

# Black Magic: Woman(ist) as Artist in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*

**Clara Juncker**

Copenhagen Business School

Two old women, both experienced artists, frame the four-hundred-plus pages of Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), a broad canvas of African and African American life from the beginnings to contemporary San Francisco yuppiedom. The opening page introduces the South American Zedé, Sr., a seamstress or "sewing magician," who creates from peacock, parrot and cockatoo feathers the traditional capes worn by priests, dancers, and musicians at local village festivals. At the close of Walker's novel, Miss Lissie, a most bewitching womanist artist, has left for posterity a self-portrait, in which Lissie-as-Lion looks daringly at the viewer, her abundant tail almost obscuring the elegant, red, high-heeled slipper on her back paw.<sup>1</sup> With(in) this frame, Walker paints black feminine creativity as a marginal, maternal, and magic space inhabited by goddesses, whose knowledge and power explode traditional symbolic and social codes. In the process, Walker presents a womanist interpretation of "the blackness of blackness," Henry Louis

1 For Walker's full definition of the term "womanist," see her *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1984), xi-xii. Her definition includes "A black feminist or feminist of color," "Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior," "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female," and "Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit."

Gates, Jr.'s term for the non-essence of black difference.<sup>2</sup>

In creating her feathered capes, Zed6 the Elder removes herself from her family hut to a location outside, a gesture through which Walker establishes the connection between feminine art and marginality. Only a few steps from the main hut, Zed6 is inside yet outside the village community. Also the South American setting, off-center in relation to the main plot of the novel, establishes the foreignness of feminine creativity, which in the words of H  l  ne Cixous "returns from afar, from always: from 'without,' from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond 'culture.'"<sup>3</sup> Zed  's daughter Zed  , who inherits her mother's creative gift and thus, as with her name, establishes the "always" of feminine artistic tradition, further connects this tradition with displacement. Escaped from imprisonment to the United States, Zed   the Younger speaks English with a heavy Spanish accent and, again in Cixousian terminology, as "woman, escapee" has marginality and dislocation inscribed in her voice.<sup>4</sup> An old photo of the newly arrived Zed6 holding her baby daughter Carlotta shows Zed  's "drawn face ... partly in shadow," later revealing to Carlotta's husband "the stress of oppression, dispossession, flight," as well as the hidden, mysterious face of the woman artist.<sup>5</sup> The notion of feminine creativity as "the repressed of culture" recurs in Walker's description of Zed  's immigrant life.<sup>6</sup> In the daytime Zed6 works within masculine sign systems by making jeans and country-and-western shirts in a San Francisco sweatshop, but at night, she "furtively," at home, continues to make exotic feathered headdresses and capes (6).

The decentered existence of Walker's artist associates her with magic, even madness. The original "sewing magician," Zed6 the Elder, works, as her daughter explains, "as if by magic." Without looking at her work, she operates in a dreamlike state, her fingers knowing "just what to do" (47). Miss Lissie, the most flamboyant and haughty of Walker's artist

2 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Methuen, 1984), pp. [285]-321.

3 H  l  ne Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981), p. 247.

4 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 249.

5 Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar* (New York, Pocket, 1989), p. 18. Subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

6 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 248.

figures, proudly labels herself a "witch doctor" and a "sorceress" (97) and thus again positions female creativity outside of phallogocentric discourse, in the realm of magic and miracles (104-05). Even Fanny, the granddaughter of *The Color Purple*'s Celie and an ex-academic turned masseuse in contemporary San Francisco, places a crystal at her client's head and feet and speaks, it seems to Carlotta, "the very babble of witches" (293). This feminine "chaosmos" functions as a joyous subversion of masculine logic and order.<sup>7</sup> The feathered artwork of the two Zedés, for example, surfaces at festivals and parades as disrespectful, bold signs of carnivalesque topsy-turvey, a phantasmatic discourse that breaks through grammatical-semantic and social-moral codes.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Carlotta observes about her mother's cockatoo and peacock-feathered ornaments worn at a Halloween parade in San Francisco that they seem "almost too resplendent for the gray, foggy city"(6); the naked, beer-drinking and crystal-carrying gay man who wears one of the enormous headdresses constitutes himself a sign of feminized, marginal and pleasuring illogic.

