Half in Shadow
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CHAPTER TWO

Some Very Vital Missing Thing

Not all of my life is painful—most of it is not. And certainly the professional life has far exceeded anything I could have dreamed up during the fall of 1966 when I made my way to those first evening classes at Queens, feeling afraid. The M.I.T. thing is going to pay me more money than anyone else has ever paid me to do anything!

But it is not enough. There is something very vital which is missing.

—NELLIE Y. MCKAY, memorandum to Joyce Scott, May 1977

In 1980, three years into a tenure-track position at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Nellie Y. McKay had a decision to make. The chair of McKay's tenure review committee had informed her that she needed more than her Jean Toomer book, recently contracted by the University of North Carolina Press, to fulfill the research requirement for tenure. McKay's manuscript revisions were already slow going, so the thought of adding new projects to an already teeming list of writing tasks filled her with dread. Strategically, McKay turned her attention to shorter pieces: an essay on being a Black woman at a white university, reviews of books by William L. Andrews and Barbara T. Christian, and a third project her review chair deemed unwise—an interview with Toni Morrison.

McKay's review chair insisted that an interview with Morrison was “not real scholarship.”¹ But for McKay, it was the key to a new way of knowing: “We've been trained to read and criticize Faulkner and Shakespeare,” she observed in a letter to longtime friend and historian Nell Irvin Painter, “but none of us were told how to look at Toni Morrison or Sarah Wright.”² This interview with Morrison—who at that time had been nominated for a National Book Award for Sula (1973) but had not yet penned Beloved (1987) nor won the Nobel Prize—would help McKay define a Black feminist pedagogy. McKay professed an epistemology articulated by Black women writers, artists, and thinkers as they hastened against what Christian would call “the race for theory,”³ the privileging of esoteric analyses over criticism grounded in tropes endemic to the text itself. McKay's decision to conduct the interview confirmed the sovereign value of Black women’s literature, asserted the importance of Black women defining for themselves the writers, the topics,
and the texts that warranted their intellectual attention, and set McKay on a path toward reshaping American literary history.

This was risky business. McKay was defying her review chair, who, no matter how solipsistic, ventriloquized institutional values reinforced by an academic elitism that privileged high theory. He insisted that the Morrison interview was nothing more than McKay “evading the ‘real’ work that [she needed] to do” to earn tenure. He committed to that position.

Until, at least, the interview was published.

The stakes were high for Black women such as McKay who worked to establish Black feminist thought and Black literary studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They risked their careers and reputations, jeopardized their health and well-being, and had their literature and criticism dismissed by the mainstream academy. Note the players in the anecdote above: McKay, a Black woman with limited power; her review chair, a white man with institutional authority; and the work, literature and scholarship that centered Black women’s texts and perspectives. It was an ongoing battle between the three that pitted McKay’s vision for her life and work against the low ceilings white men, Black men, and white women tried to place on her aspirations. McKay risked her professional future to pursue work that men, that white people, snubbed until it became popular. McKay bet on herself when she challenged institutions, pried them open, and demanded a seat at the table. McKay found allies and fostered collaborations that redefined what counted as scholarly contributions to the field. In this next phase of her career, and with the PhD in hand, McKay defined the scope of what she called her “project,” which involved her “turn toward black women’s writings” as an area of critical inquiry.5 McKay wanted recognition. Not for herself or for individual gain, but in the interest of collective impact. Black women—their recognition in leadership and literature, their camaraderie and collaborative labor, and their embodied existence in the American academy—were the very vital missing things McKay sought, and she was willing to take the risks required to build the foundation they deserved.

As a graduate student at Harvard University, McKay reinvented herself by presenting as a single woman, childless and fully prepared to focus exclusively on her studies. She gained inspiration from Jean Toomer, the subject of her dissertation who was also the focus of her first book, as a writer who lived “a divided life.”6 Writing about Toomer moved McKay to think imaginatively about how and why she would remake herself. McKay was drawn to Toomer because he was an enigma, and she was invested in
uncovering “some of the elements in his personal life in order to determine how his life and literary output affected each other.”77 Toomer’s life was forever changed by his three-month immersion into Black life in Sparta, Georgia, his time there forming the basis of his masterpiece, Cane (1923), and marking the moment when he decided that choosing his place in the world meant choosing “to live his own life as a white man.”78

The idea of choosing a life instead of being fated into a particular future appealed to McKay, whose research on two of Toomer’s plays, Balo and Natalie Mann, both from “the early 1920s,”9 led her to conclude that Black women’s interiors, the unseen experiences and desires suppressed by domestic duties, were more than sites of angst. These interiors held desires safe, and by attending to Toomer’s women in her analysis, McKay could draw them from the shadows and grant them the grand stage they deserved. For example, in her study of Balo, “a documentary account of one day in the life of protagonist “Will Lee, a black peasant farmer, and his family,”10 McKay considered his wife, Susan: “a yellow-complexioned woman with large, deep-set eyes that are sad and weary, a cracked voice, and a frail body.”11 McKay made the effort to see Susan beyond her appearance or her condition and found something in Susan she recognized: “Susan is the voice of the growing number of those who want more from life. She knows there are things other than what she has, and while she is unable to define them concretely, she wants to have some of them.”12 Susan’s search for what was missing was not hers alone. McKay embarked on a similar search, and with each academic position, with each new leadership opportunity, she made choices that supported her quest for intellectual and personal freedom.

In late August 1977, following her readmission to Harvard, McKay was awash in the optimism brought by the good news of multiple job prospects. William J. Holmes, the fourth president of Simmons College, who in his 1970 inauguration speech acknowledged the need for the college to “expand programs that train women for executive-level careers,”13 an observation that led to Simmons creating the first “MBA program designed for women in the country,”14 informed McKay of the college’s decision to grant her “the presumption of tenure . . . after the satisfactory completion of the 1977–1978 academic year.”14 The administrative process that put McKay on the path to tenure at Simmons certainly differed from twenty-first-century review processes—processes that typically involve a series of intermediate reviews in which institutions determine whether a tenure-track candidate is meeting the mark in the areas of research, teaching, and service—but Simmons’s
message was clear: McKay’s impressive work had made her the candidate department chair F. Wylie Sypher would move mountains for.

About a month after receiving the Simmons offer, McKay was invited by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to serve as a 1978 visiting assistant professor in literature “for the spring semester, to teach a course in Black Autobiography.” The head of the Department of Humanities, historian Bruce Mazlish, offered to pay McKay $3,500 to teach the course. By even today’s standards, where adjunct professors at baccalaureate institutions earn anywhere from about $2,000 to $4,500 per course, MIT’s offer was generous. Indeed, the amount astonished McKay, who admitted to Joyce Scott that “the M.I.T. thing is going to pay me more money than anyone else has ever paid me to do anything!” However, for a woman whose admission to Harvard was followed by a handwritten letter in which she outlined her financial hardships and requested a loan to fill the gap between a Harvard fellowship and a Woodrow Wilson Foundation grant, McKay needed more than the promise of good pay to feel satisfied. There was another possibility on the horizon. This opportunity would turn McKay’s attention away from the prestige of tenure at Simmons and the financial rewards of academic life in New England toward new possibilities in the Midwest.

Richard Ralston, on behalf of a search committee affiliated with the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Afro-American Studies Department, had contacted McKay to find out whether she would be interested in a job teaching Afro-American literature at the flagship campus of Wisconsin’s state university system. Ralston, a Fisk University–educated “Africanist with a special interest in the relationship between the U.S. and Africa,” had learned about McKay as a prospective candidate from Samuel Allen, a fellow alumnus of the historically Black Fisk University who had earned a law degree from Harvard, studied at the Sorbonne, and who, in 1977, was teaching at Boston University. It is clear from the letter inviting McKay to apply for the position that Ralston understood that Madison might be a hard sell for her. He confessed, “You may not have thought of making such a move at the present time.” He was right.

McKay responded positively to Ralston’s initial request for information but, in a private letter to Joyce Scott, her longtime friend from Hollis, Queens, expressed ambivalence about “the Black Studies thing.” McKay felt great affinity for the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, which, while relatively unknown to anyone outside of Harvard at the time, was slowly but surely building a reputation all its own. It was a space that had emerged out of “long years when Black Studies was still only a wish on our part,” and
McKay, who appears to have been a Du Bois Institute fellow from 1977 to 1978, was eager to expand its profile. But Black studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison gave her pause: the isolation of the Midwest and the prospect of a life far away from her familiar haunts in the Northeast were certainly not appealing. McKay respected the fact that Wisconsin was the kind of place where people go “to become more attractive for places like Harvard etc.,” but she also believed that “one does not go to Wisconsin to remain forever.” Or so she thought.

Faced with the biggest decision of her professional career thus far, McKay solicited advice from Preston N. and Constance W. Williams (better known as Connie), Harvard friends who knew her, understood the profession, and were well respected in the Harvard community. Preston, the first director of Harvard’s Du Bois Institute, earned his bachelor’s degree in divinity from Johnson C. Smith University. He mentored McKay and, at this particular moment, helped her to weigh her professional options. McKay frequented Preston and Connie’s home on Martha’s Vineyard, a secluded residence in Chilmark that was twists and turns away from the historic Black enclave of Oak Bluffs, which was home to Dorothy West, author of *The Living Is Easy* (1948). As the first tenured Black faculty member of Harvard’s Divinity School, Williams knew plenty about the climate and politics of the place and was a generous sounding board for McKay during her time at Harvard. Politically astute and well connected, Preston provided McKay with invaluable insight into life in the professoriate. When it came to making a decision about Madison, however, he was not the only member of the Williams family who had an opinion about McKay’s next steps.

