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Illuminating Toni Morrison's Manuscripts at Princeton

A campuswide slate of public events and exhibitions starting in February will celebrate the author.



Toni Morrison at Princeton in an undated photograph. The university acquired the author's personal papers in 2014 and will display part of the archive, along with artwork inspired by it, next semester. Credit...Robert Matthews/Princeton University



By **Hilarie M. Sheets**

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The creative process of the Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, who brought an indelible Black voice to American literature in novels including “Song of Solomon” (1977) and “Beloved” (1987) and taught at Princeton from 1989 to 2006, will be on display next semester at the university. A campuswide slate of public events and exhibitions uses the 200 linear feet of Morrison’s personal papers, acquired by Princeton in 2014 from the author, as the springboard for new scholarship and cross-disciplinary collaborations.

“This project is bringing artists and scholars to Princeton who may not normally have come here and is pushing the thinking about what the archive can inspire,” said Autumn Womack, a professor in the African American studies and English departments, who spearheaded the initiative.

With a team of graduate students, Womack has spent two years culling 90 never-before-exhibited objects from some 400 boxes of Morrison’s manuscript drafts, speeches, correspondence, photographs and other ephemera housed in the Princeton University Library’s department of special collections. The selections will go on view in the exhibition “Toni Morrison: Sites of Memory,” opening Feb. 22 in the Milberg Gallery at Firestone Library.

Highlights include day planners from 1974 and ’75, when Morrison was working at Random House (she was the first Black woman senior editor in fiction) and outlining “Song of Solomon” during spare moments in the margins of paper schedules that she carried in her bag. The only extant drafts of that novel, these planners also contain notes for speeches and editorial feedback for people she was working with, including Angela Davis and Muhammad Ali.

“The day planners are this really dynamic space where you see all the layers of her career and different kinds of writing she was doing,” Womack said. She also excavated some of Morrison’s hand-drawn maps of imagined spaces in “Beloved” and “Paradise” (1997), visualizing the worlds from which her characters emerged, as well as correspondence from friends and collaborators in the 1970s and ’80s, including Toni Cade Bambara and Nina Simone, that illuminates Black feminist thought as it was taking shape.

Another exhibition puts sculptures, prints and textiles by the visual artist Alison Saar in conversation with the author’s writings. Titled “Cycle of Creativity: Alison Saar and the Toni Morrison Papers,” it opens on Feb. 25 at the Princeton University Art Museum’s Art@Bainbridge gallery. Both women share a “dedication to this idea that they are actively seeking out their ancestors in order to create a platform for their descendants,” said Mitra Abbaspour, the museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art, who was invited by Womack to plumb the Morrison archive.

For example, the curator has pulled out Morrison’s typed 1993 Nobel lecture (creased from when she had it folded in her pocket) and handwritten sheets of yellow legal paper that she used to brainstorm her talk. “In that speech, Morrison delivers a dialogue between an old blind woman and some children,” said Abbaspour, who will juxtapose these papers with Saar’s “Swing Low (maquette for Harriet Tubman Memorial)” (2007), a small bronze iteration of the artist’s monument in Harlem that also speaks to the idea of intergenerational exchange. “That sculpture

was installed on 125th Street as a way of linking the historical event of the Underground Railroad with the creative fluorescence of the Harlem Renaissance,” Abbaspour said.

Saar will appear in conversation with the poet Evie Shockley at Princeton, where 30 thinkers — including the novelist Edwidge Danticat and the Berkeley professor Stephen M. Best — will consider Morrison’s archive in a symposium from March 23-25. It will be punctuated by two newly commissioned works from the performance artists Daniel Alexander Jones and Mame Diarra (Samantha) Speis, made in response to Morrison’s papers, to be presented March 24-25 at the university’s McCarter Theater. On April 12, the jazz vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant will perform a new composition inspired by the archive, copresented by Princeton University Concerts, at Richardson Auditorium in Alexander Hall.

“This project could only be done at Princeton,” Womack said. “It really is opening the gates in a number of different ways.”

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