

Word-Work

VOLUME XI

NUMBER I

Bibliography Issue

SPRING 2006

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TONI MORRISON SOCIETY



Pictured above: Sue Stutman (left), Chair of the Bench by the Road Project, and Carolyn Denard (right), Board Chair, unveil Professor Morrison's Biography Bench, the Society's 75th Birthday Gift.

Society Launches Bench by the Road Project in Honor of Toni Morrison's 75th Birthday

In honor of Toni Morrison's 75th Birthday, the Toni Morrison Society launched the latest in its series of outreach initiatives: **The Bench by the Road Project**. To commemorate the occasion, the Society held a reception at Princeton University and presented Professor Morrison a "Biography Bench" that captures moments in her personal and professional life from Lorain to Princeton. The bench, in beautiful hues of blue and peach, is called "Life Braids" and was designed and painted by students with the award-winning Van-Go Mobile Arts outreach organization in Lawrence, Kansas (www.van-go.org). An inscription from the Society on the back of the bench reads: "A Bench by the Road: Presented to Toni Morrison on the Occasion of Her 75th Birthday by the Toni Morrison Society."

For more on the Bench by the Road Project and the 75th Birthday Celebration, please see pages 4 and 5.

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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TONI MORRISON SOCIETY
*is published by the Toni Morrison Society twice a year at
Northern Kentucky University*

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BELOVED

receives high honor

The New York Times Book Review has named Morrison's Pulitzer-Prize-winning 1987 novel, *Beloved*, "the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years." The newspaper came to this decision after Sam Tanenhaus, the Book Review editor, solicited opinions from notable literary leaders, including writers, editors, and critics; 125 responded out of approximately 200 asked. As A.O. Scott wrote in the *Book Review* on 21 May 2006, "Morrison's novel has inserted itself into the American canon more completely than any of its potential rivals. With remarkable speed, *Beloved* has, less than 20 years after its publication, become a staple of the college literary curriculum, which is to say a classic."

TMS committees

- ALA Planning
- Bench by the Road Project
- Biennial Conferences
- Book Prize
- Bylaws
- Festschrift
- Fundraising
- Young Readers' Circle

Interested? If so, please write to tmsociety@aol.com and indicate which committee you'd like in the subject line.

Cover photo by John Jameson, Princeton University.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear *TMS Members* and Friends,



We are extremely pleased to be returning to you in “hard copy” and have much to report as we resume publication in this thirteenth year of our existence as an official and now veteran author society. We have experienced growing pains not atypical of a decade of growth, creating an excellent opportunity for us to look backwards and forwards.

I'd like first to congratulate

Lucie Fultz, winner of the 2005 Toni Morrison Society Book Award for her penetrating study, *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference* (Illinois, 2003). Fultz thinks not only of the works themselves but also about the readers who come to a Morrison text in this important study. She tackles the issue of Morrison's complexity in a fresh and compelling way that changes the way we look at the relationship between the reader and the writers.

I am especially happy to announce the appointment of Kristine Yohe, as our new newsletter editor and TMS bibliographer. A professor in the Literature and Language Department at Northern Kentucky University, Kristine is a long-time Morrison scholar and TMS member whose commitment to bringing Morrison scholars and readers into a common community has been inspiring to us all. She will be ably supported by her university, department, and a faculty/staff who already proved themselves indispensable when NKU hosted our Fourth Biennial Conference, “Toni Morrison and Sites of Memory,” in Cincinnati July 14-17, 2005.

The Fourth Biennial was held in conjunction with the Cincinnati Opera premiere of *Margaret Garner*. The 2005 conference became for us a shining example of the potential that exists in collaborative efforts as well as in outreach, particularly our Language Matters service initiative for teachers and educators. Our conferences bring people together from around the world to critically engage the works of Toni Morrison, but we also have come to recognize the premiere role we must play in expanding our service initiatives as a complement to our critical and scholarly mission. We are fortunate and grateful that the National Endowment for the Humanities has provided support for us to carry out much of this educational work. Morrison scholars, teachers, and readers at all levels are now finding a home in the Toni Morrison Society, and it is indeed “home,” that place that will allow us to better focus on our expanding programs, to which we are now paying more attention.

2005-06 has been a banner year above all. The appearance of *Margaret Garner* in four cities—Detroit in May 2005, Cincinnati in July 2005, Philadelphia in February 2006,

and most recently Charlotte in April—has not only brought renewed interest in the story of Margaret Garner, from which the Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *Beloved* was inspired, but has also made clear the impact, power, and necessity of sharing the *untold* American stories with larger audiences. Moreover, two disasters—9/11 and almost five years later, Katrina—have given the issues in racial and world history a disturbing new relevance. All of this makes us, we believe, more appreciative of what and who we are as a nation, promotes a new sense of our shared experience of the past, inspires a greater search for understanding of and respect for why and how we are different, and offers stronger hope as we continually transform for the future.

It is within this context, both as a way of expanding Morrison's work that derives from memories of the past as they live in the present, and consolidating our purpose as an organization, that we have inaugurated our newest effort, the *Bench by the Road Project*. TMS members presented a first bench to Toni Morrison herself on the occasion of her 75th birthday. Through this public history project, we do not want simply to commemorate the well-known places but to mark many of the unknown but important sites in our history, many of which have been highlighted in Morrison's novels. In other words, we want to focus on “learning about the past,” as the benches themselves create new “sites of memory.” A major underlying goal is to connect this kind of collective display to creativity and tradition and to use it as the basis for promoting social harmony and advancing human knowledge.

TMS goes international this fall with a special exhibit at the Louvre, “A Foreigner's Home,” 9-29 November 2006, curated by Professor Morrison. We invite TMS members to journey to Paris to participate in the opening of the exhibit, as well as a number of additional scheduled events associated with it. Please watch our website, www.tonimorrisonociety.org, for regular updates and a final schedule.

Thank you for your support these thirteen years, and for recognizing the value of what we do as a society. We encourage you to become even more active participants on one or more committees, a list of which appears on page 2. Your suggestions are welcome, especially for *ideas and donors* for the *Bench by the Road Project*. Be sure to pass along the exciting news about the society and send all interested persons to our website where they can take out a membership today—or freely duplicate and share the information on the back cover.