In fact, the feathered capes, shawls, headbands and whatnot that Carlotta's mother produces during the sixties, when San Franciscan rock stars are "into" feathers, functions within a libidinal economy of abundance and waste. With her spectacular, superfluous, ornamental artwork, Zedé creates (her) desire within an economy that, in Cixous' phrase, "can no longer be put in economic terms.... At the end of a more or less conscious computation, she finds not her sum but her differences."<sup>9</sup> The woman artist is, in other words, a Bataillan gift-giver, who depropriates endlessly, more, and through the mere wastefulness of her gifts transforms conventional systems of exchange and profit. Yet Zedé does in fact make a profit on her capes, but her ventures into a masculine "gift-that-takes" economy rests on a foundation of subversive theft. Carlotta steals the feathers her mother transforms into art and thus becomes a Cixousian *voleuse*, a bird-robber-woman who "take[s] pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying

7 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 258.

8 Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 36; *Tales of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 381.

9 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 264.

structures, and turning propriety upside down."<sup>10</sup>

The rearranged furniture and broken walls of this festive subversion include Western conceptions of Self and signal the fluid personality boundaries of Walker's woman(ist) artists. Fanny regularly falls in love with spirits, who inhabit her or vice versa for months on end; on a journey to Africa, she discovers an African sister who mirrors her not only in looks but also in sharing her middle name Nzingha. This merging with others, living and dead, is intensified in the case of Miss Lissie, who refers to "myselfes" in describing the many women, men, and even animals, she has been in lifetimes spanning thousands of years. In photos taken of Lissie over her present lifetime, she appears forever different: tall, short, light, dark, healthy, crippled, haughty, beaten, etc. As Lissie explains to Fanny's husband Suwelo during his stay in Baltimore after the death of his Uncle Rafe, the photographer/lover for whom Lissie modelled "had never, in all his work as a photographer, photographed anyone like me, who could never present the same self more than once, and I had never in my life before found anyone who could recognize how many different women I was." Even to her parents, Lissie didn't seem to have, in their words, "no certain definite form" (91). With her gesture towards fluidity and multiplicity, Walker deconstructs the Western, masculine impulse towards unity and wholeness of textual voice, because, to represent the dividing and incompatible forces of her existence, the black woman(ist) artist must assume her own division. In Barbara Johnson's phrase, "the sign of an authentic voice is thus not self-identity but self-difference."<sup>11</sup> Through this lack of correspondence to a single referent, Walker moreover writes her female artist into the African/American trickster tradition. As Jay Edwards explains in "Structural Analysis of the Afro-American Trickster Tale," the trickster figure "assumes his unique and powerful role by virtue of his crossing and violating boundaries."<sup>12</sup> In all the lifetimes Lissie recalls, she was "someone who started trouble" (54). Accordingly, through fluidity of form and irreverent behavior, Walker's trickster-artist violates symbolic and cultural codes and thus embodies what Ellison designates the lib-

10 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," pp. 259,258.

11 Barbara Johnson, "Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in Gates, *Black Literature*, p. 212.

12 Jay Edwards, "Structural Analysis of the Afro-American Trickster Tale," in Gates, *Black Literature*, p. 91.

erating "joke" of the trickster.<sup>13</sup>

The two self-portraits that Lissie and her impotent husband-companion Hal give to Suwelo upon his departure from Baltimore express in one sense a joke on Suwelo's closed circuits of interpretation. The backgrounds of the paintings show the trees, corn, and flowers of his old friends' house, but the centers consist, instead of portraits, of mere outlines of a man's and a woman's torso, surrounded by the deep blue space of infinity. Turning over the paintings, Suwelo reads on Miss Lissie's self-portrait, "Painted by Hal Jenkins" and on Hals's, "Painted by Lissie Lyles" (193). Apart from the notions of art as a chaotic, festive gift as discussed above, the paintings suggest the fluid ego boundaries of Walker's feminine or feminized artists, and, moreover, associates them with absence and negativity, with what is not there. As Julia Kristeva theorizes in "Oscillation between Power and Denial," woman-as-artist rejects by assuming a negative function "everything finite, definite, loaded with meaning" and thus sides with revolutionary explosions of social codes.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, through their tricksterly signifyin(g) on the self-portrait form, Lissie and Hal break up Suwelo's phallogocentric conception of self and instead introduce him to invention, to change. Lissie and Hal, for one (or two?) must, in other words, be imagined. When Suwelo initially moves into his uncle's house, for example, the photos of Lissie that had decorated the hallway are missing, alerting him only with the contours of the frames in the wallpaper to their existence (40).

