

*Between the Self and the Others: Subjective and social consciousness in Toni Morrison's Jazz and Dionne Brand's In Another Place, Not Here*¹

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes and evaluates the way in which a counterbalance between subjective and social consciousness is articulated and developed in two North-American novels: Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*. This counterbalance is explored with reference to the issues of class, gender and race that the novels bring to the foreground. First I will make an analysis of individual and collective spaces in relation to agency and social determinism; afterwards I will pay attention to the figure of the ancestor and to textual techniques which also help these writers assess the view of what constitutes a balance between personal aesthetic choices and dreams and social or collective concerns.

Key words: body, agency, determinism, appropriation, diasporic space, ancestor, essentialism, heteroglossia.

RESUMEN

ENTRE EL YO Y LOS OTROS: CONCIENCIA SUBJETIVA Y SOCIAL EN JAZZ, DE TONI MORRISON, Y EN IN ANOTHER PLACE, NOT HERE, DE DIONNE BRAND

Este artículo analiza y evalúa la manera en que dos autoras formulan y desarrollan un equilibrio entre la conciencia subjetiva y la social en dos novelas norteamericanas: *Jazz*, de Toni Morrison, y *In Another Place, Not Here*, de Dionne Brand. Me propongo explorar este equilibrio en referencia a las cuestiones de clase, género y raza que las novelas ponen de relieve. En primer lugar hago un análisis de

los espacios individuales y colectivos con relación a la agencia y al determinismo social; a continuación presto atención a la figura del antepasado y a las técnicas textuales de las que estas escritoras se sirven para sostener su concepción de aquello que constituye un contrapeso entre elecciones estéticas y sueños personales y preocupaciones sociales o colectivas.

Palabras clave: cuerpo, agencia, determinismo, apropiación, espacio diaspórico, antepasado, esencialismo, heteroglosia.

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to analyze and evaluate the way in which a counterbalance between subjective and social consciousness is articulated and developed in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*². I propose to explore this tension through an analysis of different spaces, through attention to the figure of the ancestor, and through some textual strategies or aesthetic choices whose deployment is not merely formal, but which carries meaning in regard to my topic. Thus, I will first look at those individual spaces—particularly female bodies, but also trees and rented rooms—from which characters contest social forces and resist the determinism of the places where they live: to claim the body as territory owned by oneself opens up the enterprise of constructing a social space and the possibilities of claiming it, and with this, social transformation.

Secondly, my attention will be turned to the importance of the community and of communal spaces for these two writers. That is, I will refer to how characters relate to each other, live together in the same houses; how they form communities, in their neighborhoods and cities, and how they also claim a collective appropriation of the streets. The result is a move from a static notion of setting as a functional narrative element towards a more dynamic idea of it: far from being a preconceived background, setting is understood to be created by characters in narrative itself.

Issues of “home” and “belonging” will appear in a third part, where diasporic spaces and racial bonding are considered. These constitute a further level of relatedness among individuals, through which Morrison and Brand transcend the limits of physical relationships and places. The counterbalance between subjective and social consciousness finds some of its meaning in a spatial location which is particularly relevant for black writers.

Once the dialectics implicit in such relations –to the self, to the community and to the place called ‘home’ or to that of origin– have been explored, I will go on to a consideration of the figure of the ancestor. This

figure is included in much literature written by writers of African descent, and the connection it articulates between the subject and racial consciousness will be shown by the sustenance it gives both to the individual and to the community.

A final section will deal with two specific textual strategies: polyphonic narration and open endings. The tension between individual and social consciousness can also be explored at the formal level. Indeed, I would like to believe in Fredric Jameson's (1981: 79) contention that narrative can be a symbolic solution to unresolvable social conflicts.

These points of analysis will lead me to conclude that both Toni Morrison and Dionne Brand maintain a counterbalance between the self, the individual, and the social community; both write with a commitment to their art (subjective consciousness) *and* to a political cause (social consciousness); as 'individual' instances of writing, *Jazz* and *Place* stand, in my opinion, as two of the finest novels written in North America in the last decade. This is to be observed in the depth and moral commitment with which human problems are treated, together with a great artistic quality manifested in Morrison's serious concern with the intricacies of story-telling and literary tradition and in the poetic dimension of Brand's narrative. However, such aesthetic values are not at odds with the writers' desire to engage the project of historiographic writing which has been very much practiced in postmodern literature. The versions of history that one can read here are not those inscribed by dominant discourses, but by marginal ones: the black immigrant communities of the 20s and 70s arriving in New York (*Jazz*) and Toronto (*Place*), respectively.

Morrison and Brand know that they are working for a community, claiming a space of their own in the literary and cultural space of their multicultural societies. By writing about Black women's experiences, these two writers know that they could run the risk of essentializing them, precluding the possibility of difference and of institutional and social change. So they seem to be aware of the dangers of generalizing for the community. In this sense, it might be appropriate to think of Carole B. Davies's (1994: 4) proposal that "black women's writing [...] should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing." Davies escapes essentialism by adopting Judith Butler's understanding of the category of 'woman' as "one of performance of gender" (Ibid.: 8). Thus, "the category of Black woman, or woman of color, exists as multiple performances of gender and race and sexuality based on the particular cultural, historical, geopolitical, class communities in which Black women exist" (Ibid.: 8-9)³.

2. LOOKING INTO SPACES

2.1. Individual / private spaces

The question of individual spaces calls forth related issues of agency and determinism. The individual space closest to us is obviously the body, and the clearest way in which characters assert their own agency against the determinism of social and historical forces is, in Henry Lefebvre's words (1991: 166-7), "the reappropriation of the body":

Any revolutionary project today, whether utopian or realistic, must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda.

