

THERE IS MORE TO IT THAN MEETS
THE EYE: ALICE WALKER'S *THE TEMPLE
OF MY FAMILIAR*, A NARRATIVE
OF THE DIASPORA

SILVIA DEL PILAR CASTRO BORRGO
Universidad de Málaga

Remembrance is the Key to Redemption.

Inscription on memorial to Jews who died in World War II
concentration camps, Land's End, San Francisco

The complexity of Alice Walker's book –a rainforest tangle, the front
and back of the tapestry seen all at once– perfectly embodies its vision of life,
not alienated, rigid, hierarchized, bleached,... but life interlocked, multiple,
multiplying, endless, desirous, vociferous, and gorgeously peacock-colored.

URSULA LEQUIN

Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*, published in 1989, joins her contemporaries in the effort of deconstructing history in a way that creates space for the stories that form the history of black people in the United States.¹ Contemporary African American women writers are engaged in a project of reconstruction and revision that deeply affects the thematic and formal features of their novels. Writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Sherley Ann Williams, Gloria Naylor, and filmmakers such as Julie Dash, are involved in a project of historical

1. Writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Gloria Naylor or Paule Marshall claim that they learned to write by listening to older women talk around the kitchen table, by hearing the stories that their parents told repeatedly about their lives, about myths and old fables. See Paule Marshall's «The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen» in *Reena and Other Stories*.

deconstruction that shows the ambivalent position of history when it relates to the experiences and stories of African Americans living in the contemporary United States.² In this project, fiction appropriates history, and the relationship between fiction and history is at once one of interdependence and of opposition. Fiction stands as the ally of history, as the language of the truth, restoring truth to the representation and the telling of the historical past of the diasporic identities of African Americans living in the United States, situating their history within the larger context of the African diaspora. Simultaneously, fiction subverts history, relieving the written text from the rigidity and closure of traditional historical discourse. Fiction functions, in contemporary African American writing, as a version of history which Ralph Ellison described as «...chaotic and full of contradictions, changes of face, and surprises as life itself» (247).

As Justine Tally states in «History, Fiction, and Community» black people have «traditionally been excluded from mainstream history». She refers to Toni Morrison when she argues that white American literature and its representation of history emerges from a context that for blacks means «history-lessness» and «context-lessness». Therefore, creative black writers have «undertaken the reconstruction of both history and context for their people». As Tally further points out, African American women writers are located at the core of our discussion in the relationship of history to fiction since, historically, they have been denied the entrance into historical and literary discourse by both race and sex. Black women writers of the 1980s and 1990s strongly claim the authority to control discourse, achieve power and re-write (re-right) history (357-8).

The storytelling structure of contemporary novels functions as a mnemonic device, tracing the origins of African American culture to southern, rural and African roots. It also functions as a meaningful unit of the present African American culture, beliefs and forms of expression. The underlying purpose of this cultural preservation is, as we should understand, an effort that still today, four hundred years after the arrival of the first group of «fresh Africans» to North America a slaves, still perseveres in the African American community. The search for the disrupted wholeness of an African system of meaning and belief that black slaves passed on recreated from memory, preserved through oral tradition, improvised upon in ritual –as in music and the repeated oral narrative, was willed to the subsequent generations as «hermetically sealed and encoded charts of cultural descent (Gates 5). Thus, contemporary fictional works by black women in the United States have the trope of slavery at its heart. The series of circumstances that slavery set into motion have defined to greater and lesser degrees American existence, American cultural formation, African American life, and white America's subtle and blatant racism.

Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* extends this project to the revision of the history of people of color not only in the United States but also in South America and

2. Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Sherley Ann Williams, *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987), Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (1988), Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).