We hope you were able to join us at ALA in San Francisco 25-28 May 2006, where yet another sign of our growth was the two panels that were planned and the teaching forum, now an annual event, this year guided by Durthy Washington, who teaches in the English Department at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. We also had a brief business meeting to present a new slate of officers for your approval to begin their term in July 2007. Please see back cover for information about ALA 2007.

If you weren't able to make it to San Francisco, then we will meet in Paris in November. Please watch the website for updates of the November event.

Sincerely,

MARYEMMA GRAHAM
University of Kansas
TMS President



75th birthday celebration for TONI MORRISON

by Kristine Yohe, Northern Kentucky University

To celebrate Toni Morrison's 75th birthday, about 60 people gathered at

Princeton University on Friday evening, 17 February 2006, for a reception given by the Toni Morrison Society. Attendees came from nearby and from far away, from New York City, Providence, RI, Washington, DC, Cincinnati, OH, Durham, NC, Philadelphia, PA, and beyond. TMS members, friends, and supporters came together to honor the significant milestone for Professor Morrison, who was born 18 February 1931.

The champagne reception was held in the Chancellor Green Rotunda, a beautifully restored building at Princeton. Here, everyone joined Professor Morrison in a festive, candle-lit setting, where, with jazz playing in the background, she was toasted, presented with a gift, and honored with the launch of an exciting new project.

TMS president Maryemma Graham, of the University of Kansas, welcomed the group and thanked Professor Morrison for her attendance and participation. Past TMS president, Marilyn Sanders Mobley, of George Mason University, made the acknowledgements, thanking in particular Van Go Mobile Arts, Paper Tiger Catering, Prestige Printing, Rene Boatman, the Princeton Music Program, and the members of the Toni Morrison Society.

Mobley also announced a generous first sponsorship for the Bench by the Road Project from Linda Schwartzstein, her colleague at George Mason University and a Princeton parent. Schwartzstein told Mobley that she was making a donation to help the TMS "get on the road" with this project.

Founder and Board chair Carolyn Denard, of Brown University, and Suzanne Stutman, of Pennsylvania State University-Albion, Board member and co-chair of the Bench by the Road Project, described the project's genesis and goals. The Society plans to create an "outdoor museum" by placing commemorative wrought iron benches at sites around the country important to African American history and to Morrison's writing.

Graham explained that the first bench, created as a gift for Professor Morrison, was commissioned from Van Go Mobile Arts, Inc., an arts-based social service agency in Lawrence, Kansas, for young people in crisis. Two artists, Melanie Bolden and Kali

Detherage, working with Van-Go instructor Cathy Ledeker, built and painted the wooden bench, which took six weeks to complete.

Denard and Stutman, joined by Professor Morrison, unveiled the bench as Morrison exclaimed with delight. Members of the crowd gathered closely around the colorful bench to study its many images of Professor Morrison's life and work. With detailed renderings of photographs of her children, her childhood, her receipt of the Nobel Prize and others, the bench also depicts each of her novels, as well as several of her other works, including the recent *Margaret Garner* libretto.

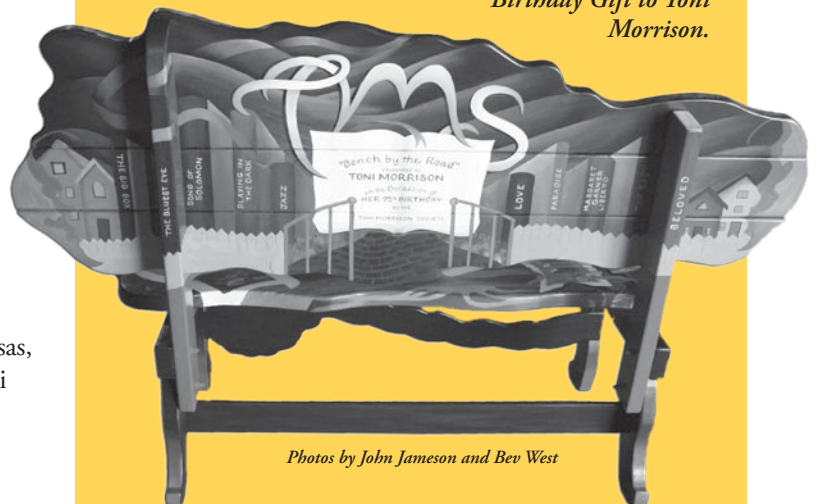
Several members of the group made enthusiastic toasts to Professor Morrison, including Eleanor Traylor of Howard University, Fritz Cammerzell and Cornel West of Princeton, and Frazier O'Leary of Cardozo High School. Denard led the group in a special Toni Morrison Society toast. We all sang "Happy Birthday" to Professor Morrison as she blew out the candles on her cake.

To close the program, Professor Morrison spoke to the group, thanking everyone assembled and expressing her pleasure in the significance of the Bench by the Road Project. She said that she was especially taken with the creativity and originality of the project idea.

Over the next five years, the TMS plans to mark ten or more sites by placing a specially created bench, each with an inscription detailing its importance. The Society will be getting the Bench by the Road Project fully underway in coming months, and members are welcome to suggest potential locations and possible sponsors.

Please see the article on page 5 for details.

The back of "The Bench by the Road," TMS's 75th Birthday Gift to Toni Morrison.



Photos by John Jameson and Bev West

The Bench by the Road Project

by Carolyn Denard, Brown University


At the TMS Board Meeting in October 2005, the Board approved the launch of The Toni Morrison Society's latest outreach initiative: The Bench by the Road Project. This project is a community outreach initiative that grows out of Professor Morrison's remarks about *Beloved* in a 1989 interview: "There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves... there is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower, there's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or better still on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn't exist... the book had to" (*The World*, 1989).

Because the mission of the Toni Morrison Society has been to serve as a place where scholars and readers could, through their engagement with Morrison's novels, remember not only slavery but also many of the forgotten moments in African American history, the Society chose as its motto "a bench by the road." The Bench By the Road Project extends the Society's mission. While there have been several notable African American museums built in American cities since 1989, the goal of the Bench By the Road Project is to create an outdoor museum that will mark important locations in African American history both in the United States and abroad.

Among the places chosen will be those that have special significance in Morrison's works—5th Avenue in Harlem where the Silent Parade, protesting the East St. Louis Riots, was held in 1917; the site of Emmett Till's death in Mississippi; train stations in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, where thousands began their journeys in the Great Migration; an all-Black town in Oklahoma—as well as other unmarked sites that have historical meaning for African Americans.