Connie was staunchly against McKay pursuing the Madison position. When McKay shared news of Madison’s interest with Preston, he responded with his trademark candor and confidence: “You should go to Madison.” Plain and simple. For Preston, Simmons College, in spite of its strong reputation in the Boston area, was a “small pond” that would limit McKay’s ability to “develop and express her own scholarship and interests.” What she needed was a “bigger arena,” the larger platform that Madison could provide. Connie, on the other hand, admittedly “risk averse,” was hesitant about McKay making such a big step. In her mind, why leave Simmons and tenure? Preston envisioned Madison as just the sort of launching pad McKay needed. In his mind, Madison was a “premier university,” the place institutions such as Harvard and Stanford University went to recruit. He was confident she would get tenure, and “if she didn’t really fit in then she knew that with her background some bigger institution would come

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calling. That was where she ought to go.” After consulting her friends, McKay promptly followed Preston’s advice and, to Richard Ralston, relayed her interest in being considered for an assistant professor position at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

IN 1977, BY THE TIME McKay looked west to teach, almost a decade had passed since Black student protests first pressured administrators to fulfill their promise to students and establish a Black studies program at UW-Madison. Conversations about Black studies at the institution had been in the works since around 1968, when the Committee on Studies and Instruction in Race Relations initially began “researching the issue.” But progress was slow, and the students wanted Black control of the program. It wasn’t enough that artist and UW-Madison Afro-American Studies professor Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis, then a master’s student, joined the committee along with other African American nonvoting student members; the fact that the committee was composed of “all white males” during a time when the students wanted Black faculty, a Black department, and more Black students was enough to launch those who were already skeptical about the university’s commitment to their issues into protest.

Then, for two weeks in early February 1969, Black students inspired by Black power, supported by mostly white Vietnam War protesters and spurred by residual grief and anger over the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on 4 April of the previous year, staged a series of protests at UW-Madison. The list of thirteen demands they presented to the chancellor on 7 February 1969 led with a call for an “autonomous Black Studies department controlled and organized by black students and faculty, which would enable students to receive a B.A. in Black Studies.” Three other related demands—such as those about a Black chair of Black studies, the hiring of twenty teachers to teach in Black studies, and the transfer of “existing Black courses . . . into the Black Studies Department”—supported their primary purpose: the establishment of Black studies as a center for the study of Black life and as a disciplinary home for Black faculty and Black students.

At first, Chancellor Edwin Young pointed to individual ad hoc courses as evidence of the institution moving in the right direction. There were “courses in Afro-American Studies; a seminar on black history, [and] a black literature course” already being offered. Chicago native and Pulitzer Prize winner Gwendolyn Brooks also taught creative writing. The protesters were not impressed. When students proceeded with their peaceful protest,
the chancellor called in the National Guard to quell their march. In *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Radical Reconstruction of Higher Education, 1965–1972* (2012), Ibram H. Rogers, now Ibram X. Kendi, captured the events on 13 February 1969, as follows:

Nine hundred National Guardsmen strolled onto the UW Madison campus with fixed bayonets that Thursday. Some rode on jeeps decked with machine guns. Helicopters surveyed the thousands of protesters. If the presence of city police had stirred campus activism a few days earlier when black students kicked off their strike, then the National Guard whipped students into a frenzy. After picketing and obstructing traffic during the day, about ten thousand students, with African American torch bearers leading the way, walked in the cold from the university to the capitol in the largest student march of the Black Campus Movement (BCM).41

“Their bodies may have been freezing that night,” Rogers continued, “but their mouths were on fire” as they shouted, “‘On strike, shut it down! Support black demands!’”42 The organizers pressed on, leading a nonviolent march of anywhere between 6,000 and 10,000 that evening—“the largest crowd of the strike”43—up State Street to the capitol to draw national attention to their cause.

Decried for his decision to bring in the National Guard and termed the “War Maker, Strike Breaker” because of it, Chancellor Young defended his decision, stating that he did so “to protect the students from untrained sheriff’s deputies who may have wanted to ‘teach these young people a lesson.’”44 He certainly deemed students’ desire to “close the university down” as “anti-intellectual,”45 but there’s no arguing with the fact that without student resistance, which was highly organized and sustained over many years, Black studies at UW-Madison might never have come into being.46 Student effort paid off. On 3 March 1969, faculty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison approved the “establishment of a Black Studies Department.”47 It was ratified by the board of regents in 1970.

In 1977, McKay made her way to UW-Madison as a prospective hire, fully aware that what Black studies protests had afforded her as a student at Queens and Harvard also opened doors for her as a job candidate in the heartland. She envisioned a direct link between protest and access and was grateful for the opportunities forged from sacrifice: “I still think that I went to Harvard because some people were willing to riot in the streets,” she explained. “I don’t have any doubt about that. I got there because there were

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some Black folks who got their heads battered in. Those doors would not have opened had not some people been willing to die. I probably would never have gotten in those doors.” McKay lived through the race riots at Queens and experienced Harvard in the wake of the storming of University Hall, so she was familiar with the strife leading to the creation of UW-Madison’s Afro-American Studies Department. This history shaped her personal mission at the same time it informed departmental pedagogy, which cited relevancy as a core value. McKay understood that the path to Black studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison had been won through great physical violence and sacrifice. She was interviewing with a department that believed that it was responsible for delivering a relevant education to its students and responsible for serving as a positive influence to the community beyond its walls. This was the history, climate, and culture of the department McKay sought to join.

McKay’s campus visit was folded into an experimental course that featured prominent Black male writers and Black male critics. Ralston asked her to prepare a lecture as part of a course coordinated by Africanist Edris Makward called Trends and Ideas in Contemporary Black Writing. McKay’s proposed talk, “Jean Toomer and his Generation,” was one of “a series of guest lectures” that featured the likes of satirist Ishmael Reed, poet Robert Hayden, and literary critic Addison Gayle, among others. McKay was excited to see these luminaries on the roster and, while honored to be among such esteemed writers, appears not to have been threatened by their relative celebrity. A few weeks after McKay’s trip to Madison and her Toomer presentation, she received a letter from Richard Ralston about the “enthusiastic” responses to her visit. Shortly thereafter, McKay was hired as an assistant professor in the Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison; she started her first semester as a tenure-track faculty member in the fall of 1978.

McKay joined Afro-American Studies during a moment of transition. In the wake of a student strike that led to Black studies at UW-Madison, the department faced a new challenge: how would it balance its commitment to relevancy as a curricular value while becoming “academically respectable” in the eyes of white institutional tastemakers? The distinction is specious but important to acknowledge, since this would not be the last time Black studies practitioners would face pressure to shape the products of their intellectual labor into forms palatable to a white institutional elite. McKay was brought on as part of a cohort of new faculty—hired within a year or so of one another—who would take an integrative approach to the dual desire
for culturally relevant teaching and scholarship legible to the white male faculty members who overwhelmingly comprised the institution’s tenure and promotion committee. In addition to labor historian Herbert Hill and Tom W. Shick, who in 1976 had earned a PhD in history from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the department also hired poet-scholar Sarah Webster Fabio to join its faculty ranks.

Hiring Fabio to teach at UW-Madison was a masterstroke. She had taught “some of the earliest Black studies courses at Merritt College and the University of California, Berkeley” and, in her teaching and poetry, represented a “generational bridge” between “Black Power and Black Arts.” She was known as “Panther teacher” among “Huey Newton and other young activists” and brought expertise as a teacher-practitioner to UW-Madison, especially through her powerful and innovative performances of spoken-word poetry. Fabio was guided by an investment in making legible Black women’s sensibilities—namely, the unknown Black woman, the Rosa Parks figure, and the Black mother—and her careful attention to craft distinguished her as one of “several leading poets” of the Black Arts Movement. Pioneering the cultivation of “black aesthetics” and altering previously accepted conventions of how scholarship was supposed to sound, Fabio dared to experiment with poetry and prose through a “blend of poetic rhythms and critical delineation,” to reveal how the poet might “jazz up” archaic, arthritic academic prose. Fabio was committed to working within a Black aesthetic that could “create a power force which will interpret, support, and validate the reality of ‘black experience.’” Fabio came to UW-Madison ready to shake up students’ conceptions of the technical foundations of spoken-word poetry.

One of Fabio’s students recalled a firsthand experience of the poet’s influence. Student Fabu Mogaka came to UW-Madison as a practicing poet but wanted to develop her understanding of the literary traditions that informed creative production. At first, Mogaka mistook Fabio’s poetry as the product of pure spontaneity. Poets with a strong performative bent are sometimes mistaken as producing out of raw emotion. Not theorists. Not scholars. A tough teacher, Fabio disabused Mogaka of this notion. While she performed live, Fabio’s poetry paid careful attention to craft. She embodied Howard Rambsy’s claim in *The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry* (2013) that the “poets, critics, and theorists are one.” By demonstrating the interplay between the “artistic use of poetry” and “the study of poetry,” Fabio transformed Mogaka’s sense of herself as a writer. The study of the formal elements of African and African American literature “added a depth” to Mogaka’s writing, and she credited Fabio for influence that lasted a lifetime.
The differences between Fabio and McKay encapsulate an early debate around the mission of Black studies programs as they negotiated their activist origins and elite academic futures. Fabio’s community connections made her more reflective of the activist leanings of Madison’s Afro-American Studies Department; McKay, a Harvard-educated scholar who would similarly focus on Black women’s literary and cultural production, reflected the institutionalization of Black studies even if she often bristled at the way the field was ghettoized by her white peers. Together, perhaps, Fabio and McKay would reconcile that which seemed irreconcilable at the time: the activist tradition of Black studies and the codification of Black studies as a “reputable” area of academic inquiry. Fabio and McKay were different yet complementary, and the possibilities for innovation between them were vast. Unfortunately, members of the department would never see how these two women might have come together to steer the early years of Black literary studies at UW-Madison. Just as McKay was being hired, Fabio was quietly battling cancer. When Fabio left the university, sometime between 1977 and 1978, she never returned. Sarah Webster Fabio died on 7 November 1979, “after a courageous two-year battle with cancer.” McKay served as a member of Fabio’s memorial committee.

