

Nellie Y. McKay and the Evolution of Black Feminist Literary Studies

BY STEPHANIE R. RYTILAHTI

Shanna Greene Benjamin, *Half in Shadow: The Life and Legacy of Nellie Y. McKay*. University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 276 pp. notes. bibl. index. photos. pap., \$24.95, ISBN 978-1469662534.

Biographer Shanna Greene Benjamin takes readers through the intellectual genealogy of Dr. Nellie Y. McKay, mapping both her outsized impact on the field of Black literary studies and the great pains she took to keep her personal life and history out of the limelight. McKay began her undergraduate career at Queens College (part of City University of New York) in the mid-1960s. Against the backdrop of burgeoning women's movement, Black power, and anti-war activism, she entered college as a single, divorced mother of two. She papered over this background with evasions, warm dinner parties, and a certain professional distance that would define the rest of her career. Then, when she entered graduate school at Harvard, she deftly passed her daughter off as her younger sister. She deflected questions about her personal life and background throughout her career, and it wasn't until her death that some of these pieces began to fall into place for her close friends and colleagues. Greene Benjamin uses this narrative sleight of hand as an entry point to explore the dual positionality that defined McKay's groundbreaking work: McKay's attempt to protect the boundaries of her personal life while also increasing the visibility of Black literary scholars like herself within multiple academic fields.

From the outset, McKay cemented inclusive pedagogical practices and network-building as the corner-

stone of her professional work. From her beginnings as a student of the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge program at Queens until the end of her career, she held a deep commitment to collaborative work and mentoring. When the isolation at Harvard took her too far afield of that commitment, she stepped away from her graduate work for a time to teach at Simmons College in Boston. This position connected her with a network of Black feminist scholars and aligned with her vision of teaching as a form of social justice. As a member of reading groups and academic circles that connected her with the likes of Barbara Christian, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Toni Cade, McKay thrived in this environment and would use it as a platform to shift the boundaries of Black literary studies in the decades ahead. Even when she returned to her graduate studies at Harvard, she remained connected to this broader network of scholars focused on collective engagement and the development of a distinct mode of Black feminist analysis.

When McKay landed a tenure-track position at the University of Wisconsin in 1977, she ambitiously tackled field formation and institutional change as top professional priorities. As a junior faculty member in African American Studies, McKay acted against the wishes of her department chair and dedicated her dwindling research time to an interview with Toni Morrison. Morrison didn't yet

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hold a place of renown in the Black literary canon (indeed, because McKay and others hadn't yet had time to construct it), and an interview didn't fit the traditional mold of tenure-portfolio materials. Nonetheless, McKay forged ahead, and her intuition was right on. The interview made a huge splash in *PMLA*, the prestigious journal of the Modern Language Association, and landed her a contract with the University of Wisconsin Press for her biography on legendary Black writer Jean Toomer. She would eventually receive offers from Harvard and other prestigious institutions as her reputation soared. Yet she remained in Wisconsin throughout her career, tackling a host of institutional and disciplinary challenges.

The biography's central motif—half in the shadows—reminds readers that these successes were not lightly won.

Even as McKay ascended to impressive professional stature, she felt closed off from domains of influence in a predominantly white institution and a still masculinist Black literary field. She built bridges with white feminists in the newly formed women's studies program at Madison and held fast to a larger national network of Black feminist colleagues. Yet she constantly grappled with the erasure of Black women's writing from literary canons and with her own feelings of displacement and, at times, inadequacy. Her own training and impulses drifted toward collaborative projects, field-defining essays, and edited collections—the exact opposite of the kinds of work rewarded by the individualistic professional standards of higher education. Thus, even as her disciplinary impact was unmistakable, McKay held a somewhat peripheral position in the institutional spaces she occupied, by the standard measures of academic success and because of the inherent racism and sexism of those spaces. She also carefully cordoned off large parts of herself, keeping her personal life, internal battles, and anxieties off limits to even her closest colleagues and friends.

Shanna Greene Benjamin deftly pulls apart these threads by keeping personal relationships at the center of her biography of McKay. She juxtaposes anecdotes of institutional challenges with the warmth and vibrancy of dinner parties McKay hosted throughout her life. She weaves McKay's lifelong friendship with Princeton historian Nell Irvin Painter, and their almost daily correspondences, throughout tales of professional triumphs and disappointments. And, perhaps most crucially, Greene Benjamin includes her own intellectual genealogy as McKay's graduate student. Opening each chapter with a brief overview of her own personal and intellectual trajectory, she reminds readers of the personal impact McKay had on a generation of Black scholars.

Finally, the closing pages of *Half in Shadow* provide readers with an unraveling of the worlds McKay worked so hard to keep separate. As her illness reduced her independence, friends and colleagues formed a “Nellie Tree” to support her through her final days, crossing into the boundaries of her personal space

and eventually becoming privy to her best kept secret—her hidden history of motherhood and family life.

Ultimately, Greene Benjamin offers readers a front-row seat to the challenging world of field formation, academic burnout, and the divisive politics of professional academic organizations, editorial boards, and university departments. Relying on an archive composed of oral history interviews, a lifelong correspondence with Painter, and notoriously dry academic records, Greene Benjamin mines history to lift the veil on aspects of McKay's life that remained sealed to most of her colleagues and students. In so doing, she offers a compelling narrative of the stakes and challenges faced by pioneers in the field of Black feminism and Black feminist literary studies as well as their remarkable collective effectiveness. *Half in Shadow* also reminds us of the relatively short history behind the institutionalization of fields like African American studies and gender and women's studies, and of the need for those fields to retain their rightful place within academia at a time when budget cuts and systematic racism threaten to return them to the shadows.

[Stephanie R. Rytlahti became the director of the University of Wisconsin System's Women's and Gender Studies Consortium in 2018. As director, she facilitates the collaboration of research, pedagogical initiatives, and strategic planning of all gender and women's studies programs and departments across the System. She currently serves as the co-chair of a systemwide task force on caregiving and also coordinates a monthly feminist leadership series, a decolonizing pedagogies workshop, and an annual women's and gender studies conference co-convened with the Office of the Gender and Women's Studies Librarian. As an undergraduate at UW-Madison, Stephanie attended one of the last Black feminist literature classes taught by Professor McKay, and she remembers the experience fondly.]