This very invisibility is, on still another level, a Walkerly signifyin(g) on the canonical African American absence, a tradition that describes blackness as a negative essence, a transcendent signified.<sup>15</sup> However, rather than creating another transcendent signified of blackness as presence, Walker posits an interpretative openendedness, the notion of aesthetic indeterminacy and play.<sup>16</sup> The "blackness of blackness" must, then, be constantly produced and invented, and the non-essence of black feminine creativity accordingly includes dynamic motion.

This energy is characteristic of Arveyda's mother, who before three

13 Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Signet, 1966), pp. 61-73.

14 Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation between Power and Denial," in Marks and de Courtivron, p. 166.

15 Gates, "Blackness," p. 315.

16 Gates, "Blackness," p. 305.

years of physical inactivity channelled her creativity into the founding of the Church of Perpetual Involvement. This woman, as Arveyda remembers her, "did not recognize limits," to the extent that no year of birth is placed on her gravestone. Besides such connections with infinity, she invents herself as Katherine Degos instead of accepting her given name. A trouble-maker and trickster in Lissie's mold, "she was a woman of such high energy she always seemed to him to be whirling, and the first time Arveyda heard the expression 'whirling dervish' he thought of it as a description of his mother" (12). Lissie herself/selves seem/s to Hal to be "so black ... like, *concentrated*" (44) and feels her brain to be "charged ... like a battery" (52). Through the non-representable energy of these characters, Walker creates the visual and verbal text of black femininity as dynamic process and play. As Ellison writes in *Invisible Man*, "black is" and "black ain't."<sup>17</sup> At the same time Walker communicates with her charged images the power of black women artists.

This power is intimately associated with the expert readings of feminine eyes/I's. Talking with Suwelo in Uncle Rafe's kitchen, for example, Lissie answers his unspoken question about the number of locks in her wild, glorious lion's mane, itself a sign of untamed bodily energy and creativity: "Exactly one hundred and thirteen" (53). Lissie's mirror image Hal becomes practically blind whenever he, prompted by his father, stops painting "Like seeing someone forced to blind himself" (60), says Miss Lissie, thus denouncing the Law of the Father, that enemy of feminine re-vision. "How am I to be a great painter if I never *see* anything," writes one of Walker's budding artists in her journal a few generations earlier. Despite her traditional female socialization, this young woman(ist) disguises herself as a man and enters the brothels of Victorian London in order "to look, to study, to contemplate" (220). This breaking of feminine boundaries becomes as well a re-vision of art, in that she, so to speak, invents the female gaze: woman looking at woman (looking). "I am fascinated," she writes in her diary, "by the women's eyes, their bold, aggressive stares, their business-like appraisal" (220). Significantly, the invention of the feminine artistic I is connected to the female body and the multiplicity of desire: "I must say that it is this sucking the women most seem to enjoy and their enjoyment of it in turn stirs me ..." (221). The mirror relationship established

17 Gates, "Blackness," p. 315.

here suggests, moreover, that in inventing a female gaze, woman as artist invents as well herself as (desiring) subject. Lissie, for example, looks "on people's lives as if they was plays," Hal explains. "She was always moving people around" (43). This ability to usurp power through the creation of alternative scripts resurfaces in another of Lissie's lifetimes, when she and her friend Fadpa set up shop as fortune-tellers. Not only does their crystal ball again establish Lissie's expert vision, but true to her tricksterly creativity, she mocks the world of masculinity: "For every man, they saw war, a future of fighting.... But Lulu [Lissie] and Fadpa would say, instead, that they saw a hundred pretty women locked in a room to which the man in front of them, alone, had the key..." (105).

