

# THE FUNCTION OF

## As a Site for Memory and Community

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# ART IN *STIGMATA*

During U.S. slavery, African American communities did not have the right to ownership. Not only were they deprived of their own land or homes, but they could also not preserve the objects and heirlooms that were representative of their own lives, family, and culture. They could not be spokespeople of their own experiences in the public discourse and were not allowed to hold on to the heirlooms that represented their experiences (Miles). The few objects that they could keep, or hide, were often small personal items like combs or pieces of cloth, tools related to their work, religious items, and occasionally letters. These limited objects, when preserved and passed down, thus became charged with meaning and history but still lacked the full scope of a family's history. *Stigmata* (1998) by Phyllis Alesia Perry rebels against this cultural erasure in the form of a recovery of memory and cultural identity. Perry's novel presents a matrilineage that finds a way to preserve the identity of Ayo's family amidst different eras of discrimination in the U.S., managing to allow ownership by the descendants of enslaved people of their own stories and culture.

In Perry's text, Ayo's lineage, starting with her daughter

Joy, her granddaughter Grace, her great-granddaughter Sarah, and her great-great-granddaughter Lizzie, do so through a communal effort, depicting each other's stories through art such as journaling and quilting. The objects they create are not only representative of a part of the family's history, but they also become a portal, through their supernatural ability to cause reincarnation, to their history and connection with community. Ayo describes in her journal her family's gift of reincarnation by saying, "I come from a long line of forever people" (Perry 7). Once Ayo passes away, she reincarnates within her granddaughter Grace inherits Ayo's journal and as she takes in her grandmother's story, she gains access to her memories (118). Grace still maintains her individuality but because Ayo's spirit lives within her, Grace can relive Ayo's memories (57). Once Grace passes away, she reincarnates within Lizzie, who in turn acquires a connection with both Ayo's and Grace's memories once she engages with Ayo's journal and Grace's quilt (19, 24). Since the spirits of these women cohabit in one body, they can access each other's stories, giving them the ability to depict each other's lives and collaborate beyond death as they produce art. The artmaking pro-

cess in *Stigmata* is crucial, as the women in the family, across the generations, learn their history together and create experiences that further unite them. These are objects that they did not get from the past, but they are engaging in an empowering action by making them for their own community. In these ways, art in *Stigmata* functions as a device to replace lost heirlooms in order to reclaim communal memory and salvage community.

In the first entry of her journal, Ayo the great-great-grandmother of Lizzie, who was kidnapped from Africa and taken to America to be enslaved, states the purpose of telling her story, saying, "I am Ayo. I remember" (7). The journal itself is a site of remembrance. Ayo remembers aspects of her past that allow her to take possession of her African identity and consequently her communal memory. Community begins at the family-level, with Ayo's ancestors, parents, and descendants, and then moves into the larger community with those of African origins or descent. This communal memory references the experiences, beliefs, and traditions that are relevant to the construction of Ayo's identity and her family's. By moving from the personal to the communal, this memory also speaks to a greater African and African American experience. First, Ayo reclaims her African name when she says, "Bessie aint my

name.... My name Ayo" (7). Bessie is most likely the name that her enslavers gave her. In this moment, it is implied that Ayo is a free woman and no longer enslaved, thus, with these words, she decides to stop living as Bessie, an enforced identity, and instead begins living as Ayo, an African woman (Patton 103). Up to that point, the only space where her African name existed was in her memory. By writing her name down, Ayo creates a record of her existence and experiences as an African woman which will be passed down. Through the journal, Ayo's descendants can learn about their familial history and cultural identity. This access to their history after Ayo's death is seen when Lizzie, Ayo's great-great granddaughter, inherits a chest with the family heirlooms including Ayo's journal. When Lizzie first sees the journal, she "shine[s] the flashlight on the sheaf of papers [the journal]. The writing seems centuries old... I don't understand any of it. Something about eternity" (Perry 17). When Lizzie illuminates the papers that comprise Ayo's journal, she is also shining a light on a part of her family's previously unknown past. As a descendant from an African woman who was enslaved in America, Lizzie has the rare opportunity to engage with first-hand accounts of a history that was often dismissed during the era of U.S. slavery. This scene is so significant since the journal