Over the next five years, the Society plans to mark ten of these sites by placing a specially crafted bench, each with an inscription detailing its significance. Corporate donors will be invited to join the Society in this effort by sponsoring a bench at an appropriate site. The Society hopes that the Bench by the Road Project will serve not only to acknowledge Toni Morrison's attention to these historic sites and their meanings in her novels but also to mark their locations, inspire dialogue, and engage them as part of our public memory.

On the occasion of Toni Morrison's 75th Birthday, the Society made its public launch of the Bench By the Road initiative as a tribute to Professor Morrison's vision. The Society also presented to Professor Morrison, in honor of her birthday and as a symbol of the Project, a "biography bench." This bench, called "Life Braids," was painted by two students, Melanie Bolden (age 18) and Kali Detherage (age 19), who are part of the Van Go Mobile Arts Program in Lawrence, Kansas. Van Go Mobile Arts has completed several commissioned art benches



for organizations and individuals, most notably one for poet Rita Dove, "Dove Tales," in 2004. Van Go Mobile Arts serves at-risk children ages 8 to 21 in the Lawrence area by providing jobs and training in the arts. Van Go Mobile Arts recently received a "Coming Up Taller Award" from the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities for their arts program, JAMS (Jobs in the Arts Make Sense), which provide job opportunities in the arts for at-risk children.

Painted in bold acrylic blues, pinks, greens and lavenders, the biography bench chronicles Morrison's life from Lorain as a young girl to her acceptance of the Nobel Prize in 1993. The bench includes images of her childhood, of Lorain, of Howard, of her children, the *Black Book*, and the Nobel Prize ceremony. The back of the bench, taking the shape of a bookshelf, includes painted book spines of all of her published works. The bottom rail of the bench is painted as a long grey, signature braid. In a beautiful ceremony in the Chancellor Green Rotunda at Princeton on Friday evening, February 17th, approximately 60 Society members and guests witnessed the unveiling of the biography bench and the launch of the Bench by the Road Project.

Professor Morrison was thrilled with the Bench By the Road Project. It brings her work "full circle", she says: "It's about my work, but it also takes the work back to the community and commemorates our history... And they're also comfortable and accessible—people can sit down on the benches. I like everything about this Project."

Board Member and former Society President Marilyn Sanders Mobley, Associate Provost for Academic Programs at George Mason University, announced the first contribution to the Bench by the Road Project from her colleague at George Mason, Linda Schwartzstein, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. Schwartzstein, a Princeton parent and a great admirer of Morrison's novels and of the work of the Toni Morrison Society, was pleased to make this contribution in her daughter's honor, and to help us, as she says fondly, to get "on the road with this project." The Society has also received a Program Officer's Grant for \$1000 from the Kellogg Foundation to help launch the Project.

The Bench By the Road Committee, chaired by board member Suzanne Stutman of Pennsylvania State University-Albion, will begin this summer to invite suggestions from Society members regarding sites and to move ahead more broadly to raise funds for the Project. The Society hopes to place ten benches over the next five years. If you would like to serve on the Bench By the Road Committee or make a financial contribution to the project, please contact Sue Stutman (sxs9@psu.edu) or the Society office (tmsociety@aol.com).

A TRIBUTE TO TMS
FOUNDING ADVISORY
BOARD MEMBER:

Dr. Nellie Y. McKay

by Marilyn Sanders Mobley
George Mason University

Dr. Nellie Y. McKay, the Bascom Professor of English and Afro-American Studies and an affiliate member of the faculty in Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, died on January 22, 2006. In the months since her passing, there have been numerous tributes to her, including a day-long symposium that her campus hosted in April.

Those of us in the Toni Morrison Society know her fondly as one of the intellectual midwives, not only of our Society, but also of serious critical scholarship on Toni Morrison.

It is only fitting, therefore, that we honor the multiple ways Nellie McKay contributed to the work we have done to introduce, develop, and sustain an ongoing commitment to scholarship on the work of Toni Morrison.

As a member of our advisory board, Dr. McKay was always a phone call or e-mail away. In fact, during the early days of planning the Toni Morrison 70th birthday tribute, it was Nellie McKay who recommended that I contact fellow advisory board member Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to assist with securing the New York Public Library as the site for that grand celebration. The subsequent phone call to "Skip" Gates was the turning point in our planning for what is now universally regarded as one of the highlights of the Society's work.

Throughout my term as president, telephone conversations with Nellie about TMS business always inevitably turned to discussions of our work, our personal and professional lives, and the challenges we face in academe to both pursue our scholarship and to build communities that would sustain us as Black women. I was grateful for the ways in which our time together always became moments of intellectual reciprocity and mutual encouragement. More than anything, however, those conversations were reminders that I had a sister scholar and colleague in her who valued our work, who was knowledgeable about the field, and who was committed to nurturing us and the next generation of scholars.

The tribute that follows will appear with several others in an upcoming issue of the African American Review.

Nellie Tree Reflections: *The Best Tribute to Her Memory*

When I first met Nellie Y. McKay at an MLA conference in 1988, I recall being honored to meet her. Her scholarship on Jean Toomer had already helped me teach the Harlem Renaissance, so it was an honor to be welcomed into the community of Black women scholars by one of her stature. By the time I planned one of the first full-day symposia on the work of Toni Morrison back in 1994 at George Mason University, it was Nellie McKay, the editor of *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (1988), who was my choice for keynote speaker.

