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*Trauma, Memory, Healing and the Haunting
Ancestor: An Analysis of Phyllis Alesia
Perry's Stigmata and A Sunday in June*

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Introduction

The aim of this work is to analyze Phyllis Alesia Perry's neo-slave narratives, entitled respectively *Stigmata*¹ and *A Sunday in June*². Some of the main themes in the novel are the representation of the slavery system and the ongoing consequences of the bondage experience, the figure of the haunting ancestor and the reincarnation process, the representation of trauma, its consequences and the process of healing and, finally, the contraposition of the denial or the acceptance of the past and the distinction between African and Western values.

Consequently, in order to allow a better understanding of Perry's novels, their themes and their characters, the first chapter is devoted to the explanation and the analysis of some theoretical works concerning the history of the discourse on slavery, trauma, and transgenerational transmission of trauma and memory. It is also focused on the definition of several literary genres that can facilitate the description and categorization of the two novels. It also introduces the tropes of the ghost and the scars that are main features of Perry's narratives.

To begin, the first chapter underlines that for a long time the history of slavery has been the matter that America wanted to avoid. It became a "secret,"³ in the words of Ashraf Rushdy, because it ran counter to the democratic premises of the country. Moreover, also in contemporary times the American mainstream still avoids looking back at the past of bondage and oppression that does not fit the narrative of freedom and democracy that the United States has crafted for itself. The public discourse concerning slavery was rarely explored until the last decades of the 20th century. In fact, the growing literature and research on the trauma and the consequences of the Holocaust propelled the investigation of trauma and the consequences of other big scale events such as slavery. In that period, the field of trauma studies thus knew a considerable growth. Cathy Caruth's works were useful in order to provide the definition of the concept of trauma⁴, as well as the concepts

¹ Phyllis Alesia Perry, *Stigmata*, New York: Hyperion, 1998.

² Phyllis Alesia Perry, *A Sunday in June*, New York: Hyperion, 2004.

³ Ashraf A. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001, p. 2.

⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 11.

of latency or belatedness⁵ and repetition.⁶ Some distinctions on the various types of traumas are drawn in the first chapter, such as the division between direct, indirect and insidious trauma introduced by Maria Root.⁷ Furthermore, the phenomenon of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is explained basing on Bessel van der Volk's and Ono van der Hart's researches on the matter.⁸ A section is also devoted to the explanation of the phenomenon of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome theorized by Joy DeGruy.⁹ All these works and theories help to understand not only the condition of the African American individual who endured slavery and life in bondage, but also the psychological and social condition of the subsequent generations that still carry the burden of the traumatic memory of slavery. In fact, the introduction of Marianne Hirsch's and Alison Landsberg's concepts, respectively called postmemory¹⁰ and prosthetic memory¹¹ by the two scholars, allows to underline that memories can be trans-generationally transmitted. Moreover, the concept of collective memory, popularized by Maurice Halbwachs and expanded by Jan and Aleida Assmann¹², is also analyzed in order to highlight the possibility of a memory to be shared within a community and not only being experienced on an individual level. These concepts and phenomena are useful to examine and understand the condition of the protagonists of Perry's novels since they undergo a process of transgenerational transmission of the traumatic memory of slavery caused by their foremother who has experienced life in bondage. Consequently, they have to cope with the transmission of the trauma of oppression as well, as they try to find a way for healing from it.

Secondly, I have dealt with the definition of different literary genres, since they can contribute to a better investigation of Perry's novels. In fact, the two books can fall under the categories of neo-slave narratives, trauma narratives, speculative fictions and magic realism. As a consequence, it is useful to define neo-slave narratives relying on Bernard

⁵ Ivi, p. 4.

⁶ Ivi, p. 2.

⁷ Quoted in Hicks, *A critical analysis of post traumatic slave syndrome*, p. 30-32.

⁸ Bessel A. van der Volk, Ono van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, 173, 177-178.

⁹ Joy L. DeGruy, *Post traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*, Portland: Joy DeGruy Publications, 2005, eBook, Chapter 4.

¹⁰ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 5.

¹¹ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 2.

¹² Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 31-32.

Bell's¹³ and Ashraf Rushdy's¹⁴ works, the first to offer a definition of contemporary novels about the slave past. Moreover, some main distinctions between slave narratives and neo-slave narratives are also pinpointed, in addition to a description of the genre of the trauma narrative and its purposes and of speculative fiction.

Lastly, I introduce the tropes of the ghost and the scars, which are two of the main features appearing in Perry's narratives, describing the general meanings and purposes of these two elements with the help of works of scholars such as Joanne Chassot¹⁵ and Carol Henderson¹⁶. Furthermore, the figure of the "living-dead"¹⁷ belonging to the African tradition is introduced.

The second chapter introduces Perry's first published novel, *Stigmata*, offering a summary of the plot and an analysis of the genre structure of the text applying the concepts of neo-slave narrative, trauma narrative and speculative fiction that have been introduced in the previous chapter. Moreover, some of the main themes and features of the novel are examined, such as the representation of slavery provided through the excerpts of the diary that the haunting ancestor Ayo has dictated to her daughter Joy, in order to be able to pass on her story and the memory of her experience during the Middle Passage and slavery. The second topic that is tackled in the chapter is the representation of the character of the haunting ancestor, Ayo. Her purpose is the remembrance of her past and of her trauma of bondage and oppression. This is emphasized in the novel through the process of reincarnation that she initiates. In fact, Ayo reincarnates in one of her descendants, Grace, and both women reincarnate in Lizzie. A parallel is drawn between the character of Ayo and the description of the ancestor provided by Oyeniya Okunoye.¹⁸ Ayo is also compared to the figure of the "living-dead" explained by John Samuel Mbiti. The ambivalence of Ayo's character is also highlighted due to the

¹³ Bernard Bell, *The Contemporary African-American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches*, Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004, 199.

¹⁴ Ashraf A. Rushdy, *Neo Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 3.

¹⁵ Joanne Chassot, *Ghosts of the African Diaspora: Re-Visioning History, Memory and Identity*, Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2018.

¹⁶ Carol E. Henderson, *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002.

¹⁷ John Samuel Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1990, p. 81-82-83.

¹⁸ Oyeniya Okunoye, "The Trope of the Ancestor in Contemporary Black Poetry," *Obsidian*, 8(2), (2007), 140.

introduction of the concept of the “rape of history” that has been formulated by Lisa Long, who affirms that Ayo metaphorically rapes her descendants by forcing a bodily and mental penetration because of the reincarnation process.¹⁹ Other two interesting readings of the character of the haunting ancestor are provided by Camille Passalacqua and Éva Tettenborn. The first places Ayo at the center of a non-Christian Trinity, composed by Ayo and the two descendants who are the victims of her reincarnation process, Grace and Lizzie. This alternative Trinity, instead of striving for the salvation of humankind, works towards a process of remembrance of the past.²⁰ The second reading compares Ayo at the deity called Oya belonging to the Yoruba tradition. This would explain her power to influence her descendants and her purpose of guiding them towards the honoring and appeasing of their ancestors.²¹

Finally, I describe the process of healing that takes place for all the three reincarnated women and that happens thanks to Lizzie’s ability to accept her condition and thus metaphorically accept and face her past, her heritage and the traumatic memory of slavery. With her actions she is able to provide a degree of healing to herself since she can re-appropriate her life. She also provides a partial, if not almost complete, healing to Grace since she reconnects the mother/daughter tie she had lost with Sarah, Lizzie’s mother and Grace’s daughter. Moreover, Ayo’s purpose is fulfilled since her memory is not forgotten, and on the contrary, Lizzie’s actions contribute in countering the premises of the slavery system that Ayo had to endure.

The third chapter discusses the themes of haunting and trauma in the novel more in depth. In fact, all the mediums that propel and initiate the haunting are analyzed. Both Lizzie’s (the protagonist in *Stigmata*), and Grace’s (one of the protagonists in *A Sunday in June*) reincarnation processes begin after they come in contact with the trunk, the diary, the quilts and a piece of blue cloth that belonged to Ayo’s mother. All these objects that belong to Ayo and her past function as recipients of her memory. When the descendants come in contact with them, they are literally and metaphorically invested by the memories

¹⁹ Lisa A. Long, “A Relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*,” *College English*, 64(4), (2002), p. 462.

²⁰ Camille Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones’s Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry’s Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela’s Cambio de Armas*, Doctoral Dissertation, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina: 2009, p. 111-112.

²¹ Éva Tettenborn, “Africana Concepts of the Ancestor and Time in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*,” *Obsidian*, 12(1), (2011), p. 101-102.

of Ayo's past and forced to share them as if those memories were their own. After the reincarnation process starts there is a superimposition of the bodies, but also of the minds of the three women. In addition, there are other elements that have the role to underline the connection between the reincarnated women. For instance, the scars that Ayo acquired in slavery and that both Grace and Lizzie inherit as a consequence to the reincarnation process, the blood that is produced by the scars when they open after having endured episodes of violence (for Ayo in bondage and for the other two women in the reincarnation flashbacks), the mirror, which functions as a sort of portal that enables the contact with the haunting ancestor, and finally dust, which symbolizes the passing of time and the connection to the past.

Perry uses several literary strategies in order to convey trauma and its healing. In fact, *Stigmata* is written in a non-linear and fragmented way, as the narration bounces back and forth in time due to the descriptions of the reincarnation flashbacks. Additionally, multiple elements, such as the extracts of Ayo's diary and Grace's letter, are patched together rather than being located in different chapters. These two features reflect the non-linearity of Lizzie's life since she is forced to experience different times and spaces due to the reincarnation flashbacks, and the fragmentation of her body and identity since her body is marked by scars and her identity is the result of a merging together of Ayo's, Grace's and her own mind and experiences. Moreover, the circularity of the narrative in *Stigmata* emphasizes the process of healing of the matrilineal legacy. In fact, the completion of the quilting process of Lizzie and Sarah represents the closing of all gaps and the partial if not almost complete healing of all the women involved in the novel.

Another important feature of the narrative that is analyzed in the third chapter is the quilting trope. After a general introduction on quilting I explain that Perry uses this trope in order to symbolize both the trauma that Lizzie endures and the process of healing from it. The quilting trope is also used in order to highlight the importance of storytelling, folk cultures and the female bonds in the African American community.

Finally, I investigate the contraposition between characters who accept the supernatural, the past and their heritage and those who do not. At the end of the novel, Lizzie is able to accept the supernatural as an inherent part of her life and this symbolizes her connection with her past and her African heritage. On the other hand, her parents are not able to

believe or comprehend the supernatural explanation of their daughter's condition. Like the doctors, who try to cure Lizzie from what they wrongly consider a condition of denial and suicidal tendencies, they embody the values of rationality and skepticism of the Western society.

The fourth chapter's aim is that of analyzing the prequel to *Stigmata*, called *A Sunday in June*, where the narration is slightly more linear than in the sequel, but a level of fragmentation is still maintained since the plot follows the narrative lines of more than one character simultaneously. Furthermore, several elements, such as extracts of Ayo's diary and Grace's letter, are united to the main narrative rather than separated in different chapters. The prequel does not present the feature of circularity that characterizes *Stigmata*, since while in the latter Lizzie is able to accept her condition and thus metaphorically her past and her heritage, the protagonist of *A Sunday in June*, Grace, who experiences the reincarnation process as well, is not able to accept it. On the contrary she tries to ignore it and escape from it. Her attitude prevents the healing to take place and the gap to close. The only narrative strand that is provided of a circular closure is Eva's, Grace's sister, who heals from her endured trauma of rape. The several similarities and differences of both structural elements and themes that appear in the two novels are also dealt with in this chapter, together with the mediums of the initiation of the haunting, which are the same as in the sequel. The trunk, the diary, the quilts and the piece of blue cloth make an appearance in this novel as well, also serving the same function.

The contraposition between the characters that accept or deny the supernatural and the past is also drawn in this chapter as well. In fact, while Grace's sister, Eva, learns to accept the supernatural, her gift of clairvoyance inherited from the grandmother Ayo, and thus she establishes a connection with her traditions and her African heritage, Grace is not that inclined to accept her condition of reincarnated woman. She tries to ignore Ayo's voice and presence and finally attempts in vain to escape from the ancestral possession. Grace's parents do not accept the past and the supernatural as well as they have undergone a process of assimilation into Western values, so that they despise everything that reminds them of their past of oppression and slavery. Moreover, they try to distance themselves from the rest of the African American community, criticizing their practices and refusing to preserve African traditions. They are also unable to accept the supernatural as explanation for their daughters' gifts and conditions and they consequently refuse the help

offered by Willow, Ayo's friend who has a vast knowledge of ancestral medicine and rituals.

In this chapter a section is devoted to the extensive analysis of Willow's character and her role in the novel. In fact, the character of Willow symbolizes the connection with the past and the African heritage. She can also be compared to the figure of the medicine-men belonging to African tradition, described by John Samuel Mbiti.²² It can be affirmed that she shares the main characteristics of these specialists, and their purposes as well. In fact, she has been trained by another slave woman in order to acquire knowledge on how to use roots, herbs, minerals and so on with the purpose of preventing and curing diseases, misfortunes, and both physical and psychological conditions. Willow is also able to communicate and act as a bridge between the ancestral realm and reality. In fact, it can be stated that she has maintained her tie with the deceased Ayo, and she often acts on her behalf and as a medium for Ayo's will.

In conclusion, the purpose of this work is that of highlighting the way in which the process of traumatization, of transmission of the traumatic memory, and of healing, are masterfully described and conveyed in the novels, thanks to the themes of the haunting ancestor figure and the reincarnation process. In fact, these two elements are helpful in order to underline that the consequences of the traumatic bondage experience and of the memory of slavery are still tangible in the contemporary society. Perry, thanks to these two novels, highlights the importance of facing and accepting one's past and one's heritage in order to heal from the trauma that has been caused by the slavery system and all forms of oppressions of which the contemporary African American individual still carries the burden today.

²² John Samuel Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1990, p. 162.

1. The trauma of the past and the ghost

This first chapter has the aim to introduce the main concepts which will be useful in order to analyze the novels that are at the center of this study: *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June* by Phyllis Alesia Perry. Perry's neo-slave narratives focus on the transgenerational transmission of the trauma that has been generated by the slavery experience. Trauma, in these texts, is concretely depicted through the use of the tropes of ancestral ghosts who convey their experiences and their traumas on the following generations; and the scars that the protagonist inherits from her ancestor who experienced bondage in the institution of slavery.

Consequently, it is necessary to focus on the theme of the memory of slavery and how it was completely avoided in the past and still largely disregarded today, despite it can be noticed that there has been a growing interest and a growing literature on the matter. Secondly, trauma theory will be explored since it can be argued that the consequences of the trauma of the slavery experience are still tangible in our contemporary society and still haunt African American individuals today. It can be important to analyze the causes and consequences of traumatic events in depth in order to understand the contemporary condition of the African American subject depicted in Phyllis Alesia Perry's neo-slave narratives. Furthermore, the neo-slave narrative will be defined and compared to its textual antecedent, the slave narrative. Particular attention will be given to the main features of the neo-slave narrative and its evolution in time. Lastly, the concepts of ghosts and scars will be examined as they are two of the most widely used tropes to portray the ongoing consequences of the trauma of slavery. The analysis of these tropes is particularly important as they are central features in Perry's narratives as well.

1.1 The memory of the slave past and trauma as collective memory

Slavery in the U.S was legally abolished in 1865 with the ratification of the 13th amendment, but its consequences still exist today. Therefore, many scholars, psychologists and writers have studied and written about this institution, focusing on the

concepts of collective memory and multi-generational trauma associated with deeply traumatic experiences as slavery was.

Slavery and its consequences were not particularly acknowledged in the past. After the abolition “many, if not most, former slaves wanted to forget the past and look toward a new, more open future [...]”²³ and “[they] were more concerned with the future, with education and self-help, than with remembering slavery as something more than a means of orienting collective agency.”²⁴ Consequently, slavery became “the family secret of America,”²⁵ as Ashraf Rushdy argues in *Remembering Generations*, since neither the former slaves nor the rest of the population were willing to look back at this traumatic past. Rushdy continues explaining that: “It is secret in the sense that it haunts the peripheries of the national imaginary [...]”²⁶ Moreover the institution is

a central paradox in the creation of American freedom, the social system that thwarted the ideals of the nation’s founding statements. Slavery, in other words, functions in American thinking as the partially hidden phantom of a past that needs to be revised in order to be revered.²⁷

Indeed, the American population is still largely avoiding looking back at a past that causes a profound sense of guilt and that does not fit the narrative of freedom and equity that America had crafted to describe itself.

The years after the Holocaust have witnessed an inversion of the tendency to keep the distance from the memory of the traumatic past. The magnitude of the event and the extreme cruelty that the tragedy of the Holocaust has manifested has prompted researchers and psychologists to start investigating the phenomena of obedience to authority and especially of trauma. Consequently, the field of trauma studies has witnessed a growth and increase of research on this subject. In fact, as stated by Laura DiPrete:

²³ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 33.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 40.

²⁵ Ashraf A. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001, p. 2.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

Over the last twenty years, the problem of telling and writing traumatic experiences has been at the center of a rich proliferation of texts that have contributed to the birth of the genre of trauma theory. Particularly historiography, faced with the devastating historical events of the twentieth century and primarily the Holocaust, has interrogated itself regarding the imperative of recording and remembering on the one hand, and the appropriate forms for doing so on the other.²⁸

Moreover, “only from the 1970s onwards, according to Levy and Sznajder (2006), did the Holocaust come to serve as a referent for other public memory projects.”²⁹ And “It is at that point, too, that the history of transatlantic slavery entered discussions of public memory.”³⁰

Since the field of trauma studies has experienced a considerable growth since the years following the tragedy of the Holocaust and simultaneously the slavery trauma started to be acknowledged, psychologists have started to investigate the consequences of such traumatic experiences and the ways they affected survivors and subsequent generations. In fact, trauma theory and the understanding of the causes and consequences of traumatic events can be helpful to grasp the psychological condition of the former slaves’ generation but also of the contemporary African American subject as well. An instance of the growing interest in the matter is the acknowledgement of the phenomenon of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association. In fact, the disorder had been extensively studied before but formally disregarded.³¹

Furthermore, numerous definitions have been given regarding the notion of trauma and traumatic events. Cathy Caruth in her renowned and substantial work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* has described trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”³² Trauma can be caused by a threat to one’s body or one’s survival but the

²⁸ Laura Di Prete, *Foreign Bodies: Trauma, Corporeality and Textuality in Contemporary American Culture*, London: Routledge, 2006, p. 2-3.

²⁹ Paulla A. Ebron, “Slavery and Transnational Memory: The Making of New Publics,” in *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales*, edited by Chiara de Cesari and Ann Rigney, Boston: De Gruyter, 2014, p. 153.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 154.

³¹ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 3.

³² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 11.

consequences and the real rupture after surviving a traumatic event happens in one's mind: "What causes, trauma, then, is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time [...]."³³ Furthermore, trauma does not consist in the shock of the threat of the traumatic event in itself, but in the incomprehensibility for the individual of his/her survival after the deeply traumatic experience: "It is because the mind cannot confront the possibility of its death directly that survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of living."³⁴

Besides providing an accurate definition of trauma, Cathy Caruth explores other popular theories closely related to this phenomenon, such as the concept of latency or belatedness and repetition. In fact, she claims that after the traumatic event the individual sometimes experiences a period of amnesia in which the traumatic event remains buried in his/her consciousness before making a reappearance in terms of compulsive repetitions, hallucinations, nightmares and other post-traumatic symptoms. As Nancy Peterson underlines,

Caruth theorizes trauma as the (re)experiencing of a wound that has not been forgotten but has been missed at the original moment of infliction; trauma occurs when the wound cries out belatedly, after the fact of the original wounding. Thus, for Caruth, trauma involves a double wounding and, in its inherent latency, trauma is simultaneously a displacement of that experience and an undeniable connection to it. The link between trauma and the initial missed experience leads to a model of reference that is not direct and immediate, but belated, displaced and oblique.³⁵

The concept of latency derives from Freud's *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), where he introduced the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* or belatedness. According to Caruth, belatedness is a "necessary component of traumatic experience [...]."³⁶ This concept has been criticized by other scholars who affirm that, as memory is not capable of engraining

³³ *Ivi*, p. 61.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 62.

³⁵ Nancy J. Peterson, *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p. 13.

³⁶ Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014, p. 7.

every detail of the traumatic experience, the phenomenon cannot be labelled as a latency period but rather as a failure of the exact recalling of facts.³⁷

Furthermore, trauma is characterized by the act of repetition. This repetition is often unconscious and enacted against the will of the traumatized subject. It is the way in which the experienced trauma manifests itself after the period of belatedness. Trauma “repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will.”³⁸ Trauma can be repeated also in form of dreams in which the traumatic experience is relived by the individual. Furthermore, this act of repetition can be used by the individual in order to grasp, comprehend and master the traumatic experience:

Repetition compulsion is also believed to be a defense mechanism used to transmit trauma (Maker & Buttenheim, 2000; van der Kolk, 1989). Repetition compulsion, the repetitive re-enactment of past or earlier life experiences (DeName, 2013; Mitchell & Aron, 1999), was coined and defined by Freud (1914) as ‘the systematic degeneration of distress: painful symptoms, painful patterns of behavior, painful fates, painful affective states (Freud, 1914, as quoted in Mitchell & Aron, 1999, p. 114). Some psychoanalysts hold that individuals systematically repeat past experiences that are unresolved in order to master them (DeName, 2013; Mitchell & Aron, 1999; van der Kolk, 1989).³⁹

Laurie Vickroy likewise affirms that repetition gives the individual a sense of control over the situation and provides self-agency to contrast his/her feelings of helplessness.⁴⁰

Maria Root⁴¹ classified trauma in three different categories: direct, indirect or insidious. Direct trauma refers to directly experienced traumatic events such as violence, accidents, natural disasters, genocides, displacements, etc. Indirect traumas are vicariously experienced, they are lived secondhandedly. Indirect traumas can involve numerous situations, such as witnessing a close relative or close friend enduring a traumatic experience, having access to information or materials that expose violence and forms of violent behaviours, witnessing racist behaviours, etc. The last kind of trauma is insidious trauma, which is “a cumulative form of trauma that may begin as early as birth, endure

³⁷ Ivi, p. 11.

³⁸ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 2.

³⁹ Shari Renée Hicks, *A critical analysis of post traumatic slave syndrome: a multigenerational legacy of slavery*, Doctoral Dissertation, San Francisco: California Institute of Integral Studies, 2015, p. 47.

⁴⁰ Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, London: University of Virginia Press, 2002, p. 25.

⁴¹ Quoted in Hicks, *A critical analysis of post traumatic slave syndrome*, p. 30-32.

throughout of one's lifetime."⁴² For instance, racist or gender biased behavior in society can be labelled as insidious trauma. These three types of trauma can be experienced together at the same time, both by individuals and entire communities.⁴³ It can be affirmed that the former slaves' generation endured direct and indirect trauma, being subjected to violence in bondage and witnessing violence perpetuated on friends and family members, while the following generations have endured both indirect and insidious trauma since the African American subject still has to suffer from the consequences of the slavery experience and consequently racism and racist behaviors.

Moreover, individuals may react in different ways concerning traumatic memories. In fact, traumatic memories can either be repressed or dissociated. Although the two terms have been used interchangeably by some scholars, they imply two different ideas: "what is repressed is pushed downward, into the unconscious. The subject no longer has access to it. Only symbolic, indirect indications would point to its assumed existence."⁴⁴ Dissociation on the other hand implies that "when a subject does not remember a trauma, its 'memory' is contained in an alternate stream of consciousness, which may be subconscious or dominate consciousness [...]."⁴⁵

Another repercussion of traumatic experiences is the condition that has been called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is the condition which an individual experiences after the exposition to particularly dramatic and traumatic events. It is considered one of the most annihilating psychological disorders because it is the most direct link between the suffered or witnessed external violence and the individual's psyche.⁴⁶ PTSD consists in a perpetual and continuous re-enactment, in the present, of one's past traumatic experience.⁴⁷ PTSD can be caused by various types of physical and mental traumas, such as:

⁴² Hicks, *A critical analysis of post traumatic slave syndrome*, p. 32.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 30-33.

⁴⁴ Bessel A. van der Volk, Ono van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 168.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 58.

⁴⁷ Bessel A. van der Volk, Ono van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 177-178.

Exposure to war as a combatant or civilian, threatened or actual physical assault (e.g., physical attack, robbery, mugging, childhood physical abuse), threatened or actual sexual violence (e.g., forced sexual penetration, alcohol/drug-facilitated sexual penetration, abusive sexual contact, noncontact sexual abuse, sexual trafficking), being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as a prisoner of war, natural or human-made disasters, and severe motor vehicle accidents. For children, sexually violent events may include developmentally inappropriate sexual experiences without physical violence or injury....Witnessed events include, but are not limited to, observing threatened or serious injury, unnatural death, physical or sexual abuse of another person due to violent assault, domestic violence, accident, war, or disaster, or a medical catastrophe in one's child....Indirect exposure through learning about an event is limited to experiences affecting close relatives or friends and experiences that are violent or accidental (e.g., death due to natural causes does not qualify). Such events include violent personal assault, suicide, serious accident, and serious injury.⁴⁸

These forms of trauma generate a wide spectrum of symptoms that severely affect the traumatized individual's life. In fact, the individual may struggle with maintaining and engaging in social relationships and reacting to social environments, he/she may be easily irritated, can have outbursts of uncontrolled anger, manifesting stress and insomnia problems, difficulties in imagining a future which to his/her eyes appears shortened, consequently the individual experiences a lack of commitment and engagement in significant life activities.⁴⁹ Moreover, PTSD can force the individual to reminisce the traumatic events, as Bessel van der Volk and Ono van der Hart highlight: "One of the hallmarks of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is the intrusive reexperiencing of elements of the trauma in nightmares, flashbacks, or somatic reactions."⁵⁰ Some studies have also argued that PTSD has a genetic component and can be transmitted to the following generations.

These theories concerning trauma can be applied to the traumatic experience of slavery as well. In fact, psychologist Joy DeGruy further theorizes that many slaves experienced nearly the whole spectrum of trauma inducing events, thus suffering of a particular kind of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which she called Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). It consists of the condition suffered by individuals who have been exposed to multi-generational and long-lasting traumatic events related to slavery and racism, and

⁴⁸ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*, (5th ed.) Washington, DC: Author, 2013, p. 274-275, quoted in Hicks, *A critical analysis of post traumatic slave syndrome*, p. 34-35.

⁴⁹ Joy L. DeGruy, *Post traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*, Portland: Joy DeGruy Publications, 2005, eBook, Chapter 4.

⁵⁰ Bessel A. van der Volk, Ono van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past," p. 173.

whose consequences are still tangible in these individuals' lives. The formal definition DeGruy provides for the concept of PTSS is "a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today. Added to this condition is a belief (real or imagined) that the benefits of the society in which they live are not accessible to them."⁵¹ According to DeGruy the syndrome has three main repercussions on the individual's mind: vacant esteem, ever present anger and racist socialization which would consist in the adoption of the slave master's value system by the subjugated subject. Furthermore, one of the notions of main importance in this theory is the idea that the traumatic memory and, thus the trauma itself with all its consequences, can be transmitted from generation to generation, especially since people of African-American descent still have to face difficulties and discriminations in their daily life. This is what DeGruy calls a "legacy of trauma."⁵² In fact, trauma can be experienced at an individual and personal level but also by an entire community, and thus affect it on socio-political and collective levels. Many other scholars have theorized that the memory of trauma persists through generations. This kind of memory has been called in several ways:

'absent memory' (Ellen Fine), 'inherited memory,' 'belated memory,' 'prosthetic memory' (Celia Lury, Alison Landsberg), 'mémoire trouée' (Henri Raczymow), 'mémoire des cendres' (Nadine Fresco), 'vicarious witnessing' (Froma Zeitlin), 'received history' (James Young), 'haunting legacy' (Gabriele Schwab) and 'postmemory'.⁵³

All these names refer to the memory of a traumatic event that is transmitted to the following generation, although the latter was not yet alive during the unfolding of the event itself. Marianne Hirsch, who named this phenomenon "postmemory", affirms that the term

⁵¹ DeGruy, *Post traumatic Slave Syndrome*, Chapter 4.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 3.

describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right.⁵⁴

In fact, she further explains that the prefix “post” indicates a delayed phenomenon, and a focus on the aftermath of the event rather than on the event itself. Another accurate definition of this memory manifestation has been provided by Alison Landsberg, who named it “prosthetic memory” and describes it as a new form of memory which

emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum. In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history [...]. In the process that I am describing, the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live.⁵⁵

Landsberg adds to this notion that this particular kind of memory is able to shape one’s personal beliefs, tastes, feelings and political opinions. It may be important to specify that it is impossible to literally transfer one’s memory to another individual, therefore postmemory has not to be intended as a literal memory passed on from generation to generation, but as a very accurate approximation of the feelings and psychological effects that are related to that memory. Therefore, the concept of postmemory can be used to describe the condition of the contemporary African American subject who inherited the memory of the slavery experience from the former generations.

Furthermore, many scholars have distinguished between different types of memory. The first distinction to be made is the one between individual and collective memory. The term collective memory has been popularized by Maurice Halbwachs⁵⁶ and it refers to a memory which is shaped and shared within a community, rather than experienced on an individual and personal level. Moreover, according to Jan Assmann we can identify two

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 5.

⁵⁵ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 31.

kinds of collective memory: communicative and cultural. Communicative memory can be defined as

‘biographical’ and ‘factual,’ and is located within a generation of contemporaries who witness an event as adults and who can pass on their bodily and affective connection to that event to their descendants. In the normal succession of generations (and the family is a crucial unit of transmission for Jan Assmann), this embodied form of memory is transmitted across three to four generations [...].⁵⁷

Aleida Assmann extends this binary distinction and discerns four types of memory: individual and social memory, which correspond to Jan Assmann’s communicative memory, and political and cultural memory, which constitute Jan Assmann’s cultural memory. The crucial assumption underlying this theory is that memory can be shared between individuals, thus turning a personal memory into a memory that can be appropriated by a whole community rather than remain a private belonging. Although collective memory may concern larger chunks of population, the site where this phenomenon mostly happens, according to Aleida Assmann, is the family circle.⁵⁸ Moreover, Landsberg claims that collective memory is culturally specific, that is to say: “The social frameworks of memory often serve the purpose of social cohesion and thus are tied to a culturally and historically specific group of people.”⁵⁹ Collective memory allows the individual to focus on his/her outlook on the past while simultaneously being aware of his/her present situation, in Landsberg’s opinion: “People who acquire these memories are led to feel a connection to the past but, all the while, to remember their position in the contemporary moment [...].”⁶⁰ This concept of individual and collective memory can be applied also to the memory of slavery since the latter can be experienced on an individual level, but considering the magnitude of the event and the amount of people that suffered from it, it can be considered as a memory which is shared by a vast community and thus lived on a collective level as well.

The second major distinction is between two modes of remembering which have been termed in various ways by different scholars:

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 32.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, p. 8.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 9.

