Piecing Memories, Connecting Lives: The (Inter)Textual Quilt in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*

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Abstract
The use of structural and thematic qualities of the quilt has given rise to a rich tradition in American women's literature, reflecting the historical transformation of American women's culture and/or suggesting alternative modes of perception. Using the quilt as a tool for textual analysis, this paper will explore Phyllis Alesia Perry's Stigmata *(1998), a debut novel describing three generations of black women bound by a shared legacy of slavery. Perry establishes herself in the tradition of black women's writing, while creating in her work "an intertextual quilt" that challenges perceptions of American history.*

Keywords
African-American fiction, Intertextuality, quilt, legacy of slavery, Phyllis Alesia Perry, *Stigmata*

Introduction

> *Quilts—factual or fictitious—clearly have the capacity to encapsulate stories within the fabrics and designs of their squares.*
>
> Janice Barnes Daniel

In the opening section of *Quilts as Text(iles): The Semiotics of Quilting* (1996), Judy Elsley notes that "quilts and texts are inseparable."[1] Indeed, the use of structural and thematic qualities of the quilt has given rise to a rich tradition in American women's literature, flourishing particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Authors such as Louisa May Alcott, Bobbie Ann Mason, Eliza Calvet Hall, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, to name but a few, have employed in their fiction the metaphor of the quilt and/or the qualities of piecing, patchwork, and quilting to reflect the historical transformation of American women's culture or to suggest alternative modes of perception.[2] And more recently, feminist literary critics have come to regard the quilt as a useful tool for textual analysis, observing "that a knowledge of piecing, the technique of assembling fragments into an intricate and ingenious design, can provide the contexts in which we can interpret and understand the forms, meanings, and narrative traditions of American women's writing."[3] In this paper, focusing on the narrative tradition of African American women's writing, I use the metaphor of the quilt to explore Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998). Specifically, I discuss Perry's use of the quilt to establish herself in the tradition of black women's writing, while creating in her novel "an intertextual quilt" that challenges perceptions of American history.

1 Judy Elsley, *Quilts as Text(iles)*: *The Semiotics of Quilting* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 1.

2 For more details about the use of the quilt and/or the qualities of quilting in the nineteenth and twentieth century fiction, see Elaine Showalter, "Piecing and Writing," in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), 222-247 and Margot Anne Kelley, "*Sisters' Choices*: Quilting Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Women's Fiction," in *Everyday Use,* ed. Barbara Christian (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 167-194.

3 Showalter, "Piecing and Writing," 227.

Stigmata as a Quilt Novel

> I decided that the best way, the gentlest way, to reopen the subject of my past was to make this quilt. Kind of a story quilt.[4]

A debut novel, *Stigmata* tells a haunting story of three generations of black women bound by a shared legacy of slavery. Exploring the psychological pain of loss, separation, and fragmentation, it examines the historical wounds of African Americans wrought by their traumatic past, while elevating the artistic form of the quilt to the status of a medium generative of healing and wholeness. In doing so, it claims a part in a distinctive aesthetic heritage that, with its roots in African culture and its use of the principles of improvisation, combination and connection inherent to quilting, "contribute[s] to a restructuring of [the] historically white, bourgeois, European form [of the novel]."[5]

To accomplish its goals, the novel first introduces the quilt as an object of inheritance. Turning fourteen, Lizzie DuBose, the protagonist, inherits her late grandmother Grace's trunk, in which she finds, among other objects, a quilt and a diary written by Grace's mother Joy. The journal records Grace's grandmother Ayo's testimony of her life as a former African slave. The diary and the pictures on the quilt soon unlock the door to a past, so that Lizzie begins having visions about her long-dead relatives. The quilt in particular becomes sort of a bridge between the past and the present, enabling Grace and Ayo to invade Lizzie's mind so much that their pain also invades her body, leaving it with raw scars. These physical manifestations of that pain assure Lizzie that she is not simply imaging the past but undergoing it; she is re-living the lives of her female ancestors.

At first Lizzie does not understand why this "communication between then and now is going on"[6] and why her dead ancestors keep coming back to haunt her. Describing their visitations and her mysterious wanderings during which she is able to see through her ancestors or be reincarnated in them, she is certain that she is not having delusions, nor is she just hearing voices. As she explains to her doctors: "'*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.'"[7] "Chosen" by her ancestors to take an active role in these events, Lizzie has no control over the course of the replays, as she has no control over how other people may regard her supernatural experiences. Thus, after having had a bodily experience of the suffering on the slave ship, resulting in bleeding cuts all over her body that her parents interpret as evidence of a suicide attempt, she is committed to a mental institution to be cured of her ilness.