The ability of Walker's artists to decipher their surroundings originates, perhaps, in their intuitive access to knowledge. An African scholar with "lifeless eyes" (61) becomes a "well-educated, smooth-talking zombie" in representing masculine, academic "truth," while Lissie's folk knowledge based on personal experience receives the author's endorsement, if only through the massive narrative energy devoted to her stories. Similarly, Suwelo finds his knowledge of (Black) American history in masculine work bastions such as the university and the research library, while Fanny comes upon the things she needs to know haphazardly, by coincidence. In knocking over a vase, perhaps, she will find that "the information, or whatever it was, she'd been looking for, vaguely, would appear on the wettest page of one of the books" (277), as Suwelo recounts with exasperated envy. This libidinal encircling of knowledge, of seeing, surfaces also in non-fictional descriptions of African American feminine creativity. Toni Cade Bambara states to Zala Chandler in *Wild Women in the Whirlwind* (1990) that when working on *The Salt Eaters*, she never had to leave her house: "Once you understand what your work is and you do not try to avert your eyes from it, but attempt to invest energy in getting that work done, the universe will send you what you need. You simply have to know how to be still and receive it."<sup>18</sup>

The valorization of intuitive patterns of knowing possibly relates to the African aesthetic of Walker's art(ists). As defined by Sunday O.

18 Zala Chandler, "Voices Beyond the Veil: An Interview with Toni Cade Bambara and Sonia Sanchez," in *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 350.

Anozie in "Negritude, Structuralism, Deconstruction," an African theory of art must reckon with "a *lived* system of signs and symbols, a sort of experiential semiology shared by all." Traversing boundaries of genre and form, African signs and symbols 'speak' "in traditional African decorative arts, sculptures, graffiti, and so on."<sup>19</sup> Rather than focusing on *l'écriture* and *parole*, or the artist-as-writer, Walker has consequently in *The Temple* zoomed in on painters and musicians, most of whom rely on the African continent for self-identity/ies and inspiration and express themselves through African aesthetic principles.

The colors of Walker's artists, for example, form the clear, bright, natural spectrum of African/Native American art, as with the intense, deep sky blue in the outlines of Hal/Lissie's self portraits, or the energy-instilling "complex royal blue" of Celie, a woman "very much influenced by color" (143). Occasionally, Walker draws on peacock imagery to communicate the power and dignity of her artists' color schemes. Among the first of the many Walker artists who depart for Africa, Eleandra Burnham Peacock becomes a painter after her encounter with M'Sukta, an African woman imprisoned for ten years in the Museum of Natural History in London. Several generations later, Carlotta, whose roots are South American, establishes herself as a bell chimist in a San Francisco cottage, whose rooms—blue, green, olive, gold—communicate "a peacockish feeling" (387).

As indicated with this relationship across time and space—what Chinosole in discussing Audre Lorde labels a "matrilinear diaspora"—the art of *The Temple of My Familiar* is in the African tradition communal and functional.<sup>20</sup> At the M'Sukta Art School, for example, an institution set up by Eleandra Peacock's bluehaired grandniece, students paint on walls and, moreover, express themselves aesthetically with locally woven bedspreads and brightly painted wardrobes (343). Even Lissie and Hal's gumbo, cooked with sensitivity, love, and creativity, becomes a sign of artistic and social communality, as do the many wall decorations of Walker's prehistoric cave dwellers. Above all, the African art of Walker's millenium-spanning novel is ancestral, rooted in connections to ancient pasts and selves. One of Miss Lissie's last paintings accord-

19 Sunday O. Anozie, "Negritude, Structuralism, Deconstruction," in Gates, *Black Literature*, p. 122.

20 Chinosole, "Audre Lorde and Matrilinear Diaspora: Moving History beyond Nightmare into Structures for the Future," in *Wild Women in the Whirlwind*, pp. [379]-94.



ingly depicts "the tree of life, with everything, including 'the little white fellow' [one of Miss Lissie's many forms] in its branches" (416). With this ancestral emphasis, Walker again joins forces with black women writers such as Toni Cade Bambara and Sonia Sanchez, who in the Chandler interview "both speak of the need for African people to rely upon the spirit and the bones and the knowledge of those who came before us, ancestors."<sup>21</sup> Or, as H  l  ne Cixous chooses to express this reliance on tradition, "Woman always occurs simultaneously in several places.... In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history. As a militant, she is an integral part of all liberations."<sup>22</sup>