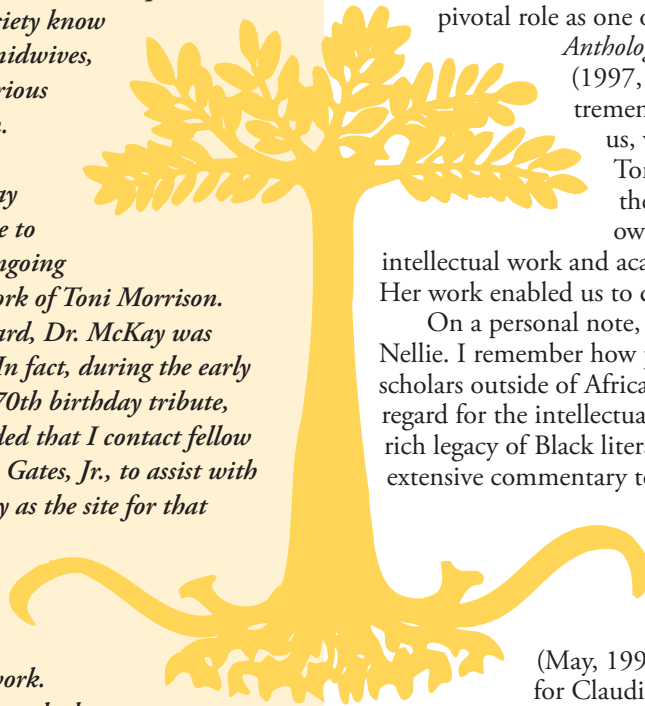
Over the years, Nellie and I would call on one another periodically for various projects. When she asked me to contribute to the MLA volume she and Kathryn Earle were doing, *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison* (1997), I was honored to receive an invitation. Her pivotal role as one of the general editors of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997, 2004) had already won her tremendous critical acclaim. Indeed, all of us, whether Morrison scholars in the Toni Morrison Society or scholars of the literature of the African diaspora, owe a tremendous debt to the intellectual work and academic leadership of Nellie McKay. Her work enabled us to do ours.

On a personal note, I have three particular memories of Nellie. I remember how passionately she lamented that some scholars outside of African American Studies had so little regard for the intellectual rigor required to do justice to the rich legacy of Black literary and cultural research. Her more extensive commentary to this effect became the subject of a *PMLA* essay, "Naming the Problem That Led to the Question 'Who Shall Teach African American Literature?'; Or, Are We Ready to Disband the Wheatley Court?"

(May, 1998). Second, at the memorial service for Claudia Tate, I recall warmly squeezing

Nellie's hand several times, aware that at one point she had referred to herself and Claudia as a "sorority of two," describing their graduate school years of difficult isolation as Black women at Harvard. Most of all, I remember her confessing a few years ago that she was not likely to write another book, but would devote her efforts to establishing a center for Lorraine Hansberry, something she adamantly believed was way past due. When I hold the books that bear her name in my hands, including *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook* (1999), I sing a quiet praisesong in tribute to the productivity she achieved, in the midst of mentoring, serving on committees, and being available for so many so often.

On the first day of class in my Toni Morrison course this semester, I began by telling my students that scholars around the country were acknowledging the debt we all owe to Nellie McKay for her intellectual labor, profound commitment and unwavering support. I know her fearless intellect and



courageous spirit will be with us always. I count it a blessing to have known her. The best tribute we can pay to her is to inspire our students and the next generation of scholars to do their best work and not get weary because our beloved sister scholar Nellie McKay is counting on us to treasure the work and pass it on.

Note: The Nellie Tree refers to the deep roots and multiple branches of influence that Nellie McKay produced throughout her life and work as a teacher, scholar, citizen and friend. When she became ill, many of her colleagues, students, and friends established their own form of “hospice” that they affectionately

called “the Nellie Tree,” according to Dr. Kimberly Blockett, Assistant Professor of English at Pennsylvania State University at Delaware County, who put out the call for reflections. As a metaphor for the network of caregivers who provided “critical support as she battled her illness,” Dr. Blockett viewed the collection of reflections as a way to turn “loss and struggle into rebirth and possibility.” *The African American Review* will publish these reflections in a late-June issue of the journal dedicated to the memory of Nellie McKay.

Biography of Dr. Nellie McKay

Nellie Yvonne McKay was a pioneer and distinguished scholar in the field of African American studies, who secured a place for Black women’s literary studies over the course of her career in the academy. She was the Bascom Professor of English and the Evjue Professor of African American Literature at UW-Madison, and one of the first scholars to bring serious critical attention to the work of Toni Morrison. A resident of Madison, Wisconsin, she died of cancer on January 22, 2006.

A native of New York City and the daughter of immigrants from Jamaica in the West Indies, Professor McKay earned a B.A. with honors in English from Queens College in 1969, an M.A. in English and American Literature from Harvard University in 1971, and a Ph.D. in English from Harvard in 1977. She taught at Simmons College in Boston from 1972 to 1978 before joining the faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1978. Though she was invited to chair the Afro-American studies department at Harvard, she turned it down and recommended Henry Louis Gates, Jr., instead, who accepted the position and who has enjoyed success in that role. McKay served as chair of Afro-American Studies at UW-Madison from 1993 to 1996. The University of Michigan bestowed on her an honorary degree in 2002.

She was best known as the co-editor with Gates of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, first published in 1988 and for being one of the first scholars to bring serious critical attention to the work of Toni Morrison. *The Norton Anthology*, published in a second edition in 2004, has become a standard text in African American literature courses, has a large general public readership, and has sold over 200,000 copies. Her other books include *Jean Toomer, Artist: A Study of His Literary Life and Work, 1894-1936* (UNC, 1984); *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (G.K. Hall, 1988); *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison* (MLA, 1997; co-editor Kathryn Earle); *Toni Morrison’s ‘Beloved’: A Casebook* (Oxford, 1999); and *Harriet Jacobs: ‘Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl’* (Norton, 2001; co-editor Frances Foster). Her 1998 PMLA article, “Who Shall Teach African American Literature?” sparked a long overdue dialogue in the field of African American literature about increasing the numbers in the Black PhD pipeline, about encouraging white graduate students to study Black literature, and about ensuring the requisite training for white scholars who would undertake scholarship and teaching in Black literature. Near the time of her death, she was working on an interpretive history of African American literature and developing a concentration in Black women’s studies.

Professor McKay was also well known for her devotion to her students and colleagues. Her decision to remain at Wisconsin rather than go to Harvard was an example of her commitment to building the Afro-American Studies Department at her own institution and to continuing to serve her campus community. In a sense, by helping to create the UW-Madison’s Bridge Program, which enables qualified master’s candidates to pursue Ph.D.s in African American Literature when they complete their master’s degree, she enacted a personal and professional intervention in the problem that she had described so articulately in her writing. Although she did not live to see a center erected in the name of the playwright Lorraine Hansberry, as she had hoped, Professor McKay was nevertheless successful in establishing the Lorraine Hansberry Visiting Professorship in Dramatic Arts at the UW-Madison in 1998, which brings visiting artists of color to campus to explore diversity issues in the dramatic arts. Recently, she had been working on raising funds for the chair of this endowed professorship. She received four teaching awards, including honors from UW System (1988), UW-Madison (1992), Phi Beta Kappa (1999), and graduate students in the UW-Madison Department of English (2000). In 2003, she convened the UW-Madison Center for the Humanities symposium commemorating the centennial of W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Professor McKay, who was divorced as a young woman, is survived by a sister, Constance Prout of Hollywood, Florida, two children—Patricia Watson of St. Louis and Harry McKay of New York—one grandchild, and one great-grandchild. Her family requests that memorials be made to the Lorraine Hansberry Visiting Professorship in the Dramatic Arts, c/o University of Wisconsin Foundation, U.S. Bank Lockbox, Box 78807, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 53278. The UW Foundation requests that “In Memory of Nellie McKay” be in the subject line on checks.