Sadly, Fabio would not be the only loss suffered by the department as it expanded its faculty in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As a new faculty member at UW-Madison, McKay no longer had Fabio to build with, but a friendship formed at Harvard and fostered through correspondence would help her combat the isolation that overwhelmed her in her new home town.

In the quiet of the early morning, the rich darkness yielding to daybreak as the sun ascended over Lake Monona, Nellie Y. McKay moved her lithe fingers across the keyboard of her IBM typewriter. As the motor hummed and vibrated, massaging her fingers as they rested on the springy keys between sentiments, between thoughts, between sentences, McKay practiced the writing ritual that had begun the day she left Cambridge, Massachusetts, for Madison, Wisconsin, and that lasted until shortly before her death. For nearly thirty years McKay maintained a correspondence with Nell Irvin Painter, a graduate peer turned colleague she first met in 1969 while studying at Harvard but became close to several years later. Like clockwork, McKay placed her morning letter in the outgoing mail bin kept beside the administrative assistant. It was the first piece of outgoing post nearly every day. As her colleagues arrived to the office and daily work commenced, McKay’s letter became buried beneath department memoranda, recommendation let-
ters, and the like, all eventually collected by mail carriers and sorted by postal workers who routed each piece to its appropriate destination.

In the 1970s, letter writing, for both McKay and Painter, was part of a larger effort to make space for themselves through peer-to-peer systems of support in an academy that, for Black women faculty teaching at predominately white colleges and universities especially, was overwhelmingly white and male. They maintained at least two kinds of space. One was disciplinary and institutional space, where Black women broadened the scope of their fields of study and integrated academic departments made up of mostly white men. The other was a private space, the Black interior, a site of quiet creativity, where Black women communicated with one another out of “silences. Loopholes. Interstices. Allegory. Dissemblance” to oppose the pressure to “present highly censored ‘positive’ images [of themselves] to an often hostile public.” The letters between McKay and Painter offered, as Farah Jasmine Griffin explained in Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends (1999), “proof of the importance of sister-friendships in life as well as in fiction.”

Their correspondence was initiated self-consciously with the intention of becoming part of the historical record and, when read in its entirety, offers a “social history of late 20th-century black women scholars.” Certainly, the correspondence is useful for the insight it offers into the experiences of two Black women as they navigated careers in the professoriate at a particular moment in time. It also pulls back the veil on how Black women sustained academic friendships to offset the isolation they felt as Black faculty at predominately white institutions. Their relationship—specifically, how they found each other, how they supported each other, how they disagreed with each other, and how they identified opportunities for each other—promoted a peer-as-mentor model in which subterranean sentiments crucial to the intellectual space-making of Black women of this generation were conveyed through letters.

McKay and Painter met at Harvard “in the fall of 1969,” but based on the first letter included in their archived correspondence, it wasn’t until 1977, shortly before McKay filed her dissertation, that the two began corresponding regularly. Painter was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania by then, conducting research for what was to become her second book, The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South (1979). In 1976, while in Philadelphia to “interview the second wife of the subject of her dissertation” on Jean Toomer, McKay stayed with Painter at her house on Pine Street in what is now the Society Hill section of Philadelphia. They came together again a year later during a cross-country road trip.
trip, solidifying the bonds that would last for decades to come. These early meetings reflect a truism about the relationship between McKay and Painter: supporting each other’s intellectual interests was just one facet of their friendship. They also supported each other emotionally and in quotidian contexts: they shared recipes and gossip and discussed exercise regimens, fashion, and romance. These topics were as much a part of their letters as the sharing of essay or talk drafts, news clippings, or reader’s reports. Like all interpersonal contact, their friendship was complex and at times characterized by conflict. Without any professional models of academic mentorship for them to follow—especially as it related to the status of Black women in predominately white spaces—they bushwhacked together to clear a space for disciplinary interests that challenged the intellectual status quo. The correspondence afforded them an intellectually rigorous yet microaggression-free space to pose questions and connect, to refine both ideas and craft.

Painter supported McKay as she struggled to revise her dissertation and transform it into a book. Making the turn from dissertation to book as a new faculty member was hard for McKay, who considered herself a slow, if deliberate, worker, reader, and writer. McKay’s insecurities as a writer, dare I say as a creative, resulted from how she viewed her productivity when compared with her peer group. Whether stated explicitly or conveyed implicitly, academic circles value work that is both quick and prolific. The tenure track, which requires new faculty members to reach a particular threshold of research, teaching, and service work within a six-year window, favors those who work fast and who produce much. Never mind the scope of the project or the process of the scholar. “Quite a few factors, including socioeconomics, gender, institutional support, and the properties and expectations of specific domains,” explained Howard Rambsy, “affect pace and amount of output.” Rambsy studied “African American literary studies and creativity research” in Bad Men: Creative Touchstones of Black Writers (2020) and suggested that instead of privileging productivity, or the amount of work produced, we need also consider creativity in a broad sense so that work that moves imaginatively between multiple “creative domains” is praised as a product as well as for the complexity of the process.

McKay’s Jean Toomer, Artist: A Study of His Literary Life and Work, 1894–1936 (1984) was one such creative undertaking. McKay’s book, as University of Kansas Distinguished Professor and director of the Project on the History of Black Writing Maryemma Graham wrote in her 1985 review, bore “a double burden.” Not only was McKay “confronting one of the most widely dis-
cussed literary texts in the Afro-American literary canon,” but she was also, as Toomer’s biographer, “attempting to solve the largest puzzle about Toomer’s life.” Jean Toomer, as a biography, involved the analysis of source material from different creative domains: manuscript sources from archives in Nashville, Tennessee, and New Orleans, Louisiana; published books, stories, poems, plays, autobiographies, and essays; unpublished novels, plays, and stories by Jean Toomer; secondary sources on Toomer; and other works to facilitate McKay’s immersion into, among other things, Gurdjieff philosophy. McKay imagined that her research was slow going because of a personal deficit, when in fact it was more likely that the work was slow going because such is the nature of biographical research.

The response McKay received from University of North Carolina Press editor Malcolm L. Call following an inquiry about publishing her Toomer book did little to assuage her self-doubt. Call, who also worked as an editor at Massachusetts and Pennsylvania university presses during his career, expressed interest; but following an external review of her manuscript, he could not commit to publishing it. Call yielded to the recommendation of the external reader, who offered a lively and insightful assessment of the merits of McKay’s manuscript (it had “provocativeness, insight, and a readable style”), and encouraged McKay to undertake a “period of reflection and synthesis” to better contextualize the “array of forces” that “give resonance” to her claim of Toomer as an “artist with words.” The reader did not, however, offer an unequivocal recommendation for publication, which of course was the outcome McKay desired most.

McKay, “dismayed” by the prospect of undertaking revisions for two years as recommended by the reader, solicited feedback from Painter to help her process Call’s letter and the reader’s report. Painter—already a tenured associate professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania—admitted to reading Nellie’s letter “as I would feel if what happened to you happened to me, so be warned that I might be right on target, but I might be way off.” With critical distance, Painter let McKay know that she had actually received a “wonderful” reader’s report—one that refused, in the words of the reviewer, “to make the type of concise judgment here that editors so dearly love” but that provided McKay with a solid road map to guide her manuscript revisions. Painter’s empathic response was informed by the fact that she had already faced three rejections for the Hosea Hudson book and was still awaiting word from Harvard University Press. As Painter helped McKay see the good in even a conditional response, she reckoned with the thought that hers might be conditional as well, “because the manuscript, as I submitted it,
had neither introduction nor completed footnotes.” While revising sans contract is not ideal, the manuscript feedback McKay received from the external reader prepared her to fulfill the publishing requirements for tenure at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. With all the effort she was putting into the book, she needed it to meet the mark.

McKay’s book revisions were intermittent, due in large part to the teaching demands that accompanied her faculty position. By the time McKay arrived at UW-Madison, she had already been teaching for seven years—at Simmons and between visiting positions at Northeastern University, Boston University, and MIT from 1971 to 1978—and was nearing burnout. She wondered when she would ever find the time to work or the mental space to process reviewer feedback. McKay’s dreams of a summer vacation and an opportunity to rest vanished abruptly once she concluded that given her workload, a vacation was a luxury she could not afford. She instead spent the summer of 1980 writing about Toomer’s *Cane*, the imagistic prose poem that chronicles Black life in the South, Black life in the North, and the complexities of reconciling Black identity that became Toomer’s most important and best-known work. Initially, McKay planned to complete five chapters “or almost all of that” over the summer and imagined securing a research leave so she would be positioned to complete the book and have it accepted for publication in time for her fall 1981 tenure review. Would a spring leave work? If so, how would that leave be financed? Sublet and move into a spare room? A friend’s basement? A couple’s attic? Stay and borrow money to cover essentials? To make matters worse, McKay began experiencing dizziness around midsummer, likely the result of a nonstop summer work plan. The doctors could not identify a source, which left McKay to wonder whether the dizziness was “stress related.” As the physical costs of McKay’s summer of “sitting at [her] desk and typewriter” and “throwing lots of sheets of paper into the waste basket” mounted—she was both dizzy and “dead tired”—and was left to wonder how, in a day with only twenty-four hours, twenty-six hours of work would ever get done. In spite of the overwhelming circumstances, she pressed on. “If you stick me with a pin,” she once told Painter, “you won’t find blood—just black coffee and *Cane.*

On-campus camaraderie was a very vital missing thing, so during McKay’s early days in Madison, and to combat the isolation she felt as a new professor, she befriended the white women who were part of UW-Madison’s newly formed Women’s Studies Program, which became the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies in 2008. When McKay faced difficulties at
Harvard, she had dealt with them by expanding her network of friends and collaborators and by engaging in work that affirmed her capacity as a teacher and a scholar of Black literature. In Madison, to ease her rough transition and soothe intense feelings of isolation, she found that she would need to enact the same strategies she deployed when she brought coworkers together through dinner parties at 111 Road in Queens or when she collaborated with Black feminists in the Boston area. McKay initially struggled to cultivate similar networks in Madison, which made acclimating to the institution and life on the isthmus tough. There were a limited number of Black women faculty for her to connect with, and without any of the natural relationships that form between mothers of young children or members of a Black sorority, McKay’s community roots were shallow. For many Black women faculty members, taking a faculty position without a network was, in the words of sociologist Lori Walkington, to navigate alone the “chilly reception, negative department climate, norms and expectations, and the assumption by their peers that blacks are incapable of theorizing.” Luckily, McKay was expansive in her thinking when she imagined the connections she could make, the relationships she would need to form to do the work she wanted to do, so she used gender as an organizing feature of her outreach and befriended white women, particularly those affiliated with Madison’s burgeoning women’s studies program, to help make the place feel more like home.