The African jungle, where several of Walker's artists discover themselves, functions, in fact, as a maternal space of liberation and creativity. Lissie's dream memory of a childhood in a "forest that, for all we know, covers the whole earth ...," with "no concept of finiteness, in any sense" (83) represents this space as unconscious, pre-linguistic, without separation and difference—in other words, as a Kristevan Imaginary, untouched by the Law of the Father.<sup>23</sup> In the contemporary American scenario, the space of maternal creativity has, to no surprise for readers familiar with Walker's work, become a garden. Hal and Lissie paint in the luscious garden surrounding their small house, amidst giant dahlias, corn, blue morning glories, and infinity: Suwelo experiences the day he spends there as "eternity itself" and soon drifts off to sleep—the unconscious, maternal landscape of feminine creativity (191-92). Similarly, Fanny's "mother-in-law cottage," the location for her masseuse activities, sits sensuously among "hibiscus and jasmine," vaguely remembered by Carlotta as "bright colors and a lovely scent" (292). Like Fanny's massage parlor, which it resembles, Carlotta's own bell chimist studio is the guest house in a garden of flowers and colors, an alternative space with waterfalls, bells, and chimes reminiscent of Kristevan

21 Chandler, "Voices Beyond the Veil," p. 342.

22 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," pp. 252-53.

23 While this uncolonized maternal jungle roughly corresponds to the wilderness as a place of refuge and self-discovery in Melvin Dixon's *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (University of Illinois Press, 1987), Walker operates outside Dixon's hierarchical framework, which from the underground sends the African American protagonist off to the mountaintop. With this gesture, Dixon convicts women novelists such as Hurston and Walker to difference for life by designating their "womanist spaces" a transitional function, paving the way for phallic heights.

Imaginary babble. As a feminine space of freedom and creativity, the garden thus signals woman(ist) artists who have—finally—found themselves. In the process, they have reinvented their identities. Carlotta has left behind the stiff bras and high heels that made her resemble a female impersonator, and, hair cut and thighs slimmed, has broken down walls into androgyny. "You don't look like a woman anymore," Suwelo exclaims, only to be confronted with elasticized notions of femininity: "Obviously," Carlotta laughs, "this is how a woman looks" (399).

As in the exchange above, where Carlotta's body is the site of change and invention, the wild gardens and, just as importantly, the cottages of Walker's women artists are signs of the female body, whose uncolonized sexuality allows for artistic explosion. A lengthy passage, in which Fanny describes her love of spirits, establishes the house/body metaphor, and, with its climactic organization, the connections between feminine self-invention and pleasure:

They open doors inside me. It's as if they're keys. To rooms inside myself. I find a door inside me and it's as if I hear a humming from behind it, and then I get inside somehow, with the keys the old ones give me, and are, and as I stumble about in the darkness of the room, I begin to feel the stirring in myself, the humming of the room, and my heart starts to expand with the absolute feeling of bravery, or love, or audacity, or commitment. It becomes a light, and the light enters me, by osmosis, and a part of me that was not clear before is clarified. I radiate this expanded light. Happiness. (185-86)

The libidinal-creative energy of women artists relates, in other words, to the cosmic, unconscious and unappropriated female body. In the words of Cixous: "More so than men who are coaxed towards social success, toward sublimation, women are body. More body, hence more writing."<sup>24</sup> This celebration of femininity reverberates in Walker's descriptions of prehistoric women tribes, whose playful decorations of their anatomy with feathers, bark, sand, shells, flowers constitute a bodily art that connects the women to the supernatural and inspires the envy of male tribes. Also Arveyda's mother expresses herself in a bodily discourse, when after years of "doing" for others she sits down to look out a window for three years: "She began to play with her make-up, painting her face, dyeing her hair, doing her nails as if she were creating a work of art with her body, and with her mind she appeared to roam great empty distances" (12-13). This cosmic, bodily art constitutes a sort

24 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 257.

of "anti-logos" weapon employed as well by Cixous' "admirable hysterics," who bombard masculine-Mosaic systems "with their carnal and passionate body words,... with their inaudible and thundering denunciations."<sup>25</sup> As Susan Willis notes in "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison," on Morrison's eroticized descriptions, bodily representation explodes alienation and repression because "sensuality is embedded in a past which is inaccessible to sexual repression and bourgeois culture" and thus opens up for social and historical alternatives.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, Fanny originally set up her massage shop to avoid marital and academic dominance. In a sensuously charged atmosphere of music and scent, Fanny inscribes as an artist her pain on the knotted body under her hands, and, at the end of a session, with both masseuse and client restored to themselves, "would look satisfied, as if she's achieved a sweet, if temporary victory" (294).