Lizzie spends fourteen years in various mental institutions, during which she comes to understand much of her ancestors' experience, why her relatives are coming back and what they are trying to communicate. As a fourteen-year-old child, Ayo was captured in Africa and taken away 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."[8] It is precisely

4 Phyllis Allesia Perry, *Stigmata* (London: Judy Piatkus Publishers, 1999), 222.

5 Kelley, "*Sisters' Choices,*" 184.

6 Perry, *Stigmata*, 83.

7 Ibid., 141, emphasis mine, ellipses in the text.

8 Corrine Duboin, "Trauma Narrative, Memorialization, and Mourning in Phyllis Alesia Perry's Stigmata," *Southern Literary Journal* 40.2 (Spring 2008): 287.

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—"*You rite this daughter for me and for them*"[9]—and then, after Joy's failure to validate her mother's experience, invading the body and mind of her granddaughter Grace.

Possessed by uncontrollable pains, Grace is unable to explain what is happening to her and "keep things straight in her head."[10] Thus she 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, as happens two generations later to Lizzie. Grace travels to the North in the hope of leaving the haunting past behind her, taking with her an unfinished quilt in which she has sewn images of her family "so she can remember them. So that Grandmother Ayo doesn't drown them with the past."[11] Yet Ayo never stops tormenting her, and Grace, thinking this act will make her daughter safe from pain and mental confusion that she believes hereditary, before her death, writes a letter to her sister Mary Nell, asking her to give her possessions steeped in painful memories—the quilt and Joy's diary—to her yet-to-be-born granddaughter.

This act of love is, however, 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. This is a wound that Sarah 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 and her family past, without which she can never be fully whole. It is this "unfinished business"[12] of reconnecting Sarah to her mother that her ancestors demand of Lizzie, once she gains release from the last mental institution.

To attend to her task, Lizzie, just like Grace before her, sets about to piece her memories into "kind of a story quilt," an appliqué quilt that would evoke "walking, talking memories and the lifetimes layered one on top of the other,"[13] a map charting the course of her ancestors' lives. In "*Sisters' Choices*: Quilting Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Fiction," Margot Anne Kelley notes that one of the major qualities of quiltmaking is "the promise of creating unity among disparate elements, of establishing connections in the midst of fragmentation."[14] By sewing her fragmented memories of the lives of her ancestors together, Lizzie hopes to achieve a unified whole of her family past that will enable Sarah to recognize her lost mother Grace, accepting her mother as the missing element in her life: "I have to continue the story, and maybe, please God, Mother will understand in the process." [15]

In designing her quilt, Lizzie first draws vignettes of Grace's life to construct the story in all of its complexity, showing Grace as a loving yet desperate mother who abandons her family, leaving for the North, only to come back home in a casket. Lizzie then assembles the already cut pieces of the story "like a horseshoe"[16]—a shape suggestive of

9 Perry, *Stigmata*, 17, italics in the text.

10 Ibid., 58.

11 Ibid., 57.

12 Ibid., 96.

13 Ibid., 222, 213.

14 Kelley, "*Sisters' Choices*," 176.

15 Perry, *Stigmata*, 61.

16 Ibid., 153.

an unfinished circle waiting to be completed. As for fabric, consistent with the tradition of quilting, she chooses both old scraps of cloth and some new cloth she has bought for the binding, thus symbolically ensuring both connection and continuation. To acknowledge the shared legacy of the pain wrought by the Middle Passage and passed on from Ayo to Grace and to Lizzie, Lizzie chooses for the new cloth the color of red. As she explains: "The edge of my new quilt needs blood red. Blood red binds three lives."[17]

Asking Sarah to help her sew the cut pieces together, Lizzie engages her in the healing process of reclamation, inviting Sarah to look at her past in order to be able to move forward in life, an idea reminiscent of the West African philosophical concept of *sankofa*, which "teaches the wisdom in learning from the past."[18] Although at first she sees Lizzie's idea of making the quilt as a relapse and fails to recognize Grace's story in Lizzie's drawings, 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."[19] 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."[20] Sarah has reclaimed her mother and accepted the long denied ancestral past that Lizzie has incorporated in her project by inserting into her own quilt a "tiny replica"[21] of Grace's quilt with Ayo's story, thus eternally connecting the lives of all of them.