Morrison and Brand are particularly sensible to the history of Black bodies, since these had been, as Brian Jarvis (1998: 114) notes, "objectified and brutalised as fixed capital." Both the female and male characters in *Jazz* and *Place* know very well how it is to carry the burden of a history of physical oppression and violence, and to want to claim their own bodies as spaces of self-control, to reappropriate them, which is a first step in reappropriating space. Theirs is the project, to borrow Michel Foucault's (1977: 148) words, of "expos[ing] a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" to finally liberate such burden. Jarvis emphasizes the centrality of the body in Morrison's work, although his commentary can be extended to Brand's:

Morrison's cartographies [...] are arranged around a series of concentric spatial spheres that share the body as a common centre. [...] Morrison's work frequently dramatises the attempt to reclaim this territory from white oppression, to overcome self-alienation and feel at home in one's own body. Corporeal spaces become a cynosure that signify the impact of race across the American landscape (Jarvis 1998: 114).

Keeping in mind a reading of class and gender (which Jarvis' does not include) together with that of race, in the following paragraphs I discuss the body as a central element in both *Jazz* and *Place*.

Attitudes towards the body in these two novels vary from neglect to destruction and self-destruction. But in the narratives, they are all transformed into some kind of reappropriation, be this in the way of celebration or of resistance to domination. The solitary characters of Wild, in *Vesper County* and *Elizete*, both on the island and later in her Toronto scenes, stand for the neglect of bodies that are inscribed with unwanted pregnancy and violence. Wild is reduced to animal life; she does not speak, she bites.

The deer eyes are closed, and thank God they will not open easily, for they are sealed with blood. A lip of skin hangs from her forehead and the blood from it has covered her eyes, her nose and one cheek before it jelled (Morrison 1993: 153-4).

Elizete arrives in Toronto, with scars all over her body, and “[h]eavy as hell. [...] She doesn’t want a sense of it while she’s living on the street” (Brand 1997: 54). Perhaps there is a way to see the neglected, solitary body positively if one looks at Wild and Elizete as “jamettes”, and not as savage and destitute vagrant, respectively. As Krishna Sarbadhikary (1996: 121-2) has said:

For Brand, not only language is gendered, space too is gendered. [...] The historical figure of the ‘jamette’ was of a female belonging to the underworld and the lower classes. Branded a loose woman, her space was on the streets. It is her space because she possesses it and it gives her, her sense of power. It is free space, and on all sides are receding spaces of confinement, oppression and suffocating respectability. [...] Brand claims the freedom of the jamette’s space by a return to the solitary self.

At this point, in the streets of Toronto, Elizete would rather not feel her body, but soon she realizes that other bodies can become spaces in which she could take refuge. She experiences that “[a] woman can be a bridge, limber and living, breathless because she don’t know where the bridge might lead” (Brand 1997: 16). Verlia, whose love takes Elizete away from the island, is one side of the bridge; Abena, whom the downtrodden Elizete meets in Toronto, will finally turn out to be the other.

This is a similar attitude to that of Alice Manfred and Violet towards the end of *Jazz*. They are finally able to manifest a different attitude towards their own bodies. They can transcend the suffering and celebrate them. Alice feels that “[t]he moment she got breasts they were bound and resented, a resentment that increased to outright hatred of her pregnant possibilities” (Morrison 1993: 76). Just as Violet, she cannot conceive of an idea of bodily pleasure unless it is to the advantage of a male partner. They do not love their female bodies until at some point in their relationship they realize that, although mature, they can still enjoy them. Alice, “whose breasts are probably soft sealskin purses now” (222), goes back to Springfield and gets “[t]he cheerful company maybe of someone who can provide the necessary things for the night” (Ibid.). And for Violet and Joe, now “the body is the vehicle, not the point. They reach, grown people, for something beyond” (228).

Dorcas and Verlia, whose celebration of their female bodies had taken place through love and sensuality in their relationship with Joe and Elizete, respectively, move however from celebration to the liberation of their bodies in death. Here a difficult task has to be confronted, since readers are forced

to reconsider self-destruction as a liberating practice. Katy Ryan's (2000) insightful discussion of "Revolutionary suicide in Toni Morrison's fiction" can help to elucidate this problematic. In this article, the critic defines "[t]he concept of revolutionary suicide not [as] defeatist or fatalistic. On the contrary, it conveys an awareness of reality in combination with the possibility of hope" (Ryan 2000: 4)⁴. Self-destruction is not seen as a final act, but as "a penultimate position" (Ibid.: 3).

Dorcas and Verlia could readily be seen as scapegoats or as victims. However, Morrison and Brand seem to reject victimization. Although their death is primarily caused by an external agent –Joe and the U.S. invaders, respectively– it is self-determination which ultimately prevails: in Dorcas to "let herself die" (Morrison 1993: 209) and in Verlia to jump off the cliff and fly to "some other place, less tortuous, less fleshy" (Brand 1997: 247). In Brand this is clearer than in Morrison, since Dorcas would certainly not have chosen to die had Joe not shot her. Joe's destructive act, as well as Violet's (she stabs Dorcas's face at her funeral) are probably the most intriguing aspects of *Jazz*. Moved by jealousy, it is not enough for them to appropriate their own bodies as people who can abandon a subjugated life in the South and have occupations and an economic income of their own, but they also need to kill a young "light skinned" girl, thus appropriating her body and the possibilities they did not have in the country. But in any case, one can read positively these two characters' choice of death over life as a denouncement of male violence and of the capitalist imperative of possession, as a way of keeping the ultimate control on their bodies.

