

Toni Morrison Tribute to Paula Giddings and Biography Subject Ida Wells Celebrates “Women Outlaws”

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New York, April 2, 2009 – In a rare public engagement, on March 27, Nobel Laureate **Toni Morrison** paid tribute to social historian **Paula J. Giddings** and her biography *Ida: A Sword Among Lions, Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching* at a special event hosted by the National Council for Research on Women. Co-hosted by the NYU Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, it drew a large audience from business, academic and policy circles at New York University’s Kimmel Center.

“We are extremely honored to host two national treasures: Paula Giddings and Toni Morrison. They are towering figures in their respective fields and they have recaptured the stories and lessons of the past, honoring and infusing them with meaning. Their approaches differ: Paula Giddings gathers data and conducts rigorous analysis while Toni Morrison weaves elaborate tapestries of evocative narration that transport us into the deepest fibers of the human experience,” said Linda Basch, President of the National Council for Research on Women.

In addition to Dr. Basch, speakers included **Catharine Stimpson**, Dean of the NYU Graduate School of Arts and Sciences; **Beverly Guy-Sheftall**, Director of the Women’s Research and Resource Center at Spelman College; Pulitzer Prize-winning historian **David Levering Lewis**; and **Phillip Harper**, Chair of the Department of English at NYU.

In her introduction, Beverly Guy-Sheftall called the event “a celebration of friendship,” and praised Toni Morrison for her courageous uncovering of “the complexities and healing powers of women finding a safe harbor in each other.”

Toni Morrison said that from her earliest works, “I have always had a long, deep preference for outlaw women (and in *The Bluest Eye*, outlaw children): women who are pushing the boundaries and hungering for a certain kind of freedom.”

Ms. Morrison said such women were often silenced in African American literature, treated as outlaws and despised. In her own novel *Sula*, Hannah Peace was such a character. “As a female, she was both bounty and threat, reflecting the scope and complexity of black women’s lives,” she said.

Until Paula Giddings’s book, Ida B. Wells was a largely forgotten figure in African American history. Toni Morrison mentioned the recent death of the historian **John Hope Franklin** (who had died only two days

before the event at the age of 94) and David Levering Lewis credited Franklin with helping to ensure that her autobiography was finally published in 1970 by Chicago University Press.

Paula Giddings's book was a labor of love. "I have been waiting 20 years for this day," quipped Professor Levering Lewis, commenting on the many years of research with sporadic interruptions over the nearly two decades he has known Paula Giddings, a former colleague.

Coincidentally, one of Paula Giddings's first jobs was as part of the typing pool at Random House that prepared Toni Morrison's manuscript for *The Bluest Eye*. "Toni is the audience I write for," Giddings said, blaming Morrison for adding years to the production of the Ida Wells biography by her simple comment, "Ida Wells is important."

Born to slaves in Mississippi, Ida Wells began her activist career by refusing to leave a first-class ladies' car on a Memphis railway and rose to lead the first national campaign against lynching. Giddings's book proffers a detailed look into the life of an exceptional woman, during one of the most tumultuous periods in American history.

"Ida B. Wells was the least cynical and most hopeful reformer, she knew of people's capacity to change and the capacity of grassroots organizations to force change, if necessary. I don't think she would be surprised by current events," said Paula Giddings.

Paula J. Giddings is the Elizabeth A. Woodson Professor of Afro-American studies at Smith College and the author of *When and Where I Enter* and *In Search of Sisterhood*. **Toni Morrison** is the Nobel Prize-winning author of *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved*, among many others.

Co-Sponsors of the event included the Department of English, Department of History, Department of Social and Cultural Analysis and Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at NYU; Fordham University Department of English/Arts and Sciences; the Women's Research and Resource Center at Spelman College; and the Women Donors Network.

A slide show and audio tape of the March 27 event is posted on the NCRW website: www.ncrw.org. For further information contact **Vivienne Heston-Demirel**, Director of Communications at the National Council for Research on Women: vbeston-demirel@ncrw.org; tel: 212-785-7335, ext. 201.