

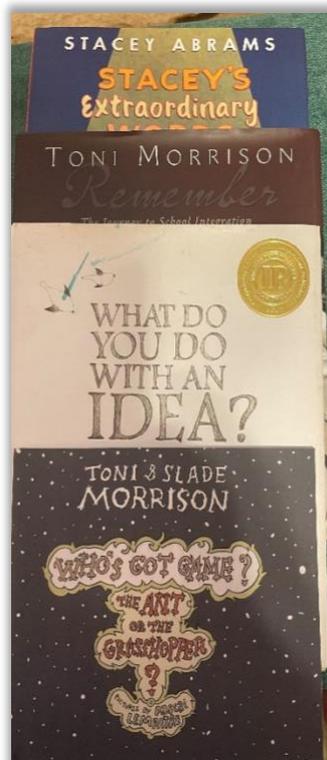


The Toni Morrison Society

2024: The Year in Review

January

Reactivation of Young Readers' Circle

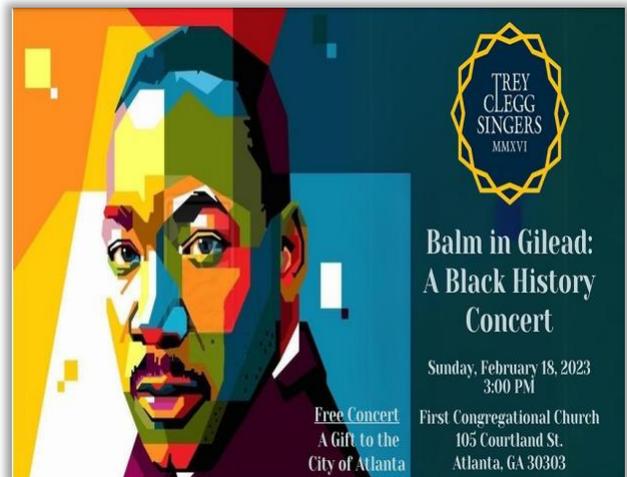


In January, an ad hoc committee met to explore the possibility of activating the **Young Readers' Circle** as a Pilot at a church or school in the Atlanta area. Eight members of the Society in the Atlanta area met at the home of Carolyn Denard to discuss strategies for launching the program. The group looked at children's books by Morrison and other children's book authors that the group thought would work for the targeted 9-13 age of

the Young Readers Circle. The Group decided to “go where the children already are” and work with after-school programs and in-school reading programs to begin the Young Readers Circle Pilot. We hope to begin the Young Readers Circle Pilot at Hope-Hill Elementary School and Drew Charter Middle School in Atlanta, DeKalb Elementary School for the Arts, and the Eastlake YMCA in Dekalb County this spring.

February

Birthday Celebration for Toni Morrison

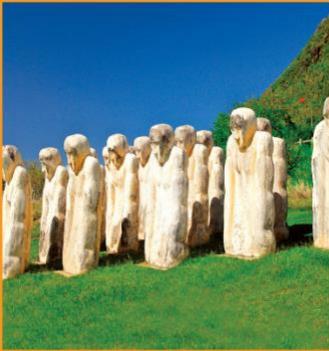


The Society was honored to join with the acclaimed Trey Clegg Singers at First Congregational Church of Atlanta on February 18th, Toni Morrison’s Birthday, to offer a special tribute to Toni Morrison during their Black History concert, where they dedicated the title song of the performance “Balm in Gilead” to Toni Morrison. “Balm in Gilead” was also played as a special tribute to Toni Morrison at her memorial service in 2019. After the concert, the Society sponsored a birthday-cake reception in the Church Fellowship Hall to continue celebrate Ms. Morrison’s birthday.

March

Reception at the French Consulate in Atlanta

In March, the Society was delighted to receive an invitation from the Consul General of France in Atlanta to be the guest of honor at a cocktail reception sponsored by Consul General Anne-Laure Desjonquères and Commissioner of the Martinique Tourism Authority Bénédicte de Géromino.



INVITATION

Under the patronage of **Anne-Laure Desjonquères, Consul General of France in Atlanta**

Bénédicte di Géromino, Commissioner of the Martinique Tourism Authority is delighted to invite you to discover the culture, culinary delights & wonders of Martinique Magnifique !