Other individual spaces, rural and urban, where characters display their willingness to determine their own actions, are trees and rented rooms. It is a fitting coincidence that in both *Jazz* and *Place*, trees are related to absent mothers. Abandoned by his mother, and having perhaps been told her story –that she had been found pregnant lying by a tree just before giving birth to him –Joe sleeps on a tree until he falls out from one and meets Violet (who, in turn, has been left alone by a suicidal mother). Elizete grows up "under the samaan tree" (Brand 1997: 17), thinking of it as her mother, until she is beckoned by "the woman-she-was-given-to". Trees give these characters motherly protection and allow them to find a space of their own. I would even say that rootedness, or the symbolic desire to stay close to the earth connects these characters with a racial past through the figure of the mother. This interpretation is especially positive if one thinks of the associations that trees have had with lynching in the history of people of African descent.

Rented rooms represent the material opportunities for Joe and Dorcas, as well as for Verlia, to keep a private space safe. Malvonne's place means adulterous freedom for Joe, and freedom to give pleasure to her own body for Dorcas. Brand shows how important it is for Verlia to make her room personal,

by not making it full of all the memories or objects that defined her identity before arriving in Toronto. The different rooms that she rents are blank spaces in which she can start a new life and identity, and, more importantly, in which she can define her own self against the commodity culture of (white) capitalism: “She wants it [the room] bare, everything bare. No photographs, no sentiment, no memory. Everything down to the bone [...] She sits there on the floor in her first room for a long long time” (Brand 1997: 156).

However important the control over all these individual spaces (bodies, trees, rooms) is, it is only a first stage to achieve individual freedom. Morrison and Brand move forward to define subjective consciousness in relation to others as well. The places that characters share do not work well as communal spaces at the beginning: “in Violet and Joe Trace’s apartment, the rooms are like the empty bird cages wrapped in cloth” (Morrison 1993: 11). And Elizete and Jocelyn “don’t trust nobody here so they circle each other [...] If you had to resist friendship what the hell kind of a place was this?” (Brand 1997: 79)

Thus, the relatedness of the individual psyche and experience to other experiences, to make communal space reassuring, is found necessary by both Morrison and Brand. It gives the impulse to the social, it opens up the possibility to feel and live for others. But, as I will show, this is not presented as an easy process.

2.2. The importance of the community and of communal spaces

Carole B. Davies (1994: 17) supports the idea that people of African descent search for connection and bonding: “Because we were / are products of separations and dislocations and dis-memberings, people of African descent in the Americas historically have sought reconnection.” Patrick B. Bjork (1992: vii) has stressed the same idea in relation to Black women writers in general, and to Morrison, in particular: “Morrison’s work consistently shows that identity and place are found in the community and in the communal experience, and not in the transcendence of society or in the search for a single, private self.” The tension between self and community in Morrison has already been assessed by this critic:

In depicting a totality of communal emotions and experience, Morrison’s novels demonstrate that the community is a multiple, refractory space within each self which, as it dispossesses and nurtures, deceives and instructs, assails and comforts, serves as the ultimate touchstone in the search for self and place (164).

However, Bjork’s book was published before *Jazz* was written, and my view is that Bjork’s statements would not completely apply to *Jazz*, at least as they

apply to the rest of Morrison's novels. It is true that Violet, Joe and Felice find redemption in their reunion at the end of the story. An alternative to the traditional idea of family provides a sense of community that redeems the characters from their personal anxieties –Violet's lack of a daughter, Joe's need to communicate and profound repentance for his murder of Dorcas, and Felice's want of parents who will take care of her and whom she can make feel young and happy. But once readers reach the end of the novel and go back to the beginning, the following sentences remain troublesome: "Violet invited her [Felice] in to examine the record and that's how that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom" (Morrison 1993: 6). Once Joe has killed Dorcas and Violet has cut her dead face with a knife –which is seen as "the commencement of all sorts of destruction" (9)– have the neighborhood and the narrator, as part of a community, redeemed Violet and Joe? In *Jazz*, the neighborhood gossips about, criticizes and ostracizes these characters. For whom, if not for the neighbors, is that threesome "scandalizing"? So the redemptive powers remain an advantage of the very small group, an individual structure inside the social collective. The whole novel shows how the community, including the narrator, judges Violet and Joe for their acts, which to a certain extent implies that there is still a moral center to which one can refer when considering the acts of murdering a young girl and damaging her dead body. But even when the characters are ready to start new lives, it is not clear that the community has forgiven them. Jan Furman's (1996: 95) concluding sentence in her discussion about the community in *Jazz* is an appropriate summary in this respect: "Perfection is not possible, but transcending imperfection is."

In Brand, ideas about the Black community are also problematized. Hers is an ambiguous attitude in this regard. The community both gives strength to the individual and weakens him or her. As a child and teenager, Verlia needs to get distanced from a community in which she feels alienated, to "leave these people who do not seem to be able to protect her or themselves [...]" (Brand 1997: 122) Communal life on the island is synonymous to hunger, peril, superstition, fear, violence. And when Verlia arrives in Canada, traditional communal structures, as represented by the kind of life her aunt and uncle have accommodated to, are also suffocating for her. Those communities of contented and assimilated Blacks will not let her "liquefy, make fluid, grow into her Black self" (149); they will suppress her individuality. And at the same time, she has learnt from Franz Fanon, that "[i]n the struggle for liberation 'individualism is the first to disappear'" (158) and that "[t]he colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native's mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shut himself up in his own subjectivity [...]" (158-9). So Verlia has to search for another kind of community that allows

her to maintain the balance between personal, subjective needs and collective, social concerns. Her support for the community finds meaning in the Movement, in the struggle with her brothers and sisters, not in

her people, gathered in barber shops and tailor shops and basement parties reminiscing, [who] make her weak. She smells their seduction, it's the kind of seduction that soothes *the body* going home on the train, *insulates it* from the place of now and what to do about (182, my emphases).

