Half in Shadow

Benjamin, Shanna Greene

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

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The department of English at the University of Wisconsin–Madison is housed on the upper floors of Helen C. White Hall, a building named in honor of an English professor who was the first woman full faculty member in the College of Letters and Science. On the north side of the building, there are spectacular views of Lake Mendota, one of the two lakes that form Madison’s isthmus, a strip of land that separates the university to the west and communities to the northeast. The English Department sits high and looks low. Nellie Y. McKay experienced its loftiness while on the tenure track, avoiding faculty in the English Department who reminded her too much of the isolation she had felt at Harvard University. “I didn’t have anything to do with English, actually,” recalled McKay, when asked about her early relationship with Madison’s English Department. “It was like doing Harvard all over again,” she continued. “It wasn’t that they were trying to be nasty or anything like that. It was just that they’d never had to live up close with a woman, a single Black woman who had come to the community, what do you do with her?”

In the 1980s, UW-Madison’s English Department was in the wake of a series of battles that divided the department along political and philosophical lines. On one side were conservative scholars who upheld the canon as it was constructed at the time; on the other side were those who were “insisting on shaking up the canon.” The women and the Black people, especially, argued against Black writers as syllabus appendages and advocated for a literary “tradition” reimagined with the interplay between history, literature, and culture firmly in place. Toward the beginning of her career at UW-Madison, the upper floors of Helen C. White Hall buzzed with gossip about McKay’s worthiness, the climate proving hostile toward both McKay and her area of study. “In the earlier years,” recalled colleague Deborah “Deb” Brandt, “there would be remarks made all the time by faculty, sometimes by staff. The climate was not good. . . . I’m not going to name names, but I heard snide remarks about Nellie in the English department by some people about her. . . . I don’t know, her education, her trying to make it, ridiculous stuff.” English at UW-Madison was a “very, very canonical, conservative department” at “a rather white university” and, as such, was rigid about the literatures it deemed worthy of study.
Instead of becoming concerned about a climate she couldn’t control, McKay looked inside for inspiration. From her apartment on Bluff Street, a quiet two-lane drive that bordered Hoyt Park—its massive stone fireplaces and sturdy picnic enclosures reminding visitors of its former days as a quarry—she imagined worlds beyond the margins. McKay had just earned tenure and was embarking on what she called her “project,” an exciting and new endeavor that involved focusing on “black women’s writings” as an area of critical inquiry. At the same time, she turned toward another vision: formalizing the relationship between African American literary studies and English at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. “I’ve never felt that African-American Literature can survive without that other body,” she offered during our interview. “It has to be inside of that body. It’s central to the body and can’t leave the body alone any more than the body can leave it.” McKay’s efforts to integrate literary studies were about more than institutional hierarchies or a belief that American literature superseded Black literary traditions. McKay wanted American literature to open wide, to bend toward her, and she was willing to do what was necessary to impress upon her colleagues this simple fact: without Black literature, American literature doesn’t exist.

McKay’s hard-won battles at her home institution prepared her to ignite change in later years, when she took on the masculinist impulse in Black literary studies at large. Drawing from a position of embodied power, and with the full weight of her experience and expertise behind her, McKay avowed to Americanists and African Americanists alike that when and where she entered, Black women’s literature entered with her.

The title of this chapter evokes Anna Julia Cooper’s A Voice from the South (1892), the “first book-length Black feminist text” written by the fourth Black woman to earn a PhD. Cooper argued for the educational empowerment of Black women, since their economic independence and self-sufficiency would produce a new class of citizens poised to uplift not just African Americans but the whole human race. Cooper’s project was the product of her Blackness and her womanness, so her reclamation of the Black female body in A Voice from the South, as Brittney C. Cooper explained, “reminds us that intellectual work is not a disembodied project.” McKay and her cohort of Black feminist thinkers invoked similar analytical frameworks in their criticism. Who they were was as important as what they did, and with Cooper’s epistemology as both conscious and unconscious backdrop, McKay and others justified the sovereign value of Black women’s texts and perspectives in their criticism.
Anna Julia Cooper included the first-person and oft-cited “when and where I enter” in the chapter “Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race.” The title of this chapter falls under the subheading “SOPRANO OBLIGATO,” a musical descriptor signaling an obligatory female singing voice, to indicate the indispensability of Cooper’s claims, which sound from the highest moral and intellectual registers. In “Womanhood,” Cooper made it plain: “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.’”

In this not-so-subtle dig at abolitionist and Black Nationalist Martin Delany, who “used to say when honors fell upon him, that when he entered the council of kings the Black race entered with him,” Cooper rejected the belief that maleness and so-called pure Black blood were the primary mechanisms by which authentic and representative blackness could be measured. Cooper’s nineteenth-century response to Delany anticipated twentieth-century gender tensions that emerged in Black literary studies. McKay mirrored Cooper’s rebuke of Delany in her fervent rejection of the masculinist impulse in Black literary studies. And out of her desire to center Black women as theorists, teachers, and students, McKay wrote them into her criticism, pedagogy, and leadership. McKay’s intellectual project was also embodied work that, when read through a Cooperian lens, “reminds us that we cannot study Black women’s theoretical production or tell Black women’s intellectual history without knowing something of their lives.” McKay lived her life and produced her work within a profession that was as resistant to her intellectual contributions as it was unsettled by her physical presence.

In his 1992 presidential address, “Local Pedagogy; or, How I Redeemed My Spring Semester,” Houston A. Baker Jr., the first Black president of the Modern Language Association (MLA), who is now Distinguished University Professor at Vanderbilt University, described his early complicity in the erasure of Black women’s voices in Black literary studies. Baker’s class was Black Women’s Writing, and during a discussion of Phillis Wheatley’s poetry, as the students “were energetically holding forth on neoclassical literary conventions,” a voice came from the back corner of the room. A Black woman, who had been listening quietly to the conversation, had a question: “You know, we have been going on and on about conventions and how Wheatley subverted them and everything. But I’m not so much interested in conventions as in what Phillis means to the black community per se. I’d like to see us
talk about Wheatley in more direct ways.”17 “Well,” Baker responded, “in this class we are going to deal with conventions. You and I can discuss the black community during office hours.”18 With the goal of improving students’ “reading skills,” he returned to the discussion in progress, intent on maintaining the critical legitimacy, not the political relevancy, of his class.

But Baker was undone by the event and couldn’t shake the feeling that in “suppress[ing] her individual black ‘womanist’ voice,” in denying “an actual black woman’s voice rife with narrative potential,” what he deemed “pedagogical entraîée,” he missed the opportunity to invite into his class—on Black women writers, at that—a consideration of how situated, local, and embodied pedagogies inform critical reading.19 He came around and, by the end of the address, expounded on how this lone Black woman “redeemed” his pedagogy. Baker’s pedagogy may have been free, liberated by his Black woman student, but the Black women responsible for providing the critical vocabulary he used to characterize her voice as womanist—Alice Walker, for example—were noticeably absent. Baker’s address marked a moment in time. As Black women’s ideas became indispensable within the mainstream academy, the women who produced them became disposable. Like Baker’s student, Black women scholars found themselves calling out from the proverbial back corner of the classroom and demanding, with their research and teaching, that white men abandon their supremacist practices, that white feminists abandon their racist behavior, and that Black men abandon their masculinist ways.

It was the climate of the times, the culture out of which McKay did her work, and literary theorist Hortense J. Spillers, who now serves as Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English at Vanderbilt University, remembered how Black women were excluded not just from American and African American literary studies but from feminist studies as well. In “‘Whatcha Gonna Do?: Revisiting ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’: A Conversation with Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelly Eversley, & Jennifer L. Morgan,” Spillers explained how, from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, Black women struggled to be recognized for their contributions to feminist discourse. Instead of their being invited to collaborate around critical conversations, Black people were used as “raw material” that served “as a note of inspiration” for the scholarly pursuits of others.20 Black women’s recovery work and intellectual interventions were changing higher education, but Black women themselves were consistently marginalized, their ideas invoked without reference to the Black women responsible, to the battles Black women fought, or to the price Black
women paid to document Black women’s literature and to elevate and challenge the relevancy of literary theory.

Black women’s literature was becoming the next hot thing, an “occult,” according to Ann duCille, and its popularity threatened to displace Black women from the field they had toiled to form. duCille pondered how the marginalization of “the black women critics and scholars who excavated” African American literature and Black feminist studies would impact the face of these fields when she asked, “What does it mean for the future of black feminist studies that a large portion of the growing body of scholarship on black women is now being written by white feminists and by men whose work frequently achieves greater critical and commercial success than that of the black female scholars who carved out a field in which few ‘others’ were then interested?”

If we look again to the incident recounted by Baker, the Black women scholars who knew Baker’s student without ever having met her, those who occupied a similar position when they asserted the value of Black women’s literature and criticism or demanded acknowledgment of their contributions to literary and feminist studies writ large, came to understand that their salvific wish, their redemption through representation, would be fulfilled only from within. There would be no cavalry coming to the rescue, no affirmation from on high. McKay, Spillers, duCille, and others would be responsible for doing the work of remembering Black women writers and critics in the face of forces that would rather forget.

To understand what McKay and her counterparts were up against as they forged the Black literary origins of Black feminist thought, it is useful to rewind to June 1986, when Mel Watkins, the first African American editor of the New York Times Book Review, published “Sexism, Racism and Black Women Writers,” a review of Steven Spielberg’s film version of Alice Walker’s The Color Purple (1982) that masqueraded as a review of the novel. The review lambasted Walker and a litany of other “notable writers”—Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, and Michele Wallace especially—for “exposing aspects of inner-community life that might reinforce damaging racial stereotypes already proffered by racist antagonists.” Incensed, Black women literary critics Deborah E. McDowell and Gayle Pemberton penned letters to the editor castigating Watkins for suggesting that Black women keep the unspeakable unspoken especially in the presence of white people.