Much like the social justice movement for Black civil rights, the second wave of the feminist movement had a profound disciplinary impact on the academy and those who entered the ivory tower at this time. As they had in the fight for Black studies, students played an integral part in forcing mainstream institutions to first acknowledge and then address the absence of the voices of the marginalized and oppressed in classrooms. As feminist writers such as Betty Friedan and Kate Millett captivated the popular imagination, women students and faculty were actively pushing institutions of higher education to make space for women’s voices and ways of knowing. Students led their own reading groups and circulated the work of feminist theorists and the manifestos of feminist organizations; they also began valorizing the forgotten work of women in history, philosophy, and literature. In cases where institutions were slow to either designate new resources or reallocate existing resources, students and faculty designed their own classes beyond the confines of the existing curriculum.

Scholars of women’s literature played a crucial role in excavating and valuing the work of relatively unknown or unheralded women writers, which contributed significantly to foundational theoretical and methodological
approaches in the field of women’s, gender, and queer studies. The persistence of supporters within and outside the academy, as well as the reality that many traditional disciplines in the humanities and social sciences were changing in part because of this and other mass social movements, made possible the slow yet steady incorporation of these spaces of feminist teaching and learning into the curriculum. The first women’s studies program in the United States was founded at San Diego State College and was followed by the proliferation of similar programs nationwide. At many institutions, feminist scholarship and teaching has become one of many respected interdisciplinary fields that exist in the academy where one can find whole courses dedicated to the intellectual work of Black women. By joining with a group of women’s studies scholars, McKay connected to a broader women’s movement that promoted the study of gender, and the presence of women, in the American academy. This collaboration reflects McKay’s openness about cultivating diverse friend groups and her commitment to community building with white feminists even as she actively critiqued the reinforcement of white supremacy and the tokenization of Black women.

As an assistant professor, McKay walked a tightrope between maintaining her sense of self and cultivating friendships with white women when she was befriended by Gerda Lerner, the feminist historian and author of *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (1972), a collection of primary materials related to Black women’s history. Lerner took an immediate interest in McKay and met regularly with the new professor to talk about personal and professional matters. The two had a complicated relationship. The greatest tension between the pair involved Lerner’s condescension, constant supply of unsolicited advice, and absolute belief that her way was the right way. This, at least, was how McKay portrayed matters in her letters to Painter. When McKay wrote to Lerner directly, the tone was markedly different. Whether writing to Lerner to wish her well during one of her West Coast trips to visit her grandchildren, express gratitude for their friendship, or rib Lerner for hassling her over one thing or another (“After all, nobody fusses with me the way you do!!!!”), McKay seemed much less impatient with Lerner’s meddling when she corresponded with her directly.

There was a power play at hand, and McKay understood the stakes. McKay was keen in her ability to assess people, evaluate situations and systems of power, and make decisions with her ultimate goal in mind, and her deft handling of Lerner reflects strategies that facilitated her later success. Lerner’s interference in McKay’s life, especially when it came to relation-
ship advice, may have chafed the new professor (Lerner thought McKay's relationship issues would be solved if she'd only consider working class Black men) but the payoff of having Lerner in her corner outweighed McKay's annoyance over Lerner's ways. To that end, even though McKay experienced ambivalence around what she sometimes felt was her token status as a member of the women's studies group at UW-Madison, she ultimately developed close friendships with several colleagues, namely Susan Friedman, a faculty member in the English department, and Linda Gordon of Madison's history department. One of the burdens McKay bore as a faculty member, especially in the early years, involved maintaining her integrity without sacrificing community or assimilating. In certain contexts, the interracial relationships McKay cultivated with her white peers seem politically motivated and driven by a desire to keep her access to powerful networks close. In other contexts, McKay seemed invested in the gift of friendship and the possibility for collaboration with the white women of women's studies. Ever “sober” in her outlook, McKay calculated the risks and rewards associated with the friendships she formed in white academic spaces.

During her early days in Madison, McKay often felt alone, a byproduct of her experience as a Black woman at a white school that did not necessarily reflect the experience of all Black women in the professoriate, particularly those at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Black women's experiences in the academy have existed along a spectrum ranging from hostile to hospitable, from isolated to included. For some, the placement of their offices in closets—some with windows, others without—or some other ancillary space speaks to their marginalization on campus or in their departments. For others, as McKay's experiences illustrate, Black studies departments or women's studies programs helped Black women find community at white schools before there was a critical mass of Black women to break bread together. But what risks getting lost in discussions about institutional climate are the assumptions made about who we're talking about when we talk about Black women in the professoriate.

Conversations about climate in higher education presume the presence of Black women in inherently white spaces. Exclusionary practices and isolation may characterize the experiences of Black women at predominately white institutions, especially elite ones, but these same terms don't necessarily describe the experiences of Black women PhDs who taught at HBCUs. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, who spent her entire career at the historically Black all-women's Spelman College, observed: “I think we really have to unpack what we mean when we say Black women in the academy, and this notion...
that we don’t belong there, you know it’s not isolated, and it’s not isolating to be a Black woman who teaches at an HBCU. Isolating? In fact, I would say what you experience is overwork. You’re not isolated. Differentiating between experiences acknowledges the particulars of McKay’s experiences without painting the experiences of all Black women in the professoriate with too broad a brush.

The support McKay received from her women’s studies friends and, for the most part, her Afro-American Studies colleagues, was only part of what buoyed her spirits in the early years. Her success in the classroom helped her to combat the feelings of isolation and the depressive episodes she battled early on. In one instance, positive student evaluations (provided verbally after class) were confirmed by a formal university assessment in which students reported that McKay’s class (she didn’t identify which in her letter to Painter) was “the ‘best’ course they had ever taken.” Riding high on this good news following a stressful first semester, she was ready to exhale and take some time to celebrate. Nothing fancy, she thought, just a drink. But the only person available to drink with was Herbert Hill, a former labor director for the NAACP who had recently joined Madison’s Afro-American Studies Department and had been tasked with oversight of McKay’s tenure process.

The two had a contentious relationship. But McKay, as a junior faculty member with minimal institutional power, opted to temper her displeasure with Hill’s paternalism and focus instead on her performance, the one thing she could control. She met Hill for that drink and, suffice it to say that her celebratory cocktail didn’t go as planned. “I wanted a drink, felt I deserved it, and I wanted to talk about me and Madison,” she explained to Painter. “Well, Herbert either does not drink, or does not drink at lunch, or something of the kind—so I had no drink. But the worse [sic] of the lunch was that I spent the time listening to Herbert Hill lecture on Herbert Hill.” Annoyed but intent on finding an upside of all her hard work that Hill seemed to ignore, she leaned into kudos from her colleague Bill Van Deburg, summarized in a letter from department chair Richard Ralston, who expressed appreciation for her “splendid and selfless chores . . . undertaken in the building up of our [Afro-American Studies’] literature curriculum.” Brick by brick, McKay was building the profile that would lead to tenure and the bona fides she would need to clear a space for others at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and for African American literature nationwide.

McKay was immediately successful as a teacher, but she took longer to find success in her research. As she worked on the Toomer book, the project on which the bulk of her research dossier hung, McKay found that the dif-
Difficulties she faced as a dissertator at Harvard followed her to UW-Madison. She struggled to move the monograph forward, her slow pace magnifying her self-doubt. The harder it was to write, the faster her tenure clock seemed to move. It was becoming clear to McKay that the two years recommended for revisions, an overhaul of the book really, would take longer, especially because her teaching responsibilities prevented her from making substantive progress. No matter her teaching load, McKay repeatedly said that she could not “teach and write” because “teaching takes that much from me.” She needed time. And for scholars on the tenure track, time is always in short supply.

To secure herself some breathing room, McKay began applying for fellowships that would free her from teaching and service responsibilities and allow her to focus solely on writing. She won a research leave at Michigan State University for both the spring and summer of 1981, which was topped off by additional funds from a summer research service grant sponsored by UW-Madison. In addition to affording her dedicated time to write, these research leaves paused her tenure clock, pulling out of thin air the time she desperately needed to remain in good standing with the department and complete her Toomer manuscript in time for her tenure review. Beyond tenure, the Toomer book would lay the foundation for future feminist studies of his work; but there were also institutional changes that needed to take place before McKay could embark on a systematic overhaul of literary studies. To institute the structures that would provide a professional platform for Black women literary critics, McKay pursued leadership within the Modern Language Association (MLA) and supported broader efforts to secure a place for Black literary scholars within an organization open to Black literature but hostile to Black critics.