‘mémoire profonde’ and ‘mémoire ordinaire’ (‘deep’ and ‘ordinary’ memory) (Charlotte Delbo), ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’ (Dominick LaCapra), ‘perception’ and ‘memory’ (Juliet Mitchell), ‘traumatic memory’ and ‘narrative memory’ (Bessel van der Volk and Ono van der Hart), ‘introjection’ and ‘incorporation’ (Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok) [...].⁶¹

These concepts are not mutually exclusive or opposed, they represent various layers of understanding, accepting or distancing the past.⁶²

Hirsch continues to expand the discourse explaining the idea of rememory developed by Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved*. In a passage of the book the protagonist Sethe describes the feeling of bumping into a “rememory”:

‘I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place-the picture of it-stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.’

‘Can other people see it?’ asked Denver.

‘Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else.’⁶³

A rememory can be thus defined as a site which contains a memory of such vividness that gives the impression of being one’s own act of remembrance. In fact, rememory, according to Ashraf Rushdy, consists in “individual experiences of suffering (which) continue to exist at the site where the suffering happened.”⁶⁴ Marianne Hirsch also describes it as a “transposition” where the contemporary individual is plunged into the past with the danger of an haunting over-identification with the past sufferings.⁶⁵ The concept of rememory, along with trauma theory and other types of memory, will be

⁶¹ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 82.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, London: Random House, 2004, p. 43.

⁶⁴ Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 83.

particularly useful in the analysis of the protagonists of Perry's *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June* and their condition of inherited generational memory and trauma.

1.2 The neo-slave narrative and its evolution

In the 1960s black history became a widely studied subject and the African American past gained a rising interest, turning into an “institution and a commodity and thus a key part of American culture.”⁶⁶ With the focus on the black past being established and the increasing number of studies on trauma and its consequences, the following years saw the influence of the subject in literature, thus giving birth to the ‘trauma genre’. As stated by Gibbs:

As the trauma paradigm was more widely disseminated through American culture during the late twentieth century, so a tendency developed to read everything through its increasingly monolithic and programmatic critical prism. This in turn began to influence the form of cultural products, such that an identifiable “trauma genre” emerged, a self-reinforcing circuit of fictional and non-fictional prose narratives that existed in tandem with a supporting critical structure.⁶⁷

The genre of the trauma narrative “flourished particularly in the 1980s and 1990s [...]”⁶⁸ One of the most renowned trauma narratives is *Beloved*, written by Toni Morrison and published in 1987. The main purposes of these narratives are to direct the attention to the concepts of fragmentation of the self against the Western myth of the autonomous, whole subject and to highlight the effects of trauma or traumatic experiences, as extensively illustrated by Laurie Vickroy:

First, these works attest to the frequency of trauma and its importance as a multicontextual social issue [...]. Second, trauma narratives raise questions about how we define subjectivity as they explore the limits of the Western myth of the highly individuated subject and our ability to deal with loss and fragmentation in our lives. Third, the dilemmas experienced by characters in such narratives confront us with many of our own fears [...]. Lastly, trauma writers elucidate the dilemma of the public's relationship to the traumatized [...].⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Keith Byerman, *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, p. 1-2.

⁶⁸ Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, p. 2.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

In addition, trauma narratives have the purpose of functioning as witnesses of large-scale traumatic events, creating and preserving the collective memory of such occurrences. They are able to do so by narrating the individual's experience and merging it with the context of a memory which is collectively shared. In fact, as Vickroy affirms: "Another significant aim of trauma narratives is to reshape cultural memory through personal contexts, adopting testimonial traits to prevent and bear witness against such repetitive horrors."⁷⁰

Furthermore, in the 1960s African American literature had profoundly changed due to the rise of the civil rights movement and Black Power. This allowed the neo-slave narrative to gain an increasing importance.⁷¹ The term neo-slave narrative was coined in 1987 by Bernard Bell who described this kind of text as "a residually oral, modern narrative of escape from bondage to freedom."⁷² During time this definition expanded to include different types of works and was reformulated by Ashraf Rushdy in terms that underlined even more their intertextual links with the genre of the slave narrative. He described neo-slave narratives as: "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative."⁷³ It is important to specify that many texts which are considered neo-slave narratives, however, do not completely fit these definitions. Although they do not thoroughly follow the conventions of the genre they still deal with the past in more intricate ways.

Contemporary literature through the trauma genre and the neo-slave narrative thus progressively focused on the memory of the traumatic past with a special emphasis on its effects and consequences. In fact, "Memory has played a special role in the shaping of African American culture generally and in contemporary literature specifically [...]."⁷⁴ Moreover, literature and memory are deeply connected to each other, since:

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 5.

⁷¹ Ashraf A. Rushdy, *Neo Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 3.

⁷² Bernard Bell, *The Contemporary African-American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches*, Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004, p. 199.

⁷³ Rushdy, *Neo Slave Narratives*, p. 3.

⁷⁴ Byerman, *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*, p. 27.

literature not only challenges or sustains social dimensions of memory in many ways by preserving or subverting cultural meaning, or by commenting on or dispersing it. More than this, literature must also be reckoned as a special form of cultural memory in itself: as a complex *lieu de mémoire*⁷⁵ with its very own forms and strategies of observation and writing from older memories and their diverse representations.⁷⁶

Consequently, it is in this context of willingness to remember that many writers started to address and rewrite the past, using literature in order to mourn and try to overcome the repercussions of their traumatic memories of slavery. Contemporary literature concerning this theme largely differs from the previous one in various ways. These writers are significantly influenced by their historical context. As Keith Byerman illustrates:

These are writers who came into their maturity in the 1960s, with all that that era signifies: civil rights, Black Power, Vietnam, popular culture, violence, ghettoization, the emergence of a black middle class. Their fiction began to be published in the 1970s, at the time of the Black Studies programs, black history as an academic discipline, blaxploitation films, *Roots*; in other words, the institutionalization and commodification of black experience.⁷⁷

Many of the writers Byerman refers to have decided to concentrate their works on retelling the past rather than focusing on the present in order to represent the sufferings of slavery, commemorate their lost ancestors and describe the psychological effects induced by the experience of slavery, not only concerning the former slaves' generation but all the subsequent generations as well. In fact, many scholars affirm that the consequences of slavery and the memory of the traumatic past, consequently including also the trauma itself with its repercussions, are trans-generational. They can thus be passed on from generation to generation, as Renée Shari Hicks states: "Trauma can be

⁷⁵ The concept of 'lieu de mémoire' was introduced by the French historian Pierre Nora. The 'lieu de mémoire' is a place where collective memory is sealed. It is a sort of recipient of the traumatic memory which has a deep tie with the past and that can take numerous and various forms. Kathleen Brogan in *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (p. 140) provides an articulate definition of this concept. She writes: "Lieux de mémoire, which can take the form of places, objects, or texts, are not simply repositories of the past; these sites that serve to anchor collective memory are invested by the imagination with a symbolic aura, and they are always associated with ritual."

⁷⁶ Lars Eckstein, *Remembering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetic and Politics of Literary Memory*, New York: Rodopi, 2006, p. x.

⁷⁷ Byerman, *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*, p. 2.

transmitted to the descendants of those who have endured traumatic experiences.”⁷⁸ Byerman likewise claims, writing about the subject of memory: “It (memory) also affects the group’s sense of itself, as the stories of the past are repeated from generation to generation.”⁷⁹ Memory and trauma are passed on by the families or by the communities that had to raise their children while they were still scarred by the psychological injuries generated from the traumatic experiences that they have lived.

Moreover, in addition to the focus on the past and its consequences on the present, one of the main characteristics of the neo-slave narrative is the inner focus on the characters and their psychological experience. It is a feature that, according to Toni Morrison, the antebellum slave narrative purposely avoided to explore. Morrison explains that the slave narrative’s writers used to leave out of their narration the most horrible and haunting parts of their experiences, in order to appeal to the white public who, they knew, could be of crucial importance in the fight for the abolition of slavery. In addition to that, she continues: “most importantly - at least for me - there was no mention of their interior life.”⁸⁰ Furthermore, as Morrison underlines, slave narratives had clear goals:

Whatever the style and circumstances of these narratives, they were written to say principally two things. One: ‘This is my historical life - my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race.’ Two: ‘I write this text to persuade other people - you, the reader, who is probably not black - that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery.’ With these two missions in mind, the narratives were clearly pointed.⁸¹

The slave narratives’ objectives were to document the slavery experience of the authors, to represent their individuality and their community and mostly to demonstrate the worthiness of black people to the white population. Their aim was to inform the public of the ongoing cruelties that they were subjected to and to give an alternative representation of slavery to counter the unrealistic one the white population was exposed to.

⁷⁸ Hicks, *A critical analysis of post traumatic slave syndrome*, p. 42.

⁷⁹ Byerman, *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*, p. 27.

⁸⁰ Toni Morrison, “The site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, edited by William Zinsser, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995, p. 191.

⁸¹ *Ivi*, p. 186.

The main aims of the neo-slave narratives are obviously different, as they are not tools in the fight for emancipation as slave narratives were. They aim to offer a counter narrative of the events and thus question the official historical accounts of slavery, filling the gaps of what has been told about the bondage experience and, finally, to expose the influence of the effects of slavery that still haunt the contemporary generations. Caroline Rody affirms that the writers of the neo-slave narratives

reinscribe received historical narratives in order to debunk and purge them; to relocate the site of the historical and redefine history's meanings; to challenge prevailing discourses of power and knowledge, infuse oral tradition into the written, and reassert devalued folk memory; and to reinvent ethnic, political, and literary bloodlines.⁸²

Timothy Spaulding, referring to the writers of what he calls the postmodern slave narrative, affirms that they

view the history of slavery as in need of *re-formation*. In sociopolitical terms, these writers set out to reform our conception of American slavery by depicting a more complex, nuanced view of black identity in the context of American slavery. In aesthetic terms, they seek to create a new narrative form through which to reveal the complexities embedded within the slave experience and obscured by traditional historical accounts.⁸³

The writers of postmodern slave narratives do not just aim at retrieving the past and giving a voice to those who lived in bondage during slavery; but they also “set out to reform the slave narrative itself, as a document and critique of American slavery, by recovering the ideological project that served as the slave narrative’s original foundation.”⁸⁴

Furthermore, as Spaulding shows, contemporary writers of the neo-slave narrative often turn to unconventional ways in order to represent the institution of slavery and the slavery experience. They often use the fantastic or the supernatural in order to approach these

⁸² Caroline Rody, *The Daughters' Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fiction of History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 5.

⁸³ Timothy A. Spaulding, *Re-forming the Past: History, the Fantastic and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*, Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2005, p. 4.

⁸⁴ *Ivi*, p. 8.

themes and their characters often do not respect the boundaries imposed by concepts such as those of time and space.⁸⁵ He further adds:

By creating characters that defy the conventions of time and space (as both Butler and Reed do), by using formal devices that subvert the conventions of narrative realism (as Morrison and Johnson do), or by mining genres that many regard as escapist (as Delany and Gomez do), African American writers reform traditional historical representations of slavery from a contemporary perspective.⁸⁶

The use of these methods and strategies enables the postmodern slave narrative's writers to blur the lines between the past and the present, presenting in this way characters that are deeply influenced by the past and the legacy of slavery and a present that still allows the consequences to exist. Writers of the neo-slave narrative write speculative fictions in order to achieve this purpose. Spaulding argues on this matter:

Through the narrative freedom of imaginative or speculative fiction, postmodern slave narratives blur the lines between historical subject and contemporary author, between the past history of slavery and its current legacy in contemporary culture, between historical and fictional reconstructions of the past.⁸⁷

Speculative fiction can be defined as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and the interaction of estrangement and condition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.”⁸⁸ Although they employ supernatural and fictional elements, the fantastic and other non-mimetic devices, the authenticity of postmodern slave narratives is not weakened but established, since it is exactly through this blurring of lines that they claim the authority to reform an history that was not faithfully represented in the historical documents and accounts. Therefore, they see and represent slavery as a legacy that still influences the contemporary individual. In Spaulding's words: “These narratives approach slavery not as an event isolated by time and space or abstracted by the narrative act, but rather as one of the continuing grand narratives of Western domination that links

⁸⁵ *Ivi*, p. 7.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷ *Ivi*, p. 18.

⁸⁸ Suvin Darko, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, p. 7-8.

the contemporary author to the historical subject.”⁸⁹ One of the main characteristics that allow the authors to create this continuum and this connection between past and present is the non-linearity of the time of narration:

the expansiveness of speculative fiction and its rejection of verisimilitude allow these writers to fashion a circular, or fluid, conception of time in their texts. By creating characters who occupy a world that is both historical and contemporary, or that inexplicably travel through time and space, writers of postmodern slave narratives challenge our impulse to bury the past with willful ignorance or abstraction.⁹⁰

This element of circularity of time urges the characters and the readers to reflect on a traumatic past that is still haunting the present reality and that still influences our contemporary condition and historical and political context.

1.3 Ghosts and scars

As discussed above, the neo-slave narratives make large use of non-mimetic and supernatural elements to create a continuum between past and present, thus resurfacing the memory of a traumatic past and its consequences that still persist today. The image of the ghost is one of the most effective and utilized tropes in order to achieve this purpose, since “The past that resists integration into the present because it is incomprehensible or too horrific takes shape as a ghost that can possess.”⁹¹

The figure of the ghost is nearly impossible to define since it can be represented in countless ways, acquiring different forms and serving different functions. As Joanne Chassot underlines:

there is something paradoxical in the very attempt at defining the ghost: to define is to establish limits, to fix definitely and definitively the form, the essential nature, and the meaning of the object; yet there

⁸⁹ Spaulding, *Re-forming the Past*, p. 19.

⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 25.

⁹¹ Kathleen Brogan, “American stories of cultural haunting: Tales of heirs and ethnographers,” *College English*, (57)2, (1995), p. 153.

is nothing definite, fixed, or essential about the ghost, a figure that has no precise outline and defies all boundaries.⁹²

In fact, the ghost does not belong to a specific time or space and it transcends these concepts, inhabiting more spaces and times simultaneously, since the ghost has experienced the past, but it also continues to exist and haunt the present. Hershini Bhana Young writes that “ghosts breach linear temporality to occupy different spacial and temporal sites simultaneously.”⁹³ It is for this very reason that the ghost trope primarily functions as a tie between the past and the present. The ghost allows different generations to come in contact with each other, highlighting the importance of familiar relationships. According to Elliot Gorn, “Ghostlore also broke down generational barriers, allowing the living and dead to continue interacting.”⁹⁴

The character of the ghost is paradoxical also in another instance. By definition its very presence highlights an absence and an invisibility which can be referred not only to those who became absent and invisible because of death, but also to “those who are absent from the narrative of American History itself because their presence, as well as their violent disappearance, did not fit the ideal narrative America has been telling about itself.”⁹⁵ Therefore, the ghostly characters that inhabit neo-slave narratives often have the purpose of giving a voice to all the silenced subjects of the past and at the same time exposing the injustices they were forced to undergo. In Chassot’s words: “the ghost not only signifies what, or who, has been effaced and silenced, but also exposes the workings of this effacement and silencing.”⁹⁶ That is why the ghost trope was frequently present in African American texts in the 1980s, a period which “was marked by an affirmation of folk culture, a turn to history, and a general critique of master narratives, as well as a growing presence of women’s voices in literature, a conjunction of literary, theoretical, and political projects in which the ghost is precisely a useful resource.”⁹⁷ Specifically, it was

⁹² Joanne Chassot, *Ghosts of the African Diaspora: Re-Visioning History, Memory and Identity*, Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2018, p. 15.

⁹³ Hershini Bhana Young, *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text and the Black Diasporic Body*, Hanover: University Press of New England, 2006, p. 44.

⁹⁴ Elliot J. Gorn, “Black Spirits: The Ghostlore of Afro-American Slaves,” *American Quarterly*, 36(4), (1984), p. 559.

⁹⁵ Chassot, *Ghosts of the African Diaspora*, p. 17.

⁹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 153.

⁹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 29.

a useful resource in order to underline the centrality of the theme of slavery in the African American community. The slave is, in fact, one of those silenced and absent subjects in the frame of American history. Consequently, the slave and the slavery past were often represented in the form of ancestral ghosts who haunt the following generations with their memory of sufferings and violence. In this instance the ghost can be interpreted as an embodiment of memory. This is the reason why this trope serves also the purpose of enhancing and demonstrating the dilemma of remembering and forgetting that inevitably accompanies the discourse of the memory of slavery. Moreover, the ghost enables the authors to underline the complexity of the slavery system, as Gorn explains: “Slavery was an infinitely complex institution, eliciting from all involved the entire range of human emotions. Ghostlore highlights this complexity.”⁹⁸ The ghost trope also opposes the logic that underlies the slavery system as “In reaffirming this continuity between the living and the dead, [ghosts] contradict the very logic of the institution of slavery and its disruptive effects on all aspects of the lives of the slaves as much as their descendants [...]”⁹⁹ It opposes also dominant historiography, as the ghost provides an unofficial account of the experience of slavery, filling the gaps of the formal historical documents and accounts. What is more, “The ghosts not only expand the limits of the archive by bringing new kinds of sources: they also signify another way of knowing, an alternative epistemological mode that strikingly resembles what Gordon describes as ‘haunting.’”¹⁰⁰ Gordon’s concept of haunting refers to a kind of magical and unintended knowledge of reality that is experienced as profoundly transformative.¹⁰¹

The character of the ghost can also serve other, different, functions: for instance, ghosts, specifically in female ghost narratives, may warn of the dangers that impend on the other characters, they may deliver messages that “warn of the dangers of domesticity,”¹⁰² or they can allow to establish a connection and a relationship between the other characters and their matrilineal legacy.¹⁰³ Therefore, the ghost can be perceived negatively or positively depending on the function it performs in the text. It is usually perceived as a

⁹⁸ Gorn, “Black Spirits,” p. 554.

⁹⁹ Chassot, *Ghosts of the African Diaspora*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ *Ivi*, p. 99.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰² Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar, *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991, p. 14.

¹⁰³ *Ivi*, p. 16.

positive character in female narratives, according to Lynette Carpenter and Wendy Kolmar:

In their ghost stories, women writers seem more likely to portray natural and supernatural experience along a continuum. Boundaries between the two are not absolute but fluid, so that the supernatural can be accepted, connected with, reclaimed, and can often possess a quality of familiarity.¹⁰⁴

Moreover, it is especially in the context of African American culture that the supernatural is often perceived as a natural phenomenon and it is accepted as an inherent part of life: “In African-American and Native American cultures, family ghosts, like living family members, are simply part of the experience. They can be healing and supportive, and can bring information crucial to survival [...]”¹⁰⁵ John Samuel Mbiti affirms that in African culture the notion of the living-dead is of crucial importance. The living-dead is an ancestor and a family member that has departed but has not yet completed the process of passing so he/she lives in a state of immortality. These deceased ancestors can appear to the eyes of the living family members, usually the oldest in the household. They may take interest in family discussions and take part in family decisions, since they are officially still considered members of the family unit. Although they offer suggestions and warn of possible dangers, the relationship between living family members and the living-dead is not always unchallenging. If the departed ancestors appear too frequently the relationship may deteriorate and, additionally, the living family members may offer them hospitality, but simultaneously persuade the ancestors to move away. This happens because the family members fear the revenge of the living-dead for offenses that he/she may have received in the past, such as an inappropriate burial.¹⁰⁶

The living haunted individuals can thus deal with the ghost in different ways since the ghost itself acquires different functions. However, especially in the case of ancestral ghosts, specifically when these characters represent an embodiment of a memory and an embodiment of the past, “Learning to live with ghosts is [...], as Derrida intimated, not only a politics of memory but also a politics of inheritance, a respect and responsibility

¹⁰⁴ *Ivi*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ *Ivi*, p. 12-13.

¹⁰⁶ John Samuel Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1990, p. 81-82-83.

for the dead as well as for the not-yet-born (xviii).”¹⁰⁷ In fact, the ghost as an embodiment of memory is of crucial importance for the survival of the individual because it provides access to the memory of the past that is lacking in the present. It is, therefore, important to welcome and deal with the ghost since:

when one resists the urge to run like mad when the ghost appears (when it cajoles), as Gordon explains, ‘the ghost can lead you toward what has been missing, which is sometimes everything’ (58). And that ‘everything’ is quite often a memory (a counter-memory), or a call to affirmatively forget—it is a memory that captivates, enthralls, possesses, *occupies*. The ghost is the ultimate ‘occupier’ of memory (its unwitting *hôte*), and it occupies due precisely to what it maintains the memory/forgetting of: a ‘future’ justice that is always to *come*. So in order to attend such justice, it is necessary to continue pursuing the ghost.¹⁰⁸

Moreover, it is only through the process of understanding and accepting the memory of the traumatized past, in this case represented by the ghost, that the individual can create and establish his/her identity in the present and overcome the inherited trauma. In D’Aguiar words: “Cure resides in knowing the facts and rehabilitating the pain associated with them.”¹⁰⁹

Another trope that is widely used in neo-slave narratives in order to highlight the memory of the past and the ongoing consequences of trauma is the image of scars and wounds. Although these elements do not transcend temporality in a supernatural process, they still represent the traces of a past that is difficult to erase. Their inherent nature of being forever engraved on the skin represents the permanency of the consequences of the traumatic past. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison is again one of the most renowned and illustrative examples. The protagonist Sethe has, in fact, her back completely disfigured by scars that intertwine each other creating the shape of a “chokecherry tree”¹¹⁰, as Morrison describes it in her novel. The scars that Sethe carries on her back are a constant reminder of her past and the trauma that is associated to it. They represent the memory of the sufferings in the slavery system and the physical and psychological consequences that

¹⁰⁷ Chassot, *Ghosts of the African Diaspora*, p. 200.

¹⁰⁸ Trevor L. Hoag, “Ghosts of Memory: Mournful Performance and the Rhetorical Event of Haunting (Or: Specters of Occupy),” *Liminalities*, 10(3), (2004), p. 13.

¹⁰⁹ Fred D’Aguiar, “The Last Essay About Slavery,” in *The Age of Anxiety*, edited by Sarah Dunant and Roy Porter, London: Virago, 1996, p. 136.

¹¹⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 18.

haunt the individuals. In fact, whippings and other forms of violence, and consequently the wounds and the scars that were inflicted on the slaves' bodies, were used by slave masters as a means to demonstrate and assert their dominance on their slaves, who were considered objects of property rather than human beings. Slaveholders used to maintain their status by physically violating the bodies of the slaves. Moreover, as stated by Carol Henderson, "This effort was not only instrumental in maintaining the dominance of the slaveowning class; it was crucial in regulating the *material* interests of slaveowners as well."¹¹¹ Therefore, scars were effectively used as markings to describe and recognize the slaveholders' property in case slaves escaped. On the postings for fugitives all the scars and the wounds were listed in order to allow the recognition and the re-appropriation of the escaped slaves. Scars and wounds were also considered an essential method for judging the value and disposition of the slaves before buying them. At the market, all scars and wounds were closely inspected since they accounted for precedent whippings or other forms of punishment, thus revealing that the slave might have been insubordinate and rebellious. Henderson writes:

Any scars found on a slave's body during this process would let the potential buyer know the 'temperament' of the slave – if the slave was a 'problem' slave, one with a rebellious tendency. Amputated limbs, disfigured body parts, welted backs – all were read as manifestations of a rebellious spirit.¹¹²

In addition, the exposition of these wounds and these scars reminded all the other slaves what the consequences of rebelling were, thus they served as threats to discourage acts of disobedience and resistance. All the physical scars and wounds that were inflicted during slavery turned to psychological and metaphorical scars that still hurt and engrave the African American individual. Henderson argues that the Middle Passage has been the rupture point where a deep cultural wound has been inflicted:

The forced dispersement of Africans from their native land calcifies, for many, the indelible mark of cultural wounding prominent in the African and African American racial memory. The Middle Passage – that heinous voyage from Africa to the Americas in the belly of slave ships – lays bare the intricate mechanisms that facilitate not only the ruptures of a spiritual and cultural wholeness but also the

¹¹¹ Carol E. Henderson, *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002, p. 23.

¹¹² *Ivi*, p. 36.

formation of a linguistic system of suffering framed in the borderlands of the scar. [...] Thus the psychological and physical wounding of the black body in transit – in the watery space between the African and the American coast lines – added an additional layer to the reading of, and a whole new dimension to the marking and scarring of, the black body in the context of America’s chattel bondage system.¹¹³

However, scars and wounds in narratives can serve a dual function, in fact according to Henderson they are: “simultaneously signs of wounding and signs of healing.”¹¹⁴ They are signs of healing since they can become symbols of recognition between individuals, connection and unity in the context of a collective kin, as Pamela June explains: “The collective experience of whippings and mutilations during and after the Middle Passage becomes a means through which enslaved people could sympathize, unite and rebel.”¹¹⁵

As it will be analysed in the next chapters, Perry uses both of these tropes in her novels as a way to represent and investigate the lasting effects of the slavery trauma in the black community.

¹¹³ Ivi, p. 35-36.

¹¹⁴ Ivi, p. 7.

¹¹⁵ Pamela B. June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity: Postmodern, Feminist and Multi-ethnic Writings of Toni Morrison, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Phyllis Alesia Perry, Gayl Jones, Emma Pérez, Paula Gunn Allen, and Kathy Acker*, New York: Peter Lang, 2010, p. 49.

2. *Stigmata*

2.1 The author and the novel

Phyllis Alesia Perry was born in 1961 in Atlanta, Georgia but she grew up in Tuskegee, Alabama, where her first novel, *Stigmata*, is largely set. She graduated in communications from the University of Alabama. After her graduation she became a journalist, also winning a Pulitzer Prize along with a group of reporters for their investigation on the high mortality rate in the Alabama infant population. *Stigmata* was her debut novel and it was published in 1998. The prequel to *Stigmata*, called *A Sunday in June*, was published in 2004.

In *Stigmata*, the protagonist is a young woman called Lizzie DuBose who lives in Tuskegee with her family. When she turns fourteen, she inherits a trunk which contains a quilt and a diary. The trunk originally belonged to Lizzie's great-great-grandmother and it was passed on by her grandmother Grace who died before her birth. Grace had specifically instructed her sisters, Mary Nell and Eva, to give the trunk to Lizzie. They instinctively understand the right time for her to inherit the object. Readers later discover that Lizzie's great-great-grandmother Ayo was enslaved exactly at the age of fourteen. It is precisely when Lizzie starts to inspect her trunk, using the quilt and reading the diary, that the strange haunting experiences begin to happen to her. Lizzie starts to relive the past and the life of both her great-great-grandmother Ayo and her grandmother Grace simultaneously. She understands that both women are reincarnated in her body thus sharing their lives' experiences with her. Consequently, she is faced with the violence and sufferings related to slavery because of Ayo's memories, while Grace's memories serve as the guide and key to the understanding of the phenomenon that Lizzie is enduring, since Grace was the first one to experience it. In fact, it is through the reliving of Grace's past that Lizzie grasps the reason behind her present condition. Through Lizzie's flashbacks, readers learn that Grace suffered for the process of Ayo's reincarnation. Consequently, she decided to distance herself from her family since she was afraid she was mentally unstable and that she would be labelled as crazy, thus hurting them. Lizzie herself in a passage admits: "You see, I think that Ayo reincarnated as Grace and Grace

reincarnated in me. Grace had to leave her home and her family because Ayo's memory became too much for her to handle."¹¹⁶

Furthermore, it can be noticed that the reincarnation process can be inherited only by the females of the family creating a strong matrilineal legacy. However, the phenomenon always skips one generation so that Sarah, Grace's daughter and Lizzie's mother, does neither experience it nor, at first, understand it. Through flashbacks Lizzie begins to grasp the personalities and characteristics of the two reincarnated women and she describes them as very different. On the one hand Ayo is described as silent and far, as a suffering presence, while Grace on the other hand seems nearer and more outspoken: "Grace always speaks loudly, her memories hissing insistently inside my head. And behind her are the dream-like tangles of Ayo's life. More distant but also more painful."¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the flashbacks in which Lizzie relives the past of her ancestors are not completely detached from her reality and they leave concrete proofs of these haunting episodes. In fact, every time the flashback comes from Ayo's presence, Lizzie not only inherits her memories but also the same scars and markings on her wrists and ankles that were left by chains on Ayo's body during the bondage experience. Lizzie describes the flashbacks as if she is really transported in a different place at a different time, as if she is really inside another person living what she had lived. In a passage of the novel she describes herself transitioning from her reality to the reincarnation flashback, revealing the connection that she has with the different time and space in which she is plunged into:

As I stare out of the window at the white lines on the asphalt shooting straight and sure down the highway, that creepy feeling begins to sneak up on me again, that feeling of looking back into time at some distant point and feeling more familiar with that place than with where I am now.¹¹⁸

Moreover, in another instance she reveals the physical superimposition on her person of her reincarnated ancestor in the flashbacks: "I sit on the bed with old Grace, marveling that I can move her fingers and toes."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Phyllis Alesia Perry, *Stigmata*, New York: Hyperion, 1998, p. 181.

¹¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 87-88.

¹¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 65.

¹¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 56.

Her constant wandering between different times and spaces, and the appearances of mysterious scars on her wrists and her ankles worry her mother and father. In fact, they are both unaware of her reincarnation process. Although Lizzie tries to explain her condition to her parents, they are not able to comprehend her experience and do not believe her version of the facts, thus considering her mentally unstable. Consequently, they begin to think that the scars and the wounds are the consequence of self-harming. Therefore, unable to understand their daughter's condition and not finding any other solution to the problem, they decide to seek external psychological help for Lizzie. She is then put under observation and treatment in a psychiatric hospital where doctors also don't believe her version of what is happening to her. They try to cure her problem, which is perceived as merely psychological and medically labelled as a condition of self-harm, suicidal tendencies and denial. In fact, doctors give a rational explication of what Lizzie has to endure and, not believing in the supernatural but only in scientific explanations, they cannot fathom Lizzie's truth. Doctors take precautions in order to prevent Lizzie from harming herself, but the scars continue to reappear on her skin. Although doctors cannot explain how she could have harmed herself when she was under control, they stick to the medical and psychological explanation of the facts.

However, it is exactly inside the hospital that Lizzie finds people who validate her story. First, another patient, a woman, witnesses her act of transitioning from Lizzie's body into that of another person. She then confronts Lizzie about what she has seen, thus validating her version of the facts rather than the doctors' perspective. In this way if the readers had been skeptic up to this point and did not know whether to believe the rational explanation given by Lizzie's parents and doctors or the supernatural one provided by Lizzie herself, they are given the proof that confirms the latter case. The second instance in which Lizzie's version is validated is the moment of her encounter with a Christian priest. He seems to perceive that Lizzie is different from the other patients and he affirms that she looks too sane to be held under observation in a psychiatric hospital. Interested in her situation, he asks why she is a patient and he thoroughly believes Lizzie's account of the story. Being Christian he explains the phenomenon of the scars on her wrists and ankles as a kind of stigmata that marks the body with the aim of remembering the past. While under observation Lizzie understands that she needs to appear in her right mind at the eyes of the doctors in order to return home and so she begins to pretend that she is not

having strange flashbacks from a past she has not lived. She is finally allowed home to her parents where she realizes she finally has to communicate her true situation to her mother, Sarah. Being the reincarnation of Grace, Sarah's mother who left her family to protect them from her "craziness", Lizzie decides she also has to restore the relationship with her mother/daughter. In order to do that she starts a quilt project with her. She patches an appliqué quilt which represents her story, hoping that her mother/daughter will finally understand the truth and thus reconnect their tie. Despite some moments in which Sarah worries about a relapse, she gradually grasps the situation and finally understands that Lizzie is her mother/daughter. The matrilineal legacy is reestablished, while the father at the end of the novel still does not understand the whole situation. Lizzie, now mastering her condition and accepting her past and her heritage is able to reconstruct her life.

