



## How Memory Works Through Things: Memory Objects in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*

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As Lewis R. Gordon reminds us, “[t]he question of building a future is strongly focused on in African-American feminist thought”; he adds that this thought aims at formulating a narrative of black women’s lives “as a critique of racism and sexism and an inspiration for the construction of an ethics or politics of social transformation in which racism and patriarchy are destroyed in the interest of a feminist future” (Gordon 100). This implies that in order to build a fairer future, it is necessary to investigate the past. Mastering the knowledge of the past is a key to both personal and communal growth, while ignoring it endangers both the individual and the society. However, acquiring this knowledge is not always easy: “remembering is not a simple or even safe act” (Brogan 29), especially in the situation in which the past includes trauma affecting numerous generations, either directly or by way of postmemory. This term, coined by Marianne Hirsch, refers to “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before [...]. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors” (Hirsch 5). According to Hirsch, it is not necessary to hear the stories of past trauma in order to be overwhelmed by them. In fact, such domination is made more acute by the absence of the telling, as the memory of trauma is passed on unwillingly and unwittingly. Obstacles on the way of a seeker of knowledge include family secrets, amnesia, others’ refusal to share what they know about traumatic events (either personal or communal), and institutional erasure of certain types of knowledge. Many of the abovementioned risks and challenges are dramatized in *Stigmata* (1998) by African American novelist Phyllis Alesia Perry.

As a rule, objects play an important role as memory activators because they are incorporated in social relations and provide a material link with the immaterial past: “Among the most important dimensions of the ‘social life of things’ is their acquisition of meanings from human uses, transactions, attributions, and emotional attachments, all of which enable them to mediate between the lived present and the remembered past” (Zarzycka and Mogul 7). Besides, material things are a source of stability and continuity thanks to their durability (Klassen 297). Consequently, they are a frequent trope for recovering lost memory in fiction. While the words

“object” and “thing” are often used interchangeably, they are not exactly the same. The difference key to this article is that an object is a physical item that can have emotion directed at it; therefore, it is not identical to the sum of its particulars, contrary to a thing.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the term “memory objects” will be used in the body of the article. Inherited objects are a particular class of memory activators, since they grant access to family secrets. Like memory itself, they “occup[y] the space between mind and body” (Brennan 52), providing context and enabling us to narrate family past. When it comes to the transmission of an African American traumatic past, objects can be particularly hard to come by: indeed, as Edouard Glissant famously said, Africans arriving in the Americas were naked migrants, *migrants nus*, since prior to their arrival they had been deprived of all material possessions, and so had to resort to the traces of their original culture left in their memory in order to rebuild their selves in the new environment (Glissant 109).

The present article proposes to look at the role objects are shown to play in reconstituting family and communal memory in the context of traumatic amnesia, cultural haunting, and intergenerational transmission along gender lines in a novel written by an African American novelist. The most important memory objects in *Stigmata* are two quilts, so the article will start with a brief outline of the importance of quilting in African American culture. After a presentation of the original trauma, the text will focus on the roles that memory objects play in the narrative, on their origin and on the gendered dimension of remembering. The central argument of this article is to show how pain is passed on across generations of African American women in non-linguistic ways, engaging the bodies of the women, and to interrogate the possibility of ending that pain.

## **On quilting**

In her presentation of a collective exhibition called *Keeper of My Mothers' Dreams (Keeper)* and presented at the Tube Factory Artspace in Indianapolis from November 2017 to January 2018, Maria Hamilton Abegunde claims that healing is necessarily collective: “How do I stop the pain? *I* don't. But *we* do” (Abegunde 6). For her, audience participation is essential “to remember the violent histories that have impacted Black women and their families emotionally, physically, psychologically, and spiritually: slavery, enslavement, lynching, sexual violence, and child mortality” (Abegunde 8). LaShawnda Crowe Storm, the artist and activist who conceived *Keeper*, is also the author of *The Lynch Quilt Project*. In the webpage devoted to its origins, she explains the importance of quilts as a tool in the examination of and healing

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the distinction between object and thing, see Kristie Miller, 2008.

from violence: “Quilting is about piecing together remnants of fabric and lost history, reclaiming tossed garments and forgotten lives, stitching together all of these fragments into a whole cloth that reflects a more balanced and total view of history, revealing multiple truths along the way” (Crowe Storm). According to Crowe Storm, sewing a quilt collectively makes it possible to turn the circle of sewers into a circle of healing, so as to balance different stories and at the same time include everyone present in the process.