**Destination Presentation
Cocktail Reception**

Tuesday, March 12, 2024
5:30pm-7:30pm

La Résidence de France
1040 West Paces Ferry Rd NW
Atlanta, GA

Guest of honor : The "Toni Morrison Society"

"If writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic."
Toni Morrison

"Beware, my body and my soul, beware above all of crossing your arms and assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of griefs is not a proscenium, and a man who walks is not a dancing bear."
Aimé Césaire



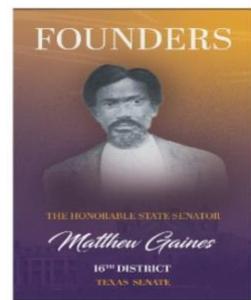
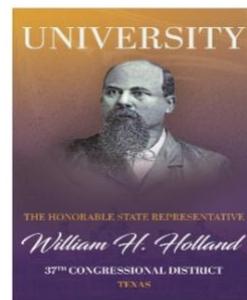
RSVP by March 5 : events.us@atout-france.fr



The reception highlighted the Society's growing international presence and Ms. Morrison's and the Society's relationship with France and Martinique. The Society held its 4th Biennial Conference in Paris and has placed a Bench by the Road for Louis Delgres and Aime Césaire. The reception also highlighted the 2024 Summer Symposium that will be held in Martinique. Consul General Madame Desjonquères and Madame Muriel Wiltord, Director Americas of the Martinique Tourism Authority, offered congratulatory remarks to the Society and gifts from Martinique. The French Consulate of Atlanta was also one of the sponsors for the Summer Symposium in Martinique.

33rd Bench Placement

Also in March, the Society was honored to place its 33rd Bench at Prairie View A&M University during the inauguration of its 9th President, Dr. Tomikia LeGrande, on March 19, 2024. The Bench was placed to honor the University founders, Matthew Gaines and William H. Holland, “two 19th century legislators, born into slavery, who were instrumental in the establishment of Prairie View University.” In addition to honoring the University’s founders, the Bench by the Road placement at Prairie View also highlighted the University’s connection to the legacy of Toni Morrison, where the University has launched the Toni Morrison Writing Program in her honor. [For more on the Bench placement at Prairie View, click here.](#)



April

Bench by the Road in “Stories for All” Festival

In April, the Society participated in the “Stories for All” Festival at the University of Kansas. *Stories for All: A Digital Storytelling Project for the Twenty-First Century* brought together more than forty--mostly Kansas-based-- partner projects” dedicated to gathering marginalized and suppressed histories, interconnecting them, and sharing them widely through digital media. *Stories for All* was a partnership between the Hall Center for the Humanities and the Institute for Digital Research in the Humanities at the University of Kansas. It was supported by a major grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in effect from 2021 to 2024.” The Toni Morrison Society was awarded a small subgrant of \$12,000 to collect interviews with each of the, then 32, sponsoring organizations who had placed Benches in their communities and digitally

document the “stories” behind each of the Benches. Four interviews were shared in a video presentation at the Festival by Carolyn Denard and Craig Stutman, co-chairs of the Bench by the Road Project. They closed their presentation with a video introducing the Benches placed so far in the Bench by the Road Project. [Click here to see the video of the 34 Benches placed by the Toni Morrison Society:](#)

For more information on the Stories for All Digital Storytelling Project, visit <https://storiesforall.ku.edu/>.

May

Mellon Planning Grant Awarded

In May, the Society was delighted and honored to receive news that it had been awarded a \$60k grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation to organize the archives of the [Bench by the Road Project](#)! That work began in July and is ongoing with the goal of organizing applications, programming documents, media, photography, and histories of each of the Bench by the Road sites. The documents will be part of a public exhibit and eventually housed in Special Collections at the Princeton University Library.



