
An Animal Reading of Toni Morrison's *Jazz*: Mirroring, Transforming and Witnessing

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Abstract

This essay approaches Toni Morrison's *Jazz* through the lens of animal studies to examine how both nonhuman agency and human animalization shape the novel's vision of relation. It argues that animal figures are woven into the text's emotional, social, and memorial fabric, revealing how the boundaries between species sustain and unsettle human meaning. The parrot's fractured refrain, "I love you," and the rooftop bird's responsive flight render intimacy as echo and persistence rather than possession, opening a form of relation grounded in vulnerability and repetition. The narrative's focus on Wild and Joe exposes identity as a process negotiated at the threshold of the human and the animal, where language, desire, and social recognition falter. While he recurring red-winged blackbirds serve as witnesses that carry grief into collective memory, suggesting an ethics of remembrance sustained across species. Drawing on Haraway's notions about companion species, Derrida's definition of the animot and Wolfe's redefinition of the human-animal divide, the essay contends that *Jazz* transforms animal presence into a mode of thought: it imagines relation as interspecies and ongoing, where intimacy, identity, and memory endure through shared acts of response and care.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Animal Studies, Donna Haraway, Jacques Derrida

1. Introduction

"I love you. I love you. I love you." Morrison's *Jazz* opens its domestic space with a bird's refrain rather than a human declaration. The parrot's voice, caught between intimacy and echo, frames a novel where animals do not stand at the edges but work within the texture of relation. In *Jazz*, avian and other nonhuman figures test what language can hold, how care survives injury, and how memory circulates when speech falters.

The parrot's fractured declaration invites us to ask how animal figures shape relation in *Jazz*, and scholarship has begun to offer partial answers. Although the symbolic role of animals has not yet taken center stage in Morrison studies, some critics have acknowledged their significance. Armbruster (2005) highlights how Morrison's animals evoke a state "before language," pressing us to consider the fragility of intimacy where speech fails. Eckhard (2011) emphasizes their spatial force, showing how animal presences inscribe estrangement into Harlem's uncanny geography. Kotecki(2023), in a more recent contribution, reads the parrot's pared-down refrain as a fragile medium of memory and forgetting. These perspectives illuminate important facets, but they remain dispersed and limited in scope, circling around isolated species or functions.

What is missing is a framework that can grasp both the agency of nonhuman creatures and the processes by which human figures themselves are rendered animal. This is precisely what animal studies makes possible. As Cary Wolfe reminds us in the introduction to *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, the field's task is not simply to "add animals" to literary analysis but to question how the very category of the human is constructed and policed (Wolfe, 2003, p. ix). From this angle, my study approaches *Jazz* by placing nonhuman agency at the center while also examining the animalization of characters such as Wild, tracing how Morrison stages relation along the unstable boundary between human and animal.

My argument, then, is that Morrison stages animals as more than ornamental motifs: they work as mirrors that register fractured intimacy, as figures that dramatize the instability of identity under the pressure of animalization, and as witnesses whose movements and echoes transform grief into collective memory. These functions complicate readings of *Jazz* that return animals to human allegory, showing instead how they participate directly in the novel's exploration of relation.

To substantiate this claim and delineate how the subsequent analysis proceeds, it is necessary to clarify how the theoretical framework of animal studies is applied in the present study. The discussion unfolds along several intersecting critical lines that guide its reading of *Jazz*. Building on Cary Wolfe and Jacques Derrida, the framework interrogates the porous boundary between the human and the animal, attending to the ways Morrison's narrative unsettles human exceptionalism through acts of mimicry, perception, and naming. At the same time, drawing on Donna Haraway's notion of companion species, it explores how interspecies intimacy and the ethics of co-becoming are transposed into the affective and sonic registers of Violet and Joe's relationship. Meanwhile, informed by posthumanist accounts of animalization from Agamben and subsequent theorists, it situates these encounters within a racialized modernity, where to be marked as "animal" exposes the unstable foundations of the human itself. Through these interwoven perspectives, animal studies operates not merely as a conceptual backdrop but as an analytic method that structures the essay's close readings—from parrots that echo domestic care, to the predatory idioms of desire, to the red-winged birds that bear witness to communal grief. And it is to ask, finally: can intimacy be secured by language alone, can identity stand apart from what eludes it, can memory survive without the echoes of other voices?