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"[22] that Lizzie found in the trunk and kept with her—signifies transgenerational and transcontinental connections, it also highlights the connection to African origins and aesthetics, for the indigo-blue scrap symbolizes the West African tradition of dying cloth, of which Ayo, as Lizzie learns in one of her memories, was a master. As Duboin explains, Perry's use of a quilt is thus doubly significant in that it functions both as "an overarching metaphor for the legacy of the past" and a "gendered expression of a shared cultural memory."[23] Lizzie's quilt records and validates the painful history of black women brought on slave ships to America during the slave trade. It does so both explicitly, through the pieced stories that speak of black women's lives, and implicitly, by its very nature—for quilting is a tradition with African roots, passed on by women from one generation to the next.

Stigmata as a Textual Quilt

"I see a story there, but it's all alone. Embellish!"[24]

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

17 Ibid., 62.

18 Adolph H. Agbo, *Values of Adinkra Symbols* (Kumasi: Ebony Designs and Publications, 1999), 3.

19 Perry, *Stigmata*, 230.

20 Duboin, "Trauma Narrative," 298.

21 Perry, *Stigmata*, 72.

22 Ibid., 17.

23 Duboin, "Trauma Narrative," 293.

24 Perry, *Stigmata*, 235.

novel. As Duboin observes, Perry pieces together the fragments of various written narratives: Joy's diary about her mother Ayo's experience, Grace's correspondence, and Lizzie's recollections of her life in and out of mental institutions recorded in her own diary.[25] These fragments are contained within twenty six chapters, which, just like the pieces on Lizzie's handmade quilt, bind the past with the present as they alternate between three time periods: April 1974 to March 1988, a period prior to and during Lizzie's confinement in mental hospitals; June 1994 to July 1996, a period after Lizzie's discharge from the last hospital; and December 26, 1898 to July 23, 1900, a period covered in Joy's diary. While there is a regular pattern among the overlapping stories (each chapter from periods one and two ends with an excerpt from Joy's diary), the regular pattern, as Duboin observes, is disrupted on three occasions to emphasize "the gap between narrative time (or text-time) and narrated time (or story-time)" and, more importantly, to "recall the 'improvisational qualities' of African American quilts."[26]

Indeed, the novel features several qualitites of a quilt, summarized by Maude Southwell Wahlman and John Scully in their article "Aesthetic Principles in Afro-American Quilts," in which they describe correspondences between African American appliquéd quilts and West African textiles. "In both […] *strips* are used 'to construct and to organize top design space'; there is a partiality toward '*large-scale designs*,' as well as one for 'strong, *highly contrasting colors*'; and color and design work together to produce both '*off-beat patterns*' and '*multiple rhythms*.'"[27] To organize her novel, Perry makes use of these five qualities to emphasize the distinctive aesthetic heritage of African American literature, which, as noted earlier, "contribute[s] to a restructuring of this historically white, bourgeois, European form [of the novel]."[28]

First, Perry employs dated chapters that delineate squares on the quilt, just as strips would do on a quilt made of fabric. As noted above, the squares have a regular pattern, occasionally disrupted by "irregularities" or "intended flaws" in the "patchwork composition" of the novel, the meaning of which I discuss later.[29]

Second, to design her quilt, Perry chooses fragments of stories from four generations of women, while her overall, large-scale design is the story of the Middle Passage, as is poignantly summarized in the last chapter of the novel, describing Lizzie's creation of a painting in an art class therapy:

> A dark, naked shape drifts toward the vortex. The red spiral moves,
> rises to meet it. Small legs and arms fly out in a confused jumble,
> needing something solid but finding nothing to cling to […]
> "I see a story there, but it's all alone. Embellish!"
> He [the teacher] moves away, and I take up another brush to
> paint a gray ship and a brown girl standing at the rail.[30]

Lizzie makes the painting after she has "heard" Grace talk about her memory of being forced to witness a scene in which white people throw a black boy overboard a slave ship. Watching him fall, she felt as if he were inviting her "*down there*" to "*the*

25 Duboin, "Trauma Narrative," 293-4.

26 Duboin, "Trauma Narrative," 296-7.

27 Qtd. in Kelley, "*Sisters' Choices*," 170, emphasis mine.

28 Ibid., 184.

29 Duboin, "Trauma Narrative," 297.

30 Perry, *Stigmata*, 235.

doorway to heaven."[31] Following the instructions of Lizzie's teacher, Perry provides more detail and embellishes the story in her textual quilt to include characters whose lives span a hundred years and who, like Ayo, still remember the "unspeakable" as they continue to live "*forever. Here at the bottom of heaven…*"[32]