From a structural point of view, it is important to underline the non-linearity of the style of narration. The story is not narrated in a linear and chronological way so that the text is perceived as fragmented and patched together, as Lizzie's identity and her appliqué quilt also are. In fact, Pamela June states that Lizzie's memory "after all, is a collection of nonlinear events, many of which she herself never actually lived."¹²⁰ The novel thus begins with Lizzie talking to doctors at the psychiatric hospital just before the moment of her return at home and only later in the text, in a gradual process, the whole story is unfolded for the readers. This fragmentation of the text is conveyed by the fact that

Stigmata is divided into two alternating strands of narrative, one narrating chronologically from June 1994 to July 1996 (the present-day period following Lizzie's release from the hospitals), and the other chronologically from April 1974 to March 1988 (the period when Lizzie begins experiencing her foremothers and is consequently institutionalized).¹²¹

Moreover, after every chapter corresponding to the first strand of narrative identified by Pamela June, readers can find a passage of the diary which was found in the trunk. The diary contains the recorded account of Ayo's bondage experience written down by her

¹²⁰ Pamela B. June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity: Postmodern, Feminist and Multi-ethnic Writings of Toni Morrison, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Phyllis Alesia Perry, Gayl Jones, Emma Pérez, Paula Gunn Allen, and Kathy Acker*, New York: Peter Lang, 2010, p. 54.

¹²¹ *Ivi*, p. 53.

daughter, Joy. It is in this way, in addition to Lizzie's flashbacks, that the slavery experience is portrayed in the novel. The diary echoes the literary genre of the slave narrative since it relates the experiences of Ayo's kidnapping and enslavement. As highlighted by Corinne Duboin, *Stigmata* is intertextually linked with noted first-person accounts of slavery:

Joy's notes recall canonical works such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (in particular the description of the Middle Passage from the perspective of a traumatized child) or Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* that gives an inside account of the black female experience of slavery.¹²²

Furthermore, another central aspect of Perry's narrative is the plurality of voices that emerge from the text. The main account is Lizzie's but due to the process of reincarnation and the extracts of Ayo's diary, readers are able to listen to the voices of her ancestors as well, learning about Ayo's and Grace's past. Duboin also adds another voice to the choir stating that "In *Stigmata*, many female voices are being heard: Lizzie's, Ayo's, Joy's and Grace's, not to mention Perry's implicit authorial voice."¹²³ The novel is also characterized by the circularity of the narration. In fact, the novel begins with Lizzie in the psychiatric hospital and it also ends in the same location. This element of circularity is underlined by the completion of the appliqué quilt project as well. When the project is finished Lizzie is finally able to reveal her truth to her mother/daughter, thus closing the circle of the reincarnation process. The perception of time as circular in the novel is expressed several times by the characters as well. For instance, Lizzie finds this sentence written in the diary: "We are forever. Here at the bottom of heaven we live in the circle. We back and gone and back again."¹²⁴

Stigmata can be mainly defined as a neo-slave narrative as the novel largely explores the theme of slavery and the ongoing memory of the traumatic past generated by the bondage experience. Because of the process of reincarnation and the diary excerpts, readers learn about the violence of the enslavement of the black population and specifically about the

¹²² Corinne Duboin, "Trauma Narrative, Memorialization, and Mourning in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*," *Southern Literary Journal*, 40(2), (2008), p. 291.

¹²³ *Ivi*, p. 289.

¹²⁴ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 17.

condition of black women in bondage. Experiences such as the journey on slave ships in the Middle passage, the selling of slaves at the markets, whippings and other bodily violations are described. Furthermore, because of Lizzie's flashbacks, readers are provided with additional information on the matter and on Ayo's experience and feelings as a black enslaved little girl. They are thus pushed to reflect on how the consequences of the slavery experience are still tangible today in African American individuals' lives since the memory of the traumatic past has been inherited by the contemporary generations as well, just like Lizzie inherited her great-great-grandmother's memories through the reincarnation process.

The novel can be labeled as a trauma narrative as well, since it focuses on the causes and consequences of endured traumas but also on the trans-generational transmission of trauma and its memory. Through the process of reincarnation Perry highlights this process of trans-generational transmission and represents it also through the trope of the scars and wounds. In fact, scars are the perfect depiction of an ongoing, indelible and ineffaceable trauma that remains engraved on the skin and psyche forever. It highlights the fragmentation of the self that Lizzie experiences firsthand and it underlines the problematic relationships of the traumatized subjects with other people. In fact, this surfaces in the relationships Lizzie has with her parents and the doctors, which are challenging or precarious if not slightly conflictual. Furthermore, the hospitalization of Lizzie underlines once more the consequences of the traumatic experience since the event can be read as an allegory of the denial by contemporary whites of the consequences of the slavery experience. Just like the doctors, who do not believe Lizzie's account and do not take her words into consideration, so the US mainstream refuses to recognize that the marginality and oppression of contemporary African Americans is a direct consequence of centuries of slavery and racism.

Finally, *Stigmata* can be defined also as speculative fiction since the protagonist, due to the process of reincarnation, defies the boundaries of time and space. The opposition between the scientific and rational explanation given by the doctors and the supernatural one provided by Lizzie highlights the importance of the fantastic and the non-mimetic elements in the text. In fact, the supernatural elements are of main importance in the narrative as the reincarnation process is the event on which the text revolves. Perry justified the use of this writing mode affirming that she wanted to "get underneath the

facts. In order to do that, you have to go some place where the facts don't really go. [...] I had to take a speculative route."¹²⁵ She thus uses the supernatural and the fantastic with the aim of exploring narratives that cannot be told in a mimetic way. With the use of the supernatural and the reincarnation process she is able to give a voice to the enslaved ancestor who gives an account of slavery that goes beyond the facts reported by official accounts, revealing intimate and profound feelings of hardship and frustration under bondage. Through the use of these non-mimetic strategies she can also highlight the fact that the consequences of slavery are still affecting individuals today since, like Lizzie, who inherits Ayo's memories and scars due to the reincarnation process, all African American individuals inherit the memory of this traumatic past from previous generations.

The novel has also been described as a magical realism novel by Ana Nunes who writes

I argue that Perry engages with the magical in order to rework the narrative model presented by Morrison. Perry's narrative explores the tension between the Tzvetan Todorov's notion of the fantastic and the supernatural accepted, or magical realism, and her development of a sense of community in the context of the fantastic and magic realism.¹²⁶

In an apt summary of the characteristics of Perry's texts and their themes, Corinne Duboin writes that

Mixing the realist mode with the fantastic, both texts deal with the connection to the past, historicity and memory. Perry also explores the intricacies of painful family relationships, grievous separations, reconciliations and healing with the restoration of loving bonds.¹²⁷

2.2 The representation of slavery in *Stigmata*

As it has been mentioned above, one of the central themes of Perry's narrative is the representation of the slavery experience. This is achieved thanks to Ayo's account written

¹²⁵ Duboin, Corinne, "Confronting the Specters of the Past, Writing the Legacy of Pain: An Interview with Phyllis Alesia Perry," *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 62(3/4), (2009), p. 638.

¹²⁶ Ana Nunes, *African American Women Writers' Historical Fiction*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 7.

¹²⁷ Duboin, "Confronting the Specters of the Past, Writing the Legacy of Pain," p. 634.

in her diary, which can be defined, in Maja Milatovic's words, as a "slave narrative *within* a neo-slave narrative."¹²⁸ In fact, Ayo's accounts are reminiscent of those that can be found in traditional slave narratives, such as the descriptions of the enslavement process, the Middle Passage and the slave ships, slaves sold in markets and life in bondage including whippings. Perry adds to this slave narrative within a neo-slave narrative a more personal and emotional component, also describing Ayo's feelings. In fact, referring to slave narratives she affirms that "the narratives would be telling about horrific things that happened, but there was something about them that was too matter-of-fact to me."¹²⁹ The diary contains only the most important and significant events of Ayo's life but it is a very useful element as it not only informs Lizzie of what is happening to her and provides the accounts of Ayo's slavery experience, but it "also provides the means to develop the characters of Lizzie's ancestors in a way that is not possible with only Lizzie's first-hand and brief encounters with the past and these deceased relatives."¹³⁰ The first instance of an excerpt taken from the diary is marked with the date "December 26, 1898". Joy notes down that her mother suddenly asked her to write. She then notes these sentences:

Bessie aint my name she said. My name Ayo. Soon as she said that her voice fell low. She stop and look way over my shoulder like she werent even in the same room with me. Like she saw something off on the edge of the world. And her voice got deep and low and words roll off her tongue like water falling from a high place.

My name mean happiness she say. Joy. That why I name you that so I dont forget who I am what I mean to this world. I come from a long line of forever people. We are forever. Here at the bottom of heaven we live in the circle. We back and gone and back again.¹³¹

In this passage the feeling of hardship in remembering the slavery experience is highlighted by the description of Ayo's reaction while talking about it. Her detachment and her mental distancing express the pain and the sorrow she is remembering. Ayo reminisces the time in which her name was changed from her original one to the enslaved one. She was not allowed to be called Ayo anymore, but she could only go by the name

¹²⁸ Maja Milatovic, *Reclaimed Genealogies: Reconsidering the Ancestral Figure in African American Women Writers' Neo-Slave Narratives*, PhD Thesis, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2014, p. 210.

¹²⁹ Duboin, "Confronting the Specters of the Past, Writing the Legacy of Pain," p. 635.

¹³⁰ Camille Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones's Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry's Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela's Cambio de Armas*, Doctoral Dissertation, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina: 2009, p. 80.

¹³¹ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 7.

of Bessie Ward, her slave name. In fact, it was commonplace to change slaves' names when they were sold in order to erase their origin, their heritage and their previous free identity. The practice of imposing a new name, or a new language and a new culture, was a means of imposing one's superiority on a population perceived as inferior and easy to subjugate. Ayo's reclaiming of her original name equates with the reclaiming of her own identity and heritage, as well as her distancing from the values imposed on her under bondage. As stated by Maja Milatovic:

Reclaiming her African name and its rejoicing potential and passing the name down to her daughter, Ayo creates precisely the counter-text which challenges the objectifying logic of slavery. For Ayo, naming constitutes her personal history rooted in ancestral Africa and bears witness to survival and the crucial role of storytelling and intergenerational bonding.¹³²

Furthermore, Joy continues writing:

I am Ayo. I remember.

This is for those whose bones lay sleeping in the heart of mother ocean for those who tomorrows I never knew who groaned and died in that dark damp aside a me. You rite this daughter for me and for them.¹³³

What emerges from this passage is that Ayo's primary concern is to remember and to be remembered. This compulsion and the need of not forgetting her story are also proved by her decision to start the reincarnation process and the way in which she haunts Lizzie with her memories of the past. Moreover, Ayo also chooses to remember all those who died in the Middle Passage, all the lost lives who never even had an appropriate burial because they were directly thrown into the ocean from slave ships. It is her way to commemorate them since she could not do it at the time of their passing.

However, when these lines are later read by Lizzie, they inexplicably show some alterations: "I am Ayo. Joy. I choose to remember."¹³⁴ The addition of the word "choose" emphasizes Ayo's agency in passing on her story and her memory. Furthermore, Pamela

¹³² Milatovic, *Reclaimed Genealogies*, p. 214.

¹³³ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 7.

¹³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 17.

June explains that the word “rite” (spelled in the same way in both instances of the lines’ transcripts) can be interpreted as a misspelling of the word “write” but Ayo could have also meant: “‘right,’ meaning that she wanted the sin of slavery to be ‘righted or corrected. If we read it in this light, we understand why Ayo may have come back to haunt her descendants.”¹³⁵

Another pivotal moment of Ayo’s life which has been written down in the diary is Ayo’s kidnapping. She was at a market with her mom but being a curious kid, she strayed away to explore. When she was far from her mother this is what happened:

You rite fast Joy she say. I aint gon tell this but once. It too bad to tell more than once.

I think when the man grab me in the market I kick him but he put his hand over my mouth and nose and I cant get no air. So I fall out. Faint right away. And when I come back to myself Im lyin on some sand and there are others there. Strangers with iron round they arms and legs. I saw a child walkin and cryin so I get up on my knees to go to him but I cant cause my hands, my feet chained together with iron too! Oh child! I am chained to the man next to me and when I look at him, he look like he weeping. [...] Over the sweatin shoulder of those chained together people the ocean rushes and rolls. I remember staring out at that water going on and on to the edge of the earth even while I screamed so hard my nose start to bleed. And this...this ghost with hair like fire and no color eyes comes over and hit me cross the head with his hand.¹³⁶

The memory is so painful for Ayo that she admits she will not tell the story more than once. Although she is an adult when she tells this story with the aim of documenting it and keeping her memory alive, she still narrates it from the point of view of the little girl she was at that time. In fact, she was only fourteen when she was kidnapped, and it is exactly with a fourteen-years-old’s naivete and spontaneity that she tells her story. In the passage she describes her first encounter with a white man, her kidnapper. It is a traumatic but revealing first encounter, as she will rapidly realize that all the white people she is going to meet will behave the same towards her. In fact, at the end of the passage she affirms: “Yes daughter that was the first white man I ever saw and though I done met some since who was gentler I never met none any less cruel.”¹³⁷

¹³⁵ June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*, p. 62-63.

¹³⁶ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 71-72.

¹³⁷ Ivi, p. 72.

In the passage the extremely degrading conditions of the enslaved people on slave ships are described. In fact, “Having been purchased on the African coast, the slaves destined for America would cross the Atlantic in a journey that became known as the ‘Middle Passage.’”¹³⁸ They were all chained together in order to control them and limit their movements, thus eliminating every chance of rebellion. They were all packed together on the ships, one on top of the other with no space to move, in order to optimize the number of slaves who could be carried from one coast to the other. The number of slaves who slave-traders transported equated to the profit they would make once they arrived on land. This is the reason why they privileged high numbers instead of the quality of life and the physical conditions of the captured slaves. Moreover, slaves were not considered human beings, so they were not considered worthy of having decent life conditions. Consequently, many slaves died on slave ships because of the insufferable living conditions and other illnesses that easily spread in the packed concentration of people on ships. Herbert Klein states that

The biggest killers were gastrointestinal disorders and fevers [...]. Bouts of dysentery were common and the ‘bloody flux’ as it was called could break out in epidemic proportions and was the most common of the gastrointestinal diseases. Dysentery was also probably the most common disease experienced on all voyages [...].¹³⁹

The impossibility of having humane relationships on slave ships is underlined by the impossibility for Ayo to rescue and help the abandoned crying child. Furthermore, the young and scared Ayo cannot do more than screaming out of fear and despair in this situation in which she is confined alone with strangers, without her parents to take care of her. In fact, slave-traders did not hesitate in separating family members when it came to slaves. Their only concern was the profit they gained from the slave trade and slaves were not considered human beings but merely treated as objects and commodities to sell. The slaves’ subjugation and the commanding status of the slavers were maintained with physical punishments as well, as it can be observed in the passage in which the white man imposes silence on Ayo through violence.

¹³⁸ Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 130.

¹³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 151.

Ayo also describes the arrival on land after the seemingly never-ending voyage through the Middle Passage. She says that she tried her best to endure the degrading conditions they had to suffer on the ship because she knew that they could not sail forever. However, in the end her naïve hopes of returning home were dashed. She dictates to Joy:

Well jest about the time I think them ghost people could live on the water the day come and they led us out and throw sea water on us all and after I clear the water out my eyes I look out and the ship is beside a large wooden thing stuck out in the water. People everywhere but I thought I was going to fall down and die. I wasnt home. They was nothing but white ones far as the eye could see. Wimmin and chillun pointing and starin and lookin like ghosts. That was where they were pointin us to that land of walking ghosts. Oh Joy I was dyin.¹⁴⁰

She perceives the enslavers as spectral. This perception reveals her fear and the developing of her trauma because of the white capturers' behavior. Maja Milatovic affirms that this passage reveals

the impact of racism or the psychological terror of the protagonists' traumatising encounter with whiteness. In the captured survivors' minds, the stranger's country is colourless and terrifying, contrasted with the warmth, colours and freedom enjoyed in their home environments.¹⁴¹

After her meaningful description of how she perceives white people as ghosts who haunt her, and their land as a place in which she will eventually fall and die, another violent episode takes place:

I was hanging there both feet over holdin the rail with my hands tryin to figure out how to jump without taking this other poor critter with me when one of them white men on the ship came and jerked me back. He got hold of the chain that was hooked to the chains on my wrists and pulled so that I fell back headfirst on the ship. I just lay there for a long time and the sores on my wrists open up again and I watched the blood run down onto the wood planks that soaked it up like the ship was thirsty. Drank it up. Drank it right up.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 97.

¹⁴¹ Milatovic, *Reclaimed Genealogies*, p, 213.

¹⁴² Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 97-98.

This excerpt is another example of the violent and merciless way slaves were treated, both young or old, men or women, regardless of their age and gender. The image of Ayo's blood absorbed by the ship is extremely meaningful as it is the concrete trace of Ayo's existence and her survival through the Middle Passage, as explained by Camille Passalacqua.¹⁴³ She adds that "Blood simultaneously directs attention to the injured body and the ship as receptacles for the human degradation occurring there."¹⁴⁴ Blood thus serves a double function as on one hand it highlights the presence of life in Ayo's body although she had to endure the inhuman and demeaning experience of the slaves' voyage in the Middle Passage. Simultaneously, on the other hand, it represents the atrocity of the violent behavior of slavers on the slaves' body. The consequences of this behavior were the wounding and the scarring of slaves' bodies. These signs remained engraved on the slaves' skin to remind them of their sufferings and also of their survival after the traumatic experience. Blood will also function in the novel as the concrete representation of the close connection between Ayo and Lizzie as she will inherit the scars and wounds of her great-great-grandmother, consequently inheriting the memory and the firsthand experience in flashbacks of their opening and their bleeding.

When slaves arrived on land, the next atrocity they had to endure was their selling in markets. At first, Ayo affirms that she cannot and will not talk about the experience since she "cant stand to tell you (Joy) that."¹⁴⁵ However, later in the text she actually provides an account of the event. The first thing she recalls is that "One man there saw my arms and legs and the scars there and said somethin to the man what brung us off the boat [...]."¹⁴⁶ As it has been explained in the previous chapter, slaveowners used to check slaves' scars in order to understand their temperament. Scars and wounds accounted for their previously suffered punishments thus revealing their rebellious or insubordinate behavior. Then Ayo proceeds in giving the details of the market experience:

He put his hand in my mouth. Taste like dirt. He pulls my lips back and points to my mouth. My eyes open and I see all those ghosties lookin and pointin and talkin. I start to cry. Then he lifts the skirt of

¹⁴³ Camille Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones's Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry's Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela's Cambio de Armas*, p. 86.

¹⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 87.

¹⁴⁵ Perry, *Stigmata*, p.80.

¹⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 109.

my dress with his walking stick he carrying. He lift it up up up and points. [...] A scream starts creepin up in the back of my throat and I let it loose. They laughin laughin.¹⁴⁷

In markets slaves were inspected and treated like mere animals to be sold. As David Brion Davis writes in *Inhuman Bondage* slaves in markets were divided according to age, gender and physical condition and they “were then paraded stark naked for inspection by prospective buyers, and sold by brokers who dealt with them as livestock, as if they had been horses or cattle.”¹⁴⁸ In fact, Ayo’s mouth is inspected by one of the possible buyers with the aim of checking her physical condition. This is a common practice often performed on animals. Moreover, the passage underlines the complete loss of privacy of the slaves. The most intimate parts of their bodies were observed and inspected as well. Carol Henderson explains that

History bears witness to the very public manner in which the slave body was handled. Women were stripped before an audience of prospective buyers on the auction block; men had their genitalia frisked like cattle in an effort to determine their market worth; men and women were herded together irrespective of the mates they themselves had chosen in order to ‘breed’ more slave property—all these acts created a social decorum that prohibited the enslaved African American from obtaining any sort of privacy at its basic level.¹⁴⁹

In addition, it can be argued that this passage clearly alludes to the constant raping of black women in bondage. Lisa Long affirms that the walking stick the man uses to point the private body parts of Ayo can be read as a phallic metaphor, thus alluding to the bodily violation of black women by white masters.¹⁵⁰ Long continues writing that “In *Stigmata*, Perry suggests that we know that the rape of African American women happened in the past because African American women feel its presence in their sexual relationships today.”¹⁵¹ In fact, in her reading of the book she underlines that Lizzie translates her

¹⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 132-133.

¹⁴⁸ David Brion Davis, *Inhumane Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 94.

¹⁴⁹ Carol E. Henderson, *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002, p. 41.

¹⁵⁰ Lisa A. Long, “A Relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*,” *College English*, 64(4), (2002), p. 466.

¹⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

physical attraction to Anthony Paul, her lover, in terms of a physical assault and a bodily violation.

Furthermore, it can be noticed that the spectral description of the white slavers is used once again to convey Ayo's sense of fear and terror. Moreover, the feeling of helplessness and fright is highlighted by Ayo's crying and her screaming which are not only ignored but laughed at. The action of screaming is repeated several times in this diary entry in order to express the brutality of the happenings and the inability to convey through words the pain and the humiliation she had to endure. As Camille Passalacqua explains: "Words fail to capture the inhumanity of the situation, and in the context of their failure, it is Ayo's screams that convey the spectacle's bestiality. The traumatic memory embodied in this violation of her female body emphasizes the reason for Ayo's trauma."¹⁵² Another instance of the description of Ayo's painful screams used in order to express the inability of words of describing her suffering can be found in her account of the whippings. In one of the diary excerpts she narrates the instance in which she was whipped for her inability to understand her cruel mistress' words. This event emphasizes the injustice and the unfairness of the violence perpetuated on the slaves. They often were unfairly punished for the tiniest mistakes or for events that were not under their control.

Ayo dictates:

I done put the bucket down and tryin to help Mary get up when she comes back with two men. Big muscular hands. And Im scairt but Ida been even more if Ida know what she was up to. She carryin a whip and them two mens hold my arms while she whip me cross the back. Oh daughter she was laughin while she done it and them mens wouldn't look at me while I buck and try to get away. My dress fell away in big pieces and the blood ran down in the dirt and her pink dress was all splattered. Mary whimpered over the water pump and Im sure my hollerin could be heard from here all the way to Afraca.¹⁵³

In the passage there is a deep merging of the public and the private sphere since Ayo is publicly humiliated by the whippings, but in contrast her pain "becomes a private and

¹⁵² Camille Passalacqua, "Witnessing to Heal the Self in Gayl Jones's 'Corregidora' and in Phyllis Alesia Perry's 'Stigmata,'" *MELUS* 35(4), (2010), p. 151.

¹⁵³ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 172-173.

isolating reality, which she receives and feels in the pain of her beaten and bloodied back.”¹⁵⁴ As a consequence, this occurrence testifies to

her profound lack of voice in the face of a publicly visible experience. Ayo’s testimony to Joy transcribed in the diary leaves the trace of the experience while orally sharing this at once public and private experience allows Ayo to insert a narrative voice where she was once denied one.¹⁵⁵

Moreover, the cruelty of the mistress, whose behavior can be interpreted as an embodiment of the villainy and the demeanor of all white masters, is conveyed through her reaction in whipping her subordinate. In fact, she does not feel any sense of pity or empathy towards her slaves, instead she takes pleasure in inflicting punishments in order to establish her superiority. Furthermore, the image of blood representing both Ayo’s survival and the violence she was subjected to is used once again. Ayo’s screaming is the pivotal moment of the passage and “Once again, the inadequacy of words to capture the inhumanity and extremity of the situation results in her screams that convey the bestiality of the experience.”¹⁵⁶ Moreover, her screams are the proof and the reminder of her humanity. Although she is treated as an animal or a commodity, she reminds readers of her humanity using her voice in the most primal of instincts.¹⁵⁷ Passalacqua adds that “Perry uses Ayo’s screams as a way to decry the shameful scene of the white slave master’s dismissal and neglect of her human dignity.”¹⁵⁸ The consequence of these violent and degrading life conditions is Ayo’s complete traumatization. This is clearly conveyed in her words of the following diary entry:

I would ask the spirits to take me home and then Id close my eyes thinkin they had come. But I always wake up in the same place. [...] You know daughter I think it was about then that I just went plum crazy. I needed to die and God wouldnt let me. I needed it so bad. I could taste death in the back of my troath and I had no need fo food.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones’s Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry’s Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela’s Cambio de Armas*, p. 91.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁶ *Ivi*, p. 82.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁹ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 184.

Ayo witnesses an apparition of her mother still dressed in her African clothes, since it is the only way she remembers her. This apparition is the reason why she decides to start to eat again and continue living. Her last words in this passage reveal that she was switched from being a house slave to working in the fields. She admits that this choice “suited me fine”¹⁶⁰. It is an acknowledged fact that not only male slaves were assigned to the field work: “Slave women, including pregnant women and nursing mothers, were also subjected to heavy field labor.”¹⁶¹

The last entry of the diary is Joy’s announcement of her mother’s death. It is a peculiar moment since Ayo, before passing, inexplicably predicts the birth of Joy’s daughter giving her a baby quilt she had made for the occasion.

The diary will be also analyzed again later in this work from the perspective of its use as a vehicle of the transmission of transgenerational trauma.

2.3 The ancestral ghost: Ayo

The figure of the ancestor is of central importance in African culture and consequently largely respected in African American culture as well. Oyenyi Okunoye writes that

Ancestral consciousness in the African world derives from the belief in the continuity between the worlds of the dead and the living. This is in turn based on the understanding that the soul is immortal and that death is only a transition from the physical to the spiritual plane. Ancestors are dead members of the community who have ascended the spiritual plane and are seen as capable of communing with and watching over living members of their families.¹⁶²

Therefore, Ayo can be surely labelled as an ancestor, and although initially it can seem that she does not protect the living family members but haunt them instead, in the end readers can understand and sympathize with her choices. The motives of her haunting and

¹⁶⁰ *Ivi*, p.185.

¹⁶¹ Davis, *Inhumane Bondage*, p. 199.

¹⁶² Oyenyi Okunoye, “The Trope of the Ancestor in Contemporary Black Poetry,” *Obsidian*, 8(2), (2007), p. 140.

her objectives are finally justified and validated, and as such easily sharable by readers. Furthermore, Okunoye explains that “Whether figures are drawn from the distant past or recent history, some consensus is emerging as to who qualifies to be an ancestor. Despots, murderers and self-centered rulers and figures are not given the dignity and honour befitting ancestors.”¹⁶³ As a consequence, it can be claimed that Ayo perfectly fits the description as she was the victim subjected to the violent behavior and despotism of self-centered white masters rather than a perpetrator of brutality herself.

Ayo can be also compared to the figure of the ancestral ghost which has been presented in the first chapter, called “living-dead” by John Samuel Mbiti. In fact, Ayo is a departed family member who has not yet completed the process of passing, thus appearing to the eyes of other family members. However, she does not appear to the eyes of the oldest family members, instead she reincarnates in the body of one of the youngest.

Her aim in reincarnating in other female characters belonging to her matrilineal legacy is the same aim she had in dictating the diary to her daughter Joy. Her primary objective is always the act of remembrance. The main importance is given to the act of remembering and being remembered. Her deepest desire and her driving force is the need of her story to be passed on to the following generations. Ayo’s greater need is that the experience of slavery is not forgotten in time, that is why she decides to reincarnate, or re-embody in Pamela June’s words, in Grace’s and Lizzie’s bodies respectively. Pamela June explains that she prefers to address Grace’s and Lizzie’s experience as “re-embodiment” rather than “reincarnation” because “the women involved here are unique individuals with their own ‘varied and complex social reality,’ to borrow a phrase from bell hooks (*Feminist* 44).”¹⁶⁴ In fact, it has been already specified in the previous paragraphs that Ayo and Grace are described as very different characters by Lizzie, and the three women show very different personality traits in their behaviors and in the context of facing traumatic situations. Consequently, Ayo is portrayed as a suffering character having endured and survived the slavery experience, Grace is depicted as a troubled woman who does not accept the reincarnation process and decides to leave her family and her community,

¹⁶³ Ivi, p. 144.

¹⁶⁴ June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*, p. 51.

Lizzie instead finds a way to cope with the re-embodiment of the women in her body accepting her condition and re-appropriating her life.

However, Lizzie's relationship with Ayo is not always accepting and unproblematic. Initially Ayo is perceived as an intrusive and unwanted presence in Lizzie's life. Ayo can be also perceived as an ambivalent figure by the reader, as she on one hand inspires sympathy and empathy in her accounts of sorrow and pain endured in bondage, but on the other hand she can be perceived as the haunting presence troubling Lizzie's life. Éva Tettenborn highlights the fact that in the novel Ayo is often described as the daughter of a "master dyer"¹⁶⁵ that can be linked to

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.¹⁶⁶

In fact, her intentions are not to harm but to pass on her memory of the traumatic slavery experience, in order to prevent the following generations from forgetting. Tettenborn continues explaining that Ayo being both the daughter of a master dyer and a survivor of the Middle Passage

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.¹⁶⁷

This process of reincarnation that has been initiated by Ayo can be seen as a paradox since to acquire remembrance and justice, she makes her descendants relive her own wounds and her own pain. Tettenborn explains that instead this paradox "does not run counter to Africana traditions of honoring ancestral figures. Rather, it follows a logic that

¹⁶⁵ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 143.

¹⁶⁶ Éva Tettenborn, "Africana Concepts of the Ancestor and Time in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*," *Obsidian*, 12(1), (2011), p. 98.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

is created out of the disruption of Ayo's African concepts of the world and time due to her experience of the Middle Passage and slavery."¹⁶⁸

Lisa Long gives another interpretation of this ambivalence of Ayo's character. She introduces the concept of the "rape of history", which she uses to describe the process of the penetration of Ayo's memories into Grace's and Lizzie's bodies. Consequently, she depicts her character as the figurative rapist of Grace's and Lizzie's bodies since Ayo imposes the process of reincarnation to her descendants, thus the unwanted physical and mental penetration.¹⁶⁹ The representation of the reincarnation process as showing only the worst memories of Ayo's life may suggest a depiction of African American women as the "mules of the world."¹⁷⁰ On the contrary it can be argued that it underlines their strength and vigor. In fact, "Despite their subjugation, Ayo and Grace powerfully endure beyond the grave as particular personalities and as effects on Lizzie's body."¹⁷¹ This bodily penetration translates into a transgenerational transmission of Ayo's own memories and wounds into Grace's first, and then Lizzie's body. However, she does not only pass on memories and scars but also her sense of displacement:

The perpetuation of Ayo's displacement from Africa continues with Grace's migration north and then Lizzie's forced hospitalization. The slave trade removes Ayo from Africa, the haunting memories of the past lead Grace away from her family, and Lizzie's parents send her to various mental hospitals to cure her of what psychologically and physically threatens her life.¹⁷²

Moreover, as stated also by Pamela June, since Ayo's and Grace's memories are all shared into a communal consciousness inside Lizzie's body, it can be argued that the reincarnation process that Ayo has established is an embodiment of the concept of collective memory. All the memories and the different experiences of the three women are in fact merged into a unique body creating "one unbearable collective memory."¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 95.