Watkins appears to have established his “qualifications” as a critic of Black women’s texts in his coedited 1971 collection, To Be a Black Woman: Portraits in Fact and Fiction. To Be a Black Woman received a scathing review
from then—Random House editor Toni Morrison, who skewered Watkins for confirming the myths about Black women he supposedly sought to dispel. “With the kindest words, the sweetest euphemisms, the commonest sociological jargon,” Morrison wrote, “‘Portraits in Fact and Fiction’ manages to remain fiction. We are left at the end with the same labels provided in the beginning: ‘laborer,’ ‘breadwinner,’ ‘sexual myth incarnate—plaything,’ ‘protector,’ ‘provider,’ ‘cushion.’ In spite of the inclusion of a few splendid pieces, no recognizable human being emerges. What does emerge is an oppressed but sexy, sexy but emasculating bitch.”

Literary scholar Candice M. Jenkins drilled down into the meaning behind this moment in her essay “Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker’s ‘The Color Purple,’” which paid particular attention to the story behind the overwhelmingly negative criticism Walker received from Black men. In this essay, the precursor to her full-length study *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (2007), Jenkins analyzed criticism of Alice Walker’s novel-turned-movie as a case study in what happens to the Black woman writer who has been written out of the Black community, marginalized “as a kind of racial turncoat,” and “scripted by a black (male) critical establishment as a delinquent daughter who has strayed from the black family fold.” After the release of the film adaptation of her novel, which introduced her epistolary fiction to a broad audience, Walker became a target for detractors who readily admitted that they had not read the novel but were willing to criticize its representation of Black men nonetheless.

By refusing to adhere to narrow scripts about Black womanhood or cloak the truths of their material realities behind a veneer of respectability, the Black women writers McKay and others wrote about became easy prey for critics with an axe to grind because these very same Black women writers were brave enough to confront taboo topics in their texts. In the face of outright hostility toward Black women writers—their choice of subject, their treatment of sexual violence, their portrayals of Black men—McKay and her peers collected a body of literature and created modes of critical analysis to write their own version of Black women’s literary and cultural history and to trace the contours of what would become known as Black feminist thought.

In their scholarship and publishing, Black women writers and critics culled the archive to allow Black women readers to see themselves in the literature; with the primary source material they compiled, they supported one another’s teaching of, and research on, Black women writers. These twentieth-century Black feminist texts established an intellectual geneal-
ogy that launched future studies of the tradition. The clarion call was issued by Toni Cade, whose *The Black Woman* (1970) was an act of self-definition and healing for Black women that, according to Eleanor W. Traylor, would liberate “a future of ever new audiences,” and here Traylor invokes Bambara's words, “to think better than they've been trained.”


Thematically driven critical studies of Black women's literature defined disciplinary subfields and critical vocabularies essential to the study of Black women's texts across time and genre. I list these texts here, together and as catalog, to demonstrate, even visually, the titles that collectively formed the cornerstone of Black feminist literary futures. These books include Barbara T. Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* (1980); Trudier Harris's *From Mammies to Militants: Domestics in Black American Literature* (1982); Hazel V. Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987); Joanne M. Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (1989); Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (1992); Karla F. C. Holloway's *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (1992); Frances Smith Foster's *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women*

Books that compiled interviews or essays accompanied by critical introductions, such as Claudia Tate’s *Black Women Writers at Work* (1983) and Mari Evans’s *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation* (1984), Hortense J. Spillers and Marjorie Pryse’s *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (1985), and Cheryl A. Wall’s *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women* (1989), were especially useful classroom tools that kept the theorizing of Black women accessible and in circulation. The journal *Conditions: Five, The Black Women’s Issue* (1979), edited by Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith, compiled poetry and prose by both established authors and women who never thought they’d see their work published in a journal to “disprove[e] the ‘non-existence’ of Black feminist and Black lesbian writers.”30 *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (1982) by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith is indispensable for how it named the work and established the stakes of Black feminism, providing extensive resources for those who wished to learn, as well as those who needed to teach. bell hooks’s *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) rejected separatism as mainstream feminism’s organizing framework and reevaluated the role of Black women’s everyday experience of sexism, patriarchy, and white supremacy in the feminist imagination. These collections answered the implicit call issued by Morrison in the final lines of her negative appraisal of Mel Watkins’s collection: “Somewhere there is, or will be, an in-depth portrait of the black woman.”31 With these texts, together a gallery of early Black feminist theorizing, Black women created a rich palette and painted themselves with luminous strokes, to create anew the colors of us.

**Affirmed by the impactful work of her Black feminist peers, protected by the acquisition of tenure, and justified by the publication of her Jean Toomer book,** McKay took advantage of the power she possessed and the relationships she had formed and set her sights on ways to impact the profession through sustained institutional change. She began with UW-Madison’s department of English and focused on integrating African American literature into American literary studies and giving it pride of place within English departments nationwide. A savvy academician, McKay strategized on two fronts: first, she had to
place herself in a position of power within an English Department that was conservative, hostile, and isolating; second, she had to convince faculty in the Afro-American Studies Department to release their hold on the teaching of Black literature at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. An offer of a joint appointment at precisely the right time gave her the opportunity she needed to initiate the institutional change she envisioned.

While McKay’s home department was Afro-American Studies, for the length of her time at UW-Madison she had worked closely with English faculty associated with women’s studies, most notably Susan Stanford Friedman, the former Hilldale Professor and Virginia Woolf Professor of English and Women’s Studies. During a period after McKay earned tenure, she remembered an unnamed representative from English saying, “Well, you know, you do a lot of work for us,” to which McKay responded, “Yes, I do a lot of work for you, and maybe it would be nicer if we had some sort of legal attachment.” The details of the exchange are vague, but we know that before long the sides came to an agreement. And so it would be: beginning in the fall of 1984, McKay’s first semester as an associate professor, she officially held a joint appointment in the departments of English and Afro-American Studies. McKay used her joint appointment as a tool. While later she would work alongside an English Department ad hoc diversity group on a pipeline program between Afro-American Studies and English, her first order of business following approval of her joint appointment was to make courses on Black literature taught in the department of English.

To advance her initiative, McKay finessed negotiations between English and Afro-American Studies on the issue of which department would “own” Black literary studies. At the time, Black literature was the purview of Madison’s Afro-American Studies Department, so to weave it into English, to cross-list Black literature courses, McKay first needed to convince her home department to share this part of their curriculum. McKay’s friend William L. Andrews, “Bill” to McKay and colleagues, had entered UW-Madison’s English Department in 1977, just a year before McKay joined Afro-American Studies. He remembered a disciplinary terrain where the lines were strictly drawn. Even though he identified as an African Americanist, incorporated Black writers and Black texts into his courses on American literature, and gave a job talk that focused on “late nineteenth-century American and African American novel[s],” it was clear, he said, that “African American literature was taught in the Afro-studies department,” not in English.

When Richard Ralston became chair of Afro-American Studies, remembered Susan Friedman, things loosened up, and McKay “managed to get
Afro-American Studies to agree to have their courses cross-listed out.” As a faculty member, the Department of Afro-American Studies grounded McKay within a space that presupposed the value of Black subjectivity and the relevancy of Black methodological frameworks. McKay ardently believed that students in English needed these frameworks, too. To her mind, the health of Black literary studies depended on it. It is impossible to know for sure to what extent broadening access to African American literature in this way contributed to the issues of identity politics McKay would raise later in her essay “Naming the Problem That Led to the Question ‘Who Shall Teach African American Literature?’,” but for the time being, McKay envisioned the integration of Black literary studies as a move in the right direction. By asserting a vision, soliciting buy-in, and managing personalities, McKay placed herself on the path toward institutionalizing Black literary studies on a grand scale.

On the heels of McKay’s work to expand Black literary studies within the English Department, she secured support for Afro-American Studies programming through a series of Ford Foundation grants. These grants were written using the same collaborative approach McKay took to integrating the English Department’s curriculum, but they developed her individual skills in grant management and program development as well. Black literary studies was still in its infancy, so McKay pursued grants that would protect the nascent field. Through grants to UW-Madison’s Afro-American Studies Department and similar programs nationwide, the Ford Foundation deployed its massive financial resources to remake Black studies according to priorities that included “racial integration and diversification of college campuses and curricula.” Over a span of fifteen years and especially where support for graduate students was concerned, the foundation funded numerous grants to strengthen programming and amplify the impact of Afro-American Studies at UW-Madison and within the Midwest Consortium for Black Studies, a group that included the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and Carnegie Mellon University. For example: between 1989 and 1993, McKay and her colleagues at UW-Madison sought and received funding to support “programs in the Afro-American Studies department in the areas of research, materials, development & dissemination,” resources that buttressed the quality of instruction and the support for collaboration between programs in the region. McKay’s grant writing and partnership with the Consortium was good for Black studies in the Midwest and good for her professionally, since it was here that she solidified her gift for leading from behind.
At the University of Wisconsin–Madison and in her work with the Consortium, McKay built her capacity as a leader by understanding her strengths and weaknesses and by surrounding herself with colleagues she trusted and whose strengths complemented her own. McKay developed an especially productive working relationship with one Afro-American Studies colleague in particular: Craig Werner. Werner, who joined Afro-American Studies in 1984 as another Black literature specialist, graduated from Colorado College and attended the University of Illinois for graduate study, where he earned his master’s in American literature and his PhD in English. Werner was trained by Kenneth “Ken” Kinnamon, a Richard Wright expert and scholar of African American literature who coedited *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology* (1972) with senior Illinois colleague Richard K. Barksdale. Barksdale, who, in 1951, became the second African American to earn his PhD in English from Harvard, emerged as a “dean of African American letters” and took steps to codify Black literature in his coedited compilation. Werner’s knowledge of the broad sweep of Black literature and his speed as a writer operationalized McKay’s personal vision and professional connections, and the two enjoyed a close partnership over the years. Stanlie M. James, another member of the department, described McKay’s approach to collaboration: “Well, Nellie thinks up these ideas about what we should do. Then I wrote the proposal. Then she calls up all her friends and invites them. That’s how we would do it.” Between 1995 and 2004, with support from the Ford Foundation, Consortium members such as UW-Madison’s Afro-American Studies Department were able to make Black studies a viable and respected part of their institutions through grants that supported “a series of seminars on Black women and on urban communities” and “projects to institutionalize the Midwest Consortium for Black Studies.”