2. Animals as Mirrors: From Parrots to Birds Listening to Music

Among the many motifs in *Jazz*, birds occupy a particularly charged symbolic space. More than background details, they serve as mirrors through which the novel renders visible Violet and Joe's fractured intimacy. The shifting presence of parrots, canaries, and finally a fragile rooftop bird charts a progression from silence to tentative healing. By attending to these avian figures, we see how Morrison stages animals as reflective surfaces: they echo unspoken longing, record abandonment, and finally gesture toward the possibility of renewal.

Such animal mirroring, however, is never merely symbolic. It gestures toward what Donna Haraway calls the companion species relation—the entanglement of human and nonhuman lives through acts of care, naming, and response. Yet *Jazz* does not simply exemplify this relation; it reimagines it under conditions where reciprocity has been historically broken. In Morrison's world, the capacity to respond—to love, to name, to listen—emerges not from equality but from fracture. It is in this tension that the novel gives new resonance to Haraway's question: how can relation endure when its grounds have been undone?

Birds first appear in *Jazz* within the private space of Violet and Joe's household, where they fill a silence that has settled into the couple's marriage. Violet, unable to bear children and increasingly estranged from her husband, turns to birds as substitutes for intimacy. Among them, the parrot that repeats "Love you" becomes especially significant:

The parrot, shivering and barely turning his green and blond head, told her each time, 'Love you.' 'Get away,' she told him. 'Go on off somewhere!' The second morning he had. All she saw, down in the cellar well beneath the stoop, was a light yellow feather with a tip of green. (Morrison, 2004, p. 93)

The parrot's mimicry dramatizes Violet's inability to articulate affection. In this sense, the parrot's speech does not secure intimacy but sustains it in fracture, suggesting that affection in *Jazz* is lived through echo rather than declaration. Its mechanical repetition exposes the silence at the core of her relationship with Joe. Her refusal to answer back—never once saying "I love you" in return—becomes emblematic of what she cannot voice in her life. This fractured echo between Violet and the parrot invites a return to Haraway's idea of companion species, where relationality is built not on sameness but on enduring difference. As Haraway argues, "companion species are about significant otherness, and yet they are inseparable in co-evolutionary histories" (Haraway, 2003, p.19). Yet Morrison relocates this interspecies bond into a history where "co-evolution" has never been equal: Violet's silence speaks from within a world where care and domination are entwined. Her affection thus unfolds not through mutuality but through an echo sustained by nonhuman mediation. Violet's silence is not a simple absence of love but a sign of how affective bonds can be sustained, and strained, through nonhuman mediators.

This tension between speech and silence extends to naming, another act through which affection and control become indistinguishable. Violet never gives the bird an individual name, calling it only "my parrot." As Haraway notes, "Naming is always a move of both love and power. The question of who gets to name and who gets to be named is a question of who gets to be a subject and who gets to be an object" (Haraway, 2003, p. 21). Violet's refusal might resist turning the parrot into an object of domination, yet the possessive "my" suggests an emotional projection that binds the bird into the tensions of her marriage. Just as Joe is "my man," the parrot is "my parrot," both figures of intimacy and possession, shadowed by silence.

Joe himself voices this displacement in one of the novel's most telling moments: "Violet takes better care of her parrot than she does me... She don't hardly talk anymore, and I ain't allowed near her" (Morrison, 2004, p. 49). The bird here replaces the

communication Joe longs for. Its presence structures the household's affective rhythm, but only by underscoring the failure of human dialogue. Haraway reminds us that animals "are never passive objects but shapers of human emotional realities" (Haraway, 2003, p.18). In other word, in *Jazz*, this shaping occurs through absence as much as presence: the parrot "shapes" Violet's emotion not by understanding her, but by returning her words emptied of intent. The animal's agency thus becomes spectral, a mirror that speaks only by repeating what has already been lost. The parrot's mimicry, then, becomes a fragile architecture of love, one that both sustains Violet and indicts her silence.

The collapse of this fragile arrangement comes after Violet's violent outburst at Dorcas's funeral and her subsequent expulsion from church. In response, she releases the birds into the winter air. When Violet releases the birds, the novel enacts the failure implicit in Haraway's ethics of care: the moment when relation collapses back into possession and abandonment. Haraway noted that "The risk of abandonment when human affection wanes, when people's convenience takes precedence—or when the pet fails to deliver on the fantasy of love" (2003, p. 39). Morrison dramatizes this very risk when Violet casts the birds out, severing the emotional bond that had temporarily carried her grief. The abandoned parrot, once trained to say "Love you," becomes emblematic of a failed fantasy of consolation, a reminder that love cannot be secured by surrogates. And yet, she refuses to leave Violet and Joe in abandonment. The final rooftop scene reopens Haraway's concept of care, but strips it of domestic enclosure. When the couple begins to reconcile, they purchase a new, fragile bird: "They took the cage to the roof one Saturday, where the wind blew and so did the musicians in shirts billowing out behind them" (Morrison, 2004, p. 224).

