

ANNOTATIONS

UW-Madison English Alumni Newsletter

A LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Dear alumni and friends of the English Department!

Two weeks ago, I donned my regalia and favorite mask, showed my electronic green "Badger Badge" on my cell phone (to ascertain I was in compliance with COVID-19 regulations), and was admitted to Camp Randall to participate in the socially distanced in-person Commencement ceremony for graduate students. It was the first time in over a year that I saw colleagues and students in person, and it felt more than good...

(continued on the next page)



Over the past 15 challenging months, our students have continued to amaze us with their resilience and creativity. You can learn more about the extraordinary Class of 2021 on our [graduation website](#). I also invite you to read about our amazing [scholarship and writing award winners](#). When asked what they liked best about their experience as English majors, our students speak about the “close-knit community of English majors,” and the opportunity to build relationships with peers and instructors that are “endlessly thoughtful and inspiring.” Their commitment to the study of language, literature, and writing is matched by our outstanding faculty, staff, and graduate instructors, several of whom were recognized with campus- and even system-wide awards for their teaching excellence this year. I am thrilled to say that we continue to be the UW-Madison department with the highest number of teaching awards!

look for the
purple
underlined
text to find
links!

Our students have ambitious plans for their future. Some plan to go to grad school, others seek summer internships. Some will spend a year teaching English abroad, and some look forward to starting their first job as a UW alum—with technology companies, non-profit organizations, or in the educational sector. We learned this year to organize effective career events online. You can read about our collaboration with SuccessWorks, the L&S Career Center, in this newsletter. We could not have done this without a stellar group of alums who volunteered their time. Thank you all!

We look forward to coming together again as a community in the fall. I am grateful to our colleagues in the sciences who brought us tests, vaccines, and safety protocols. But there are many challenges around the pandemic that lab work cannot address. As one student wrote in an appreciation of their time as an English major, we have the privilege to study questions that go “to the heart of humanity”—and there is a lot to learn from this year that brought loss and strife for so many, especially for racial and ethnic minority groups.

Thank you for your continued friendship and support!

On Wisconsin,

Anja Wanner



The English Undergraduate Scholarship Fund provides financial assistance to deserving undergraduate students who are English majors and whose personal and family resources do not cover the costs involved in attending UW-Madison. Thanks to the generosity of Thomas '73 and Barbara Johnson, the English Department has provided scholarships to students through this fund since 2014. We invite you to contribute whatever you can to help our students thrive! Donations can be made by following [this link](#).

To learn more about how you can support students in the Department of English, contact Jill Way at jill.way@supportuw.org or (608) 284-0012.



*Thank you for
your support!*

**THIS APRIL WE WERE FINALLY
ABLE TO HAVE THE SECOND
ANNUAL DAY OF THE BADGER!
WE WANT TO SEND OUR
SINCERE THANKS TO
EVERYONE WHO DONATED
TO OUR DEPARTMENT, AND
TO GENEROUS MEMBERS OF
OUR BOARD OF VISITORS
WHO PROVIDED A MATCHING
GIFT.**

**QUESTIONS?
COMMENTS?**

Contact us!

webadmin@english.wisc.edu

WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU'RE EXCITED TO ACCOMPLISH IN YOUR NEW ROLE?

I want to build on the technology adjustments used during COVID to create an inclusive advising environment for all students. While I am eager to return to in-person appointments, I recognize that many students struggle to find time for advising. I am excited to create resources and support for students, even if they can't come to my office.

HOW CAN ALUMNI HELP SUPPORT CURRENT UNDERGRADS?

Alumni play a critical role in supporting our undergrads. More than ever, undergrads are concerned about post-graduation plans and career opportunities. Acting as a mentor, connecting through our LinkedIn group, and sharing your story of how you reflect on your English major all will help the current students.

WE COULDN'T HELP BUT ASK: IF YOU COULD BE A CHARACTER IN ANY BOOK, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

This is an impossible question! If I had to pick, I would say Isabelle from "Nightingale" by Kristin Hannah. The character is based off a historical figure who helped downed English fighter pilots escape to Spain during WW II.



INTRODUCING Erin Polnaszek Boyd UNDERGRADUATE ADVISOR

We are pleased to share that we have welcomed a new Undergraduate Advisor to our department! Not only has Erin worked and studied at schools in the UW System, even earning an MA in English Literature from UW-Eau Claire, she has valuable experiences as a first-generation student to inform her work supporting our fellow English majors.



TEACHING AWARDS

Our department is home to the most award-winning teachers on the UW-Madison campus! This year we are proud to announce several new additions to our tradition of teaching excellence.

ALLIANT ENERGY JAMES R. UNDERKOFER EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING AWARD 2021

Dr. Mary Fiorenza
Associate Director of English 100
(our first-year composition program)

GRADUATE STUDENT TEACHING AWARDS

Innovation in Teaching Award:

Andrew Thomas

Early Excellence in Teaching

Award: Kaitlin Moore

Teaching Fellows Awards:

Brenna Swift, Yinka Arawomo

Since 1953, the College of Letters & Science has recognized its most accomplished faculty with the Distinguished Teaching Awards. Our department is proud to be home to two of this year's winners! You can read more about the award [here](#).



PROFESSOR AMAUD JOHNSON

Chancellor's Inclusive Excellence Award

From a student letter of support: "He embodies the importance of poetry... as being important not just for an academic setting or professional possibility, but primarily as soul work, as attention to language and song and stillness, as finding the words to tell someone just how much they mean to us or just how deep they cut us."