This is a good example of how Brand needs to emphasize experience at an individual level, at the level of the body, which needs to open up to, not be insulated from, other 'social bodies'. Verlia's struggle with herself and with others is constant; she goes on fighting against the absorption of the self in the community: "here does not hold still, you absorb it and it ... you disappear" (199).

Like Morrison, Brand also presents alternatives to the traditional family. For Verlia, this is found in the people from the cell where she works: "[t]he cell has been her life here. Holding her together like a family, it's the only family she can bear. Comradeship chosen, friendship that was not chance or biology (192). Later one realizes that even that kind of smaller community ends up being unsatisfactory for Verlia. Again, the balance is shifted towards her subjective consciousness. On the island, far away from her Toronto comrades, Verlia writes: "[i]t has been a good opportunity to distance myself, to collect myself" (219). When threatened by the U.S. bombardments, Verlia makes the individual choice of leaping from a cliff, and yet she does this as revolutionary suicide, a social act. Arun Mukherjee (1997: 104) makes a compelling point in this respect: "It seems to me that Brand is linking Verlia's jump to her death with the defiant suicide in 1650 by forty Caribs, [...] the original inhabitants of this island [Grenada], when they lost to the colonial invaders of their island." Thus, the balance between individual and social consciousness is played throughout *Place* in a way that Verlia best represents. The final expression of the counterbalance, however, could be seen through the characters of Elizete and Abena, in one sisterly relationship that points towards a hopeful future. Elizete can find in Abena a reason to stop rambling the streets of Toronto and Abena can open her hands, which the narrator had symbolically presented as closed fists, to new love.

As Doreatha D. Mbalia (1993: 628) explains, in their migrations to the North, "Africans forgot the necessity of communication and they lost the value of collectivism. Silence and selfish individualism sprouted in their place." This lack of communication can be seen in practically all the characters in both novels. The narrators (and authors) use narrative to bridge the gap between characters, as well as that between readers and text.

The small communities, or relationships of a limited number of people that the novels celebrate, claim their own space and shape a new idea of setting. For the individual consciousness to develop, a given geographical place must be re-inscribed through the figures that transform it. New York and Toronto could no longer be treated as the fixed, dead landscapes which whites once built, either as maps or as settings for fictional works. Morrison and Brand seem to recreate those places with the conviction that “every social space is the outcome of a process” (Lefebvre 1991: 110). Lefebvre supports the communal creation of space as process by asserting that

the creative capacity in question is invariably that of a community or collectivity, of a group, of a fraction of a class in action, or of an ‘agent’. [...] [N]o individual or entity may be considered ultimately responsible for the production itself: such responsibility may be attributed only to a social reality capable of investing a space, [...] of producing that space (115).

Morrison and Brand have manifested a special interest in the question of place or space, in how communities create it. In an interview Morrison said: “I never felt like a citizen. But I felt [...] a very strong sense of place, not in terms of the country or the state, but in terms of the details, the feeling, the mood of the community, of the town” (Stepito 1977: 473). The very name of Brand’s novel points to the search of place. She has stated:

When you grow up black anywhere in the western world, there is an uneasiness [...] an anxiety of place. It is as if there is nothing behind you. So when you hear people putting pieces into place, you recognize it as ‘the something’ that was absent (Qtd. in Harris 1986: 117).

What can already be observed here is a sense of displacement or lack of belonging which results in a common desire to contribute to the construction of communal space and of the social reality to which Lefebvre alludes, but this space is not to be understood according to traditional ideas of citizenship and nationhood. Morrison and Brand problematize notions like these; they challenge the constructions of received geography, and they disclose the contradictions and complexities present in cities which, though being multicultural, are still traversed by the injustices derived from white cultural hegemony.

Morrison has declared her interest in exploring the immigrant’s experience in the City:

I was fascinated by the thought of what the City must have meant to them, these second and third generation ex-slaves, to rural people living there in their own number. [...] I was interested in how the City worked. How classes and groups

and nationalities had the security of numbers within their own turfs and territories, but also felt the thrill of knowing that there were other turfs and other territories, and felt the real glamor and excitement of being in this throng (Schappell 1993: 112).

The excitement of the writer in the previous quote is the one her characters in *Jazz* experiment. And here lies another similarity between Morrison and Brand: their characters are already in love with the city, even before getting there:

[Violet and Joe] stared out of the windows for first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them. Like a million more, they could hardly wait to get there and love it back (Morrison 1993: 32).

[Verlia] is already in love with this city. She is already living here, she has been waiting to live here (Brand 1997: 138). She loves this city and the moment the Greyhound bus set her down on Bay Street (Ibid.: 154).

But they will soon start to have opposite feelings. Morrison and Brand are interested in disclosing aspects of the cities that need to be explored from the perspective of “Otherness”. Two of these aspects are the ‘doubleness’ and anonymity of the communal spaces their characters inhabit. Thus, the previous excitement is transformed into inequality and racism. The Trace’s neighborhood has no high schools and no banks (Morrison 1993: 10); Dorcas’s father is murdered just because of his color – “he wasn’t even in the riots” (57); her mother’s house burnt (ibid.); and Dorcas herself dies before an ambulance arrives in time to save her: “[T]he ice, they said, but really because it was colored people calling” (210). Brand gives multiple examples of racism in Toronto, but the most explicit one is illustrated by the hatred personified in a white man who shouts “Go back to where you came from! Go back to the jungle, niggers!” (Brand 1997: 173) during a rally against the *Klan*. Events like this, that is, public manifestations of communities of black people, are no coincidental ‘background’ information in these two novels. Morrison remembers “the silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two hundred dead in East St. Louis” (Morrison 1993: 56-7). For Verlia, there is nothing like “[t]he pavement under her feet” (Brand 1997: 171). Certainly theirs are affirmations or redefinitions of ‘public’ space as really public.