Unlike the earlier parrots and canaries, this bird is neither rare nor expected to perform speech. Instead, it becomes part of a scene of shared experience—brought into the open air, surrounded by music and community. The movement from enclosed, mirror-lined rooms to the rooftop marks a shift in the meaning of companionship. The bird no longer functions as a surrogate for speech but participates in a communal rhythm that Violet and Joe rejoin, which indicates that Morrison transforms this mutual existence into attunement rather than balance. Care no longer protects an owned other but opens toward a shared rhythm—human, animal, and urban—where response replaces control.

In this transformation, Morrison reframes the mirror-function of animals. The earlier parrot reflected estrangement, echoing love words unreturned. The new bird reflects healing, not by voicing human emotion, but by being present within a shared soundscape. As Haraway observes, care "is not just about protection but about how care shapes mutual existence" (Morrison, 2004, p. 18). Through these birds, *Jazz* shows how silence can give way to sound, how isolation can open into community, and how animals, as mirrors, refract the fragile movements of human love.

Birds in *Jazz* thus function as reflective surfaces: they expose what Violet and Joe cannot yet say, mark the pain of abandonment, and accompany the couple's gradual return to shared life. From parrot to rooftop bird, Morrison stages an arc from substitution to mutual attunement. This dynamic of animal mirroring prepares the way for the next chapter, where animality itself, rather than animals as companions, structures identity through hunting narratives and the deconstruction of self.

3. Animals and the Making of the Human: Pursuit, Boundary, and Becoming

The fragile harmony traced through sound and gesture in *Jazz* finds its darker echo in the logic of pursuit. What begins as the desire to touch or to understand often turns into an act of following, of measuring distance rather than presence. Morrison's language of closeness is shadowed by the grammar of hunting: love moves through the same syntax as capture. Here, animality is not a static boundary between species but a relation that structures both intimacy and domination—how one approaches another, and how a society decides who counts as human.

In *Jazz*, animality is part of how people act and how they are acted upon. Hunting images shape scenes of desire and harm, and those marked as "wild" are pushed toward the edge of communal life. Read together, these strands show intimate life entangled with public power: one learns to approach a beloved as something to be tracked and taken, even as the racial order answers by animalizing the very subjects it refuses to recognize.

3.1. Hunting Narratives and the Deconstruction of Self

Joe Trace is formed by pursuit. As a boy he learns to look for signs of his mother in the woods; as a man he follows Dorcas through crowds until the rent-party gunshot brings pursuit to its worst end. Hunter's woodcraft makes the point explicit: "many times the signal Hunter relied on most—redwings, those blue-black birds with the bolt of red on their wings... seeing four or more of them always meant she was close" (Morrison, 2004, p. 197). The forest instructs Joe to measure nearness by signs rather than speech; recognition becomes tracking, and his very name, Trace, keeps him in the posture of following.

That training crosses into adult desire. Joe's approach to Dorcas repeats the movement after, the closing of distance, the act of "taking." Derrida's phrase about the "boundless wrong that man does to animals" (Derrida, 2008, p. 89) designates not a single moral transgression but an entire structure of perception. For Derrida, the wrong originates when the human secures knowledge and mastery by naming and appropriating the animal other. To know becomes to take, and the act of understanding is inseparable from possession. Joe Trace has internalized this grammar of relation. As a boy, he learns to recognize his lost mother by following signs rather than by hearing words; his earliest form of intimacy is tracking. When this mode of knowing persists into adulthood, desire reproduces the same logic: pursuit becomes proof of attachment, and capture appears as the fulfillment of love. In *Jazz*, Morrison transforms Derrida's "boundless wrong" into a psychic and linguistic condition—love and harm unfold through the same syntax of pursuit, where to reach the other is already to risk enclosing it. At the same time, the novel refuses to leave Joe fixed within the role of hunter. The same structure that enables his pursuit of Dorcas turns against

him within the social field. As a Black man in 1920s Harlem, he becomes the object of another kind of chase—policed, categorized, and disciplined by institutions that reproduce the logic of pursuit on a collective scale. In this reversal, Morrison extends Derrida's notion of the "boundless wrong" from the human-animal relation to the racialized order of modernity. The wrong persists not only in how one seeks the other, but also in how entire systems seek to define and contain human life.