Quilts have multiple functions. They are used to provide physical comfort and emotional security: “it is precisely because of quilts’ capacity to provide warmth materially that they are often associated with comfort symbolically” (Ott 105). They are also historical documents, since “they capture diverse or distinct cultural traditions and thereby serve collectively to help preserve the past” (Warren 68). This is particularly relevant when we speak about the communities that lack written records: “Given the lack of historical sources directly from slaves, researchers have had to find this group’s ‘voice’ in other sources, including material ones, and particularly quilts, providing a cultural and political record of the past” (Chouard 109). Quilts are connected to storytelling in many ways, not only because of their role in historical research. Some of them are figurative and narrative: for example, story-telling Bible quilts by Harriet Powers bear witness to her “personal experience of deliverance” (Patton 69). Such quilts are mnemonic objects, making it possible to “overc[o]me illiteracy” (Patton 70). Finally, quilt-making provides a good occasion for storytelling during work. In African American communities, quilting “was a communal activity and a source of networking for rural women in farming areas” (Cash 35); it strengthened cohesion among women by reinforcing kinship networks. Last but not least, quilts have a political function: As Géraldine Chouard writes, they “were used as a form of protest both before and after emancipation” (114). Indeed, protest quilts included written messages, such as antislavery poems or appeals, and constituted “a powerful tool to express commitment to justice and freedom” (Chouard 114); besides, they were sold to raise necessary funds for the abolitionist cause and for charity. For Faith Ringgold, story quilts constitute a typically feminist art form: “the quilt, so intimately connected with women’s lives, seemed the most effective vehicle for telling a woman’s life story” (Patton 242), which is why Ringgold herself used quilts to write her autobiography. The technique of patchwork, collage, makes it possible “to register multiple, even conflicting, sensations and experiences” (Ott 103), which makes patchwork quilts a suitable symbol of overcoming differences and repairing fractured relations.

Ringgold compared quilting to jazz, claiming that both artistic practices constitute “the legacy of our African heritage and carr[y] it into *our common* future” (8, emphasis added). This remark highlights the positioning of quilts at the balancing point between the past and the future as well as the recognition of their syncretic character: “By celebrating African heritage

as a trait that allows African American quiltmakers to contribute distinctively to U.S. quilt making, this stance synthesizes elements of the participation and separation tropes” (Klassen 310). In Perry’s novel, quilting is indeed used as a metaphor for constructing a common future; yet this happens not on the national scale, but within a single African American family.

### **Ayo’s trauma and its transmission**

The trope of separation emerges in Perry’s novel in the shape of a trauma affecting Ayo and her descendants—trauma in the sense of an experience “so disturbing that it threatens the very structure by which meaning is made of the world” (Brogan 71). The original traumatic separation in *Stigmata* is the kidnapping of teenage Ayo by slave catchers when she wanders away from her mother’s market stall in a mid-nineteenth century African village. The precise time and location are not disclosed to the reader. Ayo (whose name means “joy”) is sold to the Americas as a slave. It is this abducted girl who wants her story to be remembered. But her story is difficult to tell, and she resorts to several channels of transmitting it to different generations of her descendants, who struggle in various ways with her trauma, without being able to come to terms with it or to satisfy Ayo, until the moment one of them appears to do so.

Ayo dictates her story to her daughter Joy. As her name is the translation of her mother’s name into English, Joy may have been intended to become Ayo’s double in the new world, possibly a happier and a more fortunate one, which seemed to make her the ideal amanuensis to put the older woman’s words on paper. However, the results fall sadly short of Ayo’s expectations. There are things the former slave does not feel ready to share with her daughter: “*Whats that like the selling I ask Mama. Joy, I aint gon tell you that she says. I cant stand to tell you that*” (Perry 80, italics in the original, original spelling). These difficulties indicate that trauma is characterized by “the non-representability of the event that prevents its adequate assimilation to knowledge and transformation” (Caruth 79). Joy, born after slavery, finds it difficult to imagine the situations her mother is evoking, so she lacks what Toni Morrison called “emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared” (77). As a result, Joy may be in the possession of facts, but they do not add up to become the truth about her mother’s past. Joy’s journal is passed on to her daughters, and eventually to her great-granddaughter, and some of them are granted this emotional memory that Joy seemed to lack. Ayo’s suffering is conveyed to two of these descendants in the form of dreams, hallucinations, time travel, corporal possession and finally, very real pains, wounds and scars, evolving from internalized and invisible to the other characters through more and more visible to shockingly visible. The mode of communicating and materializing one’s suffering—as opposed to hiding and disguising it—is therefore one of the main preoccupations of the novel.