McKay was part of a group of younger Black literary critics frustrated by the MLA’s marginalization of Black literary scholars and committed to taking up greater institutional space within the organization. Without Black pushback, the MLA might have continued with the exclusionary practices that prompted Black faculty and teachers from HBCUs to form the College Language Association (CLA) in 1937. The CLA, as an alternative to the MLA, welcomed Black critics, elevating their research through conference presentations and publishing their scholarship in the association’s journal, CLAJ. As Black literary critics integrated historically white institutions, however, they sought visibility within the mainstream MLA, the governing body of English literature and language departments worldwide. Chester J.
Fontenot, who would become one of the founding members of the journal *Black American Literature Forum (BALF)*, recalled a core group of newly minted PhDs that included McKay, Thadious M. Davis, Ann duCille, himself, Trudier Harris, Deborah E. McDowell, R. Baxter Miller, and Hortense J. Spillers. They and others engaged in different types of grassroots work to improve the climate for Black scholars at the MLA’s Annual Meeting, to ensure the visibility of Black literary studies, and to influence policy within the association’s governance structure.

The issue was never whether Black literature was of interest to members of the MLA. According to Fontenot, quite the opposite was true. Panels on Black literature and culture were often “packed” even before there was an MLA division dedicated to supporting them. Interest was not the issue; parity, climate, and organizational culture were. When McKay began teaching African American literature in the 1970s, the MLA was actively “ghettoizing” Black literary studies by presenting book displays with no books by Black people and scheduling Black literature panels at the tail end of the conference. Fontenot remembers how “people would show up to the session with their bags packed in the back of the room, would give a paper, and then couldn’t stay for the Q&A” because panels scheduled late in the conference conflicted with the travel plans of the participants who had limited flights to choose from. Conference organizers further aggravated the issue by assigning panelists to rooms with locked doors or no heat.

Following a spontaneous walkout during an annual meeting, Fontenot recalled sitting down with the president and MLA board to discuss the treatment of the members who were part of what was then called the Black American Literature and Culture discussion group. Favorable placement on the agenda, unlocked doors, and heat were a start, but they were only part of the group’s collective effort to become a known quantity within the association.

For Black American literature and culture, as a specialty area, to have autonomy and agency within the MLA, they needed to be designated as a division, not just as a discussion group. Darwin T. Turner, the stalwart Toomer scholar who became chair of the University of Iowa’s Afro-American Studies Program in 1972, was a “lone voice” who maintained his MLA membership well before a critical mass of Black scholars peopled its conventions. Turner was instrumental in helping newer faculty find their way in the organization. Turner, as Richard A. Yarborough explained, “was a real bridge between MLA and CLA . . . he was also a bridge between the black aesthetic movement and black cultural nationalism and the mainstream academy.” Turner, who Yarborough described as a “really crucial
Some Very Vital Missing Thing

figure who did not get a lot of attention and hasn’t gotten his due,” estab-
lished the African American literature discussion group well before there
was a critical mass of Black scholars who shared an interest in this burgeon-
ing field. Turner’s early work and Fontenot’s subsequent provocations set
the stage for R. Baxter Miller, a North Carolina Central University graduate
and Brown University PhD who authored the application to move African
American Literature and Culture from a discussion group to a division and
who worked alongside Fontenot and others to formalize Black literary stud-
ies within the Modern Language Association. While, as of 2020, the MLA had subsumed what were once discussion
groups and divisions into forums, scholars of Black literature undertook the
administrative labor and vision casting that took Black literary studies from
being “written in pencil” as a discussion group and perennial favorite to be-
ing “written in ink” as a division and permanent fixture. The benefits were
significant. In addition to providing access to much-needed funding as a di-
vision, scholars of Black literature also assumed editorship of a division-
sponsored journal that, beginning in 1983, benefited from the prestige of
being indexed with PMLA, the association’s flagship journal. Black literary
scholars had another organ—edited by specialists in the field—in which to
publish the peer-reviewed essays that would help them earn tenure and ex-
and the critical base established by CLAJ. Joe Weixlmann became de facto
editor of the division’s journal after he took a job in American and African
American literature at Indiana State University, and he served as the jour-
nal’s intrepid editor for over forty years, transforming, alongside leading
scholars in the field, what was then the Negro American Literature Forum, a
publication “for School and University Teachers,” into the BALF and, later,
the African American Review (AAR). McKay was a member of the AAR’s advi-
sory board, which allowed her to advance the work of other scholars by re-
viewing and recommending essays for publication.

Black scholars in this core group published field-forming work out of
their respective areas of interest and disparate domains of expertise, so it is
important to acknowledge the range of ways they contributed to the larger
project of Black literary studies. At the time, one could count “the number
of black people on two hands,” recalled Trudier Harris—the University
Distinguished Research Professor at the University of Alabama—so schol-
ars contributed where they could to have the most impact. Their numbers
were small, but as a group they were mighty. These scholars wrote their
books, earned tenure, and helped establish the next generation of tenured
faculty in African American literature by reviewing book manuscripts,
writing tenure letters, and advising graduate students. “I think people work with what they’re most comfortable doing,” explained Harris. Some were interested in leadership; “[I helped] to create the scholarship and get the work out there.”

McKay demonstrated her interest in MLA leadership in her bid for a position on the executive committee of the MLA’s Division on Women’s Studies. Since another part of McKay’s intellectual project involved leveraging the gains of the women’s movement to secure Black women’s access to leadership, she planned to use her status as an executive committee member to increase the presence of panels on Black women’s literature at the MLA’s Annual Meeting and to facilitate the entry of more Black women into MLA leadership. Individual leadership, for McKay, then, was a means to an end, and hers was inspired by the collective needs of an ever-expanding network of Black women literary scholars spread across the country, isolated in their respective departments but soon bound together by a common interest in collectively advancing Black literature in general and the writings of Black women in particular. Recognition within the MLA was vital to McKay, who imagined that she could have a positive influence on literary studies by building from within.

If Black scholars, as a group, faced challenges circumscribed by race, then McKay confronted an MLA governance structure that also held a “history of . . . indifference to women.” By the time McKay pursued leadership in 1979, it had been about a decade since pressure from the women’s movement prompted the MLA to create the Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession. At the time, “women ma[de] up one-third of MLA membership,” but they “rarely exercised administrative or executive power.”

The gains of white women did not extend to Black women, who struggled to secure a seat at the table well into the 1970s. In a telling and painful letter to McKay, Gloria T. Hull captured this disconnect between the organizational achievements of white women and the ongoing disenfranchisement of Black women within MLA governance. Hull, who coedited the seminal *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982), was appointed as cochair of the MLA’s Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession in 1976. She followed Barbara Smith, her close friend and *Brave* coeditor, who became the first woman of color appointed to the commission in 1975. Their presence
on the commission broke new ground. In pursuit of MLA leadership, however, Black women paid a high emotional tax.

In a confidential memorandum from Hull to “CSW Members and Cheryl” regarding the “May 18 [1979] meeting with Executive Council and attendant matters,” Hull called the Executive Council to task for creating a “hostile and condescending” environment that prevented Hull and her colleague “Margo” from being received respectfully as “colleagues in the profession.” The treatment, according to Hull, reflected the council’s “elitism, sexism, and racism—and their ignorance and underlying contempt for the Commission and our work as women.” Among their most egregious acts was the failure to appoint Nellie Y. McKay to the commission as the “Black woman replacement.” Even though such a designation may read like a quota to our twenty-first-century sensibilities, this move was part of an affirmative step to guarantee participation from an otherwise marginalized constituency. It was the second year McKay had expressed interest in the commission, and while she was not appointed her first time around, she held out hope that, in this case, the second time would be a charm.

In Hull’s memo to the group, which she sent to McKay with the presumption that she would later place it in “File 13” (the wastebasket), Hull historicized the practice of having “at least two Black women” serve on the commission to justify her disappointment in McKay being passed over for the position. The practice began “after a traumatic confrontation between Barbara Smith and the rest of the then all-white Commission.” Smith was not only the coeditor of But Some of Us Are Brave alongside Hull but also a cofounder of the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black feminists who later published a statement arguing against separatism from “progressive Black men” while demanding that the concerns of Black lesbians be woven into any discussion of Black feminism. Hull framed the inclusion of at least two Black women on the commission as an “indispensable principle,” but it fell on the deaf ears of a council that “as a whole just did not see race as a compelling issue.” Hull’s memo explored a few alternate pathways; a handwritten letter to McKay accompanying the memo reads, “In the end, nothing could be done about the choices which had been made.” Hull, “disappointed, angry and alienated,” sent McKay a copy of the memo as an expression of her sadness over “any inconvenience or disappointment” this may have caused. Hull’s correspondence depicts the climate of the MLA for women and Black people and demonstrates how, for Black women whose tenure dossiers required evidence of service to the profession, which included committee service, it wasn’t enough just to throw your hat in the
ring. Structures, even those with supposedly feminist foundations, needed to be overhauled to prevent the reinforcement of hierarchical racial structures in their selection of new members.

The outcome was not ideal, but Hull’s powerful advocacy, while draining, seems to have prompted allies to respond creatively to McKay’s predicament. In February 1980, Erlene Stetson, former professor of English at Indiana University and author of *Black Sister: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746–1980* (1981), invited McKay to chair a session on Black women in the academy. Stetson planned to use the fact that the commission was responsible for a “certain amount of in-house programming” to guarantee that this proposed project was a “shoo-in,” thereby avoiding any obstructionist moves by the more conservative elements within the MLA. Two months later, in April 1980, McKay received a second invitation. This time, the invitation came from the late Helene Moglen on behalf of another group: the Women’s Caucus for the Modern Languages (WCML). Moglen, a feminist scholar and former professor emerita of literature and women’s studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, invited McKay to participate in the forum “Literary Influence: Gender to Gender.” McKay accepted. While McKay’s papers include no invitation to join the panel “The Second Sex in Academia,” where she would present “Black Professor: White University,” the fact that the panel was organized by the WCML is notable, since even though the “MLA never officially sanctioned WCML,” the group was influential enough to get women on the program.

