Half in Shadow

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CHAPTER FOUR
Crepuscule with Nellie

For years, Nellie Y. McKay lived alone in a beautiful three-story house at 2114 West Lawn Drive in Madison, Wisconsin. After she purchased the 1909 Prairie-style home with money earned from an advance for The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (NAAAL), she spent the next several years renovating and decorating it to her liking. Appointed with hardwood floors and rich oak detailing, her house received the same care and attention McKay put into her clothes. Her personal style—expressed in the form of beautiful scarves, mud cloth, and stylish sweaters—reflected her inner elegance and separated her from her white male colleagues, who, she quipped, didn’t start paying attention to their appearance, to really dressing, until Black women showed up in predominately white academic spaces. McKay’s West Lawn Drive home was full of beautiful art and antiques, the latter of which she often found when she and her daughter, Patricia M. Watson, went antiquing in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, during their regular visits to the National Mustard Museum.

McKay’s home represented quintessential Nellie: welcoming and personable with clearly defined limits. She greeted visitors on her screened-in porch and welcomed them into spaces on the first floor: her living and dining rooms, kitchen, powder room, and den. McKay kept the upper floors, floors that housed her bedroom and study, to herself. Self-admittedly “selective about sharing [her] house with others,” she created a home that symbolized the boundaries of her private life and professional self. West Lawn Drive provided McKay with privacy, protection, and a respite from hostile academic spaces. Consequently, she carefully controlled the flow of persons in and out of her doors. McKay treated her home as she treated her life: she maintained strict boundaries and differentiated between public and private areas to clearly define what was generally accessible and what was certainly off limits. Even McKay’s house hunting reflected her priorities. She wanted character and enough space for her guests to sleep on another floor: “I no longer wanted to sleep on the same floor as the ‘public’ areas of my living space.”

As much as she would come to enjoy her home—which she called “The Barn” because of the appearance of her detached garage—at an earlier time,
in the mid-1980s, McKay was certain that “home ownership would never lie in her future” because of the upkeep and money homes required. She had deduced, after visiting friends in a home that she was surprised stood upright given its want of repair, that “owning property means investments of time, energy, and financial resources that I don’t want to face.” McKay changed her tune less than a decade later, explaining to Nell Irvin Painter “that owning a home was the greatest happiness she held outside of her academic career.” It may have been “only a house,” but “outside of work” it gave McKay “indescribable joy.” McKay was highly regarded as a member of the Madison community, but she was also well aware that the professoriate, as a space, was not her own. So, McKay cultivated her home as a place where she could live in peace and with an agency not consistently replicated on campus or in her professional work.

McKay’s house was a sanctuary beyond the academy, where not even the sanctity of her office could prevent invasions of her space. In just one example of power and privilege (not to mention bad manners), in the days when McKay was still untenured, a white male colleague barged into her office, ignoring the fact that she was already engaged in conversation with a Black woman colleague. As McKay explained in “A Troubled Peace: Black Women in the Halls of the White Academy,” the opening essay to Lois Benjamin’s Black Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils (1997), the man “stopped at the door and, without apology, pushed his way past my colleague. Before either she or I realized what had happened, he preempted her presence in our space to make a request of me.” The intrusion suggests that the communicative space occupied by McKay and her colleague, notably another Black woman, did not automatically warrant the respect of outsiders, in this case a white man. Later in her career, McKay felt more comfortable establishing boundaries, but in this instance she was shocked into silence, gagged by her pretenure status and constrained, perhaps, by respectability. Worse still, in her office, no less, she lacked, if only for a moment, the power to reinforce boundaries. In this episode, the “white male colleague’s behavior exemplifies academic cultures which deny black women the right to occupy space.” This was a climate issue, to be sure, one that encapsulated how Black women were marginalized when attempting to diversify academic spaces never meant for them in the first place.

Published nearly fifteen years after her 1983 essay “Black Woman Professor—White University,” McKay’s “A Troubled Peace” returned to the tension between how Black women expected to be treated and how white universities responded to their presence, but with a twist. In the first essay
McKay chronicled “the difficulties and discomforts” she and “other black women” experienced as early-career faculty members at historically white institutions. In the second essay, which was published in a collection compiled by Lois Benjamin to extend the work begun during the seminal “Black Women in the Academy: Defending Our Name, 1894–1994” conference at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), McKay took on the issue of institutional space in a way that eerily anticipated the cost of a life of the mind, particularly for Black women professors at white universities. In “A Troubled Peace,” McKay did more than praise the persistence of Black women professors; she considered the unanticipated costs associated with academic life. In her original conclusion, McKay proffered that “to be a black woman professor in a white university is difficult and challenging, but it is exciting and rewarding, and black women professors like it here. We aim to stay!”; in “A Troubled Peace,” she added, “At the time, I did not ask, At what price?”

As a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, McKay complained of overwork yet gladly made time for her students, who she was happy to let take advantage of her open-door policy. She helped them work through issues both personal and professional and guided Lisa Woolfork as she became, in 2000, the first of McKay’s advisees to earn a PhD in English at UW-Madison. McKay also executed two initiatives during this time. The Tom Shick Memorial Fund was instituted in memory of a much-beloved member of the Afro-American Studies Department, and the Bridge Program created PhD pipelines between Afro-American Studies and the departments of English and history. The publication of the NAAAL in 1997 increased McKay’s visibility, and subsequently, in 1989, while the NAAAL was in progress, McKay declined an offer to join the faculty at Harvard University. When Harvard made its bid, Congresswoman Donna Shalala, then chancellor at UW-Madison, retained McKay by giving her what was, at the time, the largest raise in the institution’s history. For Shalala, this was precisely what one needed to “put together” to “retain a star.” The Harvard offer elevated McKay’s status, but the retention move came at a cost: rumors of resentment circulated and some Afro-American Studies colleagues took exception to the attention McKay received, especially because the success of the department had always resulted from collective hard work.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, McKay had made her mark on the American academy, mostly from behind the scenes. The majority of McKay’s graduate students from the 1990s and before had landed jobs, and she prepared to launch those who entered UW-Madison’s graduate programs in the
late 1990s and early 2000s. Requests for letters of recommendation, tenure letters, and promotion letters came pouring in, and, according to colleagues, McKay wrote them all.\textsuperscript{13} In April 2003, alongside Craig Werner and with help from her graduate students, especially David LaCroix who managed the enterprise,\textsuperscript{14} McKay coordinated a massive symposium on W. E. B. Du Bois, which featured an interdisciplinary slate of participants and a keynote from Pulitzer Prize–winning Du Bois scholar David Levering Lewis.

But by the early part of the twenty-first century, her commitment to building what she called her “project”—which originally included the recovery and publication of Black women’s texts, the development of Black feminist methods of analysis, and the codification of Black literary studies, but which now also involved the establishment of Black PhD pipelines and career support for junior faculty—had begun to take a profound toll on her body. A decade older than many knew, McKay wrestled with a physical decline that typically accompanies old age. Just as the seeds she had sown were taking root, just as her efforts to establish PhD pipelines, make Black literature accessible, and contribute Black feminist analytical frameworks were breaking ground, the stress on her body made her increasingly ambivalent about her career choices and their physical costs.

The daily letters McKay once wrote to Nell Irvin Painter slowed to a trickle. For decades, McKay had set aside time at the start of each day to write her friend a letter. With the rise of the internet, email, and reasonably priced long-distance phone calls, the frequency of their correspondence diminished. The advent of electronic communication meant that letters once central to how they communicated with each other, encouraged each other, and challenged each other were sent less and less frequently. In the mornings, there were fewer letters addressed to Painter in the administrative assistant’s out-box. Instead, there were “recommendations by the dozen” and “tenure evaluations” for early-career faculty members who needed a senior scholar of McKay’s stature to evaluate their scholarship and write in support of their tenure dossiers.\textsuperscript{15} The responsibility she felt to the field was a weight her body struggled to bear.

\textbf{THE LONG HALLWAY STRETCHED OUT} before her. Fluorescent lights, disinfectant, and those walls. Those neutral, sterile walls. Slowly, she made her way back to the waiting room. Sleepwalking was more like it. Feet moving, body upright, mind elsewhere. Perhaps her thoughts drifted back to an earlier time, when all she needed to worry about was whether the chef had remembered to keep her entrée salt-free. Perhaps she thought no further
than the examination room, where only moments before, she had learned that her indigestion was not indigestion at all. Perhaps she thought of nothing and instead felt the heaviness of her legs, her slender limbs weighed down by the burden of what was finally an accurate diagnosis. McKay had always been petite and now was particularly so, her already small frame made all the more slight by the food she denied herself to avoid aggravating recent digestive issues. But at a distance, she appeared especially physically ill-equipped to make it the rest of the way to the waiting room, where Susan Friedman waited to hear, for certain, what was ailing her friend. Slowly walking. Head down. Until McKay lifted her gaze, looked her friend in the eye and whispered.

