Half in Shadow

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Published by The University of North Carolina Press

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Half in Shadow: The Life and Legacy of Nellie Y. McKay.

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Introduction

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong
Like “rent,” “feeding a wife,” “satisfying a man.”
—Gwendolyn Brooks, “kitchenette building”

On 1 April 2006, friends and colleagues, students and guests, gathered in Morgridge Auditorium, a lecture hall nestled inside the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s School of Business, to memorialize Nellie Y. McKay, a preeminent scholar in the fields of Black literary and feminist studies. “The cause was cancer,” reported the New York Times, and those in academic circles grieved the loss of another Black woman scholar who died prematurely, physically impacted by the toxicity of the academy, the stress of anti-racism work, and a range of diseases assaulting “the lives of black women who are artists, teachers, activists, and scholars.” At the time, it felt like an epidemic, and McKay’s passing, on 22 January 2006, only added to the grief. In the span of a decade, from 1992 to 2002, Black feminist scholars, students, and Black studies practitioners had already lost figures, forces of nature actually, who laid the foundation for Black women’s studies with their writing, teaching, and activism: Audre Lorde (1992), Sylvia Ardyn Boone (1993), Toni Cade Bambara (1995), Sherley Anne Williams (1999), Barbara T. Christian (2000), June Jordan (2002), and Claudia Tate (2002). Most were dead by fifty-five. Often, the cause was cancer. Now, Nellie was gone. The symposium gave those impacted by McKay’s academic work and professional influence the opportunity to come together and remember a woman who shaped the lives of countless individuals through her scholarship, teaching, and mentoring.

Craig Werner, chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies and McKay’s longtime ally, oversaw symposium proceedings. As colleagues, Werner and McKay had advised students and collaborated on a variety of projects, many of them Ford-funded grants to fortify Black studies at UW-Madison. Outfitted in an oversize steel-gray blazer atop a pink-and-white striped shirt and black tie, instead of the baseball caps and hockey jerseys he regularly wore in casual contexts, Werner thanked the event sponsors, faculty, students, and support staff who made the event possible before moving deliberately, sometimes joyfully, at other times somberly, from
guest to guest, speaker to speaker, as outlined in the symposium program. After opening remarks came a series of panels: “From Margin to Center: Nellie McKay’s Scholarly Achievement,” “Nellie McKay and the Art of Mentoring,” “Nellie McKay and Black Women’s Studies.” In the audience, Lani Guinier, the first Black woman tenured professor of Harvard University’s law school, sat quietly; former UW-Madison chancellor Donna Shalala, who was unable to attend, sent regrets. Afterward there would be dinner at Baraka, an East African restaurant and a favorite of McKay’s. Guests who returned to the lecture hall after dinner would view the video montage “Remembering Nellie McKay,” watch a dramatic reading from Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, and hear McKay’s friends, colleagues, and former students read literary passages in her honor. While skimming the program, I saw it. In the middle of the day’s events was a special presentation to Patricia M. Watson on behalf of congresswoman Tammy Baldwin, the former a woman many had met but none had ever really known.

For her entire career, McKay’s students, colleagues, and friends within the profession thought her students were her only children and her work her only lover. However, a man and woman, seated together toward the rear of the auditorium, but noticeably apart from the clusters of colleagues, the groupings of students, and the famous friends peppered throughout the audience, had always known better. The events of the day confirmed the speculation, the truth revealed only after her death, the secret McKay had hidden from even her closest friends in the academy. Not only had McKay once been married, but she was also ten years older than we knew and a mother of two: a son, Harry McKay, and a daughter, Patricia M. Watson or “Pat,” whom McKay had always introduced and referred to as her sister. To me, she was Professor McKay. To her colleagues, she was Nellie. To the Madison community, she was Dr. Nellie. But to Pat, she was mother. To the seated young man, Nicholas Henry Watson, McKay was grandmother—his Nell.