Third, the novel also works with significant contrasts. One contrast, which Perry sets up from the beginning, is that of the binary opposition of sanity/rationality represented by Western culture with its tradition of (medical) empirical science, versus insanity/spirituality, informing the worldview of people with "the gift of memory."[33] This is introduced in the opening line of the novel, in which Lizzie, institutionalized in an Atlanta "nuthouse," is having a session with a psychiatrist, Dr. Harper: "[I]t is the contrast that makes me laugh."[34] As the narrative reveals, 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 phenomenon as she declares that sanity " 'is a mutual agreement between folks trying to control their world.'"[35] For Perry, the twentieth century United States 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 those 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."[36] It is against this world that Lizzie has to reclaim her right to "re-memory" and assert the subjectivity of her African great great-grandmother.

Implicit in Perry's negotiations of the binary of sanity/insanity is also the question of reality/unreality. Are Lizzie's experiences unreal because they involve "unreal" pain? And why does Perry open and close her textual quilt with the scenes describing someone locked up in a mental hospital, framing the novel with her own "out of the ordinary" experiences? In doing so, Perry may be suggesting that the atrocities intrinsic to American slavery are impossible to approach with reason. As the novel makes clear, Lizzie's scars, just like religious stigmata, cannot be understood empirically. Or perhaps, Perry could be suggesting that there exist alternative versions of reality, which, "surreal" as they sound and "unreal" as they appear, may be actually more "real" than our own version based on the mistaken belief that the African American past does not concern us.

It is largely in light of this that we must read Perry's use of "color and design" to produce "off-beat patterns" and "multiple rhythms"—irregularities intended to disrupt the flow of the narrative. According to Kelley, "off-beat patterns," such as scrambled chronology, work to destabilize the reader, to put him/her "into a tension between focusing on the individual colors and concentrating on the pattern" or to prompt in him/her "a reconsideration of the whole design."[37] Duboin observes that

31 Ibid., 234, italics in the text.

32 Ibid., 17, italics in the text.

33 Ibid., 205.

34 Ibid., 1.

35 Ibid., 193.

36 Duboin, "Trauma Narrative," 285.

37 Kelley, "*Sisters' Choices,*" 174.

the segment dated August 16, 1899 (chapter 9) is inserted before the April 3, 1899 excerpt (chapter 11). Its extreme brevity strikes the reader as unexpectedly breaking the rhythm of the text: "What that's like the sellin I ask Mama. Joy, I aint gon tell you that she says. I cant stand to tell you that" (81). Moreover, this fragment is placed and read a good while before the passage that details Ayo's harrowing experience of the auction block (chapter 15). The disorder of the text keeps the reader in suspense; it momentarily and deliberately leaves a blank that signals the repression of the unspeakable and the unwillingness to remember such a traumatic scene.[38]

Perry's technique also keeps the reader involved in other ways. Just as Lizzie's project of the quilt engages her mother in reclaiming her family past by sewing scraps of her ancestors' lives together, the textual quilt engages the reader in a project generative of wholeness and healing by Perry's use of narrative strategies. For example, 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," making the feelings of protagonists "tangibly present in the flesh of the reader."[39] In doing so, the reader, although seemingly disconnected from the story, geographically and otherwise, cannot simply dismiss the story as ontologically distinct from our own but read it as one of his/her own. Moreover, through the non-chronological fragmentation of the overlapping narrated events (Ayo's story, Grace's story, Lizzie's experiences in various mental institutions as well as home prior to and after her institutionalization), the reader must participate in "working out" the connections in order to be able to appreciate the overall, large-scale design. Finally, just like Lizzie's father, who eventually comes to understand how important and meaningful the quilting experience is, and decides to make a contribution by buying a frame to make the quilt a permanent fixture in their home, the reader also has an opportunity of "geting in the game"[40] and partaking in preserving and passing on history.

Stigmata as an Intertextual Quilt

I'm telling Grace's story with this quilt—just as she had told Ayo's story with hers—and the fabric has to hold up at least until the next storyteller comes along.[41].

Just as Lizzie inserts in her own quilt "a tiny replica" of Grace's quilt to ensure connection to and continuity with the past, so Perry, in her own textual quilt, inserts tiny replicas of, i.e. parallels to, African American women's novels written prior to hers, embellishing, in their own creative ways, the story of "the gray ship and the brown girl standing at the rail." In doing so, Perry not only establishes her place in the circle of African American

38 Duboin, "Trauma Narrative," 296.

39 Karen Sanchez-Eppler, "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition," *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988), 36.

