Half in Shadow

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Growing up, summertime meant family reunions, when extended family scattered across the country, and sometimes around the globe, reconvened over card games in the hospitality suite, under a shade tree at the cookout, or across the table at the banquet. Through porch talk, laughter, games, and food, we ritualized our connection to family, those living and those deceased. Over time, our numbers grew. What began in the yard I raked became highly coordinated affairs with hotel stays and buffet dinners celebrating superlatives: the youngest and oldest in attendance, the person who traveled the farthest. There were small variances in execution from year to year, but one thing remained consistent: the reading of the family history.

Cousin Johnny, an impressive man who stood over six feet and spoke in a rumbling bass, would read this history aloud, tracing the roots of our family tree as he lifted up the names of relatives long gone. By remembering our history, we claimed our inheritance, affirmed our interconnectedness, and highlighted our shared legacy. The family history began as little more than a paragraph or two sandwiched inside a simple cardstock program. Later, it swelled into an extended narrative, accompanied by a multi-page computer-generated diagram of our family tree, bound together as a booklet. As a child, I marveled at the expansiveness of our tree and lingered on the pages with my name. I followed genogram symbols—solid and dotted lines, triangles and circles—defining my place within my immediate family and among my extended relations. As I grew older, I became curious about the stories hidden behind the names or inside the lines delineating marriages and partnerships, siblings and cousins, deaths and births. How did my people come together? Why did they break apart? What did they endure? How did they triumph?

One afternoon, I acted upon my curiosity while visiting my paternal grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Griffin Greene. With college, graduate school, and jobs taking me from the South to the Midwest and back again, I visited Grandma Greene in the “Oranges” whenever I happened to land near New Jersey. She and her sisters, Alberta and Pauline, lived together in separate apartments within the same senior living facility, a building that was the former site of the YMCA where their mother, who I called Nana, had worked as
a domestic. As I got older, I grew more appreciative of their knowledge, their wit, and their outlook, and looked forward to the times when it was just us. My academic training had introduced me to broad narratives about Black women’s intellectual and social work, so as I listened to their stories, I grafted them onto a larger context and before long, saw how my academic training supplied new vocabularies to animate my personal history. Their stories fascinated me, and I looked forward to hearing multiple versions of the most colorful ones over and over again. I especially enjoyed one-on-one time with Grandma Greene because she never tired of telling me stories about my father when he was a boy. Then, one day, I decided to ask her about herself, instead of asking her about Daddy.

“How did you and PopPop meet?”

The question seemed simple enough. Grandma Greene was born in Chatham, Virginia, on 19 December 1922. When she was not quite ten, she moved with her parents and nine brothers and sisters to Orange, New Jersey—a town in the northern part of what is now known as the Garden State. In 1931, my great-grandfather William C. Griffin made the trek of nearly 500 miles north with his family in tow because he yearned for more opportunities than those afforded to him in the South. In Virginia, he worked as a carpenter. Moving to New Jersey, he hoped, would allow him to fulfill his dream of becoming an architect. This would never come to pass. Fed up with “not being able to build the type of dwelling for his family that he was capable of building,”1 William C. took on work as a janitor. He was still working as a janitor at the time of his death.

In her response to my query, Grandma recounted the days when James C. Greene, the man who would become my PopPop, came courting. Day after day he showed up like clockwork, and they would sit and visit together on the porch, talking for hours. After it became clear that his visits were becoming a habit, Nana pulled Grandma aside and presented her with an ultimatum. If she was serious about this here James C. and marriage was on the horizon, then she had a choice: learn to sew or learn to do hair. As I listened to Grandma’s story, my thoughts ran to Nanny, the grandmother in Zora Neale Hurston’s classic Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), and the episode when Nanny forces the protagonist to marry someone she thinks is a sure thing after she sees that “shiftless” Johnny Taylor “lacerating her Janie with a kiss.”2 In the novel, Nanny’s solution to Janie’s flowering womanhood, to the singing bees and creaming blossoms, was marriage and the security Nanny presumed it would afford. Perhaps Nana knew something similar when it came to my grandmother. If marriage was the likely outcome of all
this time young Mary was spending with James C., then she would need a vocation. Doing hair and sewing clothes were respectable forms of employment for Black women because they did not involve cleaning white folks’ homes.

