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Maddie Dirrim
Denison University

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Into the Wild: Exploring the Power of Black Female Wildness in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

Maddie Dirrim

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Toni Morrison asserts that when she and other authors write for black women, they “are not addressing the men as some white female writers do. [They] are not attacking each other, as both black and white men do” (Furman 7). Instead of putting her focus on the male figures in her narratives, and without attacking members of other races or genders, Morrison seeks to craft stories that are made for black women. This goal is prevalent in every novel she writes, but one story in particular that seems to stand out in this regard is *Jazz*, her sixth novel out of the many she wrote during her lifetime. The black woman characters in this novel each possess a sense of “wildness,” yet another theme that makes its way into many of Morrison’s works. The combination of this quality and her intended focus on black women allows conclusions to be made concerning the degree to which this portrayal of wildness is dangerous, and how much it is powerful. I would like to argue that it is more powerful and authoritative than dangerous, unless one frames this danger in relation to the men of the story; it seems that this established power is frequently over male characters, in which case, the wildness is a danger to them and them alone. The characters of Wild, Violet, and Dorcas in particular possess this quality – wildness – and use it as a way to work against the violence and stereotyping that is frequently perpetuated by men. In her novel *Jazz*, Morrison portrays the idea of wildness in black female characters as a powerful, authoritative quality rather than a dangerous one, demonstrating that it is necessary as a method of attempted survival.

The definition of the word “wildness” itself can have several meanings; it can connote that something is uncultivated, without discipline, or lacking sound reasoning. However, it can also indicate a strength of emotion, which is the definition that will

be used in this case. It is the strength of these women's characters that allows them to use their wildness as a way to gain authority over their male counterparts. This strength is a necessary one, as their external conditions and perceptions propel them to use their wildness in different ways in order to survive. As Doreatha Drummond Mbalia states in her essay "Women Who Run with Wild: The Need for Sisterhoods in *Jazz*," "Wild... signifies defiance, rebelliousness, aggressiveness, selfishness, and silence" (625). These qualities, the defiance and rebelliousness, translate to the innate power that lies in black women's wildness. It does, however, manifest in different ways. For the character Wild, her wildness lies in her status as a legend among men, as something for them to fear. Violet has "cracks" or violent tendencies, which come across as wildness and help her to make sense of Joe's affair. Finally, Dorcas's wildness resides in her ability to embrace her sexuality, allowing her to survive in a rather unconventional manner.

Wild, Joe's mother who is never truly present in his life, inherently gains authority over the men around her because of her elusivity and her ability to hold fear over their heads. Wild's identity is established as a mysterious and feared woman – the men can't even pin down her location. The legend of Wild was spread by word of mouth: "She lived close, they said, not way off in the woods or even down in the riverbend, but somewhere in that cane field – at its edge some said or maybe moving around in it. Close" (Morrison 166). Her looming presence, one that is incredibly close to the men working in the fields, is enough for them to be frightened. The wildness that she possesses even goes so far as to manifest in her lack of a home, instead portrayed as a woman who cannot be pinned down. Wild's unpredictability is even enough for the men's work to be disrupted, as they say that "[j]ust thinking about her, whether she was close or not, could mess up a whole morning's work" (166). She doesn't have to be seen, and the men do not have to experience her in person, for her to hold great authority over them. The rumors of her wildness inherently give her control, a control that has tangible consequences for the men and the work that likely fuels their own sense of masculine strength. With just one thought in Wild's direction, this part of

their masculinity is compromised. Wild's effects go deeper than their work as well. The fear perpetuated by her name causes them to actually feel physical reactions. Morrison lets the reader know that the men "weren't prepared for the way their blood felt when they caught a glimpse of her, or for how trembly their legs got when they heard that babygirl laugh" (167). Using a myriad of sensory experiences, Morrison demonstrates the raw power that Wild has over these men. The influence of her presence, even just a glimpse, is enough to have an effect that runs so deep that they can feel it in their blood. Presenting Wild's laugh as especially youthful and girlish emphasizes her femininity, reminding the reader of her womanly authority and affirming that no matter how she exhibits her presence, she exerts great influence on these men.