In the end, silence is preferred over speech, and the visual or sensual over the verbal. The novel seems to claim that storytelling is not always a sufficient strategy in dealing with trauma, and that it may be better to find a suitable material expression, for example in an artistic object, in order to come to terms with traumatic experience. This distrust of the power of language to convey meaning is related to the nature of pain, which, as Elaine Scarry said, produces an “absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the reality of other persons” (4).

Ayo’s body dies, but her pain does not. Instead, it visits Grace, afflicting her with intense and uncontrollable physical and psychological suffering, which makes her helpless: “Ayo—Bessie—has invaded Grace’s memories and she can’t keep things straight in her head” (Perry 57). Ayo / Bessie, whose change of name reflects her dislocation and the split between African and American parts of her life, creates a similar breach in her grand-daughter’s generation: Grace, convinced that her family may be doomed if she does not restrain the violent haunting she is subject to, decides to leave her husband and children, including her daughter Sarah, in order to protect them. She also tries to find a different channel for expressing the pain, so she makes an appliqué<sup>2</sup> story quilt. Grace never returns home, but sends back the trunk with the quilt inside in 1945, thirteen years before her own death and fifteen years before Lizzie’s birth.

When Lizzie Dubose, Grace’s grand-daughter and the only child of a well-to-do middle-class couple, inherits it, she is fourteen years old: Ayo’s age upon her kidnapping. As she opens the trunk, “an old smell, a sigh, a breath escapes from the past” (Perry 16). It is as if the voices of ancestors were about to be heard, but the violence of the trauma precludes their words from being uttered; as Scarry argued, “physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language” (Scarry 4). In Perry’s novel, various characters attribute different epithets to the trunk: for Lizzie and her cousin, it is a “magic box” (Perry 11); but Lizzie’s mother Sarah calls it first “Lizzie’s trunk” (23) and later “Pandora’s box” (46). Both expressions show that Sarah wants to distance herself from the object, but the second one also hints at its ominous character and highlights the supernatural powers of the ancestors, whose memories are stored inside. By alluding to the jar in which various plagues and calamities were placed by the gods, Sarah acknowledges its threatening nature. However, she also makes her daughter bear responsibility for the consequences of opening it: in Greek mythology, Pandora released the evil contents of her box into the world. In this way, Sarah shields herself, implying that the past is evil and should be left alone. Sarah’s resorting to this reference from Classical mythology also hints at her wish to

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<sup>2</sup> In “appliqué” quilting, patches of fabric in different shapes and patterns are sewn or stuck onto a larger piece in order to form a picture or pattern.

conform to the mainstream white American culture, which ascribes value to classical Greek heritage, and her rejection of African American tradition.

After covering herself with Grace's quilt and reading Joy's journal, Lizzie starts visualizing scenes from Ayo's past. Having looked at Grace's representation of "two figures walking down a road with baskets on their heads. A woman and a child. Their footprints stride behind side-by-side and then the smaller prints—the child's—branch off and end at the edge of a large body of water" (Perry 23), Lizzie falls asleep and dreams of going to the market with the woman represented on the quilt, who is her mother in the dream. When she wakes up, her feet are dusty. Thus, she occupies the position of young Ayo, which makes it possible for her to understand a language she cannot speak in her conscious life. This dream also complements the picture on the quilt, for Lizzie knows what she is carrying: "I don't stop to look in the basket; I know it's full of cloth" (Perry 24). There is a supernatural quality to this sequence, as the quilt actively modifies Lizzie's perception, becoming a "magic talisman that enable[s] the vision of an alternative reality" (Gervasi). Eventually, Lizzie begins to behave in unusual ways, and occasionally her physical appearance changes, which is noticed by other family members: for instance, as her cousin says, "I swear it was like somebody else was sitting there across from me" (Perry 39). At last, several years after opening the trunk, she shares Ayo's experience on board the slave ship:

The ground slowly rolls under my feet. I smell—taste—sweat and blood and months of misery. The scent knocks me dizzy for a moment and I stumble forward. Then I am pulled, jerked. I open my eyes, but there is a void in front of me. Light, gray and weak, filters in slowly from the left side of my vision, and I see the deck, the water beyond and the line of dark bodies going jerkily forward into the ghost-land. Each bent back ahead of me is familiar. (Perry 85)

Due to her contact with memory objects, Lizzie, born in an affluent middle-class household, experiences the hardships that her ancestors knew in their flesh. However, she also has to face her parents' refusal to acknowledge her lived experience and their reluctance to believe her version of the story.