Grant Funded: Archives of the Bench by the Road Project to support the organization of archival materials relating to the Bench by the Road Project and other necessary planning for a digital archive in collaboration with Princeton University Library. [Click here to read the Press Release.](#)

Mellon Foundation Explore Ideas Inside Mellon Search	<h3>Archives of the Bench by the Road Project</h3> <p>to support the organization of archival materials relating to the Bench by the Road Project and other necessary planning for a digital archive in collaboration with Princeton University Library</p> <table><tr><td>Grantee</td><td>Toni Morrison Society, Inc.</td></tr><tr><td>Location</td><td>Avondale Estates, Georgia, United States</td></tr><tr><td>Amount</td><td>\$60,000</td></tr><tr><td>Date of award</td><td>May 01, 2024</td></tr><tr><td>Length</td><td>12 months</td></tr><tr><td>Grantmaking area</td><td>Public Knowledge</td></tr><tr><td>Guiding strategy</td><td>Preservation</td></tr></table>	Grantee	Toni Morrison Society, Inc.	Location	Avondale Estates, Georgia, United States	Amount	\$60,000	Date of award	May 01, 2024	Length	12 months	Grantmaking area	Public Knowledge	Guiding strategy	Preservation
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ALA Meeting-Chicago

In May, the Society also made its 30th presentation at the American Literature Association meeting. At this year's meeting in Chicago, **the Society presented two panels organized by Vice President and Program Chair Michelle Hite**. The first panel, "Two Scholars, Same Neighborhood, Divergent Readings" featured Drs. Herman Beavers and Marilyn Sanders Mobley who discussed their different approaches to spatial literary studies in their readings of Morrison's works. Beavers in *Geography and the Political Imaginary in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, published in 2018, examines Morrison's fiction as a sustained effort to challenge the dominant imaginary narratives of racial hierarchy and create instead more inclusive spatial geographies and sustaining and healing cultural spaces in her work. Mobley's book *Toni Morrison and the Geopoetics of Place, Race, and Belonging*, published six years later in 2024 and also informed by spatial literary studies, focused on the narrative strategies that Morrison uses to "make spaces for the reader" in her novels and in a similar way create spaces of belonging. Robert Tally editor of books focusing on spatial literary studies, served as the respondent for both presentations.



Because of Morrison's prolific collection of interviews, the second ALA panel explored the "interview" as a genre in Morrison's Studies. Panelists included Aoi Mori, Carolyn Denard, and Katherine Painter. Several members of the Morrison Society were in attendance to listen and participate in these outstanding panels. The Society also presented two Book Prize Awards: to Susan Mayberry for *The Critical Life of Toni*

Morrison (Camden House 2021) and *Toni Morrison and the Natural World: An Ecology of Color* (University Press of Mississippi, 2021).

June

34th Bench Placement

On June 18th, during a week of Juneteenth Celebrations, the **Toni Morrison Society** placed its 34th Bench by the Road in the Covered Bridge Historic District in Smyrna, Georgia. The Bench honored the lives of Matilda Ruff an enslaved woman in Cobb County and her children who were also enslaved in Cobb County and continued to live in the same area and establish a business after Emancipation. Their story is one of the few documented histories of enslaved families whose lives were followed from slavery to freedom. Legislators, community members, local artists, and business owners supported this historic addition to the Concord Covered Bridge Historic District. To compliment the site, a local garden club planted a small flower bed around the Bench called “Matilda’s Garden.” For more on the Bench Placement for Matilda Ruff and her children—[read here](#).