For a moment, Grandma stopped talking. But her story hadn’t ended. “But I wanted to be a math teacher.”

Her response hovered in the air like smoke. Almost immediately, my mind raced. Was it a coincidence that my father had earned his bachelor’s degree in mathematics, which he parlayed into an over-thirty-year career in computer technology, systems engineering, and management? I knew enough of my family history to know that the lack of access my grandmother had to higher education was not entirely a question of money: my great-grandfather did well enough for himself, in spite of his limited vocational options. But only the boys earned college degrees. While my Aunt Georgia, who died before I formed a strong memory of her, attended college briefly, she never finished. What could Mary Elizabeth Griffin Greene have been if Nana had granted her the space to pursue her calling? Grandma became a hairdresser, a salon owner, and eventually skilled in switchboard operation, typing, and keypunch. She was a successful entrepreneur, had a loving family, and maintained an extensive network of friends with whom she played cards and attended church. But hairdressing wasn’t her dream. Her ambitions, thwarted. Her place in the genealogy, set. Grandma was wife to James C., mother to James L. and Charles E., grandmother to Shanna, Onaje, and James Jr. But this other part of her story—her yearning for a piece of life where she could cultivate her own abilities and pursue her own joys—was invisible to everyone except me.

Half in Shadow: The Life and Legacy of Nellie Y. McKay is a biography driven by interlocking personal and intellectual commitments. I make visible the hidden story of McKay, the literary scholar who made an indelible mark on the American academy by creating space for Black literature, Black scholars, and Black feminist thought. Simultaneously, I position myself as a link in the chain of Black women’s intellectualism. As I recount McKay’s beginnings, how she realized her vision of a life beyond the one prescribed for Black women in the first half of the twentieth century, I chart my inheritance through a matrilineal line in which the work of McKay and other Black feminist literary scholars becomes my intellectual birthright. McKay’s story is an account of field formation, how African American literature and Black women’s studies became codified within the academy. This is a story about McKay’s brave pursuit of her ambitions in the face of racism, sexism,
class oppression, and age discrimination; it is also a statement of the inheritance I claim because of her sacrifice.

If my grandmother’s story planted the seed for this project, then it broke ground with a conversation. In 2009, I hosted my colleague and Mellon Mays comrade Gene Andrew Jarrett as the Connelly Lecturer in English at Grinnell College. The Connelly Lectures, named for the late Peter Connelly, who taught at Grinnell for over thirty years, feature accomplished literary scholars who are not only experts in their fields but also generous teachers and mentors. After two days of lectures and classroom visits, Jarrett and I met for lunch to reflect on his visit and catch up. We discussed McKay’s passing and the secrets revealed after her death. I told Jarrett what I knew: who was told and when, the daughter McKay introduced to colleagues as her sister, the life we knew nothing about, and my questions about her legacy.

“You should write about that,” Jarrett offered.

My eyes widened. I shifted in my seat. Smiled a little, maybe.

The conversation continued. We finished our lunch, but I couldn’t stop thinking about Jarrett’s suggestion and how it raised questions about the writing of McKay’s story, my preparedness to undertake it, and the potential risks involved. How would I write a biography faithful to the nuances of her life when so many of the key players were still alive? What stories were McKay’s alone, and which stories, particularly those involving persons close to her, were for others to tell? How could I offer revelations about McKay’s life without exposing her peers unnecessarily? Then again, how could I not take advantage of the opportunity to speak directly to Black scholars who entered the professoriate in the 1970s and 1980s to better understand the climate of the times and how that climate impacted McKay’s choices? What would McKay’s story tell me about how there came to be a place for me—as a scholar of African American literature—in the English department at a small liberal arts college in the middle of Iowa? I found the prospect of writing McKay’s story both exciting and daunting but ultimately decided that my curiosities could not stop with that conversation.