By the start of the symposium, most had already heard the news of this family life hidden in McKay’s professional shadows. Many responded with good humor to the irony, laughing that their friend had pulled one last trick on them; others saw little humor in this postmortem revelation or were angry with McKay for her withholdings. Susan Stanford Friedman, McKay’s English Department friend and women’s studies comrade, used her time at the podium to imagine both the humor and the pathos in McKay’s concealments. In remarks titled “Nellie’s Laughing,” Friedman named the deception and imagined the impetus: “She fooled us all. . . . And for so long. Out of what necessity or compul-
sion? And with what devilish glee?” Friedman continued, assessing the other side of the coin: “No, I don’t think her fooling us all—friends and acquaintances alike—was simply a matter of fun and rebellion. At times it must have tickled her fancy, at other times perhaps it left her feeling quite alone.”

It was this loneliness that led Richard Ralston, McKay’s longtime UW-Madison colleague, to feel great sadness over McKay’s secret. Ralston had helped to recruit McKay to Madison’s Afro-American Studies Department in 1977 and was on hand to witness it all: McKay’s early adjustment, the tenure track tensions, struggles with the Jean Toomer manuscript, sadness over colleague Tom W. Shick, pride in a Black Norton, love of her students. But in the end, he found nothing funny about a woman who felt the need to live her life half in shadow. McKay was a master of narrative and was particularly adept at interpreting the narratives of Black women writers. The extent to which she had mastered her own narrative, dictating its contours, limiting our access to details, and managing the flow of information, only came to light after her death. I, too, wondered “Why?” and returned to an interview I had conducted with McKay two years prior for clues.

In the October 2006 issue of PMLA, the journal of the Modern Language Association, I published “Breaking the Whole Thing Open: An Interview with Nellie Y. McKay,” which documented McKay’s “undergraduate work at Queens College, her graduate years at Harvard, and her professional life in Madison.” I met McKay in the spring of 1994 and became her graduate student in the fall of that same year. I was one of her “daughters,” a group of five Black women graduate students who arrived one or two at a time in the early to mid-1990s, most of us earning master’s degrees in Afro-American studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison but all of us earning PhDs in English, just as McKay had done at Harvard decades before. I conducted the interview during the summer of 2004 after feeling an intense and inexplicable pull to Madison, Wisconsin. Something similar had called me to South Carolina to sit at the knee of my maternal grandmother, Magnolia Means, years before. It turned out to be the last summer Grandma Means was alive. So, when I heard that same inside voice telling me to “go talk to Nellie,” I knew better than to ignore it. I rerouted a flight and made my way to Madison. The summer of 2004 was the last summer McKay was well enough to sit and answer questions at length. At the time I conducted this interview, I envisioned it as the moment to document truths about McKay that were off limits to the general public. I felt as if the intimate conversations about her life were mine alone and that the published version of our interview would reveal something altogether new. Later, I learned that she...
had told of the early days so often that the carefully edited version she presented to me had come to sound complete, whole.

“Breaking the Whole Thing Open,” an edited, published version of this interview, focused on McKay’s recollections of the formative years of Black literary studies. What remained on the cutting room floor, and which I reference throughout this book, are her first-hand accounts of childhood memories, recollections of “my mother,” “my parents,” “my dad.” Later, I found a problem. McKay’s version of these events collided with truths found in my research. McKay narrated her childhood as idyllic, governed by memories of her mother’s love and care and her father’s encouragement. There is no mention of an early shocking and traumatic loss, only the inevitability of an academic career after being shaped by parents who were connoisseurs of Black literature, parents who would read the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar to her at night and who would bring home Langston Hughes’s Jesse B. Simple stories from the Post. The full interview illuminates the disconnect between McKay’s public narrative and what I call her secret, what certain colleagues call a lie, what Kevin Young calls “storying,” and what a dear friend calls McKay’s business. McKay’s letters, personal reflections, and scholarship, then, provide the keys to understanding the meaning behind her machinations and a window into how she narrated an academic self as a Black woman.