“It’s very bad.”

Her fatigue had been overwhelming. Sure, McKay was prone to overwork and exhaustion, but this time was different. During the summer of 2004, she found herself bone-tired and experiencing severe digestive issues. In desperate need of relief, she visited her physician, who offered anemia as the diagnosis. A follow-up confirmed that she had suffered a small stroke in November 2003, about a year and a half prior, and an endoscopy revealed abrasions on her stomach. Her symptoms improved slightly after she was placed on two medications: a proton pump inhibitor and an iron supplement. Then, suddenly, the anemia worsened. Alarmed by her ten- to fifteen-pound weight loss, doctors ordered CT scans. The first CT scan, of her abdomen, revealed a tumor on her liver; a biopsy confirmed the cancer in January 2005. Immediately after receiving her diagnosis, McKay reached out to Meg Gaines, the founder of the Center for Patient Partnerships, an advocacy group that amplifies the voices of patients so they have agency when navigating the healthcare system. McKay learned about the center from Susan Bernstein, a faculty colleague from English, and Robin Douthitt, a retired dean of Madison’s School of Human Ecology. Gaines’s advocacy would prove indispensable, because before long, McKay’s exhaustion was accompanied by shortness of breath. A second CT scan, this time of her lungs, revealed that both had spots. Doctors confirmed the worst: her dry cough was a symptom of metastasis. The cancer had already spread. On 21 February 2005, McKay was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer.

While Gaines coordinated McKay’s care by scheduling appointments, securing second opinions, and investigating clinical trials, McKay assembled her students to share news of her cancer diagnosis. She brought them ice cream. She knew receiving the news would be hard for them because sharing it had been hard for her. Their eyes wet with tears. Their hearts heavy

Crepuscule with Nellie 171
with sadness. Their lungs empty of air. Their throats, already, choked with grief.

A year later, when she was gone, the sadness remained. It wasn’t just faculty in the department who mourned; the space mourned, too. “If the walls and the chairs could cry out,” imagined former graduate student Eric Pritchard, “I’m sure they would have because she just meant so much. She was the identity of the department. It was her. It was her.”21 And when she was gone, it was never quite the same.

FROM HER EARLY DAYS AT UW-MADISON, McKay experienced a wide array of physical and psychological maladies that seemed to result from the pressures of completing her Jean Toomer book and starting out well as a faculty member. First, there were the dizzy spells. Then depression. And anxiety.22 Finally, a psychotherapist provided her with documentation that would have secured her a semester-long leave prior to her tenure review. She opted not to take it because it was too risky: “I feel that I have to anticipate everything that can be used against me, especially because I don’t feel that I’m dealing with people who really like me—too many middle aged white men who have their own set of hang-ups which I’m sure they’d just as soon get rid of by showing this black woman from Harvard where to get off.”23 Anticipating backlash from her colleagues at the start of her time at UW-Madison, McKay decided not to follow doctor’s orders.

Later, she learned to manage her blood pressure by adhering to a strict low-sodium diet. Then, weakness on her right side led doctors to believe that she may have had a stroke.24 As time went on, she entertained less and less. Aging was certainly a factor, but her work schedule didn’t help. She rose daily at 5:20 a.m. and hit the office until the evening, returning home only to eat and to sleep. McKay understood that her field-forming efforts required her constant attention; otherwise, “her life’s work” might begin to “crumble around her.”25 As her career progressed, she was working, more and more, to fortify the borders of Black literary studies, investing time and effort by mentoring graduate students and assisting the next generation of Black literature scholars however she could. McKay was building an intellectual home for the next generation just as her body, the foundation, was beginning to give way.

Committing intense effort within so many different domains—research and writing, institution building, teaching and mentoring—made McKay tired and prone to mistakes. In one instance, after running into Herman Beavers at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association (MLA),
McKay invited the newly tenured faculty member from the University of Pennsylvania to speak to her graduate students. McKay was one of the field-forming faculty members whom Beavers “had come up under in the 80s,” and he was delighted to help in whatever way he could. “Nellie, I’ll do anything for you,” he responded when asked by McKay to speak, and she promised to get back to him with details related to his visit before long. They set a date, but a week prior to his planned day of arrival, Beavers had neither plane ticket nor itinerary. “She still hadn’t contacted me with any arrangements, so she called me on this Saturday, it was the day before I was supposed to leave to come to Madison.” McKay converted an unused ticket for Beavers’s travel, and he arrived in plenty of time to give a talk, meet with McKay’s graduate students, and enjoy dessert at her home afterward. The graduate students were none the wiser, completely unaware of the last-minute maneuvers executed to correct McKay’s original oversight. One can only imagine how many administrative balls she had in the air, given that this one nearly dropped.

McKay would drift off to sleep during talks. Everyone in English and Afro-American Studies knew how overextended she was, so faculty and students responded gracefully to moments when, from her seat in the front row, her eyes would close and her head would bow, as if in prayer, heavy with exhaustion. No one roused Nellie. McKay had already been thinking about the wear and tear on her body, and in reflections published as part of Florence Howe’s The Politics of Women’s Studies: Testimony from 30 Founding Mothers (2000), she noted: “So, while I take joy and satisfaction in my role in the project to which many of us committed ourselves three decades ago, I yearn for less: for my own time to rest from the weariness of continuous overextension—the relentless demands on my time. Like others, I see wonderful achievements but only at the cost of extremely heavy tolls on the well-being of the self, on personal relationships and health.”

In the early part of the twenty-first century, and after over two decades at UW-Madison, the length of her academic career, McKay thought more and more about the price she had paid to live the life that she wanted.

To what extent McKay’s professional commitments and physical maladies impacted her scholarship is anybody’s guess. As early as the 1990s, McKay and Painter exchanged several letters that discussed, in part, what the latter saw as the declining quality of McKay’s work. One of the recurring themes in the McKay-Painter correspondence was their workload: there were tenure letters to write, theses and dissertations to advise, lessons to prepare, students to mentor, administrative responsibilities to fulfill, and research to undertake. It was this final category that troubled Painter. She
Began her 6 May 1990, letter with two paragraphs, one that summarized her concern and another that offered a solution:

Dear Nellie,

I wanted to say a few last things to you about your working, then I promise to let it alone—at least until I get too alarmed to keep my peace again. I’m deeply worried that the quality of your work is suffering, as you rush about from one chore to another, never stopping to do the background reading you need to keep current or to let your brains rest so they can think creatively. Think about the exciting work you were doing a couple of years ago, particularly when you were at Harvard last time, and what you do now in a rush. My worst fear is that you will get a reputation for superficial thinking because you haven’t taken the time to reflect on deeper meanings of the topics you take on. You will say, “ah, I was on leave then, and I can’t be on leave all the time.” And your public won’t know leave years from nothing and will judge you on the quality of your output, from leave years and rushed years, all.

I also realize that you get great satisfaction from being in your office and seeing a lot of people. In the past, when I’ve suggested that you work at home where you’d have peace and quiet, you said that you’d get lonesome. So how about a compromise next year when you’re on leave and want to write seriously? Consider this: working at home in the morning for several hours, say, until noon or two p.m., then coming to the office in the afternoon to pick up mail and see people. This will give you the quiet in which to read and think, plus a daily immersion in the life that nourishes you emotionally.31

Painter wanted to help but also understood that the topic might be a touchy one. Early in their correspondence, the two had agreed that nothing was off limits—and that becomes apparent here, where a sensitive issue was fair game. However, Painter’s assessment would not be the final word. In her response, McKay differentiated between not producing and producing poor work and proposed the former as a more accurate assessment of her publishing profile at present.

It is hard to read McKay’s response to Painter’s letter for all that may have been said between the lines. In McKay’s reply, she admitted to not writing but rejected Painter’s assertion that her writing was superficial. She listed her work thus far and employed a cataloging technique that was typical of how she responded when she felt overextended:
I’m not sure what work of mine you are worried about in terms of quality. As I recollect, I have not been writing much of anything for the past three years, because, as you know, I have not had time to do so. I did the essay on Jarena Lee and Rebecca Jackson while I was at Harvard ’86–’87; I did the rape essay, which I think is pretty good, and only one other essay in the last 18 months—the one on Hurston’s *Their Eyes* which I did for Michigan. That’s an essay I hope to do some revisions on at a later date, but I don’t think the Michigan version is bad at all. Otherwise, I am not writing, and have not been writing for the past year outside of Dictionary entries which require no research. I have not even done book reviews in these three years. I have been afraid of what not writing could mean for my career, but not that I have written anything in the last 3 years that can be called superficial.  

