Half in Shadow
Benjamin, Shanna Greene

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

Benjamin, Shanna Greene.  
Half in Shadow: The Life and Legacy of Nellie Y. McKay.  
Project MUSE.  

For additional information about this book  
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/83139

For content related to this chapter  
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2842544
CHAPTER ONE

Strategies, Not Truths

Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat’s one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can’t stop you from wishin’. . . . Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me.

— Nannie to Janie, in HURSTON, Their Eyes Were Watching God

As a young girl of maybe five or six, Nellie Reynolds and her mother left their East Harlem apartment at 1804 Madison Avenue at 118th Street and rounded the corner toward the park. What is now known as Marcus Garvey Park, just up the street at 120th, would have been a likely destination. Years earlier, this public space (defined by West 120th Street to the south, West 124th Street to the north, and Madison Avenue to the east) was called Mount Morris Park, so named for its western boundary, Mount Morris Avenue. In the 1930s, renovations transformed what began as terrain unsuitable for children into a family-friendly space that included a playground, a community center, and a child health station. Renamed in 1973 after Garvey, the Jamaican founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) who promoted repatriation and self-sufficiency for Black Americans, the park would have been in walking distance from the Reynoldses’ four-story apartment building, close enough for mother and daughter to enjoy time together, perhaps with baby sister in tow. Then again, they may have visited Harlem River Park or another playground in closer proximity to a neighborhood school, since it was near a school that little Nellie’s earliest memory impressed itself upon her mind.

One particular day, as young Nellie stood impatiently beside her mother, who had turned to talk to a neighbor, she spied some children her age across the street. Immersed in conversation, Mrs. Reynolds missed the little hand slipping from hers, the feet that took off down the sidewalk and across the street in the direction of carefree joy and laughter. Little Nellie joined the others in play, oblivious to the dangers of crossing the street all alone, unaware of her mother’s panic, her fear. Nellie’s playtime was short-lived, since as soon as mother caught up with daughter, she slapped her across the face in view of everyone. McKay never forgot this episode, embarrassed by
the public shaming, the overwhelming hurt that her mother “had done this out in the public.”

Chances are, this never happened.

McKay recounted the episode when I interviewed her in 2004. In response to my opening question about her earliest memories, McKay recalled playing with friends in the park, roller-skating on the sidewalk, stealing coins from the collection plate, and learning to read. These were among her most vivid childhood memories. McKay’s mother, whom she remembered as a strict disciplinarian, a source of instruction, and a model and standard to emulate, played a central role in the recollections she shared. According to McKay, her mother read frequently to her and her sisters. Bright and curious, McKay followed along, memorizing the words on the pages as her mother made her way, book after book, left to right, top to bottom. McKay learned to read, as many children do, by imitating grownups: she would pick up the book and “read,” turning the pages at the appropriate moment, reciting memorized text, without anyone ever realizing that she, in fact, “didn’t know how to read it, because [she] had memorized it so well.” The memory of McKay’s mother resonates in new ways when backlit by the truths that emerged following McKay’s death. Given what we now know about McKay’s family and her early years, these books were not the only fictions McKay had memorized and passed off as the real story.

McKay rewrote a traumatic past by nurturing personal ambitions through professional pursuits. McKay’s ambitions, like those of Nannie, the figure whose voice opens this chapter, were housed in what Elizabeth Alexander called “the black interior,” a space where “black life and creativity” exist “behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination.” A domain for reflection, introspection, and observation, the interior is a quiet space that, according to Kevin Quashie, encompasses “the full range of one’s inner life— one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears.” But why differentiate between a Black interior and the privately held beliefs and desires of any human being? The opening epigraph and the latter part of Alexander’s definition offer clues. Slavery, a circumstance beyond Nannie’s control, aimed to break her spirit and reduce her to a body of labor. To justify the enslavement of stolen Africans, dehumanizing stereotypes painted the enslaved as savages without souls or reason, as simultaneously dangerous and docile, crafty yet naïve. These stereotypes were never meant to faithfully portray Black humanity. In the face of anti-Blackness, the interior becomes necessary for African Americans because it offers a space to live and create, to imagine and dream, to live out a range of creative possibilities beyond
Strategies, Not Truths

the reach of Black death. McKay’s interior afforded her space to imagine. But it also afforded her the space to withhold. McKay understood the slippage between image and interior and manipulated it to her advantage: “No one believes that human beings live only an exterior life,” she wrote in a response to Arnold Rampersad’s essay “Biography and Afro-American Culture.” “The internal life is hidden,” she asserted, “and we can never capture it fully, but we now have the tools [in psychological theory] to discover some of what takes place in the reflective inner self.” McKay engaged in what Audre Lorde called biomythography, which involves the manipulation of history, self-fashioning, and mythmaking. Instead of focusing solely on the truths McKay withheld, this chapter unravels her motivations to name the strategies she used to get what she wanted out of life.

When McKay’s parents, Harry and Nellie Reynolds (née Robertson) made their separate ways to the United States in the 1920s, they were two of 12,243 West Indian immigrants who entered the United States by 1924 and made New York their home. Hailing from Panama and the British West Indies, respectively, Harry and Nellie made their way in “this man country” as grocer and housewife, aiming, perhaps, to “buy house” and raise a family in a place where “you could at least see your way to make a dollar.” If Paule Marshall’s 1959 novel Brown Girl, Brownstones is any indication of the immigrant experience in New York at the time, then Harry and Nellie Reynolds, like Deighton and Silla Boyce, saw the States through hopeful eyes, imagining, perhaps, homeownership, or wrestling, maybe, with a longing for family in the Caribbean. Unfortunately, as with Deighton and Silla, the lives of the Reynolds family would be marred by tragedy.

On 13 May 1925, Harry and Nellie welcomed their first child, Alfreda, into the world. Once mother and child were fit to travel, they made their way uptown from Babies Hospital, a care facility founded in 1887 that would later become “one of the nation’s pre-eminent children’s hospitals,” to their Harlem walk-up at 207 West 147th Street. Alfreda was born prematurely, and the couple, I’m sure, prayed for the best, hoping that Alfreda would grow stronger, day after day, and live to enjoy the life they imagined for her. But this was not to be. Barely a month later Alfreda died, leaving her parents to grieve the loss of their firstborn child, whose final resting place would be Potter’s Field. About a year later, the Reynoldses had already moved over a few blocks, to 241 West 142nd Street, when their next child, an unnamed boy, was born at Harlem Hospital. It was 3 May 1926, and the couple, yet again, were pummeled with more bad news. This time,
they would not be taking a baby home. The boy, who lived only an hour, left Harry and Nellie with what must have been indescribable grief. They waited years before trying again. By 1930, the year of little Nellie’s birth, Harry and his wife had suffered the loss of two infants—Alfreda and the baby boy—in less than five years. When Harry Reynolds and his wife, Nellie, brought home their newborn daughter to a modest apartment on Manhattan Avenue, later moving uptown on Madison Avenue, they were bringing home a child hoped for, prayed for. Little Nellie was her mother’s namesake. She was wanted. And, I imagine, very much loved.

Born on 12 May 1930, Nellie Yvonne Reynolds entered into a world that held limited life choices for Black women. Jacqueline Jones’s award-winning Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present (1985) characterizes the era into which McKay was born as one during which the African American unemployment rate reached a staggering 50 percent. As the nation headed toward depression and Southern Blacks pressed their way north as part of a great migration that sent them in search of the “warmth of other suns,” African Americans who remained “at the very bottom of a hierarchical labor force” held out hope that Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Fair Employment Act would ensure equitable access to government work by forbidding discriminatory hiring practices. Though modest advancements were made by a relatively small group of Black people, the Depression placed a stranglehold on the occupational opportunities of African Americans as a group. By 1940, jobs once held by Black women—namely “sharecropping, private household service, and unskilled factory work”—were unavailable. According to the educator and activist Nannie Burroughs, these jobs had “gone to machines, gone to white people or gone out of style.” McKay and her sister Constance E., who was born on 23 September 1932 and affectionately known as Connie, were children to parents who held out hope that their daughters would grow into a world where the hindrances that beset Black women in the 1930s would become a thing of the past.

McKay may have been born into an era when it was more likely for Black women to work as beauticians or as domestics than as the mathematicians or physicists portrayed in the popular film Hidden Figures (2016) or Duchess Harris’s book Hidden Human Computers (2016), but it is both unfair and inaccurate to frame Black women’s work solely in terms of what they did. Ever present is what Black women wanted to do—what they were capable of—and the rich interior lives they maintained in the face of racism, sexism, and patriarchy. The epigraph for this chapter, a passage from the early pages of Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), captures this disconnect be-
Strategies, Not Truths

 tween Black women's aspirations and their material reality. A now-classic bildungsroman of Black women's fiction, *Their Eyes* recounts a Black woman's coming of age through relationships that test her mettle and shape her voice. In the section cited, Nannie speaks to her granddaughter Janie, the novel's protagonist, imagining a different life from the one slavery's afterlife afforded her. Slavery may have placed a stranglehold on Nannie's ability to “fulfill [her] dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do,” but circumstance could never suffocate the desire, her wish, to “preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high.” Nannie also admits to a secondary, yet no less present, inner desire to move beyond her station, a desire that did not fade during her life. Nellie Y. McKay stood fast in a similar desire for more. She may not have had slavery to contend with, but she refused to allow obstacles beyond her control to dampen the dreams she held deep within.