McKay acknowledged how she wrote and rewrote her personal narrative to emphasize the elements that play on the public or serve a political purpose in a letter to her friend and colleague Nell Irvin Painter, the highly regarded scholar of African American history and the author, most recently, of The History of White People (2010) and Old in Art School (2018). In the letter cited here, McKay recalled a talk she had agreed to give but had forgotten to prepare (such slip-ups were not uncommon in McKay’s life, as she worked quite regularly to exhaustion). Note her reflection on how she rendered a romanticized and “propagandistic” personal story to manipulate her white audience:

But flush with victory from my King Day talk, I decided to go the path of my own autobiography and to talk about how I got to be doing the work I do. So out came another romantic version of my growing up years and how the riots at Queens College in 1967 led to my decision to study American Literature (that’s absolutely true). Also true was the part of how important my folks thought education was and how all of their daughters lead successful lives (also true).
What I really did however, was to spin a tale that I consciously knew I was trying to weave to show that there were black people, still are, who are not from the slums and ghettoes, whose values are very middle class whether they have money or not, and who, to a large extent are “just like white people.” It was all in the casting. The story was basically true but the emphasis pointed to something that was romantic and propagandistic. I found it very interesting.  

Later in the letter, McKay—who was noticeably intrigued and, dare I say, tickled by her professional antics—wrote: “Autobiography is a construction (as we’ve known for sometime) and how one shapes it makes all the difference.” Her assessment is as much a commentary on the talk she gave at the last minute as it is a primer for decoding her life story. In describing to Painter how she constructed her personal story for those retired professors, McKay offered hers as a counternarrative to stories about Black folk, stories propagated by a white establishment, stories limited in their representational scope because they equate a Black experience only with “the slums and ghettoes.” The stories McKay told—the details she included as well as those she omitted—reinforced her vision for her life, allowing her to eke out a space for herself and her ambitions as an older Black working-class and soon-to-be divorced wife and mother whose opportunities were limited by age, race, and class prejudice. McKay wanted to pursue her dreams. With her race and gender always on display, she manipulated and policed the boundaries of the one thing she could control: her narrative.

Even though “Breaking the Whole Thing Open” repeats some anecdotes documented elsewhere, the interview in its totality is significant because it provided me with an as-told-to version of McKay’s life story that I would later examine against the alternate version that emerged after her death. What’s more, it taught me my greatest lesson as an ethnographer: how not to allow culturally inflected notions of respect and respectability to override my responsibilities as a researcher. Whenever I think back to the afternoon I interviewed McKay, I lament not asking the question ready to leap from my lips: Did you ever regret not having children? I heard it in my head, but I kept my mouth shut, out of fear that I would hurt her feelings or trespass the borders of her personal life. McKay was known as a professor who kept an open door. This open door was a symbol of her accessibility. But accessibility does not equal intimacy. McKay gave her colleagues and her students access on her own terms. And for her Black women students, particularly, boundaries were maintained by rules of engagement dictated by McKay’s status as elder.
In reflections published as part of the Nellie Y. McKay memorial issue of the African American Review, two of McKay’s former Black women graduate students, Lisa Woolfork and Keisha Watson, pondered first names, respect, and Black women. “The ease with which I’ve been calling her Nellie in this remembrance does not reflect my name for her during the entirety of my graduate career,” Woolfork explained. “I called her ‘Professor McKay.’ This gesture was not at her insistence, but at my own. Not out of fear, but out of genuine and heartfelt respect, the boundaries of our relationship were clear.” Watson echoed Woolfork’s sentiments: “I only called her Nellie when outside of her earshot, thinking it impertinent to be that familiar with so wise and accomplished an elder, and a Jamaican one at that. (She never disabused me of this notion either.)” Watson’s “eight years in a small, primarily Caribbean, fundamentalist school in Brooklyn” were instructive: “always call people respectfully and by their proper name,” she learned, and she applied this lesson to her engagements with McKay. My aversion to potentially insulting my adviser notwithstanding, I don’t believe McKay would have admitted anything if I had asked her directly about wanting to be a mother. I imagine she would have laughed and said something like, “But Shanna, you’re all my children!” Nevertheless, while I use “McKay” throughout my biography, it is not out of fear of trespass; it is out of respect for her as a scholar who has earned the right to be called by her “proper name.” I am consistent with my use of quotes and use “Nellie” when my interlocutors do, except when I use “little Nellie” to differentiate between McKay and her mother or to signal intimate exchanges, especially those at the time of her death.