Africa prior to colonization. Alice Walker puts the rhetorical device of storytelling traditionally rooted in African American folk culture at the heart of the structure of her novel. Walker places a feminine ancestral figure, the goddess archetype, at the center of the skeleton of her text. Lissie Lyles, the ancestor, will tell us the stories of her previous lives, since she has been reincarnated many times either as a human or as an animal. The recollection of all the memories from her previous lives, the multiple storytelling structure to which the text turns, will arouse the reader's consciousness in themes and issues that have been traditionally left out from historiography, since historical discourse has been at the service of supremacist, colonial, patriarchal ideologies. Walker, with the help of the dream of the memory, since the memory, as the mind, has the capacity to dream, takes us back to the origins of culture and civilization in an attempt to explain the wrongs that modern societies inflict on people of color all around the world.

Contrary to Sethe, the main character in *Beloved*, who finds it so hard to remember and needs the ghost of Beloved to force her to remember, Lissie is willing to remember. It is her re-memory that brings to us the stories of her lived past(s). These stories, mainly old, will shape consciousness into the lives of the rest of the characters in *Temple*, giving them an understanding about their lives that directly stems from the old stories' wisdom and knowledge.

Alice Walker establishes the relationship between memory and the imagination in a way that is distinctively different from Morrison's. First of all, Morrison structures her narrative from the starting point of a factual historical event recorded in American history. Walker, in her representation of memory, goes even further than her contemporaries because she does not need historically recorded events to start her story(s). In having her female characters develop their remembrances from their dreams, Walker is showing her distrust in traditional historiography. In this way, Walker tells the unrecorded history of the black female in the diaspora without following any socially or traditionally accepted patterns of historical research. Furthermore, this is an instance of the spiritual wisdom and artistic creativity that Walker sees and seeks to represent as relevant in black women's lives. The memory and the mind are all powerful for Walker. Lissie states that the memory is the site of dreams, and in this way, from a small scrap of memory, she is able to dream, imagine, remember, or «construct» the past. Not only the memory and the imagination, but also the dreams are valid instruments in Walker's work to tell the world about history as remembered and lived in African American experiences.

The idea of ancestry is at the core of the act of re-membrance and places the figure of the ancestor as a mediative device between history and memory, past and present. The fictional re-membrance which characters undergo in contemporary African American women's novels stand as a textual acknowledgment of the spiritual history that African American women writers attempt to recover and re-integrate from what has been lost in the African American collective historical past.³

3. Crucial to this project of the recovery of the spiritual history in African American literature is the argument of wholeness. See my article «The Quest for Wholeness: Empowerment through Spirituality in African American Literature» .

Alice Walker's novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, challenges hegemonic history and memory in the very structure of the narrative as it confronts the importance of memory to personal and cultural identity. The text in *Temple* creates a space that interrupts the traditional linear narrative allowing the entrance of a multiplicity of voices and perspectives. The structure of *Temple* relies on the restorative effects of storytelling. Storytelling and the archetypal, ancestral storyteller, Miss Lissie, allow Walker to clarify the importance of the past to the reconstruction of repressed cultural identity. The past provides powerful and important connections that are essential to the historical and spiritual revision that *Temple* undertakes.

Through the use of postmodern techniques such as temporal fragmentation, intertextuality, parody, and repetition, Walker subverts institutionalized history. The textual fragmentation of *Temple* in which many stories unravel simultaneously, fusing past and present, and involving a multitude of characters and voices, points out the value of history because of its discontinuities, its concern with blanks, ruptures, and interruptions. By exploring the values and limits of fragmentation not only in the narrative but also in its content, Walker includes the notion of fragmentation as a condition of history and as a strategy of representation. However, we cannot detach *Temple* from Walker's previous line of work, always marked by a strong sense of growth towards a larger project of wholeness. As Barbara Christian points out, Walker's poetry, fiction, and essays always focus to some extent on the major characters' perceptions of their past as crucial to their personal transformation in the present and the possibility of change in the future (72). The characters of *Temple* achieve a potential for growth through their experiences of listening to each other's stories that further on will reconnect them with other human beings and with their environment.