New Smyrna Bench and Garden Honors Enslaved and Free Black Communities

By imandersSpecial, 2024-06-20

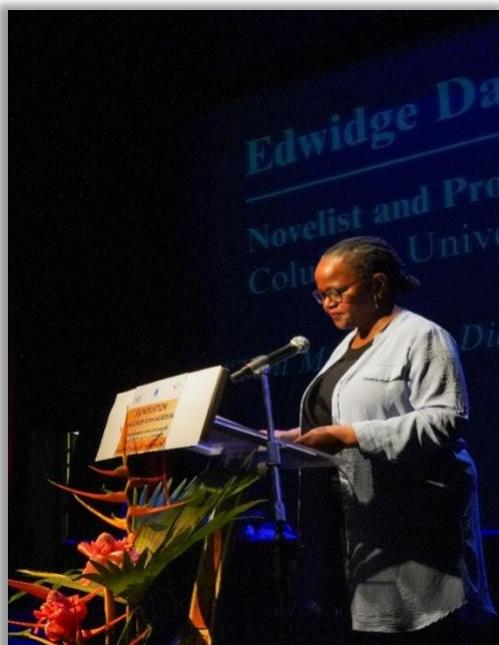


Photo: Marietta Daily Journal Online. Writer, Isabel Manders

Martinique Summer Symposium



Also in June, the Society held its first **Summer Symposium on the African Diasporic Vision and Legacies of Aimé Césaire and Toni Morrison** in Fort-de-France Martinique. At the invitation of the **Martinique Tourism Authority**, who sponsored the 10th Bench by the Road for Aimé Césaire’s 100th Birthday, the Society returned to Martinique-- this time to explore the intellectual, political, and artistic connections between Césaire and Morrison. The five-day Symposium (June 22-27) included opening keynote lectures by Haitian American novelist **Edwidge Danticat** and French Guadeloupean poet **Daniel Maximin**; four plenary panels on the manifestations of diasporic themes in the work of Morrison and Césaire; and a rededication of the Bench by the Road on Aimé Césaire’s birthday. The seventy attendees at the Symposium were generously welcomed by the Office of the Mayor in Fort-de-France and the Martinique Tourism Authority, stayed at La Pagerie Hotel on the island of Trois Ilets, visited historic sites on the island, and attended Symposium sessions at the Aimé Césaire Theater. They enjoyed wonderful fellowship together and affirmed a renewed commitment to the Society and its international programming initiatives.





September

Rededication of Third Bench by the Road

On September 28th, the Society rededicated the Third Bench by the Road, placed in Hattiesburg, Mississippi in 2009 to honor the Black community's important contribution to the work of voting rights, education, and social justice during July and August of 1964 in what is historically known as "Freedom Summer". The city's rededication of the Bench by the Road coincided with the 60th Anniversary commemorations of Freedom Summer held throughout the nation. The Society presented a commemoration plaque to the Director of Hattiesburg Museums to document the rededication.



Third Bench by the Road, placed in Hattiesburg, Mississippi

October

The Society held its fall online business meeting on October 1st where we presented the slate of new officers and welcomed members who would like to serve as members of standing committees of the Society.

The New Officers of the Toni Morrison Society

Michelle Hite (Spelman College) , President

Emmanuelle Andres (Rochel Universite) , Vice President

Khalilah Watson (Olive-Harvey College) , Secretary

Brennan Collins (Georgia State University) , Treasurer

Robin Sinckler (Independent Scholar) , Archivist

Tracyann Williams (Fordham University) , Membership Chair

Craig Stutman (Delaware Valley University) , Bench by the Road Chair

Joshua Leach, Diaspora Communication Public Relations Chair

Lynne Simpson (Morehouse School of Medicine) , Bibliography Chair

Newly Appointed Members of the Board of Directors

Farah Jasmine Griffin, Columbia University

Dwight McBride, Washington University at St. Louis

November

Advisory Committee for Mellon Grant Visit Society Archive in Atlanta

On November 1st, three members of the **Advisory Committee for the Toni Morrison Society Archive Project supported by the Mellon Foundation** visited Atlanta to **review the archive** and to give advice to those organizing the archive on how to prepare materials to showcase in an exhibit and to prepare for shipment to Princeton University Special Collections where the papers of the Bench by the Road Project and the Toni Morrison Society will be housed. Three of the five Advisory Committee members, Lexy deGraffenreid, Assistant Librarian for Special Collections Technical Services at Princeton University; Maryemma Graham Former Board Member and Founder of the Project on the History of Black Writing; and Clint Fluker, Senior Director of Culture, Community, and Partner Engagement for the Carlos Museum at Emory University met with Carolyn Denard, Project Director, and Pat Chandler Smith, Clerical Assistant.



December

Two new Benches approved for the Bench by the Road Project

**35th Bench for
John and
Lillian Miles
Lewis,
Date TBA**



**36th Bench for
the Female
Literary
Association of
Philadelphia,
September
2025**



*Thank you for your
continued support and best
wishes in the New Year!*

~The Toni Morrison Society