George Mason University photo by Vincent Desnoës

MARGARET GARNER:

from history to opera

by Shannon McNay
Northern Kentucky University

Anyone familiar with contemporary American literature knows that Toni Morrison is one of the most accomplished American novelists of our time, so it comes as no surprise to discover that she is also a gifted librettist. In her first opera, *Margaret Garner*, the subject matter she chose to write about is true to Toni Morrison style. While Morrison loosely based her 1987 novel, *Beloved*, on the Margaret Garner case, more recently she decided to revisit the story to create what became the libretto for the *Margaret Garner* opera, published by Schirmer in 2004. The break from 1987 to 2004 may have leant new creativity to Morrison, who was consumed with the *Beloved* story for so long that, she says, it had mentally exhausted her.

Though written to be performed, the libretto for this opera features the narration style and range that her readers have become familiar with when reading Toni Morrison: her ability to breathe life into every word and her poignantly rendered, complex, and troubled characters. Besides Morrison's indisputable talent, the subject lends itself to the genre and power of an opera. Although, outside of Toni Morrison scholars, the Margaret Garner story remains today widely unknown, the opera will surely help to change that. It has the potential to overwhelm the reader or listener with grief and addresses a vital issue in history: how far will one woman go to escape slavery, and what does it mean truly to protect one's child?

As Morrison set out to write the libretto, she says she was slightly troubled with

insecurities. Although she has had her poetry set to music by André Previn in *Four Songs* in 1994 and *Honey & Rue* in 1995, this is her first libretto. Perhaps even her fame made the pressure that much deeper, since her devoted readers expect so much from her works. Still, she discusses in a note about the opera that can be found in the Detroit Opera program that she was guided by two important principles: "1. Narratives of nineteenth century African American enslavement are inexhaustible—there can never be [should never be] a final one; 2. No human experience—however brutalizing—was beyond art. If it were, then the brutalizers will have triumphed" (Morrison 8; brackets original). Morrison used these two principles to guide her development of this libretto, resulting in a work that has been well reviewed and widely praised. Thanks to Morrison, the Margaret Garner story is now available to a new audience that may have never read *Beloved* or studied American slavery. It is so important today that slave stories like this one are made available to the largest audience possible. As explained by Delores M. Walters in the program for the Fourth Biennial Toni Morrison Society Conference in July 2005, "Compelling dynamics of race, gender, and class play a significant role in her explaining Margaret's infanticide, her resistance to enslavement and likely her resolve to escape from sexual exploitation and physical abuse. If Margaret's story were more widely known, the triumph over her captors and the physical and sexual violence fundamental to the institution of slavery would have to be acknowledged" (Walters 16-17).

Toni Morrison stepped outside of her usual format in writing this libretto, but she did it because she felt the story needed to be told in a deeper way. Morrison is not the only one who felt like this. In 1996, Richard Danielpour met with Morrison with the intention of discussing the creation of an opera, only to discover that they both wanted to create an opera about the Margaret Garner story.



International scholars with Professor Morrison the night of the Margaret Garner premiere.

Photo by Marcia Johnson



Carolyn Denard, Professor Morrison, Kristine Yohe, and Maryemma Graham.

Photo by Marcia Johnson

Danielpour began to compose the opera as Morrison wrote the libretto, and it was co-commissioned in 2000 by the Cincinnati Opera, the Opera Company of Philadelphia and the Michigan Opera Theatre. According to Walters, the main themes addressed in this opera are the issue of local slavery (especially for those who live in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky), the issue of families in flight due to slavery, and “the plight of women and children under slavery that still resonates with issues pertaining to domestic abuse today” (16).

In the note Toni Morrison wrote for the opera programs, she describes the her need to tell the story: “I realized that there were genres other than novels that could expand and deepen the story. The topic, the people, the narrative theme, passion and universality made it more than worthy of opera; it begged for it” (8). Now that the story has expanded beyond the novel to the opera, the floodgates may be opened so that it can be told in other ways. Walters illustrates this sentiment: “despite the significance of this case in shaping our nation’s history, Margaret Garner’s story had all but faded from public memory until *Beloved*, the novel, the film, and now the *Margaret Garner* opera” (17). The slave stories are a rich, albeit deeply saddening and tragic part of American history and must not be ignored. Through creations like the *Margaret Garner* opera and *Beloved*, Toni Morrison is making sure that this does not happen.

Works Cited

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Denyce Graves, star of Margaret Garner, greeting Edwin Rigaud of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center at the Freedom Center cast party on premiere night. Photo by Marcia Johnson

Attending the *Margaret Garner* Opera Premieres: STUNNING PERFORMANCES IN THREE CITIES

by Helena Woodard
University of Texas-Austin

The *Margaret Garner* opera made its debut to sold-out audiences and rave reviews in 2005-2006 as part of a more than six million dollar, tri-city sponsorship: Detroit, Michigan; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Opera premiered first in Detroit on 7 May 2005, in Cincinnati 14 July 2005, and in Philadelphia 10 February 2006. An opera buff with a vested academic and historical interest in contemporary slave recovery projects, I journeyed to all three cities to view the 2004 creation by Pulitzer-Prize-winning novelist and Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, who penned the libretto, and Grammy winner Richard Danielpour, who composed the music. Like so many others in attendance, I witnessed the Opera’s historic opening as the first to be based on the tragic story of an enslaved African American woman, as a new addition to the growing *American* opera canon, and as the first libretto and opera musical composition for acclaimed novelist Toni Morrison and musician Richard Danielpour, respectively.