The narrative of *Temple* is divided into six parts, each one containing multiple stories that eventually are related towards the end of the book. The contemporary stories that open *Temple* evolve around four main characters, Suwelo and Fanny, Arveyda and Carlotta. However, the book has its hidden center in the character of Lissie Lyles or Miss Lissie, who represents the figure of the matriarchal goddess. Miss Lissie's rememory allows her to recount the multiple stories of her successive pasts as white or black women, or men, that extend in a revisionary fashion through the whole history of mankind. Miss Lissie's ever-present ancestor's voice and memory extend to a distant past where humans and animals lived in harmony as familiars. The storytelling device, in which most of Miss Lissie's conversations are shaped, contributes to the keeping alive of that traditional harmony-Native American as well as African, as one of her main functions in the world of the 1980s and 1990s.

Part I of *Temple* introduces us to Carlotta, a Latina living in contemporary United States. The narration focuses first on Carlotta's mother, and grandmother in South America, and we learn that:

In the old country in South America, Carlotta's grandmother, Zedé, had been a seamstress, but really more of a sewing magician. She was the creator of clothing, especially capes, made of feathers. These capes were worn by dancers and musicians and priests at traditional village festivals and had been worn for

countless generations. When she was a young child, Carlotta's mother, also called Zedé, was sent to collect the peacock feathers used in the designs. (Walker 3)

Already in the first paragraph of the narrative, Walker introduces the reader to important themes such as grandmothers, and ancestral figures, feminine arts and spirituality which survive and are perpetuated in the culture of women through history and memory. Zedé, a South American exile, still continues her female family tradition, making feathered capes which now she sells to rock stars of the Sixties. This is how Carlotta meets her husband, Arveyda, the rock star for whom she delivers peacock capes made by her mother.

As the present life of Carlotta's marriage with Arveyda unravels, so do the stories of her mother's past in South America, and we learn that originally there were the women who were the priestesses, who had the responsibility of keeping the spiritual and cultural well being of the village. However, eventually, the men out of envy because women were able to produce life, destroyed matriarchy, stealing the women's feathers and their rights to be priestesses. In this way, ironically, the expressions of female powers and spirituality are reduced by an encroaching patriarchy into mere producers of robes for male glorification. By the time Zedé learns to make the feathered garments, they can only be sold in gringa boutiques, since North American capitalism has outlawed village traditions and religious practices, placing the dollar as their new god. Zedé eventually returns to her country of origin. This journey reinforces her identity, since she again embraces her cultural traditions. By recalling these stories of her past that she passes on to her daughter Carlotta, Zedé enables her to incorporate this remembered identity into her own self as a Latina living in the United States.

Fanny Nzingha is an African American woman whose life at the beginning of the novel is marked by a strong sense of alienation that stems from the anger she feels towards her husband, Suwelo, and towards white society. She confronts her anger towards white society by returning to the African country that represents half of her cultural heritage. Her father, Ola, is African, and she has an African sister, Nzingha Anne. By meeting her sister, Fanny gains a better understanding of the African part of her identity. As they have mirror names, Fanny Nzingha and Nzingha Anne, Fanny also feels that by looking at her half-sister, she is «looking into a mirror as an African-American...and the mirror was reflecting only the African» (Walker 251).

In Africa, Fanny understands that her anger is real, but also that by directing it towards white people, she is missing the point: any society that represses is the enemy, regardless of color. Alice Walker extends her concerns with the wholeness of women of color by examining the negative effects that fragmentation and alienation have in the lives of black women, and by expanding her focus to all women of color living in the United States, demonstrating the ways in which this alienation prevents them from forming bonds with others.

All characters of *Temple*, male and female, have to look back to their pasts in order to progress. This is made possible by structuring the telling of their past and

present experiences through the cultural medium of storytelling. Storytelling undertakes the function of the exploration of memories of many characters in *Temple* in order to bring to the surface the unremembered parts of their existence; recalling memories that can account for their past.