Half in Shadow: The Life and Legacy of Nellie Y. McKay traces twentieth-century Black literary history through McKay’s life to reveal her role in field formation. As a scholar, McKay achieved remarkable professional success. From her groundbreaking feminist analysis of the life and work of Jean Toomer, author of the imagistic prose poem Cane (1923), to her coeditorship of The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (1997) with Henry Louis Gates Jr. and her authorship of introductions, forewords, and afterwords, McKay helped codify Black literary studies, especially at predominantly white institutions. Black literary studies were already alive and well at many historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and in Black periodicals such as Black World—facts McKay readily acknowledged—but McKay’s work is noteworthy because it justified the work to white scholars and insisted on the centrality of Black literary studies in English departments nationwide. “The Norton Anthology of Afro-American Literature,” McKay wrote, was “the white literary establishment’s final endorsement of
this field” and, as such, “was one of the single most significant events in the history of black studies.” Where there was once only a smattering of books by Black critics, McKay and her peers created new shelves of knowledge to hold what they created as well as what they imagined would come.

In addition to her field forming work in Black literary studies, McKay was also a foremother of what we now call Black women’s studies. By recovering and publishing literature by Black women, writing about the texts, collecting them in anthologies, and teaching them in college and university classes, McKay and a critical mass of Black women literary scholars theorized a tradition of Black feminism. McKay and others woke a sleeping tradition of Black feminist thought reaching back to Victoria Earle Matthews, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, and others dating from the late nineteenth century. McKay published essays, which focused on how to read Black women’s literature, how to understand the state of the field, and how Black women experience white universities; she contributed to the efforts of other Black women scholars, Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Barbara Smith, Patricia Bell-Scott and Gloria Hull, for example, and together, as scholars and editors, advanced the study of Black women as writers and intellectuals in books, symposia, and public-facing work. The intellectual genealogies of Black women and their contributions to Black literary studies still remain in the shadow of their male counterparts. *Half in Shadow* highlights McKay’s influence to bring Black women’s role in African American literary history to the fore.

I am certainly not the first scholar to take an interest in the history of Black literary studies or in McKay’s role in it. In 2004, Farah Jasmine Griffin published a review of “Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies,” which traced key moments in the recovery, teaching, institutionalizing, and publishing of Black literature and identified historical movements, scholars, and particularly formative texts published between 1974 and 2004. Griffin followed “Thirty Years” with her 2007 essay “That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black Feminist Literary Criticism,” which maps the contributions of a number of scholars—Barbara Smith, Ann duCille, Toni Cade, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Mary Helen Washington, Michelle Wallace, Frances Smith Foster, Deborah E. McDowell, Hortense J. Spillers, and Hazel V. Carby, to name a few—by illuminating how their intellectual contributions “influenced their disciplines even if they did so from the margins.” Griffin dedicated her essay to McKay, a “pioneering feminist critic, inspiring teacher, and devoted mentor.”

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Jackson’s *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934–1960* (2011) reaches back to the generation prior to capture what we learn when we look at specific groups of Black writers, such as those who produced during an era when integration, assimilation, and “a myth of liberal America” impacted what they wrote and how they were received, effectively staging the singular story I seek to tell.22 *Half in Shadow* drills down, adding specificity to the comprehensive analyses offered by Griffin and Jackson, and lifts up the name of one critic—Nellie Y. McKay—to unravel the rich life she lived and name specific sites of institutional impact, so that the daughters, too, may soar.

*Half in Shadow* also builds upon a body of research on Black women’s intellectualism reaching back to the early Black Atlantic and collisions between Africans in the diaspora and white Europeans. Stephanie Y. Evans’s *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850–1954* (2007), Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway’s *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (2007), and Toward an *Intellectual History of Black Women* (2015), edited by Mia E. Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage, are three texts that “challenge narrow assumptions about intellectual history by demonstrating how ideas have been crucial to black women”23 as they confronted interlocking systems of oppression. As scholars have traced the long arc of “black women’s educational attainment”24 according to “a long history of ideas,”25 they have also attended to how Black women fared as professors and administrators in institutions of higher learning. The first-person accounts in Lois Benjamin’s *Black Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils* (1997) and Deborah Gray White’s *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower* (2008) contribute to an archive that documents not only Black women’s experiences in the professoriate but also how their “very presence . . . is a testimony of revisionism and change.”26 Motifs repeated throughout these books—how Black women sacrificed to pursue their ambitions and how they responded to racism and sexism while pursuing the PhD and in their professional work—emerge in *Half in Shadow*, too. But in a book-length study that delves deeply into a single life, I can be expansive, free to treat “work that does not lend itself as easily to summary”27 with nuance and specificity. I eagerly await Barbara D. Savage’s intellectual history of Professor Merze Tate, the Oxford- and Harvard-educated Black woman historian who traveled widely, wrote extensively, and named specifically the contours of her own extraordinary life through “something few black women have the power to generate: a historical archive.”28 *Half in Shadow* contributes to this historical record to further prevent Black women scholars like McKay from languishing in obscurity.