This exchange named the sites of joy for McKay—being in community, producing work that brought self-satisfaction—but it also staged the collision between desire and obligation, between institutional pressures and personal values. McKay seems to have been experiencing midcareer malaise, the period following tenure and promotion when faculty are supposed to “feel empowered, energized, and well poised to capitalize on their occupational privilege” but instead experience “misdirection, uncertainty, ambivalence, and even decline.” The ambivalence McKay experienced at midcareer resulted from the tension she felt between the work she wanted to do and the type of research expected of those at research-intensive institutions.

Around this time, McKay sketched plans for a second book, but they never took off. Not because she was incapable, but because she made professional choices that prioritized other things. There was the book of interviews inspired by her published conversation with Toni Morrison; a book on autobiography; and, following the publication of the *NAAAL*, “An Interpretive History of African American Literature.” These projects stalled indefinitely. What McKay did, and what she was good at, was writing influential essays and project endorsements through introductions, afterwords, and the like. Unfortunately, within research-intensive academic circles, short essays and introductions do not “the big book” make. So, for all of McKay’s unflinching assessments regarding the profession and work to help launch careers, this did little to advance her profile within the profession, which framed success in limited and individualistic terms. Her fear of “what not writing could mean for my career” was well-founded, and in this reflection,
published in the *African American Review* memorial issue dedicated to McKay, her longtime friend and colleague William L. Andrews reconsidered McKay’s contributions as he explained why monographs mattered and how not having a second may have negatively impacted McKay’s endowed chair prospects:

In our profession, we tend to lionize those whose contribution to knowledge is epitomized by what I’ve always called “the big book,” the single-authored critical volume that changes the way we think or evaluate big issues, major writers, central movements, defining genres of African American literature, and so forth. Nellie never wrote that kind of big book. Few of us do. In the last years of Nellie’s life I joined a number of her friends and colleagues in writing recommendation letters in support of Nellie’s candidacy for major endowed chairs at Wisconsin. Nellie never won any of those chairs. Why?34

McKay’s feelings of inadequacy ran so deep that she sometimes found it hard to feel good about her friends’ successes. One day, she and Susan Stanford Friedman were “standing in the main office of the English department.”35 Friedman, who had recently published her “second critical book,” *Penelope’s Web: Gender, Modernity, H. D.’s Fiction* (1990), showed it to McKay.36 McKay was unable to celebrate with her friend. She responded: “I don’t have the same book.”37 At that time, Friedman recalled, “[Nellie] couldn’t say, ‘How wonderful, Susan. That’s great.’”38 McKay’s feelings of failure, brought on by comparing herself with others, ran too deep. Then there was Lawrence L. Langer, McKay’s colleague from her early days at Simmons University who “lost touch with her for a while” but who reached out again once he found out she was ill.39 He remembered the call to her home, while she was battling cancer, proceeding something like this: “‘Nellie, this is Larry.’ And do you know what she said? She said, ‘Larry, I never wrote another book.’ I said, ‘Nellie, that’s not why I called you to yell at you about not writing another book,’ but that must have been on her mind.”40 McKay’s cancer brought about a strange mix of pride and regret, feelings healthcare advocate Meg Gaines attributed to her terminal diagnosis: “When somebody gets a diagnosis that they think they’re going to die from,” she explained, “the first thing that comes up for them really are the regrets and things you might have to say you regret.”41

With her colleagues, McKay expressed regret for not having published a second book, but with Gaines, her regrets were wrapped in the ambivalence she felt about personal sacrifice and her life choices. There was never any one conversation between the two that encompassed all that McKay had to
say, but Gaines remembered the accumulation of moments when McKay talked about “needing to be younger than she was and needing not to have a family and needing to be pretty fleet-footed and unattached and uncomplicated, and wanting to explain to me what the environment was like back then for her, and for African Americans generally, and African American women in particular in academia, and what it would take and this and that.”

When McKay was sick, Gaines explained, she was “oracular, visionary,” and through these winding, circuitous narratives, would link together events from fifty years prior through “these almost free associations.” Since Gaines didn’t know McKay before the cancer struck, she didn’t know whether McKay’s nonlinear musings were reflective of who she had always been. Even without this prior knowledge, it was clear to Gaines that during these moments, McKay took advantage of the fact that there was “no danger” in telling Gaines the truth. No judgment. Just the discretion of a lawyer and advocate who would speak only when given permission to do so. Never one to commit to totalizing assessments, even in the face of a terminal diagnosis, regret was not all that McKay thought about when she pondered her life.

McKay also felt overwhelming pride in all she had accomplished. When she talked about the NAAAL, reminiscing on the collaborations and her achievements, it was clear to Gaines that “she was proud of what she had done.” McKay conveyed a sense of self-satisfaction when she thought back to being hired as a tenure-track faculty member at UW-Madison. She had broken down barriers, she had “really made it,” and although Gaines said she “can’t possibly recreate the words [McKay] would use to describe [her accomplishments],” McKay radiated a special energy when she talked about it and how much it meant to her that she had been hired at UW-Madison after “going back to Harvard as, in a sense, an adult student, having had already a life in some way and then getting hired and needing to say that her age was younger.”

In these moments, McKay shifted her attention away from cancer and any assumption that, in the words of disability scholar Therí Pickens, “the focal point for the patient must be the illness.” Instead, McKay reveled in the joy she felt in her exchanges with Gaines, the interpersonal moments when she was more than her diagnosis. For example, there was almost always a coy smile that peeked through whenever McKay mentioned her age, and when Gaines tried to figure out which one of the birth dates on her paperwork was the right one, McKay would “smile at you and she’d say she’s certainly not the first person to make herself younger.” McKay was clear on her legacy, even if she felt conflicted about the cost of her choices. She was not ambivalent about her community.
service, however, and although this labor remained in the shadow of her public accomplishments, a closer look at this work reveals a particularly tender and compassionate side of McKay.

Extensive community service, especially that which never showed up on her curriculum vitae, reminds us that McKay never forgot relevancy as a Black studies core value or what it was like to be young and capable yet resource poor. Her papers overflow with various and sundry requests—to write tenure letters, to review African American and women's studies programs, to give a talk to this or that community organization—and early in her career, McKay responded to requests on an ad hoc basis instead of prioritizing them based on a particular set of guiding principles. For example, in 1979, she volunteered at the Fox Lake Prison, a medium-security men's prison in Fox Lake, Wisconsin. Then, in 1980, Cheryl Peterson, the youth coordinator of Madison’s YWCA, asked McKay to consult on a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant she was writing. If awarded, the funding would support the production of short plays about historical Black women. McKay agreed and, in the reference letter she submitted on behalf of Peterson's application, confirmed her willingness to serve “as a resource person in its implementation.”

From time to time, McKay did say no. In 1982 McKay declined Ralph Johnson’s request to record her Introduction to Afro-American Literature course for a statewide radio broadcast (she cited her mixed-methods pedagogy and large class size as reasons why broadcasting from her class wouldn’t work), but she became a mainstay on Wisconsin Public Radio in 1998, a short time after the NAAAL hit bookshelves, and on the radio she shared, with the listening audience, her knowledge of “writers like Toni Morrison, Phillis Wheatley, and Harriet Jacobs.” McKay had a gift for radio and enjoyed the medium, contributing “Being Poor” to the Madison radio show What’s the Word? in 1998. That same year, McKay joined the MLA’s Radio Committee, a professional organization that, according to her CV, she served on until her death. By the end of her career, it was clear that she privileged opportunities to interact with adult learners, especially those for whom the ivory tower had previously been just a castle in the air.

The radio democratized her voice among a broader public; teaching in UW-Madison’s Odyssey Project and College Days program made McKay’s teaching accessible to an audience of curious adults who were probably a lot like she was when she went to college at thirty-six. With Odyssey, McKay taught “humanities classes for adult students facing economic barriers to college” and helped single parents and those who had struggled with “home-
lessness, drug and alcohol addiction, incarceration, depression, and domestic abuse” to be better “advocates for their children” and live better lives for themselves.54 During the summer, McKay taught in the College Days program, an “education vacation” sponsored by UW-Madison’s Extension Division that gave participants the opportunity to “experience college life” by residing in dorms and being taught by faculty.55 McKay taught classes on autobiography and W. E. B. Du Bois56 to rave reviews: “Another hit!,” “Another well-received seminar!,”57 wrote Bonnie Hutchins, Extension Program outreach coordinator, in a letter thanking McKay for her participation.