Fanny is married to Suwelo, a professor of history. He persists in teaching history not only from a male, but from a white perspective. At a point in the book when Fanny is trying to encourage him to read African history from an African feminine perspective, Suwelo admits to himself that «he had never read a book by a woman...He did not want to change the way he thought of Africa. Besides, when he wanted insight into Africa, he'd read a man» (Walker 176). Suwelo represents the masculine failure of the post-sixties generation to overcome sexist stereotypes and whose philosophy about life is persistently focused on white ways of knowing and behaving. As the narrator tells us,

his generation of men had failed women –and themselves...for all their activism and political development during the sixties, all their understanding of the pervasiveness of oppression, for most men, the preferred place for women had remained the home; the preferred position for women, wherever they were, supine. (Walker 28-29)

Suwelo has lost contact with his ancestry, and in this way, he is disconnected from Fanny and from himself.⁴ Fanny and Suwelo's relationship deteriorates as Fanny experiments with several progressive personality changes suggested by her readings and events after returning from Africa. Simultaneously, Suwelo travels to Baltimore where his uncle Rafe, recently deceased, has left him a house. Suwelo, to his astonishment, feels comfortable in this old house, surrounded by his uncle's things. He barely knew his uncle who, to his surprise, now appeared in his memories, encouraging him to look around and get to know him better. However, Suwelo will indeed have the chance to know his uncle Rafe through his uncle's friends, Mr. Hal, and Miss Lissie. Whenever Mr. Hal and Miss Lissie visit Uncle Rafe's house, they bring unending stories about their past. As Suwelo is more and more drawn into the worlds of these stories, he realizes how much he misses talking to old people and realizes the value of these oral experiences recorded in memory. These old people, as Suwelo later acknowledges, are the ancestors, to whom time and experience had installed with knowledge and a sense of wisdom that only now he is beginning to understand:

Suwelo realized with a start that in his real life, the life in California away from his uncle's cozy Baltimore row house, he was never around old people. He

4. As Lennox Birch points out, Walker's own experience of teaching illiterate black women about a history they had been taught to regard with shame, makes her aware of the need to revise that account of events from which black women had been written out by white men.

didn't know that one of the skills they acquired with age was the ability to read minds. For as he sat there, embarrassed, he knew Mr. Hal was reading him. Easily, casually, as he himself might read a book. (Walker 39)

Suwelo's parents died in a car accident when he was in college, a part of his past that he needs to learn to accept in order to find harmony within himself. Mr. Hal and Miss Lissie are offering Suwelo the chance to reconnect with a past filled with stories, that to his amusement, he feels delighted in listening. Miss Lissie, «the one who remembers everything» (52), is the ultimate goddess figure, the one who contains within herself the archetypal memory of humanity. Lissie conceives that her capacity to remember lies in her memory, which acts as «a battery,» continuously recharging her brain. The memory «like the mind, has [also] the capacity to dream» (83), and the «dream memory» resides in our subconscious levels in the brain. This is how Miss Lissie, the ancestor, remembers her many past lives, and through her stories, which she relates to Suwelo in full detail, we learn about the history of humanity from the very beginning, before civilization, patriarchy, colonization, racism, sexism, and the separation of the human and natural world occurred. Seen through the eyes of a woman, these stories fill in the many holes that Suwelo has in his knowledge of American and World history.

The microhistories that Miss Lissie recalls leave Suwelo with the desire to write «an “oral” history –one of those unofficial-looking books, full of “he said” and “she said” that he'd always despised– about Mr. Hal and Miss Lissie» (191), once he returns to California to look for his wife Fanny. By then, by listening to the stories, he would have acquired the knowledge about his past, and about women's ways. This, he thinks, will allow him to try to save his relationship with Fanny.