While McKay faced barriers based on race, gender, and class prejudice throughout her life, these societal obstacles were compounded by the psychological weight of an early trauma at home. It was her mother. We don't know who found her, but at 10:30 A.M. on 31 May 1936, just three weeks after little Nellie celebrated her sixth birthday—with cake and Grape-Nuts or rum raisin ice cream, perhaps—Nellie Reynolds was unexpectedly found dead in their home on Madison Avenue. She was only thirty years old when she passed, having died alone of “Hypertension and Cardiac Valvular Disease” —an illness that typically strikes down women twice her age. For her husband, Harry, springtime must have brought memories of much heartache: the deaths of two children and the loss of his wife—a yearly reminder of the babies who never realized their full potential and the spouse with whom he’d never grow old. Something fell off the shelf inside of young Nellie, I’m sure, and years later, when she went inside herself in search of her mother, she would find only an inherited history of hypertension. The loss haunted McKay, who could pull no information about her mother from her father. Did he see in his daughter’s face the eyes, the mouth, the brow of the woman he had loved and lost? When he called his daughter’s name, did it conjure memories of his deceased wife? Years later, an aunt would gift McKay a small, grainy black-and-white family photograph. In it, barely visible, was her mother. Later, extended psychotherapy and a visit to her mother’s gravesite would help heal the wound, but until it did, McKay longed for her mother’s love and nurturing. On 4 June 1936, Mrs. Nellie Reynolds was buried at the East Ridgelawn Cemetery in Clifton, New Jersey, by Harlem undertaker Ernest A. Reid. The location of the grave is Section 14, Block B, Row H, number 18. It is not marked.
After the death of her mother, young Nellie was sent to Jamaica to live with relatives, most likely her father’s parents. For nearly twenty years, she lived life outside of the States and beyond the reach of this biographer. What we know through oral history and official records is this: Nellie Yvonne Reynolds married Joseph McKay, and in 1951 and 1952, respectively, bore children Patricia and Harry. McKay was barely in her twenties when she found herself married and the mother of two children under two. She returned to the States in May 1954 and did so alone, leaving her children to live with her father’s family—probably her paternal grandmother—while she made a way for herself in the States. Five years later, in 1959, McKay’s children, Pat and Harry, joined their mother and Aunt Connie in their grandfather’s house in Queens, New York. Joseph McKay remained in Jamaica. There is scant information about McKay’s marriage, and it appears that she gave it little thought once she began her new life in Queens. McKay’s father, Harry, purchased a home to accommodate the daughters he expected to stay close, to house the children who would help after he had lived so many years with his wife gone. Though this expectation was communicated quite directly to her and her sister, McKay could not conform. McKay was intent on leaving and pursued a life beyond her father’s house. Her sister, Connie, married and stayed close. Years later, after moving to Florida with her husband, Basil J. Prout, Connie relocated their father to the Sunshine State to care for him during his twilight years.

ST. ALBANS, THE NEIGHBORHOOD McKay moved into in 1954 and where her children joined her in 1959, sits just beyond the gentle curve of Farmers Boulevard, a neighborhood of modest single-family homes in Queens, New York. Hers was a two-story house. A brick stoop and symmetrical bay windows face front, watching. McKay called it 111 Road. The full address was 190-28, 111 Road, Hollis, Queens, to be exact. And for twelve years, it was her life. It was the locus of “very happy” and “very sad” years; it was the home she shared with her father, sister, and two children; and it was the place where she decided, as she wrote to her dear friend and confidante Joyce Scott, that “WOMEN NOW WANT SOMETHING out of life.” McKay could not define that “something” in specific terms at the time, since her priority was eking out a living for herself and her children, but she had an orientation, a worldview, that allowed work she didn’t find fulfilling to aid in her growth and development. It was still the 1960s, and for the time being, McKay held a workaday existence at Bennett Brothers, the place where her thoughts on the rights and roles of women collided with what white men thought she ought to be and do.
To support herself and prepare for the arrival of her children, who were living with family in Jamaica, McKay worked at Bennett Brothers, a company that began as a jewelry business and later became known for the plethora of household goods compiled in its “Blue Book of Quality Merchandise.” While there, McKay paid little attention to the warehouse full of food processors and other odds and ends. Instead, what she noticed most about Bennett Brothers was the way it exploited women, mostly “women with children and women who had to work to make a living.” She recalled: “It was capitalism at its worst in a certain way. . . . It was very bad and I thought it was such unequal work. Very few women were managers. The managers were men [and] they were white. . . . Women just did the grunt work and they were, essentially, as I saw it, locked in for their lives. Many of them had been married before, or were divorced women struggling to raise children.” While there is no evidence McKay ever told her coworkers about her marriage and divorce, a fact that may offer insight into where McKay placed the partnership along a spectrum of personal priorities, it appears that McKay sympathized with these women because it was an experience that she, too, shared as a single mother of two.

Bennett Brothers may have been the place where McKay worked a job, but it was through dinner parties at home that she lived her life. She frequently invited a “coterie of friends” to her father’s house in Queens and hosted simple gatherings that allowed them to break bread and share ideas. It was the beginning of a tradition, an expression of what later became a lifelong love of bringing people together around food and talk. Those who attended held forth on a variety of topics—the theater, music, and literature among them—and together maintained an intellectual life that far exceeded anything that was expected of them at Bennett Brothers warehouse. McKay knew how to find people who shared common interests and held strong opinions. In this community of coworkers who joined her for dinner, they would sit and talk, eat and drink, and discuss the intellectual topics that interested them in spite of their relatively “lowly, ho-hum jobs.”

The dinner parties were also one place where the lives of McKay and her young daughter, Patricia, began to split from the rest of the family. Even though all members of the household would have been welcome at dinner, only McKay’s daughter, Pat, joined in the fun. As Pat recalled, she learned to cook by watching her mother prepare meals for the group. Pat remembered these gatherings fondly for how they instilled in her a love of good friends, great food, and scintillating conversation: “Oh, gosh. I remember a lot her dinner parties. Those were some of the best. I told you she was working at
Bennett Brothers and had a close coterie of friends, about half a dozen of them. She would have these dinner parties all the time, fix meals and invite them over for dinner. . . . That’s how I got my taste for French champagne. After a certain point, I’d be allowed to have a sip. I’ve been spoiled for good champagne ever since.” McKay used these dinners to create a space where she could explore her inner thoughts and opinions and voice all that she held inside while on the floor at Bennett Brothers. Her daughter shared in what, between the two, became an exclusive journey. “This was not my mother, my grandfather, my aunt, and these additional people,” Pat recalled; “This was my mother, her friends, and generally, me.” A special relationship between mother and daughter formed during these events, one in which the two found themselves apart from the other members of the household. Dinner parties at 111 Road would not be the last time their opportunities or experiences diverged.

As intellectually stimulating as McKay found the dinners with her Bennett Brothers coworkers, they were not enough to satisfy her yearning for sustained intellectual engagement and a fulfilling professional life. The job paid the bills, but something inside told her that she wanted something more, something different. Would college be the pathway? Her high school experience had left her feeling less than inspired about higher education. When she earned her diploma, she thought, “Well, this is the last of me in school. I’m never going to go back to school again.” Fortunately, an intervention from her church community convinced McKay that she had what it took to pursue higher education and that there was a path for her to get there, if she wanted it.

Soon after Bennett Brothers became McKay’s workplace, she found a church home in Hollis Presbyterian Church. The church was founded in 1922; Donald “Don” Scott became the head minister in 1959 and was the pastor who shepherded his flock through the turbulent 1960s and encouraged McKay’s educational pursuits. Robert “Bob” Plows, a former attorney and lifelong friend of Pastor Scott and his wife, Joyce, remembered when the exclusively white congregation began to change. It started as a trickle. African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans from Brooklyn and Harlem made their way to Hollis, Queens, in search of “a place where they thought they could have a decent life, raise their children, and achieve some measure of prosperity.” Before long, the area experienced “more than a usual degree of white flight.” The white people who stayed and the Black people who came, however, shared this in common: a commitment to striving. Hollis was composed of “a community of strivers,” Plows recalled, and it was an
“environment of people who, even if they didn’t have it, recognized the value of an education.”

Scott, who joined the congregation after graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary, approached his ministry with the values of the community and the needs of young people in mind.

Pastor Scott’s personal history made him inclined to think broadly about what young people were capable of. Princeton’s seminary drew him out of the Pacific Northwest, and after benefiting “from a stretch move,” he made it his mission to “stretch [young people] to achieve using whatever gifts or capacities they had.” Even though McKay was technically an older member of the congregation, Pastor Scott saw her “quiet determination,” her potential for excellence outside the Hollis community, and initiated efforts that would open the doors of higher education to her. Impressed by McKay’s thoughtfulness and confidence, Pastor Scott told her about a new program recently initiated at Queens College. The pipeline program instituted to diversify the city college system was called SEEK, and it stood then, as it stands now, for the “search for education, elevation, and knowledge.”

While SEEK, initially branded as a tool for educational advancement, transformed McKay’s life, its beginnings were complex and contradictory. At the time the program was instituted, white flight, coupled with a boom in the number of New York City residents from Puerto Rico and “the southeastern United States (especially black migrants),” produced a radical shift in the city’s population. In an essay titled “Black Feminist Pedagogy and Solidarity,” Alexis Pauline Gumbs explained how the city sought to control its “post-civil rights diasporic population.” There were two ways the city opted to manage the influx of Black and brown families: by expanding the carceral state and by granting “educational access to people of color.” The SEEK Program was the educational arm of the city’s broader initiative, which was geared toward managing “the dispersal of white residents and the consolidation of racialized migrants in New York City.” Through remedial math, English, and reading courses, and with financial aid through college stipends, SEEK became the on-ramp by which “disadvantaged” Black and Puerto Rican youth could gain access to the city’s college system. The system was, of course, inherently flawed. How it addressed the problem of educational access did not take into account the systemic disparities that segregated the most vulnerable populations in substandard public schools. But that didn’t keep a cadre of wonderfully radical intellectual troublemakers — mostly Black women hired to teach writing in the SEEK Program — from introducing their students to the imperialist underpinnings of higher education, or from training them to be more than cogs in the university machine.
Launched in 1966 by the New York State Legislature, the Percy Ellis Sutton SEEK Program aimed to “reach qualified high school graduates who might not attend college otherwise.” As the program’s founder, was one of the “Gang of Four”: a “group of distinguished Harlem politicians” that included “attorney Basil Patterson, former New York Mayor David Dinkins and Congressman Charles B. Rangel.” As a politician, Sutton was formidable. He was the “longest-serving Manhattan borough president and, for more than a decade, the highest-ranking black elected official in New York City.”

