Half in Shadow

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


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In this new space one can imagine safety without walls, can iterate
difference that is prized but unprivileged, and can
conceive of a third,
if you will pardon the expression, world “already
made for me, both snug
and wide open, with a doorway never needing to be
closed.”
Home.
—TONI MORRISON, “Home”

As a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Nellie Y. McKay built me a home. Not one of bricks and mortar, even though she owned a home that brought her joy. She built me a home on the foundational belief that all that she had started, we were prepared to carry on.

My life, it seems, has been an ongoing process of leaving and returning home. Not to New Jersey, where I grew up, but to the South, where I spent my summers, went to college, and reunited with family. My first visits down South were out of necessity. My parents sent me away so my younger brother could learn to talk (apparently, I did all his talking for him). By summer’s end, he was speaking in full sentences. As adolescents, he and I spent our summers between my Grandma Means’s house in Blair, South Carolina, and with Mommy’s older sister, my Aunt Gladys, in Columbia, South Carolina. My mother was the youngest of eight, and my brother and I were the babies of the bunch, but we tried to hang with the big kids as best we could. My older cousins taught me pitty-pat. We played acey-deucey well past my bedtime. But to get to South Carolina, first my mother would drive us from New Jersey to Baltimore so my Aunt Beulah could carry us the rest of the way. At my feet in the back seat were coolers full of fried chicken.
between white bread, blocks of cheese, and bologna, all because Aunt Beulah’s generation was still “on the bus,” as Daddy would say—so accustomed to the impact of Jim Crow segregation on travel that they left before night had turned to morning with enough food and gas to get them to their destination without stopping. South Carolina was Mommy’s home, but it was also a place where, in the shade of my family tree, I could see myself as one of many. I could know how it feels to come home.

Years later, I was on the road again, this time traveling from Madison, Wisconsin, to Charlotte, North Carolina, for a new job at my alma mater, Johnson C. Smith University (JCSU), and a new life with my fiancé, Edwin. I had fulfilled my graduate school residency requirement and was more than ready to put Madison in my rearview and head toward the new life I had chosen. Nellie was already nervous about me leaving, and if she had had her druthers, I would have stayed in Madison until the dissertation was complete. What I didn’t know then, and what I learned years into my marriage, was that sometime before Ed and I left town, while we were both in the Department of Afro-American Studies but I wasn’t around, Nellie cornered him. The department itself is a set of interconnected hallways, a big rectangle, really, so there’s no place to hide. One big common area. Nellie, easily a head shorter and 100 pounds lighter, pulled Ed aside, looked him squarely in the eye, and told him, “Make sure she finishes.”

I finished and then accepted a tenure-track job at JCSU. I avoided telling Nellie about my job for as long as I could. I knew she respected historically Black colleges and universities (HBCs, as she called them), but I felt something unspoken about the expectations attached to the training I had received. The goal, so I thought, was to get the best job you could—something at an Ivy, a large land-grant Research I, or an elite liberal arts college—someplace highly resourced with a minimal teaching load. And even though teaching at an HBCU was the reason I went to graduate school in the first place, I thought Nellie would be disappointed in me. I told her my plan and without missing a beat she replied, “It’s your life.”

I reflect, now, on professional choices I’ve had the privilege to make—the choice to go, to leave, to find and recreate home—because of Nellie. The freedom to choose is a generational wish. One that I link to my inheritance as a Black woman scholar, and one that I heard, albeit implicitly, in the recitation of my family history during family reunions. As I think about my intellectual legacy, then, I think, too, about my great-great-great-great-grandmother, Jomimmie, who was born in Africa and who died in Fairfield County, South Carolina. My enslaved ancestors were subject to *partus sequitur ventrem*,
wherein children followed the condition of the mother, but the computer algorithm that traces my family tree says otherwise. I am listed as a descendant of Colonel David Provence. But what of Jomimmie and her longing for Africa’s distant shores? For choice? What would she have wished for me?

The home that Morrison imagines in this epigraph is one based on “a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter,” where one can be “both free and situated” within a third space that affords belongingness beyond the binary. When I think of this space and my connection to ancestors familial and intellectual, I imagine routes and roadways, pathways waiting, created in anticipation of my arrival, laid to carry me beyond what I can see. I think of Nellie and the price she paid for me to have privileges both seen and unseen. I am grateful for the space I occupy, the space Nellie and her cohort of Black feminist thinkers bought and paid for with their very lives.

In(to) places that were never mine to begin with, Nellie Y. McKay built me a bridge and made me a home.