Somehow, Miss Lissie is gifted with the ability to recreate her ancient, unfolding selves visually through the images created in pictures. When Suwelo arrives at his Uncle Rafe's house, he notices that many pictures in several parts of the house have been taken away, and that his uncle Rafe leaves notes and scribbles on all kinds of materials around the house –napkins, newspapers, shoe boxes– all referring to Miss Lissie. These are little clues about his uncle's life that Suwelo cannot resist exploring. Only when Miss Lissie has told Suwelo about some of her selves and stories, and she makes sure that he learns how to listen, is she ready to show Suwelo her pictures –the ones she herself removed. She knew that whomever Rafe's nephew would be, he would be able to understand them. When he looked at the pictures, Suwelo remembered what Mr. Hal had told him: «Lissie is a lot of women» (91). Indeed, to his astonishment, Suwelo saw

thirteen pictures of thirteen entirely different women. One seemed tall, another very short, one light-skinned, with light eyes, another dark with eyes like obsidian. One had hair to her waist, another had hardly enough to cover her skull. One appeared acrobatic, healthy, and glowing. Another seemed crippled and barely ambulatory. (91)

Those thirteen pictures, taken in a period of over thirty years, revealed many different women, even those who Miss Lissie was in previous, even ancient lifetimes. Her many selves claimed their place as historical facts, testified to both personally and by the unequivocal proof of photography. These pictures represent the «unspeakable»,⁵ the inheritance of a communal memory of endless oppression. African American writers and many other ethnic writers from the United States are involved in the project of filling in the gaps in the marginalized collective memory since historically, and in the words of Toni Morrison, «[they] were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when [they] were its topic» (Site 111). In this way, Toni Morrison emphasizes the necessity for African Americans to build a collective historical memory, the necessity of remembering a past which, although in some ways desirable to forget, is impossible to forget: slavery and the Middle Passage, Emancipation and the Reconstruction period.

Both Miss Lissie and Mr. Hal are artists in more than one way. Not only are they able to transfer their knowledge about the world and humanity by telling wonderful stories, but they also are painters. When Suwelo drops by their house to say good-bye, they both have, as presents for him, self portraits representative of their ancient selves fused within the universe.

It was the center of the paintings that was different from anything Suwelo had ever seen. For instead of faces, as in a portrait, there were merely the outlines of their upper bodies, a man's shape and a woman's shape, and these outlines surrounded blue, infinite space, painted with such intensity, depth, and longing that it was luminous and as inviting as the sky. Wonderingly, Suwelo turned the paintings over, as if that infinite space might have leaked through to the other side...On the back of Lissie Lyle's self-portrait were the words, in emerald lettering, «Painted by Hal Jenkins». On Hal's self-portrait, in bright red, were the words «Painted by Lissie Lyles». (193)

Through the way these portraits are painted, we perceive a certain dimension of androgyny in these ancestors' selves, as gender duality integrates in the wholeness of the cosmos and nature. As Ikenna Dieke points out, «for Alice Walker creative intelligence is an instrument for promoting the acceptance of nature as ultimately spiritual, and existing independently of any subjects (510). Thus, Walker presents a communality of experience that establishes re-memory as something social, offering an intercultural way of finding the common origins of humanity with no individual hero or heroine at its center, and thus further breaking with the dichotomies of individual/collective, man/woman, oral/written. Through the common recalling of

5. Toni Morrison, «Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature». Morrison and her contemporaries are committed to access and recreate the untold and unwritten interior lives of black people, of their ancestors, and, by extension, of the rest of marginalized people of color in the United States.

memories, men and women have to work together in reconstructing the past for a better present and future.

Throughout the novel, there is a continuous linkage among art, creativity, and the possibility of valuing difference, co-operation and growth. At one point, the narrator tells us that artists have «the responsibility for uniting the world» (Walker 125). As Walker reminds us in her essay, «Saving the Life that is Your Own: the Importance of Models in the Artist's Life», artistry and creativity are not only for a handful of artists, but reside in every single human being, each of whom possesses his or her unique artistic expression. Therefore, Miss Lissie and Hal's storytelling and paintings, Miss Lissie's dreams, Fanny's massages, Arveyda's music and Carlotta's wind chimes and bells are all artistic expressions of an inner creativity that reveals spiritual growth.