Mezzo-Soprano Denyce Graves led the star-filled opera in the role of Margaret Garner, with whom she has expressed a spiritual kinship. Seasoned opera performer Angela Brown (*Aida*, 2005), who played Cilla, Robert Garner’s mother,

had replaced Jessye Norman in the Detroit premiere. Stellar performances were also given by Gregg Baker as Margaret's husband, Robert Garner, and famed baritone Rod Gilfry as Edward Gaines, whose slight cold announced on premiere evening in Detroit did little to dampen his voice. Gilfry took his bows amid boos in stride in all three cities, indicative of the highly effective delivery of a villainous role. Kenny Leon, who directed *Margaret Garner* (as well as the 2004 Tony award-winning play *A Raisin in the Sun*) choreographed and fine-tuned riveting scenes to polished perfection in the opera's finale in Philadelphia, especially the opening auction, the lynching of Robert Garner, Margaret's act of infanticide, trial, and death.

Both Morrison and Danielpour have stated that *Margaret Garner* aims to bring about national healing and to show that we are all part of the same human family—or to show what can happen when we forget that fact. Three U.S. cities with sizable black populations featured well-heeled and fully integrated audiences that gazed in hushed tones as the curtains rose to black slave chorus members dressed in grayish tones lamenting, “No More, Please God, No More,” as they prepared to be sold at auction. The opera's message—to bring about healing and/or resolution for an institution that has not been fully confronted on a national level—was dramatized by black and white choruses that sang separately until Margaret Garner's tragic death in the final scene when they performed together. That symbolic message clearly transcended the stage performance in light of racial conflict and impoverished conditions that have plagued black communities in all three cities. Addressing the opera's treatment of Garner's story, a *Detroit Free Press* editor wrote the following: “The subject has particular resonance here not just because of the African-American majority in the city that Michigan Opera Theatre calls home, but because the whole region still struggles with issues of segregation and inability to talk easily across racial lines” (“Detroit Opera”).

In *Margaret Garner*, the tragic story of an enslaved African American woman who killed her infant daughter rather than have her returned to slavery after an escape attempt, is committed to a traditionally highbrow art form accustomed to depicting the tragic failings of heroes and heroines of Shakespearean proportions. Michigan Opera Theatre Founding General Director David DiChiera, who consulted with an African American advisory group before bringing the opera to Michigan, pondered over a “white” cultural institution taking on a “black” subject (“Detroit Opera”). DiChiera later brought

in Cincinnati and Philadelphia as co-sponsors. *Margaret Garner* charts new territory not previously trodden by traditional operas, though classical heroines in Verdi's *Aida*, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* and Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (in which Denyce Graves has famously played leading roles) offer kinship with Margaret Garner. In the American opera canon, larger-than-life yet mundane subjects in *Dead Man Walking* and Tennessee Williams's *A Street Car Named Desire* come to mind (Rod Gilfry played a haunting Stanley Kowalski in the San Francisco Opera premiere). But *Margaret Garner* also revises the tradition in numerous other ways.

In order to access the true spirit of the *Margaret Garner* opera, one must pay very close attention to the language. In the age-old debate about the preeminence of the libretto versus signature arias, Morrison's libretto features highly poetic and meaningful language that vies with the music for equal recognition, which led *The New York Times* to grouse that the lyrics should have been excised more sharply for an opera that is “too long for what it has to say” (Holland). But most reviewers found favor with the language, which empowers the libretto as poetry, and unites with musical lyricism and dramatic performance, raising the stakes for the “literariness” of opera. *The Detroit News*, for instance, called the libretto and musical compositions “a hand-in-glove masterpiece of words fitted to music” (“Detroit Opera”).

Danielpour's musical compositions in *Margaret Garner* lace traditional arias with time-honored black spirituals, work chants, and blues, which, again, led some critics to decry the music as derivative, likening it to Broadway show tunes rather than traditional opera. But *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* pronounced Danielpour's music “a skillful stew of American idioms and

influences, ranging from spirituals, folk and jazz” (Rosenberg D1). And *The New York Times* credits Danielpour's compositions as a “soothing eclecticism” and “a melting pot in tones” (Holland). If the opera is ever produced as an official cast CD, I have no doubt that several arias, including Margaret's

When sorrow clouds the mind,
The spine grows strong;
No pretty words can soothe or cure
What heavy hands can break.
When sorrow is deep,
The secret soul keeps
Its weapon of choice: the love of all loves.

From Margaret's aria, “A Quality Love” *Margaret Garner*, Act I, Scene 3

signature tune titled “A Quality Love,” sung by Denyce Graves, will become essential parts of opera history.

In Detroit, on the red carpet leading to the opera house, cameras filmed such celebrities as Phylicia Rashad (Tony winner for Kenny Leon's *A Raisin in the Sun*). Princeton Professor Cornel West, also in attendance, said that he wouldn't have missed this opera for the world (Carter). In the week preceding

Margaret Garner's Detroit debut, a national opera conference was held nearby by Opera America, and discussion centered on the impact that the opera's success would have on the past, present, and future of the genre, in general. All three sponsoring cities conducted educational programs and workshops with local community and school representatives in which the public was educated on subjects ranging from opera, to slavery, to the Margaret Garner story.

Cincinnati offers the most history on the Margaret Garner story, which actually took place there, so a number of opera-related events were staged. As TMS members know, the Fourth Biennial Conference of the Toni Morrison Society was held in conjunction with the opera. The University of Cincinnati-College Conservatory of Music partnered with Cincinnati Opera and TMS to present a special panel featuring world-renowned composer, singer, activist, and cultural historian Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock. Other related events included a mock trial created by members of the Ohio Chapter of the American College of Trial Lawyers and a documentary, *The Journey of Margaret Garner*, presented by WCPO-TV. Only several miles apart, both Cincinnati's National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and the Maplewood Plantation in Northern Kentucky connect with Margaret Garner's enslavement first by John Gaines, then by his brother Archibald. For example, Garner's escape attempt was partly orchestrated by activists on the Underground Railroad. At Maplewood, visitors can see the remains of a cook house where Garner worked and, nearby, a small rebuilt church where she worshipped. Members of the opera cast toured those sites, which helped them to connect with Garner's tragic life. Later, TMS conference attendees also visited these same historic places.

In Philadelphia, I witnessed the progressive staging of two particularly difficult, climactic scenes played out in rapid succession in the Detroit and Cincinnati premiers. Robert Garner's final moments in the lynching scene—chaotic, confusing, and racy in its proximity with Margaret's act of infanticide in the Detroit and Cincinnati performances—seemed slowed for maximum dramatic effect in Philadelphia. Robert Garner was stripped to the waist, hoisted by a hushed mob that surrounded him with burning torches, which shone against a resplendent body on the otherwise darkened stage. The stunning image on stage, frozen in silence for several moments, spoke volumes.