If, recalling Lefebvre, this is a “non-negotiable part of their agenda”, these events cannot be part of the immigrant’s double experience, which Linda Hutcheon has described as follows:

Doubleness [...] is the essence of the immigrant experience. Caught between two worlds, the immigrant negotiates a new social space; caught between two cultures

and often languages, the writer negotiates a new literary space (Qtd. in Morrell 1994: 9).

The question here is whether there is a possible negotiation at all, simply because for negotiation to take place, two parties are required to cooperate. As it has been shown, examples of racism in the depiction of New York and Toronto confirm that doubleness is present both in *Jazz* and *Place*, but not negotiation. The question in these two novels, I would say, is one of legitimation, rather than negotiation. Morrison actualizes the immigrant's double experience as shown in the following paragraphs:

Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women (Morrison 1993: 7).

The features of the City that follow the previous quote remind the reader that there is optimism and hope, but also sorrow, crime and violence. Brand's characters, especially Verlia, are very aware of that double sense in Toronto and of the complicated dynamics of center and margins:

There are two worlds here in this city where she [Verlia] arrives years earlier with a shoe box of clippings. One so opaque that she ignores it as much as she can—this one is white and runs things; it is as glassy as its downtown buildings and as secretive; its conversations are not understandable, its motions something to keep an eye on, something to look for threat in. The other world growing steadily at its borders is the one she knows and lives in. If you live here you can never say that you know the other world, the white world with certainty (Brand 1997: 180).

The anonymous or impersonal character of the cities in these novels offers a different reading from the one to be found in novels celebrating such an ambience as a symbol of modernity and progress in late capitalism. For Morrison, there is an uneasy awareness of anonymity, but at the same time, the pleasure of sharing anonymous spaces. Here the tension between the individual and the social can also be seen:

[P]eople notice one another in the road; notice the strangers with whom they share aisles and tables and the space where intimate garments are laundered. [...] On trolleys and park benches they settle thighs on a seat in which hundreds have done it too (Morrison 1993: 117).

In Brand, that anonymity has a bitterer taste: “[...] here is a highway and a house inhabited by strangers but it's called home and the wood, you don't

know who nailed the wood, who tarred the ground, here your hands look unfamiliar [...]” (Brand 1997: 198). For Brand, anonymity is related to marginality, to the construction of common spaces by marginalized figures of society. What lies underneath the narrator’s reflections in *Place* is the social or collective consciousness that informs post-colonial writing. The individual is lost in the mass, and not even the contributions of specific ethnic groups are recognized by white society: Brand’s is a claim to communal agency.

2.3. Diasporic spaces

Thus, for those migrant subjects the great City stands for newness and freedom. However, the City is perhaps not the place that one can call home, that one can ‘desire as home’, but the place where displaced people can project, in Avtar Brah’s (1996: 193) phrase, their “homing desires”. Brah theorizes something that the novels of Morrison and Brand clearly bring to the foreground for discussion, namely the question “Where is home?”, which is central to a discussion of the diasporic space. To this question the critic answers:

On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality [...] the varying experience of the pains and pleasures, the terrors and contentments, or the highs and humdrum of everyday lived culture (192).

In both *Jazz* and *Place*, the notion of home is problematized. As the place of origin, ‘home’ perhaps does not even exist. It is the place characters want to leave for better opportunities. For Violet and Joe, Elizete and Verlia, home is pain, is suffering in oppression. Far from providing the traditional ideas of the family as protection, “[h]ome is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement” (Davies 1994: 21). Once they get to the cities, there is no way back. And there, the contradictions that Brah describes – “the varying experience of the pains and pleasures” – shape their lives, as it has already been shown.

In her discussion of the meaning of ‘home’ in the context of diaspora, borders and transnational identities, Brah goes on:

The question of home [...] is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of ‘belonging’ (192).

Belonging is thus not a question left to the individual migrant subject, until she or he finds her or his place in the social arena. As seen by Brah, belonging depends on the willingness of society in general, those to whom a place already 'belongs', to include or exclude the migrant individual. This is true to a certain extent, but to leave everything in the hands of 'social regulation' seems to me too deterministic. Joe and Violet, and Elizete and Verlia fight against social forces and the power that the city has over them, and to a great extent, they are also responsible for their own failures and achievements.

The balance between subjective and social consciousness is greatly achieved by the search of an 'elsewhere' in both novels. Michael Hanchard defines that 'elsewhere' better than I can do it. For him, it is "consciousness [...] as a combination of knowing the condition of one's existence, imagining alternatives and striving to actualize them" (Qtd. in Davies 1994: 14). This is, in my opinion, what the characters of *Jazz* and *Place* do; they balance the conditions that oppress them as a racial group in specific places, and try to find personal solutions. Brand is perhaps more explicit than Morrison about the need to find a third space, outside the boundaries of the dichotomy "Self-Other". Her space of resistance, the one Verlia represents in *Place*, is not a geographical location, or a religious afterlife, but a state of mind or political stance in her view of the world. Since the diasporic experience is one of disconnection, in a way, these characters are separate from those predecessors who suffered slavery, but at the same time the connectedness with the ancestors is what lets them survive in a world that is still racist.