Because of its importance in the narrative as the central trope for revision through which the connections for personal and collective healing emerge, Lissie's dream memory, an extension of the collective unconscious, deserves consideration. The stories stemming from Lissie's dream memory explain the loss of culture and connectedness to the past. They also present a narrative model of storytelling, rooted in black culture, and therefore useful to study the African American narrative as moving away from the auspices of white control. Lissie's dream memory is an encyclopedia of stories, for she believes that «it is the nature of the eye to have seen forever and the nature of the mind to recall anything that was ever known» (65). The idea of a past and a continuous present that leads into the future, is the foundation upon which Walker constructs her ideas of dream memories and re-memories. As Walker herself says:

I think my whole program as a writer is to deal with history just so I know where I am. I can't move through time in any other way, since I have strong feelings about history and the need to bring it along. One of the scary things is how much of the past, especially our past, gets forgotten. (Tate 185)

Questions such as time and identity interlock in Walker's narrative of *Temple*, for each character of the novel makes a personal effort to recapture the past in his or her quest for identity, as a significant effort in his/her present experience. As time flows into the ever present, humans experiment a sense of growth that connects them to the rest of the universe. However, recalling the past is easier for some characters than for others. For instance, Suwelo has a very difficult time in remembering his parents. Lissie urges him, in a cassette recording that she made before passing away, to look past the pain, to reconnect with his parents' memories:

Hal and I felt you have closed a door, a very important door, against memory, against the pain. That just to say their names, «Marcia» and «Louis», is too heavy a key for your hand. And we urge you to open that door, to say their names. To speak of them, anything you can remember, freely and often, to

Fanny. To trace what you can recognize in yourself back to them; to find the connection of spirit and heart you share with them, who are, after all, your United Front. For really, Suwelo, if our parents are not present in us, consciously present, there is much, very much about ourselves we can never know...And, more important, the doors into the ancient past, the ancient self, the preancient current of life itself, remain closed. When this happens, crucial natural abilities are likely to be inaccessible to one: the ability to smile easily, to joke, to have fun, to be serious, to be thoughtful, to be limber of limb. (Walker 352-353)

In this way, Miss Lissie points out to Suwelo, as a process of inner healing, his relating the stories of his own past to his wife, sharing with her his pain. Miss Lissie knows that Suwelo has the ability to do this, for she is aware of and admires his «struggle against confusion». Once he learned how to listen and how to recall his own memories, he spoke to Mr. Hal and Miss Lissie about his problems with Fanny.

Fanny, as well as Miss Lissie, is gifted with a deeper understanding of the spiritual realm. Miss Lissie is a spirit that has had many bodies and lives; Fanny is a body that continuously has many spirits in her. Interestingly, most of the spirits that populate Fanny's body are historical personae that allow her to experience their lives as part of the microhistories through which real history is represented in *Temple*. Others are animals or elements of nature. For instance, one of the most real spirits that lives in Fanny is the Black-Native American Chief, John Horse. In this way, Fanny tells her husband stories about her different selves, which help them both to reconnect with their historical selves entering the collective consciousness of black people.

The stories related in *Temple* are not always transmitted through a ritualistic, artistic enterprise of oral communication. Fanny's experience of her trip to Africa with her mother, Olivia, to meet her father, Ola, and her half-sister, Nzvinga Anne, is related to Suwelo through Fanny's letters from Africa. Once more, Walker revises the epistolary form, rooted in Western literary conventions, to include it in a work which is truly immersed in the African American artistic terrain.⁶ Fanny Nzvinga is a contemporary African American woman whose personal and marital lives are devastated by her ignorance of her African past and connections, her husband's chauvinistic mentality, the racism that she experiences in her profession as a teacher, and her hatred for white society. Later, as she starts her restorative journey back to Africa, she will learn about the devastating effects that colonization has had upon her father's continent, for Fanny's journey is one of liberation, physically, as well as psychologically. After giving up teaching in the academy, that in her opinion had become as commercialized and superficial as everything else in North-American society, she moved briefly to administration. Finally, she gave up everything, opening a little massage parlor right down the street from the college where she used to work:

6. Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982) is entirely devoted to the revision of the epistolary genre for the African American literary tradition.