After Sutton served as an “intelligence officer” with the renowned all-Black Tuskegee Airmen squadron in World War II, a combination of good college grades and the G.I. Bill enabled him to attend Columbia Law School. However, the intense hours of his two jobs as a postal worker and subway conductor were incompatible with the workload and commute. Sutton transferred to Brooklyn Law School, where juggling work and school expectations was more manageable. The SEEK Program, then, reflected Sutton’s commitment to social justice in higher education because it worked to grant Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers greater access to the city’s system of colleges and universities. McKay was an ideal candidate for the program because of her exceptional promise. “She had a hell of a lot of grit and internal discipline,” Pastor Scott recalled. “She wasn’t going to go back to Bennett Brothers as a secretary. She was going to be something.” With emotional and financial support from her church family, McKay took the leap into higher education.

Not everyone at Bennett Brothers encouraged McKay’s new vision. During her last year of employment with the company, McKay worked for a man she remembered as Arthur, a “very nice guy” who taught her a great deal about “how things functioned at the company.” Even though he tasked McKay with doing his work instead of completing it on his own, she gladly acquiesced, finding clerical responsibilities “more interesting” than the work she had been doing in the warehouse. One day, when McKay mentioned that she was leaving Bennett Brothers to go to college, Arthur responded, “You really don’t need to go to college. What you need to do is, you need to go to secretarial school, and you would make a bumper secretary.” McKay remembered the conversation vividly: “That word has stuck with me ever since, and I said to him, ‘But I don’t want to be a bumper secretary. It’s not how I want to spend my life.’”

With college on the horizon and a continued need to work, McKay struggled to find time for her teenage children, Pat and Harry, who would have been about fifteen and fourteen, respectively, when McKay applied to Queens. A little older and a bit more self-sufficient, Pat was not adversely
affected by her mother’s absence due to school and work. They reconnected during dinner parties, and for Pat, focused and bright, success at school came easily. Things were different for Harry. He “didn’t really understand” why his mother was always gone. He knew that “she would try her best to take care of us but most of the time she wasn’t really around to do it, to me anyway.” While she worked and attended school, Harry felt that his mother was not emotionally available or appropriately attentive to his needs. McKay’s choices involved trade-offs. She could stay home and risk sacrificing a dream, or attend college and risk fracturing her family. Without more information about life inside 111 Road, it is impossible to imagine how the climate of the home or her relationship with Harry would have impacted her choice. All we have is her decision. Queens College would allow McKay to venture beyond the dining room for intellectual stimulation and embark on a new life in which she could prioritize her ideas and pursue her ambitions. Away from her family, she built an identity that was something other than mother, sister, daughter. Queens offered McKay the space for self-definition in a place that was uniquely hers, but it also set her on a path vastly different from the one her father had laid out for her.

McKay attended Queens College from 1966 to 1969, during a time of radical transformation in the United States, when the antiwar effort, women’s rights, and Black power sparked protests with slogans such as “Make Love, Not War,” “ERA Yes,” and “All Power to the People.” This period, and the campus uprisings that accompanied it, had a profound impact on McKay and how she thought about the usefulness of her education. At Queens College two groups stood at the center of this maelstrom: the Ad Hoc Committee to End Political Suppression (AHCEPS) and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). They began their challenge to the academic status quo in 1966 with the publication of two student newspapers that violated college regulations because they had not been authorized by the Queens College Student Governments and the Faculty Committee on Student Activities and Services. The SDS challenged Queens College’s authority to regulate and censor student expression by releasing its publications “The Free Press” and “The Activist” on 10 March and 14 April 1966, respectively. The climate at Queens mirrored institutions across the country where students invested in antiwar, prowoman, anticapitalist, and pro-Black causes collided with university administrators willing to admit Black and Puerto Rican students but unwilling to address the toxic practices that disenfranchised these groups once on campus.
What began as seemingly innocuous off-campus publications in 1966 exploded into protests and office takeovers by 1969. On 27 March 1969, “over two hundred students successfully occupied the offices and hallways of the Social Science building” at Queens College. This sit-in was driven by three issues. First, protesters occupied the building “in defense of three members of the Students for a Democratic Society who were arrested and charged for leading a protest for the removal of General Electric [and Dow Chemical] recruiters” from the Queens College campus. The AHCEPS was also upset over the college’s failure to reappoint Assistant Professor Sheila Delany, a medievalist who had helped “to negotiate a space for Marxist and gender-conscious investigations in a field that frequently stymied such work.” Related to student outrage over the treatment of Delany “was the issue of the Max-Kahn Report, which gave the personnel and Budget Committee the right to withhold the information that resulted in Professor Delany’s dismissal.” The students presented a “Statement of Demands” to Dean George Pierson. The dean refused to meet their demands and would not override decisions made by the Student Court by lifting suspensions levied against the three students, dropping the charges against them, or rehiring Delany. In response, the students resolved to sit in peaceful protest “until their demands were addressed.” After four days, the number of protesters had swelled to six hundred. On 1 April, President Joseph P. McMurray made what he called in a later statement the “most difficult decision . . . to bring police on to the Queens College campus to remove persons illegally occupying the Social Science Building.” McMurray’s action led to the arrest of thirty-eight students and one professor; all were charged with trespassing. In the end, President McMurray and Dean Pierson agreed to meet only one of the students’ demands: “the charges against the three SDS members were dropped. The rest of the demands were never met.” While there is no evidence that McKay participated in the protests or race riots, they had a profound impact on her: “It was at that point that I came to understand that there was something that was radically wrong in the country,” she said. Education would be the tool that McKay deployed to address inequities that seemed beyond the scope of her influence.

It had been a long time since McKay, a working mother of two, had set foot inside a classroom. She arrived at Queens without the academic preparation of some of her peers but quickly connected with faculty members who encouraged her and helped her fill the gaps in her formal education. Two professors in particular, “Michelle Cooper” and John J. McDermott, helped McKay grow as a student and modeled high-quality undergraduate
mentoring. During her first year, McKay enrolled in a class with Cooper, a young Jewish professor who, as McKay recalled, notoriously graded her papers with a red pen. After McKay received one of her weekly writing assignments drenched in “blood,” she went to Cooper and asked, “Do you think I ought to be in college?” Cooper laughed and reassured McKay that the feedback was not a reflection on her abilities; it was only meant to make her better. The two bonded and went on to work closely together. With Cooper’s help, McKay knew which classes to select and which professors to avoid. Cooper helped McKay, as a first-generation college student, negotiate an educational experience McKay and her immediate family knew nothing about. When McKay became a college professor, she mirrored the model set by Cooper. As powerful as Cooper’s impact was, McKay either misremembered Cooper’s name or created a composite based on professors who influenced her, as there is no record of a Michelle Cooper or a Michael Cooper teaching at Queens during this time. But the impact of Cooper, as an actual person or as a symbolic figure, is undeniable. While McKay never used a red pen to grade papers, she took great care to help enrolled students, especially her Black ones, adapt to college life.

“On the other end of Michelle Cooper” was John J. McDermott, a professor in the philosophy department who played a crucial role in helping McKay navigate Queens and prepare for success at Harvard University. McDermott, who specialized in “the philosophy of culture, of literature, of medicine and classical American philosophy” at Texas A&M University before his death in 2018, taught at Queens from 1956 until 1977. McKay most likely crossed paths with McDermott in History of Ancient Philosophy or in Medieval Renaissance History and Philosophy, courses McKay took during her first two semesters at Queens. McDermott observed that “Nellie started from scratch,” adding that it never prevented her from being courageous in her studies. One semester, McKay participated in “a little seminar” that included “Nellie and these four guys, four hard-core parolees. Felons. And Nellie.” He could still see McKay in his mind’s eye: she “sat in this room with these rough guys” holding her own, and together they “studied Philosophy all semester.” McDermott worked closely alongside Joseph Mulholland to help McKay get acclimated to the institution. Mulholland, a “former parole officer,” began as the SEEK director but his office was later ransacked by students who protested SEEK being led by a white man. He was subsequently replaced with an African American program head, Dr. Ralph Hewitt Lee from Morehouse, a historically Black college in Atlanta, Georgia. The contentiousness of his appointment notwithstanding,
Mulholland protected McKay and entrusted McDermott to mentor her when he no longer could. As well-meaning as Mulholland and McDermott were, however, McKay noticed their paternalism. McDermott explained that “without Mulholland there’s no Nellie”; McKay observed that without paternalism, there was no Queens.91

McDermott’s philosophy class transformed her, and McKay began to re-think whether majoring in English, as she had originally intended, was the way to go. She earned an A in Shakespeare and thought, for a time, that she would become a Shakespearean. She approached Cooper with her dilemma: “I have a problem. . . . I don’t know what to major in next year. . . . I either want to major in English or I want to major in Philosophy, and I can’t decide.”92 In McKay’s mind, there was this “tremendous problem,” but Cooper, “in the blink of an eye,” looked at McKay and said, “You don’t have a problem, you major in English and you teach philosophy”—the text itself and the belief systems that inform it. The creative problem-solving the “Cooper” figure demonstrated in this moment stayed with McKay and pushed her to look beyond the binary, beyond a zero-sum view of the world, and imagine creative pathways to achieve her goals.