In Philadelphia, I sat next to a well-known music producer, who said that he has been asked to record *Margaret Garner* on CD in the next year or two—should that very costly project be undertaken at all. In the meantime, the *Margaret Garner* opera's future may be indicated in the quick action taken by Opera Carolina, which sponsored the opera's move to Charlotte in April 2006 after its tri-city season had concluded in Philadelphia.

One of the advantages of viewing the opera in three cities is the enormous clarity and attention to detail that it brings. For example, the libretto's treatment of love highlights Morrison's poetic gifts and reminds us that she inhabits a traditional artistic, literary forum—only to wrest it from complacency. For example, in Act I, Scene 3, at Caroline Gaines's wedding reception, an argument erupts between her husband and father over the definition of love. Caroline breaches protocol and asks Margaret the true meaning of love. Later, after the embarrassed guests have parted, Margaret sings the arresting aria, "A Quality Love,"

which includes the following lines: "When sorrow is deep, / The secret soul keeps / Its weapon of choice; the love of all loves." (Morrison 25). The aria offers one of the opera's truly defining moments, as the enslaved woman whom Edward Gaines held in sexual bondage provides the most intelligent response to the question of love's true meaning.

In conclusion, I was delighted to witness this wonderful work in its first three cities, and I look forward to *Margaret Garner* taking its well-deserved place in the annals of contemporary opera.

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Lucille Fultz Wins 2005 Toni Morrison Society Book Award



Lucille Fultz with
Professor Morrison.

Lucille P. Fultz, Associate Professor of English at Rice University, has won the 2005 Toni Morrison Society Book Award for her penetrating study, *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference* (University of Illinois Press, 2003). In presenting the award, the TMS Book Award Committee noted "Fultz not only elegantly synthesizes multiple strands of Morrison scholarship, but she also invites the reader to participate in this process, to accompany her on her intellectual journey. As such, what Morrison succeeds in doing in her novels – 'to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate' – Fultz achieves in her own criticism."



Victoria Burrows, Lucille Fultz, Professor Morrison, Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown, Andrea O'Reilly, Gloria Roberson. Photos by Bettina Adams

Language Matters II —

READING AND TEACHING TONI

by Sarah Arbuthnot, University of Kansas

With a \$75,000 National Endowment for the Humanities grant, the University of Kansas, in collaboration with the Toni Morrison Society and Northern Kentucky University, extended a high school reading project into a dynamic summer workshop. Titled “Language Matters II: Reading and Teaching Toni Morrison, the Cardozo Project Model,” the grant extended a 2002 NEH-supported project for a Washington D.C. high school. The first project at Cardozo Senior High School, Language Matters I, focused on the work of the Nobel Prize-winning writer. Language Matters II was a special teaching initiative of the Toni Morrison Society and the KU Department of English.

and Angelyn Mitchell, Georgetown University.

In addition to their study, Language Matters II participants also visited the NKU Institute for Freedom Studies and the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and joined the Toni Morrison Society 4th Biennial Conference for the Cincinnati Opera’s premiere performance of *Margaret Garner* and in visiting the homesite of the real Margaret Garner, as well as conference sessions. Participants also met and were photographed with Professor Morrison, which was a highlight for many.

After returning home, Language Matters II participants have kept in touch and shared the stories of their Morrison

teaching successes via e-mail and the Language Matters II website www.tonimorrisonociety.org/lm2/. Materials are still being added, but visitors will find a number of resources and, in the coming weeks, audio files and transcripts of the summer workshop sessions will be downloadable for free to anyone interested in learning more about strategies for teaching Toni Morrison’s works in the high school classroom.

PHOTO A



The summer workshop took place July 9-14, 2005, on the campus of Northern Kentucky University. A group of teachers, graduate students, master teachers, and scholars met for an in-depth study of Professor Morrison’s novels and children’s books, as well as attending the Toni Morrison Society 4th Biennial Conference, July 14-17.

Nineteen teachers and three graduate students were selected from school districts nationwide to participate. During their week-long stay, participants studied each of Morrison’s eight novels and six children’s books under the guidance of leading scholars and master teachers and prepared strategies to teach those books to their high school students. The Morrison scholars included Giselle Anatol, University of Kansas; Durthy Washington, U.S. Air Force Academy; Herman Beavers, University of Pennsylvania; Keith Byerman, Indiana State University; Marilyn Sanders Mobley, George Mason University;

Language Matters II was directed by Maryemma Graham, professor of English at the University of Kansas and president of the Toni Morrison Society, and Carolyn C. Denard, associate dean of the college at Brown University and board chair and founder of the Toni Morrison Society.

PHOTO B



MORRISON IN HIGH SCHOOLS



PHOTO C



PHOTO D



PHOTO E

PHOTO A: *Language Matters II* participants with Professor Morrison.
Photo by Marona Graham-Bailey

PHOTO B: *Language Matters II* participants at the conference luncheon.
Photo by Bettina Adams

PHOTO C: *Language Matters II* participants outside NKU dorms.
Photo by Marona Graham-Bailey

PHOTO D: Doretha Williams and Sarah Arbuthnot receiving awards from Maryemma Graham.
Photo by Marcia Johnson

PHOTO E: Professor Morrison at the conference luncheon.
Photo by Bettina Adams

In Memoriam...

Mr. Art Sloan

JULY 25, 1950 – JANUARY 24, 2006

The Language Matters II Community suffered a deep loss with the passing of Art Sloan, English teacher extraordinaire. Mr. Sloan taught for 33 years at Lawrence High School, Lawrence, Kansas. Not only have we lost a great educator, but a great friend, as well. He will be sorely missed.

Toni Morrison & Sites of Memory: The Fourth Biennial

by Kristine Yohe, Northern Kentucky University

Last summer, Toni Morrison Society scholars from around the world gathered in Greater Cincinnati, Ohio, and Northern Kentucky for the Fourth Biennial Conference. The meeting location and timing were prompted by the Cincinnati premiere of *Margaret Garner* – Morrison’s first opera, written with composer Richard Danielpour – on 14 July 2005.