Funding from the Ford Foundation, however, was not without strings. A university’s institutional philosophy was crucial in determining eligibility, and the Ford Foundation privileged programs that veered away from the Black power foundations of Black studies. Under the leadership of McGeorge Bundy, explained Noliwe M. Rooks, author of *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education* (2006), the Ford Foundation took an integrationist approach to funding and supported only Black studies programs that reinforced its vision. The Foundation “refused to fund programs and groups that couched their requests for assistance within the rhetoric of Black Power,” leaving programs that took so-called militant approaches to Black self-efficacy without support. The Foundation’s focus on desegregation
pitted “those who believed in racial cooperation” against those who envisioned Black studies “as an independent field capable of delivering institutional power into Black hands, free from the interference of white faculty and administration.” Ford money, then, came at a cost. Instead of promoting self-reliance, relevancy, and Black liberation as foundational concepts, funded programs ensured their longevity by professionalizing their departments and replicating the norms of academic elites.

The “ideological divide” within Black studies had long-lasting effects on the types of literature, modes of criticism, and pedagogical practices that Black literary scholars valued and that mainstream colleges and universities affirmed. In her rich and comprehensive essay “Black Is Gold: African American Literature, Critical Literacy, and Twenty-First Century Pedagogies,” Maryemma Graham traced contemporary African American “theory and pedagogy” through the civil rights, Black power, and Black arts movements to consider the trade-offs associated with institutionalizing Black literary studies. For the purpose of this biography, Graham’s observations regarding how scholars of Black literature established “professional legitimacy within the academy” are instructive, since they detailed how, as early as Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto’s Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction (1978), Black scholars were “drawing boundaries for the field” and “redefining for its practitioners the meaning of social relevance and community engagement.” There would be no “black radical politics” or a preponderance of “writers associated with such activity.” Instead, the “path to mainstream acceptance” would be paved with high theory, “intellectual hierarchies,” and Ivy League degrees. McKay straddled the space between Black power and this new Black intellectual elite. McKay’s scholarship and service may not have been radical, but it was relevant. She held a PhD from Harvard but was more invested in theorizing that privileged accessibility over opacity. McKay published her first book with a prestigious university press, but her greatest contributions were not prize-winning monographs but field-defining essays. McKay collaborated with those from elite institutions but was not constrained by academic elitism when identifying collaborators. I make these comparisons not to reinforce specious binaries but to highlight the existence of a middle ground, a liminality, if you will, that McKay occupied as a scholar and teacher. Little did she know that her ability to bridge sides, to execute a vision, and to mediate conflict—skills she refined in the work she undertook to weave Black literary studies into UW-Madison’s English Department and to lead the Midwest Consortium for Black Studies—would prepare her to transform the teach-
ing of Black literature worldwide. The result was a “canon blast,”\(^5\) a shot heard ‘round the world.

In 1984, one year after Nellie Y. McKay earned tenure and published her Jean Toomer book, Henry Louis Gates Jr., known as “Skip” among those within his inner circle, articulated a vision for advancing a field of study still struggling to break into the disciplinary mainstream. That field was Black literary studies. Gates, who envisioned the “black anthology as canon formation,”\(^5\) aimed to make the literature of Black Americans available worldwide. While at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, Gates approached his colleague M. H. Abrams to persuade the anthology behemoth to “launch the project.”\(^5\) Abrams, a formidable literary scholar who published numerous books of literary criticism, poetry, and prose, was also editor of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* and a highly respected advising editor of Norton Anthologies. Norton was, and remains, the preeminent publisher of anthologies used for college teaching, and at the time, it offered African American literature a gateway into the mainstream and into a potentially lucrative college textbook market. It was Abrams’s relationship with Norton and knowledge of the editorial process governing anthology production that prompted Gates to share his vision for an anthology of Black literature with Abrams before packaging it as a proposal and presenting it to Norton.

The preface to *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (NAAAL) offered one version of the history of the anthology through the “Principles of Selection” and “Editorial Procedures” sections of the preface, but my alternative take on the history of the anthology, which incorporates information from primary sources and unpublished interviews, reveals how early “gender trouble” rewrote the anthology’s origin story, and maps McKay’s role in how the NAAAL came to be. Following a “two-year gestation period from proposal to approval,”\(^5\) a discussion about what was then called *The Norton Anthology of Black American Literature* (NABAL) was held at Cornell on 26 November 1986. Unnamed participants set out to define the scope of the project, establish standards, and set a time line. As logged by an unidentified author of unpublished “Rough Notes,” Gates, as leader of the project, was tasked with talking to Mary Helen Washington to “give her her choice of editorial positions.”\(^5\) Her options were as follows: take on the role of “Associate General Editor” and be responsible for the “representation of the women writers,” or accept the position of general editor of “period 2,” 1865–1919, should she decline the associate role.\(^5\)

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The unnamed author of these “Rough Notes” rightly expressed uneasiness around the practicalities of the first editorial configuration when they wrote, parenthetically, “(I’m still a little worried how this’ll work out in practice).” How would Washington, responsible only for the women, work with each period editor while maintaining the strict limitations of this role? “She is to advise, not write,” the notes explained. Washington recalled the conversation she had with Gates about joining the editorial board as one that probably took place at her apartment in Cambridge while she was a faculty member at the University of Massachusetts. Washington published some of her earliest essays in Black World—a periodical backed by Chicago’s Johnson Publishing that took a diasporic look at the Black experience—and was part of “the small band of scholars who, in 1970, inaugurated the first Black Studies program at the University of Detroit.” Washington was at the forefront of “efforts to define and institutionalize the fields of African American literature and Black feminist studies.” She was such an important figure that when Ann duCille published “The Occult of True Black Womanhood,” she explained how one of her “most precious possessions is a tattered copy of the August 1974 issue” of Black World because in it, she found an early piece of Black feminist criticism by Mary Helen Washington.

Excited about the opportunity to participate in such an ambitious project, yet nervous about the responsibility, Washington listened with great anticipation to Gates’s proposal. She thought, “This is kind of scary. I’m just a kid from Detroit. I’m not from upper-class and middle-class families.” She may not have attended “Harvard and Yale and Princeton,” but she was prepared to meet this challenge. As soon as Gates listed the original editorial board, however, it became clear to Washington that she would not need to summon the courage to accept the offer; she would need to honor her principles and decline. As soon as Washington realized that “there were no other Black women going to be on the Norton,” she put her foot down, and in a manner that she recalled as not necessarily diplomatic (“given the way I was back in the day”) she informed Gates that she was “not going to be the editor of an anthology with no Black women on it except me.” According to Washington, Gates responded by saying that decisions had been made, editors already chosen, and therefore no changes were possible.

Washington declined the offer.

It is unclear whether Gates received advice about who else might serve as coeditor of the anthology, but he subsequently reached out to McKay, who agreed under one condition: Black women would be on the editorial board. Washington, who remained friends with Gates well after the editorial board of
the NAAAL was decided, was proud of her decision. By maintaining the conviction of her beliefs, she may have made it impossible for Gates to deny McKay’s subsequent request for an editorial board with sufficient representation from Black women. The story of Black women and the formation of a new editorial board, then, is as much about Washington’s initial rejection as it is about McKay’s subsequent acceptance. There is reason to believe that McKay had spoken to Washington about Gates’s offer and that McKay was clear on the reasons why Washington could not proceed.67 Once McKay officially became NAAAL coeditor, the new period editors—five men and four Black women—began following a systematic plan to publish the anthology in six years’ time.

A methodical sketch guided the editors’ efforts. Following the Ithaca meeting on 26 November 1986, period editors created a rough table of contents and the advisory board reviewed their work.68 By October 1989, due dates were front and center: by January 1991 the manuscript would be due and by January 1992 the book would be published. The “Ithaca meeting,” “rough tables of contents,” and “advisory board review” of materials were done. From there, they would proceed this way:

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<td>WWN re-counting</td>
<td>11/15/89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editors’ votes on major works</td>
<td>11/15/89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skip and Nellie prepare a “model” author—headnote, text, and footnotes—to be vetted by Mike and John and sent to all editors</td>
<td>12/1/89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After adjustments due to counts, second contents review by advisory board</td>
<td>1/90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final contents</td>
<td>3/90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each editor or team prepares a sample author (as above)</td>
<td>3/90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skip, Nellie, Mike, John vet these samples</td>
<td>5/90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skip/Nellie prepare rough draft of General introduction, to be vetted by Mike and John, and sent to all editors</td>
<td>6/90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation and completion of all apparatus</td>
<td>6/90–12/90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Drafts of *everything* to Skip, Nellie, and John; extra copies of period intros and author headnotes to Mike69
Together with Mike and John—M. H. (Meyer Howard “Mike”) Abrams and in-house Norton editor John Benedict—Gates and McKay mapped out a plan to complete the *NAAAL* between 1986 and 1992. The advisory board was tasked with “vet[ting] rough and final Tables of Contents” and “serv[ing] for appeal on special problems.” Even though the “Special Consultants” category was framed in the plural, only one such consultant was named: Robert G. O’Meally, the Harvard-educated Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. O’Meally, who founded and once directed Columbia’s Center for Jazz Studies, was responsible for “help[ing] everybody out on the oral and vernacular traditions in every period.”