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Half in Shadow, the title, captures two aspects of McKay’s story: a life hidden behind a carefully curated public persona and scholarly contributions obscured by the elision of Black feminist scholars from the fields they formed. Barbara T. Christian, Ann duCille, and Nellie Y. McKay called the profession to task on this and similar topics in their prescient essays “But What Do We Think We’re Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History” (1989), “The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies” (1994), and “Naming the Problem That Led to the Question ‘Who Shall Teach African American Literature?’; Or, Are We Ready to Disband the Wheatley Court?” (1998). In her “B-side rendition,” P. Gabrielle Foreman’s “A Riff, a Call, and a Response: Reframing the Problem That Led to Our Being Tokens in Ethnic and Gender Studies; or, Where Are We Going Anyway and with Whom Will We Travel?” (2013) considers the “hidden entitlements” that led to the exclusion of “specialists who are also the subjects” from Black print culture studies and other subfields within Black studies.20 Half in Shadow recounts this history, then restores McKay to her rightful place as a woman whose embodied presence and literary scholarship transformed the academy by making Black writing indispensable to American literature and by rewriting Black literary canons with Black women prominently placed. Half in Shadow reads McKay’s life story alongside the literature she studied, the essays she penned, the books she wrote, the collections she edited, and the introductions she authored to offer a new assessment of Black literary studies by casting the tradition as a movement of bodies, not simply as a body of texts.

When it comes to Black women and self-writing, autobiography, not biography, has been either the genre of choice or the genre of last resort, since autobiography requires the subject to deem her life important. Biography, in contrast, requires that others both value the life and render it in words. It is more likely, therefore, for Black women to write about themselves than to be written about. The long tradition of African American self-writing through slave narratives, autobiographies, and memoirs evidences this. But then, in the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, there was a shift. Black women scholars including, but not limited to, Barbara Ransby, Nell Irvin Painter, Alexis De Veaux, Mia E. Bay, Valerie Boyd, Thadious M. Davis, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, Sherie M. Randolph, and Imani Perry decided that Black women were worthy subjects and penned biographies of historical figures, writers, and activists. In so doing, they followed in the path forged by Pauline Hopkins, the first editor of the turn-of-the-century periodical the Colored American Magazine, who is best known for her serialized novels but who also published “historical and biographical articles of persons and incidents
famous in the history of the race,” most notably, a biography of Harriet Tubman in Hopkins’s “Famous Women of the Negro Race” series. Black women scholars trained since the advent of Black power, Black studies, and the women’s movement actively recovered archival materials required to write biographies about Black women subjects and availed themselves of the publishing outlets available to them because of their professional work, developing methodologies of Black feminist biography along the way.

For all of McKay’s work to illuminate the inner lives and creative work of Black women writers, like most Black women scholars of her generation, McKay’s deep influence during the formative moments of Black literary studies remains underrecognized. Hidden, too, is her interior life, the self that informed how she approached her scholarship, managed administrative work, and mentored her students. *Half in Shadow*, the first biography of a Black woman scholar, not a Black woman writer, artist, or activist, historicizes the transformative products of McKay’s work and, by naming the institutional inheritance she left behind for students, scholars, colleges, and universities, acknowledges the Black women scholars who laid the intellectual groundwork for twenty-first century Black feminist biography.