McKay’s CV included the requisite teaching, research, and service activities in the form of teaching appointments, books and articles, and advisory boards and professional organizations, but it was incomplete because it omitted the invisible labor that made her intellectual work relevant to surrounding communities and to the public at large. This was not work McKay did to elevate her standing in elite spaces; this was work led by an inner compass that set as her true north the needs of individuals who reminded her of who she had been before Hollis Presbyterian Church, before Queens College, and before Harvard. She worked with these groups because she was sympathetic to where participants had been yet hopeful about where they could go.

The “second book” is a standard measure of productivity at research-intensive institutions such as the University of Wisconsin–Madison, but by focusing solely on McKay’s unwritten second “big” book and her despair in not writing one, we risk overlooking the ways she used other types of writing to influence the profession. Her provocative invited PMLA essay “Naming the Problem That Led to the Question ‘Who Shall Teach African American Literature?’; Or, Are We Ready to Disband the Wheatley Court?” was, at once, a bold statement on the state of the pipeline problem and a deft assessment of the essentialism that drives how institutions understand who should and should not teach Black literature as well as what Black literary scholars are and are not expected to teach. McKay probed “three critical problems”: “the insufficiency of the black PhD pipeline, the efforts to discourage white graduate students from exploring black literature, and untrained white scholars’ undertaking of scholarship in black literature.”58 With vision, wisdom, and clarity of thought, McKay’s PMLA article exemplified her ability, as an essayist, to assess and poignantly evaluate the state of the field.

McKay’s essay reintroduced issues brought up earlier and elsewhere by Barbara T. Christian, Ann duCille, and Hortense J. Spillers, for example, regarding the elision of Black women from the fields they had taken great risks to form. Together, these women defied the field’s tendency to “so
quickly forget the recent past”; McKay, like her colleagues, would demand that the profession remember. In *White Scholars/African American Texts* (2005), Lisa Long compiled essays that responded to McKay’s *PMLA* call by considering the role of identity politics and embodied diversity in determining the most “authentic” professors of Black literature. Long’s book, however, was a stunning achievement in another way. Organizationally, Long foregrounded McKay’s “Naming the Problem” essay by reproducing the full text early on and then following with essays that documented, in no uncertain terms, the proliferation of McKay’s ideas—specifically, how they generated new ways of thinking about pedagogy, authority, and authenticity. As Long’s text grappled with whiteness and a range of other positionalities meeting along “a grid of racialized and sexualized, as well as gendered and nationalized, axes of identification,” McKay’s essay was given pride of place both organizationally and conceptually. As the essay from which all others flowed, it was more than “raw material” for others, invoked without citation; in Long’s text, it was the primary source, a critical touchpoint to be referenced, cited, and named.

McKay also left behind a “bench by the road”—a commemorative marker to memorialize that which otherwise goes unmarked—in her work with the Toni Morrison Society and through her mentoring of its founder, Carolyn Denard. Denard was one of the young PhDs McKay touched and guided. After graduating from Jackson State University and receiving a master of arts in teaching (MAT) from Indiana University, Denard earned her PhD in English from Emory University. Court-ordered desegregation had forced her to attend the all-white high school in West Point, Mississippi, an experience that returned to Denard’s mind when she chose to write her dissertation on Black communities, cultural consciousness, and cultural loss in Morrison’s work. Werner Sollors introduced Denard to McKay, and the women, through their commitment to Morrison, became forever connected.

In 1992, Denard attended the American Literature Association (ALA) conference only to find that there was no Morrison Society. “That can’t be,” she thought, and took the administrative steps to establish bylaws and tap officers to serve. McKay would be an ideal board member, but Denard was uncertain: “I knew that she was busy and had many other obligations, and as I began to acknowledge as much during the conversation, Nellie stopped me and said, ‘If it has to do with Toni, I’ll do it.’” For the next twelve years, McKay was a board member of the Toni Morrison Society. Once the Society was established, membership exploded almost overnight. When Morrison won the Nobel Prize in Literature just five months after the Society was
founded, it “quickly grew from a small body of devoted Morrison scholars in the United States to an international literary society of more than 600 members.” A “standard-bearer” who served as a role model for newly minted PhDs such as Denard, McKay, “in her quiet way,” positioned Denard as a leading Morrison scholar. At McKay’s request, Denard contributed to the MLA-sponsored *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison* (1997). Denard serves as board chair of the Society to this day.

Denard acknowledged McKay’s influence on her career, but Black women critics, as a group, are not typically acknowledged for their intellectual impact. Ignoring Black women’s intellectual labor not only skews intellectual provenance, or how the proliferation of ideas can be traced on the basis of who cites whom, but the accumulation of constant slights also has a material effect on Black women, their spirits, and their bodies. In “Salvation Is the Issue,” Myisha Priest counted the costs of the seemingly unquantifiable impact stress has on Black women in the academy, specifically how the invisibility of Black women’s intellectual contributions leads to psychic and physical distress. Nell Irvin Painter, who is cited toward the end of Priest’s piece, asked, “How many times have our names not appeared where they should in Scholars’ [sic] footnotes? How many times have our books been overlooked—not even considered—for prizes?” Painter continued, Black women “live with a strange kind of invisibility that minimizes us as scholars and allows others to neglect the content of our thought. Living with that kind of marginalization can do bad things to one’s health.” Case in point: Barbara T. Christian. Toward the end of her life, Christian found words to describe what she felt in her body because of her “disappointment with the direction black cultural work was taking,” specifically the vociferous attacks on affirmative action, the steady decrease in Black student enrollment, and the systematic dismantling of Black studies programs—the original site of Black feminist and Black literary field formation. “When her cancer was still undiagnosed,” wrote Priest, “[Christian] walked around with her hand pressed against her heart, where the pain seemed to originate. . . . ‘My heart is broken,’ she said, months and months before she was diagnosed. ‘That is why I’m dying.’”

In the midst of disappointment and heartbreak, such as that expressed by Christian, published scholarship and unpublished ephemera offered “living evidence of a spiraling chain of black women intellectuals whose work,” again in the words of Priest, “has been the saving of our spiritual, intellectual, and cultural lives.” Black women scholars “made and broke narrative” to make worlds for future generations; and in their day and time, they
were, to one another, that somebody when “you don’t have anybody.” This fax, sent from McKay to Christian on 19 April, just two months before Christian’s death, on 25 June 2000, shows one way they expressed love and support for each other:

April 19, 2000
For: Barbara Christian
From: Nellie McKay

Dearest Barbara,
A long time ago, before we met and learned each other’s faces, I met you in your work that helped me across the finish line toward the life I wanted for myself. For that, I owe you a thanks too large for words.

In the now, since that long ago, we have loved each other as colleagues, friends, cohorts and fellow travelers along a path that has been full of hard patches but also of great joys. And although most often apart, we have shared the difficult and the good times, each of us always knowing that the other was always there.

So, in words inadequate to the task at hand, because I know that you will read my heart and understand, I say:

For all that you have given to me and countless others, I offer gratitude for your life as a warrior and for the blessings of who you are and will always be to and for each of us who know you.

With all my love and many hugs across the miles, absent yet present always,
Nellie

McKay’s commitment to cultivating close and loving interpersonal relationships enacted an ethics of care that allowed her to enrich the lives of others in ways that had nothing to do with the standard metrics used to evaluate professional contributions to the professoriate. She found satisfaction in doing relevant service work and in putting her gifts as a teacher to good use. Since the white academy could never be her home, she built a third home in the academy through Black women’s studies and erected a bridge to a new collaborative space where Black women scholars could find comfort and camaraderie, restoration, healing, and joy.

When McKay’s cancer treatment required her to accept intimate care in ways she never had before, her home came to symbolize the dissolu-
tion of boundaries between private and public maintained throughout her life. With each visit from a campus colleague or a West Lawn neighbor, the line separating private and public became more fluid. The treatment made McKay weak and tired—not the tired “because you hadn’t had a lot of sleep. It was a very different, sick, kind of miserable tiredness” —so she accepted food and company from those who stepped in to care for her whenever her daughter, Patricia M. Watson, was at home in St. Louis. The four or five times a year neighbor and English Department colleague David Zimmerman stepped in to help McKay put “salt in the water softener” or move “something in the house” turned into something more systematic once Susan Stanford Friedman, McKay’s longtime colleague from English and Women’s Studies, helped to coordinate McKay’s care. Zimmerman started visiting on a regular basis, sitting with McKay, asking about her family, and gossiping about colleagues (not the local ones, of course!). He often wondered whether he was really wanted there. One day, he got his answer. “I went down there because it was neighborly, and I cared for Nellie and it was on my own initiative, but I wasn’t quite sure what she wanted.” Once, when the conversation lagged, McKay, in clarifying candor, turned to him and said, “Okay, you can go now.” He wouldn’t need to wonder. Within a space where she derived energy and agency, McKay was perfectly capable of defining boundaries on her own.