The WCML organized itself and members proceeded with their work independent of MLA oversight because of their fear that the MLA’s “indifference to women” would translate into a women’s commission that was little more than a paper-pushing “study group.” Fortunately, under Howe’s leadership, the women’s commission successfully initiated several progressive actions, one of which included, in 1971, having “proportional [gender] representation” on the first Delegate Assembly. The Delegate Assembly brought together representatives from specific areas of study, regions, and professional concerns to meet during the MLA’s Annual Meeting to, among other things, determine dues, recommend actions, and approve amendments. Undeterred, McKay pursued a seat on the Delegate Assembly at around the same time she was unsuccessful in her bid for a seat on the Women’s Commission and was selected “to serve on the Assembly for a three-year term, from 1 January 1979 through 31 December 1981.” The push for representational parity on the Delegate Assembly was another move that made McKay’s eventual place in women’s leadership possible.
In the wake of strong feminist leadership, McKay’s persistence paid. By 1980, the MLA-based Division on Women’s Studies in Language and Literature had elected McKay to a five-year term (1981–1985) on its executive committee. In this role, McKay furthered the work started by Hull and Smith in their years as commission cochairs, and the three remained in contact even after their terms on the commission ended. McKay also became a close friend and colleague of Florence Howe, who later became McKay’s publisher. In addition to publishing “three essays—in 1990, 1995, and 2000—about [McKay’s] intellectual movement into feminism and particularly into Black women’s studies,” Howe also asked her to edit a twentieth-anniversary edition of But Some of Us Are Brave. McKay agreed, but on the condition that, among other things, Hull, Smith, and Patricia Bell Scott supported her in doing so. Unfortunately, McKay did not live long enough to see Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women’s Studies published. Coeditors Stanlie M. James, Frances Smith Foster, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall steered the 2009 anniversary edition to completion. They dedicated the collection to McKay.

McKay’s MLA committee appointment did not ease her annoyance with the snubbing of Black women’s literature panels at the MLA Annual Meeting. She stayed the course to earn her place within the MLA. And in the face of the MLA’s failure to grant her Black women colleagues a platform for their ideas, McKay asserted herself, using her particular brand of quiet yet firm pressure, to get what she wanted. Part of McKay’s methodology as a scholar and institutional bridge builder involved the deployment of her extraordinary interpersonal and administrative skills. Specifically, she located domains of influence—organizations such as the MLA that could help increase the notoriety of Black women critics and expand the reach of Black women’s literature—and, once inside, mobilized a web of relationships to ensure that the emerging voices of Black women literary scholars would have a home on the conference program. The bumpy road to a panel on Black women’s autobiography offers a case in point.

On the heels of the roaring success of the 1979 panel “Black Women Writers and Their Contributions to American Literature: The Quest for an Affirming Self,” which featured McKay, Thadious M. Davis, Trudier Harris, Marilyn Truesdell, and Andrea B. Rushing, McKay drafted a new proposal to present on Black women’s autobiography alongside Valerie Smith, then a new faculty member at Princeton University and currently the president of Swarthmore College, and Frances Smith Foster: a San Diego State College (SDSC) faculty member who would become McKay’s lifelong friend and collaborator. Almost as soon as Foster and Smith confirmed their participation.
on the panel, McKay received disheartening news: her special session had been rejected. In identical letters to Foster and Smith, she wrote: “I am sorry to inform you that my proposal for a special session on Black Women’s Autobiography for the MLA convention next December has not been approved.” Her letter to her colleagues offered a standard-fare diplomatic assessment of the situation and well-wishes to all: “The program committee has to make choices,” “I will probably submit [this proposal] again next year,” “Thank you for your willingness to prepare a paper.”

Then, nary a week later, McKay wrote to Ann Hull, the MLA’s convention manager, as follow-up to a phone call that took place after McKay received their rejection. This letter began with an acknowledgment of the competing demands of the selection process before moving into language more assertive and measured, especially when McKay name-dropped Wisconsin colleague Elaine Marks, a prominent professor of French literature and pioneering women’s studies scholar, to apply pressure that might prompt a different result. The letter is worth quoting at length:

This is a follow-up to our phone conversation of May 15 re the non-acceptance of my proposal for a special session at the MLA in Houston in December. In the meantime I have spoken of this matter with Elaine Marks of the Women’s Studies Program here at Madison, and she has also registered distress at the possibility of no session on the writings of black women on the MLA Convention program this year.

As I told you on the phone, what upsets me in this is indeed that there may be no session on black women writers. I had a proposal accepted for the 1979 convention and can understand if other black women who submitted proposals this year are given preference. Nor is it a matter of black women not being on the program, because I am aware of a number of black women participating on other panels. However, I am concerned that there be at least one session devoted to the analysis of the writings of black women, and this is to register that concern, which I hope the program committee will look into before the final convention program has been adopted.

This episode illustrates just one of the challenges Black women faced in getting their ideas in circulation: presence on the program. McKay’s diplomacy and assertiveness shine through in this letter, in which she made a specific ask (requesting that the program committee look into the issue), provided sound reasoning (explaining the importance of panels on Black women’s writing), and leveraged her social capital (name-dropping Elaine Marks, a
highly regarded figure within the organization). McKay was always happy to “get to meet all the black women in the field” during the MLA convention, but it was vital, too, that she claim disciplinary presence and take up intellectual space instead of just occupying embodied real estate as a prototypical “Miss Ebony First” or “Black Woman at the Podium.”

The 1980 MLA conference program confirms several papers on Black literature, but there appears to have been only one entire panel devoted to the topic. Individual papers such as Vivian I. Davis’s “Selected Black American Literature: A Cultural Interpretation,” Sonia Sanchez’s paper “Like Bigger Thomas I Didn’t Want to Love, but What I Loved for I Am: The Feminine Version of Bigger Thomas in Black American Literature,” and Barbara T. Christian’s “The Black Woman Writer: Vortex of Sexism and Racism” are worthy of note; the Discussion Group on Afro-American Literature arranged the panel “Black Drama: A Revaluation of the New Aesthetic (1960–80),” with Frances Smith Foster presiding and Marian E. Musgrave and Trudier Harris as panelists. It is unclear whether McKay’s letter and phone call precipitated Foster’s panel, but one thing is clear: McKay knew that her success as a faculty member depended as much upon her ability to instigate curricular change at UW-Madison as it did on her ability to hold professional organizations accountable for inequities that perpetuated the marginalization of Black women and Black literature when it was vital that they move from margin to center.

In addition to the barriers she faced in her pursuit of leadership, McKay faced resistance to her very intellectual project, Black women’s literature. Earning tenure at UW-Madison would be about more than demonstrating excellence in the areas of teaching, research, and service. McKay would also need to take the extra step to justify the value of her intellectual interests. Asserting the sovereignty of Black women’s literature was a risk, and the Black women scholars of McKay’s generation faced professional precarity while producing field-forming scholarship. McKay’s professional gains as an individual would increase the potency of Black women’s collective impact.

As McKay acclimatized to campus life and to her responsibilities as a faculty member, she felt better about her performance, each success adding to her dossier, the evidence of excellence. McKay’s extensive teaching experience at Simmons and MIT allowed her to hit the ground running as a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin–Madison; her MLA leadership within the Division on Women’s Studies in Language and Literature demonstrated excellence in service to the profession; and she even felt good about...
the progress she was making on her Jean Toomer book. When Herbert Hill, the chair of McKay’s review committee, let her know that her Toomer monograph would not be enough to demonstrate excellence in research, she reached out to Toni Morrison about the possibility of an interview. Hill advised McKay against it. McKay proceeded nonetheless.

McKay’s willingness to proceed in spite of the risks was standard practice among Black women who believed in their work even when those around them did not. Cherrie Moraga’s comment on Erlene Stetson’s review of *Con
ditions: Five, The Black Women’s Issue* (1979) captured “the huge personal risk involved in overcoming political and material obstacles in order to put together *in print* feminism, Blackness, and Lesbianism.” A Chicana feminist who coedited the pioneering *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) alongside Gloria Anzaldúa, Moraga highlighted in her commentary the risks associated with making intellectual interventions that might incite homophobic or racist backlash. She rejected Stetson’s characterization of *Conditions: Five, The Black Women’s Issue* as a “small beginning” and lauded the editors and contributors to the issue for their willingness to proceed in spite of the inherent risks. Similarly spirited, McKay would pursue the Morrison interview in spite of pressure from her review chair not to.

McKay first initiated contact with Morrison shortly after 13 July 1980, the date Morrison published “Jean Toomer’s Art of Darkness,” a review of Darwin Turner’s *The Wayward and the Seeking: A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer* (1980) in the *Washington Post*. McKay, impressed by Morrison’s review, sent her a letter of thanks for her “wonderful” assessment of Toomer’s work, shared an abstract of her book manuscript, and invited Morrison to engage in any “dialogue . . . connected to Toomer.” Morrison responded to McKay’s letter with a note of her own: “She’d like to see the ms. when it’s done,” McKay informed Painter. So McKay sent Morrison, who was at Random House at the time, her Jean Toomer manuscript in October of the following year. January passed. March became a memory. Still no word from Random House on the status of her Toomer manuscript.