This biography is not “traditional,” which is to say that it is not, as National Humanities Medal recipient and renowned biographer Arnold Rampersad described, a “full-scale portrait.” For Rampersad, literary and intellectual biographies such as mine run the risk of “confessions of partial portraiture, and partial failure” and “should be attempted before full-scale biographies only when there is an acute and most likely permanent shortage of data.” I don’t know whether the archive at my disposal represents a “shortage,” but I believe there’s a case to be made for nontraditional biographical approaches to Black women who have not achieved some degree of celebrity or whose personal archive may be sparse by comparison, not because they are any less important but because of what historian Deborah Gray White identified as Black women’s traditional “reluctance to donate personal papers” to “manuscript repositories” and the “resultant suspicion of anyone seeking private information.”

Cer-tainly, the limits of the archive define the contours of biography. *Half in Shadow*, then, is more than a linear accounting of the whys and wherefores of McKay’s life. This book honors the interplay between literary history, literary criticism, and memoir not only to tell the story of McKay’s life but also to explain who I am because of her, my place in an intellectual genealogy.

*Half in Shadow* does not presume objectivity; it is self-consciously subjective and embodied, meaning that periodically throughout the book, I foreground my positionality as a scholar in the field McKay pioneered and as a

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student she mentored. My positionality is not methodology, however, and the latter is informed by a tradition of Black feminist biography in which biographers must negotiate their Black women subjects’ “penchant for secrecy” to construct a life story that is faithful even in the face of missing information. To establish a narrative timeline of McKay’s life, I relied on primary sources that include, but are not limited to, curricula vitae, letters, transcripts, and personnel and student files as well as government documents; I used birth and death certificates, registrar transcripts, marriage records, naturalization papers, military service records, and social security applications to reconstruct her family history.

McKay left no journal, per se, but from time to time she sent Painter what she called “Notes to a Journal,” daily reflections a paragraph or so long listed chronologically; she also referred to her correspondence with Painter as a journal of sorts. When explicit facts were unavailable, I turned to a form of triangulation, such as the one Alexis De Veaux described in Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde (2004), to reasonably speculate when “competing truths” offer more insight into “complexities rather than absolutes.” On questions of objectivity, I cannot change my proximity to my subject. McKay was my adviser. But like Pulitzer Prize–winning essayist Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, who practices the biographical method in her feature articles, I am “the filter of [McKay’s] story,” ever present through vantage point. True to Imani Perry’s observation that “all biography is autobiography, at least in part,” I am up-front and self-reflective about my positionality; and like Barbara Ransby, who, in her introduction to Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement (2003), explained how her affinity for Baker “enhanced rather than lessened [her] desire to be thorough, rigorous, and balanced in [her] treatment of [Baker’s] life and ideas,” I write, conscious of and confident in my perspective but faithful to my archive.

As McKay’s biographer, I snooped and investigated, constructed, and arranged. I narrated, situated, and postulated. I reasonably concluded, imagined, told, traced, and explained. I read for repetition; I made sense of bits and pieces. This biography is a mosaic, held together by the mortar of leitmotif. But it is not the entire story. Missing, for example, is a rendering of McKay’s romantic life. At various points, McKay’s letters identify love interests, but I have been unable to corroborate the information. Other letters were given to me redacted to protect a reportedly married former lover who, according to my sources, is still living. The holder of those letters made a choice that I honor. The time may never come when those letters become available in full. But I make note here, lest those who read this biography
think that McKay was interested only in books. She was not. McKay was a woman who experienced desire and heartbreak, who had harsh words for a colleague she thought was trying to bird-dog her man, and who experienced fear when harassment threatened her safety.

Most members of McKay’s immediate family are deceased. I tried repeatedly to interview her sister, Constance, but she demurred each time, insisting that the next time she would talk to me. She passed before I ever heard a word about her memories of their time together in Queens, New York. McKay’s daughter, Patricia M. Watson, was forthcoming and generous from the start. I visited her several times in St. Louis before her death due to cancer. Her resemblance to McKay was uncanny. They had the same slight build, the same short Afro, and her hands: the very same hands. Watson’s slender fingers and raised veins reminded me of the many times I had seen her mother reading in her office. I visualized McKay, glasses on, book open, hands clasped, and palms upward, as if ready to receive the Eucharist. The first time we met, Watson and I talked food, Penzeys, and chili spices. She provided contact information for the family and friends who knew McKay before she entered the academy, those who knew both sides of the story. I do not know the whereabouts of McKay’s son, Harry, because Watson was the only person who could put me in contact with him. McKay’s grandson Nicholas is aware of the project, but he did not respond to my request for an interview. In chapter 1, I say more about Joyce Scott, McKay’s dearest friend from the “old days,” whom I was able to interview. She and McKay were like sisters and remained close until McKay’s death.