¹⁶⁹ Long, "A Relative Pain", p. 462.

¹⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 468.

¹⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷² Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones's Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry's Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela's Cambio de Armas*, p. 85.

¹⁷³ June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*, p. 65.

Moreover, unlike the concept of the living dead analyzed by John Samuel Mbiti, the ancestral ghost of Ayo is not perceived as an inherent part of life, like it would be perceived in African culture, where the supernatural realm is thoroughly accepted and integrated in daily life. Furthermore, she is not only initially perceived as a threat by Lizzie, but also misunderstood and not believed as real by Lizzie's parents. This may testify to their lack of acceptance of their origins and their heritage, underlining their efforts in assimilating and mimicking the values and sceptic behavior of the whites, who do not believe in the supernatural realm. This is proven by their decision of delegating Lizzie's psychological and physical care to doctors who are the embodiment of Western beliefs and values and thus who do not consider Lizzie's version of the story.

There have been also different readings of the character of Ayo that have provided various interpretations of her powers and her abilities of beginning a reincarnation process. They might give a valid explanation of the aim of the process itself as well.

Due to the remarkable presence of Christian elements in the novel, Camille Passalacqua argues that the three women's bond can be read in a semi-religious perspective as an alternative and non-Christian re-embodiment of the Trinity. In the novel, one can detect several references to Christianity. The title itself pinpoints to one of the most famous events in the religious realm. Stigmata are the wounds that were provoked on Jesus' hands, feet and chest by his crucifixion. Sometimes, these wounds were experienced by Saints, the most popular instances being Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Padre Pio of Pietralcina amongst many others, and perceived as miracles that identify the person's perfect union with the suffering of Jesus on the cross, thus physically manifesting it in the same way. In *Stigmata*, these signs are not interpreted in a biblical way but as traces of a past that must be remembered. Moreover, it is precisely the character of the priest that validates Lizzie's experiences by categorizing her wounds and scars as stigmata. He also provides the non-biblical reading of the occurrences thus furnishing an explanation of Lizzie's story and making a valuable assumption on why she has to endure the reincarnation process and all its consequences. Passalacqua thus affirms that

Ayo, Grace, and Lizzie, three women living in one body, evoke a reference to the central mystery of Christianity—the Trinity as three persons in one God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person of the

Trinity is distinct from one another yet they coexist together in one God—the Holy Spirit works with the Father and Son in the completion of humankind’s salvation.¹⁷⁴

Like it happens in the Trinity, the three women coexist in only one body, Lizzie’s, but they all have distinct personalities and they handle their life and their condition in various ways. However, despite their differences they all, consciously or unconsciously, work towards the same objective which is not the salvation of humankind as in the religious Trinity, but rather the preservation of the memory of a traumatic past. Ayo does so by dictating the diary to her daughter Joy and by initiating the reincarnation process, Grace patches her quilt instead and passes on the trunk to Lizzie and finally Lizzie re-creates the same appliqué quilt closing the circle.

The reading of this matrilineal legacy bond as similar in certain aspects to the bond of the Christian Trinity would also contribute to explaining the symbiotic and synergetic relationship between the three women: “In Christianity, the teaching is that the Father’s love begets the Son and their love produces the Holy Spirit. Ayo’s trauma begets Grace’s trauma and together their pain leads to the proliferation of more wounding in Lizzie’s body and psyche.”¹⁷⁵ Nonetheless, it is this three-way relationship that in the end provides the closing of the story since “Once Lizzie accepts that her reality is not a mark of insanity but rather exemplifies how traumatic memory affects her, the triune relationship of Ayo, Grace, and Lizzie offers her a way to emerge from despair and isolation.”¹⁷⁶ It is exactly due to the reincarnation process that Ayo accomplishes her aim of being remembered and passing on the memory of the slavery experience. Secondly, Grace can reconnect with her lost daughter and Lizzie is eventually able to accept her past and her heritage finally closing the narrative circle.

The second alternative reading of the character of Ayo has been offered by Éva Tettenborn. She has claimed that Ayo can be

described as an example of a West African woman endowed with Àjé, which is, according to Teresa Washington, a ‘vastly influential power that is inclined towards paradox and multiplicity’ (13-14) and

¹⁷⁴ Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones’s Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry’s Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela’s Cambio de Armas*, p. 111.

¹⁷⁵ *Ivi*, p. 111-112.

¹⁷⁶ *Ivi*, p. 112.

which '[i]n addition to being a cosmic force that originates with Great Mothers Deities ... is a naturally occurring property of select human beings' (14).¹⁷⁷

She has also underlined that Ayo spelled backwards corresponds to the word Oya. This can be read as a reference to the Nigerian deity Oya of the Yoruba tradition. This interpretation would explain the powers possessed by Ayo. Oya is described by Teresa Washington as the orisha of “transformation and ascendance”¹⁷⁸ and the deity whose “influence spans from the unborn to the ancestors to the domestic realm [...]”¹⁷⁹ In fact, Ayo is inexplicably able to perceive the incoming pregnancy of her daughter Joy, and she also manages to influence the life of her descendants through the reincarnation process. Furthermore, this deity has the ability of guiding “her terrestrial daughters [to] assist human beings in their quest to appease and honor their ancestors.”¹⁸⁰ As it has been already explained, Ayo’s aim is precisely that of remembering all the lives lost in the Middle Passage and remembering her story of bondage under the slavery institution. Through the reincarnation process that she begins, she can finally pass on her memory and be commemorated by her descendants, together with all the lost lives of other deceased slaves. It can be affirmed that the comparison between Ayo and Oya highlights many similarities in their aims and powers, thus validating Tettenborn’s assumptions. If the reading of Ayo is based on the Nigerian orisha Oya, consequently the scars and the wounds that Grace and Lizzie inherit from Ayo’s memories through the reincarnation flashbacks can be read as “corporeal markings of Oya in an effort to protect Ayo’s ancestral memory.”¹⁸¹ This reading coincides with the priest’s assumption in the novel. Although probably unaware of the existence of the Nigerian deity who might correspond to Lizzie’s haunting ancestor, he provides the same explanation of her condition. He affirms that the scars and the wounds, which he calls stigmata because of his religious

¹⁷⁷ Tettenborn, “Africana Concepts of the Ancestor and Time in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*,” p. 101.

¹⁷⁸ Teresa N. Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers Our Texts: Manifestations of Àjé in Africana Literature*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005, p. 48, quoted in Tettenborn, “Africana Concepts of the Ancestor and Time in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*,” p. 102

¹⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁰ *Ivi*, p. 50, quoted in Tettenborn, “Africana Concepts of the Ancestor and Time in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*,” p. 102.

¹⁸¹ Tettenborn, “Africana Concepts of the Ancestor and Time in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*,” p. 102.

background, can be interpreted as a sign of the need of remembering one's past, one's ancestors and one's heritage.

2.4 The healing of the haunting experience

The three women that are at the center of the novel have all experienced traumatic events and their quest is achieving the healing of their respective traumas. Ayo's traumatic experience consists in slavery and bondage. Her memory of this trauma is passed on to the following generations due to the reincarnation process, which becomes the traumatic experience of both Grace and Lizzie. Their inheritance of the memory of the traumatic past consists in the inheritance of the trauma itself as well. In fact, as it has been already explained in the previous chapter, both memory and trauma can be passed on from generation to generation. Consequently, the characters of Ayo, Grace and Lizzie can be perceived as the literal embodiment of these theories, the embodiment of the phenomenon of postmemory, and the embodiment of the concept of collective memory as well, since the private memories of the three women are all merged together due to the process of reincarnation.

Moreover, as it has been mentioned, Grace and Lizzie have very different approaches towards the reincarnation experience. This difference in their reactions dictates two very different outcomes. Grace distances herself from her family in fear of hurting them thus inflicting the pain of the sense of abandonment on her husband and her children, especially her little daughter, Sarah. Her decisions to leave and continue to try to avoid the problem of Ayo's reincarnation reveal her inability of facing and accepting Ayo's memories and thus metaphorically the traumatic past, the memory of slavery and her heritage. She will be able to close her narrative circle and thus partially heal her trauma, only because of Lizzie's reincarnation, which enables her to reconnect her tie with her abandoned daughter. On the other hand, Lizzie's displacement is only momentary as she is interned in various psychiatric hospitals but in the end, she is able to master her condition facing and accepting the past. It can be affirmed that Lizzie, and consequently Ayo and Grace, achieve their healing through different elements such as the quilt making process, the reconnection of the matrilineal legacy and the relationship with Anthony Paul. Moreover, it can be affirmed that Lizzie's own healing influences also the healing

process of both women reincarnated in her body. She might be considered the medium through which Sarah and Grace reconnect their tie and she also manages to accomplish Ayo's objective of remembrance. However, as Camille Passalacqua highlights

It is important to distinguish that these characters do not necessarily achieve by each story's end a complete recuperation from what was lost and ruined from the traumatic event, but rather they experience steps towards healing from and integration of the past with their now-altered selves.¹⁸²

The healing process is facilitated by the act of facing the traumatic past since "the past contains models for healing as well."¹⁸³ It is only through the act of facing and sharing the traumatic past that Lizzie can shape her identity and move on to her life peacefully. Phyllis Alesia Perry herself affirms that

it's all about remembering and learning how to live with the memory. In both novels remembering is pain. There is trauma, betrayal. You have to be able to bury it and transform it into a life that's rich in relationships. [...] And I think there is value in remembering. We never really forget a betrayal or a trauma, and pretending that you've forgotten it does not get you to true forgiveness. You have to be able to look at it.¹⁸⁴

Moreover, many of the elements which help Lizzie's, Grace's and Ayo's healing do not only imply the direct encounter with the past and its acceptance but also the act of sharing the memories with others. Laurie Vickroy explains that "for healing to take place, survivors must find ways to tell their stories and to receive some social acknowledgement if not acceptance (Herman 182-83; Felman and Laub 58, 69; Caruth, *Trauma* 153-54)."¹⁸⁵ Dori Laub also adds that survivors need to survive in order to tell their story but most importantly they also need to tell their story in order to survive.¹⁸⁶ Ayo achieves this purpose through the diary and the reincarnation process, while Lizzie, following Grace's

¹⁸² Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones's Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry's Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela's Cambio de Armas*, p. 17.

¹⁸³ Keith Byerman, *Remembering the past in contemporary African American fiction*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005, p. 37.

¹⁸⁴ Duboin, "Confronting the Specters of the Past, Writing the Legacy of Pain," p. 641.

¹⁸⁵ Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and survival in contemporary fiction*, London: University of Virginia Press, 2002, p. 19.

¹⁸⁶ Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle" in *Trauma: Explorations in memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 63.

footsteps, does so by patching the appliqué quilt in order to explain to her mother/daughter Sarah the truth of their relationship and thus reconnecting the bonds between Grace, Sarah and Lizzie simultaneously. Through the process of sharing her story with her mother/daughter due to the quilt making process, Lizzie takes a step forward on her healing path. It is exactly at this moment that all the matrilineal bonds are finally restored. This reconnection creates a counter narrative of the separation of families during slavery. It disrupts and counters Ayo's memory of her detachment to her mother because of her kidnapping and her enslavement. Furthermore, Marianne Hirsch argues that "When physical identity is altered by the mark of slavery and the daughter is separated from the mother by a radically different history, she both fears having to repeat her mother's story and longs for the recognition that ensures her identity as her mother's daughter."¹⁸⁷ This may explain Ayo's need of creating a matrilineal legacy of reincarnation and remembrance in order to never forget the bonds that connect mothers and daughters (and female bonds in general), the bond she was never allowed to have.

Another element that allows both Ayo and Lizzie, as survivors of a traumatic experience, to share their story in order to heal is writing a diary. The diary that Ayo dictates to her daughter Joy helps her in bonding with her daughter and enables her aim to pass her memory of the traumatic past onto the following generations to be realized. Furthermore, the diary allows her to counter the premises of the slavery experience in which the actions of reading and writing were prohibited to slaves in order to maintain their subjugation. Because of the diary Ayo is able to reclaim the voice she was once denied. Lizzie, instead, is forced by the doctors to write a journal when she is under observation in the psychiatric hospital. Although she has a conflictive relationship with the doctors thus generally dismissing their advices, she confesses that "The journal eases my mental pain and illuminates it, makes everything swimming through my head touchable."¹⁸⁸ The journal allows her to slowly start to take control over her situation because through writing Lizzie

¹⁸⁷ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 81.

¹⁸⁸ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 219.

is finally able to transfer her trauma from the inside to the outside. The journal consequently becomes a concrete recipient of her traumatic memory.¹⁸⁹

The writing of the journal under the observation of doctors is contraposed to Lizzie's long period of self-imposed silence in the psychiatric hospital. Silence is slightly therapeutic for Lizzie. In fact, according to Passalacqua, this process of silent reflection can be compared to the concepts of "acting out" and "working through" elaborated by Dominick LaCapra:

Lizzie's continual return to the past is not just symptomatic of being suspended in a state of 'acting out' the trauma. Rather, it is part of a larger therapeutic paradigm in which she operates while in the hospital. In LaCapra's discussion of 'working through,' he argues that this is an essential aspect of the survivor's process of coming to terms with the past trauma through critical memory work. During this process, the trauma survivor is no longer suspended in a phase of "acting out." This distinction between these two processes further explains how Lizzie begins to assimilate and integrate Ayo's past. LaCapra notes that 'working through' does not necessarily achieve closure, but rather is a way of mourning and a reengaging with life.¹⁹⁰

This period of silence is characterized by an increased frequency of the appearance of wounds and bleeding scars on Lizzie's body which corresponds to her process of "critical memory work" mentioned above. The reappearance of the scars greatly confuses the doctors who had made sure she could not harm herself, depriving her of every dangerous object. This allows the beginning of the dismissal of the doctors' rational explanation of Lizzie's condition, simultaneously validating Lizzie's version of the facts and facilitating her understanding on how to heal her trauma. However, silence alone cannot achieve the complete healing of Lizzie's mind. Although her period of silence draws Lizzie's liberation from the psychiatric hospital nearer since in this moment she realizes that she needs to feign sanity before the doctors, it does not complete her process of grasping her condition and mastering it: she is able to validate her story only by talking with the other patient who witnesses her reincarnation and with the priest; she will reconnect family ties only by sharing her story through the quilt project with Sarah; and finally, she is able to

¹⁸⁹ This recalls Pierre Nora's idea of "lieux de mémoire" which has been introduced in the first chapter. It can be argued, in fact, that both Ayo's diary, Lizzie's journal and the quilts are "lieux de mémoire" since they serve as concrete recipients of the characters' traumatic memories.

¹⁹⁰ Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones's Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry's Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela's Cambio de Armas*, p. 98.

master her situation also because of the loving relationship with Anthony Paul, a painter and an artist.

Anthony Paul is fascinated with her scars and while touching them he describes them as “Gut-wrenching to look at. But so beautiful it’s hard to stop looking.”¹⁹¹ His loving touch heals Lizzie’s body and gives it dignity, turning the scars into proofs of her humanity and ability to survive the traumatic experience:

Although the textual attention to Lizzie’s scars relates the physical traces and indelible memory of the dehumanization caused by slavery, Anthony Paul’s sensory perception recognizes Lizzie’s humanity and beauty as captured in the ‘raised pattern’ on her back. His touch and gaze carve her humanity, and by extension Ayo’s humanity, back onto Lizzie’s body. The verbal and physical exchange between Lizzie and Anthony Paul counters the spectacle from more than a century earlier when Ayo’s mistress savagely whipped her as others watched. Anthony Paul sees them (Lizzie and Ayo) as fully human in their nakedness, and Lizzie’s body becomes a physical space for the translation of the black female body as deserving of dignity and love.¹⁹²

His ability of healing Lizzie’s body consists in countering the premises of the slavery experience. As Ayo’s body was denigrated and violated in bondage, Lizzie’s body and consequently Ayo’s reincarnated presence are healed through the respect that Anthony Paul directs towards them. The relationship between Lizzie and Anthony Paul counters also another characteristic of the slavery experience, that of denying slaves intimate and loving relationships. Moreover, the character of Anthony Paul might have a role in the healing of Grace’s mind, too. When Lizzie and Anthony Paul meet soon after Lizzie’s release from hospitalization, they become involved in a romantic relationship. Although Lizzie does not immediately reveal her story to him, he feels like he already knew her. When Lizzie, and consequently Grace, see his bed they are reminded of the intimacy between Grace and George, Grace’s husband. Furthermore, before making love Lizzie explains to Anthony Paul that “things happen to people when they make love. You gotta realize that you’ll begin to know me, and I’m not talking about just in the biblical sense.”¹⁹³ To this affirmation he startingly responds with “I already know you, old

¹⁹¹ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 147.

¹⁹² Passalacqua, “Witnessing to Heal the Self in Gayl Jones’s ‘Corregidora’ and in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s ‘Stigmata,’” p. 155.

¹⁹³ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 130.

woman [...]”¹⁹⁴ thus validating the assumption of a previous encounter, maybe in another life.

Although his identity remains ambiguous throughout the novel, one can argue that Anthony Paul might be a reincarnation of Grace’s husband, George. This would allow a completion of the narrative circle and the healing of all the three women. In fact, while Lizzie is healed thanks to the re-appropriation of her life after the hospitalization and the acceptance of the traumatic past, Ayo is healed by the act of remembrance and the countering of her slave experience, and finally Grace is healed through the reconnection with her daughter and her husband. It might be important to underline that, as Camille Passalacqua suggests, Anthony Paul’s connection with Lizzie might be dictated by a relationship that dates even further back in Ayo’s past.¹⁹⁵ This may be proven by one of Anthony Paul’s paintings that portrays “A girl-woman walking into the unknown. In the distance, the waves toss a ship. She is obviously nude underneath a cloth that is wrapped around the waist of her slight body. She has her back to us—a back crisscrossed with a lacy pattern of scars—but looks over her shoulder directly into my eyes.”¹⁹⁶ After seeing the painting Lizzie proceeds to explain to Anthony Paul that the “girl-woman” he has portrayed is both herself and Ayo. The mysterious character of Anthony Paul remains unexplained thus not providing an answer on his real identity, but from this instinctual connection between him and the three women one can assume that he is a reappearance and reincarnation of the past exactly like Lizzie is.

At the end of the novel, the three women are able to achieve a partial if not almost complete healing of their trauma. Lizzie moves on to re-appropriating her life going back to normality after her hospitalization, Grace reconnects her family ties and Ayo achieves her objective of remembrance and countering of the slavery experience.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹⁵ Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones’s Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry’s Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela’s Cambio de Armas*, p. 107.

¹⁹⁶ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 148.

3. Haunting and Trauma in *Stigmata*

3.1 The mediums of haunting

In *Stigmata*, there are several mediums through which haunting is transmitted, conveyed or initiated. The first ones that readers encounter are the trunk and what Lizzie finds inside of it, the diary and the quilt. These elements can be seen as haunting mediums as it is exactly after the inheritance of these objects that Lizzie starts to experience the strange haunting flashbacks, and it is from this point on that the reincarnation process begins.

The first hint that readers have of the power of these objects is provided by the description of the trunk in the moment in which Lizzie opens it: “I’ve left the key in the lock and I turn it, opening the lid; an old smell, a sigh, a breath escapes from the past.”¹⁹⁷ The trunk is described as if it is enveloped in a mysterious but powerful energy. This description foreshadows the role of the trunk as a medium for the initiation of the reincarnation process. The object can be compared to “Pandora’s box. The contents of which need to be interpreted and understood so that the released sorrowful past can become a force of regeneration.”¹⁹⁸ The trunk is also the first means through which Lizzie can connect to her foremothers and discover their story. Reminiscing on the day she had first opened the trunk Lizzie explains that she felt the urgent need to connect with her ancestors:

My eyes fall on the trunk, on the floor at the foot of the bed. When I first opened it three years ago and read the diary and the stories Ayo told to her daughter Joy, I had felt an incredible yearning to be in that room with them, to look into Ayo’s face and see...I don’t know. To see Africa. I wanted to be Joy, sitting next to my mother, pencil in hand, and I wanted to be Ayo, sitting next to my child, my future.¹⁹⁹

Moreover, precisely validating this interpretation of the trunk and the quilt as mediums of connection and initiation of the contact with her ancestors, one of the first dream-like

¹⁹⁷ Phyllis Alesia Perry, *Stigmata*, New York: Hyperion, 1998, p. 16.

¹⁹⁸ Ana Nunes, *African American Women Writers’ Historical Fiction*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 150.

¹⁹⁹ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 38.

flashbacks that Lizzie experiences starts one night when she is wrapped in a quilt, precisely the night after the trunk was delivered to her and she had opened it:

On nights like this, dreams come soft.

I lie half-fading into sleep, and a brown woman marches across the bed, wading through the moonlight. She is wrapped in color, a woman-child beside her. She adds her footprints to others on the road to the market, one the threads laid on the surface of my bed.

The quilt engulfs the twin bed, and I have folded it in half. [...]

It is hot, but I pull the quilt up to my chin.²⁰⁰

Although it is not openly stated if the quilt which Perry refers to in this passage is Grace's quilt, the one found in the trunk, there are similarities in the way they are described and in their purpose. The quilt in this passage, in fact, "engulfs" Lizzie and she later describes feeling tangled but comfortable in Grace's quilt too. Moreover, they both produce the dream-like flashbacks which the protagonist is plunged into. The quilts thus represent "tangible links to a silent past"²⁰¹ serving the purpose of initiators of the haunting experience. Furthermore, Pamela June writes, referring to Grace's quilt, that "This feminized quilt, in other words, encourages Lizzie's painful but necessary reconnection with her foremothers."²⁰² June continues explaining that the way Lizzie describes the quilt is revealing of its purpose. In fact, she calls it a "cloth womb"²⁰³ in which she is tangled but she also feels good. This description is provided by Lizzie after she has experienced another flashback. It can be interpreted as the description of the reincarnation process itself as, at first, it tangles and troubles Lizzie's life but in the end it is also the means through which she is able to reconnect with her past and her heritage and thus partially heal her traumatic experience, as well as the trauma of Ayo and Grace respectively. In another instance of a reincarnation flashback, the haunting vision is less dream-like and feels more real. Lizzie is not about to sleep as in the preceding example, but she is talking to her

²⁰⁰ *Ivi*, p. 24.

²⁰¹ Camille Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones's Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry's Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela's Cambio de Armas*, Doctoral Dissertation, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina: 2009, p. 75.

²⁰² Pamela B. June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity: Postmodern, Feminist and Multi-ethnic Writings of Toni Morrison, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Phyllis Alesia Perry, Gayl Jones, Emma Pérez, Paula Gunn Allen, and Kathy Acker*, New York: Peter Lang, 2010, p. 64.

²⁰³ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 39.

friend Ruth. Lizzie loses consciousness and fades away from reality to relive the experiences of her foremothers. When she wakes up, she is tangled in the quilt and while her mother checks on her, Ruth explains: “‘Sarah, I don’t know what it is, but she called me somebody else’s name and then I swear it was like somebody else was sitting there across from me.’ The girl rubs her shaking hands up and down the front of her jeans. ‘She called me Joy. Joy...? Joy Ward?’”²⁰⁴ Interestingly, when the reincarnation flashback started, Lizzie and her friend Ruth were sitting on Grace’s quilt. The quilt, as Camille Passalacqua affirms, can be read as an instance of what Pierre Nora calls “lieux de mémoire”.²⁰⁵ In fact, the object becomes a recipient of the memory and the trauma lived by Ayo and Grace and thus it influences who comes in contact with it, Lizzie. The same can be affirmed for Ayo’s diary as well. Ayo’s diary is another recipient of the traumatic memory of the past that influences Lizzie’s existence when she reads it. It is another initiator of the flashbacks and the reincarnation process. This is realized also by some of the characters. For instance, Aunt Eva, Grace’s sister, affirms: “The diary, see, is just the key, baby. The diary. The quilt. Just the keys that unlock the door to what you call the past.”²⁰⁶

Furthermore, Ayo’s diary can also be defined as a testimony. A testimony is the

process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness [...]. [...] repossessing one’s life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation.²⁰⁷

Dori Laub argues that this modality of reclaiming the traumatic event is of fundamental importance because “even if successfully repressed, it nevertheless invariably plays a decisive formative role in who one comes to be, and in how one comes to live one’s life.”²⁰⁸ Moreover, as Paul Ricoeur explains, the listener, or in this case the reader, becomes a witness too, as a consequence of the contact with the testimony. The reader,

²⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁰⁵ Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones’s Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry’s Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela’s Cambio de Armas*, p. 77.

²⁰⁶ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 118.

²⁰⁷ Dori Laub, “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle” in *Trauma: Explorations in memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 70.

²⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

then, is exposed to the effects of the events narrated in the testimony and thus is able to perceive the violence and the pain of these traumatic events.²⁰⁹

Ayo's diary is the first step towards Ayo's survival and healing from the traumatic experience of slavery. When Lizzie opens the trunk and reads the diary, she consequently becomes a second-hand witness of Ayo's past. The consequence of reading Ayo's testimony is the initiation of the reincarnation process. The reincarnation process can be interpreted as the concrete representation of the second-hand witness' perception of and exposition to the effects of the narrated events. One can argue that the definition of testimony applies to Grace's quilt too, as the object has the same power of memory transmission that the diary has. Lizzie, after coming in contact with all the testimonies that were left behind by her foremothers, namely Ayo's diary and Grace's quilt, relives the traumatic past and the memory of the two women becoming the witness of all their experiences.

Another possible lieu de mémoire which can be found in the novel is the piece of blue cloth that Lizzie inherits together with the trunk, the quilt and the diary. The blue cloth is made from some garments that belonged to Ayo's mother, and it represents and contains the memory of "Ayo's traumatic break with her mother, her past, and her identity."²¹⁰ This piece of cloth, which used to be bigger, is then handed down from generation to generation and finally featured in the quilt Lizzie patches in order to tell her story and reconnect the tie with her mother/daughter. Lizzie herself describes the little piece of cloth as a "link to the past."²¹¹

Furthermore, there are several instances in the novel in which the medium for the representation of the reincarnation process is a mirror. In fact, this happens several times when Lizzie, seeing her reflection on a mirror, perceives some physical changes in her appearance. These changes signal her transition from reality to the reincarnation flashbacks. For instance, she explains:

²⁰⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "La Marque du Passé," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 1, (1998), p.17, quoted in Lars Eckstein, *Remembering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetic and Politics of Literary Memory*, New York: Rodopi, 2006, p. 23.

²¹⁰ Lisa Woolfork, *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009, p. 55.

²¹¹ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 228.

When I straighten, I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror. The face that looks back is both familiar and strange, strange enough to make me drop the hairbrush again. Then I realize that I'm sitting, not lying down. I'm at the distressing table. In a chair. And it is Grace's face that looks back at me from the glass, her flesh-and-blood, three-dimensional face, looking very surprised inside its frame of very black hair. I half expect to look out a window and see myself stretched on Sarah DuBose's good sofa.

There *is* a window, but what I see are pink roses climbing about the sill and, beyond, a barbwire fence, a pasture, cows lumbering up and down little hills.

I turn again to the mirror and watch as Grace begins to tremble.²¹²

This passage reveals the superimposition of Lizzie's body with the body of her deceased grandmother in the flashbacks. The mirror acts as a medium of connection between the two. In another passage, this happens:

Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I freeze for a moment, tight, then relax. Another girl looks back at me from the mirror. Fifteen, maybe. I've never seen her before but I know her. Someone I can't see is tying a piece of dark blue cloth on the girl's head. [...]

The girl is the young Bessie. In her mind, she still calls herself Ayo. I hear her talking to herself and she's in the mirror a lot, always doing something other than what I'm doing.²¹³

It can be thus affirmed that the mirror is a medium for the connection between reality and the dream-like dimension in which the reincarnation flashbacks take place. From her reaction when she witnesses the body switch in the mirror, it can be assumed that Lizzie is aware that what she is seeing is not part of her reality, but simultaneously she also knows that this vision will concretely influence her existence. When she is plunged into the flashbacks, Lizzie relives Ayo's or Grace's life while being inside of both Ayo's or Grace's body and her own body simultaneously. Another instance of this phenomenon is described in this way: "I'm combing and rolling my hair at the dresser and Little Ayo is at our window, the mirror. She looks at me with my own eyes, wet with tears. Her mouth makes words I cannot hear. I know her face well by now and I don't move because if I look away she'll be gone."²¹⁴ This excerpt highlights again the superimposition of the two bodies, Lizzie's and her haunting ancestor's. Moreover, the description of the mirror as a

²¹² *Ivi*, p. 52-53.

²¹³ *Ivi*, p. 141.

²¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 142-143.

window is particularly significant as it is the perfect comparison for underlining the nature of the mirror as medium of connection between Lizzie and her ancestors. In fact, a window connects two different spaces, one can look outside of a window and see another space that is separated but still connected to the one in which the individual is situated in. This is precisely what happens to Lizzie when she looks in the mirror and sees one of her ancestors. She is looking at another dimension that is separated from her reality but that, in a certain way, is also connected to it. In fact, the connection between the two dimensions is revealed by the superimposition of Lizzie's body to the body of the ancestor whom she is seeing in the mirror. While she witnesses Ayo's apparition in the mirror instead of her own reflection, she is also able to feel in her own hands the fabric that Ayo is touching: "That blue-dyed African cloth I'm looking at in the mirror seems to fold right under my fingertips, its satiny feel surprising me."²¹⁵ Pamela June explains that the mirror is a symbol which represents

the foremothers' insistence on a cross-generational reflection of their memories. In other words, when Lizzie looks at her grandmother, she also looks at herself. The face of a foremother in the mirror indicates that the women, though individuals, are 'cocooned' or interconnected with the stories of their own mothers.²¹⁶

The symbol of the mirror thus highlights the strong connection that Lizzie establishes with her foremothers and their traumatic memories, and consequently with her own heritage and past.

3.2. The symbols of connection with the ancestors and with the past

The effect that the connection established with her foremothers has on Lizzie is the reincarnation process with all its consequences and the creation of a strong matrilineal bond. The strength of the trans-generational connection between the three women is conveyed in multiple ways throughout the novel.

²¹⁵ Ivi, p. 143.

²¹⁶ June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*, p. 64.

First, the primary sign of connection is the superimposition of Lizzie's body with those of her foremothers in the reincarnation process and in the flashbacks. This physical and mental interrelation between the three women is frequently highlighted in the novel. In fact, Lizzie affirms that she feels "Old and young. Old and young at the same time."²¹⁷ Or again she describes that Ayo "walks with me, so close behind that it's as if she steps on the backs of my shoes. I often turn to look over my shoulder, but she is not flesh; she's a shadow on my heart."²¹⁸ Lizzie describes also the superimposition of Grace's body and mind onto her own by saying:

Grace wraps her thoughts around my mind and I sit there with her in the grip of a quiet fear that makes it hard to breathe.

If she sleeps, she fears the return of the dreams that follow.

