



Voices  
from the  
Gaps

# *Playing in the Dark* by Toni Morrison

*I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World — without the mandate for conquest.*

So begins Toni Morrison's essay, *Playing in the Dark*. Morrison's map is divided into three sections. The first, "Black Matters," begins with criticism of the American literary canon -- or, as Morrison calls it, "a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary critics and historians and circulated as "knowledge" (4). Her criticism is not the overwhelming presence of white literature included in the Canon but the lack of African and African-American literature. The "Africanist" presence, as she calls it, has been vital to the cultural and political development of this country, and the characteristics of American literature (individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation) have been a response to this presence. She discusses how many of the black characters in American literature were ornamental, simply present "for a bout of jungle fever, or to provide local color . . . to supply a needed moral gesture, humor or a bit of pathos" (15). She also emphasizes that much of the traditional literature she is talking about was not written for black people: "no more than Uncle Tom's Cabin," she writes, "was for Uncle Tom to be read or persuaded by" (16).

In the second portion, "Romancing the Shadow," Morrison discusses the New World as a place of opportunity, a place where an individual can make a fresh start, a place where freedom is embraced and celebrated -- a place which also accepted for a period the repression and bounding of the hands of many of its inhabitants. She discusses these contradictions and the understanding of "Americanness" by immigrants as being in opposition to blackness, stating that the slave status and social status of blacks in the early years of this country made them "Non-Americans" and helped in the development of a literary canon that differed from the European canon primarily because it had a non-white presence mixed into it, a concept that appealed to white American writers because, in the spirit of freedom and individuality, it was different from the canon of their old world.



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The third portion of the book, “Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks,” brings the essay nicely to a close by tracing the development of “American Africanism” from its purpose of establishing hierarchy to its “lush and fully blossomed existence in the rhetoric of dread and desire” (Morrison, 64). She discusses several linguistic strategies normally used to engage what she calls “the serious consequences of blacks” (Morrison, 67): economy of stereotype, metonymic displacement, metaphysical condensation, fetishization, dehistoricizing allegory and patterns of explosive, disjointed and repetitive language. This section of the book is perhaps one of the most difficult; the reader must wade through the text with a dictionary in some places, but the concepts are very interesting and Morrison makes some appealing observations about Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not*, strengthening her arguments in the first section of the book. Though it may become slightly confusing at points to the reader who is not familiar with the background or the stories which she references, Morrison’s map is overall drawn very well, in latitudes and longitudes few readers have encountered. This book/essay is not an easy read, not something one would sit down with after work, but *Playing in the Dark* is highly recommended for anyone who has an ambitious or academic interest in Morrison’s take on the African and African-American impact on the historical American literary canon.