McKay spent her adolescence and early adulthood in Jamaica. I have been unable to reconstruct this history. There may be sources and individuals in Jamaica capable of unlocking details about McKay’s adolescence abroad and willing to shed a brighter light on the motivations behind her withholdings. Perhaps this missing information will be included either in a future edition of this book or in someone else’s biography of McKay. All told, I am invested in this book doing the job it was meant to do. In other words, I am committed to introducing McKay to a broader public and to mapping her life in relation to the emergence of African American literature as a codified field of study. One day, I hope, there will be multiple biographies of McKay and her contemporaries, since the multiple biographies of Lorraine Hansberry, either published or in progress, by Imani Perry, Margaret Wilkerson, and Soyica Colbert, not to mention Tracy Heather Strain’s documentary, are proof that each biography assumes its own perspective, informed by the author’s politics, intellectual investments, and archive.
Those who agreed to speak with me about McKay did so in overwhelmingly glowing terms. For most who declined to be interviewed, a pattern emerged: they had a contentious history with McKay. I cannot claim, with absolute certainty, sour grapes as their motivation for not speaking with me. But I raise it here as a limitation because it impacts the book in two ways. The most obvious is that *Half in Shadow* may seem one-sided when, in fact, it reflects the archive, the ephemera, and the ethnographic accounts I have available to me at present. The second is a matter of degree. Moments where I pause to consider McKay’s motivations, to critique her choices not from a position of judgment but from a site of curiosity, may read as accusatory because there are only a handful of places in the book where McKay’s peers have cause to call her out or enter into conflict. With few instances to offset the contrast, this analysis may prove disconcerting to some readers, especially those invested in a particular view of McKay or rankled by the thought of the student taking on the life of the teacher. With so much harmony, dissonance is deafening. *Half in Shadow*, admittedly, is a product of this day and time. Half a century or so in the future, oral histories complicating McKay’s interpersonal relationships—such as those housed in the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s archives—will be made available to the next generation of scholars, those who will be here long after I am gone. What is indisputable, even in the face of this missing information, is McKay’s impact on African American literary history and American literature writ large. It is this legacy, and her absolutely fascinating manipulations of her personal history, that I amplify in *Half in Shadow*.

McKay rewrote her past to pursue her ambitions. Her story speaks to those whose dreams, like the ruminations of the speaker in the epigraph that opens this introduction, risk never making it past the daily work of “feeding a wife” or “satisfying a man.”

Gwendolyn Brooks, the Pulitzer Prize–winning United States Poet Laureate who penned “kitchenette building,” was known, in part, for the poetry she found in the quotidian experiences of the denizens of Chicago’s South Side. Like the dreamer in Brooks’s poem, McKay knew that she was more than “things of dry hours and the involuntary plan” and imagined that her life could be technicolor, not “grayed in, and gray.” Dreams, rendered in poetry or pursued in life, can dissipate in the rush of the everyday. Instead of the unremarkable shades of grayscale, McKay pursued color, opting for a dream, “white and violet,” fluttering like an aria sung “down these rooms,” in and out of the walls and ceilings, both literal and symbolic, that delineated her existence. McKay’s life is testimony that Black women’s dreams and ambitions are worth the
pursuit, worth taking the time to consider the possibility of what might be “if we were willing to let it in, / Had time to warm it, / keep it very clean, / Anticipate a message, let it begin?” There is no “I” in the Brooks poem. Only the “we” forced to suspend the dream when an opportunity to satisfy creature comforts strikes: “We wonder. But not well! not for a minute! / Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now, / We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.” For the speaker, the everyday supersedes the dream. This was the way McKay lived her life, until she found another way.