The scenes of water and blood and death.²¹⁹

It is important to highlight that Lizzie in this passage is able to feel the same fear that Grace is experiencing, revealing that the superimposition between the women does not only involve the body but the mind as well. This superimposition and connection between the bodies and the minds of the three women is also underlined by the sense of familiarity that Lizzie begins to associate to the dimension of the reincarnation flashbacks, rather than her own reality: "The visions don't really scare me anymore. I expect them. I've grown comfortable when I'm inside them. But in the world I am supposed to know, I feel as if a trap is slowly being sprung."²²⁰

As a consequence of this bodily and mental superimposition Lizzie inherits the concrete marks that Ayo acquired during slavery, she inherits her wounds and her scars. As Lizzie states herself, "I have been moving in and out of mental landscapes with increasing frequency in the past two years, waking dreams constructed of strange vague memories. Often I find scratches and small raw scars on my body."²²¹ The scars become bigger and more painful as the flashbacks become more vivid and portray the worst memories of

²¹⁷ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 45.

²¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 141.

²¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 56.

²²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 140.

²²¹ *Ivi*, p. 53-54.

Ayo's slavery experience. In her reading of the novel Ana Nunes affirms that the scars are

a physical manifestation of Morrison's concept of rememory, the never-ending resurfacing of a traumatic and partially lost history. On another level, it functions as a powerful means to transform abstract history into a tangible reality. At this level it works as an element of connection between the ancestors and Lizzie, the past and present, and the real and the magical [...].²²²

The scars and the wounds are thus the concrete representation of Lizzie's connection with her foremothers. They also are the representation of Lizzie's traumatic experience which consists in the reincarnation process, and the transmission of Ayo's traumatic memory of slavery. They appear on Lizzie's body after she experiences the violence that was perpetuated during slavery on Ayo's body in the reincarnation flashbacks. The scars and the wounds are the marks of the chains of slavery, both literal and metaphorical. They were created on Ayo's ankles and wrists while in bondage and they reappear on Lizzie's body in the same location and provoking the same pain. Their aim can be interpreted, as the priest does in the novel, as a concrete and painful reminder for Lizzie not to forget her past and her heritage. Lizzie realizes their purpose and with the help of the priest she labels them as a special kind of non-religious stigmata. She also attempts to explain it to one of the skeptical doctors, and her words underline the connection of the wounds and the scars to the act of remembrance: "But it's the same MO as stigmata, you see. A mysterious physical trauma. I wasn't praying when it happened, though. I was remembering. Remembering something unbelievably traumatic."²²³

They also serve as proof for Lizzie in order to validate her story of reincarnation in front of her parents and the doctors. In fact, while in the psychiatric hospital she shows her scarred back to one of the psychiatrists, labeling her wounds as "permanent remembrance of the power of time folded back upon itself. Proof of lives intersecting from past to present."²²⁴ The frequent reappearance of these marks has the aim of validating Lizzie's story in front of the doctors and her parents, who do not accept the supernatural

²²² Nunes, *African American Women Writers' Historical Fiction*, p. 156-157.

²²³ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 214.

²²⁴ Ivi, p. 204.

explanation of the facts preferring the rational one, although the latter is not able to provide any plausible clarification for how the scars may have generated on Lizzie's body in the safe space of the psychiatric hospital. Lisa Woolfork also adds that, although Lizzie's body is not "self-explanatory,"²²⁵ these marks engraved on the skin are "references, signs that begin to narrate the traumatic past of slavery."²²⁶ In addition, Pamela June claims that the scars and the wounds "become manifestations of various forms of oppression."²²⁷ But also, "the vehicle through which female characters—across their differences—recognize their shared oppressions, unite in female community, and reclaim their bodies, histories, and identities."²²⁸ In fact, the scars testify to the violence Ayo had to endure during slavery, but they also are the means through which the three reincarnated women unite and reclaim their bodies, their past and their identities.

The scars and the wounds that Lizzie inherits sometimes open and bleed. Another symbol of the connection between Lizzie, Grace and Ayo is, in fact, blood. In the novel Ayo's connection with blood is openly stated as Lizzie describes her as "Ayo, with her past of blood and water."²²⁹ Camille Passalacqua claims that blood becomes the tie between the three women because it is a visual representation of the traumatic memory and the danger to which the body of Ayo, and consequently Grace's and Lizzie's, are exposed to because of slavery and the transmission of its memory. It is a means through which the devastating force of Ayo's trauma can be properly conveyed and a means for the transmission of the traumatic memories. Passalacqua writes:

In *Stigmata*, the repetitive use of the visual image of blood expresses the verbal difficulty of communicating Ayo's trauma and its ensuing effects on other female family members. By textually highlighting blood, Perry uses it as a trace of and trigger for traumatic memory. Blood points to the unhealed psychological wounds as well as to the traumatic history embodied in the physical wounds of these women. Simultaneously an image of life and death, blood foreshadows the impending danger of death Ayo constantly lived under during the Middle Passage and slavery. Blood becomes a mark of Lizzie's rite of passage into a new life that calls for an acknowledgement of and confrontation with this inheritance of traumatic memory.²³⁰

²²⁵ Woolfork, *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*, p. 61.

²²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²²⁷ June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*, p. 2.

²²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²²⁹ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 73.

²³⁰ Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones's Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry's Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela's Cambio de Armas*, p. 85-86.

Blood represents the endured trauma and the painful consequences of the traumatic experience, but it simultaneously testifies to the endurance of the women who have survived these traumatic experiences and are thus advancing step by step on the path of healing from their respective traumas.

Likewise, besides the symbols of scars and blood, “Dust becomes another vestige of Lizzie’s encounter with the past.”²³¹ In fact, after one of the reincarnation flashbacks she finds dust on her feet, the same dust she was walking on while experiencing the flashback.²³² This occurrence serves the purpose of validating her story and “by extension the story Perry creates in *Stigmata*. If Lizzie dismisses the first encounter with Ayo in Africa as merely a dream, the dust complicates such a denial as valid.”²³³ The dust is then the tangible proof of the concrete influence that Lizzie’s reincarnation flashbacks have on her reality and the interconnection between the two realms. In another instance Lizzie is choosing the fabric for her quilt and when she sees the one she is looking for she states that it “feels like it’s been lying in the dust since the turn of the century. In a year or two, it will be dust as well.”²³⁴ This excerpt highlights the role of dust as symbol of the passing of time and Lizzie’s connection with the past. Furthermore, also Lizzie’s room is characterized by the presence of dust. After her release from the hospital Lizzie with her friend Ruth enters her room to get some clothes and Ruth exclaims: “It’s hot and dusty and crazy up there [...]”²³⁵ Dust is by definition connected to the passage of time and in the novel it highlights both this element of time passing and Lizzie’s connection to the past. Moreover, dust remains a symbol of the invasion Lizzie’s life by the past, at the point that she states: “[...] I’m always surrounded by dust, made of it, always caught up in it as it swirls and resettles and rises again and again to worry the living.”²³⁶

²³¹ Ivi, p. 88.

²³² Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 25.

²³³ Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones’s Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry’s Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela’s Cambio de Armas*, p. 88.

²³⁴ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 62-63.

²³⁵ Ivi, p. 74.

²³⁶ Ivi, p. 129.

3.3 Literary strategies conveying trauma and healing

Besides the elements and objects that are the vehicles for the initiation and the transmission of the haunting and traumatic memory, in the novel multiple literary strategies are utilized with the purpose of conveying trauma. In fact, the narrative's structure, characterized by non-linearity, fragmentation and circularity aims at mirroring the non-linear life of Lizzie, her fragmented identity and the circularity of the reincarnation process. As Alan Gibbs states, strategies such as “fragmented, non-linear chronologies, repetition, shifts in narrating voice, and a resultantly decentered subjectivity”²³⁷ are usually used by writers “in order to represent or attempt to transmit trauma.”²³⁸

First, as it has been mentioned in the previous chapter, “the collapsing of the linearity of time, is a central theme of the novel.”²³⁹ The novel is not narrated in a chronological and linear way, as it presents two different narrative strands, one of which is followed by the extracts of Ayo's diary. This non-linearity of the narration is a “prominent feature [...] of stories of reincarnation.”²⁴⁰ This happens because the reincarnation process inevitably implies a merging of one or more temporalities in one body, and consequently “the past takes on a more than usually vivid existence.”²⁴¹ Moreover, this process of reincarnation allows Lizzie not to be a “mere observer or participant in the events of another era. Lizzie does not witness her foremothers' lives from a distance, but rather she becomes Ayo and Grace [...]”²⁴²

Ana Nunes adds that the non-linear chronology used in the novel serves two different functions as “on one hand it functions as a way to defer information to the reader; on the other hand, it emphasizes the difficulty in articulating the traumatic past.”²⁴³ In fact, concerning the first function, she argues that in *Stigmata*, Perry attempts to maintain the

²³⁷ Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014, p. 27.

²³⁸ *Ibidem*.

²³⁹ K. D. Brooks, A. McGee, & S. Schoellman, “Speculative Sankofarration: Haunting Black Women in Contemporary Horror Fiction,” *Obsidian*, 42(1), (2016), p. 242.

²⁴⁰ Janet Carsten, *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, p. 11.

²⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

²⁴² Nunes, *African American Women Writers' Historical Fiction*, p. 150.

²⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 154.

“essential doubt (to believe or disbelieve) characteristic of the fantastic narrative.”²⁴⁴ This is achieved by the use of a first-person narration that implies the limited vision of the reader, who is forced to follow the point of view of only one character rather than combining multiple characters’ perspectives. Nunes argues that the first-person narration conveys also the social isolation of Lizzie, who is understood neither by her parents nor by the majority of her acquaintances.²⁴⁵ Her isolation is communicated by the writing of her journal as well. The journal is characterized by “connotations of secrecy”²⁴⁶ which represent Lizzie’s solitary attempts to heal her trauma.

Furthermore, for what concerns the emphasis, created by non-chronological narratives, on the difficulties of articulating the traumatic past, Camille Passalacqua adds that Lizzie develops this non-linear narration precisely because of the influence in her life of the traumatic memory that plays a major role in the fragmentation of her identity.²⁴⁷ Lizzie’s body and identity can both be described as fragmented as, due to the reincarnation process, Lizzie inherits wounds and scars and she contains in her body the troubled identities of other two women and their shared traumatic memories. This is the reason why her identity consists in a patching together of different elements. This translates into the need for Perry to mirror Lizzie’s bodily and mental fragmentation in the structure of the novel in order to properly convey her fractured self, as suggested by Pamela June.²⁴⁸ Furthermore, the fragmentation of the narrative utilized to mirror the fragmentation of the self is the means through which the author can attempt to transmit and describe trauma and its consequences. In addition, June explains that “the fragmented female body becomes the means through which women recognize their shared historical wounds and can thus potentially unite in order to resist oppressions caused by patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity.”²⁴⁹ This is another reason why this narrative structure is of fundamental importance, since it conveys this sense of fragmentation of the self but also the potentiality of recognizing and creating unity in order to shatter oppressive systems. In fact, thanks to the connection with Ayo and Grace, established by the fragmentation of

²⁴⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁴⁵ *Ivi*, 153-154.

²⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 154.

²⁴⁷ Passalacqua, *The Corporeal Trauma Narratives of Gayl Jones’s Corregidora, Phyllis Alesia Perry’s Stigmata and Luisa Valenzuela’s Cambio de Armas*, p. 104.

²⁴⁸ June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*, p. 2.

²⁴⁹ *Ibidem.*

the body which is in turn achieved through the inherited wounds and scars, Lizzie is able to accept her heritage, connect the tie between her matrilineal legacy and counter the premises of the slavery system.

Corinne Duboin furthers the conversation on the literary strategy of fragmentation highlighting that it creates a breach through what can be considered the “narrative time” (or text-time) and the “narrated time” (or story-time). This distinction would suggest the failing of Lizzie’s memory which is fragmented as well since, as it has been already explained, it can be read as the concrete representation of the concept of collective memory, merging together the traumatic memories of the three reincarnated women.²⁵⁰ Duboin also states that this structural fragmentation of the novel is reminiscent of the characteristics of African American quilts. In fact, she writes that

It is worth noting that Joy’s scattered chronicles, as well as Grace’s letter, are not set as independent chapters but are embedded within, appliquéd, or applied to Lizzie’s frame narrative. This collage not only turns her retrospective diary into a scrapbook reminiscent of the quilt, but also combines and connects the texts (and characters’ lives) intimately. This illuminating juxtaposition reflects the linking of traumatic events, their repetition and aftermath.²⁵¹

The quilt, which will be analyzed in depth in the next paragraph, is the metaphor for the closing of the narrative circle as well. In fact, the narrative is also characterized by its circularity that implies an interpretation of the concept of time as a circle that repeats itself. The concept of the circularity of time is highlighted also by several characters in the text. A significant instance is the remark made by Aunt Eva: “The Past—that’s what you call it—is a circle. If you walk long enough, you catch up with yourself.”²⁵² Ana Nunes argues that the image of the circle allows Perry to underline the importance of the connection between individuals and the contraposition of this concept to the social isolation that Lizzie has to experience.²⁵³ Nunes also writes:

²⁵⁰ Corinne Duboin, “Trauma Narrative, Memorialization, and Mourning in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*,” *Southern Literary Journal*, 40(2), (2008), p. 296.

²⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 297.

²⁵² Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 117.

²⁵³ Nunes, *African American Women Writers’ Historical Fiction*, p. 155.

The circle imagery in African American historical fiction [...] usually suggests an acknowledgment of the past, a sense of history that will resurface until it is recognized, shared, and transformed into storytelling (or song) and into meaningful ways of passing it on without crippling the listener with its unbearable burden.²⁵⁴

In fact, in *Stigmata* the past is resurfaced due to the reincarnation process, it is thus shared between the three women and it is transformed into storytelling through Ayo's diary and Grace's and Lizzie's quilts with the aim of passing it on and avoiding its forgetting.

One can also argue that the circularity of the narrative represents the process of healing of the three women after the traumatic experience. It is in fact with the closure of all the narrative circles that the women achieve a partial if not almost complete healing. This closure can be identified in the completion of the quilt project that reconnects the matrilineal legacy, allowing the reunification of Grace and Sarah, the countering of Ayo's experience of abrupt separation with her mother, and the achieving on the part of Lizzie's mother/daughter of insight into her condition of reincarnation. In fact, after Lizzie and Sarah finish the quilt and the latter grasps the truth of her mother/daughter's situation, Lizzie, who in that moment is also Grace, affirms: "The circle is complete and my daughter sits across from me with the gap finally closed."²⁵⁵

This idea of circularity also implies the idea of repetition. In fact, the latter is another characteristic of the novel and it is also a common way of representing trauma. Trauma is marked, as it has been explained in the first chapter, by the act of repetition of the traumatic experience through flashbacks, nightmares and other forms of compulsive symptoms. In the novel the representation of this phenomenon is achieved not only through the repetition of the past experiences, due to the reincarnation flashbacks and the reading of Ayo's diary, but also thanks to the constant apparitions of recurrent elements in the novel, such as blood and dust. The repetition of these elements highlights the ongoing consequences of the trauma experienced and witnessed by Lizzie.

Ana Nunes also underlines that "It is by repetition that history is shared and memorized."²⁵⁶ Consequently as it has been pointed out by Nunes it is important to

²⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵⁵ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 230.

²⁵⁶ Nunes, *African American Women Writers' Historical Fiction*, p. 168.

highlight, for example, that some excerpts of Ayo's diary are repeated more than once with slight differences in order to emphasize the importance of Ayo's story and its transmission from generation to generation.

3.4 The quilting trope

The quilt has been already analyzed and described as one of the mediums for the initiation of the haunting experience and as lieu de mémoire and recipient of memory. However, the quilt trope is very relevant in the novel also under other perspectives as it is also the metaphor for the fragmentation of the text and Lizzie's body and identity, an alternative oral mode of storytelling, a representation of female bonds and the element that closes the narrative circle and allows healing.

Quilting has been part of American culture since slavery. Quilts during the enslavement period were believed to be used in order to convey hidden messages and codes, but they also provided warmth and comfort in the slaves' demeaning life conditions.²⁵⁷ In fact, as explained by Elaine Hedges: "Patchwork arose out of necessity: the necessity for warmth, in clothing (which was sometimes quilted) and in bed covers, the form the quilt most commonly took."²⁵⁸ However, quilting soon became also the way in which women, of different ages and ethnicities, could communicate and the means through which they could tell their stories. Quilting was one of the main communication devices female slaves could use within the slavery system where they were denied literacy and writing. In fact, "From the beginning, however, women expended time and care on the making of quilts beyond their utilitarian purpose."²⁵⁹ Quilts thus became more than practical objects, functioning also as a storytelling technique. The art of quilting was both an individual experience and a shared communal activity that aimed at creating a strong feminine bond in the community. It was also taught by the older women to the younger generations. Quilts were made of various fabrics and they were patched together by hand as slaves did not have access to sewing machines. Quilting implied two different stages of work: "designing and sewing the quilt top, which would be exposed on the bed; and doing the

²⁵⁷ Deborah Craig Bassard, *Stitched in Silence: Life Experiences Told in African-American Quilts*, Master's Thesis, Ann Arbor: Bowie State University, 2017, p. 3-4.

²⁵⁸ Elaine Hedges, "Quilts and Women's Culture," *The Radical Teacher*, 4, (1977), p. 8.

²⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

actual ‘quilting,’ which consisted of binding or stitching this finished top layer to a plain bottom layer, with filling or wadding in between.”²⁶⁰ There are two main types of patchwork called respectively “pieced” quilt and “appliqué” quilt. The first one can be described as “straight-edged bits of fabric to create an overall patterned top”²⁶¹ while the second consists in the sewing of “small pieces or patches of fabric according to some design on to a larger ground fabric.”²⁶²

The quilt that Lizzie patches with Sarah is precisely an appliqué quilt. The choice of this style of patchwork is not casual. The appliqué quilt is by definition fragmented as it consists of different fabrics patched together to create a specific design. This fragmentation of the quilt equates to the fragmentation of the whole structure of narration in the novel. In fact, the novel’s structure is characterized by a patching together of different elements such as Ayo’s diary, Lizzie’s accounts, Grace’s letter and so on. They are not separated and located in different chapters, but they rather appear in an ensemble as they are sewn together by Perry in order to create the overall design of the whole story. The characteristic of fragmentation which can be applied to describe both the text and the quilt equates to the representation of the fragmented body and identity of the protagonist as well. Lizzie’s body is marked and thus fragmented by scars and as Lisa Woolfork underlines, “the best appliqué figures are like raised scars, riding the smooth flesh beneath.”²⁶³ The choice of patching an appliqué quilt is, exactly like the symbols of scars and wounds, a means through which the author attempts to transmit and describe Lizzie’s fragmentation of self, which is caused by her trauma and her traumatic experience. Woolfork writes: “By creating an iconographic narrative—that is, as physical as it is textual—Perry’s novel presents quilts as a new mode of reading the traumatic past and recognizing its persistence.”²⁶⁴

Furthermore, Lizzie’s identity is an intersection between the African culture of her foremothers and the American culture assimilated by her parents and in which she lives. Ana Nunes writes that

²⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*

²⁶¹ *Ibidem.*

²⁶² *Ibidem.*

²⁶³ Woolfork, *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*, p. 54.

²⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p. 56.

Lizzie's appliquéd quilt, "[l]ike Grandmamma Grace's,"²⁶⁵ reflects the hybrid nature of African American tradition. The technique Lizzie uses in the making of the quilt is similar to that used in the tapestries of West Africa, while the narrative structure roots it in an American tradition, evoking the geographical and cultural journey of black people from the African continent to the New World.²⁶⁵

Moreover, Lizzie decides to create an appliquéd quilt, but her mother, before starting the quilting project, states: "I really hoped you would change your mind and do a pieced quilt [...]."²⁶⁶ This highlights the difference between the identities and the opposite perceptions of reality of mother and daughter. Lisa Woolfork explains that "Each woman's choice of quilt modality reflects the way they conceptualize time and history."²⁶⁷ Lizzie perceives time and history as circular because of her experience of the reincarnation process and her connection to her African heritage. In fact, as underlined by John Samuel Mbiti "The linear concept of time in Western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking."²⁶⁸ On the other hand, her mother Sarah perceives the concepts of time and history as linear because of her assimilation to Western values and her disconnection from her African heritage. This difference of perspectives is underlined in the novel when Sarah and Lizzie discuss the design of the quilt. Sarah states that it would be better for an immediate understanding of the narrated facts if the different pictures were placed in a row, a statement to which Lizzie replies: "'Life,' I say, 'is nonlinear, Mother.'"²⁶⁹ However, Sarah, who is unsettled by the quilt design, replies: "'Depends on how you look at it. You may see it as a circle. But it always seems like a line to me.' She puts the chalk down and wipes her fingers daintily on a paper towel. 'The past is past.'"²⁷⁰

Although they show differences in approaching the quilting project, the two women continue working on it. The quilt represents the reconstruction of the matrilineal bond between Sarah and Lizzie, but also between Sarah and her mother Grace. Sarah, before the completion of the quilt project, is always very careful and tentative in her relationship

²⁶⁵ Nunes, *African American Women Writers' Historical Fiction*, p. 160.

²⁶⁶ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 66-67.

²⁶⁷ Woolfork, *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*, p. 51-52.

²⁶⁸ John Samuel Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1990, p. 16-17.

²⁶⁹ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 93.

²⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

with her daughter because “she is unable to fully come to terms with her mental crisis and subsequent hospitalization.”²⁷¹ Lizzie has to comfort her own mother on the quilting project subject by explaining that “It’s a project, not a relapse.”²⁷² Consequently, during the quilt making process there is a sort of role reversal between Sarah and Lizzie. While Lizzie becomes the comforting mother figure (also because in a way she is, Grace having reincarnated in her), Sarah becomes the representation of the fragile daughter, embodying the abandoned child she was when Grace left. Pamela June explains that, while quilting, Lizzie assumes the role of the instructor and takes pride in teaching Sarah, just like a mother would do.²⁷³ Moreover, the reconnection of the bond between Sarah and Grace is provided by the fact that the quilt is the medium through which Lizzie is finally able to tell her true story to Sarah, thus letting her understand that she is, in fact, her mother/daughter.

The quilt project is especially important for Sarah as it allows her to reestablish her connection with her African heritage as well. In fact, it can be affirmed that “the quilt serves an instrument for Sarah’s reintegration in the community’s traditions and history, establishing a common ground for the reunion between mother and daughter and past and present.”²⁷⁴ Moreover, the importance of finishing the quilting project for Sarah is recognized also by Lizzie’s father, who buys a large frame for the quilt. However, he does not grasp the whole situation or the reason why it is of crucial importance for his wife to finish the artistic project.

For Lizzie, the quilt thus becomes a storytelling device and Ana Nunes explains that

Perry’s use of the quilt as a means of challenging hegemonic forms of discourse continues and expands the tradition established in the works of Walker, Jones, Williams, and Morrison in which folk traditions, song, and storytelling emerge as central vehicles for the recreation of African American identity.²⁷⁵

²⁷¹ Brooks, McGee, & Schoellman, “Speculative Sankofarration,” p. 244-245.

²⁷² Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 60.

²⁷³ June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*, p. 67.

²⁷⁴ Nunes, *African American Women Writers’ Historical Fiction*, p. 161.

²⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 162.

Nunes adds that through the quilt making project Perry displays the didactic role of folk traditions. The quilt would represent another storytelling device which allows a recovering and an actualizing of the past.²⁷⁶ In fact, the quilt is described by Lizzie as a story quilt that would portray the experiences of the three reincarnated women: “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. About Grace.”²⁷⁷

Furthermore, it is exactly thanks to the quilt making process that the past is recovered, and the healing of all the women takes place. With the final addition to the quilt of the blue cloth, which travelled from Africa to America and from generation to generation, Sarah accepts the truth of the reincarnation process and the matrilineal legacy is finally reconnected. The completion of the quilt symbolizes the closing of the narrative circle and the “recovery of wholeness.”²⁷⁸ The quilt is the medium through which the process of healing of the reincarnated women is accomplished, as Ayo’s traumatic memory is not forgotten, Grace is able to renew the tie with her lost daughter and Lizzie is finally able to explain to her mother that her ancestors live in and through her. Sewing can be considered, in fact, an act of psychological and emotional survival²⁷⁹ which allows Lizzie to find her own identity and individuality. In fact, in the moment of the completion of the quilt project Lizzie states that “That’s what this quilt is about. The past. And putting the past aside when we’re through.”²⁸⁰ Furthermore, this scene of the quilt completion is read by Venetria Patton as “more than a parallel scene of mother–daughter affection; it is a fitting example of the way in which Lizzie has managed to merge the lives of Ayo and Grace with her own.”²⁸¹

²⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷⁷ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 222.

²⁷⁸ Duboin, “Trauma Narrative, Memorialization, and Mourning in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*,” p. 298.

²⁷⁹ Ozzie J. Mayers, “The Power of the Pin: Sewing as an Act of Rootedness in American Literature,” *College English*, 50(6), (1988), p. 670.

²⁸⁰ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 228.

²⁸¹ Venetria K. Patton, “*Stigmata*: Embodying the Scars of Slavery,” in *Imagining the Black Female Body: Reconciling Image in Print and Visual Culture*, edited by Carol Henderson, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 73.

3.5 The denial and the acceptance of the past

In *Stigmata*, the contraposition between the acceptance of the supernatural as an inherent part of life typical of the African and African American tradition and the skepticism and rationality of Western belief is very evident.

Lizzie's parents are not able to grasp Lizzie's true condition and do not accept the supernatural explanation of the facts. This happens because Lizzie's parents have lost contact with their heritage and they have assimilated the Western values of the society in which they live. However, mother and father show some differences in their attitude towards the end of the novel. In fact, in the end Sarah is able, through a gradual process, to understand the truth of the situation while her husband will never grasp his daughter's condition. However, at first, Sarah does not listen to Lizzie's clues and she does not understand, or even better, refuses to understand the messages that her daughter is trying to convey. Ana Nunes explains that she does neither understand nor accept the supernatural because she has "lost the essential connection with her ancestors, which would allow her to interpret the world in a way distinct from that of the hegemonic white culture."²⁸² Sarah's obliviousness is highlighted in several passages. For instance, when Lizzie and Sarah go to Aunt Eva and Mary Nell's house (Grace's sisters) after Lizzie's release from hospitalization, Sarah affirms that "that girl's still got problems [...]."²⁸³ In another passage Lizzie tries to offer her mother a hint of her condition:

'Sarah,' I say. "You remember that quilt of mine?"

'Don't call me Sarah. That's so common. I'm your mother. What quilt? This one?' She shakes it at me.

'You remember when you helped me sew some of the pieces. You wanted me to teach you how to quilt. You were... five maybe. Do you remember that?'

'Lizzie, what are you talking about? Get up off that sofa and go sleep in your own bed.' She hands me the quilt.

She isn't listening. She is already thinking about what Daddy wants for dinner and about the finger foods for her eight o'clock sorority meeting.²⁸⁴

²⁸² Nunes, *African American Women Writers' Historical Fiction*, p. 153.

²⁸³ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 48.

²⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 55.

Lizzie tries to captivate Sarah's attention by saying her full name, as a mother would do rather than a daughter. Sarah does not or does not want to catch the message. Moreover, Lizzie hints at the reincarnation process by narrating something that only Grace could know, trying to offer her mother some clues of her true multiple identity. Again, Sarah acts oblivious in front of Lizzie's attempts to make her understand the truth of the reincarnation process. Sarah does not grasp the situation even when Lizzie absentmindedly sings a tune that sounds too familiar to her. Rather than connecting the tune to the memory of her mother singing it, she asks Lizzie: "Where is that from—some book or something?"²⁸⁵ Lizzie concludes that her mother does not want to remember the past. In fact, while talking to Lizzie, her friend Ruth, who believes in the reincarnation process, speculates: "Sometimes you have to cut off the part of your memory that hurts. Maybe that's what she's doing, you know?"²⁸⁶ To which Lizzie responds: "Yes, dammit, I do know. I'm going to make the quilt whether she catches on or not, so... well, we'll see."²⁸⁷ It is exactly thanks to the completion of the quilt project that in the end Sarah understands the whole situation and finally accepts the supernatural causes of Lizzie's condition.

Besides Lizzie's friend, there is another woman in the family that comprehends and accepts Lizzie's truth. In fact, Aunt Eva seems to identify Grace's presence in Lizzie's body. This is showcased on multiple occasions. While talking to Lizzie Aunt Eva hints at her knowledge by saying: "'Take it slow,' [...] 'Someday she'll (Sarah) understand better.'"²⁸⁸ Or again: "The past ain't never really gone, is it?"²⁸⁹ and "'I'm telling you, *Grace*' [...] 'that this time you have to control this thing, these memories, or you're going to be in trouble. And you can't pack your bags and run away from it. You gotta stick here with it.'"²⁹⁰ Due to these statements readers can understand that Aunt Eva is completely aware of both Grace's past decision of leaving her family and the reincarnation process. Another time, Eva jokingly says to Lizzie/Grace: "Still making trouble I see, Gracie."²⁹¹ This reveals the strength of the sisters' bond which is maintained through time.

²⁸⁵ *Ivi*, p. 66.

²⁸⁶ *Ivi*, p. 75.

²⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸⁸ *Ivi*, p. 49.

²⁸⁹ *Ivi*, p. 113.

²⁹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 118.

²⁹¹ *Ivi*, p. 218.

On the other hand, the father does not understand the process of reincarnation Lizzie has to endure. Lizzie herself calls him “my poor clueless father.”²⁹² In fact, in general, the process is understood only by the women of the family, highlighting Perry’s aim of staging a strong matrilineal legacy that underlines the importance of feminine bonds in the African American community.²⁹³ Furthermore, Ana Nunes explains that his skeptical attitudes come from “Years of Western education and a self-conscious adoption of white middle-class values [...]”²⁹⁴ In fact, this is proved by the fact that he tries to cure the supernatural condition of his daughter with Western medicine: “Daddy puts two tablets in my hand. I swallow them silently, then rub my fingers over my wrists; the skin feels raw. He retires to a chair, looking lost, and Mother comes into the room.”²⁹⁵ Furthermore, not knowing what else to do he relies on psychiatrists to solve his daughter’s condition. His decisions contribute in isolating Lizzie. In fact, Nunes claims that “Lizzie’s experiences expressed in a language of hesitation to skeptical interlocutors contribute to her gradual alienation from social structures in which there is no place for the magical: her middle-class family, educational system, and later, Western medicine.”²⁹⁶

Western medicine can neither explain nor cure Lizzie’s condition because of its inherent rationality and its refusal to explain situations through supernatural forces. The psychiatrists do not believe Lizzie’s account of her story, thus isolating and alienating her from the community. Their disbelief is proved in several passages of the novel. The reader can already witness their skeptical behavior in one of the first pages, in which one of the doctors attempts to debunk Lizzie’s accounts of her story: “He points at the circles of raised flesh around my ankles. ‘Those aren’t from chains and manacles, are they, Lizzie?’”²⁹⁷ In fact, doctors and psychiatrists explain Lizzie’s way of accounting her story as a condition of denial. Lizzie herself illustrates: “My doctors talked a lot about denial. Every time I calmly explained to them that I knew reincarnation was real because Grace

²⁹² Ivi, p. 197.