Instead of ruminating over whether she would ever hear from Morrison, McKay shifted her focus. Without documented frameworks to decode the artistry of Black women writers and unpack the cultural tropes they deployed, Black women literary critics were recovering texts and developing critical methodologies simultaneously. McKay, as a result, knew that she and others were “inventing that [interpretive] wheel as we go along.” McKay decided that an interview with Morrison would move her closer to getting “all the help
I can in the process” of developing distinctly Black feminist interpretive frameworks. McKay shared her plans for a Morrison interview with Painter and ultimately decided to shape it after the best of the genre published in *Contemporary Literature*, a journal that “publishes scholarly essays on contemporary writing in English, interviews with established and emerging authors, and reviews of recent critical books in the field” and, fortunately for McKay, was also housed at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

With the venue confirmed, McKay moved on to identifying a model: a Nadine Gordimer interview published in *Contemporary Literature* (most likely conducted by Stephen Gray in 1981). McKay included, with her request, a copy of the interview in the hope that it would help Morrison “to get an idea of what is to be expected.” Less than a month later, on Random House stationery, Morrison responded:

> Dear Nellie McKay,
> I would be happy to be interviewed by you for *Contemporary Literature*. Some time in the fall, perhaps, when I have time and can concentrate. I hope we can come up with anything better than that awful “Intimate Things in Place.” At least I am sure your questions will be better.
> Regards,
> Toni Morrison

McKay interviewed Morrison, corrected the transcription, edited the interview, and submitted it to *Contemporary Literature* for publication. Then, the wait. Personally, McKay understood the value of her interview to the field. It represented a new direction, one in which Black women’s voices were at the center of their creative work and critical theorizing. Her review chair disagreed. He changed his tune, however, once the interview was published.

In the winter edition of *Contemporary Literature*, McKay published “A Literary Conversation with Toni Morrison,” and soon thereafter she received a note from Peter Givler, the editor of the University of Wisconsin Press (UW Press). Impressed by McKay’s Morrison interview, he wanted to meet with McKay about her Toomer book. When they met later that month, McKay shared with Givler her plans for a collection of “literary interviews with a select group of eight contemporary black women writers” that would include an introductory essay to frame how the interviews “give a critical perspective on the published works of these women.” Even though the University of North Carolina Press had the right of first refusal for McKay’s next project, Givler, undaunted, hoped to convince McKay to submit her interview manuscript to the UW Press. The interest from the UW Press coincided with the
influx of external tenure letters that testified to McKay’s strength as a scholar, the combination of which shifted Herbert Hill’s treatment of McKay from chilly antagonism to paternal pride. In addition to enjoying McKay’s Morrison interview, Hill, McKay’s tenure review chair, found her “Black Woman Professor—White University” essay “very good.” He became more “civil” to McKay as the tenure letters he read in support of her candidacy shifted his thinking about the value of her scholarship. With these successes, McKay committed herself ever more firmly to proclaiming the sovereign value of Black women’s literature in her research, teaching, and service. Deepening her knowledge of Toni Morrison’s oeuvre was a key part of McKay’s intellectual project, but maintaining her commitment to elevating Black women’s literature in spite of the professional risks was part of her mission.

The publication of McKay’s 1983 Morrison interview never resulted in a published collection of interviews on Black women. In the end, Claudia Tate’s Black Women Writers at Work (1983) and Mari Evans’s Black Women Writers, 1950–1980: A Critical Evaluation (1984) would achieve the goals that McKay proposed in her tentatively titled “Conversations with Black Women Writers.” McKay’s Morrison interview and related publications that followed—Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison (1997) with Kathryn Earle and Beloved: A Casebook (1999) with William L. Andrews—positioned her as an early Morrison expert and a scholar who had direct access to, and held sway with, the writer, whose remarkable skill made her a literary giant. Morrison was at the beginning of the long arc of her career, and at the time McKay’s “A Literary Conversation with Toni Morrison” was published, Morrison had won only one of the numerous prizes for which she would be nominated. In 1978, however, before her interview with McKay, before the accolades, professorships, and celebrity, Morrison delivered the commencement address at Spelman, a historically Black women’s college in Atlanta, Georgia.

In her address Morrison marveled at the magic and the power of the graduates, the community of Black women they had been nurtured in, and the danger they faced yet held within. Morrison stressed that these Black women graduates were dangerous because they possessed power—the power to change the world. In her final lines, Morrison rejected the conflicts, the dichotomies that typically accompany womanhood by naming their status as Black women as the source of immeasurable strength: “You are not only the ship that will travel difficult waters, you are also the harbor. You are not only the traveler who will break open new paths, you are also the inn where you will offer rest. There is no conflict in that; there is no dichotomy in that: You are women. You don’t have to choose between mar-
riage or work; a career or children. What is the history of black women in this country? We did it all.”169

McKay, like the women of Spelman, recognized Morrison’s light well before a wider public acknowledged her shine. McKay, like Morrison, would not be limited by others’ sense of what she could be and do. Morrison would write the books she wanted to read, and McKay would produce the scholarship she needed to understand. Together, as writer and critic, they would speak to Black women who saw their worlds represented in their words.

As vital as it was for Black women’s intellectualism to be recognized within the academy, it was equally vital that their embodied experiences be named and known. In addition to contributing to her tenure dossier and serving a practical purpose, McKay’s Morrison interview and other shorter pieces helped McKay develop her identity as a scholar. Her professional identity involved solidifying her claims to, and assertion of, a self—an autonomous, sovereign, and “affirming self,”170 as she once wrote in an MLA conference proposal—that was strong enough to withstand oppression and disenfranchisement. Three early essays—“Black Woman Professor—White University,” “The Girls Who Became the Women,” and “W. E. B. Du Bois: The Black Women in His Writings”—foreshadowed McKay’s particular skill as an essayist and investment in understanding Black women’s interiors. These pieces clarified how Black women expressed their subjectivity, responded to trauma, and negotiated domestic concerns such as marriage and motherhood. They also framed McKay’s trajectories as a feminist scholar of literature. Often focused on autobiography as a genre, these essays also allowed McKay to explore facets of her personal life hidden from view.

In her 1983 essay “Black Woman Professor—White University,” the essay praised by McKay’s tenure review committee chair, Herbert Hill, McKay theorized about her faculty experience in a way that set the stage for subsequent essays and compilations that documented the firsthand accounts of those who experienced the American academy from the margins. The straightforward title belied the complexity of the piece. There is physical space, denoted by the em dash, between McKay, our Black woman professor, and her place of work, the white university. Her story takes place against the backdrop of American history and its legacy of Black disenfranchisement, where white men mostly, white women, too, and Black men more invested in upholding patriarchy than in eradicating sexism continued to oppress Black women. But a new era was afoot, and Black women in particular had pursued a “revolutionary political stance”171 driven by a shift in racial politics and the
emergence of the women’s movement. McKay began by tracing the path to
the PhD for scholars such as herself who benefited from the social and po-
litical pressures that led to the admission of more Black students to histori-
cally white colleges and universities. From there, she identified the
challenges facing Black women in higher education: isolation within the
department, disrespect from students, and the burden of being the pri-
mary figure charged with attending to the personal, professional, and even
emotional needs of Black women students.

McKay’s essay represented an early effort by Black women to speak for
themselves through personal accounts that demonstrated how structural
inequality and white supremacy collide when Black women enter the class-
room at predominately white colleges and universities. Her essay carved out
important pedagogical and epistemological territory because it spoke to the
experience of many—or, at least, a rising number of—Black women hungry
for a genre of scholarship that made space for women of color to reflect on
their experiences in academe in the first person. The edited collections Black
Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils (1997), which opens with McKay’s
chapter “Black Women in the Halls of the White Academy”; Presumed Incom-
petent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia (2012); and
Beyond Retention: Cultivating Spaces of Equity, Justice, and Fairness for Women of
Color in U.S. Higher Education (2016) evidence the role such early testimony
played in creating a space for subsequent compilations.

“Black Woman Professor—White University,” as autobiography, details
McKay’s investment in how Black women tell their own stories, a concern
that emerges again in her early work on Black women’s self-writing. McKay
worked most intimately with the narrative of Harriet Jacobs, the author of
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), who penned the “first full-length
narrative written by a former slave woman in America.”172 Through the
pseudonym Linda Brent, Jacobs recounted her enslavement and escape
from the clutches of her oppressive master, Dr. James Norcom, who ap-
ppears in the text as the licentious Dr. Flint. In “The Girls Who Became the
Women: Childhood Memories in the Autobiographies of Harriet Jacobs,
Mary Church Terrell, and Anne Moody,” McKay analyzed how the strate-
gies used by these authors to render childhood remembrances reflect how
Jacobs, Terrell, and Moody “understood their own development.”173 McKay
returned, throughout her career, to coming-of-age stories—with Jean Toomer
and Zora Neale Hurston, for example—and “The Girls” allowed her to ex-
plode issues she faced in her own life, namely, how Black women overcome
patriarchy’s oppressive reach by “rejecting the status quo and opposing the
values that demean their humanity.” McKay, like Jacobs, Terrell, and Moody, understood firsthand how telling stories could help construct a self and resist a life of “self-rejection.” At the same time McKay was finding her voice as a scholar, she was being recognized on campus as a rising star.

WITH MULTIPLE ESSAYS IN PROGRESS and with her essay on Toni Morrison gaining traction, McKay was a star on the rise. The University of Wisconsin knew it. McKay received a glimpse into how faculty beyond her department viewed her when she ran into her dean at a “reception for new minority students.” In confidence, or at least until his announcement was made, he told McKay that she had been selected as one of the university’s “star” faculty. More prestige than pay, the program, backed by the Star Fund—a pool of money wrangled from the state legislature—provided raises to senior faculty at risk of being lured away and to early career faculty the university sought to retain. Even a modest raise was important because, for the general university population, UW-Madison was not doling out salary increases. When McKay finally received institutional recognition of her star status with the Dean’s official announcement, it softened the demoralizing nature of her tenure process. To Painter, she confessed, “senior professors now see me as a person.”