In her fear of the murderer within, Fanny withdrew, to the extent that it was possible, from human contact. She abandoned the classroom; too provocative...She moved next to administration. Bureaucracy and racism were a deadly combination. Her silver blade always in the air...Her blood pressure, like that of so many black people, reached alarming highs. (Walker 303)

Performing the «laying on of hands»⁷ on those academic people that she initially hated, she discovered that she

would be forced to touch people, even those [she] might not like, in gentleness, and be forced to acknowledge both their bodily reality as people and also their pain. Otherwise,...[she] was afraid [that she] might start murdering them. (293)

When Fanny goes to Africa and meets her sister, Nzingha Anne, she finds out that her sister, just as herself, refuses to achieve an education by learning the unrealistic notions taught in Western academia. Instead, Nzingha Anne resolves to learn from people's experiences and knowledge in certain areas that were of interest to her. Thus she learned the ancient stories of the village people of Africa.

Both Fanny and Nzingha Anne recognize the failure of academia to transmit knowledge based on truth, ignoring the knowledge of the elders. It is interesting that while Fanny is in Africa, learning from her father and sister, and reconnecting with her past, Suwelo is learning from the stories told by Miss Lissie. Both Fanny and Suwelo simultaneously are experiencing the kind of growth that will make them whole.

Miss Lissie, even without having met Fanny, sees in her a kind, rich, twin spirit:

A shapely, sun-brown woman with a look of the most intense anticipation of good on her face. It was a face that expected everything in nature to open, unresistingly, to it. A face that said Yes not once but over and over again. It was one of those faces that people have when they've been sufficiently kissed as very young babies and small children. Though her hands were at her sides in the picture, one had the sense that they were raised and open, offering or returning an embrace. (277)

Fanny possesses a kind of spirituality that, as Miss Lissie's, is deeply rooted in African American conceptions, where the boundaries between life and death are relaxed. «the living and the dead, were pretty much the same to Fanny, and present to her in about the same way» (281).

7. According to Barbara Christian the term «a laying of hands» signifies an ancient African American ritual of using hands in a symbolical act of blessing, healing, and ordination. Therefore for Fanny, this practice means the transmission of a miraculous power that heals, restores and transforms all that it touches.

Eventually, after her healing trip to Africa and her healing job as a masseuse where she learns to reconnect with people, Fanny decides to get rid of the last thing that restrains her –her marriage.

Marriage, in Fanny's opinion, needs to be redefined and understood in a wider sense than the bonds dictated by hegemonic traditions. This is just another step toward regaining her true identity. Fanny believes, just as Miss Lissie demonstrates with her recollections of dream memory, that «separate spaces for men and women increased harmony». She pictured «separate development that enhanced whatever [she and Suwelo] were creating separately and together in [their] journey» (282). Walker's womanist ethics transmit the message that when women marry and live with men, they enter into a hierarchical structure, dominated by external and superficial bonds, such as house payments, cars, children...not to mention the emotional dependency that women develop towards men who, adopting a patriarchal and colonizing attitude, deprive them of their freedom, which is to forbid them their creativity. Fanny feels that her marriage has colonized not only her freedom and aptitudes for creativity, but also her body, for her husband insists that she wear «Frederick of Hollywood-type lingerie», and even demands that she reach orgasms only with him.

In fact, the text itself breaks down traditional narrative boundaries, before characters can achieve and recreate authentic bonds. In this way Fanny and Suwelo's marriage is disrupted, so that the characters can complete their personal quests. The alienation that prevents the characters from having healthy relationships is reflected in the separate development of the narrative lines, which eventually merge into a single narrative, with all the characters' lives linked to each other forming family and social units, demonstrating the possibility of solidarity within the context of difference.