When the young woman tries telling this story to her parents and to doctors, she is disbelieved. In fact, she spends fourteen years in various psychiatric hospitals, because the rationalist medical practitioners ascribe her wounds to suicidal attempts and classify her stories as elaborate fantasies. Many years later, however, she tries communal artistic production, making a new quilt with Sarah. Lizzie's mother did not help Grace to sew the original quilt and was left behind when Grace fled the South, which excluded her from the knowledge about her family

past. In order to bridge the rift in the family, Sarah must acknowledge that her daughter is also her mother and her great-grandmother, since she has access to their lived experience. This means that Sarah has to reject her rational approach to life, which she has been very reluctant to do. This seems to happen during a conversation Lizzie and Sarah have while working on the second quilt. When Lizzie justifies the need to include the small piece of old blue cloth in the new quilt, she explains that it is the link to Africa:

“This was handed down, literally. It used to be a bigger piece. I was wearing something made from this, something my mother wove and dyed, the day they snatched me.”

“They snatched you...”

“Slavers.”

She makes a choking sound. (Perry 229)

The aposiopesis at the end of Sarah’s sentence hints at her difficulty in accepting what has so far seemed impossible to her. She clearly hesitates to do so, and this state of mind is corroborated further when her throat seems to be obstructed by the words of acceptance she is not yet ready to utter. She is still unwilling to admit she believes her daughter when she says,

“If you are my mother,” she says, “then tell me... about that day...”

“What day?”

“The day you left me,” she snaps, her eyes hard.

I put down the needle and tell her. About the day before, with George taking his bath and me searching for my suitcase. About the memories I was having. About the pain. (Perry 229–30)

Once again, truncated speech-acts are used to convey her hesitation, along with the tentative “if”. But in the end, Sarah forces herself to say she wants to communicate with Grace through Lizzie, and is rewarded with an explanation that Grace did not offer before leaving, many decades earlier. In this way, Sarah and Lizzie are moving beyond the “ordinary visible” and combining the material remains of a past world with its emotional memory so as to “go on living meaningfully with a heightened awareness of the consequences of intergenerational trauma” (Mihăilescu 178), with the hope that they will finally be able to complete the work of mourning. Their collaboration also hints at the importance of engaging in “collaborative acts of resistance” (Hirsh 180), rather than individual ones.

## **Memory objects**

The objects in the trunk provide the “obvious” and “stark” link between the past and the present which stresses the crucial role of this object in a narrative which is itself dedicated to the

creation of that connection, as Perry emphasized in her interview with Duboin: *Stigmata* is “rewriting the slave narrative, but it’s also about the connection between those slave experiences and who we are now. And I made the connection in a very obvious, stark way, but that’s what I wanted to do” (Duboin “Confronting the Specters,” 635).

The objects in the trunk also feminize the trunk as they evoke the maternal body—jewels and gloves that used to adorn it, the doll Bessie made for Joy which stands for mother work, and the cloth metonymically representing Ayo’s mother, who was a master dyer. Eva Tettenborn points out the link between the term “master dyer” and the power Ayo wields over her descendants:

Perry uses the term “master dyer” to describe Ayo’s mother’s profession: she was an expert African artisan who created colorful fabrics which she then sold as a successful market woman. Yet the connotations of the term “master dyer” also seem to signify on the role of the master in the traditional slave narrative who has the horrific powers to harm, maim, kill, and bend the will of those whom he or she possesses. Ayo, in possessing the minds and bodies of her descendants, appears to have somewhat similar powers, if very different intentions. Furthermore, since Ayo is the daughter of a master dyer and a Middle Passage survivor, she becomes an expert at dy(e)ing, not in the sense of creating colorful fabrics for others in her community, but of witnessing the horror of dying and death among her fellow abducted Africans, and by coloring the minds of her granddaughter and great-great-granddaughter with her own memories. (Tettenborn 98)

Among all other objects contained in the trunk, the cloth stands out as having a particularly rich and complex value, as underlined by the following entry from Joy’s journal, which suggests that Ayo kept the torn piece during the Middle Passage and subsequent sales, clutched in her fist, thus adding sweat to the fabric, “*I remember my fist being closed tight for what seem like years Mama say. I had a piece of cloth balled up in there. Beautiful blue cloth. [...] My hands was tied up but I took that piece of balled up cloth with me to the block.*” (Perry 132, italics in the original, original spelling). It appears that the cloth, woven and dyed by Ayo’s mother, is now an object enriched with Ayo’s substance, thus reuniting their bodies because both of them intimately touched the fabric.