is the first object that allows Lizzie to truly learn about her familial and cultural heritage. As Lizzie engages with Ayo's testimony through the journal, her gift of reincarnation is awakened, and she is able to have a direct connection to Ayo's memories. Ayo's journal manages to be preserved in her family and is treated as an object of great importance. Part of Ayo's reclamation of her African self involves journaling about several aspects that her ancestors passed down to her which constitute parts of her identity. For instance, in the first pages of the journal, Ayo introduces her belief system and the gift of reincarnation that she received from her ancestors when she claims, "I come from a long line of forever people. We are forever" (7). Though this may not seem like a direct reference to reincarnation, John Mbiti explains in *Introduction to African Religion*, that the African concept of time is cyclical in nature. This idea of time as cyclical is not only relevant because it is representative of Ayo's African culture, but also because it is related to her family's ability to reincarnate. In Ayo's family, those who have passed away are never truly gone as they return via the bodies of subsequent generations. This is related to African cosmology in which "human life does not terminate at the death of the individual but continues beyond death" (Mbiti 75). The journal presents a conception of time that is part of Ayo's communal beliefs and her ancestral gift of reincarnation which she will pass down to Grace, her granddaughter, and Lizzie, her great-great-granddaughter. Since Ayo chooses to create

a journal to be passed down to her descendants, that journal acts as a key to activate reincarnation. Once Lizzie, or Grace in the past, engages with the family heirlooms such as Ayo's journals, she can start to access Ayo's memories. Therefore, the art that the women in the family produce, serve as portals to engage with the spirits of those who have passed away. The fact that Ayo's ancestral beliefs are presented transforms the journal from a recounting of her life to a culturally significant object. It is not just about Ayo's identity, but also about reclaiming her place in her community. Ayo speaks about the particularities of her community. She shows the pride of her community, a sentiment which is inferred in the statement, "We are forever" (Perry 7). By documenting these aspects of her cultural and familial heritage, she reclaims her African identity via a communal memory that was repressed when she was enslaved.

Ayo's journal not only serves to recuperate her memory and cultural identity, but it also allows her to safeguard her heritage for future generations. The fact that Ayo can preserve her memory in an object allows her to assert her right to property and reverse the erasure of her identity which she experienced during enslavement. Ayo's ability to provide her descendants with their cultural heritage is thus a unique opportunity. Since she is part of a community that had an almost nonexistent chance to pass down objects that would be representative of a cultural and familial heritage. According to Pierre Nora in *Between Memory and History*, "modern memory is,

above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" (13). Since memory depends on its tangibility, memory is produced when Ayo is journaling. Not only does she talk about her heritage, but she also includes her memories of Africa, her father, her mother who was a master dyer, and her painful experiences as an enslaved person. For instance, she recounts, "I [Ayo] remember my fist being closed tight for what seem like years, Mama say I had a piece of cloth balled up in there. Beautiful blue cloth" (Perry 132). Besides the journal, this is the only object, one charged with this memory of her mother and home, that Ayo manages to keep from her home. Later, Ayo's great-granddaughter Sarah, and her daughter Lizzie will integrate the blue cloth into the quilt they make together to honor Ayo's origins and to represent all the women in the matrilineage (229). The way Sarah and Lizzie learn about the significance of the piece of cloth is in part through the journal. Furthermore, Lizzie, in particular, creates a sense of belonging and yearning of her foremothers when she reads the journal (38). The first time she sees its pages, she describes the experience, saying "... 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, ...and see ...

I don't know. To see Africa" (38). Lizzie feels a connection with the women in her family, despite never knowing them. She not only learns where her family comes from, but also has a sense of excitement about her own family history. Therefore, through the journal, Ayo's story becomes integrated into the communal memory as she places within an object that will be passed down to her descendants.

Ayo's journal has the dual purpose of acting as an object that holds communal memory and as a space in which both Ayo and Joy collaborate. Ayo chooses her daughter Joy, to be the scribe of her story (6, 7). While Ayo tells her story, she asks Joy to write it down, when Joy recalls "...Then she said to me, Joy I want you to rite somethin down for me. It take a time to rite it but we got til plantin and I wouldnt ask you but I cant rite it myself. So I [Joy] sat at the kitchen table with her [Ayo]. I watched her cut quilt pieces for a bit and then she start talkin" (6, 7). This scene shows the dynamic of how Ayo and Joy work together to document within the journal. Ayo provides her history while Joy adds her own perception and feelings regarding the writing of the journal. Together, they collaborate to create an object that will safeguard their communal history and heritage. In addition, although Ayo and Joy do not have a tumultuous relationship, as Ayo unveils her cultur-

al identity and Joy accepts this version of her mother, Ayo can reconnect with her daughter as her authentic African self. The journal is primarily Ayo's, but it also belongs to Joy since she inserts her own thoughts and feelings into it regarding her mother's stories and interactions when writing the journal (7, 33, 49). Furthermore, Joy has an active role in the artmaking process as she learns about her mother's past, her grandparents, and her cultural heritage. She also learns about how she is named after her mother, whose name means happiness, so that Ayo can always remember who she is (7). Joy honors the significance of her name and fulfills her mother's wish for her narrative to be remembered as she collaborates with Ayo to write her journal, which Joy will pass down to her daughter Grace.