Despite the existence of Wild's control over the men that surround her, the need for her wildness is a result of how she is perceived by these male figures, and how black women have been perceived for quite some time. Just her name, bestowed upon her by Hunter's Hunter when he first took care of her and she bit his hand, lets these men know that she is not to be trifled with. Therefore, her wildness and the authority she – perhaps unknowingly – establishes through gossip is warranted in order to combat this untamed perception. In her essay on narrative and identity in *Jazz*, Carolyn M. Jones discusses the implications of violence that is ever-present in the lives of black Americans. She explains, "Women, particularly black women, become the objects on whom this violence is worked out in the culture. They, from slavery forward, are imaged as savage and sexual, like Wild. Thus, women must be armed" (486). Morrison chooses to arm Wild with the ability to cultivate fear among men due to her wildness. Wild leans in to the image of herself as savage, an unpredictable solution to the male gaze that results in her authority, her survival, rather than her inferiority. She has to value her wildness because to do anything otherwise would be to open herself up to the violence that Jones discusses; it is a survival tactic that allows her to gain power while also protecting herself. Mbalia's view is similar to that of Jones': "since there are traces of Wild in all the female characters—that is, there is a common bond among women of African descent in that they all experience a triple oppression—the

reader can infer that similar conditions cause all of these women to become wild” (626). In Mbalia’s eyes, the oppression and violence that inherently comes with the identity of being a black woman due to the stereotypes perpetuated in society bonds these women together, causing their wildness and establishing it as a necessary reaction to these external factors. Through Wild’s authority over these men due to her wildness, she is able to create her own sense of control and attempt to survive in spite of the outside conditions that actively work against her.

Violet’s wildness, which lies in her violent tendencies/cracks, is a defense mechanism in order to process the pain that has been thrust upon her by Joe and his affair with Dorcas. From the beginning of the novel, Morrison makes the reader aware of Violet’s inconsistencies and violent tendencies that are amplified by the affair and subsequent murder of Dorcas. The narrator describes these tendencies as “cracks,” a darkness that implies a sense of wildness as well: “Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day... Sometimes when Violet isn’t paying attention, she stumbles onto these cracks” (Morrison 22-23). It is said that these cracks didn’t used to exist, that Violet used to be a “snappy, determined girl and a hardworking young woman” but that things began to evolve into wildness when her and Joe disconnected (23). From the language that Morrison uses, it seems as though Violet doesn’t intend to be cracked, she only stumbles upon this condition because her life requires it. She must adapt to external forces, which is an idea that seems to be common among these women, as Mbalia so aptly articulated. Yeonman Kim frames this idea as involuntary vulnerability, one that inadvertently makes these women develop a necessary sense of wildness. Kim explains, “The narrative makes it evident that the characters are induced to do wrong by seducing, misleading, and oppressive external forces to which they are involuntarily vulnerable” (127). Violet has to stumble onto these cracks – is induced to do wrong – in order to survive her troubling marriage.

This form of a defense mechanism – her displaced wildness – is mainly displayed when Violet makes an appearance at Dorcas’ funeral, in which she attempts to stab her in the coffin. Alice, Dorcas’ mother, provides commentary regarding this incident by

saying that Violet was “[t]he woman who ruined the service, changed the whole point and meaning of it and was practically all anybody talked about when they talked about Dorcas’ death and in the process has changed the woman’s name. Violent they called her now” (Morrison 75). Violet’s public perception is altered by this incident, even adopting the moniker of “Violent” in response to her cracks. In this way, she quite literally embodies the violence instead of letting someone else commit more violence against her – that is, more than Joe already has. In addition to the oppressive forces that are systematically in place against black women, Violet must also find a way to process the betrayal and criminal acts committed by Joe. This violent act in particular, part of her perceived wildness, serves as a way for her to gain control over Dorcas and by association, Joe. Thus, even though the violence is misplaced onto Dorcas instead of Joe, it is still a way for her to try and maintain power in the relationship. Even though what results is a public image of her as a wild woman, Violet seems to be projecting her authority as Joe’s wife onto Dorcas, in an attempt to remind Joe that she is the one whom he married.