The anthology was unique in that it included a CD. This aural companion to the text captured the Black vernacular tradition and, through recordings of spirituals, work songs, jazz, and the blues, reflects the places and spaces in Black writing where, in the words of Meta Jones, “the muse is music.”

As one of the only times the *NAAAL* editors would meet as a group, the 26 November meeting had to handle nuts and bolts and other issues that warranted discussion. The recorded notes, however, documented more than that. They recorded a feeling and philosophy related to the enterprise that honored the uniqueness of the endeavor and participants’ pride in being part of history in the making. According to the editors, the *NAAAL* was an unapologetic endeavor fixed on formalizing a tradition of Black writing in the foremost teaching tool for literary studies. The *NAAAL* would offer ample background information, but it would not justify. For example, when “special problems of *argot*” arose, the editor needed to “annotate for the white student as well—and remember that Afro-American students from one region may not understand the argot of another.” When introducing writers, editors were advised to keep in mind that “since this is a volume of literature that doesn’t need apology or justification, we won’t spend headnote space apologizing or justifying. By the same token, no NALW-type discussion of ‘Images of Black People in White Literature’!” The editors behaved as if the respect afforded the established traditions of American and British literature already existed for them.

As McKay guided the process, editors associated with the *NAAAL* executed a unique vision that invoked the best of the past while anticipating a space for Black literary futures. The editors felt the pressure to succeed but were also confident that if they presented the tradition of Black literature without qualification, the merits of the tradition would speak for themselves. The nine period editors—William L. Andrews, Houston A. Baker Jr., Barbara T. Chris-
tian, Frances Smith Foster, Deborah E. McDowell, Robert G. O’Meally, Arnold Rampersad, Hortense J. Spillers, and Richard A. Yarborough—were not listed in the original “Rough Notes” but figure prominently on the first edition’s masthead and in McKay’s previously unpublished but reprinted essay on “The Making of the Norton Anthology of African American Literature (NAAAL).” The editors worked “out from the center” and built a list of key writers after first identifying “commonly-agreed essential authors— the Douglasses, Baldwins, Walkers—and works—Douglass’s Narrative, Cane, maybe The Bluest Eye, if that’s taught enough”; additional selections were made based on “what room is left.”

The first edition of the NAAAL may have taken aim at the canon of American literature, but it was not a cannon blast as far as the long history of Black anthologies was concerned. NAAAL editors were unapologetic in their philosophy yet conservative in their approach. Before the NAAAL first brought together 120 writers over 2,665 pages, Black anthologies, reaching as far back as the nineteenth century, had asserted the presence and artistry of Black writing. If Les Cenelles (1845) was situated “squarely in the French Romantic tradition” in its focus on “love, friendship, and hedonistic pleasure” instead of “slavery and emancipation,” then the idea that anthologies were a high-stakes enterprise for Black people was perhaps initiated as early as 1922 with the publication of James Weldon Johnson’s Book of American Negro Poetry. Here, Johnson stated that “the final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and the standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art.”

Other important anthologies followed seeking to do similar work: The New Negro (1925) affirmed Johnson’s claim in its focus on “the younger generation”; Caroling Dusk (1927) proved the prevalence of poetry in anthologizing before the late 1980s; as “a true classic,” The Negro Caravan (1941) enacted Johnson’s vision with its scope, “superior literary intelligence,” and “closer knowledge of the field.”

The NAAAL was rooted in all that came before yet announced, alongside Patricia Liggins Hill’s Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition (1998), a new feature within Black anthologizing: texts that bore the imprint of an unprecedented number of Black scholars and reflected the broadening of the discipline across higher education. In other words, the growing number of African Americanists meant that Black anthologies could be edited by a team of experts instead of by a single editor or a pair of coeditors. The NAAAL editors were not
attempting to reshape the tradition according to new or novel voices. Instead, they organized the first edition according to established texts and left space in subsequent periods for an accounting of new directions in Black literature. Publishing such a comprehensive teaching tool certainly had its advantages, but there were, of course, inherent drawbacks. Period editor William L. Andrews pondered one question that pressed on the minds of many: “Does creating an anthology like the Norton open up? Or does it tend to close down? That’s debatable. I think that, for me, it was important to be a part of the project because I felt like first you need to open up.”

The NAAAL defined a tradition that would serve as both baseline and touchpoint for future debates about the power and limits of the anthology. It was such a stunning achievement and symbol of the times that Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner Rita Dove selected the NAAAL for inclusion in the national millennium time capsule “to represent America at the end of the 20th century.”

McKay made Gates’s vision of the NAAAL a reality to elevate something bigger than them both. As cogeneral editor, she assumed responsibility over coordinating and calling, cajoling copy from period editors, and keeping in contact with Norton staff. Over the years, McKay shepherded the process by assuming administrative oversight. Gates brought irrepressible vision to the NAAAL and leveraged his relationship with Abrams to get it done but was ultimately a “high-concept guy” who did little in the way of managing the day-to-day details to move the NAAAL forward. In contrast, McKay was more hands-on in her task management, an approach she had developed over the years in her administrative work at UW-Madison. McKay made things happen. She committed to the NAAAL not simply because it was Gates’s idea but also because it dovetailed with her investment in broadening access to Black literature. McKay managed period editors as well as her coeditor and facilitated behind-the-scenes work with Norton editor Julia Reidhead. Meeting deadlines was “a heck of a problem,” and McKay had to make sure that period editors adhered to space constraints or revised their work to make it suitable for a Norton audience. Neither was an easy thing to do, since all of the period editors, who worked at institutions across the country, had their own scholarship to advance, their own teaching to do, and their own dissertations to advise. Some were better at managing the deadlines than others. Andrews, McKay’s “old faithful,” quickly compiled his table of contents for McKay and Gates; “other people took longer.” Difficulty in receiving timely submissions from period editors, however, was only one reason why the anthology took so long to complete.
The anthology, by nature a slow-going enterprise, faced moments of inertia throughout. When Washington declined Gates's offer to join the project, momentum was lost. McKay became the person brought on to “pick up the pieces and try to put the whole project into forward motion again.” Gates knew “that he needed somebody, really, to be in charge of the project,” which is perhaps one reason why McKay was able to successfully lobby for the inclusion of Black women editors and Black women’s texts. Her impact was noticeable. Because of McKay’s involvement, period editors “started seeing more official paperwork, including contracts.” Even though the meeting record lists one visit of all involved in November 1986, several period editors recall a subsequent visit to Ithaca, where, it seems, the new team “came together, met each other, drank a lot, talked a lot, ate a lot, and fought a lot because there were all of these things about anthologies, in terms of power and influence, that had to get straight.” Work was underway.

Then, in July 1990, barely four years into the project, John Benedict, the “editor and director of W.W. Norton & Company,” died of cancer. Benedict was the anthology’s “sponsoring editor and champion at Norton,” and, until the time of his death, McKay “depended on him to keep our ball rolling.” Roughly two years passed before another in-house editor was assigned to the project. It is unclear why. Barry Wade, assigned to replace Benedict, died on 3 March 1993, barely a year after this reassignment. It wasn’t until Julia Reidhead, “the tireless intrepid third in-house editor,” came to the project that the NAAAL received the editorial push it needed. Gates was especially grateful to Reidhead “for assuming control of our project after her two predecessors died, and giving it the priority that it deserves.” This gratitude extended both ways, particularly where McKay was concerned. Reidhead appreciated “McKay’s strategic skills in collaboration and mediation,” which, in her mind, “were key in bridging differences and bringing the project to completion.” McKay “ran it” and “kept us going,” recalled Frances Smith Foster, the period editor and colleague whose participation stands out for how it reflects McKay’s thoughts about the limits of educational pedigree in determining professional opportunity. At the time, Foster did not teach at an elite institution. And while the high-powered slate of period editors might lead readers to believe that one needed to have an Ivy League education to be included, McKay made sure that skill, not pedigree, was how she identified talent. McKay had developed her unique brand of editorial leadership not only through her previous administrative work but also in her understanding of Black feminist organizing, where an appreciation of the lived experiences of Black women lives at the center.
Upon entering the job market after earning her PhD at the University of California, San Diego, Foster had the opportunity to teach at the University of California, Berkeley, but she declined, opting to stay at home in San Diego instead. Foster was motivated to stay within the state system for two reasons. First, she was married with two children and made the choice to be with her family instead of maintaining a commuter marriage. Second, she was committed to working with “working class and first-generation students,” since these constituencies reflected her pedagogical priorities. Even though Foster was at a state school, which, to some, gave her a second-tier status, McKay “was one of the few Ivy League research-one people who was not all snobbish” about where Foster taught. McKay’s longtime work in women’s studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison had taught her that there were good reasons not to overlook her colleague from San Diego State College (now University).