Mother-daughter relationships in Perry's text are important sources of reconnection to both family and a fuller community, including those lost during the Middle Passage. This reconnection is especially necessary since slavery causes breaches between some of the women in the family. For instance, Ayo gets separated from her mother when she is enslaved (50). However, Ayo is not doomed to have the same experience with her own daughter Joy. When Joy becomes the scribe of Ayo's story, she also becomes Ayo's companion in reclaiming her narrative. Joy offers emotional support and witness, but also ensures the completion of Ayo's story. Even after Ayo dies, Joy continues to write her mother's story since, "[i]t jest seem like I ought to see her

story to the end" (230). She reinforces her bond with her mother as she crafts with her what will become a family heirloom and honors her as she completes her story when Ayo is no longer able to. Ayo's journal also commemorates those who were with her en route to America and who experienced the horrors of the Middle Passage. (Duboin 291). Ayo dedicates her story to "those whose bones lay sleepin in the heart of mother ocean" (Perry 7), referring to people who died while being transported to America. In this way, Ayo connects herself to a larger African community with which she shares a very particular experience, but who unlike her, never get to tell their own stories. Moreover, as Ayo asserts her place in this community, she also integrates Joy into it. According to Perry, "memory is linked to will" (107). In other words, memory if not documented, can decay, and eventually be lost with time. For memory to withstand time, there needs to be a conscious effort to preserve it. There are several ways in which this can be done, i.e., people take pictures of moments in their lives they want to remember, and societies build museums to safeguard the objects and history that are considered valuable. This effort to preserve a moment in time is only made when the memory is deemed worthy enough to be remembered. For instance, there are many loopholes in the history of African enslaved people and African Americans from the lack of documentation. In Perry's text, the choice to remember is represented in how the women do not just talk about their experiences or take in

their foremother's stories but instead actively preserve memory in the form of art pieces, reflecting the value they attribute to their heritage and their wish to safeguard it. By writing down Ayo's story, Joy consents to write the journal "for me [Ayo] and for them [her community]" (7). Joy not only chooses to commemorate her mother but also those who lost their lives during the Middle Passage.

Beyond Ayo's journal, Grace's and Lizzie's quilts become additional artifacts through which the women in the family remember each other's stories and celebrate their heritage. Grace's (and Lizzie's) choice to make a quilt and the type of quilt she chooses is significant for her community because quilting has been an African American tradition since slavery times. This tradition consisted of enslaved women getting together to make quilts as a leisure activity that would also provide them with an object that they could cover themselves with. Since quilting had multiple purposes, it became part of the culture that enslaved people created as a way to find freedom in their oppressive environment (Cash 32). Furthermore, the choice of making an appliqué quilt models the African conception of time as cyclical since the quilts provide a nonlinear narrative (Woolfork 51). Therefore, the storytelling mode that Grace chooses to retell Ayo's story is not arbitrary, rather it is representative

of her family's cultural heritage and beliefs. In addition, quilting is reminiscent of a tradition that symbolizes a push back against cultural erasure, which is what Ayo intends and what these women do with their quilts. Even though Grace struggles with the trauma of Ayo's memories, especially while living in the Jim Crow era where she is marginalized for her experience, she acknowledges the importance of remembering Ayo's story, saying, after Grace leaves, that "[she feels that] others after us will need to know" (Perry 15), showing that the quilt she made will succeed in preserving Ayo's memory. As Grace makes her quilt, she not only engages with her family's communal memory through the journal and the visions but also crafts an artifact that will continue to expand her communal memory.

As Lizzie takes in Ayo's story through visions, the journal, and the quilt, she recognizes the importance of integrating Grace's story into their communal memory. During one of the instances in which Lizzie relives one of her grandmother Grace's memories, she realizes the pain that Ayo's memories of slavery were causing Grace, saying "Ayo—Bessie—has invaded Grace's memories and she can't keep things straight in her head" (57). Most of the memories that Grace and Lizzie relive are ones related to Ayo's enslavement. The pain and trauma Ayo experi-