McKay might have initially lacked confidence when she enrolled at Queens, but through hard work, drive, and support from invested professors across disciplines, as well as her Hollis church family, she quickly became a “powerful”94 figure who began to see graduate school as a possible next step. McKay was awarded English departmental honors, earned a spot on the Dean’s List, and graduated cum laude in just three years by loading up on courses between academic terms.95 Enrolled at Queens in 1966 as a thirty-six-year-old freshman, McKay did not end her day after class: she still had to commute home, where she started her “second shift” as a mother and provider for two. It was taxing, but ultimately, for McKay, college was a joy: “I went to Queens and I loved it. I loved the whole nine yards of that. College was just exactly what I wanted.”96

The philosophical orientation McKay developed at Queens would become indispensable to her approach to teaching, reading, and writing about Black women’s literature. Alongside a collective of Black women dispersed across institutions as early-career professors and graduate students, across geographies in the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and West Coast, McKay would find herself theorizing about Black women’s writing at the same time she engaged in the groundbreaking work of recovering it. The methodology of these Black women was inherently collaborative and their motivations expressly personal: their observed lack of research on Black women’s ways
of knowing, ways of seeing, and ways of being in the world spurred on their work.

Mckay participated in the SEEK Program at the same time as other Black women who worked as SEEK instructors but would later become renowned in their own right as writers and scholars. Toni Cade (who later added Bambara), June Jordan, Barbara T. Christian, and Audre Lorde taught at campuses across the city before they published now-famous texts such as *The Black Woman* (1970), *Soulscript: Afro-American Poetry* (1970), *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition* (1980), and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), respectively. Even though there’s no evidence that any of these women taught McKay while she was a student, she later befriended several of them—certainly Jordan, Christian, and Lorde—as her letters and collaborations confirm. Their trajectories were united, among other things, around the effort to elevate Black women’s literature and to practice distinctly inclusive pedagogies informed by their intellectual work as Black feminists. Before “inclusive teaching” became a pedagogical buzzword, Bambara, Jordan, Christian, and Lorde practiced inclusivity through teaching practices that challenged narratives of Black and Puerto Rican students as lacking, as problems to be solved, or as groups whose communicative practices were substandard expressive modes for an academic environment. They challenged rampant paternalism, not by encouraging their Black and brown students to assimilate but by connecting them with literature that animated their experiences and affirmed the value of the literacies they brought to the classroom from their home communities.

In a program that saw an astounding confluence of talent, SEEK’s Basic Writing course and the open structure of the program gave instructors—many of them Black women at the beginning of their academic careers—carte blanche in syllabus development. SEEK instructors worked without a “set curriculum or a required reading list” and as a result relied on one another for assignments and book ideas. Feminist poet Adrienne Rich, who also taught in the SEEK Program in the late 1960s and early 1970s, noted how instructors “poached off each others’ booklists, methods, essay topics, grammar-teaching exercises, and anything else that we hoped would ‘work’ for us.” Danica Savonick’s “Insurgent Knowledge: The Poetics and Pedagogy of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich in the Era of Open Admissions,” a dissertation based on extensive archival research on Lorde, Jordan, Bambara, and Rich, culled unpublished archival artifacts to document how these scholars “shaped U.S. education.” Savonick’s
important “genealogy of feminist poet-teachers as leaders of pedagogical, institutional, and social change” helped paint a picture of the radical climate within New York’s city college system at the very moment McKay became an undergraduate at Queens.

Through collaboration, student-centered practices, and the rejection of what had hitherto been a “banking” concept of education, Bambara, Jordan, Christian, and Lorde used the classroom as a liberatory space and Black writing as a pedagogical tool to redefine education for Black and Puerto Rican students. In the words of Jordan, their efforts turned “the individual drama of being human into words” so that students who supposedly had been written off by high school guidance counselors and academic gatekeepers could join the college community and, among other things, interrogate the relevance of a college education against the backdrop of anti-Black violence within the city’s police state. When McKay joined the SEEK Program in 1966, she felt the energy emanating across City University of New York (CUNY) campuses and, even as an indirect beneficiary of the groundbreaking pedagogies of her Black woman peers, felt inspired to make change through literary studies that inspired social justice.

The work of SEEK instructor Barbara T. Christian captured this feeling. Born on 12 December 1943, in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, Christian became a preeminent professor of Black women’s literature at the University of California, Berkeley, publishing the indispensable *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* in 1980. Christian first joined the SEEK Program when, as a graduate student at Columbia University, she was hired to work as an instructor. Christian was dubious of a program with a mission she sarcastically described as “designed to uplift apparently uneducable black and Puerto Rican youth by giving them the skills to enter city colleges” and fundamentally rejected the deficit model used to describe the students SEEK recruited. Through “a sequence of courses, academic counseling, financial aid counseling, and a Learning Skills Center,” SEEK was “designed to help students achieve academic success.” Even today, CUNY’s Office of Financial Affairs describes the program in the degrading terms Christian decried: “[SEEK] is a program designed to meet the needs of students who are considered to be economically disadvantaged and academically underprepared.” The mission of the program was access, but it stood on a premise of inherent inequality that was anathema to the beliefs of teachers such as Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich.

Christian’s first experience in teaching African American literature was transformative, and in “Being the Subject and the Object,” an essay that refer-
enced her work as a partner in the SEEK Program, she attributed her early contact with Black writers as foundational to her philosophy of teaching and mentoring. The essay discussed Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Alice Walker's *Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), novels penned by Black woman writers who are taught regularly today but whose books at the time were, at best, hard to come by and, at worst, out of print. The literature spoke to Christian, who sought to redefine “misrepresentations as to who a black woman should be.”

Years later, McKay would do this very same thing in her teaching.

Early in McKay’s teaching career, she was already living out the pedagogical ethos of the Black women of SEEK. One example came in the fall of 1982, when she taught Major Black Writers. The syllabus moved from external triggers, namely American society, literary scholarship, and feminist studies, as justification for her class, to an inward focus, concentrating on love as the ultimate motivation for study. She wrote: “1. I love life, I love literature, I see literature as a dynamic expression of life, and I am definitely partial to black women’s lives and the literature of black women writers. / 2. I love to share my love of all of these with you. . . . / 6. This course forces me to learn and to grow, intellectually and emotionally, in ways that no other course that I took as a student, or have conducted as a teacher, has done. When it is over we will all be wiser, and perhaps even better people, for having shared this learning experience together.”

The vulnerability expressed in these sentiments is powerful, for as McKay titled her reasons “Why I Teach This Course” and framed them within a love discourse, she risked exposing herself to rejection from students unwilling to accept what she had to offer. Any fear of potential risks came second to the strength she found within the literature read and the experiences explored within the class. McKay named the source of this strength explicitly in reason 5, where she asserted that “Black women, contrary to anything else you have heard or may think—are at the center of their world. This class will affirm and celebrate that. I hope you do too as you read these writers.” As much a moment to set the record straight as it is a reminder to herself of the source of her strength, this statement boldly moved the experiences of Black women from peripheral to primary, or, in the words of bell hooks, from margin to center. There is no supplication here, no begging to be part of American culture, no wish for the academy to bend toward inclusion, no desire for Black and white women to be friends. There is just the clear, unadulterated centrality of the Black woman’s experience on McKay’s syllabus.
The intellectual and emotional shift resulting from McKay’s acknowledgment that Black women are at “the center of their world” allowed her, in the spirit of Christian and other SEEK professors, to move beyond misrecognition. McKay rejected what forces beyond her control told her about herself. American racism, academic paternalism, or feminist elitism would not define her. Moreover, she avoided working from a reactive posture and instead used her imagination to develop a picture of where she wanted to go and with whom she wanted to travel. She centered her experience as a Black woman not just to withstand racism and sexism but also to experience laughter, joy, and pleasure—to live a full and rich human life, to live as if you are at the center of your world. There was a collective impulse, too, suggested through McKay’s use of the plural “women,” and this gesture toward community was a harbinger of what would become McKay’s professional philosophy: to dream creatively, to work collaboratively, and to celebrate collectively.

By her Senior Year of College, McKay knew that she was on her way to graduate school. At first, she thought that she “was going to go to graduate school and become a college professor so [she] could teach Shakespeare.” Her vision of professional opportunities expanded the further she went in her studies at Queens. Over time, she began to envision literary study as a tool for social justice. She had fallen in love with literature and was committed “to study the great American writers” so they could provide her with the answers she needed to solve the problems the country faced when she was a student. A New Yorker to her core, McKay never thought about applying anywhere besides New York for graduate study. She had been nominated for, and awarded, a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship by a “dean of the college with whom [she] did an independent study of Shakespeare’s tragedies” and was looking forward to spending someone else’s money at the graduate school of her choice.

She held news of her Woodrow Wilson award close to the vest. Then, by chance, she ran into an unnamed sociology professor with whom she had taken a class. Even though “his course totally turned [her] off from Sociology all together,” the two had managed to stay in touch. She mentioned the fellowship and, thrilled by the news of her success, he asked where she had applied. McKay offered three schools: Columbia, New York University, and CUNY. He asked, “And where outside of New York did you apply for graduate school?” McKay replied, “Nowhere.” He insisted that she apply somewhere else. McKay thought, “Okay. I’ll fix his wagon. I’m going to ap-
ply to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. That’ll fix him.” Rejected from Columbia but accepted by CUNY and NYU, McKay was also, as we know, accepted to Harvard. “And of course,” McKay said, “the rest is history.”

In spite of her limited exposure to Black literature as a college student, McKay’s experience at Queens propelled her toward Black writing as a vehicle for enacting social change and as a mechanism for inspiring social justice. Her personal statement to Harvard expressed her interest in studying American literature but outlined a particular investment in doing “intensive research in the field of Afro-American Literature” to have an impact on the Black students she might one day teach:

This choice [to study American Literature] has been reached for two main reasons. First, as a Negro American, I am sensitively aware of the need for more research in this area. I hope my research will uncover more of this rich area of our heritage. Secondly, as a teacher, I will have an opportunity to spend some time with young Negro Americans. Communicating with these young people through the medium of literature, especially that of their own heritage, should stimulate an ethnic pride and help them towards a greater sense of security and stability within the framework of American society.

From the very beginning of her studies, McKay saw herself as someone who would not just research and teach but also inspire and lead. In her statement, she returned to her earlier English-versus-philosophy conundrum, explaining, “It is my feeling that young people, especially those from a minority background, can more easily be reached and will more readily respond to a philosophy of life revealed through literature, especially the literature of their ethnic background, than through a course in Philosophy.”