²⁹³ The only man who can be considered an exception to this female legacy is Anthony Paul. He does not immediately grasp the truth of the reincarnation process, but he instinctively knows he already met Lizzie. After the revealing of his painting that portrays Lizzie/Ayo, Lizzie finally explains to him the whole situation, thus allowing him to share the knowledge of the reincarnation process with her.

²⁹⁴ Nunes, *African American Women Writers’ Historical Fiction*, p. 152.

²⁹⁵ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 43.

²⁹⁶ Nunes, *African American Women Writers’ Historical Fiction*, p. 152.

²⁹⁷ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 5.

and I were living it, they said very pointedly, ‘You’re in denial, Elizabeth.’”²⁹⁸ Another doctor tries to explain Lizzie’s behavior by stating:

I really believe you’re just having a very elaborate fantasy about your ancestors. It’s not necessarily a bad thing to imagine what their lives might have been like, but Elizabeth, you can’t lose yourself in those old stories. You obviously are using them to fill some emptiness in your life. You’ve got to find out what that is.²⁹⁹

One can thus argue that the psychiatrists and the doctors represent an embodiment of Western values. Moreover, the impossibility for doctors to grasp the situation and their refusal to understand Lizzie’s truth can be interpreted as the impossibility of the hegemonic white society to understand and admit that the consequences of the traumatic slavery experience are still tangible in the lives of African American individuals today. Furthermore, Nunes affirms that

If the categorization of Lizzie’s supernatural experiences as dreams is convenient to maintain the orderly world of Western medicine, the doctor’s directions about what her African American female patient should write call attention to the difficulty in accepting the authority of the black self over the written text.³⁰⁰

In contrast to her parents, Lizzie understands that she has to accept the supernatural and consequently she also manages to comprehend the purpose of the supernatural process she has to endure. For Lizzie accepting the supernatural is a metaphor for accepting her own past and her heritage, not applying the values of the hegemonic Western culture but the African ones instead. She is helped in her quest for understanding the reincarnation process and its aims by the character of the priest. In fact, he is the only one, besides another patient, who breaks the alienation and isolation to which Lizzie is confined while in the psychiatric hospital by asking her “What’s your story?”³⁰¹ At first Lizzie is startled by his question as she points out that “he doesn’t ask what’s wrong with me. He asks,

²⁹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 70.

²⁹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 138.

³⁰⁰ Nunes, *African American Women Writers’ Historical Fiction*, p. 155.

³⁰¹ Perry, *Stigmata*, p. 210.

what's my story? My story."³⁰² She finally narrates him her account of her story and explicates her condition. He believes everything that she says, and thus he validates Lizzie's statements. It is important to highlight that being a man of faith he does not share the rational view of the doctors, but he understands that there are supernatural forces at play. It is precisely the priest who assumes the purpose of Lizzie scars and who labels them as stigmata due to his religious background. In order to explain the purpose of Lizzie's pain he states: "Maybe you're marked so you won't forget this time, so you will remember and move on."³⁰³

Lizzie understands the importance of remembering one's heritage, one's past and one's history in order to heal. She demonstrates she has comprehended the importance of enduring the reincarnation process by affirming that "'I wouldn't change anything. I feel like I had to go through it all to be safe.' [...] 'From fear. There's not much that frightens me anymore.'"³⁰⁴ Moreover, while talking with Ruth, Lizzie herself acknowledges the role of the scars and the wounds that caused her pain:

She turns my hands over, sliding her fingers over the scars on my wrists. At first it's an examination, then a communication between us. Her hands are very warm. A spasm of pain crosses her face, then it's calm again.

'I'm sorry they hurt you,' she whispers, with a secretive, painful smile. She's crying a little. 'I don't know why they have to do that.'

'So I won't forget again.'³⁰⁵

In addition to the explanation of the scars' purpose, this passage highlights also the importance of female bonds. In fact, Ruth is not only aware of the true condition of her friend, but she can also understand and share her pain. In fact, when she touches Lizzie's scars, she can feel a tinge of her sorrow.

Furthermore, Lizzie defines the act of remembrance as a gift as she starts to comprehend that the acknowledgement and acceptance of the traumatic memories allow the process of healing to begin. Lizzie expresses her perception of her identity to one of the doctors,

³⁰² *Ivi*, p. 211.

³⁰³ *Ivi*, p. 213.

³⁰⁴ *Ivi*, p. 154.

³⁰⁵ *Ivi*, p. 192-193.

saying: “That’s the thing, Doctor, I’m just a typical nineteenth-century nigger with an extraordinary gift. The gift of memory.”³⁰⁶

³⁰⁶ *Ivi*, p. 204.

4. *A Sunday in June*

4.1 The novel

A Sunday in June is the prequel to *Stigmata*, and it was published in 2004. It mainly narrates the story of Lizzie's grandmother Grace, who was the first woman in the family to experience the reincarnation process. The novel also focuses on Grace's family, describing the life of her mother Joy and in particular it narrates the story of Grace's sisters Mary Nell and Eva.

One day Grace, while walking home, has a strange vision. She sees a mysterious unknown girl. She notices that the girl has some strange characteristics. In fact, she is "bare-shouldered and barefoot"³⁰⁷ despite the unbearable cold weather. Moreover, the girl does not interact with her despite Grace's attempts to engage in a conversation. The strange girl starts to walk away, and Grace begins to follow her. However, one of Grace's acquaintances, Etta Mae, stops her in the middle of the chase. Surprised she does not know the mysterious girl, Grace asks the other woman if she has any idea of the girl's name or identity. To Grace's astonishment Etta Mae replies: "I don't see nobody, Grace Mobley. You see somebody?"³⁰⁸ Grace eventually loses track of the girl who in the meantime has continued to run away. When the race is over because the strange girl has disappeared, Grace realizes that she has conducted her to her grandmother's house. Grace enters the house in order to check if the girl hid in there and she instinctively understands that the latter has been in the house previously. However, the girl is not hidden there in that precise moment. In fact, Grace does not find the mysterious girl but, in the middle of the living room, she finds the trunk where her mother Joy has put all the old properties of her grandmother Bessie. The trunk is strangely unlocked, despite Grace's belief of having seen Joy locking it before. Grace examines the contents of the trunk finding multiple quilts and a diary. She reads some excerpts and she recognizes her mother's handwriting. Although she knows that she should put the papers back where she found them, she finally chooses to take them with her. The contact with these objects belonging to her grandmother's past starts her reincarnation process. Grace begins to have dream-like

³⁰⁷ Phyllis Alesia Perry, *A Sunday in June*, New York: Hyperion, 2004, p. 10.

³⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

flashbacks of Ayo's experiences during slavery. These visions and flashbacks become more haunting with the passing of time, forcing Grace to inherit also the scars and the wounds that her grandmother had suffered from when in bondage. Willow, an old friend of Grace's grandmother, offers her help for curing Grace's condition with the use of ancestral medicine. However, Joy and her husband reject her assistance as they disagree with her methods. In fact, they consider her harmful and dangerous since she is considered to be a witch. Consequently, Grace grows up coping with her condition of reincarnation by trying to ignore the voice of her haunting ancestor. She is not and will never be able to accept and face the reincarnation process as she states that "if it was just her thoughts getting' into my head, I know I could carry that burden. But she shows me things, Eva, that I don't think I can stand to look at [...]." ³⁰⁹ Grace marries a kind man, George, with whom she has three children, two twin boys and a girl, Sarah, Lizzie's mother. Although Grace tries to find happiness and peace by staying close to her family, her reincarnation condition worsens. She finally decides to leave her family and her community in fear of hurting her children and her husband because of her "craziness," and being interned in a psychiatric hospital. She moves to Detroit and then to New York in hope of avoiding the ancestral presence that has been haunting her since the day she opened the trunk. Grace soon realizes that it is not by moving away that she can dissociate herself from the ancestral ghosts. In fact, dream-like flashbacks and the scars return anyways. When she is in Detroit and the scars reappear, Grace expresses all her pain and her frustration:

When she looked down, she had to grab the chair back for support when she saw the blood seeping from her ankles.

'No.' She stood up and began to turn around and around in the small room. 'No! I didn't leave my home and my husband and...' her voice broke on a sob, '...my chillun for this! You 'sposed to be gone. Gone! Left back there in Alabama. Hoverin' 'round your grave or somethin'. Not here! How far I got to go?' ³¹⁰

Despite the return of the scars she is still convinced that by going further away she will be safe. In New York she will be disproven once more. Consequently, Grace ends up dying in Montana, far from all her loved ones.

³⁰⁹ *Ivi*, p. 317.

³¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 326-327.

On the other hand, Mary Nell and Eva, Grace's sisters, are believed to have been supernaturally powered since their birth. In fact, they are able to sense and foresee the future through dream-like visions. Joy does not like or accept their ability and she tries in any way to prevent the sisters from using their powers in order to advise other people of the community they live in. Although, they do not make public use of their talent anymore, they still have visions and they both begin to sense that something terrible is going to happen to either one of the two. However, they are not able to "decipher the dreams that pertain to them or to fully understand the visions related to their sister."³¹¹ Consequently, they are not able to predict and prevent the terrible thing that is going to happen. In addition, Willow predicts that something wrong will occur to Eva as well, and she tries to protect her giving her a magic object. Eva accepts the gift that would shield her from the horrible event, but the object gets confiscated by her skeptical parents since they despise Willow's methods. As a consequence, on a Sunday when Eva is late for church, on the way to the building she meets the malicious Lou Henry, Mary Nell's husband. He forcibly drags her into the woods and rapes her. Mary Nell, seeing that both of them are missing from Sunday ceremony, becomes apprehensive. In fact, she ends up having a vision of the terrible event, but she decides to wait for the end of the ceremony to go rescue her sister in order to avoid raising other people's suspicions. She finds Eva in the woods all ruffled up and paralyzed in a state of shock. Unable to accept the truth of the heartlessness of her newlywed husband, she obliges Eva not to mention the occurrence with anyone and forces her to keep it a secret. Eva follows her sister's instructions, but she is not able to keep it a secret for too long as, after another sexual violation by Lou Henry, she realizes she is pregnant with his baby. Her family asks her for explanations multiple times but Eva, after the shock of the traumatic event, enters a catatonic state in which she does not interact with anyone and just focuses on her work, staying silent. This traumatic event results in an abrupt separation from her sister and a collapsing of the synergic bond they had before. In fact, Mary Nell, incapable to accuse her husband, secretly blames her sister Eva for having seduced Lou Henry who, in her distorted view, would just have been trapped by Eva's temptation. When Eva goes to her aunt's home to give birth to the child, Mary Nell follows her without her permission and kidnaps Eva's

³¹¹ Venetria K. Patton, *Grasp that Reaches beyond the Grave: The Ancestral Call in Black Women's Texts*, New York: SUNY Press, 2013, p. 168.

newborn boy. While Mary Nell moves as far away as possible in order not to be caught by Eva and the rest of the family, Eva returns home and marries Willow's son, Eddie Adam with whom she has another child. In the meantime, Willow helps Eva to take care of the child and to wash away the traumatic memory of Lou Henry's rape as well. She does so thanks to the use of ancestral medicine and by performing an old ritual based on the use of rain in order to, literally and metaphorically, wash away the endured trauma. This performance leaves Willow without energy and leads to her death. Eva, having healed from her traumatic experience, is finally able to reconnect her bond with Mary Nell, although only partially. Moreover, Lou Henry is killed by Son Jackson, another boy that was fond of Eva, thus allowing the closing of the sisters' narrative circle.

The structure of the novel is slightly more linear than the narrative structure of *Stigmata*, as it does not bounce back and forth in time. However, it maintains a certain level of fragmentation since different characters' narrative lines are followed simultaneously. Furthermore, multiple elements, such as the excerpts from Ayo's diary and Grace's letter, are patched together in a continuum without being separated and located in different chapters. The novel cannot be properly defined as circular since, unlike the sequel, there is no final closure of and no final healing from the reincarnation process. The only narrative line that is closed is Eva's process of healing from the trauma of rape. Moreover, in *A Sunday in June* the plurality of voices is displayed, as well. In fact, readers can perceive contemporarily the voices of Joy, Grace, Willow, Ayo, Mary Nell and Eva. Unlike *Stigmata*, the novel is written in a third-person narration. In fact, Perry does not need to maintain the essential doubt of the reader to believe or disbelieve, created through a first-person narration, which has been mentioned in the previous chapter. The reader, having already approached the first novel, is aware of the fact that the characters are really experiencing the reincarnation process.

The novel can be described as a neo-slave narrative as it deals with the consequences of the slavery system and the transmission of its traumatic memory from generation to generation. Just like in *Stigmata*, readers are provided with the accounts of slavery thanks to the excerpts of Ayo's diary (although not as extensively as in *Stigmata*) and the reincarnation flashbacks that Grace has to endure. Moreover, readers are also forced to reflect on the continuation of the consequences of the slavery experience in contemporary

society due to the reincarnation process that forces the contemporary individual to relive the past.

A Sunday in June can be defined also as a trauma narrative as it portrays trauma, its consequences and the transmission of its memory. The novel depicts, not only the trauma and the traumatic experience of the reincarnation process and the transmission of the memory of slavery that Grace has to endure, but also the trauma of rape that Eva suffers from. In fact, Eva's traumatic experience and the consequent disconnection of the two sisters are some of the main narrative nodes in the book. Moreover, a central moment of the novel is Eva's healing from her endured trauma and the reconnection of her bond with Mary Nell.

The novel can also fall under the category of speculative fiction as it displays supernatural and non-mimetic elements. In fact, Grace embodies the reincarnation of her grandmother Ayo, and Mary Nell and Eva have the power to foresee the future. Moreover, Willow can quite sense the future as well since she is able to feel and predict the danger which impends on Eva's life. She also performs some ancestral supernatural rituals in order to heal Eva's traumatic memory of rape.

It is important to underline that the two novels, *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*, are characterized by the recurrence of many similar themes and symbols. In fact, in both narrations the protagonist has to endure the reincarnation process that is initiated by the same haunting ancestor. Ayo is reincarnated in Grace and both women finally reincarnate in Lizzie. Moreover, also the mediums through which the haunting begins are the same. Lizzie's and Grace's reincarnation processes are both initiated after the opening of the trunk, the reading of the diary and the using of the quilts. Almost all elements and all symbols that were analyzed in the previous chapter concerning *Stigmata*, such as the trunk, the quilt, the diary, the scars and the piece of blue cloth also appear in the prequel. Grace, like Lizzie, inherits the scars as a consequence of the reincarnation process and she patches the story quilt that narrates Ayo's experiences just like Lizzie patches the appliqué quilt in order to tell Grace's story.

Another similarity between the two novels is the recurring theme of the contraposition of the African belief that perceives the supernatural as an inherent part of life and the typical Western rationality that denies it. In *Stigmata*, African values and the African heritage

are embodied by Lizzie who is able to reconnect the tie with her past and her traditions due to the reincarnation process. On the other hand, Western ideals are embodied by the doctors who pointlessly base their cures for Lizzie on rationality and scientific explanations, and by Lizzie's parents, who have lost the connection to their heritage and they have assimilated Western values. In *A Sunday in June*, the first case is embodied by Willow who, I argue, can be connected to the figure of the "medicine-men"³¹² belonging to African tradition. The tie with one's past and one's heritage is also represented by the character of Eva who, not only is the most accepting of the sisters towards their supernatural gifts, but she also accepts Willow's cures and is able to heal her trauma due to the use of traditional African rituals. On the contrary, the second case is embodied by Grace's family, and sometimes by Grace herself. In fact, the parents refuse the supernatural as the explanation for their daughter's condition and they also refuse to use supernatural powers or traditional African medicine in order to cure Grace's condition and to prevent Eva's trauma of rape. Joy and her husband have assimilated into Western society and they despise everything that reminds them of their heritage and their past. Moreover, Grace does not accept the connection with her foremother and the reincarnation process.

There are also several differences that can be detected between the two novels. The main one is Grace's reaction to the reincarnation process compared to Lizzie's reaction in *Stigmata*. On the one hand, Lizzie is able to accept the process and thus heal from the trauma, while on the other hand Grace never accepts it and on the contrary, she tries to ignore it. Moreover, Grace finally tries in vain to escape from it. It can be argued that Eva's reaction to her trauma of rape can be compared to Lizzie's reaction to the reincarnation process. They both live a period of silence and alienation after the traumatic experience but in the end, they both have the courage to face the traumatic memory thus providing a partial if not almost complete healing.

In addition, the theme of rape was only hinted at in *Stigmata*, because of Ayo's experience under bondage and the concept of "rape of history" introduced by Lisa Long, who affirmed that Ayo forces a physical and mental penetration on her descendants because of the reincarnation process. On the contrary, rape is a fully and explicitly explored theme

³¹² John Samuel Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1990, p. 162.

in *A Sunday in June*. Eva's experience is one of the pivotal moments of the novel and it concretizes the exploration of the theme that was only foreshadowed in the first novel.

4.2 The mediums and the symbols of the haunting

As it has been previously mentioned, many of the main elements and symbols that work as mediums of the haunting and recipients of memory in *Stigmata* appear in the prequel as well.

The reincarnation process that Grace has to endure starts after she is drawn to her grandmother's house by a mysterious girl, invisible to other people's eyes. In the house she finds the trunk and she decides to open it and examine its contents. It can be thus affirmed that the trunk serves again the function of Pandora's box, revealing Ayo's memories of the past and releasing a powerful force that initiates the reincarnation process. In fact, precisely like in *Stigmata*, the object is connoted as a mysterious and compelling device. When Grace stumbles on it for the first time she finds it unlocked although she had seen her mother locking it before: "It wasn't locked. Hadn't she seen Mama turn the key in the lock the last time they were here?"³¹³ It is not clear if Grace does not remember correctly or the trunk has actually mysteriously opened. One can argue that the latter case is more probable since the trunk is closely connected to supernatural events. Moreover, one can assume that the mysterious girl, who can be reconducted to Ayo's ghostly presence, is the one that unlocked the object. Furthermore, the trunk is also connoted as a powerful but dangerous object by the words pronounced by Joy. Despite her disbelief in supernatural forces, Joy seems to sense the dangerousness of the object as well, since, when she discovers that Grace has opened it and taken the diary home, she acts upset and worried:

Joy quickly read the top page and then looked at Grace, who was making no move to get ready for bed.

Joy frowned. 'You been in that trunk?'

'Yes ma'am.'

'What for? What you got this for?' She shook the pages. [...]

³¹³ Perry, *A Sunday in June*, p. 14.

Joy looked long at her daughter, who sat with her chin nearly on her chest and her eyes on the floor. There was a slight trembling in her body, little ripples of movement that seemed to invade her from head to toe, making her hands shake a little.³¹⁴

The trunk also contains the same elements that Lizzie finds when she opens it, except for Grace's quilt which is yet to be designed and patched. Grace, opening the lid, thus finds the diary, some quilts belonging to Ayo and the piece of blue cloth that belonged to Ayo's mother. She decides to take the diary home with her and read Ayo's accounts. This is another medium through which the reincarnation process and the flashbacks are initiated. The role of the diary is openly stated in the novel: "It had been years, it seemed, since she'd slept through the night. Not since she'd held those diary pages in her hands. Not since the girl in the blue dress had led her down the road. A door had opened for her that day."³¹⁵

Furthermore, Grace does not only find some old quilts in the trunk but she decides to patch an appliqué quilt of her own in order to tell Ayo's story of the Middle Passage and of life in bondage. She is also partially influenced by Ayo's presence and her memories in the designing of the quilt:

She knew that Ayo was speaking again, this time through the cloth, giving her those horrible pictures to show to the world. But she didn't stop, because as long as she had the quilt to work on, the voice of Ayo that usually took up residence in her mind was quiet. But still, she showed Grace what she wanted her to know.³¹⁶

This passage also underlines the aim of Ayo's reincarnation process. As it has been explained in the previous chapters, Ayo's purpose in haunting her ancestors is having her memory passed on and her story remembered. She thus guides Grace in patching a story quilt that portrays her life. In fact, the quilt displays images of "Boats and water. People and houses."³¹⁷ It is also stated that it portrays Ayo's kidnapping and her whipping.³¹⁸ The quilt thus serves, once again, the function of storytelling technique and it can be

³¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 29-30.

³¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 62-63.

³¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 293.

³¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 332.

³¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 332-333.

argued that, as in *Stigmata*, it also underlines the crucial role of folk traditions. It might be important to highlight that the quilt that Grace patches is an appliqué quilt, exactly like Lizzie's. This can be read again as an allegory of the fragmented body and identity of the quilt maker. Furthermore, in the novel the quilt can be read as a symbol of the connection to one's heritage, although the connection might be unintended, like in Grace's case. Although Grace denies her connection to her past and her heritage, she is forced to have this tie because of the reincarnation process that was initiated by Ayo. Moreover, her sisters Eva and Mary Nell have also inherited one of Ayo's powers which is the ability to foresee the future. This inheritance ties them to their grandmother's figure and thus to their heritage as well. It can be argued that this connection to the past and the African traditions is underlined by the fact that Grace and Eva are more talented than their mother Joy in patching quilts. In fact, the art of quilting is closely connected to the African American tradition, since slave women used quilts in order to provide warmth in clothing and in order to create blankets. They also patched in order to convey hidden messages and to tell their story through their quilt designs. The differences between Joy's, Grace's and Eva's skills in this practice are highlighted in several passages, for instance: "Her mother was a good sewer, but her efforts were fairly plain. She made quilts quick and thick and wore them out washing them."³¹⁹ Or again: "Her mother was fair with a needle, and Grace and Eva were good at it."³²⁰ Joy herself admits that she has not inherited this ability in patching, but her daughter Grace certainly did:

'Thing is, you better at sewing than I am, and that ain't an easy thing for a proud woman like me to own up to.' Joy smiled, even as Grace opened her mouth to deny it. 'Don't bother, baby, you know you can quilt better'n me. Lord knows I don't see how you make them stitches so little. I guess you inherited that from my mama. She was good with sewing or anything to do with cloth. You seen her quilts.'³²¹

In fact, Joy is the most assimilated woman out of the three to Western values. Her inability in or her distancing and refusal of everything that concerns African traditions highlights her disconnection from her own past and heritage.

³¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 14.

³²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 212.

³²¹ *Ivi*, p. 289.

Moreover, Grace wants to add to her quilt the piece of blue cloth that represents a link to the past and to the memory of Ayo's mother and thus of Ayo's heritage and story. The blue cloth reappears in the prequel as another recipient of memory. In fact, Willow recognizes the piece of cloth and her words underline the importance of this object for Ayo and her memory: "When she saw what Grace was holding she let out a heavy sigh. She put a hand to her chest, over her heart. She felt a heavy weight there and a twinge of sorrow that made its way up to her throat and behind her eyes."³²² Willow remembers Ayo's words concerning the piece of cloth and the latter confirm its role of link to the past: "It was the only thing I had left of my mother. I'm gon' put it in a quilt and put the quilt on my bed and lay under it, so I'll always have her with me."³²³ Ayo's words also confirm that behind Grace's choices of making an appliqué story quilt and of adding the piece of cloth to it, there is always Ayo's influence, since she always thought of using the little object to make her own quilt in memory of her mother.

All these objects thus function as lieux de mémoire and recipients of memory precisely as in the sequel *Stigmata*.

4.3 Denial and acceptance of the past and of the traumatic memory

In *A Sunday in June* readers can identify two different approaches to the connection to the past and the act of facing one's trauma in order to heal. These differences can be drawn between Grace and Eva in the way they react to their traumatic situation and between Willow and part of Grace's family since the first is connected with her past and her heritage while the second has lost the tie with the past and has assimilated to Western values.

Grace and her sisters have all inherited something from their grandmother Ayo. While Grace has to endure the reincarnation process and she "is able to see the departed, hear voices, have visions, and communicate with the invisible world, [...]"³²⁴ the two younger sisters have inherited Ayo's ability to foresee the future. Moreover, while Eva is perfectly

³²² Ivi, p. 247.

³²³ Ivi, p. 248.

³²⁴ Patton, *Grasp that Reaches beyond the Grave*, p. 168.

able to cope with her powers, Grace “cannot be as accepting of their gifts as Eva [...]”³²⁵ This happens because Eva “is not the focus of Ayo’s attention.”³²⁶ On the other hand, Grace has to relive the horrific experiences of her grandmother’s life in the Middle Passage and in bondage through the reincarnation flashbacks. Grace also has the ability to hear the voices of the departed, although she fears them. For instance, one night she tries to fall asleep before the voices would make their appearance, but she ends up hearing something:

Grace sighed, feeling her lungs expand and contract, her body sink into the cotton-filled mattress.

‘I only want to sleep,’ she said aloud faintly.

Sleep. That for dead folk. Is you?

There they were. But this time the words were as clear as anything. Grace sat up abruptly. But the room held just the two of them in the bed and the silver moonbeams that slanted across the floor.³²⁷

The voice continues to engage in the conversation allowing Grace to finally recognize her deceased grandmother’s voice. In a fit of rage Grace exclaims “The dead should stay dead, you hear me?!”³²⁸ Her reaction reveals her attitude of denial to connect with her haunting ancestor.

Grace also inherits the scars and the wounds that were created on Ayo’s body by the chains that white masters used in order to keep the slaves under control in bondage or by whippings. While talking to her sister Eva, she describes the surfacing of the painful scars on her body:

‘The other night,’ Grace said softly, ‘I was in here and one of them fits came over me. A bad one. And I didn’t really know where I was. But I did see George come in, happy. And he pulled me up and threw his arms around me to hug me, and I felt this awful, awful pain all over my back, like it was covered

³²⁵ *Ibidem.*

³²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 169.

³²⁷ Perry, *A Sunday in June*, p. 64.

³²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 67.

with raw welts. And I knew what it was from—when they beat her. Our grandmother was beaten worse than a mule. And it was like them scars were there, just made... when he touched me.’³²⁹

Unlike Lizzie, Grace is not able to grasp the reason why she has to endure the reincarnation process and she does not understand the role of the scars and the wounds that she feels on her body. On the contrary, she tries to distance herself from Ayo and the reincarnation process as much as possible. Grace’s unacceptance of her condition is openly stated in the novel: “She couldn’t accept that that was going to be her life, that until she died she would be in the clutches of Ayo’s sad, blood-filled memories.”³³⁰ This is why she tries to ignore her ghostly ancestor’s presence. When Ayo attempts to communicate with her, Grace tries not to focus on her voice in order to silence her:

Grace tried not to think. Because if she answered Ayo with her thoughts, she responded by speaking even more. So Grace just put her hands between her knees and breathed until everything in front of her eyes blurred and she couldn’t see anything, though she knew her eyes were still open. She just breathed. She imagined the air leaving her body and turning into a night bird and flying high, high until it touched the roof of the surrounding forest.

Mary Nell and Eva still said nothing and then Ayo’s voice came into the silence, echoing her own fears. [...]

Grace felt herself nodding, but she didn’t dare put any words in her head. She let her hands go limp, resting them in the folds of her dress. Ayo became silent.³³¹

Although from time to time her methods work, Grace is not able to fully avoid and eject Ayo’s presence. The perpetual return of the reincarnation flashbacks, of the voices and the scars leads Grace to feel estranged from her own body and unsure of her own identity. In fact, she affirms: “I don’t know who myself is sometimes.”³³² Moreover, while talking with Willow she expresses the fear of completely losing her identity and her body, and remaining stuck in the reincarnation flashbacks of Ayo’s painful memories: “‘It started out with just dreams. These days, I get it all,’ Grace said. ‘The voices, the visions, the dreams. Sometimes I walk out my front door and into whole ’nother place, Willow. One day I ain’t gonna be able to get back.’”³³³ Because of these fears and the concern of being

³²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 318-319.

³³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 153.

³³¹ *Ivi*, p. 283.

³³² *Ivi*, p. 154.

³³³ *Ivi*, p. 258-259.

a threat to herself and her own family, Grace decides to leave. In fact, Grace believes “she can escape the memories and thus avoid institutionalization [...]”³³⁴ However, Willow warns her of the impossibility of escaping from her condition: “A thang like that ain’t gon’ just get up and walk off from you, even if you try to walk off from it!”³³⁵ Grace does not listen to Willow’s wise advice, refusing to understand that “there is no escaping the past—Ayo is determined that her legacy of slavery be transmitted to the next generation.”³³⁶ Unlike Lizzie, who faced her past and accepted her heritage in order to heal, Grace tries in vain to escape from it not allowing the healing of both herself and her grandmother Ayo to happen.

Moreover, proving her dissociation from the past and her lack of understanding of the importance of the reincarnation process’ role, Grace makes sure that her daughter Sarah will never experience it. She thus instructs her sisters not to deliver the trunk to Sarah but to Lizzie. In the letter Grace sends to her sisters while moving from city to city in order to escape from Ayo’s presence, she writes:

I also have sent that quilt I was working on when I left. It’s finished and Ayo’s whole story is set on it. I feel better now it’s through. No telling where I might end up so it be safe with you.

Now Mary please do not show these to my baby girl Sarah. [...] 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 cant pass it on to her this craziness. So save it but not for Sarah. Maybe Sarah will be safe.³³⁷

In addition, she instructs her sisters to give the objects to her granddaughter instead: “I feel that others after us will need to know. Our grands maybe will need to get these things. Please leave these for my granddaughter. I know she aint here yet. But I have faith that you and Eva will know when the time is right and when it is she will be waiting.”³³⁸ In fact, Pamela June explains that “Grace does not pass the story onto her daughter in order

³³⁴ Pamela B. June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity: Postmodern, Feminist and Multi-ethnic Writings of Toni Morrison, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Phyllis Alesia Perry, Gayl Jones, Emma Pérez, Paula Gunn Allen, and Kathy Acker*, New York: Peter Lang, 2010, p. 63.

³³⁵ Perry, *A Sunday in June*, p. 181.

³³⁶ Patton, *Grasp that Reaches beyond the Grave*, p. 167.

³³⁷ Perry, *A Sunday in June*, p. 330.

³³⁸ *Ibidem*.

to ensure that her memories will be reborn *by* her daughter.”³³⁹ The letter clearly reveals that despite her unwillingness to transmit the process to the following generations, Grace is influenced by Ayo’s haunting presence to patch the story quilt and to deliver the trunk to her descendants. These objects will explain and guide Lizzie through all the processes that she will have to endure. The letter also references the ability of the sisters to understand the perfect time for Lizzie to inherit the object and it foreshadows the moment in *Stigmata* when the two deliver the trunk to Lizzie exactly on her fourteenth birthday. While in *Stigmata* readers did not have an explanation to why Mary Nell and Eva instinctively knew when to deliver the trunk to Lizzie, in *A Sunday in June* this is explained since it is revealed that the two sisters have inherited Ayo’s clairvoyance.