enced reverberate across generations in Grace and Lizzie. Both not only relive Ayo's memories, but also physically feel her experience in their bodies, acquiring the injuries Ayo had in life (143, 144). This constant struggle of trying to process Ayo's pain absorbs Grace to the point that she abandons her family so that they do not have to see her wrestle with a supernatural occurrence that she cannot explain (15, 144, 145). She also fears being institutionalized because of being perceived as "crazy" due to the stigma related to women's mental health at the time (57). Based on Lizzie's realization of Grace's hardships, she decides to make a quilt for Grace, so that her life will also be honored and remembered (58). This painful part of Ayo's enslavement is however accompanied by the memory of people that she loved and who gave her joy. When Lizzie is picturing Grace's quilt, she thinks, "There will be a moon on the quilt. And pictures of George and her sons, Frank, and Phillip. Mama, Joy. And Sarah, smiling baby Sarah. So she won't forget" (58). Some members of the family, such as Mary Nell and Eva, have vast knowledge about Grace and her reasons for deserting her family. Nonetheless, Grace's story is overall a mystery, and it is misunderstood which is seen when Lizzie asks Sarah why Grace left her the trunk, and Sarah refers to her mother as a "crazy country woman" (21). Of course, Sarah in this moment does not know her mother's story, but this idea of Grace being "crazy" oversimplifies her experience as a woman who inherited her ancestor's gift of remembering

while living in the Jim Crow era. Lizzie makes her intention for her quilt clear saying, "I'm telling Grace's story with this quilt—just as she had told Ayo's story with hers—and the fabric has to hold up at least until the next storyteller comes along" (63). Lizzie wants to protect Grace's story against forgetfulness and give it its rightful place in the family's history. Grace's story allows Sarah to understand the reason for her mother's abandonment and the importance of her own cultural heritage and familial history. For Lizzie, Grace's experiences are an immense part of her identity since they share the same gift of reincarnation, which is seen when Lizzie affirms "Bessie [Ayo] became Grace, and Grace became me. Me, Lizzie" (47), showing that Lizzie relives some events from Ayo's and Grace's lives. Grace or Ayo can speak through Lizzie since their spirits are inside her. During the quilting process, both speak through Lizzie and subsequently also participate in the quilt making. Grace takes the chance to talk directly to her daughter through Lizzie (68), a fact which is confirmed when Lizzie quilts despite a lack of quilting knowledge. Grace's ability surfaces through Lizzie when during a quilting session, she, through Lizzie, "show[s] her [Sarah] a few stitches and then hand[s] her the needle... [Grace sighs] at the huge stitches she is making." Grace, who is in Lizzie, tells Sarah, "No, sweetie, that stitching is supposed to be invisible. You gotta make them that small" (68). Although Sarah is not aware, Grace interacts with her daughter and teaches her about her story while they make the

images of the quilt. Lizzie also rebukes this idea of Grace as a “mad-woman” as she creates a quilt that integrates the painful and traumatic experiences of Grace’s life as well as her memories of happiness. For instance, Lizzie redesigns the moment in which Grace is looking at the moon through the window of her house and thinking of leaving her home as one in which Grace sits on the moonlight (66). Even though this is painful for Grace, Lizzie adds embellishments and creativity to express the nuances and importance of this part of Grace’s story. She also thinks of including Grace’s memories of joy and the people she loved such as, “her smiling Sarah and her funny, funny twin boys...[a]nd her beautiful man, George...” (56). Lizzie honors her foremother by telling her story, but she also offers Grace the opportunity to take control of her own story given that she coexists within Lizzie. Ultimately, Lizzie’s quilt, as the third object in this line of communal art pieces, solidifies a tradition of family storytelling.

The artmaking process of Lizzie’s quilt facilitates the mending of familial bonds in their matrilineage by creating a space for the women to understand each woman’s story and each generation’s stories. Lizzie’s intention for making Grace’s quilt is not solely based upon remembering Grace’s story. Through quilting, Grace—and in the process, Lizzie—repairs her relation-

ship with Sarah. Grace chooses this repair with awareness by engaging in the quilting. When Sarah and Lizzie are making the quilt, Sarah tells Lizzie that she “always wanted to be an artist like she [Grace] was” (170). This awareness shows how Sarah is deeply hurt by her mother’s departure. By teaching Sarah how to quilt, she complies with Sarah’s wish while showing her story so that Sarah knows that Grace did not want to abandon her. Before making the quilt, Grace, in Lizzie’s body, asks Sarah, “[y]ou remember that quilt of mine...You wanted me to teach you how to quilt...” (55). In this moment, Sarah cannot listen to Grace because she is still hurting from her mother’s abandonment; however, making the quilt with Lizzie, and unknowingly with Grace, allows her to become a witness to the truth of Grace’s story at her own pace and to gain empathy for her mother. In the quilting process, Sarah interacts with her mother through Lizzie and through the images on the quilt. In teaching her daughter a beautiful tradition, Grace initiates her into the familial community of storytellers. The entire process of sewing the quilt helps Sarah recognize her mother’s story so she can finally communicate face to face with her. As she identifies her mother through Lizzie, she also mends her bond with her daughter since she can finally understand and validate her experiences, realizing that neither Grace

nor Lizzie are “crazy.”