In her conclusion, McKay asserted her interest in making “a worthwhile contribution to the field of Afro-American Literature by making it more accessible.” McKay knew, from the very beginning, what she wanted to do and why she wanted to do it. With her acceptance to Harvard, she was moving forward, steady on.

As McKay completed her bachelor’s degree at Queens and looked forward to graduate study, her daughter, Pat, was finishing high school and moving toward a life change all her own. An industrious student and budding poet in her own right, Pat had her eyes set on attending Columbia University—and only Columbia. She was just like her mother in this regard: a die-hard New Yorker who felt no need to venture beyond the city for advanced study.
When she sat down with her high school guidance counselor to discuss her college applications, Columbia was the sole institution on what barely qualified as a list. Questioned on the practicality of investing in only one college, Pat mused, “Why do I need to apply to any other school if Columbia is the only one I want to attend?” With gentle cajoling, the counselor convinced Pat to apply to Harvard as well. In a move that seems made for the movies, Pat submitted her college application for undergraduate admission to Radcliffe College the same year her mother applied to Harvard’s graduate program in English. As fate would have it, both McKay and daughter Pat were accepted. The good news should have made it a happy time at 111 Road. But this was not the case. While McKay’s and Patricia’s Harvard acceptances promised to expand their worlds by taking them to Cambridge, Massachusetts, their bright futures cast a shadow over Harry, the son and brother left in their wake, and exiled him from the world of ideas and expanding possibilities rising to greet his mother and sister.

Harry, who was born about a year after his sister, lived in another world, a separate solar system from the one orbited by mother and daughter, who together were planet and star. While McKay and Pat were entertaining guests during champagne-soaked dinners and discussing the state of the world, life, and art, Harry struggled to make do. So, he did what he could. Living his life in the streets fit him better than living a life of the mind: “Everybody had the brains,” he said, “and I wasn’t in the line for none.” He resented the fact that he was unable to stay in school, let alone succeed there, and instead pursued a revolving door of odd jobs. By his own description he was, at one time or another, a failed mechanic, a gypsy cab driver, a janitor, and a messenger. Even though he “could basically sit down and reason with people about just about anything,” by his own account he seemed to live with severe learning deficiencies that prevented him, for quite a while, from even learning to tell time.

The hardest part of measuring himself against his mother’s yardstick was that in his mind, Harry was doing his level best. His mother and grandfather, however, thought differently and admonished Harry for not applying himself: “Everybody’s supposed to be able to do this,” they told him, and ignored Harry as he insisted that he was trying as hard as he could. “Nobody ever listened to me,” Harry complained. “No matter what, nobody ever heard me.” Dejected, Harry felt pushed further to the periphery of his immediate family. As the possibilities for McKay and Pat expanded, Harry’s world closed in, and he was eventually pushed out of 111 Road (by whom, I don’t know) and resorted to living on trains, stealing bikes, and
pilfering from the collection plate to stay afloat. He yearned for a relationship with his father, Joseph, who still lived in Jamaica, and the nurturing hand of a mother who “kept moving” and “was always working.”125 But it never came. Harry was a “lost soul” who tried to find a home in the Navy but was rejected, as I understand it, due to flat feet.126

Pursuing the college degree that allowed McKay to look beyond the limits of life at home and dead-end work at Bennett Brothers also marked the beginning of her estrangement from Harry. By all accounts, as a teenager of about thirteen or fourteen, he was often left in the house alone with no one to help care for him. When McKay attended night school at Queens, her friend Joyce Scott frequently cooked for Harry, since neither his aunt nor his grandfather did so. According to Scott, the only thing McKay regretted about moving from Queens to Cambridge was her failed relationship with her son. If Harry was on the periphery of home life when McKay and Pat were in Queens, he disappeared from the picture altogether once they got to Harvard—the place where McKay and her daughter, for all intents and purposes, became sisters. Harry was about seventeen when McKay set off for graduate school, and he struggled with the ultimatum McKay presented. “She told me I had a choice of where I could go. I could either come with her or go to Granny. The only thing I knew at the time was that [Boston] would’ve been the wrong place for me. . . . All I used to hear is Boston was somewhat of an educational town, colleges and this and that. I knew I didn’t fit in there. . . . That day, it was almost like my heart dropped.”127 Both McKay and her son longed for nurturing from their mothers. McKay never received it, so perhaps she didn’t have it to give. Years later, whenever Harry needed money, though, McKay sent it to her son through her sister, Connie. Mother and son remained estranged until McKay’s death. Harry did not attend his mother’s memorial.

Harvard symbolized the realization of a dream for McKay and Pat. It was also the final act that separated McKay’s life from her immediate family. Before Cambridge, 111 Road was a house of five: Harry, Nellie, Connie, Pat, and Harry. After Cambridge, Pat never returned home; McKay visited infrequently. Try as she might to leave memories of home firmly rooted in the past, they steadily crept into her present. The ghost of her mother’s premature death followed her wherever she went. The unanswered questions and grainy photo left an open wound that might be healed if McKay could be to others what she never had herself.

Joyce Scott was the one other person who McKay carried with her into her new life in Cambridge and beyond. The two first met when McKay
joined Hollis Presbyterian, where Joyce’s husband, Don, was pastor. During their over-forty-year friendship, the two “really became as close to being sisters” as they could be and displayed this sisterly spirit by being “mutually supportive” of each other throughout their lives. Scott offered “a sympathetic ear and a quiet voice of support through difficult times,” and McKay relied on Scott’s listening way—a skill Scott most likely cultivated in her career as a social worker—as McKay struggled at Queens and navigated the elite world of Harvard. When McKay transitioned from graduate student to faculty member, she left 111 Road behind but carried with her Scott’s enduring friendship. Scott was McKay’s best friend from “the old days,” and she knew all about the family history McKay kept hidden from her friends in academe. She maintained McKay’s confidences and provided quiet support away from the intellectual community that McKay formed as she advanced in her educational pursuits.

As McKay planned to venture from Queens to Cambridge, she wrote her friend a letter that reflected on their friendship and the place Scott had played, and would always play, in her life. This letter, notable as the earliest of McKay’s correspondences that I have access to, documented “the inner soul” of a woman in the days leading up to a momentous shift in her life. Here, we get a glimpse into early Nellie Y. McKay. Before she earned the degree at Harvard, before she became a notable figure, before her dreams materialized, she was a woman in the midst of a transition, searching for a way to say goodbye without bidding farewell. Of course, there was no way for her to anticipate all that her future would hold, but the letter captures quiet thoughts and ritualizes her break with the past. McKay was leaving 111 Road behind, but she would carry Scott forever in her heart:

My dear Joyce,

As the time draws near for me to leave the place and people who have comprised that part of me that has been the familiar for many years now it seems only fitting to sit down and put my thoughts in some sort of orderly fashion. It has been twelve years on 111 Road, the major part of my adult life. Needless to say I don’t suppose that I will ever be out of the influence of many of the experiences I have had while living here. There have been very sad ones and there have been very happy ones and I suppose that it is the combination of both that determine the factors that make a whole life good or bad.

But while it might be possible for me to sit and write a book on my experiences while I lived in Hollis, the purpose of this correspondence
is to be rather specific about how I do feel about having gotten to know you. A long time ago (it seems like a hundred years now) I told you that you were the first person with whom I ever felt comfortable as a friend in talking about the things that were painful to me. I think I have done some growing since the time I first told you that and probably the most important thing I learned from being able to talk with you is that friendship is not a luxury confined to enjoyment when the sun shines. It is warm and lovely and protective when the showers are coming down. Thanks for helping me to see that.

... If I were a poet or an artist like my daughter I would express my feelings in a more aesthetic manner. Not being endowed with such gifts I can only say what I feel in this manner, but I hope you will understand and accept the sentiments as coming from the inner soul of

Your friend,

Nellie

McKay's letter to Scott foreshadows how liminality and compartmentalization would allow McKay to keep separate the parts of her life she wanted to remain distinct without forsaking the friendship that was most meaningful to her. Not quite a part of her academic world yet years and miles apart from her past on 111 Road, McKay's friendship with Scott was a safe space between worlds where, in the absence of a unity between past and present, on the horizon of a new life at Harvard, McKay would enact new strategies to conceal personal truths.

IN HER PREWAR APARTMENT AT 274 Brookline Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Nellie Y. McKay cooked dinner for expected guests. This building, a brick midrise unit nestled in Cambridgeport, located at the corner of Putnam and a stone's throw away from the Charles River, was her first home as a graduate student at Harvard. Far enough from Harvard Square that few undergraduates peopled the streets, it was a more residential district by comparison, good for graduate students and those embarking on their studies at the law school nearby. For her daughter, Patricia, a first-year student at Radcliffe, Apartment 3 was her sometime home away from home. A place to enjoy her mother and the dining ritual they had begun during their days on 111 Road in Queens. Friends and food, to be sure. But during one visit, a secret, too.

With plenty of pepper on hand, McKay most likely made a family favorite because Pat, her boyfriend, and his roommates were coming over. Ackee
and saltfish, perhaps? It was something Pat recalls her mother “cooking for us when we were growing up, which I liked a lot.” Once everyone arrived, it was Pat and “the guys,” a crew of undergraduates at her mother’s house talking to one another and getting to know their host. Pat and her friends eating, laughing. Dinah Washington playing in the background, maybe. Or Nina Simone’s “To Be Young, Gifted and Black,” the song McKay listened to every day for her first two years of graduate school: “What took me through those first two years was Nina,” who McKay appreciated for her “sense of pride in being black.” Then, sometime after her guests’ arrival, the din fractured by a voice asking Pat something like “Who’s that?” McKay, who overheard, responded cheekily: “Oh, we’re sisters!”