Violet’s idea of survival seems to be framed as persisting through this period of her and Joe’s life, the one marked by Dorcas’ presence. Part of what allows her to work through this difficult part of her narrative is acknowledging that her wildness exists and using that to find strength in herself, to accept this quality and channel it into surviving. In a candid moment in chapter four, Violet seemingly processes her wildness in a stream of consciousness section that spans several pages. After a long passage describing her spinning thoughts about the specific things Joe may have been doing with Dorcas while Violet was oblivious to the affair, she states,

That’s why. And that’s why it took so much wrestling to keep me down, keep me down and out of that coffin where she was the heifer who took what was mine, what I chose, picked out and determined to have and hold on to, NO! *that* Violet is not somebody walking up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes shit no *that* Violet is me! (Morrison 95-96)

In this moment, Violet acknowledges her wildness and at the same time, demonstrates her desire for ownership and/or control over her relationship with Joe. She knows that this wildness is inside of her, but also knows that it is a way for her to sort out the traumatic event that occurred within her relationship. Violet couldn't "hold on" to Joe, couldn't maintain this sense of control and comfort, but she does have control over her own violent tendencies; as stated in the previous paragraph, she knows what she is doing when she attacks Dorcas and in an indirect way, attempts to affect Joe. This internal monologue and stream of consciousness acts as her realization of this fact, allowing her to own her cracks and see that she is the Violet who is wild, who will survive this part of her life.

Ironically, Violet survives by "killing" herself. Towards the end of the novel, the reader is introduced to Felice, Dorcas' friend who enters into Joe and Violet's life in search of her ring, one that Dorcas had borrowed before she was killed. Violet's survival is first confirmed by Felice, who tells the reader that other people thought Violet was crazy. However, Felice has her own opinion; she says, "'They're wrong about her. I went to look for my ring and there is nothing crazy about her at all'" (Morrison 202). This is one piece of evidence to suggest that the defense mechanism and method of processing that is/was Violet's wildness has done its job and allowed her to come full circle. Public perception sees this wildness as craziness, when in fact it is the thing that gave her the ability to work through this difficult series of events that occurred. After Felice meets Joe and Violet and they become rather friendly with one another, they begin to have dinner together. One dinner conversation between Felice and Violet discusses what kinds of people, what kinds of women, they want to be. Violet says that she realized she wanted to, and could, go back to the Violet she was before. The sequence of dialogue between the two goes as follows, with Felice posing the question at the start: "'How did you get rid of her?' 'Killed her. Then I killed the me that killed her.' 'Who's left?' 'Me'" (Morrison 209). This sequence demonstrates that Violet eventually realizes her wildness has served its purpose. She understands that she has gotten through the worst because of her wildness and that it would be better to get rid of it, since there is no

need for it anymore. She has processed the betrayal and her wildness, and now wants control of a different kind.

Dorcas' individual wildness lies in her ability to embrace her sexuality through her relationships with both Joe and Acton, giving her inherent power through Joe's male desire. Carolyn M. Jones has her own thoughts on Dorcas' sexuality, and her calculated way of discovering what she wants when it comes to her body. Jones explains, "Dorcas is only alive when she is a mirror of someone else. Her body is her offering, and she offers it until she finds what she wants" (484). Dorcas' ability to be alive, to survive, lies in her desire for a relationship, which in turn signals a way for her to lean into her sexuality rather than stray away from it for fear of being hypersexualized. Within the facets of oppression that black women commonly experience there lies a practice of hypersexualization, one that tends to make these women believe that they should not be sexual. Because of the existence of this external force, Dorcas develops her own sense of wildness, one that can be labeled as such due to the fact that she does not adhere to the norm. Therefore, her embrace of sexuality is her version of wildness.

It is clear that Dorcas has great influence over Joe within their relationship, exemplifying that her wildness allows her to obtain a sense of control. In a section of Joe's individual thoughts, one of the only ones the reader is allowed to experience, he describes how much he relies on his male friends versus his reliance on Dorcas. He reveals, "'Gistan, Stuck, whatever I said to them would be something near, but not the way it really was. I couldn't talk to anybody but Dorcas and I told her things I hadn't told myself. With her I was fresh, new again'" (123). Clearly, Joe relies on Dorcas more than his friends Gistan and Stuck – he goes so far as to declare that he has admitted things to Dorcas that he has not even admitted to himself. This demonstrates the influence she has and the power she holds in the relationship. Later on, when Dorcas is describing how Acton didn't want her to rub his neck while dancing (a factor that will be further discussed) she remarks, "'Joe wouldn't care. I could rub anywhere on him. He let me draw lipstick pictures in places he had to have a mirror to see'" (191). This cleverly sexual comment, one that allows the reader to

understand the hint that is proposed by Dorcas, shows how she is clearly embracing her sexuality when it comes to Joe. He doesn't care what Dorcas does to him, he seems to be content no matter what. She is in control both verbally – Joe can confide in her about anything – and physically – Joe enjoys her presence and the way she leans into her sexuality.