3. THE ANCESTOR

Toni Morrison has emphasized the importance of the figure of the ancestor in at least two of her articles (1981, 1984). For her, ancestors are "timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (Morrison 1984: 343). She had already said that

[w]hat is missing in city fiction and present in village fiction is the ancestor. [...] The city is wholesome, loved, when such an ancestor is on the scene, when neighborhood links are secure. The country is beautiful –healing because more often than not, such an ancestor is there (Morrison 1981: 39).

In *Jazz*, Wild can be seen as the ancestral figure. She is related to the rural world of the South and, as Doreatha Mbalia (1993: 625 - 35) rightly argues, she embodies features that the urban female characters in the novel, and even the City, the music and the narrator, share. Apart from the fact that she is a

pregnant woman left on her own, readers do not know very much about Wild's life. She does not nurture her child, she is rebellious and goes against traditional ideas of black women as supporters and caretakers of the family⁵. And yet, Wild lives through generations by being constantly present in the Trace's lives. She remains a point of reference in the counterbalance between individual and social consciousness because "[the ancestor] values racial connection, racial memory over individual fulfilment" (Morrison 1981: 43). Wild maintains those values whereas Joe searches for this individual fulfilment through her.

John C. Ball (1994: 18) has noted the function the ancestor plays in some of Brand's short stories:

[Characters] incorporate black ancestry and resistance into a strengthened consciousness extended beyond the city's limits by acts of identification and association. That kind of awareness, militantly committed to racial memory and open to the individual's extension into a collective self, not only allows ancestral figures to survive in the city, it makes them the key to the black immigrant's well-being.

I would say that the figure of the ancestor in *Place* is represented by Adela, who is maintained alive through generations and actualized in the story by the-woman-Elizete-was-given-to, as storyteller, by Elizete herself, as 'cultural restorer', and by Verlia, as a parallel figure of resistance and self-determination. Adela had been deported from Africa and, finding herself in a new place to which she does not belong, she refuses to name things, places and her own family. Elizete takes on the task of finding all those names Adela had erased from her memory, thus establishing a strong link with her racial past which will help her survive in Toronto and save Abena from her own self-loathing: "Elizete did not stop [saying names] though she thought that she heard weeping but Abena was dry-eyed and shining as if she'd finally understood [...]" (Brand 1997: 237). Verlia probably heard from Adela through Elizete. The relation Verlia establishes with the ancestor occurs in their determination to go back to their origins, to some other place: "[Adela] climb the silk cotton tree up there and fly all the way back to Africa" (23) and Verlia climbs up and leaps off the cliff at the end of the novel. I insist that their suicide is not, however, an act of cowardice, but one of resistance to the boundaries of space and modes of living imposed by others. Adela and Verlia decide to fly when the 'here' they had to live in was not and could not be the 'here' they had been fighting for. Their decision is a sign that they would not give in to the enemy, an ultimate sacrifice for humanity.

So, Wild and Adela are rural, ancestral women kept alive in the black urban communities of *Jazz* and *Place*. Both came from nowhere and nobody knew

where they went. Both leave their children abandoned and unnamed; both are figures of resistance, and give sustenance in this way to the characters in the country and in the cities. They provide the referential point of color and race, not renouncing to but celebrating it. If they define their existence through the negation of their selves, this is not a negation of color, but of the conditions under which white people wanted them to live. Connectedness with the ancestor provides Violet and Joe, Elizete and Abena with hope for the future. Thus a racial collective consciousness, one that sustains the individual and the community at the same time, is clearly presented by Morrison and Brand.

4. THE SELF AND THE OTHERS AS ENACTED BY TEXTUAL STRATEGIES

As I stated in the introduction to this article, the tension between subjective and social consciousness can also be explored at the level of certain formal aspects. In order to prove this, I propose to briefly examine two of them: narrative voice and resistance to closure⁶. The first of these aspects refers to the heteroglossic counterbalance between omniscient narrator and polyphonic narration in each of the novels. One could say that the balance is achieved through the maintenance of a voice that stands above the characters, accounting for their particular lives, for the life of the community, and for the history of Blacks in general, and through the ‘democratic’ inclusion of the distinct voices of characters speaking in first person. The omniscient narrators function at times as if outside of the events narrated and at others as a living part of the respective communities. Morrison objectively accounts for the migrations of “nine hundred Negroes” to the North (1993: 173) and has multiple examples of the narrator’s interaction with the City, like the one started by the statement “I’m crazy about this City ...” (7). In the following example, Brand’s omniscient narrator speaks for and about black women’s experiences, but she also includes herself in the narration:

[T]hey saw nothing good in us because they saw nothing good in themselves. They made us pay for what they had suffered. Yes, she had been a daughter. [...] They sent for us, sent for us daughters, then washed our faces in their self-hatred (Brand 1997: 231).

Polyphonic narration seems to be invoked in both novels for the purpose of rejecting an authoritative and homogeneous, single voice which would occupy a privileged position in the task of story-telling. The multiplicity of voices allows several members of the community to speak, so that readers can listen to more than one version of the story, or to different perspectives of it.

In *Jazz* almost all of the characters get a chance to tell their stories. Even the author in her last pages, or the book as an object which is alive seem to speak to the readers reminding us of the closeness between fictional and real life. Similarly, in *Place*, readers listen to Elizete, to the omniscient narrator, to Verlia, to the woman-Elizete-was-given-to, to Adela, in different registers, and no voice seems to stand above any other.