As far as West Coast schools were concerned, San Diego State College lacked the reputation of the University of California, Berkeley; California State University, Pomona; or Stanford University, but Foster remarked that it also “had the first women's studies department, and I was part of that project, so [my inclusion in the Norton] made sense.” Foster had always appreciated McKay for building coalitions founded on mutual interest and expertise: “I always think of [how Nellie chose her collaborators], because I was at what people later told me was a second-tier university.” This mattered little to McKay, who, as Foster recalled, “never seemed to consider the status of somebody’s university or title.” Before Foster became professor of English and women’s studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, McKay included her in the NAAAL to make sure that the roster represented the best, and to guarantee that systems that may have once excluded her from opportunities would not exclude a worthy scholar whose personal choices had nothing to do with her professional expertise.

Foster’s status as a relative unknown at the time the slate of NAAAL editors was composed stood in stark contrast with Gates’s celebrity both in the field of Black literary studies and as a public intellectual and cultural critic. Awarded one of the first ever MacArthur Genius Grants in 1981, when he was only thirty-one years old and still an assistant professor of English at Yale University, Gates was dubbed “Black Studies’ New Star” by the New York Times less than a decade later. The Times moniker signaled a sea change in higher education. In the 1990s, the emerging category of the academic superstar, and Gates’s standing as an “academic entrepreneur,” became new markers of status and prestige in the professoriate.
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At the time, Gates was one of the most recognizable Black male academic superstars. He had gained recognition for both his scholarly corpus and his public intellectualism, the latter of which provided a platform for him to dissect issues of the day through public-facing commentary. Gates rose to prominence through his work as a writer for the *New Yorker*, as a stakeholder in the massive *Encyclopedia Encarta*, and as editor of the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers series. These endeavors went a long way toward making Gates a household name. But his popularity was also the result of what Erica R. Edwards called “charismatic leadership”: a practice composed of narrative and performative moves formed after the end of slavery when dispossessed and disenfranchised Black communities promoted patriarchy “in the home, the church and political assembly” to mark their “fitness for freedom.”

It wasn’t enough to be “quiet but effective” like Ida B. Wells-Barnett; Black leaders needed to establish themselves as “a master of voice” to lead the race. For Black people, then, the legacy of charismatic leadership carried with it class imperatives and a “gender hierarchy” in which a well-heeled “singular black male leadership” served as the gold standard for political organizing in the twentieth century. A charismatic academic superstar, Gates spoke with “energy, charm and . . . urgent eloquence . . . to make things happen.” In Gates, cultural and institutional power brokers found charisma and much more.

Gates ascended as a superstar within a star system, the embodiment of something altogether new: the academic or intellectual entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship involves initiating moneymaking ventures, sure, but it also requires a keen understanding of the marketplace and an ability to assess opportunity and impact. Gregarious and highly resourced, Gates sold his ideas for an *Encyclopedia Encarta*, Perennial Library’s Zora Neale Hurston series, and the NAAAL, to name a few, to publishers keen on cashing in on the emerging field of Black literary studies. A support team funded by Harvard’s deep pockets made completing these projects possible. With a chief of staff, teams of graduate students, an editorial assistant, a research assistant, and ad hoc “writers and editors to help produce various projects,” Gates demonstrated his understanding of what one writer described as “a fundamental maxim of capitalism: Don’t do for yourself what you can pay others to do for you.”

“I’m an intellectual entrepreneur,” Gates proffered in an interview; “I love building institutions.”

Gates’s entrepreneurial spirit and magnetic personality made possible the NAAAL and many other projects that were good for Black literary studies. But for some, an individualist ethos could never replace the role of creative
collaborations in the work. Published in 2001, Nellie Y. McKay and Frances
Smith Foster’s “A Collective Experience: Academics Working and Learning To-
gether” outlined the role “creative collaborations” play as an alternative to the
“adversarial academy.”108 It was only after a forum on Black women’s studies,
hosted by McKay at UW-Madison with Barbara T. Christian and Barbara Smith
as participants, that the dialogic essay came to be. Foster’s participation in the
UW-Madison forum taught her “that I wasn’t working in isolation at San Diego
State; I had, in fact, the option of belonging to a community joined not by geo-
graphic proximity or unanimity of expertise but by the common idea that
knowledge production and distribution need not be entrepreneurial.”109

The NAAAL was a collective triumph, the result of coordinated efforts by
dedicated scholars bound, across the miles, by a commitment to anthologiz-
ing, college teaching, and Black literary studies. Gates’s place as the public
face of the NAAAL in spite of McKay’s behind-the-scenes work was also re-

tective of “the solidification of . . . the very concept of black leadership . . .
as a classed and gendered concept” that underscored the maxim that
“women organized while men led.”110 Underestimating the importance of
McKay’s behind-the-scenes persuasive power, however, would be a mistake.
At first, as the story goes, Toni Morrison refused to have Sula (1973), her sec-
ond novel, included in the anthology. William L. Andrews encouraged Nor-
ton in-house editor Julia Reidhead to tap McKay in the hope that she might
get Morrison to reconsider. “Nellie would probably have the strongest pow-
ers of persuasion of anyone as far as convincing [Toni Morrison] to change
her mind,” he recalled.111 He was right. Because in the end, they got Sula.

One can only wonder, however, whether Black women being “equal
though invisible partners in black cultural work”112 is enough. McKay’s pro-
found yet hidden influence does not erase what Myisha Priest described as
“differences in power and opportunity between the men and their female
peers,” where the question becomes whether Black men have been actively
promoting the work and advancing the careers of their Black woman peers
or engaging in a “passive collusion with the institutional neglect of black
women.”113 What is certain, however, is how the case of McKay’s editorial
leadership is evocative of Anna Julia Cooper and Pauline E. Hopkins—
prolific nineteenth-century Black women who, in their day, continued to
create new worlds for Black women with their writing despite being over-
shadowed by their more readily recognizable Black male counterparts.

In honor of the hard work that preceded publication, McKay organized a
symposium at the University of Wisconsin–Madison to thank the editors
and celebrate the NAAAL’s release. Between 4 and 5 April 1997, editors and
friends of the project descended on Madison, Wisconsin, and enjoyed sessions that included the following: “an overview of black anthologies,” “the Achievement of The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,” a session on how the NAAAL came to be, and a panel that considered the “inheritors of the New Canon: Graduate Students’ Voices.” The two days of panels concluded with a celebratory dinner at McKay’s house on West Lawn Drive. Attendees included a veritable who’s who of African American writers and scholars: Michael S. Harper and Wanda Coleman held forth at McKay’s dining-room table; Barbara T. Christian sat on the steps to McKay’s porch, smoking a cigarette; Deborah E. McDowell regaled colleagues and McKay’s graduate students with stories about her intellectual trajectory. Reminders of McKay’s dinner parties at 111 Road in Queens were everywhere, especially in the French champagne that flowed freely so that no one would realize that food would be running out soon. The joy of being together would stand as a living example, for her graduate students in attendance especially, of the social value of collective work.

In 1989, while the NAAAL editors were working hard to meet their deadlines, McKay received unexpected news from Harvard. The opportunity for a full-circle moment had come. Harvard wanted McKay to return and head what was then the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute but has since become the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research. When McKay was mulling over whether to take the job at UW-Madison, one of the deciding factors had been Preston N. Williams’s observation that Madison was the type of place institutions such as Stanford and Harvard would go to recruit. He couldn’t have been more right. The 13 March 1989, edition of the Harvard Crimson announced, “Afro-Am Offers Post to Literary Scholar,” outlining the details of the position and the role McKay would play if she accepted. When Harvard made the offer, there were no tenured Black women on the faculty. McKay, then, would have been the “only Black woman with a tenured post” on the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. In addition, accepting the Harvard offer would have made McKay only the second professor on campus to teach African American literature, joining her friend Werner Sollors, who was “Harvard’s only specialist in Black literature” at the time. 

Harvard’s offer came on the heels of other attempts to lure McKay away from Madison. In a single year, between 1988 and 1989, McKay declined “invitations to be considered for appointments” from New York University (NYU), Princeton University, Rice University, and the University of Washington in Seattle. In a June 1989 letter to Carl Grant, Eric Rothstein, and
Gina Sapiro, chairs of Afro-American Studies, English, and Women’s Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, respectively, McKay “puts down in writing” information that they can use when discussing McKay’s Harvard offer with the dean: “I am taking this opportunity to toot my own horn shamelessly. So here goes.” In three pages, McKay discussed her “current high visibility”; her personal connections to Werner Sollors and Nathan Huggins, two members of Harvard’s Du Bois Institute; and her work as a “teacher and a citizen” at the University of Wisconsin–Madison to justify the details she would like to see included in a counteroffer. She wanted Madison to “make it hard for Harvard” and invited her colleagues to tell her, too, if “I am not asking for enough!”

Within a month’s time, in mid-July, UW-Madison countered. McKay accepted Madison’s offer and, in so doing, received a raise that boosted her salary from approximately $44,145 to $67,000—an increase of about 52 percent—over two years’ time. In today’s dollars and given the rate of inflation, McKay would have seen her salary increase from approximately $102,000 to $142,000 in one fell swoop. In a letter dated 24 August 1989, McKay wrote a lengthy response to A. Michael Spence, the Harvard dean with whom she had been negotiating. In it, she clarified her reasons for declining their offer. “My major reason for not accepting your offer,” McKay explained, “is my sense that there is no serious commitment on the part of the College in general to accept Afro-American Studies (not just a handful of individual Afro-Americanists) into full membership within the larger intellectual community.” Spence was disappointed but undaunted: “Having met you and having (I now realize) counted on working with you, I hope we may come back in the not-too-distant future with a proposal that is more appealing to you.” McKay’s diplomacy masked her deeper feelings about the situation. She thought Harvard was racist and said as much to Painter when she forwarded a copy of the rejection letter she sent to Spence with the note: “How does one tell people they run a racist institution,” McKay wondered, “in a way that conveys that but does not sound shrill?”