This joke became their secret. It was the moment Nellie and Pat went from being mother and daughter to becoming sisters. It was easy to believe, after all—the two as peers. As a graduate student, McKay had been carded at least once, the bartender demanding proof that she was twenty-one. While McKay’s Harvard professors and peers knew nothing about the true relationship between the pair, Pat’s friends were always well aware. Among Pat’s friends, there was never any question about who her mother was: “She acted like my mother when we were alone, and in fact my closest friends always knew she was my mother,” explained daughter-cum-sister. “It’s not like everyone who interacted with us didn’t know,” she clarified. “In our lives together, there was never any question that this was a mother and daughter relationship, so I didn’t feel in any way deprived. But [to] the rest of the world, hey, it was a joke.” The joke that became their secret. “Our private joke against the world.”

The “joke” marked the beginning of a bifurcation, a separation between McKay’s personal life and professional self. The elusive “Why?” of McKay’s choices—the reason behind her withholdings—is rooted in her childhood. There’s reason to believe that McKay learned how to withhold, to keep quiet about family matters, simply by breathing the air inside 111 Road. Silence was “the absolute atmosphere of the house,” remembered Scott, and the most deafening silence involved McKay’s deceased mother. McKay tried to convince her father to open up about her, but no matter how often “Nellie tried to get [her father] to talk to her,” explained Scott, “he would not. He slammed that door over and over and he never stopped. He never stopped.”

As painful as it was to have so many unanswered questions, McKay continued this practice with her own children by keeping them in the dark about their father, Joseph McKay. “Pat and Harry did not know anything about their father or that Nellie and he were divorced,” Scott recalled, her mind
drifting back to a conversation between herself and McKay following a church function, and McKay was intent on not telling them. On the one hand, McKay’s decision might be chalked up to a generational practice in which “grown-folks” business was off limits to young people; on the other hand, McKay may have been replicating, either consciously or unconsciously, a parental model for how to deal with personal pain. In what was, perhaps, a subconscious attempt to heal this early trauma, McKay developed a lasting preoccupation with opening doors for others. Once she became a faculty member, she maintained an open-door policy with her colleagues and students and opened doors for the students and faculty she mentored. These acts of collegiality and availability as a mentor appear to have been an effort to be available to others in ways that members of her family weren’t available to her. Earning her graduate degree, then, would place her in a position to open doors for others and possibly heal herself.

When McKay arrived at Harvard, in the fall of 1969, she found another campus erupting with political fervor. At both Harvard and Queens, students took over buildings to demand that administrators be held accountable for their support of the Vietnam War and their disavowal of Black students on campus. On both campuses, the police were called in to forcibly remove protesters who impeded university business. While Harvard students were primarily concerned with the Vietnam War and Black studies, Houghton Professor of Theology Preston N. Williams clarified who sided where: “Generally speaking, the white students were angry about Vietnam and the Black students were angry about the lack of Black Studies.” Harvard’s hallowed halls could not insulate it from the tensions consuming the nation. Inevitably, protests erupted. Pressure to move forward with an Afro-American studies department and adjacent issues mounted on 9 April 1969, when student protesters “stormed University Hall,” ransacked the building, and “forcibly removed all Harvard administrators.”

This event, which was later chronicled by former Harvard professor Roger Rosenblatt in *Coming Apart: A Memoir of the Harvard Wars of 1969* (1977), marked an important cultural shift at the institution—a shift not unlike the rise of student protests and the call for Black studies at campuses across the country. “Harvard’s upheaval,” Rosenblatt claimed, “was not simply a typical war of the late 1960s between radical students and University officials. It was a deeper and more far-reaching conflict between older and younger sensibilities, between those who believed in institutions and those who wanted to tear them down, between those who were driven by sympathy for individual causes, and those who stood with traditional social
According to one article in the *Harvard Crimson*, the university’s daily newspaper, “a changing student body in a very traditional college atmosphere” spurred on a “wave of student radicalism” that led to “riots and protests” challenging even the most firmly entrenched Harvard traditions. But conflicts between old and new Harvard were about much more than social movements beyond their walls. These conflicts were also about inclusion and how the institution would make space for those who were marginalized in social, cultural, and, now, academic settings, within an elitist space that perpetually placed white men and their interests atop the educational hierarchy.

By September 1969, the year McKay set foot on campus, the smoke had cleared from student protests, but the divisions had been made clear. Robert Kiely, a professor in the English department who eventually served as the second reader on McKay’s dissertation, was a young father and husband at the time. Kiely, whose bright eyes and ready smile bear no trace of the pressures he faced as a young professor, remembered a time “of turmoil in the country and in universities,” a time when “protests against the war” and “demands for increases in recruitment of African-Americans and women in student body and faculty” dominated the day. The English department had recently voted to include African American literature in its curriculum, but tensions between faculty, students, and administrators continued to run high.

During this next phase of Harvard’s history, defined by *Blacks at Harvard: A Documentary History of African-American Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe* (1993) as the period after 1970, “Harvard hosted more Black students, professors, administrators, and guests than in all of the previous years combined.” Change was on the horizon, and this change impacted women at the same time it impacted Black people. Musicologist Eileen Southern, who in 1975 became “the first black woman to be appointed a full professor with tenure at Harvard,” described what it meant to negotiate race and gender at elite, predominately white institutions and between Black studies and women’s studies. She was designated as both the “black presence” and the “female presence” on the Arts and Sciences faculty yet occupied a liminal existence between them both: “Neither group paid much attention to my presence as a new member; indeed, the attitude of the black men . . . generally was that of indifference, shifting at times to outright hostility.” While one may think that solo members of minority groups would welcome new faces into the fold, that was not Southern’s experience: “And to me, as a newcomer, it seemed that the minorities already at Har-
vard did not welcome the idea of being joined by others. It was as if they were reluctant to lose their status of being ‘the only one.’” The tensions Southern described were in full swing while McKay was a graduate student at Harvard.

Fortunately for McKay, there was another Black graduate student in English who was happy to help her adjust to life at Harvard. That graduate student was Arnold Rampersad: now professor emeritus at Stanford University and a 2010 recipient of the National Humanities Medal. Rampersad, who would later pen award-winning biographies of W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Jackie Robinson, arrived in Cambridge in 1968, the year before McKay’s arrival. They met in Harvard Yard, a grass courtyard nestled in the heart of Harvard’s campus where persons convene and paths cross. McKay recalled their meeting as a defining moment in her life as a graduate student that foreshadowed the synchronicity she and Rampersad would maintain as colleagues throughout their careers:

The first person I ran into when I walked across the Harvard Yard for the first time was Arnold Rampersad. We were walking in opposite directions and he said, “You look like a new graduate student.” I said, “How could you know?” He said, “You just have that look.” And we went off and had coffee and he told me a few things. He was an Americanist who had come the year before and he was going to study American literature. And I was going to be an Americanist, so therefore we were going to be in the same camp, and just so on. And we became very fast friends, from that time.

Rampersad, who was born in Trinidad, found his way to Harvard from Bowling Green University in Ohio. By his own admission, he “got into Bowling Green by accident.” He had lived for “twenty-one years in Trinidad” and, after taking a job in Barbados, had “given up all hope of going to college.” That was until he learned about a partial-scholarship program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State for persons from the Caribbean to study in the United States. Imagining that the State Department would want to cultivate him as a journalist, Rampersad applied to pursue a journalism degree. He had always excelled in English as a high school student at St. Mary’s College, a secondary school blocks away from the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago in Port of Spain.

Sure enough, the State Department sent Rampersad to Bowling Green. But journalism, per se, would not be his future. Soon after his arrival he enrolled in a course with a professor who altered his academic trajectory.
Professor Alma J. Payne taught Rampersad’s course on nineteenth-century American literature and enamored the budding scholar with the study of literature. The experience with Payne clarified, for Rampersad, what he wanted to do with the rest of his career: “to study American literature and perhaps, who knows, teach it.” With courses from his education back in Trinidad and summer school classes contributing to his total college credit count, Rampersad earned his degree at Bowling Green in just two years. While completing a master’s degree there, he applied to graduate programs at several institutions, including Stanford and Harvard. He was accepted to both. He received a full ride to Stanford and had no guarantee for funding at Harvard, but he nevertheless set out for Harvard in the fall of 1968.

McKay’s circle of Black graduate school friends expanded further to include the woman with whom she would correspond for nearly thirty years: Nell Irvin Painter. McKay met Painter, a Princeton University historian emerita and the author of definitive histories of Hosea Hudson, Sojourner Truth, and white people, “in the fall of 1969,” while McKay was a first-year graduate student in English and Painter a graduate student in history. They entered Harvard the same year, but their backgrounds and academic trajectories were vastly different. Painter’s parents, Frank E. and Dona L. Irvin, had met at Houston College for Negroes (now Texas Southern University). Her father worked “for many years” for the Chemistry Department at the University of California, Berkeley, while Painter’s mother, a public-school teacher, taught in the Oakland public schools. Married for over seventy years, the Irvins were shaken by the death of their five-year-old son, who would have been Painter’s older brother, during a botched tonsillectomy. His passing influenced their approach to parenting their only other child, Painter, born Nell Elizabeth Irvin.

Grief-stricken by the unexpected death of their young son, they “focused on” their daughter and took efforts to make “life easy and welcome for her.” As college graduates themselves, Painter’s parents understood the value of higher education and encouraged her to explore freely. They nurtured Painter by providing her with familial love, encouragement, and financial resources to launch her into a world where she could develop the intellectual gifts and work ethic that would lead to her becoming one of the most prolific and recognizable American historians. While McKay came to Harvard unsure of her abilities and lacking in the cultural and social capital she thought her peers possessed in spades, Rampersad was self-assured and dignified; Painter was poised and privileged. Their attributes contrasted sharply with McKay’s insecurity and working-class upbringing, but,
collectively, Rampersad’s and Painter’s self-confident and sophisticated worldviews were key to helping McKay manage some of her most difficult periods at Harvard. Rampersad and Painter were central to McKay’s thinking about her education at Harvard and her ability to be successful there.