McKay was not demonstrative in her affections but soon became more comfortable being on the receiving end of her friends’ expressions of care. West Lawn Drive had the reputation of being “a very particular Madison neighborhood,” a community unto itself, where everybody was in everybody else’s business—but in a good way. Because she didn’t drive, McKay had for a long time benefited from such an insular community. The West Lawn community went from assisting McKay with periodic trips to Menards, the local home improvement store, to providing communal care when nurse neighbor Lisa Cappelli—who lived across the street, taught nursing at the nearby Madison College School of Nursing, and, most important, “was also a hospice nurse”—stepped in to lend a hand. Cappelli assisted with technical matters: she visited regularly and helped McKay manage the PICC line that had been inserted in her upper arm to administer her treatments without repeatedly inserting needles.

Cappelli and McKay met in early 2005, shortly after McKay’s cancer diagnosis. “My friend, Meg, called me,” Cappelli recalled, “and asked me, ‘Do you know your neighbor across the street, Nellie?’ Well, I did know her, in a way. I used to observe her from my living room window, getting in and out
of a cab that she often took to campus, or going out in the morning to pick up her *New York Times* or to look over her garden. But at that time, I did not know who she was or what she did. I mainly thought she looked like a quiet and gentle and dignified person. There was always something about Nellie that I felt drawn to.”

To test the waters and see if McKay would be interested in talking to her “about her illness and care,” Cappelli left a “note in the sleeve of Nellie’s *New York Times*” and waited for a reply. McKay called and the two met. After talking for about an hour, during which time Cappelli answered McKay’s questions about her “experience as a hospice nurse” and helped her to understand what to expect, McKay accepted Cappelli’s help. Their “relationship was very trusting from the start.” Cappelli “felt a strong bond with Nellie right away and I believe [McKay] would say the same.”

For a year, Cappelli “went to [McKay’s] home twice a day to flush her line, change her dressing, and check on her.” If Cappelli went in the morning, she would wake McKay and “help her down the stairs”; when she went in the evening, she “helped [McKay] up to her bedroom.” During the day, when she let herself into McKay’s house, Cappelli would see McKay “sitting in the same chair in her living room, with books and the newspaper on the table next to her.” Chemotherapy days were different. Cappelli would “often find [McKay] curled up in her chair sleeping. She looked like a little bird.” Some nights, McKay struggled. In the evenings when McKay “was having a difficult time, [Cappelli] went to check on her” and, if McKay “was feeling particularly vulnerable,” Cappelli would spend the night: “We developed a tender intimacy over the time we spent together.”

Cappelli was the central source of McKay’s in-home care, but former colleagues such as College of Letters and Science dean Phillip R. Certain would stop by whenever McKay had the strength to entertain visitors. Certain brought McKay “broths and soups and things like that that she could eat” because the chemotherapy destroyed her taste buds and all but eliminated her appetite. Sometimes, feminist historian and NYU professor Linda Gordon made “yogurt and honey, or something like that.” Anything to help McKay, who once took pride in inviting Painter to “eat her heart out” when she weighed in at the physician’s office healthy and strong at 110 pounds. Now, she struggled to keep up both her strength and her weight when she had neither to spare. McKay received visitors during the day but typically slept alone at night. After a day of visitors and spoonfuls of a little of this or a little of that, McKay nestled into the home that she loved and that loved her back and, in the quiet of the night, found rest in the place that embraced her.
The ad hoc help McKay received morphed into a more systematic communication plan called the Nellie Tree, in which students, friends, and colleagues in the Madison area rallied together to coordinate care. Simultaneously, former students and colleagues scattered across the country clamored for information. McKay realized that fielding phone calls about her health was not the best use of her time or energy, so the Nellie Tree evolved into an email distribution list that disseminated information about McKay’s health to her vast network of colleagues and friends. The Nellie Tree “originated in the conversational spaces between Nellie and [Susan Friedman], and then [Friedman] and Susan Bernstein. Nellie immediately ‘got’ the idea of the metaphor. . . . And she loved it.”

The Nellie Tree appealed to McKay because its origins were in the old-school phone tree, a “political tactic” that Friedman and others “used in ‘the old days’ as we tried to organize and unite people around a particular political action.” McKay’s former graduate students Kimberly Blockett and Gregory Rutledge, in their guest-edited memorial issue of the African American Review, a peer-reviewed journal of Black literature and culture then edited by Joycelyn K. Moody, discussed the Nellie Tree as both metaphor and mechanism: it represented the many “branches” of McKay’s influence at the same time it ensured that information flowed from those on the ground—McKay, Susan Stanford Friedman, Stanlie M. James, and others—to those living far away. The Nellie Tree disseminated information among a community of colleagues, students, and friends touched by McKay’s influence and linked through a system of relational pathways that routed them to a common source.

The local branch of the Nellie Tree helped McKay run errands she was no longer able to carry out herself and facilitated her transportation to and from appointments. Susan Bernstein, a friend and colleague from the Department of English who recommended that McKay coordinate her care through Meg Gaines and the Center for Patient Partnerships, saw to it that McKay made it to her medical appointments and received her prescriptions in a timely fashion. Others cleaned or helped with food preparation. From trips to the dentist or to the barber, McKay’s friends displayed their affection by caring for McKay when it would have been impossible for her to manage many household responsibilities all alone. Notably, Craig Werner and Stanlie M. James were not official parts of the Nellie Tree. Since James “was going to do whatever needed to be done anyway,” she and McKay agreed there was no need to add her to the group. James, the colleague McKay mentored by example, would play “clean-up.” Should any task fall through the cracks, James made sure it got done. Werner held things down.
in the department. He made sure McKay’s classes were covered and oversaw other administrative responsibilities as needed “to work with the students, to work with things on this end,” he recalled. Carrying on in the face of such grave uncertainty was not easy work, but her colleagues did what was needed out of loyalty to McKay and her intellectual project and so, for once, she wouldn’t have to worry about anything or anyone except herself.

In spite of an email in which McKay let members of the Nellie Tree know that she was “down but not out—and still fighting,” it soon became clear that recovery was not on the horizon. The “chemotherapy was no longer working,” and it was becoming harder and harder for McKay to manage the steps to her bedroom. She wanted to be at home as long as she could, so she had a powered chair installed between the first and second floors so she could access her bedroom. She used it only “a few weeks” before she accepted that sheer will was not enough. “Lisa, I think the gig is up,” she told Cappelli, and in late 2005, McKay moved into Agrace hospice in Fitchburg, Wisconsin. It was a beautiful facility with private rooms and patios “overlooking a wooded landscape.” Pleased with how well the space was appointed, McKay said, beaming, “Look Lisa, I am ensconced in my beautiful room!”

During the final weeks of 2005 and into January 2006, while she was in hospice, McKay received visits from her dear friends Frances Smith Foster and Thadious M. Davis. They purchased oils in the scents McKay liked. They massaged the oils into her hands and feet, restoring moisture to the dry places and soothing the skin that had become tight and ashy. In the process, Foster realized that despite years of friendship, this was the first time she had ever touched McKay in an intimate way. McKay was not a “hugger,” certainly not the touchy-feely type. But the feel of the heat of her friend’s hands as they gently kneaded McKay’s lower extremities brought McKay incredible joy. Foster recalled: “On the last two or three days of her life, I spent a lot of time massaging oil into her feet and hands and she loved it. It was such an interesting thing. Anyway, that was a very, very magic, special time.” Her friends and students were there to go as far as they could to accompany McKay on her journey home.

At this time, McKay’s closest colleagues turned away visitors to protect their friend, but several of McKay’s Black women students who refused to be denied access met in Madison to visit their mentor and to say farewell to the woman who had helped them cultivate their individual talents. After realizing that she would not receive McKay’s permission to visit, Kimberly Blockett, who was among McKay’s first Black women graduate students at UW-Madison, a group often referred to as her “daughters,” reached out to many of
the Black women who were part of her graduate school cohort—Keisha Watson and Lynn Jennings—and planned a visit to McKay at the hospice center in Fitchburg. The “velvet rope” between Blockett and McKay went up at the same moment an email distributed to a small group of former students indicated that McKay had stage IV cancer. Blockett recalled: “The moment I got the news was also the moment when a barrier went up. It was all one thing. It was like this person who’s very dear to you is very sick and you now have no access to this person. It all happened in one fell swoop.”

Insiders curtailed access to McKay at the very moment community grief swelled.