While Grace distances herself from her condition, Eva is more inclined to accept her gift of foreseeing the future. In her case her acceptance is easier since, not being the focus of Ayo’s memory transmission, she does not have to endure the reincarnation flashbacks, the scars and the transmission of the traumatic memory of slavery. However, she experiences a deeply traumatic event nonetheless. In fact, she is raped twice by her sister’s husband, Lou Henry. Moreover, she has to suffer, not only for the sexual abuse, but also for the hateful approach of her sister after the fact. Mary Nell is not able to accept her husband’s unfaithfulness and meanness and she justifies him instead. Consequently, she blames her sister for having tempted him, which is obviously an unfounded accusation. Mary Nell, despite being in another place at the moment when the horrific occurrence takes place, knows what happened thanks to a vision. After the end of the church’s Sunday ceremony, she hurries to her sister and when she finds her in the woods in a complete state of shock, she affirms:

You shouldn’t have... He a man. A certain kind. He can’t help that. Some mens can’t help that. But you know’d that, of course you know’d what kind of man he is. Ev’rybody do. He done got better, so much better. But thangs is a temptation to him, you know. You shoulda know’d that, but you had to walk that way and be all under his nose. He like you, his new little sister. But you got to be careful ’round a man like that. Ain’t you got no sense? Lord, Lord.³⁴⁰

³³⁹ June, *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*, p. 64.

³⁴⁰ Perry, *A Sunday in June*, p. 139.

Furthermore, she continues to justify Lou Henry's behavior and she also continues to blame her sister Eva despite her condition of helplessness and sorrow. Mary Nell thus affirms:

She asked for it. She shouldn't have shown herself to Lou. She shouldn't have bent over in front of him. Or passed so close when she walked by. And the way she walked... what did she expect from a man, a robust man, like Lou Evans? She was old enough to know about these things. She couldn't tell anyone. Then they would all know what she was.³⁴¹

Mary Nell urges her sister not to tell anyone of the occurrence. Consequently, after that awful day, Eva loses both her innocence and the synergic bond she had with her sister simultaneously. Mary Nell becomes rigid, cold and hateful towards her in spite of the awareness of her sister's innocence. They thus lose the connection they had in experiencing and reading their visions of the future that consequently become more blurred and less accurate. Moreover, they cannot have visions of their sister anymore.

Eva's first reaction to this traumatic event is a complete closure in her inner and now traumatized self. She experiences a period of silence in which she avoids any kind of interaction with her family and her acquaintances. For instance, when her father asks her if she would rest for a minute after having incessantly focused on her work, she briefly replies and then hurries away:

Again on this Sunday, as he had every Sunday for two months, her father asked, 'Ain't you gon' have a sit, baby?' He pulled out his chair and glanced at the back of her neck. She stood near the doorway with her head down, taking off her apron. 'No, suh,' she said, like always, and slipped through the doorway like a ghost.³⁴²

After the traumatic occurrence Eva is often described as an almost ghostly presence who wanders inside the house. She also admits that she feels that Lou Henry should have directly killed her as she is half dead already.³⁴³ Her attitude after the traumatic event is reminiscent of Lizzie's behavior in the psychiatric hospital. The period of silence that Eva

³⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 140.

³⁴² *Ivi*, p. 160-161.

³⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 150.

lives through can be compared to Lizzie's and thus it can be argued that it serves the same function. Eva's period of silence can be applied to LaCapra's concepts of "acting out" and "working through" that have been already mentioned to explain Lizzie's process of healing. Eva's temporarily alienation can thus allow the beginning of her healing process.

Furthermore, precisely like in Lizzie's case, it is only due to the sharing her traumatic memory with someone else that Eva is able to complete her healing process. In fact, she explains everything to Willow, who performs a ritual in order to heal Eva's trauma. Willow uses a storm in order to wash Eva's body and metaphorically wash away her trauma. Venetria Patton explains that "Willow believes that Eva's rape squeezed the life out of her and that she's become an old woman, but she uses the storm as an opportunity to rejuvenate Eva."³⁴⁴ In fact, the process results beneficial to Eva's condition as afterward, "Eva is described as clean, wide, open, different (307). The baptism has given her a different perspective on life as she essentially reclaims her body-her womb-from Lou Henry."³⁴⁵

Besides working towards her own healing, Eva is also able to "provide a degree of healing to her sister Mary Nell because of the intervention of the elder, Willow, who tries to mediate for Ayo."³⁴⁶ In fact, Eva replicates the same ritual on Mary Nell twenty-nine years later "passing along the same ancestral healing that Ayo had shared with her."³⁴⁷

A further instance of the unacceptance of the past in the novel is provided by Grace's parents. In fact, Joy and her husband despise everything that reminds them of their past or their heritage. They refuse to connect to any of their ancestral traditions. Éva Tettenborn also claims that "Joy rejects common African cultural practices [...]."³⁴⁸ For example, when Joy sees women balancing things on their head she "always frowned [...] 'like they back in the slav'ry time.'"³⁴⁹ When her daughter Grace asks her why she does not do it, Joy answers that "This ain't no Afraca [...]."³⁵⁰ Joy also describes African women in degrading terms, affirming that "they just ran around half-naked in the hot sun,

³⁴⁴ Patton, *Grasp that Reaches beyond the Grave*, p. 169.

³⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 170.

³⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 169.

³⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 170.

³⁴⁸ Éva Tettenborn, "Africana Concepts of the Ancestor and Time in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*," *Obsidian*, 12(1), (2011), p. 105.

³⁴⁹ Perry, *A Sunday in June*, p. 7.

³⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

not caring about turning themselves blacker than black, a sure sign to Joy of their ignorance.”³⁵¹ These passages prove that in Joy’s assimilated and mimic attitude, blackness is a burden rather than an asset, and in her opinion it would be preferable not to show it or celebrate it. She also tries to differentiate herself from the rest of the black community since it is stated that she often said things like: “Just ’cause we colored don’t mean we got to be like that [...]”³⁵² Furthermore, despite the frequent requests of their daughter Grace, both Joy and her husband refuse to tell her Ayo’s story. In fact, she explains to Grace that

Grandmama Bessie had a hard time her whole life, you hear? She had nothin’ but horror to tell. And I heard all of it. She made me write it down for her. And when I was done writin’, I never looked at it again. The tellin’ of it lifted a burden from her after she was old, but for us now, it be best to forget it all. That slav’ry stuff ain’t nothin’ to dwell on.³⁵³

This extract highlights her inability to look back at her heritage and her past. She is not able to face it and accept it, thus she is not able to heal from the inherited memory of slavery. In another instance, it is affirmed that

Her mother used to talk of living in this house and about how Grandmama had spoken often of slavery time before she died. Sometimes she talked, too, about Africa. Joy said she had written down a lot of her mother’s stories, but when they asked to hear them, she would just bend back over her sewing. Papa would look up from whatever he was doing and a certain hardness would descend on his features, half anger, half fear.

‘No need to listen to Bessie’s old stories,’ he would say, his usual pleasant expression replaced by an unhappy shadow.³⁵⁴

The passage underlines that Joy’s husband has the same attitude towards the traumatic memory of the past and he is unable to accept it and thus heal from it as well. Another important proof of his disconnection to his heritage is the fact that he uses Ayo’s slave name rather than her original one, while in the diary Ayo openly begs her daughter not to call her Bessie in order to counter the slavery premises and abandon its values.

³⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

³⁵² *Ivi*, p. 39.

³⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 30.

³⁵⁴ *Ivi*, p. 296-297.

Furthermore, Grace's parents do not accept the supernatural as an inherent part of life, as it is considered in the African tradition. In fact, Joy is unable to accept that her two daughters, Mary Nell and Eva, possess supernatural abilities. She thus affirms that "Ain't no such thing as seein' the future, but them kind of ideas die hard. In this house, we gon' kill 'em."³⁵⁵ When her daughter Eva tries to convince her that maybe she has inherited the powers by her grandmother Ayo, Joy replies by saying that the use of their abilities is "just playin', and I don't want nobody thinkin' that talk is for real. 'Cause it ain't."³⁵⁶ As a consequence of her skepticism towards the supernatural realm and her adoption of the Western values of rationality, she disdains Willow and her methods as well. In fact, she "had warned the girls not to be too friendly with old Willow."³⁵⁷ Joy also states that in her opinion Willow is some kind of witch who does things that "a Christian woman ought not to be doin'".³⁵⁸ She thus refuses Willow's help when she offers it in order to cure Grace's condition:

'Naw, naw,' Joy said quietly but quickly, the words coming out in one big rush. 'This wasn't the right thing to do. I'm sorry Grace got you here, Miz Willow. I know you got faith in this... root work... I know you do. But I'm go' put my trust in the Lord. You can go home, now. I don't know what I was thinkin' 'bout lettin' you come over here for nothin'. Grace just tired or somethin'. Can't sleep. Just like you said. She just gets that way sometimes. We don't need no hoodoo for that. Just some nice hot food in her. Some rest. She ain't slept in days. I'll take care of her.'³⁵⁹

It may be important to highlight that Joy calls Willow's methods "hoodoo" in a derogatory way. She is also clearly unable to fully grasp her daughter's condition thus not allowing her to receive the proper cure. In fact, as Tettenborn explains:

Paradoxically, by trying to shield her daughters from Willow's and Ayo's powers, Joy may end up facilitating Grace's possession since Ayo may not feel recognized properly as an ancestor in her daughter's home, especially since Joy vows to 'kill' any Africana cultural influences she perceives as incompatible with Christianity.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 20.

³⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 46.

³⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁵⁹ *Ivi*, p. 88.

³⁶⁰ Tettenborn, "Africana Concepts of the Ancestor and Time in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*," p. 105.

4.4 Willow, the medicine-woman

Willow has the opposite attitude of Grace' parents since she is completely connected to her past and her heritage. In fact, she functions as the medium and the symbol of the connection between the supernatural and ancestral realm and reality. Consequently, she has also maintained her tie with Ayo, as she is able to mediate for her. Moreover, it can be argued that she can be compared to the figure of the "medicine-men" belonging to African tradition.

As Éva Tettenborn explains Willow "represents a link to both the late Ayo and lost Africana cultural concepts."³⁶¹ Tettenborn also affirms that Willow's supernatural powers are firstly hinted by her name. In fact, her name can be referred to the West African belief of "the tree as a locus of communicating with the ancestral world."³⁶² The character of Willow can thus be read as the embodiment of this African belief and the embodiment of the connection with the ancestral and the supernatural world. This is proven by her maintained tie with the sisters' grandmother, Ayo. Willow and Ayo met while in bondage and they were both trained in ancestral practices. She often reminisces of past moments that involved Ayo and she states that they had a very strong bond. For instance, she affirms that

she missed Bessie still. People had always marveled at how alike they were, as alike as mother and daughter. Bessie was twenty years older and had taken care of Willow when she was a child. Folks used to turn and look at the two tall, dark women whenever they walked together. [...] Both Bessie and Willow had learned about herbs and curing and midwifing from another slave, an old woman named Cassie [...].³⁶³

It is stated in the book that Ayo was more talented than Willow in the ancestral medicine practice. Therefore, Willow often claims that if the grandmother was still alive, she would have trained and helped her granddaughters in the use of their inherited powers: "If Bessie were here, she would have already taught those girls, if they truly had second sight."³⁶⁴

³⁶¹ *Ibidem.*

³⁶² *Ibidem.*

³⁶³ Perry, *A Sunday in June*, p. 74-75.

³⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p. 75.

In addition, Willow seems to act as a medium for Ayo's will in multiple occasions. She says that, since Ayo had been her teacher and guidance her whole life, she felt responsible in helping her descendants.³⁶⁵ Consequently, she tries to help Grace in understanding the reincarnation process that has been initiated by her grandmother and she advises her not to escape from it but to face it instead. In fact, Willow explains to Grace that Ayo is "comin' to tell you somethin'. The old ones do that. I know Bessie wouldn't be hangin' around 'less she had somethin' important to say."³⁶⁶ She clarifies again the aim of the reincarnation process, by stating about the voices that Grace hears: "They African people you see. They must be your peoples. Bessie tryin' to tell you somethin', I suppose."³⁶⁷ When Grace affirms that she does not want Ayo to communicate with her, Willow replies: "Really listen and open yo'self up."³⁶⁸ These passages highlight that Willow is able to comprehend the true purpose of Ayo's reincarnation process. Consequently, Willow emphasizes once more the importance for Grace to listen to her grandmother's words in order to acquire peace: "But you gon' have to do what I said about listenin' if you gon' ever have any kind of peace from your grandmother. I tell you, chile, she was a strong person. Strong and big-hearted. If she came back to tell me anythang, I sure as hell would listen."³⁶⁹

Moreover, Willow is the one who explains to Eva that her clairvoyance is an inherited gift from Ayo, thus validating the sisters' powers, the same powers that are not accepted nor believed in by their own mother:

'Girl!' Willow called out, and Eva turned. 'I seen it befo' you know. The sight. Ayo had it. Yo' grandma, the one they called Bessie. She could see back and forth and sideways. That power must come straight from over there. From Afraca. And it came with her, right there on that renegade ship they brung her on.'³⁷⁰

³⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 181.

³⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 87.

³⁶⁷ *Ivi*, p. 259.

³⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁶⁹ *Ivi*, p. 262.

³⁷⁰ *Ivi*, p. 114.

Willow also tries to warn and protect Eva from the danger that is impeding on her. In fact, before Lou Henry's heartless actions she tells Eva:

'Powerful hurt is comin' to you if you don't pay attention,' Willow said. 'I coulda helped y'all girls use what ya got. I coulda helped you, I really could. Still can. You just say the word. 'Cause now God and the spirits tryin' to get your attention and you ain't got enough schoolin' on how to listen right.'³⁷¹

In this instance Eva, still influenced by the skeptical view of her parents, refuses Willow's help. Her attitude towards Willow's methods changes after the sexual abuse that she endures. When Willow offers her help once again in order to heal Eva's trauma of rape, the girl finally accepts the woman's advice and she also accepts her supernatural methods. Therefore, Willow acts through Ayo's influence in the performance of the ritual that allows Eva's healing. Tettenborn explains that "While she is successful in restoring Eva's emotional health, she dies after having completed her mission (308). Significantly, Willow sees Ayo before dying [...]"³⁷² Her vision highlights the ancestral connection between her and Ayo's presence. Venetria Patton also affirms that "Willow passes away shortly after Eva's baptism, but as she closes her eyes she sees Grace who smiles back with Ayo's smile that suggests that Ayo was working with Willow to bring peace to Eva."³⁷³ The connection between the two women and the influence of Ayo's presence during the process is underlined also by the use of rain in the ritual. In fact, Tettenborn explains that Willow's "preference recalls Oya's, who is known as 'the original Rain-Bringer' and can exercise her powers through 'gale winds, tornadoes, hurricanes' or other forms of strong winds (Washington 168)"³⁷⁴ As it has been mentioned in previous chapters, the character of Ayo can be interpreted as the representation of the orisha Oya of the Yoruba tradition. Willow's use of powers that can be reconnected to Ayo's presence as the embodiment of Oya, confirms the assumption that she acts as a medium for Ayo's will in the process of healing Eva.

³⁷¹ Ivi, p. 113.

³⁷² Tettenborn, "Africana Concepts of the Ancestor and Time in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*," p. 107.

³⁷³ Patton, *Grasp that Reaches beyond the Grave*, p. 170.

³⁷⁴ Tettenborn, "Africana Concepts of the Ancestor and Time in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*," p. 106-107.

John Samuel Mbiti in his study of African traditions and philosophy mentions another typical African figure that might describe Willow's role in the community. Mbiti describes a kind of specialist group called the "medicine-men". The character of Willow seems to match some of their characteristics.

Medicine-men can be also called "herbalists" or "traditional doctors" and can be both men and women. In many societies it is believed that these individuals are gifted with some powers either naturally from birth or due to the use of some medicines³⁷⁵. In both cases they have to undergo formal or informal training in order to

acquire knowledge in matters pertaining to: the medicinal value, quality and use of different herbs, leaves, roots, fruits, barks, grasses and of various objects like minerals, dead insects, bones, feathers, powders, smoke from different objects, excreta of animals and insects, shells, eggs and so on; the causes, cures and prevention of diseases and other forms of suffering (such as barrenness, failure in undertakings, misfortunes, poor crop yield in the field); magic, witchcraft [...].³⁷⁶

Moreover, their primary duty is to investigate and detect the sources of sicknesses, diseases and misfortunes in order to cure them through both physical and spiritual or psychological treatments.³⁷⁷ Furthermore, Mbiti adds that "Another important duty of medicine-men is to take preventive measures."³⁷⁸ Medicine-men have also the ability to control or communicate with the living-dead and they "have access to the force of nature and other forms of knowledge unknown or little known by the public."³⁷⁹

Willow fits most of these characteristics. As previously mentioned, she has undergone an informal training offered by one of the slave women she worked with in bondage. She might also be gifted with powers as she can sense the danger impending on Eva. Moreover, she has also access to the force of nature since she uses rain in order to heal Eva's trauma. Willow proves that she has extensive knowledge of root-medicine since she uses objects like herbs, roots and minerals to cure or prevent diseases and misfortunes. Willow explains this to Eva:

³⁷⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 162-163.

³⁷⁶ *Ivi*, p. 163.

³⁷⁷ *Ivi*, p. 165.

³⁷⁸ *Ivi*, p. 166.

³⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

‘Well,’ Willow said, ‘it don’t take no witch to know things. I had folk in my life, God bless ‘em, just taught me some things. Yo’ grandmamas-on both sides. Taught me some things about helpin’ take away people’s pain. The pains in the body and the pains in the heart. What plants did what. What things to use together and that sort of thing. It’s just plain old learnin’, like what you do in school.’³⁸⁰

This passage highlights that she also uses herbs, roots, minerals and so on in order to cure both the pain of the body and the pain of the heart, in other words she aims at preventing and curing both physical and psychological illnesses, diseases or traumas. The characteristics that have been mentioned above, combined with Willow’s words might validate and confirm the comparison between the character of Willow and the African figure of the medicine-men. It can be argued that Willow perfectly shares both the methods and the purposes of this kind of specialists.

In conclusion, it can be argued that Willow could be read as the embodiment of the connection with both the ancestors’ realm and the African culture and traditions. Her character is in direct opposition with Grace’s parents who have assimilated to the Western values and society, losing the tie with their heritage and their past. This is the reason why while Grace’s parents fail in helping their daughters, Willow is able to provide valid advice to Grace and to allow Eva’s healing by tapping into her knowledge of African and ancestral traditions and rituals.

³⁸⁰ Perry, *A Sunday in June*, p. 112.

Conclusion

Phyllis Alesia Perry's neo-slave narratives, *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*, have the aim of portraying slaves' endured traumas and the consequences of the slavery system that are still tangible in the contemporary society. They also display the processes of traumatization, of transmission of the traumatic memory, and of healing from trauma. Therefore, they can be categorized as trauma narratives as well. In order to display all these themes, Perry explains that she has used non-mimetic and supernatural elements because they enabled her to explore stories that cannot be told in a mimetic way. Due to the use of supernatural and non-mimetic factors, such as the reincarnation process, the author was able to give a voice to the deceased ancestor, who provides a first-hand, personal account of the slavery experience that goes beyond the facts recalled by official documents on the matter. The novels can thus be defined also as speculative fiction, precisely because of the use of these fantastic elements.

Furthermore, the reincarnation process also allows Perry to concretely represent trauma and the transmission of the traumatic memory. In fact, what Grace and Lizzie experience can be read as a tangible representation of the postmemory or prosthetic memory theory explained by Marianne Hirsch and Alison Landsberg. In fact, both Lizzie and Grace carry the burden of a traumatic memory of an event that they did not live first-hand. Moreover, the reincarnation of three women in one body, and thus the coexistence of all their experiences and memories in just one mind, can be interpreted, as Pamela June observes, as the embodiment of collective memory, a term that has been popularized by Maurice Halbwachs and expanded by the studies of Jan and Aleida Assmann. As it has been explained in the first chapter, various scholars have affirmed that trauma, through the transmission of memory, can be transmitted trans-generationally. In fact, Grace and Lizzie, due to the reincarnation process and the inheritance of Ayo's scars relive the trauma of the Middle Passage and of slavery that was first experienced by their foremother Ayo.

According to Éva Tettenborn, the haunting ancestor, Ayo, can be compared to one of the deities of the Yoruba tradition called Oya. This theory would explain her powers, since Oya is able to influence all human beings with the purpose of guiding them in the remembrance of their past and heritage and in honoring their ancestors. Her power of

influence on the living is reminiscent of Ayo's powers, since Ayo influences the lives of her descendants in the quest for the remembrance and honoring of those who have deceased in the Middle Passage and during slavery. Moreover, Camille Passalacqua claims that Ayo can be placed in the context of a non-Christian Trinity composed by Ayo herself, Grace and Lizzie. Their aim would be not the salvation of humankind as in the Christian belief, but the act of remembrance of the traumatic past of slavery and the creation of the path towards its healing.

Consequently, in both novels the traumatic memory of slavery is passed on due to the reincarnation process initiated by the haunting ancestor, Ayo, who has experienced all the horrific abuses of life in bondage. Ayo forces her descendants to re-experience her life in bondage through multiple elements, such as the reincarnation flashbacks, the reading of the diary she dictated to her daughter Joy, and the patching of story quilts that portray her life during the Middle Passage and slavery and that display the reincarnation process. In fact, as it has been previously explained, Ayo's main purpose is to have her story passed on and be remembered. That is the only way for her to heal from her trauma. The actions of writing the diary and reembodying in her descendants allow Ayo to transmit and share the burden of her traumatic memory. Sharing one's experience is one of the main steps in the path of healing. Her daughter Joy confirms that dictating the diary to her, Ayo achieved a partial relief from all the sufferings she had to endure in her past: "The tellin' of it lifted a burden from her after she was old [...]"³⁸¹ However, this was not enough for Ayo since she also needed her story to be remembered and she needed to counter the premises of the slavery system. While reincarnating in Grace she is not able to fulfil her purpose because of her granddaughter's unacceptance of her condition of reincarnated woman. Since the reincarnation process can be interpreted as a concrete tie to one's past and heritage, Grace's attitude of denial towards the reincarnation process can be read as the disconnection from her origins, from the memory of the past and her heritage as well. On the other hand, Lizzie is able to provide a partial if not almost complete healing for both herself and the two other women. After a period of silence that allows her to reflect and "work through"³⁸² her condition, she finally shares her story with her lover Anthony Paul and her mother/daughter Sarah. In this way, she heals from her trauma since her

³⁸¹ Phyllis Alesia Perry, *A Sunday in June*, New York: Hyperion, 2004, p. 30.

³⁸² The concepts of "acting out and working through have been elaborated by Dominick LaCapra.

condition is finally understood by her own mother, and she also closes the circle of Grace's narrative, since she enables the reconnection of the mother/daughter tie between Grace and Sarah. Lizzie enables the recreation of the bond that had been broken by Grace's departure and her escape from her family due to her fear of the reincarnation condition. Ayo's trauma is also partially healed as her experience is remembered by Lizzie and it is passed on thanks to the appliqué quilt that Lizzie patches. Lizzie's actions also allow the countering of the slavery system's premises since she establishes a reconnection of the mother/daughter tie. In fact, this kind of maternal bond was precluded to Ayo because of her abrupt separation from her mother at the moment of her kidnapping and enslavement. Moreover, Ayo's influence in the lives of her descendants gives her a voice where she was once denied one. Finally, the loving relationship that Lizzie has with Anthony Paul counters the premises of slavery as well, since during bondage slaves were denied intimacy and romantic bonds. As Camille Passalacqua explains, Anthony Paul also gives dignity to the black female body touching the scars on Lizzie's back and countering Ayo's memory of the whippings.

It is important to underline that the reincarnation process is experienced and understood only by the female characters while the men neither endure nor comprehend it. The only man who can be considered an exception to this trend is Anthony Paul, who knows and accepts Lizzie's condition. However, besides the character of Anthony Paul, only the women of the novel are involved in this process. It can be affirmed that Perry's choice of creating a strong matrilineal legacy allows her to underline the importance of the female bonds in the African American community.

Moreover, there are several mediums that favor the initiation of the haunting, such as the trunk, the quilts, the diary and the piece of blue cloth. Both Grace's and Lizzie's haunting experiences begin after the interaction with these elements that belonged to Ayo and her past. They all serve the function of recipients of memory or *lieux de mémoire*, since they are objects that contain and transmit, to those who come in contact with them, the memories of Ayo's traumatic experiences.

When the reincarnation process starts, there are several elements that highlight the connection between the body and the mind of the three women. First of all, the three women's bodies and minds are often superimposed due to the reincarnation flashbacks.

In fact, in the reincarnation flashbacks Lizzie is transported into another place and time and she shares the body of her foremothers and their feelings as well. The reincarnation flashbacks are not fully detached and separated from Lizzie's reality as they can influence it. In fact, she finds dust on her feet when she wakes up from one of the visions, the same dust on which she was walking in the dream-like flashback. This indicates that the two dimensions can interact with one another and thus the reincarnation flashbacks can tangibly have an influence on Lizzie's life and reality. Furthermore, as Passalacqua suggests, dust validates Lizzie's story and by extension Perry's novel as well since it confirms and demonstrates the concreteness and reality of Lizzie's experience, shattering the readers' doubts about the veracity of her reincarnation process. The recurrence of the element of dust throughout the novel also represents both the passing of time and Lizzie's tie to the past.

Furthermore, Lizzie inherits the scars and the wounds that her foremother acquired in bondage because of the manacles that were placed on her wrists and ankles and whippings. The same scars appear on Lizzie's body precisely after having experienced the reincarnation flashbacks that portray Ayo's life during the Middle Passage and slavery. Grace inherits the scars as well, although she does not comprehend their role. On the other hand, Lizzie understands it. She does so also thanks to the words of the priest who validates her story. He suggests that the scars appear on her body so she cannot forget her past: "Maybe you're marked so you won't forget this time, so you will remember and move on."³⁸³ Beyond this statement, one might perceive Perry's own authorial voice, suggesting the meaning and the function of the reincarnation process that both protagonists of her novels have to endure.

The blood that is produced by the opening of these inherited scars is another symbol of the connection between the three women. It is a visual representation of the traumatic memory of slavery and the sufferings that Ayo had to endure on the ship during the Middle Passage voyage and in bondage, with whippings and punishments. It is simultaneously a symbol of life and death as on the one hand it represents the sufferings and the violence the three women are exposed to (Ayo survived slavery and Grace and Lizzie had to endure the reincarnation process and the transmission of Ayo's traumatic

³⁸³ Phyllis Alesia Perry, *Stigmata*, New York: Hyperion, 1998, p. 213.

memory), but on the other hand it also symbolizes the women's endurance and survival of their respective traumatic experiences and memories. The scars and blood also serve to validate Lizzie's story in front of her skeptical parents and the doctors. In fact, they serve as concrete proofs of the process that Lizzie is enduring.

Perry has utilized various literary strategies to convey trauma and healing in the novel. The non-linearity and the fragmentation of the narration in *Stigmata* can be compared to Lizzie's non-linear life, since she bounces back and forth in time due to the reincarnation flashbacks, and the fragmentation of Lizzie's body and identity. In fact, Lizzie's body is fragmented because of the scars that appear on her skin, and her identity is composed of the coexistence of other two women, with their memories and their experiences, in her own body and mind. In *A Sunday in June* the narration is more linear, but a certain level of fragmentation is still maintained since the plot follows the life of multiple characters simultaneously. Moreover, several different elements, such as the excerpts of Ayo's diary or Grace's letter, are patched together rather than being separated and located in different chapters. This interweaving of all these different contents contributes in giving an appearance of fragmentation to the text. This characteristic applies to *Stigmata* as well.

Furthermore, in *Stigmata*, the narration can be also described as circular. In fact, when Lizzie and her mother Sarah finish to patch the quilt and the latter finally grasps the truth of the situation, the narrative circle is closed and completed for all the women involved. Lizzie herself affirms that the gap is finally closed.³⁸⁴ The three reincarnated women achieve their partial healing and Sarah recreates the maternal bond with her lost mother. However, in the prequel this circularity of the narrative is not present, since Grace does not accept the reincarnation process and escapes from it not allowing the process of healing to take place. The only narrative strand that has a final closure in the prequel is Eva's process of healing from the trauma of rape and the consequent, although partial, reconnection of the synergic tie with her sister.

Another important feature of Perry's narrative representing trauma, its healing, circularity, the importance of storytelling and folk traditions and the value of female bonds is the quilting trope. Besides being one of the main mediums of the haunting, the quilt also serves all these different functions. Both Grace and Lizzie choose to patch an

³⁸⁴ *Ivi*, p. 230.

appliqué quilt which symbolizes the fragmentation of their bodies and identities due to their endured traumas. However, the quilt can be read not only as a representation of trauma in the novel but also as the medium for achieving healing. In fact, it is exactly thanks to the quilt project that Lizzie is able to communicate her condition to her mother Sarah, thus allowing the healing of the whole matrilineal legacy. Moreover, the quilt can be interpreted as a storytelling device since both Grace and Lizzie patch a story quilt. The first one portrays Ayo's life experiences in the Middle Passage and in bondage while the second one depicts Grace's life of suffering and escaping in vain from her condition of reincarnation. It can be thus argued that Perry wanted to highlight the importance of the role of folk traditions through the quilting trope. The latter also serves the purpose of underlining the importance of female bonds in the African American community. Consequently, all the female bonds are restored at the end of the novel because of the communal working on the quilting project.

Finally, the art of quilting can be read as the symbol of connection to past traditions and one's heritage. In fact, all the women who are directly connected to the past, willingly or unwillingly, having inherited Ayo's gifts or enduring the reincarnation process, are better quilters than the women who are disconnected from their past and have assimilated to Western values. For instance, both Grace, Lizzie and Eva are really talented and skilled quilters. Grace and Lizzie are obviously connected to the memory of the past and their heritage due to the reincarnation process, while Eva is connected to her foremother because of her inheritance of Ayo's gift of clairvoyance. On the other hand, Joy and Sarah (the latter only at the beginning of the novel since in the end her attitude changes) are the most assimilated women of the family to Western values. They do not accept to look back to their past and their heritage and they refuse everything that reminds them of African traditions and values. Their detachment from these elements is metaphorically expressed by their lack of skills in quilting. In fact, besides their openly negative statements and behavior towards the supernatural, their heritage and African traditions, they are also depicted as less talented and skillful in the art of sewing.

The contraposition between characters that willingly accept the past or are forcibly connected to their heritage and characters that have assimilated to Western society or openly disregard African traditions and values is a common theme of both Perry's novels.

In *Stigmata*, the first case is represented by Lizzie who is able to accept her connection to her foremothers and consequently her past and her heritage. By doing so she is able to heal from the traumatic memory of slavery and as a consequence she heals from the reincarnation process as well. Lizzie at the end of the novel is able to cope with her condition and to re-appropriate her life. On the other hand, the second case is embodied by her parents and the doctors who have a skeptical attitude and do not accept the supernatural explanations of the facts because of their adherence to Western values of rationality and scientificity. The parents have, in fact, assimilated to Western society and they have lost the tie with their heritage and African concepts and traditions. This is highlighted by the fact that they neither understand nor accept the supernatural features of Lizzie's condition while in African culture the supernatural is perceived as an inherent part of life. Moreover, the doctors can be read as an embodiment of Western values of rationality and skepticism since they do not believe Lizzie's accounts. This might be interpreted as the metaphor for the white mainstream's inability to accept the fact that the consequences of the slavery experience are still affecting African American individuals in the present day. As suggested by Ana Nunes, their attitude and their direction on what Lizzie should write in her diary can also be read as the unacceptance of black authority on the written text.