In *Stigmata*, while transmission of trauma is intergenerational, it is also gendered: Male characters are excluded from the activity of remembering and experiencing past trauma. Throughout the novel, men are secondary characters, by and large reliable and supportive family providers, but weaker than women (female characters are often said to be thinking that they should protect men from dangers) and less able to cope with extraordinary events. Such a representation of male characters can be explained within the context of Àjé literary lineage. As Teresa Washington says, “in the mother-daughter Àjé relationship, the father is necessarily relegated to the outside. [...] [T]he male force [is] essential to creation but irrelevant, and



possibly an impediment, to full spiritual expansion” (173). Grace’s husband George did not know what to do when his wife was overwhelmed by her ancestor’s suffering. Lizzie’s father decides to entrust her to psychiatrists, some of whom are his friends and colleagues, for he is unable to go beyond the ordinarily visible.

The memory objects in *Stigmata* can be envisioned as a chain linking together six generations of women from the same family while at the same time serving as a reminder of the plight of a multitude of Africans who, like Ayo, lost their homeland. This chain is constructed over time, almost each generation adding an element. The first one is the blue cloth made by Ayo’s nameless mother. This is also the sole piece of Africa in the family, and its incorporation in the second quilt probably contributes to appeasing Ayo. Joy wrote the diary, but it is really a transcript of her mother’s memories, and Joy occasionally comments on the process of transmitting them: “*Mama always talk strange when she tole them ole stories. She never los that strange voice of hers from Afraca, but when she talk about her childhood and the bad times it seem like she really was Ayo and not Bessie after all*” (Perry 50, italics in the original, original spelling). Grace sewed the first quilt and packed the trunk. Sarah, who felt abandoned by her beloved mother and embraced middle-class city life as the wife of a respectable man to find security, was excluded from the chain until Lizzie enabled her to reenter it. Lizzie is the last creator in the novel, the one responsible for making the second quilt. Those memory objects are carefully preserved, but apart from Ayo and eventually, Lizzie, all the family members are afraid of them. Moreover, the trunk is an object of discord from the moment it arrives by mail. It is not bequeathed to the owner’s daughter, but to her granddaughter, which results in Sarah’s disappointment and Lizzie’s wounding and eventually, internment in psychiatric hospitals. Besides, it represents Grace’s flight from her family which is seen as betrayal by Sarah. Thus, while contributing to keeping the history of the family alive, it also deepens the division between its members and weakens them both physically and psychologically. Moreover, young Lizzie and her grandmother Grace both treat the quilt like a fetish, in the sense that it “owns its owner” (Gervasi), being one of the “human creations which have somehow escaped [...] human control, achieved the appearance of independence, and come to enslave or dominate their creators” (Leopold). Different family members deal with this domination in various ways: Lizzie and Grace become too deeply involved in the past and lose themselves in it, while Sarah believes that the only right thing to do is to render any further contact between the living and the dead impossible.

Certain objects in the trunk, such as the gloves, the jewelry, and the homemade doll, appear to play no role in the process of recovering memory. The doll “is falling apart, becoming dust” (Perry 47), when taken out of the trunk, so Lizzie avoids handling it. Although it was made by Bessie, it is not related to her life in Africa and has no direct relation to the trauma of

dispossession her descendants need to assimilate. Besides, as an object related to childhood, it must be put aside to permit a symbolic access to the adult world and to Ayo's experience: Ayo's childhood violently ended when she was kidnapped, and Lizzie's has to end the moment she opens the trunk, since this act launches her coming-of-age ritual. The gloves and the jewelry, on the other hand, represent middle-class adult woman's life, as well as a degree of material comfort and security. Moreover, gloves symbolize a barrier between human body and the outside world, whereas the contact with the quilt and the journal pushes Lizzie outside her sheltered existence. The text suggests the pair of gloves in the trunk used to belong to Grace: "You kind of look alike but she's a little taller. Darker. Wearing a hat and gloves and carrying a suitcase" (Perry 163). This remark uttered by a fellow patient at the psychiatric ward, who witnesses the moments when Lizzie is possessed by her ancestors, points to the travelling outfit representing Grace's journey to the city, but also to the latter's refusal to fully submit to the painful haunting. After all, Grace's flight originated in her disavowal of her emotional memories. These objects speak to the experience alien to Ayo, and can instead be linked to the rejection of rural African American lifestyle which both Grace and her daughter Sarah left. The transmission of Ayo's trauma is consolidated by eliminating the gloves and the jewels from the process of remembering.