For Blockett, as one of the first in a line of Black women graduate students specifically recruited to the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s English Department by McKay and Susanne L. Wofford in the early 1990s, seeing McKay meant everything. Fifteen years prior, Blockett had arrived at the UW-Madison campus with her two children and formed especially close relationships with McKay and Wofford, the latter serving as the English Department’s graduate adviser at the time of Blockett’s arrival. Together, McKay and Wofford eliminated night classes in the English Department so parents—Blockett, specifically—would not be at a disadvantage in their studies. Wofford, daughter of Harris Llewellyn Wofford, the United States senator who served as president of Bryn Mawr College and helped found the Peace Corps, championed access in the English Department and advocated for Blockett. As close as Blockett was to Wofford, who helped her negotiate motherhood and graduate study, McKay had always held an extra special place in her heart.

The unique relationship between McKay and Blockett had begun simply enough: with a phone call. As Blockett settled into her new home in Madison, McKay called to introduce herself and to let Blockett know that she had heard there was a new Black woman graduate student but had yet to see her. Blockett had been admitted directly to the PhD program in English, and before the call it had never occurred to her that “that could have been [McKay’s] way of saying to me that I was supposed to have come to her.” Then McKay became more direct: she explained that “she needed to lay eyes on me,” Blockett remembered. “I understood that,” she recalled, and asked, “When would you like me to come see you?” The new graduate student immediately made her way to McKay’s office—on a Sunday afternoon, I might add—and thus began a tradition of weekly visits that spanned, off and on, the length of Blockett’s time in Wisconsin.

Sundays were ideal for one-on-one time with McKay. The department was quiet and McKay was relaxed. Blockett was able to talk about her children.
and her marriage, her transition to Madison, and her studies. McKay, with her “listening way,” got to know Blockett during these Sundays, displaying the personalized brand of mentoring McKay had become known for during her career. McKay mentored each of her students differently, according to their individual strengths and needs. Blockett needed to process her life—her responsibilities to family and her commitment to her studies—so Sundays were a key part of what made her relationship with McKay special. When McKay became ill and Blockett was denied access, the mission to see her mentor became personal. “We’re on a plane,” she recalled. “I’m done with waiting for permission. We flew out.”

For several days following their arrival, Blockett, Jennings, and Watson went to the hospice and visited with their teacher, mentor, and adviser. Each had time with McKay and made multiple visits daily until Blockett was suddenly stopped by a nurse at the front desk: “Family only.”

What Blockett didn’t know that day was that a short time before her arrival, Nellie Yvonne McKay had passed. It was 22 January 2006, and Foster and Davis, who were with Nellie until the end, were there to witness the peaceful transition of their friend. The hospice nurses, in their wisdom, “knew that Nellie was probably going to pass that day.” Foster and Davis were there when Nellie’s breathing became shallow, her breaths more and more irregular until they just stopped. And in the silence, they waited together and felt the magic of it all: the uncanny, surreal gift of being there for their friend at the end and the honor of witnessing her transition. In spite of the sadness, in spite of the grief, they were together on that day and would not be together, at least like that, ever again. The nurse joined in to help them say goodbye. Believing what the hospice nurses said about the spirit lingering in the room for a short time after leaving the body, Foster and Davis paused together and waited for Nellie’s spirit to leave. Davis recited a poem Nellie liked. The nurse wished Nellie safe journeys by writing a farewell phrase on the whiteboard. McKay’s daughter, Watson, who had left Foster and Davis at the hospice while she made a quick trip to St. Louis, returned to find her mother dead. Some believe sending Watson away was Nellie’s doing. It is not uncommon “for people to die when their dearest, closest, loved ones are not present,” said McKay’s healthcare advocate Meg Gaines. “There may be something to just needing a little bit of empty space to make the transition and not feel as though you have to hang on for people or not die in their presence.” Nellie, it seemed, could let go when she wasn’t holding on for her daughter. Grief-stricken, no one could have anticipated how drastically things would change following Watson’s return to Madison.
During a time prior to hospice, when McKay was still relatively strong and particularly lucid, she and Watson had a conversation about the “secret” that had begun as a joke so many years earlier while they were both students at Harvard. At the time of her death, no one in McKay’s academic inner circle was aware of Watson’s proper place in the Watson-McKay household. Consequently, in the final months of McKay’s life, the question of who should be told when pressed on Watson’s mind. Watson knew that the revelation was for others, because immediate family and Watson’s circle of friends knew that they were mother and daughter.

This other side of McKay’s life, lived out of view of her colleagues, was a life she lived openly as mother and grandmother to Pat and Nicholas, respectively. When the entire family was in St. Louis, everyone assumed their true roles—mother, daughter, grandson—and withheld nothing about the real nature of their relationship with the local community. Madison was quite a different story. Daughter and grandson had very specific roles to play and, with years of experience, were adept at staying in character. Nicholas knew that in Madison, his grandmother was to be called “Aunt Nell”: “Nicholas knew, but Nellie instructed him, ‘When you’re in Madison, I’m Aunt Nell. That’s who I am.’” About six months before McKay entered hospice, while she was still living at home, Watson let her know that, once she died, the secret would be out. “When it was our secret against the world,” said Watson, “it was one thing. But with you gone,” she explained to her mother, “there’s no reason to keep the secret any longer.” Watson made clear to her mother her intention not to maintain the ruse after she died, and McKay accepted her choice. McKay knew “a lot of people will be hurt or angry.” In the final analysis, however, McKay concluded that “it’s not going to be my problem.” After all, she mused, “I’ll be dead.”

Foster, Davis, and the hospice staff had supposedly agreed not to notify Watson while she was en route to Madison, but the call somehow got made. The time Watson was alone on the road, heading back to her mother, perhaps prepared her to disclose once and for all the truth of her relationship with McKay. Watson entered the Fitchburg hospice facility and immediately went into the room to be with her mother. The others waited in the lobby. When Watson finally joined her mother’s friends, the doctor calmly stated, “Now, with your mother . . .” Before he could finish, Foster interrupted: “Oh, no. She’s not her mother. She’s her sister.” Watson rejoined: “I’ve got to tell you something that Nellie told me I had to tell you...
after she died.” Everyone there tried to get her to stop: “We said don’t worry about it. Sit down. We’re all being very solicitous to her. She’s saying, ‘No, I gotta do this. I gotta do this now.’ We’re sitting there, then it’s hazy, but I remember her saying, ‘Nellie was not my sister. She was my mother.’”

Foster laughed, thinking, “Isn’t it just like Nellie, she’s always got more about her that we didn’t know.” McKay’s friends had “many, many, many conversations” about why Watson told so quickly. Perhaps Watson understood that it was unlikely for her to have everyone in the room together without her mother present, and decided to divulge immediately while her mother’s closest friends were there. There is a chance, too, that deep within, the burden of living as McKay’s sister when she wanted to be claimed publicly as her daughter was too great, and Watson simply couldn’t wait any longer to regain control of a narrative she had felt bound to uphold. “Honestly, it seemed like a great relief for Pat,” remembered Cappelli. “I have wondered over and over the years about what a burden it must have been for Pat to maintain this secret.” While Watson’s reasons are unknowable (even though I asked her directly about her feelings), Painter, especially, struggled to wrap her mind around why a friend so close would keep this secret for so long.

Multiple accounts, similar in their assessment of Painter’s shock, suggest that she felt betrayed by what was depicted by at least one of McKay’s former colleagues as McKay’s lie. Foster was “surprised that some people felt hurt or angry or whatever” because she knew that, on more than one occasion, McKay had “misled [her].” When Watson recalled the mood in the room after she revealed the truth of her relationship with McKay, she remembered McKay’s friends expressing surprise but not shock: “Everyone was surprised, though, when I used the word shocked, that may have been too strong a word.” This, she explained, contrasted with Painter’s response: “No one took it as a personal affront that they didn’t know this, as opposed to Nell Painter, who clearly took it as an affront, and was very, very, very upset. . . . Because I think she thought she was my mother’s closest friend, and thought that all of this violated the terms of their friendship, I guess.” Joyce Scott, McKay’s dear friend from their days in Queens, remembered, quite vividly, a conversation with Painter following the “revelation” in which the depths of Painter’s grief and confusion rose to the surface.

Painter tracked down Scott after news of McKay’s death circulated via several email listservs. This particular email thread began when Miriam Petty, who was then the Geraldine R. Dodge Postdoctoral Fellow at the Rutgers Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience at Rutgers University–Newark, forwarded “a memorializing paragraph” written by
McKay’s Madison colleague Lynn Keller to a Rutgers University email list-serv, perhaps of Black faculty. This message was forwarded to Oberlin alumni. Wendell Russell, the Oberlin- and Harvard-educated attorney who “grew up knowing Nellie,” responded with an email notifying the group of his relationship with McKay and revealing information about their time in Queens that, it appears, he had never shared publicly before then: “The word of Nellie McKay’s death was very sad news for me. I grew up knowing Nellie; we attended the same church, Hollis Presbyterian Church in Hollis, Queens, New York. When I was a boy, Nellie was a young divorced mother working to support two children, her daughter Pat, and son Harry . . . Nellie was very bright but she had not finished college at that point. . . . With the encouragement of her friends at church and at work, she started to take college classes at Queens.”