Although most of Sarah’s interactions when quilting occurs with Lizzie and Grace, she also speaks directly with Ayo when listening to her talk about the indigo cloth that her mother gave her (229). Since Ayo is Sarah’s great grandmother, who died before she was born, this represents another moment of reincarnation as her spirit exists within Lizzie along with the spirit of Grace. Though Ayo does not speak through Lizzie often, she does speak directly to Sarah once she can recognize Grace through Lizzie. When finishing the quilt by adding the piece of cloth Ayo’s mother gave to her, Ayo explains to Sarah through Lizzie, what the cloth means to her saying, “Well, yes. But I’m talking about my African mother. This was handed down, literally. It used to be a bigger piece. I was wearing something made from this, something my mother wove and dyed, the day they snatched me.” Sarah’s awareness of Ayo within Lizzie is revealed when she says, “They snatched you. Slavers” (229). Sarah can now access and embrace the knowledge of both her cultural heritage and family history through the journal and quilts and also by directly communicating with her foremothers. Lizzie also gains this ability to connect in a supernatural manner to her foremothers’ thanks to both Ayo’s journal and the quilt Grace made of Ayo’s story. Not until after Lizzie acquires both objects, does she have direct access to both Ayo’s and Grace’s memories. Most importantly, Lizzie’s quilt symbolically unites all of the women since the artifact requires participation from all of

them. This full circle interaction allows their access to their communal history and cultural heritage. Only in this moment do all the women become open to learning each other’s stories and finally understand the importance of preserving them. Throughout their journeys, art served as a door for them to learn about their heritage and to connect to each other’s memory via reincarnation. The exposure to art about their community lead the women in the family to a place where they can continue to safeguard their history and heritage through artmaking. Art opens the past, which in turn becomes a critical part of the art production for new generations.

The collaboration of all the women in the family for Lizzie’s and Sarah’s quilt represents the full integration of their community, which shows their success in mending the breaks in their family caused through enslavement. Grace, Lizzie, and Sarah’s handiwork and stories are part of the quilt; and Ayo’s mother, Ayo, and Joy are integrated into it with Ayo’s piece of indigo cloth as Lizzie pins it “around the neck of the Grace figure that was about to board the train.” (230). This unity between all of the women, allows them to reach a new peace. Enslavement caused Ayo to lose her mother (50); Grace got separated from her daughter as she was undated with Ayo’s memories of slavery (144, 145); Lizzie is disconnected from her mother Sarah as she struggles to process Ayo’s trauma, since Sarah cannot grasp the idea that her foremothers are reincarnated in her daughter (70). The violence of Ayo being ripped away

from her mother takes several generations to mend. Yet, as Ayo holds on to her mother's piece of cloth, she remains hopeful. The process of writing the journal and making the quilts involves working through history and gaining empathy for each other. When they embrace all the elements of their history, including the painful ones, they are able to truly connect with each other and to safeguard memory. Mending their bonds allows them to "rewrite the legacy of slavery" as they heal the familial ruptures that it caused (Patton 117). Ayo's family not only heals from the aftermath of slavery as they resist the erasure of their memory, but at the same time they manage to reintegrate their community.

*Stigmata* presents an extraordinary concept: the ability, through artmaking, to connect with family members from the past to fill in the empty historical spaces caused by racism and violence in America. All of these women push back against the erasure of history by actively creating objects of commemoration. These women take control of their narrative through art even though their stories are deformed from the outside through suppression, misunderstanding, and misdiagnoses. Ayo's identity is suppressed when she is enslaved (Perry 7); Grace, who lives during the Jim Crow era, runs away from her family since being perceived as "crazy" would cause her to be insti-

tutionalized and thus lose the ability to be with her husband and raise her children (57). Lizzie remains forcefully institutionalized (156). Perry's novel itself acts as art that reminds people of the importance of honoring and remembering African American history, especially narratives of African American women. This story asserts that narratives of slavery and racism need to continue to be told today. The past as it informs the present demands attention. Perry's novel not only illuminates the importance of objects from slavery times for the African American community, but also the importance of continuing to tell their own stories and to own the public discourse that revolves around their culture and experiences. *Stigmata* ultimately asserts that while it is not possible to speak with those who have passed, it is crucial to honor the African American narratives from the past, while also sharing the stories of present-day African American communities.

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