How did we get there? Since 1997, I have taught African American literature at Northern Kentucky University (NKU), in Highland Heights, Kentucky, seven miles south of Cincinnati – *Beloved* country. Because of my long-term involvement with the TMS, as well as the NKU Institute for Freedom Studies and Cincinnati’s National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, members of the Cincinnati Opera approached me in the Spring of 2003 to invite TMS members to attend the premiere in Cincinnati. I pitched this idea to the TMS leadership at the Third Biennial in Washington, D.C., in June 2003, they bit, decided that the opera would provide the occasion and setting for the Fourth Biennial, asked me to be conference director, and it all started to fall into place.

Carolyn Denard, Maryemma Graham, and I worked closely together for about two years in our planning, and we also had the steady support of many of my colleagues and the administration at NKU. With the help of Cincinnati Opera, we arranged for the conference registration fee to cover an opera ticket, worked to plan a productive experience, and hoped for the best. The convergence of a TMS conference with the chance to attend *Margaret Garner*, accompanying Professor Morrison, proved enticing for many folks, as the TMS had its largest conference ever, with over 250 registered attendees, representing approximately 30 different countries.

The conference was preceded by a week-long seminar for high school teachers, Language Matters II, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Co-sponsored by the University of Kansas and NKU, 19 teachers and 3 future teachers came

from across the country to NKU’s campus where, led by leading Morrison scholars (including Professor Morrison herself), they read all of the novels and a substantial amount of the criticism, and discussed and debated teaching approaches to the work. The Language Matters group concluded their workshop in time to attend many of the conference events, including the opera.

The conference began on Thursday afternoon, 14 July, with concurrent sessions of papers. After a reception at the conference hotel, the historic Hilton Cincinnati Netherland Plaza (built in 1931, the year of Morrison’s birth), the group went to Cincinnati’s Music Hall for the *Margaret Garner* opera premiere, starring Denyce Graves. After the lights dimmed, the first thing appearing on the super-titles screen over the stage was “Welcome, Toni Morrison Society!” Conference attendees had excellent seats and watched as Professor Morrison was ushered into a box seat. As you can read in detail elsewhere in this newsletter, the opera performance was riveting. Some spectators observed later that attending the opera presented a special opportunity, as they were able to experience its artistry on so many levels: while listening to the singing and viewing the sets and feeling the impact of the music and absorbing the intensity of the lyrics—they simultaneously were *reading* Toni Morrison’s amazing words. It was truly a multidimensional experience. Late on that same evening, conference registrants attended the *Margaret Garner* cast party as guests of the Cincinnati Opera and the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

The Toni Morrison Society would like to thank the following sponsors for their support of the Fourth Biennial Conference

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Professor Morrison, Society members, presenters and guests at the Fourth Biennial Conference, where *Margaret Garner* was enslaved, and the floodwall in Covington, Kentucky.



Biennial Conference of the Toni Morrison Society

Friday found us spending the day at NKU, with an opening plenary followed by concurrent sessions and the Authors' and Editor's Recognition Luncheon. There, keynote speaker, Steven Weisenburger – author of *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-murder from the Old South* (1998), the definitive text on Margaret Garner – spoke about the historical context of Margaret Garner and her story's local and national significance. Weisenburger, now Mossiker Chair in Humanities and Professor of English at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, previously taught for 25 years at the University of Kentucky. At the luncheon, the TMS Book Award was given to Lucille P. Fultz of Rice University, the author of *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference* (2003). Following more sessions, that evening was highlighted by a return to Music Hall for "On Stage with Toni Morrison and Richard Danielpour," where the opera creators discussed their artistic collaboration.

On Saturday morning, conference attendees participated in concurrent sessions at the hotel, followed by a special session at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. There, they listened to a panel on traditional music, Margaret Garner, and Toni Morrison, featuring Bernice Johnson Reagon, Professor Emeritus at American University and renowned founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock. That afternoon, the group visited Maplewood Farm and Richwood Presbyterian Church in Richwood, Kentucky, where Margaret Garner was enslaved. This site appears much like what Sethe remembers in *Beloved*, as it beautifully envelops its

violent past: "and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too" (6).

Saturday evening was the TMS banquet where Trudier Harris, J. Carlyle Sitterson Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was the keynote speaker. Harris, author of numerous books about African American literature, including *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1991), spoke about the conference theme, "Sites of Memory," in African American literature including and beyond Toni Morrison's writing.

After two last concurrent sessions Sunday morning at the hotel, the conference closed with a tour of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

While we were fortunate in this conference to have several notable activities, one of the most satisfying experiences was that Professor Morrison so graciously joined us for almost every single event. That Morrison kindly shared her candor, warmth, and generosity of spirit delighted many of us in attendance. Overall, I believe that interacting regularly with our sister and brother scholars enriches us all, no doubt seeping into our classroom and research work, as well. How privileged we are to do what we do, to teach literature that matters, to share our love for Morrison's writing, to come together with like-minded folks, to have the chance to learn, to grow, to love, to live.

Biennial. Sites visited include the cookhouse in Richwood, Kentucky, with a mural depicting Garner's escape.

Photos by Bettina Adams and Marcia Johnson



Toni Morrison Bibliography 2000-2006

by Thom Snowden, Northern Kentucky University

This bibliography was created from the following electronic sources: *MLA International Bibliography*, *EbscoHost*, *World Cat*, and *ProQuest*. The databases were accessed through *W. Frank Steely Library* at Northern Kentucky University. The citations were organized through *RefWorks*, a computer program.

Special thanks go to the following people, all of Northern Kentucky University, for providing essential guidance and assistance: Rebecca Kelm, Steely Library; Robert T. Rhode, Department of Literature and Language; and Shannon McNay, Class of 2006.

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Association Meetings

At this year's ALA, **YVONNE ATKINSON**, of California State University-San Bernardino, organized for the TMS two sessions and a teaching roundtable, which was conducted by Durthy Washington, of the U.S. Air Force Academy. At the ALA, which took place in San Francisco 25-28 May, the Society also had a business meeting and was a co-sponsor for the reception following a reading by Al Young, Poet Laureate of California.

Plan now to attend next year's ALA, which will be in Boston, 24-27 May 2007. Conference details will be available at www.americanliterature.org, and the TMS panels will be advertised on our website, www.tonimorrisonociety.org, and on the listserv, to which you can subscribe by writing to tmsociety@aol.com.

College Language Association meeting: 18-21 April 2007, Miami Shores, Florida. Deadline for submissions is 30 September 2006. See the CLA website, www.clascholars.org, for additional information.



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