The exorcism of Ayo's pain is not possible as long as Lizzie is separated from the journal and the quilt, even if her first contacts with them result in bodily possession. The only thing that she could use during the long years spent in psychiatric hospitals is narrating the past, but the text expresses a distrust of coherent speech, which can partly be related to the issues of the reception of trauma stories. Indeed, trauma victims are frequently disbelieved because what they have experienced may appear unlikely. This is clearly the case in the novel, where various psychiatrists are depicted as suggesting that Lizzie is "a fanciful, imaginative little girl" (Perry 137). What is more, some of the psychiatrists are compared to slave masters, which hints at the violent opposition and power imbalance between Lizzie and the medical practitioners. For instance, when Lizzie is being taken for gardening occupational therapy, Dr Cremrick is watching her from the porch, and the hospital garden turns into a plantation Ayo used to work on (Perry 174-75). The attitude of medical authorities, and their infantilizing surveillance system is the reason why Lizzie refuses to speak for two years while in a psychiatric asylum, for, as another inmate says "Best not to talk around here, they use it against you" (Perry 163). Besides, in *Stigmata*, trauma also originates in supernatural events which resist acceptance by rationally minded characters. For example, Lizzie's body changes occasionally so as to make her look like Grace or Ayo, as witnessed by at least one other patient: "One day you're a woman, today you're a girl" (Perry 175); she also bleeds someone else's blood without having hurt herself: "her blood, the stuff running down my back and legs and into the rich Alabama dirt"

(Perry 175). The lack of understanding from those with the power to release Lizzie from the hospital results in “the collapse of address—of the ability to hear, or to address, another—that returns repeatedly, in trauma, to demand a response” (Caruth 79). The repetitive character of trauma, the fact that dreams, hallucinations and other symptoms keep returning to haunt the victim, results from the inability to address the right person, at the right time, in the right way, so as to be heard.

### **To tell, to sew, or to feel?**

Perry’s text offers a fairly balanced view of what happens to postmemorial generations:

Perry’s novels portray the consequences of conflicting needs of witnessing: on the one hand, there is the impetus to retell Ayo’s largely undocumented traumatic story; on the other, there is the urgency of portraying those whose minds and bodies become receptacles of her testimony and whose lives are impacted severely by this experience (Tettenborn 95).

Scholars such as Lisa Woolfork and Corinne Duboin claim that Perry’s novels depict the therapeutic value of storytelling; that even if Ayo’s story is told long after her death, the telling is a tool of psychological liberation for her descendants (Woolfork 2008, Duboin 2008). However, as Tettenborn contends, there are limits to this healing: “Perry’s characters encounter paradigms of circular experiences that privilege the reliving and preservation of the original trauma and its immediacy over a pictorial or narrative rendering of it” (Tettenborn 97). Indeed, the novel does not close with the image of a pacified Sarah and motherly Lizzie, or even with the entry from Joy’s journal, written when the young woman is still sad after her mother’s death, but looking forward to her own daughter’s birth. These elements constitute the end of the penultimate chapter. Instead, the novel closes on a scene set eight years earlier, and shows Lizzie painting one of her memories of the Middle Passage in occupational therapy. The instructor praises her work but tells her it needs embellishment. The last sentence of the novel reads: “He moves away, and I take up another brush to paint a gray ship and a brown girl standing at the rail” (Perry 235). Such an ending suggests that the peace Sarah and Lizzie have reached is only temporary.

The novel’s very structure is circular and may be read like a collage or a patchwork quilt. In *Stigmata*, which is divided into twenty-six chapters of varying length, the narration is non-chronological and spans twenty-two years according to the chapter titles (composed of dates and places), but the scope increases if we include the various memories and journal entries which widen the span to more than a hundred years. This adds one more patchwork to the two

quilts present in the diegesis and hints at unavoidable repetition. Being granted legacy may imply superimposing a double of the original owner's mindset on our own: "In addition to inheriting physical traits and household objects, we inherit other people's pain, other people's prejudices, we inherit other people's versions of history" (Duboin "Confronting the Specters," 637). As a result, we may be forced to repeat their experiences in spite of trying to end the cycle.

Grace began sewing the quilt to remember her family, but also to ward off the bad uses of memory:

She'll put a moon in the quilt. She'll put her smiling Sarah and her funny, funny twin boys in the quilt. And her beautiful man, George, who laughs with his eyes. So she can remember them. So that Grandmother Ayo doesn't drown them with the past. She'll put them on the edge, small-like. (Perry 56)

Making it was an act of protecting her loved ones and remembering them without exposing them to Ayo's angry power. By sewing a figurative quilt, Grace can portray the various family members and personalize them further with the pieces of fabrics they used to wear, creating a series of doubles to carry with her. For example, Sarah recognizes the fabric used in the quilt as coming from one of her childhood frocks: "Trance-like, she touches an appliqué of a child. 'I used to have a dress that color,' she murmurs" (Perry 22). And yet, Sarah does not seem to realize that this fabric metonymically stands in for her and is an expression of her mother's love, showing that the narrative quilt is open to different readings. Grace also decides to include "that beautiful blue piece" of fabric which "came from Grandmama, from Ayo" (Perry 58). The novel mentions her pinning it to the quilt, but it is unclear whether she finally stitched it on, since the piece of cloth is in the trunk when Lizzie opens it. The blue cloth keeps returning to the sewing basket, as if it could never settle down but was forever locked in a circle of eternal returning.