Chapter 1, “Strategies, Not Truths,” maps the experiences that propelled McKay into higher education. It traces McKay’s movement as an adult between Jamaica, West Indies, and Queens, New York; between marriage and divorce; between leaving her children and being reunited with them; and between Queens College and Harvard University. This chapter identifies the social forces that prompted McKay to attend Harvard, contemporaneously with her daughter at Radcliffe, where the two lived as “sisters.” I position McKay’s narrative in a tradition of uplift facilitated by church communities to reveal how she dissembled as a survival strategy she would practice throughout her career. The late 1960s were a moment of uprising and change, when the reverberations of Brown v. Board of Education and the women’s movement, Black power, the Vietnam War, and student protests shifted the landscape of higher education. Forever changed by the student protests for racial and social justice at Queens College in 1969, McKay experienced her intellectual flowering alongside the college’s open admissions program, a fact that contextualized her lifelong investment in inclusion and access.

Chapter 2, “Some Very Vital Missing Thing,” discusses how McKay, a first-generation divorced working-class Black woman who entered Harvard in 1969 at the age of thirty-nine, circumvented the limited professional opportunities race, gender, and class oppression prescribed and prepared herself to marshal the collective enterprise that produced Black literary studies. This chapter considers how McKay policed the borders of her professional life to make space for herself, her colleagues, and her thoughts about Black writing in institutions hostile to her ideas and to her presence. I probe McKay’s struggles at Harvard, difficulties with her Jean Toomer book, and anxieties around tenure to show how these early experiences allowed McKay to build a professional profile that would lead her to reject the individualist ethos of the academic “superstar.”

Chapter 3, “When and Where I Enter,” goes behind the scenes of the making of The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (NAAAL), the groundbreaking collection that canonized foundational Black texts—an
ongoing project reaching back to *Les Cenelles* (1845)—and made Black literature widely accessible through a premier teaching tool. This chapter traces the ups and downs of an enterprise that extended far beyond the five-year estimate into twelve years total and saw an initial 1,250-page limit more than double to 2,665 pages, to illustrate McKay’s role in making African American literature indispensable to American literary studies and a teaching tool for social justice. Using unpublished interviews and an array of primary sources, this chapter explains how McKay managed early editorial board tensions and captures how “gender trouble” impacted the anthology and the canonization of African American literature.

Chapter 4, “Crepuscule with Nellie,” recounts McKay’s final year, her decline due to cancer, and defines her legacy by highlighting McKay’s commitment to adult education, institutional bridge building, and PhD pipelines. From an early interview with Toni Morrison to her provocative *PMLA* article on white scholars of Black literature, McKay introduced little-known Black writers to the world of American letters while maintaining a close eye on the future of Black literary studies. Regularly passed over for named professorships and endowed chairs, McKay is restored in this chapter to her proper place alongside a more publicly renowned Henry Louis Gates Jr. for her often hidden yet indispensable role in field formation. An array of initiatives executed during her lifetime and following her death commemorates her work as a scholar, an institution builder, a community servant, a consultant, and a mentor.

In the autobiographical vignettes that introduce the chapters, I reflect on my origins and origin story, as well as my intellectual genealogy and personal and professional development, as a counterpoint to McKay’s life story. These vignettes identify sites of influence in my lived experience and intellectual provenance. As a Black woman scholar who came of age in the 1990s, laying claim to my intellectual inheritance involves learning more about the lives of the Black women scholars and writers who shaped my thinking. What did I know, really know, about the scholars whose work I admired? The scholars whose work gave me a vocabulary to understand Black women’s literature and culture? I needed biography, not just as a book of many pages but as a constellation of formative stories, so I could better understand the pathways of those who came before me as I set out to chart my own course.

The arcs that precede my first-person vignettes are evocative of Jean Toomer’s *Cane.* Toomer was the author McKay studied in her first and only single-authored monograph, *Jean Toomer, Artist: A Study of His Literary Life and Work, 1894–1936* (1984). In *Cane*, the arcs reflect the text’s thematic
circularity, the impossibility of closure in some moments and the literal coming full circle in others. The arcs in *Half in Shadow* symbolize the genealogical thrust of the book, which lays claim to my place in a long line of Black feminist and literary scholars. They reflect, as does this book, the process of arranging fragments, what happens when you manipulate parts of a whole and decide, like Sula, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.”

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