Painter received this email and contacted Russell, who, on Painter’s behalf, asked Scott if he could share with Painter her contact information. Scott obliged, even though she expressed to Russell that she “did not feel comfortable sharing what [she] knew when Nellie chose not to . . . and had so many opportunities to share.” The women spoke, but Scott “did not tell Nell anything, really.” Painter, who was, according to Scott, “worked up” following a less than fruitful initial phone call, called back a second time to try again to get her questions answered. For the friend who had maintained a correspondence with McKay for nearly thirty years, for the scholar who had supported McKay throughout her academic career, there were no answers. Given their closeness, why would McKay have withheld this part of her personal life from Painter?

Quite simply, McKay may have feared the loss of Painter’s friendship. When Stanlie M. James spoke to Painter after the news broke, she asked, “When was [Nellie] going to tell you? . . . You got to be really great friends and so forth. At what point could she tell you this and you wouldn’t be as devastated as you are now? Or think that ‘She’s not my friend?’” This may have been a case, according to James, when McKay found herself “caught up” in a story that, after being maintained for so long, seemed impossible to get out of. With the scope of their friendship well defined, perhaps there was no space to redefine a relationship solidified after nearly thirty years.

There is also the possibility that withholding her family story, from Painter in particular, was McKay’s effort to shield herself from the feelings of inadequacy she experienced as a graduate student at Harvard and that remained even after she became the Evjue-Bascom Professor of American and African American Literature at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. McKay said
repeatedly that “Harvard was very hard for me,” but she didn’t see Painter struggle in the same way. The differences between McKay and Painter reflect the diversity of Black women’s experiences, even though, as a group, Black women in the academy are often spoken of in homogeneous terms. In McKay’s mind, Painter’s family, class background and professional pedigree put her on the side of those who “belonged” in the academy, while she was on the side of those who did not. By the time Painter enrolled at Harvard, she had studied abroad at the University of Bordeaux in France, lived and studied in Ghana, and earned an MA in African history from the University of California, Los Angeles. Having earned her master’s, Painter completed her PhD at Harvard in five years; McKay took three years longer to complete hers. Joyce Scott was convinced that from early on, beginning with their time together in Cambridge, “Nellie wasn’t comfortable given who Nell Painter was. And where she had come from. And what her background was. . . . I think she felt on some level that it would be lost on Nell. So, she never went there.”

It is impossible to divorce Painter’s response from the complexities of a decades-long friendship. Painter loved McKay. She critiqued her, too. But McKay had her own hobbyhorse, and her presumption about the ease with which Painter worked was just one. McKay had a tendency to imagine Painter as a “superwoman” who was able to do things that she could not. That was a narrative of McKay’s making and one that Painter disabused her of whenever the topic arose. Once, in a letter, McKay suggested that Painter would be able to read ten theses in a day while she could not, to which Painter rejoined: “Gimmie a break, won’t you? In your quest to prove that you’re slower than everyone else in the world about everything, don’t try to make me into superwoman. How the hell is anyone going to be able to read ten senior theses in one day? Really!! Get serious.”

Underlying moments of conflict was a deep love that enabled McKay and Painter to form a connection in spite of the isolation that was part and parcel of being Black women in the academy. The two relied on each other for support both in their careers and in their lives. And, as her final letter to McKay illustrates, much of Painter’s sense of her voice in the world was framed in relation to refinements offered when McKay answered back. On 11 May 2005, about eight months before McKay’s death, Painter penned her final handwritten letter:

My Dear Nellie,

How are you doing? Any results from your Cat scan? Are you continuing to gain strength? Can you see your next steps?

192  CHAPTER FOUR
I think of you so often and wonder about the moments of your
day—where and how you are, what you’re doing/not doing, thinking
and not thinking, fearing and overcoming. For lack of your voice in
return, my letters feel terribly self-absorbed to me. I just natter on
about me and what I’m doing, unaccompanied, as in so many former
years, by your responses.142

Painter continued her letter with a discussion of the change in seasons, the
swelling of “the tamarack tree in our yard,”143 and husband Glenn Shafer’s
trip to England. She discussed a trip to Home Depot, her reading of The
Racial Basis of Civilization: A Critique of Nordic Doctrine (1926) and the status
of Creating Black Americans, which Painter published in 2006. She was close
to completing a full draft of The History of White People (2011) and admitted
to loving her neighborhood even though she suspected that one particular
neighbor who smiled a little too much and seemed a little too positive might
be hiding something. She ended with this postscript: “I received the good
news about your good news. WONDERFUL!! Keep getting better!”144 Painter
wrote with candor, good humor, and an attentiveness to McKay’s emotional
and professional needs. They were close friends who expressed profes-
sional success in different ways. Their friendship was the foundation for so
much: careers of note, writing of influence, and Black feminist futures.
However, it is entirely possible that Painter made McKay feel loved and
judged at the same time and that, out of earshot, McKay returned to narra-
tives about Painter’s origins—the benefits of class privilege and social
capital—that in McKay’s mind had given Painter the kind of head start that
made it impossible for her to ever catch up.

TRY AS MCKAY MIGHT to define her legacy according to what she failed to
achieve, her impact on higher education, her students, the profession, and
her colleagues and friends speaks for itself. For all the doors that were
closed to her as a child, during her lifetime McKay opened doors for as
many as she could.

McKay’s mentoring model honored a student-centered ethos practiced by
the women of the City University of New York’s (CUNY’s) Search for Educa-
tion, Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK) program—Barbara T. Christian, June
Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Toni Cade Bambara among them—and used spe-
cialized mentoring instead of a one-size-fits-all approach to guiding students,
Black students in particular, through the rigors of academic life. After McKay’s
death, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson finished the work McKay began by advising
Keisha Watson, who was the first student admitted to Madison’s Bridge Program in 1993 and who, after raising her family, returned to the University of Wisconsin to finish her dissertation and earn the PhD. McKay’s colleagues remained committed to her students because they had been trained to profess the Nellie McKay way. McKay had taught those in her circle that this brand of mentoring “was not an issue, it was not a question... This is what you did. . . . This is it. This is what being a teacher is. This is what being a mentor is.”

English Department colleague Deborah Brandt remembered that and more of how McKay spoke of her students: “Of course, those students are going to make it. Of course, they’re going to go on and make contributions to the field. She would just clear out the negative, whatever doubt there was, the feeling that it wasn’t going to work. She just did it, and it was a way of being, and it was just a practice, and I tried that with all of my students. ‘You are going to finish. You are going to make your contribution.’ I got a lot of that from Nellie.”

For McKay, there was room for everyone willing to do the work. McKay’s spirit, that commitment to seeing students cross the finish line, was in the room when Keisha Watson defended her PhD in English in 2018. Watson’s life “took a detour after [she] had children and moved away from Madison,” and even then, McKay, Werner, Sherrard-Johnson, and Lynn Keller never wavered in their support of Watson or her project. Her dissertation, “‘My Song in Bolder Notes Arise’: The African American Long Poem Tradition,” mapped the long history of the African American long poem and identified deep structures, similarities in craft and substance, that, once revealed, laid bare the commonalities between contemporary long poems and their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antecedents. “She was there,” Watson recalled of the moment during her defense when she talked about McKay, her original adviser, and how she had helped Watson, encouraging her always to “never ever give up.”

In these lines from our 2004 interview, McKay described how special her early Black women graduate students were in how she thought about the meaning of her life’s work:

I have that picture on the wall upstairs in my study of you, and Lynn, and Keisha, and Kim, and Lisa, and my mental description of this photograph—they were the first. They were the first, so I told Lynn, “Listen. You’ve got to finish. You’ve got to finish. You can’t let me die and you don’t finish it. You have to finish it.” And the same thing to Keisha, “You’ve got to finish. You were the first. This is what you can give me now. You can finish.” Then it will truly be, “They were the first.” . . . Everybody else comes after. Not that everybody else isn’t
valuable. . . . But you all, all five of you, are extra special. Extra special. And I am very blessed. Very, very blessed. Didn’t do a thing to deserve it. I just . . . life is like that.  