Harvard went back to the drawing board. After “ponder[ing] McKay’s thoughtful letter last summer for many hours,” Spence set in motion a process that responded directly to McKay’s most pressing concerns. In March 1990, he wrote McKay to renew Harvard’s offer “of a Professorship in Afro-American Studies” and to provide an update: he was pursuing visionary leadership for the Du Bois Institute and was now prepared to “provide two additional positions in Afro-American Studies.” These structural changes were in addition to a salary raise and a research fund increase that
took the original offer of $25,000 in research funds to a whopping $40,000. “I realize that your greater concerns about Harvard had to do with the difficulties of building Afro-American Studies than with financial matters,” Spence admitted, but he “extend[ed] these material conditions as a further measure of [Harvard’s] strong desire to have [McKay] with them.” McKay’s apprehensions ran far too deep for Harvard’s sizable coffer to ever fill. The first paragraph of her response read:

Dear Mike.
This is not the letter you would like to get from me. I take no pleasure in sending it. But following a careful reconsideration of my earlier decision and your renewed offer to me, again I conclude that coming to Harvard now does not serve my best interests.  

In an ironic twist, McKay’s decision to decline Harvard’s offer made way for someone else: Henry Louis Gates Jr. Harvard offered Gates, then a professor at Duke University, the position of director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute. He accepted and, since 1991, has served “as chairman of the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard” with “a joint appointment as professor of English and Afro-American Studies.” In a brief note, Gates thanked McKay for her well-wishes following the announcement of his appointment:

Dear Nellie:
I just want you to know how very much your note of support meant to me as I was making my decision about moving to Harvard. I appreciate your generosity of spirit, Nellie, and your friendship. I’ll be calling on you, often, for your wise counsel and sound advice.
See you soon.
Yours, Skip

Some of McKay’s colleagues believe she recommended Gates for the post. Others think that she may have declined the offer out of fear that details from her past, those related to her age or the daughter masquerading as sister, would have come to the surface. Whatever her reason for declining, the proof of Gates’s fit was evident. “[Skip’s reputation] never mattered to me,” expressed scholar and biographer Arnold Rampersad. “I always thought he was the cat’s pajamas for that world. I wasn’t good at building institutions. He obviously was hungry to build institutions. I think what he did at Harvard is unbelievable, astonishing. Yeah.”

Now, more than twenty years after the publication of the first edition of the NAAAL, it seems almost inconceivable that there was ever a time

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when African American literature was not widely available to teachers, to scholars, and to the general public. Since then, “the 2014 publication of a two-volume, third edition of the Norton Anthology of African American Literature (NAAL), the widespread adoption of Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) in US high school literature courses, and the awards and public notoriety afforded African American writers” have confirmed the institutionalization of Black literary studies.\textsuperscript{131} It began as The Norton Anthology of Afro-American Literature, became The Norton Anthology of Black American Literature, and ended as The Norton Anthology of African American Literature. “Never again,” McKay wrote, “will anyone anywhere in the world, to whom this volume is accessible, be unaware of what to read, study, or teach in African American literature. Never again will anyone in the United States or our neighbor countries have cause to doubt the existence and/or viability of the literature of black America.”\textsuperscript{132} The NAAL catapulted McKay’s career, bringing her respect, prestige, and financial security. Not long after the NAAL was published, however, McKay’s attention would shift from the ivory tower to the public stage as she and other Black studies scholars weighed in on the intraracial tensions and Black sexual tropes on display during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings.

\textbf{THE SAME BLACK-WOMAN-AS-RACE-TRAITOR TROPE} that surfaced with the popularization of Black women’s literature in the 1980s erupted again in 1991 when the Senate Judiciary Committee undertook proceedings to confirm Clarence Thomas to the United States Supreme Court. During the proceedings, televised live over three days in early October, the committee, composed entirely of white men and with Joe Biden serving as chair, sought to confirm the nominee George H. W. Bush had selected to replace Thurgood Marshall, who had announced his retirement after serving for nearly twenty-five years on the bench.\textsuperscript{133} On the third day, 11 October 1991, Anita Hill presented her allegations of Thomas’s sexual misconduct, his abuse of power, and his harassment. The live coverage and treatment of Hill in newspapers and other print media horrified McKay. What she saw was the unfolding of timeworn tropes regarding Black women’s sexuality and integrity, tropes familiar to those who studied or lived them but invisible to most white people and those in the popular media who painted Hill as an unreliable opportunist engaged in what Thomas himself called the “high-tech lynching” of a Black man. McKay and Nell Irvin Painter discussed the case in depth through their correspondence, which captured the moment their knowledge of the history of
race and gender relations in the United States collided with the mass media's skewed coverage of Hill and the proceedings. In their letters we find kernels of ideas that would eventually become articles compiled in Toni Morrison's edited collection *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (1992). What began as general ruminations on a racial spectacle that pitted a Black man accused of sexual harassment against stereotypes of Black women's licentiousness became a conversation that drove McKay and Painter to consider not “what took place” but “what happened, how it happened, why it happened; what implications may be drawn, [and] what consequences may follow.”

In their correspondence, McKay and Painter eked out a space to avow Black women’s credibility, affirm their feelings, and refine their analysis of the drama unfolding.

In spite of a late night, Painter rose at her usual 6:50 A.M. and then turned immediately to developments in the saga before starting her day. As reflections on a flashpoint in gender relations and sexual harassment that titillated a public obsessed with the details of Black sexuality, the following excerpts from their correspondence demonstrate how McKay and Painter processed public events privately. The two wrote almost daily for years and spilled plenty of ink discussing their work, their departments, and their lives. Anita Hill’s testimony was altogether different because of the way their epistolary exchanges produced work that led to public-facing scholarship. Their letters, typically, were for each other; in this case, their letters would produce material for the world. The thoughts below unfold like a ticker, with the most relevant portions of letters written within days of each other included here:

Dear Nellie: . . . I read every word about Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas and the women on Capitol Hill who had to stand in the hall and wait until the senators were willing to let them in to talk about sexual harassment. Son of a bitch! As one of my Af-Am colleagues said . . . how many lessons can so many people learn all at once!!! . . . Every woman sees herself and understands intuitively every move (and not-move) that Anita Hill made, while the men scratch their heads, unable to fathom why she went with him when he moved to another agency, why she continued to phone him from time to time, why she invited him to her school to speak. They know NOTHING about the power arrangements in this society as they affect women and men, nothing at all.

Dear Nellie, . . . Without rehearsing every bit of the testimony, I will say that I still lean toward believing Anita Hill, because of Clarence
Thomas’s unfinished gender business concerning his sister. His analysis of his sister’s situation tells me that he has a problem with women and understanding women’s roles in this society. . . . I think I heard enough to indicate to me that Thomas was wrapping himself in the race and exiling Anita Thomas [sic] from it. I don’t know where she fits in his racial analysis, but evidently it’s as not-black. This reminds me of a point that Deborah White and my students make: the quintessential racial crime is [the] lynching of black men, not the rape of black women. By this reasoning, giving Clarence Thomas a rough time is a racial infraction. Harassing Anita Hill is not.136

Dear Nell, . . . I think Anita Hill is a supremely brave woman. From the time she talked to the FBI she had to know that CT would not easily back out and that the most powerful patriarchal forces in the country were going to try to rip her to shreds before it’s over. Linda Greene was able to get a letter with more than 150 signatures of black women lawyers across the country off to the Judiciary Committee yesterday. I sent Hill a telegram this a.m. in the name of the “Black Women at the University of Wisconsin.” Stanlie James is right now writing a letter and she hopes to round up signatures of black women in Madison and elsewhere to also send her. She could come out of this looking like mincemeat, but she needs to know that she has the support of black women in many places.137

Dear Nell, . . . I grow increasingly distressed over this spectacle. At [t]his hour, the supporters of Thomas are now singing his praises. This whole bloody thing is too complicated for words. I hate the president and the Senate—him most of all for making this nomination in the first place, the Senate Judiciary for not doing what it ought to have done two weeks ago. So now, this august body of 100 white men can wash their hands of the whole nasty mess as the nation watches two black people destroy each other in the eyes of the whole world. Can things get any worse for relations between middle class black women and men????138

In the letters that followed the conclusion of the hearings, McKay and Painter highlighted several key themes: the display of intraracial tensions on national television; truth-telling and the “sides” taken by the Black community; sexual harassment, power, race, and gender; class performance; stereotypes and “legible” Blackness. Then, word came that there was an outlet for their thoughts. Wahneema Lubiano and Toni Morrison had decided to put together an anthology about Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill,
and Painter encouraged McKay to sign on. Even though taking on the project would mean time away from McKay’s “black women’s autobiographies” research, Painter encouraged McKay to participate because “I’d love to be in the same book with you.”