40 Perry, *Stigmata*, 197.

41 Ibid., 64.

women authors imaging an alternative history of black women, but also creates an intertextual quilt that continues to speak "the unspeakable," revising the dominant master narrative of American history.

Of the many works whose themes or structures are paralleled in *Stigmata* (of which three will be discussed), the novel that resonates the most in *Stigmata* is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which is dedicated to the "Sixty Million and More" who failed to survive the Middle Passage. In *Beloved*, Morrison sets out to give voice to these "disremembered and unaccounted for."[42] This voicing is replicated in *Stigmata* in the dedication with which Ayo prefaces her account of a traumatic event that she asks her daughter Joy to record in the diary: "*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 aside a me*."[43]

Serving as a symbolic figure of both Africa and the African American legacy of slavery, Ayo is "a tiny replica" of Beloved, a character who, as Deborah Horvitz observes, "represents the spirit of all the women dragged onto slave ships in Africa and also all Black women in America trying to trace their ancestry back to the mother on the ship attached to them."[44] It is through Beloved that Morrison "create[s] [a] complicated trans-Atlantic chain of women" (157), the connections of which are best understandable when approached in relation to Baby Suggs' *quilt*. Although devoid of the healing power attached to Lizzie's quilt in *Stigmata*, Baby Suggs' quilt can also be seen as a site for making connections among women, more specifically, those across time and space. As Margot Anne Kelley deftly argues,

> Beloved's interest in the orange squares [on the quilt] is more than just a delight in bright colors . . . she says that the "yellow flowers in the place before the crouching [from Africa before being crowded into a slaveship's hold] . . . are on the quilt now where we sleep" (214). This conflation of the bright flowers and the bright patches connects Beloved to Sethe (whom Beloved thinks picked the flowers), to Sethe's own mother (who actually was brought to American on a slaveship) and, more generally, to all slave-women.[45]

In addition to her symbolic function, Ayo can also be seen as a personification of the past, an intruder invading the bodies of Grace and Lizzie, respectively. In this role, she parallels Beloved's act of return to the flesh from "the other side"[46] to claim possession of Sethe's life and ensure that nothing will ever separate them again, neither the trans-Atlantic slave trade nor the institution of American slavery that has caused Sethe to slash the throat of her own child, trying to save her from certain enslavement.[47] However, Beloved's return, albeit significantly different from that of Ayo in its intentions, raises the same question: how to deal with one's unresolved past, and, more broadly,

42 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987), 274.

43 Perry, *Stigmata*, 17, italics in the text.

44 Deborah Horvitz, "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*," *Studies in American Fiction* 17.2 (Autumn 1989): 157.

45 Kelley, "*Sisters' Choices,*" 178.

46 Morrison, *Beloved*, 215.

47 The murder of Beloved by slashing her throat is yet another blood connection that binds Sethe's and Beloved's lives (the most obvious one is that by birth); in its direct relation to slavery, it parallels that of blood related to Ayo's physical suffering as a slave.

how to reclaim the history of slavery without being psychologically disturbed by it. Whereas Sethe does not fully succeed in her attempt to resolve her past (although *Beloved* concludes with a sense of healing, we do not know to what extent Sethe is able to recover from the damage Beloved has done to her interior life, and/or whether or not she will be able to live a "normal" life with Paul D.), Lizzie is able to pick up the threads that Grace has left her in the form of the quilt and build upon them to bring healing both to her life and that of her mother. Her success, which follows after the fourteen years of imprisonment behind the walls of mental hospitals, seems to provide a continuation of the untold story of Denver's future, who, left to embark on a new journey to Oberlin College, might have been the one to put the past to rest.[48]

Another novel with parallels to *Stigmata* is Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), a work in which the protagonist, the young black women Dana, must find her lost connection to the past, which, as the title of the novel suggests, is inextricably linked to her family. Employing the means of intimacy and immediacy of the protagonist's pain that Perry skillfully replicates in *Stigmata*, Butler collapses temporal distance and transports Dana to the antebellum South, where she is forced to live under slavery and feel the physical pain and suffering of the slaves. Thus like Lizzie and Grace in *Stigmata*, Dana learns of history through the pain inscribed on her body; "enslaved" by her own history via the demands of her ancestors, she is unable to escape the haunting presence of the past. Dana's future—through the future of her family—depends on her mission, to ensure the survival of the son of a white plantation owner without whom her family line would never begin.