In *A Sunday in June*, Eva and Willow are the characters most connected to African traditions and values and they also are the ones who are able to accept their past and their heritage. In fact, Eva is the most inclined of the sisters to accept her inherited supernatural gift and she also accepts to undergo supernatural and traditional rituals in order to heal her trauma. Furthermore, Willow performs supernatural and traditional rituals and medicine. She can be compared to the figure of the "medicine-men" belonging to African tradition. In fact, she has been trained by another slave woman to prevent and cure diseases and misfortunes through the use of roots, herbs, minerals and supernatural rituals. She is also connected to the ancestral realm as she is able to maintain her tie with her deceased friend and mother figure, Ayo. Moreover, she mediates for Ayo in several occasions. She instructs Grace to listen to Ayo's haunting voice and presence in order to heal and she also provides the healing of Eva's trauma of rape. On the other hand, although forcibly tied to her heritage due to the reincarnation process, Grace cannot accept her condition. She does not accept the inherited gift of hearing the voices of the

departed as well, and on the contrary she tries to ignore them and, finally, escape from them. In fact, it is more difficult for Grace to accept her situation since, unlike Eva, she is the focus of Ayo's attention and thus she has to relive the traumatic memories of slavery. Grace's parents are unable to establish a tie with their past and their heritage as well. They refuse to tell Ayo's story when asked to and they deny and despise every traditional practice that belongs to African tradition. They have assimilated to Western values at the point that they perceive blackness as a burden rather than an asset and they try to differentiate themselves from the rest of the African American community as much as they can. Their attitude of denial and distancing from African traditions and the African American community is openly stated in the book. This is the reason why, unlike Sarah who at the end of the novel is able to accept the truth of Lizzie's situation, they are not able to grasp their daughter's condition of reincarnation. Furthermore, precisely for these reasons they also refuse Willow's help multiple times throughout the novel. They openly affirm that they despise Willow's methods too. In fact, they call them "hoodoo" in a derogatory way, since she uses traditional African practices and rituals. They thus prevent Willow to provide the proper cures for Grace's condition of reincarnation and they do not allow the prevention of Eva's trauma of rape as well.

In conclusion, it can be argued that Perry's aim in writing these novels is thus that of highlighting the importance of remembering one's past, heritage and traditions. She emphasizes the usefulness of being able to accept and confront the traumatic memory of the past in order to heal from it. She underlines the importance of folk traditions and storytelling through the quilting projects and Ayo's diary. Perry also highlights the crucial function of female bonds in the African American community through the creation of a matrilineal legacy that unites and collaborates in order to provide the healing and the survival from the traumatic experiences and the traumatic memories of slavery and all other forms of oppression.

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Riassunto

L'obiettivo di questa tesi è quello di analizzare le due neo-slave narratives scritte da Phyllis Alesia Perry, rispettivamente intitolate *Stigmata* e *A Sunday in June*. Alcuni dei temi principali trattati nei due romanzi sono la rappresentazione dell'esperienza della schiavitù e le conseguenze che esistono ancora oggi derivate dall'oppressione vissuta durante la prigionia, la figura del fantasma dell'antenato e il processo di reincarnazione, la rappresentazione del processo di traumatizzazione, di trasmissione del trauma e delle sue conseguenze, il processo di guarigione ed, infine, la distinzione tra i valori della cultura Africana ed Afro Americana e quelli tipici delle culture Occidentali.

Con lo scopo di comprendere meglio i temi che verranno affrontati nell'analisi dei romanzi, il primo capitolo è dedicato alla spiegazione di temi quali la discussione sulla memoria della schiavitù, la nozione di trauma e la sua trasmissione transgenerazionale. Questi argomenti possono, infatti, rivelarsi utili nel provare a comprendere la condizione delle protagoniste dei due romanzi in quanto esse subiscono in prima persona la trasmissione della memoria e del trauma della schiavitù da parte di un'antenata. Possono anche, però, essere utili per capire la condizione in cui vivono gli individui Afro Americani nella società contemporanea. Il primo capitolo si pone come obiettivo anche la definizione di alcuni generi letterari utili per descrivere e categorizzare i due romanzi. Vengono, infatti, descritti i generi della neo-slave narrative, della trauma narrative e della fiction speculativa. Il primo capitolo introduce inoltre i temi del fantasma e delle cicatrici in quanto sono due delle caratteristiche peculiari e temi ricorrenti nei romanzi di Phyllis Alesia Perry.

La storia della schiavitù e la memoria di questo evento traumatico sono state a lungo ignorate dalla popolazione americana poiché questa forma di oppressione contrasta l'ideologia, tipicamente associata agli U.S.A., di libertà e democrazia. Gran parte della popolazione americana ancora si rifiuta di guardare ad un passato che si trova in contrasto con le spoglie di democrazia e libertà che l'America avrebbe dovuto, teoricamente, vestire. Quindi i discorsi sulla schiavitù e la sua memoria hanno iniziato ad essere affrontati solamente molto tardi, negli ultimi decenni del ventesimo secolo. Proprio in questo periodo, infatti, gli studi psicologici sul trauma e le sue conseguenze hanno conosciuto un considerevole sviluppo, poiché le ricerche sull'evento ed il trauma

dell'Olocausto spinsero molti studiosi a investigare anche sull'entità del trauma di altri eventi su grande scala, come ad esempio la schiavitù. Nel capitolo verranno utilizzati gli studi di Cathy Caruth per dare una definizione del concetto di trauma e di altre teorie strettamente collegate, come quelle sulle nozioni di latenza e di ripetizione. Viene sottolineata una distinzione fondamentale tra diversi tipi di trauma. Infatti, si può distinguere tra trauma diretto, indiretto o insidioso. Verranno inoltre definiti e descritti anche i fenomeni di Disturbo da Stress Post Traumatico e del PTSS (Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome). Queste ricerche sulla psicologia del trauma e sulle sue conseguenze possono risultare utili per una migliore comprensione della condizione psicologica dell'individuo che ha subito l'esperienza di oppressione ed abuso della schiavitù, ma anche quella delle generazioni seguenti che sono ancora profondamente segnate dalla memoria di questo evento. Infatti, le teorie di Marianne Hirsch e Alison Landsberg provano che la memoria di un individuo può essere trasmessa di generazione in generazione e che le persone che la ereditano mantengono questa memoria come se fosse loro, anche se non hanno vissuto l'evento in questione in prima persona. Come verrà visto in seguito, le protagoniste dei romanzi analizzati vivranno proprio questa situazione, in quanto la loro antenata che ha vissuto quasi l'intera vita come schiava, reincarnandosi in loro, trasmetterà loro anche tutte le sue memorie e i ricordi di oppressione e di violenza. Inoltre, viene evidenziato che con la trasmissione della memoria di un evento traumatico viene trasmesso anche il trauma subito. Viene descritta anche la teoria della memoria collettiva, che vede la memoria come un prodotto condiviso pubblicamente oltre che vissuto privatamente. Questa teoria può essere utile nella lettura del romanzo in quanto le protagoniste ne sono una rappresentazione concreta, essendo tre donne reincarnate in un solo corpo che condividono collettivamente le proprie memorie.

Vengono poi definiti i generi letterari che possono descrivere i due romanzi di Phyllis Alesia Perry. Questi ultimi possono ricadere nella categoria delle neo-slave narratives in quanto forniscono una rappresentazione dell'esperienza della schiavitù da una prospettiva contemporanea e le sue conseguenze. Possono anche essere descritte come trauma narratives poiché mettono in scena i processi di traumatizzazione, di trasmissione del trauma ma anche di guarigione. Infine, i due romanzi possono essere definiti anche fiction speculative dato che l'autrice utilizza elementi sovranaturali e non-mimetici con lo scopo di spingersi al di là di ciò che una narrativa totalmente realistica le permetterebbe

di fare. Il processo di reincarnazione dell'antenata nei corpi delle sue discendenti permette a Perry di dare una voce all'ex schiava che può quindi raccontare la sua esperienza personale della schiavitù e colmare le lacune dei documenti ufficiali.

Infine, la figura del fantasma e il topos delle cicatrici vengono descritti ed analizzati. Entrambi i temi sono caratteristici dei romanzi di Perry. In questa analisi viene sottolineato che il fantasma ha la funzione di rappresentare e dare una voce a coloro che non fanno più parte del mondo nel presente, non solo per via della morte ma anche perché sono stati eliminati dalla memoria pubblica in quanto erano la prova concreta ed evidente del fallimento delle ideologie di libertà e di democrazia a cui l'America avrebbe dovuto teoricamente aderire. Lo schiavo è proprio uno di questi individui cancellati dalla memoria pubblica in quanto non rientra nell'ideale rappresentazione che l'America desidera dare di sé stessa. Inoltre, il fantasma può anche essere d'aiuto ai vivi in quanto può avvisare degli imminenti pericoli e fornire informazioni cruciali per la sopravvivenza. Le cicatrici, invece, rappresentano il trauma subito dagli schiavi durante l'esperienza di oppressione e violenza. Possono essere interpretate anche come la rappresentazione del perdurare delle conseguenze di questo trauma in quanto si tratta di segni che rimangono per sempre incavati nella pelle. Le cicatrici che si potevano abitualmente osservare sul corpo degli schiavi derivavano dal fatto che essi venivano legati gli uni agli altri con catene ai polsi e alle caviglie. Queste restrizioni venivano utilizzate in maniera tale da controllarli e non permettergli di rivoltarsi o ribellarsi. Inoltre, molte cicatrici derivavano dalle frustate subite come punizione. Le punizioni venivano inflitte senza validi motivi, perlomeno per stabilire e ricordare la gerarchia di potere vigente nella società schiavista che vedeva il padrone bianco in cima alla piramide sociale. Le cicatrici venivano anche utilizzate dagli schiavisti ed i possibili compratori come strumento di valutazione, per capire il temperamento dello schiavo. Più cicatrici e ferite uno schiavo aveva più veniva considerato un individuo problematico poiché ogni cicatrice o ferita rappresentava, secondo il compratore, una punizione subita.

Il secondo capitolo inizia con un riassunto della trama del primo romanzo pubblicato da Phyllis Alesia Perry, *Stigmata*. Alcuni tra i temi principali affrontati dall'autrice nel romanzo vengono analizzati. Il primo tra questi è la rappresentazione della schiavitù. Quest'ultima viene fornita tramite il diario che l'antenata, di nome Ayo, detta a sua figlia Joy. Questo diario contiene la narrazione dei principali eventi della vita di Ayo come il

suo rapimento, il terribile viaggio affrontato sulle navi schiaviste per arrivare sulle coste Americane, la vendita degli schiavi al mercato, le punizioni e le frustate che la padrona le ha inflitto. Grazie alle parole di Ayo nel diario, non solo il lettore può comprendere l'entità del trauma subito dagli individui ridotti in schiavitù, ma anche lo scopo principale che influenza le azioni dell'antenata. Si capisce già dalle prime righe che la sua intenzione è quella di ricordare tutti coloro che sono deceduti durante il viaggio sulle navi schiaviste e durante la schiavitù. Ayo desidera che la sua storia non venga dimenticata, anzi che venga ricordata e trasmessa di generazione in generazione poiché solo conoscendola, accentuandola e affrontandola si può guarire il trauma che ne deriva. È per questo stesso motivo che Ayo decide di dare inizio ad un processo di reincarnazione nelle sue discendenti, prima Grace e poi Lizzie. Infatti, se Ayo si reincarna in Grace, entrambe le donne si reincarnano nel corpo e nella mente di Lizzie, protagonista di *Stigmata*.

Il personaggio di Ayo è di fondamentale importanza e quindi viene estensivamente analizzato nel secondo capitolo. Il personaggio di Ayo viene innanzitutto paragonato alla definizione di antenata della tradizione africana con cui condivide molte caratteristiche, e successivamente viene comparato anche alla definizione del concetto del "living-dead" sempre appartenente alla tradizione africana. In quest'ultima, infatti, il soprannaturale è percepito come parte integrante della vita quotidiana. Il living-dead consiste in un membro defunto della famiglia che non ha ancora completato il processo di morte e quindi può apparire agli altri membri ancora viventi del nucleo familiare, solitamente i più anziani. Nel caso di Ayo, non appare, ma si reincarna in uno dei membri più giovani. Il rapporto tra l'antenata e le discendenti in cui si è reincarnata non è sempre pacifico e privo di difficoltà. Infatti, Lisa Long introduce il concetto di "rape of history" ed afferma che Ayo è una figura alquanto ambigua, dato che tramite il processo di reincarnazione, forza una penetrazione sia fisica che mentale sui corpi e le menti delle sue discendenti. In aggiunta, due letture molto interessanti di questo peculiare personaggio vengono fornite da Camille Passalacqua e da Éva Tettenborn. La prima studiosa pone Ayo al centro di una Trinità non Cristiana, che vedrebbe l'unione delle tre donne reincarnate. Il loro obiettivo non sarebbe quello di lottare per la salvezza dell'umanità come nella religione Cristiana, ma quello di ricordare ed affrontare la memoria della schiavitù. La seconda studiosa, invece, paragona Ayo alla divinità di nome Oya appartenente alla tradizione Yoruba. Questa comparazione potrebbe fornire una valida spiegazione dei poteri

sovranaturali di Ayo e delle sue intenzioni in quanto la divinità sopraccitata è in grado di influenzare la vita di tutti gli esseri umani viventi con lo scopo di guidarli verso la celebrazione e il compiacimento del volere dei loro antenati.

L'ultimo tema trattato nel capitolo è il processo di guarigione delle tre donne reincarnate. Infatti, non solamente Lizzie è in grado di guarire sé stessa in conseguenza al trauma della reincarnazione e quindi dalla trasmissione della memoria della schiavitù attuata dalla sua antenata, ma è anche capace di guarire parzialmente il trauma delle donne reincarnate in lei. Tramite il progetto di creazione di un quilt con sua madre, Lizzie riesce a rivelarle la sua condizione di donna reincarnata che prima Sarah, la madre di Lizzie, non riusciva né a comprendere né ad accettare. Quindi, Sarah capisce che dentro il corpo e la mente di Lizzie risiede anche il corpo e la mente di sua madre, Grace. Quest'ultima aveva abbandonato la sua famiglia dopo aver scoperto di essere la reincarnazione di Ayo. Conseguentemente alla paura di essere un pericolo per sé stessa e la sua famiglia e al timore di essere internata in un ospedale psichiatrico, era fuggita con la vana speranza di riuscire a scappare anche dalla presenza ancestrale. L'arrivo a questa comprensione e alla conoscenza della situazione da parte di Sarah permette il ricongiungimento del rapporto tra madre e figlia che era stato perso in passato, quindi conseguentemente permette la guarigione del trauma dell'abbandono subito da Sarah e del trauma di Grace. Le azioni di Lizzie forniscono una parziale guarigione anche di Ayo in quanto Lizzie è capace di affrontare la memoria del passato e della schiavitù e ne contrasta anche le premesse. La ricongiunzione del rapporto materno si oppone al ricordo della separazione forzata di Ayo da sua madre, per via del rapimento e assoggettamento da parte degli schiavisti. Anche la relazione amorosa di Lizzie con Anthony Paul contrasta la memoria e il trauma di Ayo. Infatti, Anthony Paul tocca le cicatrici, che Lizzie ha ereditato dall'antenata, riconferendo dignità al corpo femminile e contrastando il ricordo delle frustate che il corpo di Ayo ha subito durante la schiavitù.

Nel terzo capitolo vengono innanzitutto analizzati gli oggetti che fungono da veicolo per la trasmissione della memoria traumatica dell'antenata alle sue discendenti. Il primo tra questi è il baule, appartenente ad Ayo, che può essere interpretato come una sorta di vaso di Pandora. Una volta aperto rilascia la memoria dell'antenata e, solamente comprendendone e accettandone i contenuti, esso può diventare una fonte di rigenerazione piuttosto che di dolore. Inoltre, il baule contiene anche gli altri oggetti che

veicolano il trauma della memoria della schiavitù. Lizzie dentro al baule trova il diario di Ayo, il quilt creato da Grace che ritrae sulla stoffa la storia dell'antenata ed infine un pezzo di tessuto blu che apparteneva alla madre di Ayo. Tutti questi oggetti possono essere definiti come "lieux de mémoire," cioè contenitori di memoria. Tutti i ricordi dell'antenata sono contenuti in questi oggetti che, quando entrano in contatto con le discendenti, ne influenzano l'esistenza. Infatti, dopo aver aperto il baule, aver letto il diario e aver usato il quilt, Lizzie inizia ad avere strani flashback simili a sogni o visioni dove rivive le esperienze delle antenate che si sono reincarnate in lei. Un ulteriore strumento che viene usato dall'antenata per manifestare la sua presenza è lo specchio. Quest'ultimo funziona come una sorta di portale che permette la connessione tra la dimensione in cui avvengono i flashback e la realtà in cui vive la protagonista.

Nel romanzo si possono individuare anche svariati simboli che enfatizzano la connessione tra la protagonista e le sue antenate e il suo passato. Innanzitutto, si può sottolineare la sovrimposizione dei corpi e delle menti delle tre donne all'interno dei flashback vissuti da Lizzie. In queste concrete visioni del passato il suo corpo è contemporaneamente il suo ma anche quello delle sue antenate. Lizzie può muovere le loro braccia, le loro gambe e così via. Anche le menti delle tre donne sono unite in quanto Lizzie può sentire e provare i sentimenti delle ave. In conseguenza a questa sovrimposizione dei corpi Lizzie eredita anche le cicatrici e le ferite che gli schiavisti avevano creato sul corpo di Ayo. Ogni volta che la protagonista rivive le memorie dell'antenata, di quando era legata con catene ai polsi e alle caviglie, o di quando veniva impietosamente frustata, vede affiorare sul suo corpo le stesse cicatrici. Un prete che Lizzie incontrerà durante la permanenza all'ospedale psichiatrico la aiuterà a comprenderne il ruolo, affermando che queste cicatrici affiorano sulla sua pelle cosicché lei sarà obbligata a ricordare, a non scordarsi del suo passato e delle sue origini. Spesso queste cicatrici si aprono e sanguinano. Il sangue può essere definito come un altro dei simboli della connessione tra le donne. Inoltre, simboleggia simultaneamente sia la morte che la vita. Da una parte espone l'entità della violenza subita e dall'altra enfatizza la capacità di queste donne di sopravvivere al trauma perpetuato sui loro corpi. Infine, la polvere è un altro elemento che ricorre più volte nel romanzo e può essere interpretato come la rappresentazione dello scorrere del tempo, ma anche della connessione di Lizzie con il passato. Le cicatrici, il sangue e la polvere servono anche alla protagonista per avvalorare la sua versione dei fatti. Anche

nell'ambiente sicuro e controllato dell'ospedale psichiatrico le cicatrici si manifestano sul suo corpo e iniziano a sanguinare come se fossero state appena aperte. L'inspiegabile fenomeno sottolinea l'erroneità della diagnosi fatta dai dottori. Inoltre, dopo essersi svegliata da una delle visioni, Lizzie trova ai piedi del suo letto una manciata di polvere, la stessa polvere su cui stava camminando durante il flashback. Questo avvenimento e la presenza della polvere sono la prova dell'interconnessione tra le due dimensioni e la prova concreta e tangibile della veridicità delle parole di Lizzie.

L'autrice utilizza svariate strategie letterarie per trasmettere il dolore del trauma subito dalle donne del romanzo, ma anche la loro guarigione. Come prime strategie si possono individuare la non-linearità del testo e la sua frammentazione. Infatti, sono presenti due linee narrative differenti che si intervallano tra un capitolo e l'altro. Il testo è anche frammentato in quanto svariati elementi, come ad esempio il diario di Ayo o la lettera di Grace, co-esistono unitamente nel testo e non sono collocati in capitoli separati. La non-linearità del testo rappresenta la non-linearità della vita di Lizzie, che è costretta, per via del processo di reincarnazione e dei flashback, ad essere sbalzata in spazi e tempi diversi. La frammentazione del testo invece equivale a quella del corpo e della mente della protagonista che sono il risultato dell'unione delle tre donne reincarnate. In aggiunta, la narrazione si può definire circolare in quanto alla fine del romanzo Lizzie è finalmente capace di chiudere il cerchio e contribuire alla guarigione delle donne della famiglia. Molto spesso la circolarità del tempo e della narrazione è sottolineata anche dai personaggi stessi.

Anche il progetto di Lizzie di realizzare un quilt insieme a sua madre enfatizza la circolarità del romanzo. Il quilt, oltre ad essere un contenitore della memoria dell'antenata è anche il simbolo ed uno dei mezzi che contribuiscono alla guarigione delle donne. Il quilt viene utilizzato da Lizzie come strumento per narrare la sua storia e quella delle sue antenate reincarnate in lei. Quindi l'azione di cucire questo oggetto diventa, non solo uno strumento per la narrazione della propria storia e del proprio passato e quindi un modo per Perry di evidenziare l'importanza della tradizione popolare, ma anche una maniera per Lizzie di far comprendere a sua madre la sua condizione di donna reincarnata. Quando Sarah, la madre di Lizzie, comprende finalmente la situazione, il cerchio si chiude. Conseguentemente, ha luogo anche la guarigione dei rispettivi traumi: di Sarah e di Grace grazie al ricongiungimento materno, e di Ayo che ha raggiunto lo scopo di non far

dimenticare la sua storia. In quanto questa attività viene svolta in comunità tra le donne del romanzo, si può affermare che Perry voglia sottolineare, grazie al progetto di Lizzie, l'importanza dell'unione e del rapporto tra donne nella comunità Afro Americana.

L'ultimo argomento trattato nel terzo capitolo è la distinzione tra attitudini diverse. Alcuni personaggi riescono ad accettare il sovrannaturale ed il proprio passato e quindi, metaforicamente, aderiscono ai valori della tradizione africana. Al contrario altri personaggi essendosi assimilati alla società occidentale ne hanno acquisito anche i valori ed hanno perso la connessione con il loro patrimonio culturale di origine. Il primo caso, in *Stigmata*, è rappresentato da Lizzie che alla fine del romanzo si dimostra capace di accettare ed affrontare la memoria traumatica del passato di oppressione e violenza vissuto dai suoi antenati. Il secondo caso, invece, è rappresentato dai genitori di Lizzie che non riescono ad accettare la spiegazione sovrannaturale della condizione di loro figlia, dimostrando anzi di aderire ai valori della cultura occidentale e quindi affidando Lizzie alle cure di psicologi e psichiatri. Questi ultimi, si potrebbe affermare che incarnino proprio i valori della società occidentale, cioè lo scetticismo, la scientificità e la razionalità. Nonostante le testimonianze di Lizzie e l'inspiegabile e continuo affiorare di cicatrici sul suo corpo, i dottori continuano imperterriti a definire la sua situazione come una condizione di rifiuto della realtà e di tendenze suicide. La loro attitudine di rifiuto nei confronti delle parole di Lizzie, della sua condizione e del sovrannaturale, si può interpretare come la metafora dell'incapacità o del desiderio della popolazione americana di non comprendere ed accettare che le conseguenze della schiavitù sono ancora concrete e tangibili nella società contemporanea. Inoltre, l'obbligo che i dottori impongono a Lizzie di scrivere un diario e la loro guida su cosa descrivere nelle pagine, potrebbero rivelare la loro incapacità di accettazione dell'autorità dell'individuo Afro Americano sul testo scritto.

Il quarto capitolo ha lo scopo di analizzare il secondo romanzo scritto e pubblicato da Phyllis Alesia Perry nonché il prequel di *Stigmata*, intitolato *A Sunday in June*. In questo romanzo viene narrata la storia della nonna di Lizzie, Grace la prima a sperimentare sul proprio corpo il processo di reincarnazione. Viene raccontata anche la storia delle sorelle di Grace, Mary Nell ed Eva.

Anche *A Sunday in June* può essere descritta come una neo-slave narrative in quanto anche Grace trova e legge il diario di Ayo e quindi riporta le sue esperienze durante la vita come schiava. Alcuni passaggi vengono riportati, anche se in misura minore rispetto a *Stigmata*. L'esperienza della schiavitù di Ayo viene descritta anche tramite il processo di reincarnazione che Grace è obbligata a subire e tramite le immagini che cuce sul quilt sotto l'influenza dell'antenata. Il quilt di Grace racconta la vita di Ayo dal suo rapimento in Africa fino alla sua esperienza con gli schiavisti una volta arrivata in America. Grazie al processo di reincarnazione Perry è in grado di sottolineare le conseguenze della schiavitù, esistenti nella società contemporanea, causate dalla memoria del trauma di oppressione e violenza subite durante la prigionia. Il romanzo può anche essere definito una trauma narrative in quanto mette in scena e descrive i processi di traumatizzazione, di trasmissione della memoria e del trauma e della successiva guarigione. Grace subisce il trauma causato dal processo di reincarnazione e della trasmissione della memoria della schiavitù da parte dell'antenata. Eva, invece, subisce il trauma dello stupro. Infatti, viene abusata dal marito di sua sorella, che invece di prendere le difese di Eva ed incapace di accusare il marito, incolpa la sorella di averlo tentato. Quindi Eva si trova a dover affrontare, non solamente il trauma fisico e mentale che le viene causato dall'abuso, ma anche la perdita del rapporto, quasi sinergico, che aveva con la sorella prima del terribile avvenimento.

Grace non riuscirà a trovare guarigione dal suo trauma fino a quando Lizzie non deciderà di affrontare il suo passato e la sua condizione, ristabilendo anche il rapporto materno tra Grace e sua figlia Sarah. Grace è incapace di accettare la sua condizione di donna reincarnata e si rifiuta di guardare indietro al suo passato e affrontare la memoria di Ayo. Grace tenta di ignorare le voci ancestrali che continua a percepire ed infine prova senza successo a scappare, sperando di fuggire anche dalla presenza di Ayo. La fuga dalla presenza ancestrale non le sarà possibile e Grace finirà per morire lontana dalla sua famiglia ed incapace di garantire la sua guarigione e quella dell'antenata reincarnata in lei. Eva, d'altro canto, riesce a superare il suo trauma con l'aiuto di una vecchia amica di Ayo, Willow, che le lava via di dosso la violenza subita grazie ad un rito di guarigione in cui usa la pioggia per depurarle il corpo.

Il romanzo è inoltre definibile come fiction speculativa poiché l'autrice fa di nuovo ricorso ad elementi sovranaturali e non-mimetici con lo scopo di dare voce a chi prima una voce non la aveva.

Anche in *A Sunday in June* la narrazione è frammentaria in quanto vengono raccontate le vicende di più personaggi, ed in aggiunta, diversi elementi, come il diario di Ayo e la lettera di Grace, non sono separati dal resto del racconto. La narrazione è più lineare rispetto a quella del sequel in quanto non ci sono spostamenti improvvisi nello spazio e nel tempo come invece succede in *Stigmata*. La caratteristica di circolarità su cui era imperniata la narrazione del sequel non è presente in questo romanzo. Infatti, se nel sequel Lizzie chiude il cerchio delle narrazioni di ogni personaggio garantendone la guarigione dai rispettivi traumi, nel prequel Grace non riesce a farlo. L'unica linea narrativa che presenta una sorta di circolarità e di chiusura è quella di Eva, che con l'aiuto di Willow riesce a superare il suo trauma e a riconciliarsi con la sorella, Mary Nell.

Nel capitolo viene inoltre sottolineato che gli oggetti con cui vengono trasmessi la memoria ed il trauma sono gli stessi che compaiono nel sequel. Il processo di reincarnazione di Grace inizia precisamente dopo il ritrovamento e l'apertura del baule da parte della protagonista e della lettura del diario dell'antenata. Anche Grace, a sua volta, nel baule trova alcuni quilt e il pezzo di tessuto blu appartenente alla madre di Ayo.

Perry enfatizza ancora una volta la divisione tra personaggi che accettano il loro passato, il loro patrimonio culturale di origine, quindi anche il sovranaturale e le tradizioni africane, e personaggi che essendosi assimilati alla cultura e alla società occidentale hanno abbandonato questi valori e ne hanno adottati di diametralmente opposti.

Nonostante Grace sia forzata dal processo di reincarnazione ad essere legata al suo passato, non è in grado di accettare questa condizione e nemmeno di affrontare la memoria trasmessa dall'antenata. Inoltre, i suoi genitori sono il perfetto esempio di assimilazione alla cultura occidentale. Non solo non comprendono né accettano il sovranaturale ma denigrano apertamente tutte le pratiche e le tradizioni derivanti dalla cultura africana o afroamericana. Vedono il loro colore di pelle come uno svantaggio che deve essere pian piano abbandonato e perciò provano a distanziarsi il più possibile dal resto della comunità afroamericana. Denigrano anche le pratiche di Willow, chiamandole

“hoodoo” con attitudine derogatoria. Per questa ragione rifiutano anche il suo aiuto precludendo sia la cura alla condizione di Grace, sia la prevenzione del trauma di Eva.

L’ultimo argomento affrontato nel quarto capitolo è l’analisi del personaggio di Willow. Quest’ultima rappresenta la connessione con il passato, con la tradizione africana e con gli antenati. Willow può essere paragonata alla figura dei “medicine-men” appartenenti proprio alla cultura africana. Infatti, ha ricevuto un addestramento da parte di un’altra schiava nell’uso di erbe, radici, minerali, ecc. per prevenire e curare malattie, sfortune e problemi sia fisici che psicologici. Per via di questa connessione e conoscenza delle tradizioni e dei valori africani, che vedono il sovrannaturale come elemento integrante della vita quotidiana, Willow è in grado di comprendere ed accettare la veridicità della condizione di Grace e quindi di consigliarle l’ascolto della voce ancestrale in quanto ne capisce il ruolo e lo scopo. Riesce inoltre a prevedere l’arrivo imminente di un pericolo che incombe su Eva. Per aiutarla ad evitare il terribile avvenimento previsto le consegna un oggetto protettivo, che però viene confiscato dai genitori di Eva impedendo la riuscita della prevenzione del trauma. Infine, Willow riesce anche a curare definitivamente il trauma di Eva sottoponendola ad un rito di purificazione, usando la pioggia per lavarle via dal corpo la memoria dell’abuso subito. È importante sottolineare che spesso Willow agisce sotto il volere e l’influenza di Ayo, confermando l’ipotesi che il suo ruolo sia anche quello di ponte tra la realtà ed il mondo ancestrale.

In conclusione, si può affermare che lo scopo dell’autrice sia quello di sottolineare l’importanza del ricordare il proprio passato, il proprio patrimonio culturale di origine e l’adesione alle proprie tradizioni. Tramite le sue neo-slave narratives, Perry enfatizza la rilevanza della capacità di affrontare ed accettare la memoria traumatica del passato nel processo di guarigione. Con i suoi personaggi prova che non si può guarire da un trauma, una violenza o un’oppressione se non la si affronta e non si condivide la propria esperienza con gli altri membri della propria comunità. Grazie alla presenza nel romanzo di oggetti come il diario di Ayo e i quilt creati da Grace e Lizzie, Perry sottolinea anche il valore delle tradizioni popolari e della narrazione. Infine, mettendo in scena una comunità di donne che si uniscono e collaborano per garantire la guarigione e la sopravvivenza dalla memoria traumatica del passato e dai traumi subiti di oppressione e di violenza, l’autrice evidenzia l’importanza del rapporto femminile nella comunità afroamericana.