The guidance Watson received from Werner and Keller was unwavering, but there was something singular about the support she received from Sherrard-Johnson, a thoughtfulness that had a profound impact on Watson during the final stages of the process. Even though Sherrard-Johnson really “didn’t know” Watson, what Watson saw in the mentoring she received was a “legacy of sister support through Cherene . . . there was something about the attentiveness and her understanding of what I was doing that was deeply appreciated.” But Sherrard-Johnson knew McKay and understood that “Nellie was very much committed to the University of Wisconsin, but more importantly, she wanted to see Black women bloom in African American and Women’s Studies, the fields she so carefully tended,” fields Watson contributed to in her dissertation by shining a spotlight on a poetic tradition that has yet to receive its due.

McKay’s mentoring meant the world to various scholars and former students, but one story in particular captures how McKay showed up for them in real time. As a teaching assistant for English 100, Madison’s introduction to college composition course, Sherry Johnson, now an associate professor of English at Grand Valley State University, inadvertently transposed the room number of the Writing Center, an alternate location where her class was supposed to meet, in a message to her students. It was the first spring day after a long Madison winter, and the students took advantage of Johnson’s oversight and collectively decided to ditch class. After Johnson marked everyone absent, students complained to the director of the English 100 program, who then advised Johnson to “not penalize them in any way because you did put 7142 when you should have put 7124.” Feeling unsupported—especially because the students intentionally ignored the fact that the Writing Center was clearly identified as the meeting place—Johnson went to McKay’s office for advice. “This is silly,” Johnson thought. “I didn’t feel like I had the support from the coordinator of the program. I didn’t have his support, his concern was with the students.” Johnson imagined her students’ motivations: did they disregard her instructions because she was young? Because she was a Black woman? Because she was just a teaching assistant? McKay advised her to do what was best.

Still overwrought, Johnson made her way from McKay’s office to the restroom and quietly cried in a stall. As she walked out, “there was Dr. McKay.
coming into the washroom. She looked at me, and she said ‘Sherry, stop it. Stop that right now. Teach them a lesson, you teach them a lesson.’”

Johnson admitted, “McKay’s statement to me made me stronger. I didn’t do what the program chair’s recommendation was, which was totally undercutting my authority. I followed my gut, and it worked out fine, but that was because of Dr. McKay, and not the conversation that I had in her office, but when she caught me in the washroom crying. That’s the conversation that helped me.”

McKay’s mentoring empowered her students to not yield to institutional equivocating. Others have stories, many of them published in the McKay memorial issue of the *African American Review*, that captured the many sites of McKay’s impact. Still more hold inside a sliver of thought, a tiny personal memory kept to themselves, their secret against the world, a landmark of McKay’s wisdom to guide them on their way.

McKay’s legacy remains felt on the campus of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the institution she joined in 1978 and the place she remained her entire academic career. McKay’s space-making, a central tenet of her work as an institution builder, can be seen through physical spaces named in her honor, intellectual space she afforded through fellowship funding, and disciplinary space in the English Department. In 2011, UW-Madison renamed Frederick Hall after Vel Phillips, “the first black woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 1951.” Phillips Hall renamed “houses and floors . . . after influential women for the university,” including McKay, historian Gerda Lerner, and others. Housing administrator Jeff Hinz renamed the building as “a way to keep history alive” and to give “students the opportunity to learn about [these influential women] and to hear stories about the struggles that took place.” It is appropriate, then, that given the experiences McKay chronicled in “Black Woman Professor—White University,” especially those related to the hostility she faced from students, that UW-Madison earmark real estate to honor her institutional history, that it set aside a floor of a residence hall to help students feel at home, and lift up the academic legacy of a woman who made a profound impact on undergraduate life.

On a yearly basis, the Nellie Y. McKay Lecture in the Humanities, initiated with the help of Susanne L. Wofford, former director of UW-Madison’s Center for the Humanities, and Susan Stanford Friedman, former director of UW-Madison’s Institute for Research in the Humanities, honors McKay in a speaker series that brings to campus McKay’s old friends and new voices in the fields of Black studies, critical race studies, and studies of the African diaspora. Since McKay’s passing, Frances Smith Foster, Henry Louis Gates Jr.,
Thadious M. Davis, Eddie S. Glaude Jr., Anne A. Cheng, Saidiyah V. Hartman, Earl Lewis, Christine Yano, Christina Sharpe, and Michelle Stephens have presented on a range of topics, from ethics and race and identity politics to Asian American commodity culture and island studies. The breadth of topics covered speaks to the wide reach of McKay’s early intellectual investments. These lectures also convey McKay’s commitment to making space for a wide array of voices, an investment that grew out of her work on a lifelong project that involved expanding access through community service and graduate school pipelines, codifying the literature of African Americans through anthologizing and teaching, and establishing Black feminist thought as a framework for critical inquiry.

If the space to create new and exciting intellectual work is made possible, in part, through the time faculty have to devote to the reading and writing required to produce scholarship, then two awards—the Nellie Y. McKay Fellowship and the Anna Julia Cooper Postdoctoral Fellowship—afford early-career professors at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, those invested in furthering McKay’s groundbreaking efforts to institutionalize African American literature, time away from their teaching duties to write their books. These awards have helped Cherene Sherrard-Johnson publish Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance (2007); Aida Levy-Hussen finish How to Read African American Literature: Post–Civil Rights Fiction and the Task of Interpretation (2016); and Brigitte Fielder write Relative Races: Genealogies of Interracial Kinship in Nineteenth Century America (2020). All three monographs enrich the field that was built upon the intellectual foundation laid by McKay as a UW-Madison faculty member.

McKay’s legacy is also visible in the English Department at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, which now boasts five faculty members in African American literature and global Black literatures. Sherrard-Johnson, who was hired as the first English Department specialist in African American literature in 2001, over forty years after McKay first joined the faculty, chaired a cluster hire that resulted in the hiring of four new professors to teach in areas related to the “black Atlantic world.” In a “year-long search that attracted close to 200 applications,” four professors rose to the top, and Laila Amine, Ainehi Edoro, Yanie Fecu, and Kristina Huang joined UW-Madison's English Department. African American literature maintains a presence in McKay’s first academic home, the Afro-American Studies Department, and the department’s coordination of the April 2006 symposium in McKay’s honor and, most recently, the hiring of Brittney Michelle Edmonds, a specialist in

*Crepuscule with Nellie* 197
“black critical humor after 1968,” continues the legacy of African American literature at UW-Madison. McKay’s disciplinary impact is also legible in the literature—her books and essays, her edited work and anthologies—but also in how those she worked with chose to honor her passing in print. In 2014, the third edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* was published. The slate of editors was different: Valerie Smith was co–general editor beside Gates; Houston A. Baker Jr. and Arnold Rampersad were editors emeriti; and Kimberly W. Benston and Brent Hayes Edwards joined the masthead. The anthology had expanded: in two volumes instead of one, the editors covered 140 writers—up from the 120 writers included in the first edition—to represent “the most historically important and aesthetically sophisticated works” of Black writing from 1746 to the present. But the third edition is unique in that it includes a dedication page “In Memory of Nellie Y. McKay,” which editor Julia Reidhead noted as something that had never been done “in a Norton Anthology, but for whom better to set the precedent?” Stanlie M. James, Frances Smith Foster, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall made a similar move in *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women’s Studies* (2009) with the inscription “For Nellie Y. McKay.” These dedications mark McKay’s impact on two particular fields of study, African American literature and Black women’s studies, but they also conjure something deeper. The dedication page features McKay’s name, in black typeface, centered against a stark white background. This island of a name floating in a sea of white space reminds us of the isolation out of which she labored, the singular effort that preceded the collective work signified in the table of contents that follows.

*Half in Shadow* carries out some of McKay’s unfinished business. Her last major project was titled “A Freedom Story to Pass On: An Interpretive History of African American Literature,” which, in a 2005–2006 National Endowment for the Humanities proposal, McKay described as a “narrative of African American literary history from its beginning to the end of the 20th century” that “will expand the meaning of freedom in African American literature beyond understanding it purely in reactive terms, as a way of asserting Black agency in a hostile, indifferent or uncompromising white mainstream world. I want to complicate that concept,” she wrote, “to make freedom a collective endeavor toward spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic freedom.” McKay imagined a future for herself and Black literary studies as a field centered on freedom where, in the face of despair, one finds joy in having oneself.

*Half in Shadow* reclaims McKay’s story, her past, and her purpose to establish her place in a genealogy that maps Black women’s intellectual influ-
ence across generations. McKay exists as part of what Audre Lorde, in *The Cancer Journals* (1980), called “a continuum of women's work” in which the act of “reclaiming this earth and our power” continues beyond death. McKay felt an urgency to accomplish all she could in the life she chose, and out of this frenetic drive to establish a tradition, to forge a space for the furious flowering of a literature wrought by persons of African descent, she reclaimed a personal power that is our inheritance if we do the work. McKay, like Lorde, was aware of her greater purpose. Our responsibility, then, is to find our own.
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