Even the voice of the reader is called to participate in both novels. Second person address, the 'you' that the narrators use in descriptions of place bring readers near to those places, involve us in the events happening there:

Do what you please in the City, it is there to back and frame you no matter what you do. [...] All you have to do is heed the design –the way it's laid out for you, considerate, mindful of where you want to go and what you might need tomorrow (Morrison 1993: 8-9).

Brand switches from third to second person in search of empathy between readers and character: "Here is a hole in a wall opening to the sea and you ... she cannot recognize anything after that ... she cannot remember why you ... she is standing at a corner called Bathurst and Bloor looking into a store window..." (Brand 1997: 198).

The tension or counterbalance between collective and individual consciousness is achieved by foregrounding the objective and actual data of deportation and migration, in the more standardized voice of the narrators, and by giving a chance to particular characters as well to tell their own stories, to leave a record of how those communal experiences were lived at the individual level. The balance could also be seen through the metaphor of 'textual suicide', which is explained by "the enactment of the death of the narrative 'I' in favor of the continued life of a textual *sujet d'énonciation*" (Ross Chambers qtd. in Ryan 2000: 8). *Jazz* and *Place* function in a continuous play of this 'I's death and resurrection.

Similarly, the question of open endings, or the question of "the search of narrative methods which resist the totalizing impulse of narrative and of readers themselves" (Cutter 2000: 1), will help me reinforce my point. Dominick LaCapra (1987: 14) contends that

one way a novel makes challenging contact with "reality" and "history" is precisely by resisting fully concordant narrative closure [...], for this mode of resistance inhibits compensatory catharsis and the satisfying "meaning" on the level of the imagination and throws the reader back upon the need to come to terms with the unresolved problems the novel helps to disclose.

Neither *Jazz* nor *Place* offer to the reader a univocal and unique ending in which everything is explained and where social contradictions and problems

are solved. The relationships which are suggested at the end of each of these novels are only tentatively redeeming. As readers, we are invited to imagine how these relationships will develop and how the characters will further interact with the cities and their past.

The fluctuation in these two novels between narrators, perspectives, temporal and spatial settings and the use of an ending which is not resolved are all deliberate aesthetic choices. Yes, in tune with the postmodern contexts in which these novels have been written, but also serving to reinforce the necessary transformations of the sociopolitical contexts in which they operate and to bring into a dialogue the writers' subjective consciousness enacted in the individuality of the text and the social, collective consciousness of the 'reality' and 'history' with which the texts come into contact.

5. CONCLUSIONS

I hope to have shown how Toni Morrison and Dionne Brand achieve a counterbalance between individual and social consciousness: both writers display their poetic and imaginative skills with a social concern and political commitment in mind, though none of the works lends itself to be read merely as a political manifesto. Their novels are proof that "[t]he best art is political and you ought to be able to make it irrevocably beautiful at the same time" (Morrison 1984: 345).

Similarities between these two writers have arisen, perhaps more than differences: their characters, though much marked by a past history of oppression, are subjects with new opportunities for self-development and independence. For both authors, the question of space is of fundamental importance, and with it, the questions of multiple displacements, of subjectivities that are shaped by a migratory experience, of identities that are rejected in a traditional spatial sense of nationhood and at the same time resist being subsumed in such a space, looking for the construction of their own place, starting from the (female) body, from claiming that space as a territory to own, to defend against foreign appropriation, a territory in which to display one's agency and self-control.

Susan Willis (1985: 214) analyzes "the devastating influence of late capitalist society, particularly as it erodes the cultural identity of Black people, replacing cultural production with commodity consumption." In my opinion, *Jazz* and *In Another Place, Not Here* resist this process by creating a social space and reinventing alternative kinds of community. Following Willis' discussion, I have tried to demonstrate how these communities reject bourgeois social models, which are based on an economics of production,

accumulation and exchange, and search instead for the production and exchange of social spaces and relationships (Willis 1985: 218-9).

In order to start their new lives, Morrison and Brand's characters abandon their places of origin, traditionally seen as 'home', and instead develop a 'homing desire' in the cities to which they move. There they arrive full of hope and willingness to claim a space of their own. But soon they find out that the transformations they envisaged can only be achieved at a high personal cost. It is then that they look for refuge in the community, in their neighborhoods and in ancestral figures. Their resistance is to accept their communities as ghettos; they do not want to give up their racial identity and they do not want to be segregated because of it. They aspire, as any other human being, to happiness, and they finally find those hopeful possibilities in reciprocal, non-sexist sexual relationships and in the 'uninstitutionalized' love of alternative social structures.

Leaving aside these rather thematic questions, I agree with Jameson (1981: 79) in that "the aesthetic act is itself ideological", and, as I said in the introduction to this article, I would like to believe with him that "the function [of this act is that] of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions." (Ibid.) But it is very difficult to assert that these narratives by themselves solve the problems of racism, sexual oppression and homophobia (this last one addressed only in *Place*) presented in them, simply because those problems continue to exist in 'real' life; Jameson's contention has to be read as an utopia. However, one needs to be alert at the possibilities of textual agency as expressed by Dominick LaCapra:

[A] narrative may radically question dubious relations between structure and its "others" in "reality" and at least suggest the possibility of alternative articulations, in part through its own textual operations in "working through" the problems it explores (1987: 14).

And it has to be remembered as well that "textual agency is always instrumental and historically specific and consequently a non-essential or formal property of the text itself, but an effect of the uses to which it can be put" (Landry and MacLean 1993: 92).