McKay agreed to submit an essay but insisted on a very particular approach. She had just returned from Ohio University, where she gave a paper based on the Thomas-Hill proceedings, and decided that she was invested in writing “a piece addressed to a group of white women.”139 “I would like mine to be a very personal piece addressed to the white feminist community which, I think, did not see how complicated the situation was,” McKay continued, “I don’t know what you will think of it, but it was therapeutic for me to do it, and now I can go on with my life, feeling somewhat cleansed of anger and helplessness.”140 The embodied foundations of McKay’s scholarship and the healing power of Black women’s friendships once again found their place.

Included in a collection that features pieces by Leon Higginbotham Jr., Manning Marable, Gayle Pemberton, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, among others, and with a brilliantly crafted and surgical introduction by Toni Morrison, McKay’s essay, “Remembering Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas: What Really Happened When One Black Woman Spoke Out,” achieved precisely what she had envisioned: it offered a firsthand account of the incident in question and relied on McKay’s personal and professional authority, not a litany of secondary sources, to stake its claim. Traces of earlier letters and draft material remain, but the marked difference between the draft copy enclosed in a letter to Painter—a talk given at Ohio University titled “Acknowledging Differences: Can Women Find Unity through Diversity?”—and the published version is the latter’s restraint. Raw emotion pervaded the Ohio talk. McKay talked about depression, hurt, and disappointment, eventually moving toward hope, “hope tempered by fears—enormous fears and apprehensions about what lay ahead for Anita Hill.”142 In contrast, McKay’s focus on social class, Hill’s demeanor and humble roots, her dignity and composure, seem to constrain the essay—so much so that McKay’s reference to “angry black women” in the final line seems out of place, an eruption of sorts. Borrowing from Sojourner Truth, McKay wondered: “If one lone woman named Eve could turn the world upside down, then thousands of angry Black women might certainly be able to turn it right side up this time.”143 Hill interrupted what was to be Thomas’s smooth transition to the court. McKay and Painter, alongside their contributors to Race-ing Justice, refused to allow the implications of that interruption to go unnoticed.
Similarly, Painter wrote her way into her essay for Morrison’s collection through a letter to McKay. She wrote freely about the “racial symbolism,” its multiple angles, the “trope of sex-and-race, with the cheapness of Black women’s bodies,” and then, “Well, enough of this,” she concluded. “This is the best argument I’ve had in weeks. Everybody around here agrees with me all the time. Thanks a lot. You’ve got me started on my essay for Toni and Wahneema’s collection.” With a graduate classroom as the frame narrative, Painter’s “Hill, Thomas, and the Use of Racial Stereotype” fleshed out issues alluded to in her letter to McKay to offer an analysis of the “significance of race in an intraracial drama.” Painter’s earlier assessment of Thomas’s depiction of his sister, at first included in a letter to McKay, showed up again in Painter’s published piece. Painter explained how Thomas wielded stereotypes; traced the origins of the “black-woman-as-traitor-to-the-race” trope and pinpointed how Hill’s illegibility because of her class, political leanings, etc. caused her to virtually disappear. In other words, it was easy for senators, the viewing public, and newspaper writers to describe Hill when facets of her story aligned with stereotypes of the oversexed (and in this case jealous) Black jezebel. But when her class and upbringing collided with this portrayal, she became illegible, impossible to pigeonhole, and out of place, and therefore politicians and the public needed to have her extricated from view. As a whole, Race-ing Justice synthesized a vocabulary that distilled how the days’ events fit within a history of race relations rooted in stereotype. It also offered a form of public-facing scholarship that anticipated the work of twenty-first-century Black public intellectuals who engage with current events faster than McKay, Painter, and their contemporaries could, at the time, ever imagine.

Black studies and the scholarly groundwork laid by McKay, Painter, and others has afforded today’s “black digital intelligentsia”—those writers, scholars, and thinkers who critique and contextualize current events with lightning speed—critical approaches from Black feminism, cultural studies, and critical race theory, for example, with which to dissect current affairs. Their early, formative work, of course, remains relevant. The critical vocabularies that undergird, say, Tarana Burke’s invocation of intersectionality in #metoo, and Moya Bailey’s acknowledgment that misogynoir exists because #blackstudiesdidthat, prove that Black women’s theorizing goes far beyond published books and “elite” spaces. It proliferates (and is unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, also plagiarized) on the internet. The experience of being #blackintheivory, captured in the hashtag created by Shardé M. Davis and Joy Melody Woods, confirms the persistence of the systemic issues McKay, Painter, and their Black women peers decried decades prior.
When and Where I Enter

Black women’s theorizing remains indispensable to a genealogy of critical thought in the ivory tower and the public sphere as well.

Through collective action, Black women have consistently voiced their opposition to injustice. In a final example that demonstrates how Black women came together publicly and in solidarity with Hill, the group African American Women in Defense of Ourselves published a full-page ad in the New York Times—a $50,000 endeavor that included a statement signed by 1,603 Black women. They wrote: “We speak here because we recognize that the media are now portraying the Black community as prepared to tolerate both the dismantling of affirmative action and the evil of sexual harassment in order to have any Black man on the Supreme Court.” For every public display, private organizing took place. By examining the private letters that led to public intellectualism and investigating the McKay-Painter correspondence as a space for intellectual woodshedding, we see the collective process that preceded individual achievement.

**Mckay Felt the Pressure to Achieve Individually**, as a writer of books, but in truth, this was not her calling. In spite of being crystal clear on Black women’s contributions to the academy, she was less confident about the significance of her contributions as critic. McKay expressed her dissatisfaction with her scholarship whenever she berated herself for failing to complete a second book. The yardstick she used to measure her productivity was the scholarly monograph—a standard common within research institutions but a criterion out of sync with her creative gifts. McKay was a supple scholar with diverse interests, and the incredibly wide-ranging collection of essays she produced during her career reveals her as someone particularly adept at deploying her comprehensive knowledge of the broad reach of Black women’s writing in analyses that spanned literary genre. McKay was more than The Norton Anthology of African American Literature and not just Jean Toomer. Her shorter works challenged traditional systems of academic value and demonstrated her interest in making scholarly expertise available to everyone and in using her academic authority to advance the projects of early-career faculty.

In her introductions, forewords, and afterwords specifically, McKay contextualized, justified, and endorsed the intellectual merits of texts written by Black women (or that featured Black female protagonists) to reclaim Black women’s authority over the literature they authored and the characters they embodied. Slave narratives and other early forms of Black writing may have required authentication from abolitionists, white owners, or “white men of
high social and political esteem,” but by raising the profile of texts she deemed important, McKay chose work out of an act of personal power and academic agency, not a reinforcement of white, elite hierarchies of literary value. In her introduction to Ellen Tarry’s *The Third Door* (1992), for example, and following a conversation with the “80+ yr old red-head I once talked with in NY,” McKay situated Tarry’s autobiography along a continuum of Black women’s self-writing and lauded the narrative for its illustration “of the strength and courage of one woman who defined her own mission in life and, in the face of many obstacles, never failed to engage her commitment.”

At the request of Florence Howe, founding editor of the Feminist Press, McKay wrote introductions to Ann Petry’s *The Narrows*, Marian Anderson’s autobiography *My Lord, What a Morning*, and Mary Church Terrell’s *A Colored Woman in a White World*, books originally published in 1953, 1956, and 1940 but reprinted with McKay’s introductions in 1988, 1993, and 1996, respectively, as part of a book series that introduced “‘lost’ fiction by women writers . . . to a contemporary audience.” The introductions expressed McKay’s appreciation for Petry’s complex and nuanced portrayals of Black women’s subjectivities, her understanding of the motivations behind Anderson’s narrative restraint, and how the Black Women’s Club Movement collided with Du Boisian notions of the Talented Tenth in Terrell’s life story, contextualizing for general readers the significance of these texts beyond the stories they told. McKay’s collaborations with Howe, the feminist editor and former chair of the MLA’s Division on Women’s Studies, yielded essays and first-person accounts that contributed to various facets of the press’s “publishing program” and affirmed McKay’s commitment to women’s studies at large. At Howe’s request, McKay wrote three essays “about her intellectual movement into feminism and particularly into black women’s studies” in 1990, 1995, and 2000. In addition, the coming-of-age commentary in McKay’s afterwords to Jo Sinclair’s *The Changelings* (1985) and Louise Meriwether’s *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1986) gave everyday readers access to literary and feminist insights written in language accessible to a broad readership.

This was important work. With “10,000 copies of *The Changelings* and 30,000 copies of *Daddy*” sold, Howe estimated that during the decades these books have been in print—and accounting for the circulation of used copies and library books—McKay’s essays have reached over 80,000 readers, combined. Even though McKay was ambivalent about her own scholarly achievements, she appreciated the value of using her scholarly authority to raise the profile of texts that were meaningful to her, even if there was little chance that the writing resulting from these efforts would ever elevate her status within academic
circles. McKay’s forewords and introductions to others’ scholarly editions, for example—Marcy Knopf’s *The Sleeper Wakes: Harlem Renaissance Stories by Women* (1993), John Gruesser’s *The Unruly Voice: Rediscovering Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins* (1996), and Sharon Harley and the Black Women’s Collective’s *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work* (2002)—certainly provided crucial historical and cultural context, but they also allowed McKay to lend her academic bona fides and endorse the work of an up-and-coming generation of literary scholars. McKay, then, labored in both macro and micro contexts. As important as it was for her to shepherd the NAAAL, it was equally important for her to do the local work required to advance the careers of others and to make Black literature and Black feminist insights available to readers beyond academe.