Interracial relations are not only eamined through Dana's family line, but also through her marriage to the white man Kevin, who is through her transported in time and space to experience his own share of American slavery. As Angelyn Mitchell points out, it is in their mutual sharing of their experiences that Butler imagines a potential healing: "Both black and white Americans […] confront[ing] their shared past of racism, […] acknowledg[ing] the pain and the scars of the past, and […] liv[ing] together as kindred."[49] Although written primarily about and from the perspective of black women, In *Stigmata,* Perry like Butler in *Kindred*, does not claim that only black women have access to historical truth. While Lizzie is the "chosen" one to mediate between the past and the present worlds and to re-experience the original trauma of the Middle Passage, she is not the only character to have access to the historical legacy of African Americans. As the reader learns in the course of the narrative, Lizzie's (black) lover, Anthony Paul, has also had dreams of Ayo which he is able to transform into a painting, and a mysterious white woman in the Montgomary "nuthouse" is able to see both Ayo and Grace. By including in her narrative these characters of different genders and races who can see Ayo, Perry to some extent reflects Butler's belief 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.[50]

48 Among other obvious parallels between the two novels, one can find the scars on Sethe's back replicated in the scars on Lizzie's body, the emphasis on inadequacy of reason to explain the past's ability to haunt the living by way of ghosts or mysterious travels in time, and both works' lack of closure.

49 Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 70.

50 Parallels between the two works could be the issue of sanity versus insanity, reality versus unreal experience and the use of the fantastic, collapsing the past and the present in order to invite the reader to "participate" in the project.

The third novel paralleled in *Stigmata* is Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). Although not written as a slave narrative, the novel's focus is on Miranda, who is the great grand-daughter of an African slave, a sort of timeless figure who foregrounds both transgenerational connections and the passing on of the family past. In the novel, Miranda is asked to make, for Cocoa, her sister's granddaughter, a double wedding ring quilt, in which she decides to sew the lives of her family:

> A bit of her daddy's Sunday shirt is matched with Abigail's lace slip, the collar from Hope's graduation dress, the palm of Grace's baptismal gloves. . . . Her needle fastens the satin trip of Peace's receiving blanket to Cocoa's baby jumper to a pocket of her own gardening apron. . . . The front of Mother's gingham shirtwaist, it would go right nice into the curve between these to little patches of apricot toweling. . . . Rummaging through the oranges, she digs up a piece of faded homespun. . . . It doesn't help to listen to the clock, 'cause it's only telling her what she knew about the homespun all along. . . . What really happened between her great-grandmother and Bascombe Wade?[51]

An heirloom to preserve the past, Miranda's quilt becomes a silent marker of the interconnections between and among the family members and a repository of the family mystery. Just as Grace's quilt in *Stigmata* waits for Lizzie to disclose its secrets, Miranda's quilt will speak when Miranda is no longer alive, hoping that someone will listen to the legend of Sapphira Wade.[52] For as Lizzie comes to understand: "[The past] wants to be remembered,"[53] even if the circumstances seem to suggest that "This is not a story to pass on."[54]

Conclusion

Perhaps no other African American novel written by a black female author deserves the designation "quilt novel" more than Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*. Employing the quilt thematically as an "overarching metaphor for the legacy of the past," the book "celebrate[s] black women's artistic creativity in their transmission of cultural memory,"[55] while giving voice to the painful and largely ignored history of African women who were brought on slave ships to America. Structurally, the text replicates the art of quilting to connect the reader to the story and engage him/her in a project generative of wholeness and healing, not unlike the quilt made by Lizzie and her mother Sarah. Finally, by suggesting replicas of or parallels with other African American novels dealing with the topic of the Middle Passage and slavery, the novel becomes an intertextual quilt, connecting Perry to other authors writing an alternative history of black women in America, which in itself takes

51 Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 137-8.

52 Here in both novels one can find, for example, the issue of female bonding and celebration of black female culture, the figure of the wise ancestor (Aunt Eva in *Stigmata*; Miranda in *Mama Day*); the image of a cure for a form of national amnesia, as well as the linking of the personal and communal.

53 Perry, *Stigmata*, 194.

54 Morrison, *Beloved*, 275.

55 Duboin, "Trauma Narrative," 292.

the form of a large-scale quilt: a ground of unity on which squares represent the diversity of individual versions of the overarching story of "the gray ship and the brown girl."

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