Given the timing of this recognition, McKay’s tenure seemed assured. But she remained on guard nevertheless. The dean was only one person, and one moment of recognition could not prevent her from being seen as an affirmative action case, as the beneficiary of rewards she had not earned. In a postscript to one of her letters to Painter that captures the disconnect between Black women’s experience on the tenure track and how members of the dominant group viewed their path to tenure, McKay mentioned: “P.S. A young white untenured woman in the English Dept. saw me yesterday & asked if I am anxious about tenure. I told her I was anxious because of the University Committee, none of the members of whom I know, & whom I suspect don’t care 2 copper pennies for what I do. With wide-eyed innocence she asked: ‘But they wouldn’t turn down a black woman, would they?’ McKay knew full well that she could be turned down, and that the diversity she embodied may have been a boon to the institution’s profile but would not guarantee tenure. So, even after earning a Ford Fellowship, which entitled her to time away from campus, McKay stayed in Madison to keep an eye on her tenure case. Within an institutional culture and academic climate that required McKay to repeatedly justify her work, her presence, and her worth, she knew she could leave nothing to chance.
It turned out to be a wise decision. McKay received notice of her tenure review hearing (which she thought sounded like a “death warrant”) and gathered “materials to be considered by the executive committee” in advance of the 3 October deadline. But before she could turn to revising her curriculum vitae, creating a “Chronology of Teaching,” and detailing her service to the institution and to the profession, McKay had to first clean up a mess of somebody else’s making. The problem had to do with her tenure dossier, and it began when the “wrong materials” were sent “to the wrong people” and McKay became responsible for locating the source of someone else’s mistake and personally fixing it. As if that wasn’t enough, there was also the matter of lost letters from external reviewers and a committee chair who claimed to need someone other than himself to manage the details. Deeming the talk of tenure “old hat and not of much importance” anymore, McKay had a final thought: “I bet I’m the first person who’s ever come up for tenure who actually did most of the work that the Chair of his/her committee was supposed to do. But it is over, and it all went well, so that’s all that counts.” McKay’s first book, Jean Toomer, Artist: A Study of His Literary Life and Work, 1894–1936, was in production in time for her tenure review. By December 1983, it was official: Nellie Y. McKay was a tenured member of the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Department of Afro-American Studies.

Jean Toomer, Artist was the first book to offer a uniquely gendered, feminist reading of Cane that grounded Toomer as an African American writer in spite of his ambivalences about race; with this book, McKay also became one of the first African Americanists to pen a single-author study of a Black writer. Books such as this were crucial during the days when African American literature was a burgeoning academic discipline because they provided the biographical and cultural context required to read and understand the literary works of key figures in Black literature. Natural analogues for McKay’s Toomer monograph include Arnold Rampersad’s The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois (1976) and Robert G. O’Meally’s The Craft of Ralph Ellison (1980), but juxtaposing McKay’s monograph with Thadious M. Davis’s Faulkner’s “Negro”: Art and the Southern Context (1983) enables us to see how in reading the men, McKay and Davis also investigated the intersection of gender and race. Black feminists wrote about gender in works by newly discovered Black women writers, of course, but by considering representations of Black women in literature by Black men, white men, and white women, they also revealed the mutable meaning behind the deployment of Black women as sign and symbol.
The publication of *Jean Toomer, Artist*, McKay’s positive tenure review, and her successful adjustment to Madison were due in no small part to Tom W. Shick, McKay’s department colleague whose vast knowledge of institutional culture helped McKay through a few rough patches at the beginning of her career. When McKay joined the Afro-American Studies Department, McKay, Shick, and his wife, Chris, became fast friends. Shick had earned his PhD at UW-Madison in 1976, joined the department in 1977, and published *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* in 1980. Together, he and McKay formed an informal cohort, with McKay especially benefiting from the camaraderie of working alongside another new faculty member who had the place-based knowledge Shick had developed as both a graduate student and a faculty member at UW-Madison. They broke bread together even though, early on, McKay was unsure whether the Shicks cared for her cooking. The Shicks helped McKay feel at home in a new town that, initially, didn’t feel like home at all.

Personally and professionally, Tom W. Shick served as McKay’s sounding board, helping her to navigate the politics of the department. From the beginning of her time in Madison, McKay made sure she established a professional presence in Afro-American studies and was both acknowledged and respected. Simply stated, she would not be overlooked by her male colleagues. For example, once, when it looked as if Shick had laid claim to the floating department typewriter soon after McKay’s arrival, she took advantage of a moment when Shick, a historian, was busy looking at microfilm, and promptly moved the typewriter to her office. McKay’s goal was to put Shick on notice. She wanted him to know that “from now on . . . he has to share it with me.” Unoffended, Shick demonstrated his care for McKay by serving as her ally and interceding on her behalf with her prickly review chair, Herbert Hill.

Shick was unafraid to speak candidly with McKay about Hill and submitted that Hill was inclined to take on the work of serving as her review chair even though he “never does any work for the dept.,” because “he will have the glory of having brought the first lit. person the dept. has ever brought up for tenure to a successful conclusion.” McKay loved and trusted Shick, and the two communicated freely about the department, its personalities, and conflict resolution. A much-beloved member of the campus community and a rising star, McKay recounted enjoying “a real party” (DJ and all!) at the Shicks’ and celebrating Tom’s thirty-sixth birthday over chocolate cake and ice cream. McKay enjoyed the company of her friends. As she
moved along the tenure track, possibilities expanded before her. She made worthwhile contributions to the Modern Language Association, advocated on behalf of Black women scholars, taught Black women’s literature, published her book, and strengthened her profile as an interviewer and essayist. Madison, as a place, expanded before her. For Tom W. Shick, Madison was closing in.

McKay relayed the ups and downs of Shick’s emotional state in her letters to Painter. In the spring of 1983, Shick suffered “an emotional crisis” that she wrote might “keep him out of the classroom for the rest of the semester” and prevent him from teaching summer school. Following a leave in 1984, however, things started looking up. Shick had landed a job in Washington, D.C., and Madison was negotiating an increase in salary to get him to return. By August 1985, Shick, “the person [McKay] cared about the most,” “the person [she] understood best” and could always depend on, had returned to the isthmus and was “working very hard” to further his scholarship and deepen his community engagement “to make up for his year away.” So, when McKay first heard that Shick was missing, through either department scuttlebutt or a notice in the Wisconsin State Journal that read “Professor reported missing,” she fancied it “romantic” — thinking that he had taken off in the middle of the semester without a care in the world. Days passed. Then weeks. All along, McKay welcomed updates, imagining that Shick’s disappearance had nothing to do with his personal life or his professional work. She anticipated affirmation that Shick was safe and sound. It never came.

Instead, McKay learned the worst: after Shick’s car was found in a UW Arboretum parking lot in late November, and following the thaw of Lake Wingra, “two girls walking a dog” came across the body of a man later identified as Tom W. Shick. Immediately following the discovery of his body, McKay referred to Shick in fleeting terms in a letter to Painter: a single paragraph, mention of his professional success, and the tragedy of such a loss. Then, about a week later, waves of grief washed over McKay and she released, finally, the depths of her sadness. Vacillating “between anger, pain, and guilt for Tom,” McKay wondered: “What gave him the right to leave the rest of us to feel as we do? Why did he think his pain was any greater than that of the rest of us? How could he not have known that his was an act of selfishness that would cause a great many other people great pain?” She pondered whether prevention would have been possible and considered the rhetorical nature of her queries: “All questions have no answers, and we will never know just what pulled the trigger at the final mo-

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Confused and heartbroken, McKay struggled to process the news and accept the reality of Shick’s death. Shick would never be replaced. Nor could he be. But he would be remembered. In the years following his death, McKay—either consciously or unconsciously—adopted an approach to her teaching and mentoring that reflected Shick’s values. Shick was “a sensitive and loving man” who was well known “as a man who gave readily of himself.” He never said no, kept his door open, and helped his friend McKay negotiate the politics of a new place and find a life in a town she was initially determined never to call home. In the years since Shick’s death, Madison’s Department of Afro-American Studies and the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. came together to celebrate his life with an award that honors “students who have maintained a high academic standing and . . . demonstrated the intellectual vigor and concern for racial equality that epitomized the life of Tom W. Shick.” Shick “had been the heart and soul of the department,” recalled Craig Werner, McKay’s former colleague who has since retired from his faculty position in Afro-American Studies. He was the person students went to when they had a problem. When he died, “somebody had to step up and fill that role.” With his passing, the “spiritual center of the department,” explained Werner, “passed from Tom to Nellie.” In the next phase of her career McKay would become, for her students, her colleagues, and the profession, their very vital missing thing.
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Nellie Y. McKay holds her daughter, Patricia, circa 1951. Inscription reads “To: Dear Grandpa / With love / From Pat.” Photograph courtesy of Patricia M. Watson.

Nellie Y. McKay’s mother-in-law, undated. Most likely in Jamaica.
Photograph courtesy of Patricia M. Watson.
Nellie Y. McKay in her St. Albans kitchen at 111 Road in Queens, New York, sometime between 1964 and 1969. Note the generous use of black pepper! Photograph courtesy of Joyce Scott.
Nellie Y. McKay with Hollis Presbyterian Church congregants. Pastor Donald Scott, McKay, and Mary Morgan in foreground; unnamed church member in background. Picture taken in the Sunday school area of the church. McKay was a Sunday school superintendent. Photograph courtesy of Patricia M. Watson.
Nellie Y. McKay and an unidentified guest during one of her signature dinner parties at 111 Road in Queens, New York, undated. Photograph courtesy of Patricia M. Watson.

Nellie Y. McKay’s headshot, included in her Harvard University application, circa 1969. Photograph courtesy of Patricia M. Watson.
Nellie Y. McKay hosts a PhD party for the author at her home in Madison, Wisconsin, 2002. Note the picture of Pat on the table on the right side of the photograph. Photograph courtesy of James L. Greene.
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