So let my article be just a reading among one of those many uses and situate my discussion as an approach to the realities of these African-American and Trinidadian-Canadian writers, not as a generalization of the literature written by Black women novelists. I uphold Diana Fuss's (1989: 20) cogent discussion of essentialism vs. constructivism and agree with her in that "[t]he radicality or conservatism of essentialism depends, to a significant degree, on *who* is utilizing it, *how* it is deployed, and *where* its effects are concentrated" (her emphases). The ideas of the theorists who have appeared in the course

of this article; the views of the world and of women that Morrison and Brand display through their works; and my bringing them together have to be understood to be functioning for concrete political purposes; at least as “‘appropriate essentializing’ in its bringing diversity together because doing so provides a position of strength” (Morrell 1994:12).

Andrew Gurr has said that “historical distance and perspective are perfectly suited to the scope of a novel which is seeking to analyse a colonial society and to find a social identity through its history” (1982: 160). Morrison and Brand chose concrete historical moments to actualize those experiences in the lives of real people. Morrison recreates the migrations of black communities to the North in the United States during the first decades of the last century and the resulting social atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance. Brand brings readers close to the experience of many immigrants, among whom she herself was one, from the Caribbean islands to Canada during the seventies, a period of multicultural formation which has been proudly recalled by certain sectors of the Canadian political discourse. Their ideas about literary ‘setting’ are not to be discovered in any consideration of it as a picturesque element, something taken for granted, but as a dynamic social space that can no longer be seen as historically or imaginatively fixed. Narrators and characters construct those settings—New York and Toronto—in the very depictions of them. The problems that started to exist in those new urban contexts then continue to be relevant at the moment these authors write. Today, both individual and social spaces are still claimed and transformed, and in the case of Morrison and Brand, at least as expressed in *Jazz* and *In Another Place, Not Here*, this is achieved mainly by counterbalancing the individual and the collective, subjective and social consciousness.

NOTES

¹ My gratitude to the *Fundación de Estudios La Caixa* and the *Fundación de Estudios Canadienses*, which made this article possible by giving me a grant to study one year in Toronto, Canada.

² I will refer to the novels as *Jazz* and *Place*. Page numbers will be given in parentheses in the text.

³ For the sake of clarity, here follows a summary of the stories in each of the novels: *In Another Place, Not Here* narrates the interwoven stories of friendship and love between women from different Caribbean islands and their migrations to Toronto in search of better opportunities in the seventies and eighties. Driven by revolutionary ideas, Verlia joins the Movement in Toronto and commits herself to political action. In spite of all the racism encountered, there she finds a family and a reason for living. Abena, who does clerical work in order to help immigrants, becomes her friend and lover. But after thirteen years, Verlia finds the situation stifling: things have not changed much and Abena’s love is not enough. Verlia realizes that the Revolution cannot be something merely theoretical. So, escaping the numbness of mind that Toronto had left on her, she goes to an impoverished island to fight for the rights of black men and women who work in

conditions of slavery. There she meets Elizete, a younger, motherless, woman who needs to escape but does not know where to. She is a victim of rape and exploitation who finds in Verlia a model for future hope. But Verlia will not be her eternal companion because, under the threat of U.S. bombardments on the island, she and her comrades prefer to commit communal suicide rather than being killed.

Left alone, Elizete decides to go to Toronto, though her ideals are not so high as those of Verlia. With nothing in her hands, and still suffering racism and even rape in the city, the only thing that can save her is sisterhood first with Jocelyn, her roommate, and then with Abena, for whom she looks, in an attempt, only suggested in the novel, to share the pain caused by loss and to continue the love relationship that neither of them could fulfil with Verlia.

In *Jazz*, Morrison recreates a different moment in the history of black migration and one of flourishing black creativity, the Harlem Renaissance, in the New York of the twenties. Joe and Violet get married in Vesper County, Virginia, but soon migrate from this rural South to the thriving industrial North. Behind they leave parentless childhoods and lives of hard work. Violet's grandmother, True Belle, abandons her family for Vera Louise, a white lady, and Golden Gray, her child. This rejection of her own race leads Rose Dear, True Belle's daughter and Violet's mother, to commit suicide. Violet will not want to have children of her own (though she has two abortions), so that they do not suffer the conditions of poverty that her family had gone through. Joe does not even have the opportunity to know his mother, Wild, nor his father, and is brought up by a hunter, Henry Lestory or "Hunters Hunter", who at the same time is Goden Gray's father.

After some years in New York, Joe falls in love and keeps a relationship with Dorcas, a young girl whose dreams of escaping to a better place he, being still married to Violet, cannot make true. Dorcas is determined not to waste her youthful years and thus she enjoys the music and the sensual atmosphere of Harlem. Joe kills her at a dance because he cannot stand her happiness and his own misery. The girl's ultimate proof of love is not to reveal the name of her murderer, just before dying. Violet, desperate in the face of the discovery of her husband's infidelity, stabs the girl's face at her funeral. This episode costs her the enmity of Dorcas' aunt, Alice Manfred, with whom, nevertheless, Violet will be able to speak and exorcise her feelings of guilt until both deem each other necessary confidants. The novel ends with the suggested union between Joe, Violet and Felice, one of Dorcas' friends, as a kind of redeeming future relationship. They seem to find some sense for their lives, complementing each other in their most profound needs.

⁴ References to the articles by Kathy Ryan and Martha Cutter (retrieved from the Internet) are to my own pagination.

⁵ Other women in the novel do the same: True Belle abandons her family by going to Baltimore with Vera Louise; Rose Dear commits suicide when her children are very young; Violet refuses to have children.

⁶ For deeper stylistic analyses of *Jazz* see Martha Cutter and Nicholson Pici.

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