The second quilt, sewn by Lizzie and her mother, features appliqué figures representing various moments from Grace's life, arranged in a circle and sewn on "midnight blue background fabric" (Perry 93). The circular design alludes to the rebirth of all things and the connection between the living and the dead. The color blue is meant to trigger the memory of the past while at the same time putting its ghosts to rest in peace, standing for "a direct connection between the African continent and the New World" (Duboin, "Confronting the Specters" 648), so it is used as the background and is also present in the torn piece of Ayo's outfit. Using both old and new blue fabric in the second quilt hints at the ongoing link that should be maintained with Africa and at the possibility of opening up a new future. And yet, first and foremost, this quilt is a testimonial object, in the sense that it "carr[ies] memory traces from the past... but also embod[ies] the very process of transmission" (Hirsch 178). Lizzie does not learn quilting, instead, she acquires its mastery thanks to her grandmother's memories: her body remembers

how to quilt though her mind has never learnt it. As Scarry puts it, “[w]hat is ‘remembered’ in the body is well remembered” (Scarry 109), and Lizzy’s fingers are gifted with a new skill. For the same reason, it is significant that various parts of the quilt would in the past cover the bodies of the family members.

The third type of memory objects is Lizzie’s own scarred body. In her analysis of *Beloved*, Anita Durkin highlights the textual dimension of scars marking the bodies of Morrison’s characters. She points out that “the act of branding suggests [...] the construction, or more accurately, the invention of black identity by whites” (Durkin 544). Scarification, as in branding, enables human bodies to be identified; “in this sense, [it] acts in a manner very similar to that of the linguistic sign, an inscription to be read by the viewer / reader” (Durkin 543). I would add that in Perry’s novel the scars also serve as reminders of the occasion on which the original wounds were inflicted on the body. Inscribed and marked with Ayo’s scars, Lizzie’s body turns into a textual body and becomes a double of Joy’s transcription of her mother’s life story. These scars are ambivalent. On one level, they remind Lizzie of the occasions upon which physical punishment was inflicted on Ayo: for example, Lizzie has round marks on her wrists, because Ayo was wounded by chains. They also force her to remember Ayo and Grace and to know them in her flesh. On another level, they signal Ayo’s dominion over her, marking Lizzie as her possession, since branding and scarring served as means of slave identification. On a third level, they are signs whose meaning is clear only to the initiated: indeed, the doctors cannot understand them, and misread them as symptoms of psychiatric disorder, while another patient can at least notice them. Scarring can also be, after all, a sign of belonging to secret societies. The return of those scars on Grace’s and Lizzie’s bodies may be interpreted as a sign that “tragically dislocated Africana peoples [...] are doomed to repeat past lessons if we fail to remember and evolve from them” (Washington 183). It can be observed that both women characters remember the past, what is more problematic is using these memories for future growth. The repetitive infliction of scars on subsequent generations is a call to finally “address the Continental terror that forced millions out of Africa and onto alien lands, concerning bones bleaching in the Atlantic and ancestor-warriors chained on auction blocks” (Washington 183).

Significantly, Lizzie cannot start sewing a new memory quilt until the moment when her wounds turn into scars, which happens when she stops being a sacrificial victim of bad memory. In contrast, Grace never seems to leave the position of the victim. In her discussion of the modifications undergone by the term “victim” over the past thirty years, Susana Onega shows that its earlier definitions focused on the sacrificial aspect in a religious ritual, aiming at salvation or resolving an issue (92-93). Subsequently, the term has lost much of its religious meaning, which also led to viewing victims as passive, powerless and useless (Onega 93-95). It can be said that Grace, who works alone and dies far away from her family, embraces the

part of a sacrificial victim since she wants to save her family from suffering. Thus, Grace is not totally passive, as she decides to leave her family home, trying to escape Ayo's grasp. However, her rebellion is inefficient, because although she can experience trauma in her flesh and narrate it by means of sewing the quilt, she is "drown[ed]" in the process, the very fate she wanted her family to avoid. Her sacrifice is pointless: In the end, the quilt she makes in order to shield her family from harm passes the trauma on to Lizzie.