The logic of pursuit that structures Joe's intimacy does not end with him; it reappears as a linguistic reflex within the social world that defines Violet. When agency shifts from the body to the voice, the grammar of taking becomes a grammar of naming. Morrison thus exposes the continuity between Derrida's "boundless wrong" and the communal act of speech that fixes a subject within its story. Violet's public act at Dorcas's funeral belongs in the same field of vision. When she slashes the corpse, neighborhood talk fixes her with a name that reduces grief to impulse. The nickname "Violent" works like a small machine of animalization, turning a bereaved woman into a spectacle of instinct; the body is managed by the story told about it. Yet *Jazz* does not leave Violet inside that label. Through work, uneasy visits, and a slow refusal of silence, she begins to move otherwise. The hunting habit, as image and social reflex, bears down on more than one figure; identity is unmade in that pressure, even as the narrative opens room to resist being written by it.

3.2. *Wild as an Animalized Bare Life*

Wild shows what animalization does at the level of status. She is remembered living on literal and symbolic margins—unnamed, undocumented, largely silent; people say she roams the woods, cannot be made to settle, and cannot be integrated into civic life. The name itself performs the work: "They called her Wild because she couldn't be tamed." The sentence fixes her at the border of the human, circulated as rumor and image rather than received as voice.

Agamben's account of the "anthropological machine" gives the mechanism a precise outline: humanism defines "the human" by excluding "the animal," not to leave it outside, but to trap it in a zone of indistinction that polices the border of the polis (Agamben, 1998, p. 37); the human-animal split thus functions as a political strategy of exclusion (Agamben, 1998, p. 79). *Jazz* stages this capture through the terms in which Wild is remembered—"feared, not grieved," "remembered, but not heard"; granted presence as body and noise, withheld logos and claim. In Afro-pessimist language, this approaches social death: visible yet unintelligible, alive yet outside the community of rights and responsibilities.

The novel also records refusal. Wild slips hunters, eludes gossip, and will not be found even by the son who traces her. The brief forest meeting intensifies the pressure: rather than romanticize the wilderness, the scene shows civic and species borders already unstable at the moment of attempted recognition. Haraway's reminder about entanglement helps register what the scene exposes, not a truth about "what Wild really is," but the way categories have been enforced against her (Haraway, 2003, p. 38). For Joe, the cost is intimate: selfhood suspended on glimpses and fragments. For the narrative, the cost is ethical: a community that can only say "Wild" depends on the category of the animal to hold itself together.

The bird sign that once enabled pursuit now bends toward aftermath. From Joe's window, "darkness taking the shape of a shoulder with a thin line of blood... slowly, slowly it forms itself into a bird with a blade of red on the wing" (Morrison, 2004, p. 225). The image returns the redwing to the city as a figure that registers harm rather than tracks a target.

In *Jazz*, hunting is not only an image; it is a habit that converts closeness into pursuit and "taking," while animalization expels those a community refuses to acknowledge. Joe's hunter/prey doubleness and Wild's life at the threshold belong to the same pattern. What remains is witness. The red-winged blackbirds recur not just as signs for the hunt but as presences that hold memory and open the first gestures toward repair—work taken up in the next chapter.

4. Red Wings: Animals as Witnesses

In the final sections of *Jazz*, the presence of red-winged blackbirds signals a pivotal shift in the symbolic role animals play—from mirrors of human emotion to silent witnesses of trauma, memory, and the possibility of healing. These birds, flitting across the narrative at key junctures, bridge the boundaries between nature and human suffering, suggesting that the environment itself is complicit in, and responsive to, the emotional landscapes Morrison portrays.

The redwings first appear in connection with Hunter's attempts to locate Joe's mother, Wild: "many times the signal Hunter relied on most—redwings, those blue-black birds with the bolt of red on their wings. Something about her they liked, said Hunter, and seeing four or more of them always meant she was close" (Morrison, 2004, p. 197). These birds function not simply as background elements, but as affective markers that respond to Wild's presence. That Hunter reads the movements of redwings to locate her emphasizes how her existence—marginal, half-mythic, and ungrievable—is mediated through the attentiveness of animals. The redwings see what society refuses to see. They register the trace of a woman who has lived outside legibility, and thus act as natural agents of memory. In this role, they enact a kind of nonhuman testimony: tracing Wild's presence through movement, vibration, and visibility rather than language.