McKay was conscious of her legacy, as her correspondence with Painter shows, and her interviews and reflective essays archive her commitment to historiography in field formation. Toward the end of her life, McKay wanted to write an interpretive history of African American literature, “from the Oral Tradition to the Age of Technology.” She never completed this comprehensive history. Instead of writing a history of the field, she recounted her place in it through interviews and other types of first-person accounts. In two interviews, the first, “Charting a Personal Journey: A Road to Women’s Studies,” published in Howe’s *The Politics of Women’s Studies: Testimony from Thirty Founding Mothers* (2002), and the second, “A Love for the Life,” her interview with Donald E. Hall, McKay spoke to a broad audience—those in literary, cultural, and women’s studies—about her early years as a Black woman in the professoriate and how women’s studies enlivened her pedagogy and made her feel at home as a new professor in Madison. Written in an altogether different tone, McKay’s commentary in the *PMLA* Forum on “The Inevitability of the Personal” was not personal. Here, McKay focused on how her individual beliefs existed as part of a “broad-based and inclusive” knowledge system and identified sources of influence through her reading of Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Frederick Douglass. Notwithstanding the restraint of the latter, published in the more mainstream flagship journal of the Modern Language Association (MLA), these pieces bear the imprint of a woman conscious about leaving her trace and contributing her piece to a collective narrative about the profession and the place of women and Black people in it. When we spoke in 2004, she described her legacy this way: “What I’d like my legacy to really be,” is “in the way you treat students, and in the way you encourage people, and the way you remember what it was like, before you became whatever it is that you become. What do you do to help the next generation?”
McKay’s intellectual project was broad in its focus and, remarkably, a place where McKay hid a privately kept personal life in plain sight. McKay published on Black women’s autobiography (“Black Women’s Autobiographies—Literature, History, and the Politics of Self” and “Nineteenth Century Black Women’s Spiritual Autobiographies”); Black theater (“What Were They Saying? Black Women Playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance” and “Black Theatre and Drama in the 1920s: Years of Growing Pains”); Black women writers in general (“Black Women Writers: Revising the Literary Canon” and “Black Women Writers and Critics”); and Zora Neale Hurston (“‘Crayon Enlargements of Life’” and “Race, Gender, and Cultural Context in Zora Neale Hurston’s Dust Tracks on a Road”). These pieces reflect her wide-ranging interests. They also pull back the veil on her thoughts about how race, gender, and age shape how Black women construct the self. Interestingly, when McKay was asked to be forthcoming and offer insight into the personal, say, in her interviews, she could be curiously circumspect; but, when tasked with writing about others, as in the aforementioned essays, she could be incredibly personal. McKay’s Hurston essay is a prime example. In it, McKay refuted criticism that cast Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography (1942) as a victim of its own “lies”—its “evasions and lack of honest self-disclosure, including Hurston’s misrepresentation of the date of her birth”—and proposed that it was more productive to consider, in the words of Barbara Johnson, “Hurston’s strategies rather than her truths.”

We now know that there is reason to believe that when McKay explained, in her Dust Tracks essay, that “Hurston was playing the trickster on all her readers,” she was most likely talking about herself and the trick she was playing on us, too.

**McKay Made Herself Indispensable to** American and African American literary studies through her scholarship and editorial leadership. She also lived out her mission of removing barriers and expanding access by establishing the Bridge Program between the Afro-American Studies Department and the departments of English and history. This program has two origin stories that, when considered together, suggest the idea had been forming slowly over time but would only be executed when the time was right. An early mention of the Bridge Program was the product of a conversation between McKay and William L. Andrews circa 1988, when Andrews left UW-Madison for the University of Kansas. The two discussed an initiative that would “bond a literature part of Afro-Am studies with the literature of teaching in the English department” and provide a Black studies–centered approach to a PhD in English and history. Susan Stanford Friedman re-
called a conversation four years later, following the April 1992 acquittal of four police officers charged with beating Rodney King, during which she and McKay searched for something concrete to do “instead of feeling so angry and helpless.” If the idea began in 1988, it was concretized in 1992, as shown through a series of memos that described how McKay and Friedman, and a “subcommittee of the English Department Ad Hoc Committee on Diversity,” proposed a new program to increase cooperation between English and Afro-American Studies. The proposal had three objectives: first, it aimed to increase cooperation between departments; second, it sought to “facilitate the transition to a Ph.D. program in English . . . for those Afro-American Studies M.A. students who wish to go on in literature”; and third, it aimed to “help the English Department recruit students of color into the Ph.D. program.” As early as her Harvard application, McKay had made clear that she was invested in building the capacity of young people, and with what would be called the Bridge Program, she made sure no opportunity would be off limits, especially for the Black students to whom she remained committed.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the history of the culture of the English Department, there was less resistance to the idea of a Bridge Program than one might think, but executing the plan required flexibility from both faculty in English and faculty in Afro-American Studies. Issues of graduate student funding, teaching assistantships, and course sequencing needed to be worked out. Advance planning and open communication would be key. But it was also the perfect time for such a proposal. English sought to heal from the conflicts that had fractured the faculty in the previous decade, and the institution itself was in the throes of a campus-wide diversity initiative, former UW-Madison chancellor Donna Shalala’s Madison Plan. In addition, there were enough voices within the department, a chorus composed primarily of women, for McKay to have the allies she needed to get English on board. Susanne L. Wofford, former director of graduate studies and now dean of New York University’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study, remembered that by the 1990s, a significant shift had taken place within English, so the battles “were not so intense anymore.” She continued: “I think part of that was because people like Susan [Friedman] and others became more and more prominent so that the notion that this was a small marginalized group of weird people disappeared compared to the notion that this is actually a major, respectable part of academic life.”

McKay’s alliances with white women in English, some she had met as members of the women’s studies group she joined early in her career at
UW-Madison, proved beneficial in building a bridge between departments. This outspoken cohort of English Department feminists—Susan Stanford Friedman, the new chair of the department; Wofford; Susan Bernstein, who recently left UW-Madison for Boston University after twenty-eight years as a specialist in “Victorian Literature and gender studies”; and Deb Brandt, now UW-Madison professor emerita—worked behind the scenes and in casual contexts to garner support for the initiative. Their efforts paid off. The Bridge Program proposal was approved circa 1993, in time for Keisha Watson, who entered the department of Afro-American Studies for graduate study that same year, to become the first official “Bridge” student. In the end, the English Department seemed pleased. “I remember it being a release. I think the English department was relieved that it was happening,” recalled Brandt; Wofford confessed, “I might have very rose-colored glasses, but my memory is that people were pleased with the creation of the Bridge Program, but maybe that’s just because I didn’t listen to people who didn’t like it.”

To learn that the Bridge Program languished with McKay’s passing should come as no surprise given the fact that, from the time the program was first instituted, it seems that McKay had personally negotiated “the parameters and requirements of the program . . . on an ad-hoc basis” with the director of graduate studies. It is likely that in spite of generational shifts within the English Department, McKay maintained almost singular control of the program because of her distrust of an aging group of faculty that not only were committed to a traditional, Western canon but also were limited in their ability to identify talent and assess potential for graduate study because of selection bias, or the likelihood that they would lean toward applicants who presented most like them. McKay’s tight grip saw the program through fragile early years but became a structural liability after her death, when there was no longer a consistent point person to recruit students or oversee the admissions process.

Cherene Sherrard-Johnson stepped in to “continue the bridge program as an important part of Nellie’s legacy” and to make sure that “students who might not otherwise pursue a doctoral degree” saw a path from Afro-American Studies to English. Sherrard-Johnson was hired in 2001, more than two decades after McKay joined the Department of Afro-American Studies as a literature specialist. When Sherrard-Johnson was hired, she received the Anna Julia Cooper Postdoctoral Fellowship, which afforded her time to focus on starting out well at UW-Madison by developing her research profile and completing the writing required for tenure. McKay introduced Sherrard-Johnson to her friends in the field, Thadious M. Davis and William L. An-
drews, for example, who read her work, contacted editors “just to say, ‘Please give this a serious look,’” chaired conference panels that Sherrard-Johnson was on, and “intervened departmentally with service demands” by saying, on Sherrard-Johnson’s behalf, no to service requests so that she “didn’t have to be put in the position of having to say no to the chair about a service commitment early on.”

Even though Sherrard-Johnson was hired through the English department, McKay argued that she “should not have a joint appointment,” since early-career faculty often find themselves with “mixed allegiances” when they serve more than one department.

McKay’s advice was prescient. Sherrard-Johnson became a tenured member of the English Department in 2007 and stepped in to finish McKay’s work with dissertators and to fulfill McKay’s vision of the English Department at UW-Madison as a home for Black literary studies. A decade later, in her first year as director of graduate studies, Sherrard-Johnson “updated and then restarted the dormant MA/PhD bridge program . . . by admitting three new students . . . after several years of no new admits.”

Sherrard-Johnson’s procedural adjustments improved Bridge students’ funding, the climate in English toward Bridge students, and access to specialists. McKay’s personal and professional commitments are inscribed within the Bridge Program, and its longevity is testament both to McKay’s vision and to her investment in a pipeline to the PhD for students interested in Black literary studies. Sherrard-Johnson’s 2001 hiring brought McKay’s vision for the integration of African American literature within departments of English full circle because it marked the moment that the English Department at UW-Madison hired its first African Americanist.

In 2019, a department that was once hostile to Black writing as a field, and to McKay as a Black woman scholar, fulfilled its goal of a cluster hire in global black literatures, which brought four scholars of diasporic Black literatures to the English Department. The search, chaired by Sherrard-Johnson, was initiated, in part, to honor “the legacy of professor Nellie McKay.” McKay, with a vision, had entered the academy; and it was then and there that she transformed it.
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