Through the reinforcement of the need of keeping female creativity, Walker offers a vision of women as the repository of African American culture. For instance, to reinforce the message that pre-historical African spirituality survives, and is perpetuated in the culture of women, Walker introduces in the narrative of *Temple* the diaries of a hundred year old white woman, Eleanora Burnham, containing the story of M'Sukta. M'Sukta, is brought to North-America as the last survivor of her African village and placed in a Natural History Museum, endlessly weaving the traditional cloth of her people. M'Sukta knows that her spirit, and the spirit of her people will only survive as long as she keeps creating their cloth. Therefore, women will keep passing on their artistic abilities, the spirituality that they represent with their lives, experiences, and example.

African American culture and the women's culture at its center is not to be enjoyed just by a handful of people in the realm of the academy. This is why in her representation, Walker refuses to have it restricted to the middle-class. This is ultimately why Fanny abandons her women's studies courses becoming a masseuse, because she believes that physical rather than intellectual contact is the true source of healing. Along the same vein of thought, Nzginga Anne gives up formal education and decides that what she needs is «parent knowledge». From a fragmented, convoluted group of stories at its beginning, *Temple* develops into an inclusive, unique story that encompasses the spiritual growth of its main characters, Fanny and Suwelo. From the perspective of fragmentation and disconnection, Walker constructs a reality where her

characters can live as whole human beings, because they have been able to reconnect with the past, and in this way, make one's experience of the past accessible to others through the guidance of the ancestors. The growth that comes from reconnecting with the past leads to the production of art and becomes a revised history. Zedé's stories and feathered clothes, and her granddaughter's bells, the canvases painted by Miss Lissie and Mr. Hall, M'Sukta's weaving are all recoveries of the past which guide the characters' spiritual pilgrimages.

Walker is consistent throughout the novel in her assertion that spiritual health is possible for all of those who listen to ancestral voices. She contends that the Western, industrial world has closed peoples' ears to those ancestral voices, and it is the artist who must take his/her responsibility to carry on the messages that keep African American culture well and alive.

The text of *Temple*, complicated with so many stories told in many ways, defies explanation because, as Lillie P. Howard suggests, «it is meant to be experienced, without judgment, rather than explained or rendered anew» (139-146). The reader is encouraged to connect with *Temple* at many levels, to find his or her own way of understanding, unlocking the mysteries of the past as revealed by multiple experiences, rooted in multiple, multiethnic backgrounds. As the novel «calls», the reader is encouraged to «respond» over and over again.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Castro, Silvia. «The Quest for Wholeness: Empowerment through Spirituality in African American Literature» in *Power and Culture in America: Forms of Interaction and Renewal. Actas del V Congreso SAAS*. Eds. Antonio Rodríguez Celada et. al Salamanca: Almar, 2001. 167-176.
- Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. New York: Pergamon, 1985.
- Dieke, Ikenna. «Toward a Monastic Idealism: The Thematics of Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*». *African American Review* 26.3 (1992): 507-514.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage, 1972.
- Howard, Lillie P. «Benediction: Few Words about *The Temple of My Familiar*; Variousy Experienced and Possessing the Secret of Joy». *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: The Common Bond*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1993. 139-46.
- LeGuin, Ursula. «Review of *The Temple of My Familiar*». Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad, 1992.
- Lennox-Birch, Eva. *Black American Women's Writing: a Quilt of Many Colours*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994.
- Marshall, Paule. *Praisesong for the Widow*. New York: Plume, 1983.
- , *Reena and Other Stories*. New York: Feminist Press, 1983.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987.

- . «The Site of Memory». *Inventing the Truth*. Ed. William Zinser, Boston: Houghton, 1987. 103-124.
- . «Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature». *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. Ed. Angelyn Mitchell, Durham: Duke UP, 1994. 368-398.
- Naylor, Gloria. *Mama Day*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988.
- Tally, Justine. «History, Fiction and Community in the Work of Black Women Writers from the Ends of Two Centuries». *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture*. Ed. Werner Sollors, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Pocket, 1982.
- . *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens. Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt, 1967.
- . *The Temple of My Familiar*. New York: Pocket, 1989.
- Williams, Sherley Anne. *Dessa Rose*. New York: Morrow, 1986.