Half in Shadow

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

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There is a conflict between public and private life, and it’s a conflict that I think ought to remain a conflict. . . . So I just do the obvious, which is to keep my life as private as possible; not because it is all that interesting, it’s just important that it be private. And then, whatever I do that is public can be done seriously.

—TONI MORRISON, “Rootedness”

While writing about Nellie Y. McKay’s early struggles, I relived moments past, such as the time I learned how default whiteness pervades the professoriate and experienced how classrooms become hostile spaces for Black students. When I reflect, I understand anew how McKay’s wisdom has rooted me in ways I notice when I feel most vulnerable.

When I arrived at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1994, I was one of a handful of Black women graduate students studying African American literature. It didn’t take me long to appreciate the value of keeping the personal private. To protect myself from exposure and the limiting beliefs of those who didn’t understand the power of a historically Black education, I focused on what I was there to do and not on where I had been.

That was, at least, until my first graduate class with Richard Ralston. It was a history class of some sort, and our day-one icebreaker included simple introductions. When my turn came, I said my name and my undergraduate institution: Johnson C. Smith. “In Charlotte?,” he asked. Other times, with similar icebreakers, the response had not been so affirming. Usually, I was met with blank stares. I typically heard, “Smith College? In Massachusetts?” Most of my classmates knew nothing about HBCUs, let
alone a school that wasn’t Spelman or Morehouse or Hampton or Howard. No, Ralston knew exactly what I was talking about. That feeling remains palpable: I was safe and seen. “Yes,” I responded, my leg, back, and neck muscles softening with relief.

At the time, I didn’t appreciate the indispensable role historically Black colleges and their graduates have played in the development of Black literary studies. Writing this book taught me something altogether new. Richard K. Barksdale, the second African American to earn a PhD in English from Harvard University, taught at several HBCUs before moving to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and coediting, with Keneth “Ken” Kinnamon, *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology* (1972). Darwin T. Turner, who taught at the University of Iowa until his death at fifty-nine, began his career at Florida A&M University before taking a position at North Carolina A&T State University. Blyden Jackson, the first African American to earn tenure and, later, the rank of full professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, graduated from Wilberforce University. Learning about these scholars revealed my roots in a tradition of Black literary excellence grounded in the Black college experience. I know this is a list of men. I know the white academy limited their professional choices. But I also know that there are many more—the Jerry W. Wards, the Eleanor W. Traylors, the Inez Moore Parkers—whose legacy makes me legible, even if it’s to no one but myself.

I was legible in Ralston’s history class, both seen and understood; I was illegible in Cold War Fiction, unseen and unknowable. In Cold War Fiction, I learned the physicality of marginalization, the visceral effects of microaggressions. How it feels to be invisible, hypervisible, and misrecognized. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) was our text, and it was my turn to facilitate discussion. Class opened and I introduced my goals: together, we would unpack Ellison’s use of folk culture to differentiate between caricature and trickster. This, I thought, would help prepare us to discuss race when teaching the text. It seemed straightforward enough. Then, crickets. Not a word. I sat and waited. No one made eye contact. Our professor—uncomfortable, perhaps, with the silence—broke it with this query: “So? What about the universality of the novel?” The class erupted and the discussion went on without me. I sank inside, the knot in my throat choking back the tears. Class ended. I lumbered downstairs to McKay’s office, my shoulders stooped with shame, my eyes downcast in disbelief. I sat down, closed the door behind me, and explained what happened. I didn’t cry. She was having none of that. I recounted my experience and waited. She was sitting
behind a midcentury steel Tanker desk in an office overrun with books on the fourth floor of Helen C. White Hall. Behind her was a window—practically the size of the wall, as I recall—and on the side of the desk closest to me, as usual, a small candy dish. She lowered her chin, looked at me from over her glasses, and with eyes that conveyed the seriousness of her words peered directly into mine and said, “Shanna, you have no power. Get your A and get out.” As I rose to leave, she added, “And don’t write about Ellison in your final paper.”

I got my A, got out, and wrote about Ellison anyway. My Cold War Fiction paper focused on Mary Rambo: a minor figure in the novel who played a major role in Ellison’s drafts. Rambo got short shrift in the published book, not because Ellison thought she was unimportant—her “section of the novel underwent more revision than any other and is the sole portion of the drafts to be published as a narrative unto itself”¹—but perhaps she was too grand, too bold, a scene-stealer and changemaker, so was written into a narratively small, yet conceptually large, role as a result. “Imagine, indeed, what the American Negro would be without the Marys of our ever-expanding Harlems,” Ellison intoned.² Imagine, indeed, what the American academy would be without Black women who, if not here, “would have to be invented.”³

It is uncomfortable for me to revisit that moment in Cold War Fiction because my body remembers, too. I am there then, even as I write now. And yet, writing McKay’s story and bringing together the strands of what she taught me, well before I was ready to receive the lesson, lifts me up and fills me with gratitude. Exposed and vulnerable, McKay and the Black women of her generation poured themselves into their writing for themselves and for me. They bore the condemnation of colleagues, tenure review committees, journal editors, and book publishers who dismissed their work only to turn around and co-opt their theories and pass them off, uncited, as their own. The history of Black women’s place in Black literary studies, as told in Half in Shadow, reminds me that the price has been paid. Justification is a distraction. My job is to continue the work and to take care of myself—not only because longevity matters, but also because I deserve it.

The opening epigraph, in which Morrison delineates the space between public and private lives, has helped me to think of McKay as a scholar who made choices about her private life that allowed her to maintain a laser-sharp focus on her professional work. But if we mine the ellipsis separating the first part of this quote from the second, we find Morrison teasing out the role of individual work done with a “tribal or racial sensibility,”⁴ a facet
of McKay’s scholarship and institution building that was never far from her mind. *Half in Shadow* has given me a new way to understand Cold War Fiction, the shame, and the burden to keep personal stories private. I tell here, now, to honor the elders and ancestors, McKay among them, whose sacrifices and secrets afforded me opportunities they never could have imagined. Their concealments bought me the freedom to reveal. I am rooted in the work of a long line of Black women who taught me the value of race literature and to see value in myself.