Lizzie, however, is able to move from the position of the victim to that of a witness and starts representing not only Ayo, but also thousands of other slaves. She recognizes that she has been offered a "gift of memory" (Perry 204), so she has the duty to mete out justice to those who did not experience fair treatment in their lifetime: "The witness is both someone who testifies about an event, whether a crime or an ordinary occurrence, and a moral figure of extraordinary power" (Dean 111). Thanks to her personal and embodied knowledge of slavery, Lizzie has to give testimony and bear witness to the realities of slavery, which can only be achieved if she is granted epistemic authority. The issue of recognition, reliability and trusting the witness arises when her version of what the quilt means to her is routinely disbelieved by her parents and medical practitioners her parents entrust her to. For these characters, the plight of Ayo and other enslaved Africans is best forgotten, or at least put behind. As long as Ayo is treated like a ghost, she remains an annoying other, who must be killed rather than remembered, which corresponds to the erasure of the trauma of slavery from the national consciousness. This erasure of certain victims from public awareness is not limited to African Americans. Writing in a different context (that of the War on Terror) Judith Butler highlights the dehumanization of the populations regarded as "ungrievable" because their existence is invalidated:

If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never "were," and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. (Butler 33–34 qtd. in Onega,96)

As long as Ayo is regarded as a mere unreal solitary specter, the mourning cannot be complete. Ayo's aim is also to attest the existence of other enslaved people, whose deaths she witnessed: "Ayo's compulsive need to share her memories is not a self-centered act of transmission but a commitment to those who perished while on route to America or on plantations" (Duboin, "Trauma Narrative" 291). Indeed, as stated in Joy's diary, her testimony is for many slaves: "This is for those whose bones lie in the heart of mother ocean for those who tomorrows I never knew who groaned and died in the damp dark beside me. You rite this daughter for me and for them" (Perry 17, original spelling). Of course, Lizzie and Grace resent the pain she inflicts upon

them, but Lizzie also manages to witness not only Ayo's pain, but also other persons', which is why she appears to be more efficient at handling the trauma than Grace was. Moving from the position of a victim to that of a resilient survivor, surviving guilt resulting from middle-class comfort unavailable to ancestors, we have a moral obligation to deliver justice for those who came before us, as Paul Ricœur argues : « Le devoir de mémoire est le devoir de rendre justice, par le souvenir, à un autre que soi » (108). Lizzie is forced to remember, and violently so, because even though slavery was abolished long before she was born, its legacy lives. She has made progress in her remembering, and yet more remains to be done. Discarding the elements of middle-class comfort, such as gloves, from the work of memory, shows that Lizzie is not fully at ease with the entirety of her heritage. Paul Ricœur, dealing with the ethical obligation to remember, writes that the appeal encouraging people not to forget makes sense only in the situation when the community, the nation, or some of its parts find it difficult to recollect certain events in a peaceful way : "L'injonction ne prend sens que par rapport à la difficulté ressentie par la communauté nationale, ou par des parties blessées du corps politique, à faire mémoire de ces événements d'une manière apaisée" (105). Consequently, as long as the whole nation does not come to terms with its slave past, Ayo's ghost will tend to return: "The problem of representing Ayo's sufferings meaningfully always reverts back to the women who descend from her as they remain unable to introject their memorialization projects into society at large" (Tettenborn 107).

## **Conclusion**

As memory objects tell stories without resorting to words, but engaging bodies instead, the transmission of past experience can be facilitated in the situation where the words are either missing or inadequate. Besides, memory objects referred to in *Stigmata* stand for dead family members, so they ease access to emotional, embodied memory, which is essential to truly understand the experience of the impact of violent histories. Turning an object ostensibly designed to provide comfort into a vehicle of suffering points to the ubiquity of violence and its ability to rise up and assault those who seem to live safe, protected lives. Moreover, the novel speaks to acknowledging the difficulties for African American women to claim the epistemic viability of their experience and memory objects also help to dramatize this issue: Indeed, they are made by women and for women from the same family, and when they are mentioned outside the family circle, they stop being taken seriously. In this context, while it may be tempting to read this second quilt as the final tool of liberation from the exceedingly strong influence of the past, such an interpretation appears to be overly optimistic. After all, Sarah is the only character who now seems convinced that her daughter is telling the truth. It is possible that Lizzie's grand-daughter will, also eventually relive the pain. Lizzie buys a high quality

textile for the second quilt, because “the fabric has to hold up at least until the next storyteller comes along” (Perry 63). The ending of the novel is ambivalent, and allows to doubt the hopes raised thanks to the completion of the collaborative quilt project. As in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* or Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, violent haunting has come to a halt, the wounded bodies are scarred, but this may be a temporary interruption since there is no widespread, public recognition of the witnesses’ trustworthiness.

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