Their symbolic function deepens as the novel nears its end. Joe, after killing Dorcas, is caught in a spiral of guilt and haunted memory. In a moment of blurred vision and affective intensity, he sees a redwing in the shape of Dorcas: "his head turned toward the window, he sees through the glass darkness taking the shape of a shoulder with a thin line of blood. Slowly, slowly it forms itself into a bird with a blade of red on the wing" (Morrison, 2004, p. 225). In this moment, the symbolic conflation between animal and human emerges not as metaphor but as transformation. Dorcas is not merely represented by the bird; she is transfigured through it. Her blood, her absence, her silence all take flight in the form of the redwing, which returns as a carrier of unresolved grief.

This alignment of the avian figure with grief draws attention to the idea that witnessing need not be verbal to be valid. Derrida's concept of the animot—a neologism fusing the French words animaux (animals) and mot (word)—illuminates this process. For Derrida, animals disrupt the linguistic boundary between the sayable and the ineffable; they “speak” not through vocabulary, but through embodied presence, interruption, and visibility (Derrida, 2008, pp. 39, 48). In this sense, the redwings are animots: they do not symbolize Joe's remorse or Wild's invisibility, but rather mark the space where these emotions fester without articulation. They refuse to resolve trauma—they only testify to its ongoing existence.

That this testimony takes place across species lines underscores the novel's ecological logic. The redwings are not isolated symbols, but parts of a dense network of affect and matter. The movements of birds—who they respond to, where they fly, how they appear—reveal an entangled landscape where human and nonhuman life are deeply co-constituted. As Joe's vision demonstrates, the line between his inner world and the animal world is not fixed. The bird is not outside his guilt, but shaped by it. The sight of its “blade of red” marks both Dorcas's blood and the ecological embedding of emotion into the world. As Morton writes, “the ecological thought... is about interconnectedness, not just between ourselves and other humans but between ourselves and nonhumans” (Morton, 2010, p. 8). The redwing becomes an agent within this interconnection, carrying Joe's pain into the shared atmosphere and registering its presence without requiring translation.

The significance of redwings is deepened by their mythic genealogy. In Native American lore, the red-winged blackbird acquired its crimson stripe by flying too close to danger, trying to warn others of an oncoming fire, it was singed in the act of care. Morrison's invocation of this image when Joe recalls Dorcas's wounded shoulder suggests that her pain, like the redwing's, marks an act of emotional exposure. She becomes, retroactively, the one who tried to love, who tried to speak, and was punished for it. As she reappears in Joe's perception not as a vengeful spirit, but as a wounded bird, Morrison situates mourning within a trans-species register. Dorcas becomes part of the ecosystem of loss.

The redwings' final function is not catharsis but continuity. They do not resolve the novel's grief, but persist as quiet observers. Their appearances signal a cosmology in which animals are not outside human drama but deeply imbricated in its unfolding. As Violet and Joe inch toward emotional repair, the birds hover nearby—not as omens, but as companions to their pain. In doing so, *Jazz* reimagines narrative empathy. The redwings neither speak nor sing, but in their flight they bear witness to what remains unspeakable. Through them, Morrison constructs an interspecies ethics in which animals, too, remember.

5. Conclusion

In *Jazz*, animals are not symbolic ornaments but essential figures that structure emotional experience, complicate human identity, and sustain memory in the face of rupture. The birds in Violet and Joe's household trace a passage from substitution to mutuality: first reflecting emotional absence, then becoming fragile companions in the couple's tentative recovery. Their shifting role reveals how care can emerge not through mastery or control but through shared vulnerability and presence.

Joe's entanglement with the logic of hunting exposes how desire and violence are mutually encoded in a racialized urban order. His pursuit of Dorcas is not merely personal but shaped by a system that renders Black men alternately hyper-visible and disposable. The language of animality—of predator and prey—marks Joe's disintegration but also points toward the limits of selfhood defined through dominance. Wild, in contrast, exists on the very edge of legibility: animalized, uncontained, and unyielding to narrative resolution. Her endurance outside the boundaries of the knowable human unsettles the frameworks through which identity is secured. The red-winged blackbird gathers these threads in its final appearances. First a signal in the woods, later a silent witness to harm, the bird absorbs what cannot be spoken and insists on attention where language falters. Its reappearance folds mourning into memory, offering not closure but continuity—remembrance that resists forgetting. In this, Morrison does not redeem suffering but asks what it means to remain with it, to witness rather than resolve.

Through animals, *Jazz* reimagines relation not as hierarchy or analogy, but as proximity across difference. The novel refuses to isolate the human from its others, insisting instead on a shared world where intimacy, grief, and survival move through human and nonhuman bodies alike. In bearing this out, Morrison not only renders animals visible but asks her readers to recognize the forms of knowledge, resistance, and care that live with them.

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