Dorcas also finds herself experiencing wildness while seeing Acton, even though their relationship differs from that of Dorcas and Joe's. It must be acknowledged that Acton is younger, more popular, and more commanding than Joe. As mentioned before, Acton tells Dorcas how to act, dress, and dance. This fact is extremely discouraging for a black woman like Dorcas who is attempting to embrace her long-diminished sexuality. Morrison herself recognizes the command that men have over women's bodies, a fact that has not evolved too much over time. In an interview, she admits, "The issues concerning what we do with our bodies haven't changed. This is very often determined by the command of men ... the whole beauty thing, is not about owning your body but having it defined for you by men" (Hoofard 89). In addition to hypersexuality, body image is another external construct that influences Dorcas' choice to love her sexuality and her body. Through her wildness, Dorcas attempts to gain agency over her own body while also commanding authority over the men who make demands regarding what she does with this body. While going out with Acton, Dorcas does claim that she is happy with him; she has just decided to leave Joe, and has claimed Acton's attention. However, this happiness does come with reluctance. While dancing with Acton, Dorcas' inner thoughts read differently: "He's coming for me. I know it. He's been looking for me all over. Maybe tomorrow he'll find me. Maybe tonight" (190). These wandering ideas are not in reference to Acton, but Joe – even though she is physically with Acton, she thinks about Joe instead. This indicates that perhaps she has chosen Acton for a purpose, as a way to further embrace her sexuality, yes, but also to make Joe jealous. In this moment, she knows how much power she has over Joe and uses Acton to exert this power.

Despite the fact that Dorcas is killed by Joe in the ultimate attempt for his own control, she survives through the power of

memory. After wondering if Joe will find her while dancing with Acton, he does just that; however, the consequences are unfortunate, to say the least. He shoots her at the party, the action that eventually claims her life. Clearly, Dorcas underestimated Joe's potential for jealousy and the power she holds in their relationship, as she did not predict his deadly actions. It seems as though her wildness and embrace of her sexuality was snuffed out by this act, but Morrison decides otherwise. Even when Dorcas is gone, she haunts both Joe and Violet. Early on, her presence is established; when describing their house, Morrison ends with, "The mantel over the fireplace used to have shells and pretty-colored stones, but all of that is gone now and only the picture of Dorcas Manfred sits there in a silver frame waking them up all night long" (Morrison 13). Dorcas is now able to exercise her power from the center of their living room, as she has such a great effect that Joe and Violet can no longer sleep through the night. Ultimately she is the one who leaves a rather permanent mark through her memory, surviving because of her occupancy in a large majority of Joe's heart.

These three black women – Wild, Violet, and Dorcas – all exhibit their own qualities that can be classified as "wildness." This idea, prevalent in many of Morrison's novels, can generally produce many interpretations. In this case, it is clear that wildness, no matter the woman, is a powerful trait that allows them to establish authority over both male characters and external forces that plague their identities. Wild seems to be portrayed as a legend among men, who in their minds is savage and sexual. However, the authority that she gains through her legendary status and the fear that is cultivated within these men makes her wildness necessary. The control that she gains through this fear allows her to survive in a world that makes its own definitions for black women. Violet's wildness differs slightly in that it is physically demonstrated by her violent tendencies. What remains the same is the notion that her wildness is warranted; Violet does this in order to process the events perpetrated by her husband Joe, as a method of survival that eventually leads to promising results. Finally, Dorcas' sense of wildness stems from the way she embraces her sexuality. This deviance from the norm of repressed sexuality due to a societal

expectation of black women's hypersexualization constitutes a wildness that creates Dorcas' authority in her relationship with Joe. He is so infatuated with her that he kills her; no matter, as Dorcas survives through her ability to haunt both Joe and Violet. All three women attempt to survive by developing different ideas of wildness, allowing them to establish authority over stereotypically dominant male figures and cementing the notion of wildness as power.

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