McKay experienced Harvard as an elitist institution steeped in and committed to maintaining its superiority. McKay was eager to attend at first, but her excitement faded little by little as she came to feel “out of place within the vast sea of whiteness and New England culture. It was alienating. There was this feeling that if you didn’t come from there, you didn’t belong there.” Harvard may not have necessarily gone “out of its way to make people feel miserable,” but it did not cultivate a climate of belongingness either. So as a Black woman in a place that didn’t know “what to do with women or with African Americans,” McKay found herself in a “double bind.” She was not alone in her feelings about Harvard’s climate. Cheryl A. Wall, who arrived at Harvard for graduate study a short time after McKay and became a scholar, professor, and specialist in Black women’s literature at Rutgers University in New Jersey before passing in 2020, came prepared for Harvard’s academic rigors but not for the shock of affluence and excess that colored her classroom experience.

Born in New York City and raised in South Jamaica, Queens, Wall was the daughter of a Baptist minister and came of age in a household where “education was highly valued.” An English major at the historically Black Howard University, Wall was “more interested in American Studies” than English for graduate study and enrolled in the History of American Civilization program at Harvard following her participation in an intensive summer study program for “Negro students” sponsored by the Ford Foundation. The summer program opened up a world of possibilities for Wall: “It was that program that really made me think, ‘Oh well, this is something that you would really enjoy and that you would be good at.’ It was important.”

Once at Harvard, Wall realized that her summer preparation was only part of the lesson she would learn about how to be successful there. For example, one day, after taking time to carefully prepare for class, she entered the room and, after discussion commenced, found herself completely outside of the conversation, unable to mimic the academic moves of her peers. Paralyzed, she kept quiet. When she learned, later, that there were students who had not read but instead had “bullshitted” their way through the discussion, she experienced a new degree of alienation. She learned that “it was not substance, it was style, it was performance, and it was a performance that was enabled by lives of great privilege.” That moment in the
classroom was, for Wall, a very “prototypical Harvard experience”; navigating the institution’s extreme “material wealth” and the privilege that accompanied it, she bemoaned, “was a constant challenge.” Given the paucity of Black graduate students at Harvard before 1970, no wonder McKay struggled to acclimate.

McKay’s difficulties turned acute when it became clear that the nurturing she had received as a student at Queens would not be found at Harvard. She worked hard to maintain a veneer of strength in the face of her difficulties, but her efforts were futile. She could not keep her problems hidden from two of her dissertation advisers, Robert Kiely and Warner Berthoff. They knew she was having trouble, even if she kept her difficulties to herself. Kiely, an assistant professor at the time, imagined that she “must have felt pretty lonely in the crowd of white students,” even though “she never once complained to [him].” Kiely was a rarity within Harvard’s otherwise conservative English department. An Americanist, Kiely was open to McKay’s interest in Toomer and supported her study of his life and work even though he knew nothing about the author who had penned the imagistic prose poem *Cane* in 1923 and about whom McKay had chosen to write her dissertation. Harvard Divinity School professor Preston N. Williams remembered Kiely as “one of the greatest gifts of Harvard to the literature community and to its movement and the direction of diversity. If she had Kiely as her dissertation adviser, she would have gotten support. But if she would have been working with some of the other folks in the department at that time, she would not have gotten support.”

The late Warner Berthoff, another faculty member in the English department and a member of her dissertation committee, learned of McKay’s difficulties and encouraged her when he could. He recalled “one particular instance when, reading a chapter draft, I came across one sentence that seemed to me extraordinarily good: both substantial in content and quite elegantly phrased; it was a pleasure for both of us when I read it back to her and complimented her.” Their support stuck with McKay, who subsequently dedicated her compilation *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (1988) to Kiely and Berthoff, among others, clearly grateful for their encouragement. As appreciative as she was for their words of support, intermittent praise was not enough. Sporadic wouldn’t suffice. Just two years after enrolling at Harvard, riddled with self-doubt and ambivalent about her path, McKay considered withdrawing.

McKay needed sage advice, so she sought the counsel of the ever-sensible Arnold Rampersad to help her come to grips with the fact that she was look-
ing for a way out of the institution she had worked so hard to get into. “I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do,” McKay recalled. “I just knew I had to get out of there. And I remember telling Rampersad.” Even though she counted Rampersad as a friend, she did not look forward to admitting that Harvard had gotten the better of her. Perhaps McKay thought her friend would be disappointed when she forewarned, “I have something to tell you and I know you’re not going to like it.” To her surprise, Rampersad was not the least bit fazed by her admission. Instead of responding with disappointment, as she had anticipated, he responded with compassion. “Oh, you don’t have to feel badly about that,” he reassured her. “A lot of people do that.” He reminded McKay that “Boston is full of schools” and encouraged her to cast a wide net in her search for employment. McKay promptly shared her plans with her network of friends in the area. When Andrea B. Rushing, another Queens College graduate and, later, professor emerita of English at Amherst College, learned that McKay was in the market for academic employment, she offered fortuitous news: Rushing was leaving her teaching position at nearby Simmons College. Hopeful about her prospects, McKay applied.

Unlike Harvard, which conferred PhDs, Simmons was a women’s college grounded in the liberal arts that prioritized teaching and building the capacity of its students. McKay landed the position, hoping that Simmons students, faculty, and campus culture would be the “antidote” to what ailed her about Harvard. There was much about the history and culture at Simmons that would have appealed to McKay. Founded in the late nineteenth century by a Boston clothier who revolutionized prêt-à-porter suit making, Simmons College, now Simmons University, aimed to educate women and prepare them to be economically self-sufficient by pursuing vocations outside the home. The “cult of domesticity” was a dominant ideology of the nineteenth century, governing white women’s roles and life choices according to a set of principles that dictated what they should value; this “cult” also fashioned a set of spheres that demarcated the boundaries of their work. Women were to be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. Their work, then, was limited to the home and hearth, where child-rearing and other household duties held prominence.

While the category seems gender-specific, as Harriet Jacobs reminded us in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), it was also racially inflected. When Linda Brent, the narrative’s protagonist, intoned, “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage,” she invoked the marriage trope of nineteenth-century Victorian novels and recast it according to enslaved Black women’s ultimate goal: freedom. White women could
be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. Enslaved Black women could not. Simmons College considered this history and not only provided women of the day—notably those who could afford a college degree—access to higher education but also made inclusive strides earlier than most. In 1914, the institution “produced the first African-American Simmons graduate”; it was also “one of the only private colleges that did not impose admission quotas on Jewish students during the first half of the 1900s.” McKay would be joining a faculty that valued teaching and promoted inclusive social justice for women.

On 22 September 1971, McKay submitted a notice of withdrawal to Harvard, indicating that she had “accepted a teaching position at [sic] local college for one year.” By her own description, McKay, who would go on to win teaching awards at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, extended the social justice–driven focus of her SEEK experience and developed what would become her signature pedagogy at Simmons. She enjoyed being part of a close-knit department committed to developing the potential of young women. Simmons boasts several notable Black women graduates, among them journalist and late “Washington Week” coanchor Gwen Ifill, chief executive and former Rockefeller Foundation trustee Ann Fudge, and Grammy-nominated jazz vocalist Nnenna Freelon, and McKay happily served as one of a handful of faces on the faculty and staff side that Black women students could encounter during their time at Simmons. At Harvard, McKay had struggled to find her place; but at Simmons, and as part of a broad-based Boston community of Black women, McKay was able to make a space for herself, and eventually for other Black women, by cultivating ideas and developing relationships that would serve as a lifetime lifeline of support.

In contrast with all that had alienated McKay from Harvard, she felt welcomed within a coterie of Black women in Boston, many of whom had descended upon the city for academic jobs or graduate study. Together, they taught themselves what their formal education was unable to teach them about Black women and the products of their intellectual and creative labor. Boston was ground zero for what eventually became the renowned Combahee River Collective (CRC). The CRC, composed of a group of Black women thinkers, began as the Boston chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization, or NBFO, an organization that Duchess Harris cited as central to the history of “Black women’s involvement in formal American politics.” In short order, this once formally political group transformed into a transgressive, “anti-capitalist, socialist, and revolutionary” organization that rejected
the white-feminist leanings of feminism in the United States and splintered from the “bourgeois-feminist stance” of the NBFO. When the CRC severed its ties with the NBFO, they set as a goal to take a more intersectional approach to Black feminist organizing. Specifically, they chose to “focus more exclusively on issues of sexuality and economic development” so that Black women would be empowered to resist the stereotypical portrayals from the Moynihan Report, seize control of their reproductive rights, resist heterosexual oppression, include Black lesbian issues, and systematically combat the emerging and demoralizing figure of the welfare queen.

The Boston-based CRC, led by Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, and Beverly Smith, produced what would become a seminal text in Black feminist theory: The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties (1986), originally published in 1977. It is a slim volume, approximately twenty pages total. But what it lacks in length, it more than makes up for as a radical statement of Black lesbian feminism and for what its grassroots method of dissemination teaches about early Black feminist organizing. The statement was named for a river in the South Carolina Low Country, the Combahee River, since it was on this site in 1863 that Harriet Tubman master-minded and, with help from 150 Black Union troops, executed the Combahee Ferry Raid. The raid itself “freed 750 enslaved people”, but it was Tubman’s leadership as “the first woman to lead a major military operation in the United States” that inspired the authors to name the Statement in her honor.

The Statement was one of several foundational texts penned by Black women in the 1970s that helped form the field of Black feminist thought, shaping the vocabulary Black cultural critics use even now to reckon with current events. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor elaborated: “It is difficult to quantify the enormity of the political contribution made by the women of the Combahee River Collective . . . because so much of their analysis is taken for granted in feminist politics today.” While “intersectionality” is typically attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s 1989 article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Taylor continued, the CRC introduced this concept when they identified “interlocking” forms of oppression that created “new measures of oppression and inequality.” The collaborative nature of their work was reflective of strategies that introduced McKay to a burgeoning framework of twentieth-century Black feminist thought and methodologies of Black feminist organizing.

