by the ways in which Perry engages the reader in her project generative of wholeness and healing, especially her use of narrative strategies. By employing the means of “the fantastic,” collapsing the temporal frames through Lizzie’s reincarnations and mysterious travels in time, Perry contracts the distance between narrated events and the moment of their reading, thus making the protagonists’ pain more tangible for the reader.

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Address:

University of Ostrava

Faculty of Arts

Department of English and American Studies

Reální 5

701 03 Ostrava

Czech Republic

Karla.Kovalova@osu.cz