However, while Fanny's satisfaction and the orgasmic structure of her house/body monologue indicate feminine (self)pleasure, the religious connotations of the passage introduce the female body as a temple, inhabited by Spirit(s). In Walker's representation, women artists are vessels of spirituality, Black Goddesses of infinite power and wisdom. In the maternal jungle space, for example, the trees are "like cathedrals" (83); the African women who, through the generations, inhabit this space are angry "storehouses of energy" (267), worshippers of Medusa and Isis, "the Great Mother, Creator of All ... The Goddess" (268). Aware of her connections to African spirituality and creativity, Lissie tells Suwelo that his Uncle Rafe, "knowing me to contain everybody and everything, loved me wholeheartedly, as a goddess. Which I was" (372). The Temple of Walker's title, which reappears in one of Lissie's dreams, is, in other words, a feminine text-body-space, occupied by a Goddess-Priestess and her interestingly phallic familiar or pet, a combination which suggests a Utopian dream of non-difference: an "in-between ... the ensemble of one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another."<sup>27</sup> In the postscript, Walker herself—as author or author-function—acknowledges

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Susan Willis, "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison," in Gates, *Black Literature*, p. 268.

<sup>27</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 254.

her creative connection to process and infinity a la Lissie-as-Goddess: "I thank the universe for my participation in Existence. It is a pleasure to have always been present."<sup>28</sup>

The spirituality of Walker's feminine artists is ultimately connected to their social/psychological function. While they are, as Arveyda speculates, messengers, whose modest task consists in "uniting the world" (123), they are, above all, allied with danger, with transformation. Their liminal sphere of activity becomes apparent, for example, in Zedé the Younger's tale of Ixtaphataphahex, whose name means the Goddess. Zedé describes this woman's role in female initiation rites as a feminine (non)center for liminal wetness, magic, and transition (46). On the socio-political level, Fanny unites with her African double, Nzingha, in writing plays in the tradition of their activist father, who comes to represent Fanny's discovery of roots and her escape from Otherness. As in Carlotta's dream of being a cave-dweller, who fearlessly contemplates a "magnificently and scarily carved" wall decoration of a "strange beast with the head of a very ugly, big-nosed and long-lipped person," Walker's woman(ist) artist exists in a uteral zone of creativity and danger.

The red-slippered lion from Miss Lissie's last series of paintings marks this zone and, indeed, presents itself as a sign of black femininity. The self-portrait depicting a lion signals both the anonymity and marginality of the daring female I in relation to logocentric masculinity, and the multiplicity and difference of the feminine artist: the lion changes from painting to painting and is, moreover, unmistakably Other, a depiction of concentrated energy and motion rather than a rational Self. Its "dare-to-be-everything" lion's eyes nonetheless invites the reader/viewer to enter into its universe, where it has always existed, a knowing observer of natural and human life for generations and millennia. Associated with uncolonized African jungles, it communicates, moreover, the danger and wildness of its species, as well as its silent, prelinguistic modes of communication. It is, besides, a painting deconstructing the margin/center hierarchy, in that it invests significance in, above all, the detail: Behind the lion's "tawny, luxuriant tail," itself a sign of the wasteful abundance of feminine art, is hidden the all-impor-

28 For the distinction between author and author-function, see for example Cheryl Walker's "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 16 (Spring 1990), pp. 551-71.

tant "shiny red high-heeled slipper" (417). The lion's wearing a shoe, in the first place, signifies in tricksterly fashion upon our preconceived expectations of good lion behavior and, furthermore, signals its unmistakable femininity.

The masculine I's studying this outrageous and powerful womanist text are ultimately changed by the experience. Suwelo, who has brought out the painting from under Hal's retirement home bed, has, through Lissie's paintings and stories, become able to experience the multiplicity and difference of Fanny (and Charlotta), and both Hal and Suwelo discover themselves to be in the presence of feminine magic. For in contemplating the red-slippered lion and listening to Lissie's tape-recorded tale of her prehistoric lion's life, Hal recovers his vision: "What's that reddish spot in the corner?" (416). What Hal, without Lissie, sees somewhat imperfectly but Suwelo quite clearly is, of course, the feminine art by which they have both been transformed. Black or white, as Miss Lissie's many selves, this womanist art is above all red: daring, flamboyant, elegant—and dangerous.