I consulted my graduate advisers and learned that McKay’s daughter, Patricia “Pat” Watson, would be key, so I wrote to ask if she would support my efforts to write her mother’s biography. I suppose I could have proceeded without her participation, but in truth, the thought never crossed my mind. I knew writing McKay’s life story would require that I tap an expansive archive, that I work within and beyond those institutional repositories that house the documents and ephemera that archivists deem “valuable.” I knew that institutional archives, those contested sites of knowledge production,
privilege certain materials to the exclusion of others, so to tell the story I wanted to tell, I would need access to resources that might never find their way into the archive's acid-free folders and low-lignin boxes. I knew that when initiating contact with Watson, I needed to lead with a sensitivity that conveyed my seriousness. I mailed my letter then waited. A few weeks later, I received a card from Watson; I found, enclosed therein, an email thread. Watson explained that since she didn’t know me personally, she felt lacking “in the knowledge needed to make a good evaluation of [my] request,” so she did “the only logical thing: [she] passed the ball to those who did have that knowledge.” In the card, she included a copy of the “string of e-mails” exchanged between her and McKay’s closest friends and colleagues in the professoriate, then concluded the correspondence by agreeing to support my efforts to write about her mother: “I would be very happy,” Watson wrote, “to give my consent and cooperation to your project.” With this, the work of learning about McKay’s life had officially begun.

Watson’s support resulted from the endorsement I received from literary scholars Susan Stanford Friedman and Thadious M. Davis, historian Nell Irvin Painter, and Black women’s studies scholar Stanlie M. James. I had already been in touch with Painter about gaining special access to her nearly thirty-year correspondence with McKay, and in the e-mail exchange with Watson, Painter confirmed my interest in going “about this project in a scholarly way” and recognized that my “affection for Nellie will ensure a careful, sensitive job.” Friedman concurred but noted that a project like this “grows and grows.” It is this unwieldiness, and the shift between literary criticism and biography, that informs Davis’s response: “I agree with Nell about Shanna’s being the kind of person and scholar to do a biography of Nellie, and I also agree with Susan that Shanna may want to consider that biography as a second book because writing biography is very time consuming and difficult to do—it is and it isn’t the same as most of our academic writing.” I was so floored by these early endorsements that I completely underestimated Davis’s admonition about how long biographies take and how they differ from more traditional forms of literary scholarship. My writing proceeded slowly. Then, with barely two years of preliminary research under my belt, I became a mother of two, and the conditions under which I found myself working completely changed.

My research proceeded in fits and starts. I worked while the babies slept. I kept a notebook handy for brainstorming. In my office, a picture of McKay reminded me of my responsibilities to my project. I chipped away at the research, and even though in some years progress felt slow, I know now that
I had been absorbing and synthesizing the information all along, allowing what I had learned from interviews or in the archives to become a part of me. As I conducted research, I published articles where I reflected on the methodology behind Black women’s biography and taught my undergraduates the delicate business of writing Black women’s stories. Seeking Watson’s support, and witnessing how she consulted her mother’s community of friends, led me to write “Intimacy and Ephemera: In Search of Our Mother’s Letters,” an essay that discusses how I initiated “invisible trust-building work” to build the repository of primary sources I needed to narrate McKay’s story. My mentored advanced research with a team of students was the foundation of “Black Women and the Biographical Method: Undergraduate Research and Life Writing,” an essay that explains how undergraduates can be trained to assist with research projects about women prone to secrecy. These projects bridged my interests in mentoring, pedagogy, and humanistic inquiry, to be sure, but they also inspired me to keep going with my research on McKay while I negotiated the competing demands of work and family life. There was a story I felt compelled to tell. Some projects you choose. This project chose me.

When I started McKay’s biography over ten years ago, I was in the early stages of figuring out how to commit to my work, give love to my children, and take care of myself. My research gave me a glimpse into some of the trade-offs McKay negotiated during her life, but when I became a parent, motherhood opened up an entirely new set of questions relative to the book. Specifically, how do Black women create conditions conducive to creative expression and negotiate trade-offs when pursuing a passion? What are the narratives we tell ourselves to keep going, and where do those stories come from? How frequently do we all engage in some form of self-fashioning in which we make and remake ourselves according to a vision that’s out of step with popular portrayals, caricature, or stereotype, and in what way is an academic persona a survival strategy for Black women? Understanding McKay’s path by way of the narrative she created to progress allowed me to better understand my personal story and place in the professoriate. Therefore, as much as this book is about McKay, it is also about me and the Black women who inherited a literary tradition reflective of a range of Black women’s subjectivities; the working women who burned the midnight oil in order to create; the grandmothers, aunts, and mothers who “passed,” in one way or another, to circumvent oppression resulting from race, gender, age, or class bias. McKay spent her life creating space for others. This book creates space for her.
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