Codifying Black feminist politics required a visionary outlook, so Smith, Frazier, and Smith proposed collecting, publishing, and disseminating Black
feminist writing as a way to archive the work of Black feminists laboring in isolation across the country. At first, the Combahee River Collective’s Statement was published in the anthology Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism (1978). Later, the authors duplicated the Statement and distributed it “hand-to-hand.” After finding its way into several anthologies “by feminists of color,” in 1985 the Statement was published by Kitchen Table, a press that began as a publishing outlet that would give “disenfranchised women of color . . . autonomy” when determining “the content and conditions of our work” and “the words and images that were produced about us.” The CRC, unified by a common interest in elevating the voices, thoughts, and politics of Black women, developed a statement of Black women’s contributions to intellectual enterprises from which they were otherwise excluded. The Statement documented and defined the foundational elements of Black feminist politics and was organized in four sections: “(1) the genesis of contemporary Black feminism; (2) what we believe, i.e., the specific province of our politics; (3) the problems in organizing Black feminists, including a brief herstory of our collective; and (4) Black feminist issues and practice.” It was within a study group not unlike those described in the Combahee River Collective Statement that McKay was launched into the study of Black women’s literature.

Black women graduate students in the Boston area formed a “women’s study group” committed to the recovery and dissemination of Black women’s literature. Sometime after joining the Simmons faculty, McKay was invited to a dinner at the home of Andrea B. Rushing, who was “then an instructor in the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard.” In McKay’s memory of the gathering, it was a “nice warm spring night” when a group of Black women graduate students gathered at Rushing’s to discuss Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God. McKay took the train to Roxbury, climbed the hill to Rushing’s, and joined a who’s who of Black feminist graduate students and early-career faculty to discuss the book. As mentioned in Mary Helen Washington’s foreword to Their Eyes, Rushing remembered McKay, Combahee cofounder Barbara Smith, and Wesleyan University professor emerita Gayle Pemberton in attendance. McKay recalled Hortense J. Spillers and Thadious M. Davis, too. Mostly, these women were either teaching at local colleges (Amherst hired Rushing to teach English and Black studies in 1974) or on their way to earning degrees at institutions that included Harvard (McKay and Pemberton), Brandeis University (Spillers), and Boston University (Davis). Smith, who had earned her BA from Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, re-
turned to the Boston area after earning her MA in literature from the University of Pittsburgh. Boston brought them together, but Black women's literature bonded many of them for life.

Once everyone had assembled, Rushing posed a question to the group. McKay recalled: “And Andrea said, ‘Well, I brought you here because I want us to talk about something that is really serious.’ And she said, ‘Have you thought about the question, Where are the women?’ After that, according to McKay, it was pure bedlam. The room exploded. Until that time, the women in attendance had primarily been reading the men. James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Langston Hughes were ever present, but the women, by and large, were absent. McKay only “had any real sense” of one woman: Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize, for *Annie Allen* in 1950. The women present were “all in fact teaching by then,” so they took advantage of that fact and began teaching texts by Black women: “So we started copying everything and sharing” because, at the time, many of the books they wanted to teach were out of print.

Even though McKay was unclear about the first text they circulated, she remembered Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* being one of the first. They shared titles and taught the texts. Then they used “these little three-by-five cards,” the ones once clustered together in card catalogs, now relics of the research library, to search for other sources and reclaim more of the literature. In the end, “it wasn’t like we reinvented it. We didn’t invent it. It was just there, sleeping.” This experience informed McKay’s teaching at Simmons by putting her on the cutting edge of a field that was being formed by Black women who created intellectual communities geared toward elevating the literature of their sister writers. This, along with Alice Walker’s teaching of the first class dedicated to Black women writers at Wellesley College during the 1971–1972 school year, moved Black women’s literature a step closer to becoming a field unto itself.

Teaching at Simmons gave McKay classroom experience, but interacting with the handful of Black women in her classes connected her to teaching and mentoring as a calling, and a gift. She admitted that teaching validated her: “I had grown up with a father who had not been able to do what he wanted to do in his life and he was angry and bitter. But he used to tell us that we needed to find work that we could love because having work that you didn’t like was not a good thing. . . . So I had essentially discovered, actually found, yes, this is the thing I want to do.” Before long, the chair of Simmons’s English department, F. Wylie Sypher, took notice of McKay’s disciplinary expertise, developed in collaboration with her Black women
colleagues in Boston, and her skills as a teacher and mentor, fostered in her experimental teaching at Simmons. Sypher, in turn, initiated a process to keep McKay at Simmons College for the long term.

Sypher, a Harvard-educated literary scholar and professor who developed an exceptional and widely known research profile while maintaining a stellar reputation as a teacher, took a shine to McKay. He would later credit McKay for making “invaluable” contributions to Black studies and for doing “an inspiring and inspired job in our experimental freshman curriculum.” Sypher taught Renaissance literature at Simmons for over fifty years and was a resident elder statesman known for his kindness and generosity and, to some extent, his chauvinism. Sypher elected to hire McKay even though it was not standard practice for him to hire women. McKay’s Simmons colleague Lawrence L. Langer recalled Sypher saying that the women “get married and have children. The children get sick and they call in and say ‘My baby is sick. I can’t come to class today.’” Because McKay had said nothing about her former husband or her undergraduate daughter, Langer noted, too, that “Nellie was not married and had no children, so that wasn’t a problem.” McKay had the requisite experience and, as far as her Simmons colleagues were concerned, was unattached, so in Sypher’s eyes, she was a good fit for the position.

Sypher’s thinking was unfortunately standard fare in the society at large and common among male academics and professionals at the time. When asked about the climate that may have contributed to McKay’s decision to keep details of her personal life private, Pamela Bromberg, another former Simmons colleague, imagined “that [McKay’s] motivations are complex, and they had to do with race, but also gender. I’m quite sure that Nellie really calculated that she would not be taken seriously as an older woman, not to mention an older black woman.” Having experienced at least one incident stemming from discriminatory decision-making practices at work, Bromberg understood the climate for professional women at the time. Once, while competing with another woman for a full-time position, Bromberg was given part-time work because she “was married and had a working lawyer husband.” There was no talk of qualifications. “This is how decisions were made back then,” said Bromberg, who, in spite of seeing women leaders at her alma mater, Wellesley College, failed to see women in higher education reap the same professional benefits as their male colleagues. Under most circumstances, the interlocking influence of race, gender bias, and age discrimination would have made McKay especially vulnerable as an early-career faculty member; as a single woman without
young children, she became more attractive to her department head. In spite of how women were typically treated in the workplace, McKay gained the trust and support of white men very early on in her career. Her collegial relationships with Sypher and others put McKay in close proximity to the power and social currency white men either wielded or freely accessed. In spite of the social climate, but without her degree in hand, McKay was promoted to assistant professor after only a two-year stint at Simmons.

Before she could join the Simmons faculty on a long-term basis, McKay had one last hurdle to cross: the Harvard PhD. Strengthened by her friendships with Black women and empowered by her success in the classroom, McKay initiated the process to return to Harvard. At Simmons, she had taught in the experimental freshman curriculum and had contributed graduate courses in Black literature and a graduate seminar in modern American drama. Sypher, who appreciated how McKay had made herself indispensable to the English department, wrote in support of McKay’s readmission to Harvard. In his letter, Sypher noted that McKay was “admired and valued” by “students and faculty” for her “intellectual vigor, her strong sense of commitment, and her good will and congeniality.” With Sypher’s support and ongoing encouragement from friends Constance W. and Preston N. Williams and from Gwynne Evans, Harvard’s director of graduate studies at the time, McKay returned to Harvard after being readmitted to its PhD program in English on 8 January 1975.

As a graduate student at Harvard and as a professor at Simmons, McKay decided that she would not tell her professors, classmates, and peers that she was a divorced wife and mother of two, or that Pat was her daughter, so that she would be defined by the quality of her work, not the theater of her personal life. McKay wanted to fit in among her peers even if, as a Black woman, she could not belong. In the privacy of her graduate school application, she mitigated one personal detail that she thought might raise eyebrows: her age. In the section that required her name, date of birth, and marital status, McKay shaved two years off her age and identified herself as a divorced mother of two. The latter was true. The former was not. Two years isn’t much, but perhaps McKay imagined that if she positioned herself closer to thirty-five than to forty, the selection committee would be more likely to support the institution’s investment of time and resources in the burgeoning scholar and admit her. In all other parts of the application, however, McKay was faithful to the facts. A Harvard degree would help McKay achieve an “independent black female selfhood,” a topic she would later explore in essays about Harriet Jacobs, Mary Church Terrell,
and Anne Moody. Furthermore, her study with other Black women in the Boston area taught her the value of group ascent, so she couched her achievements within a broader narrative of Black women’s intellectualism instead of sharing her successes as a story of inspiration. She would not be known as “an older woman who had raised a family and was going back to school.”216 She wanted to be commended for the fruits of her labor, not congratulated for overcoming personal obstacles.

By the time McKay resumed her studies at Harvard, she was a different person. At Simmons, she had been nurtured into confidence by colleagues who valued her contributions and by students who trusted her guidance. She reenrolled, more secure in her abilities and confident in her capacity to see the PhD through to completion. “I stayed away for two years and then I reenrolled,” McKay recalled, “but I had a very different sense of myself when I went back. I had done something on my own and I had a different life and I was no longer intimidated.”217 Alongside Simmons colleagues Langer, Bromberg, and David Gullette, McKay had fashioned a life that existed beyond the reach of her Harvard professors. She saw herself with new eyes. Department chair F. Wylie Sypher encouraged McKay by reminding her that Simmons “shouldn’t be the end of the street.”218 Earning her doctorate, then, was nonnegotiable both in McKay’s mind and in the minds of those around her. Her ambition reignited, she knew that it was all part of a bigger plan: “There was a life that I said I was going to have; that required that I finish my graduate degree.”219 She returned to Harvard ready to complete her doctorate and pursue the life she wanted. Possibilities awaited on the other side.
This page intentionally left blank