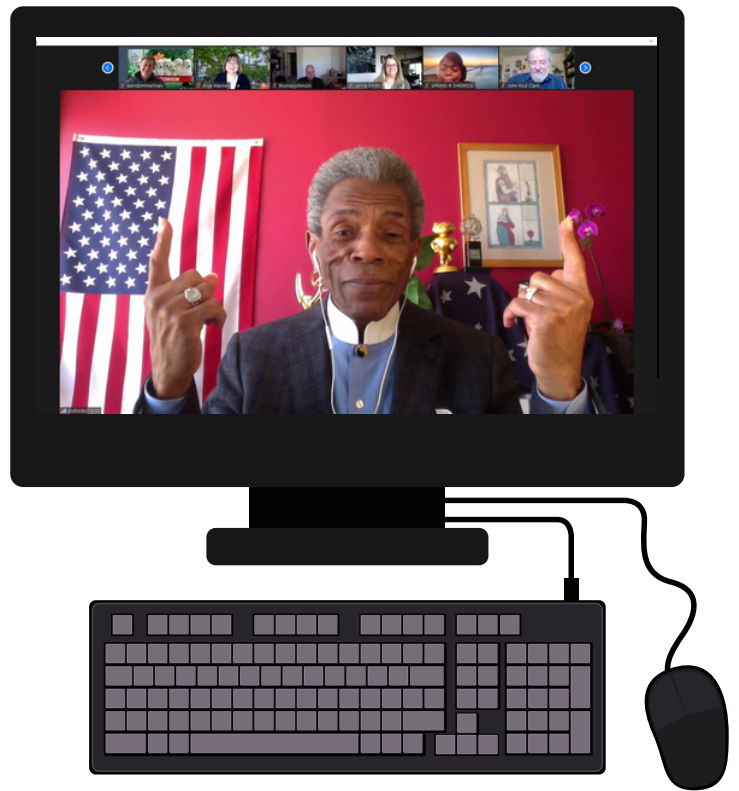
PROFESSOR CAROLINE GOTTSCHALK DRUSCHKE

Community Based Learning Teaching Award

From a student letter of support: "The trust she placed in our class inspired all of us to do our best possible work, represent UW-Madison as well as we could and seek connection at every opportunity."

A VISIT FROM ANDRÉ DE SHIELDS

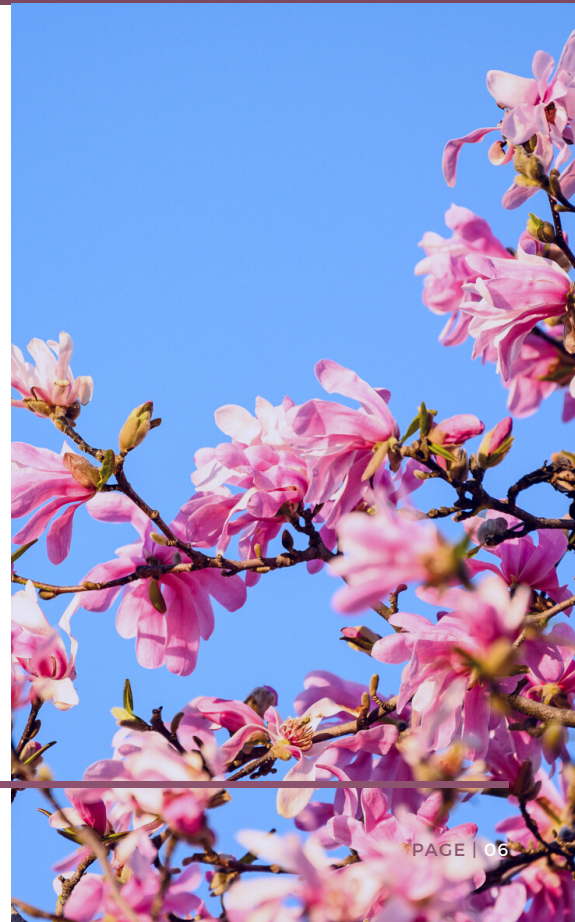
You might know him from his many appearances in acclaimed Broadway plays, television performances, the Tony Awards, or the Grammys. André De Shields is, among all these other things, a graduate from the UW-Madison English department! In a lively Zoom discussion at the end of April, our Board of Visitors presented him with the Distinguished Alumni Award. In addition to his commencement speech for UW-Madison's entire graduating class, he also included a special message for English's own Class of 2021. You can follow [this link to watch the video!](#)



ENGLISH & SUCCESSWORKS

A recap by Julia Meuse (Career & Internship Coordinator)

As part of the English department's ongoing commitment to undergraduate career readiness, we recently co-hosted an alumni career-networking event titled "English at Work". Our aims for this event were manifold: to expose our English majors to a broad variety of career paths, some of which they may have never before considered; to demonstrate the value of the English major to all students; to make clear the connections between their English coursework and skills to those needed in the workplace; to help students gain confidence in exploring and pursuing their career interests and goals; and, finally, to practice networking with alumni in a low-pressure, low-risk setting.



During this uncertain and turbulent time, we felt it was more important than ever that students feel confident they have the tools and knowledge to succeed in an increasingly competitive job market. During my time as the English Career Advisor, I have found that many of our majors believe they are narrowly suited to a few careers—publishing and English teaching being among the most common. But we know that not only are the skills associated with English degrees in demand across industries, but also that many alumni ended up in fulfilling careers for which they didn't plan or anticipate while they were students.

So, in partnership with the College of Letters and Sciences career center (SuccessWorks), we reached out to mid-career UW English alumni who could represent a wide range of fields. Our department chair, Professor Anja Wanner, sent out letters to prospective alumni describing the event and inviting them to participate.

We received many enthusiastic responses, and after we settled on about twenty alumni, we began to set the planning wheels in motion. Planning for an event of this scale, in an entirely new format with so many moving parts, was no small feat. But we managed to pull it off with nary a hitch while also laying the groundwork for similar events in the future.

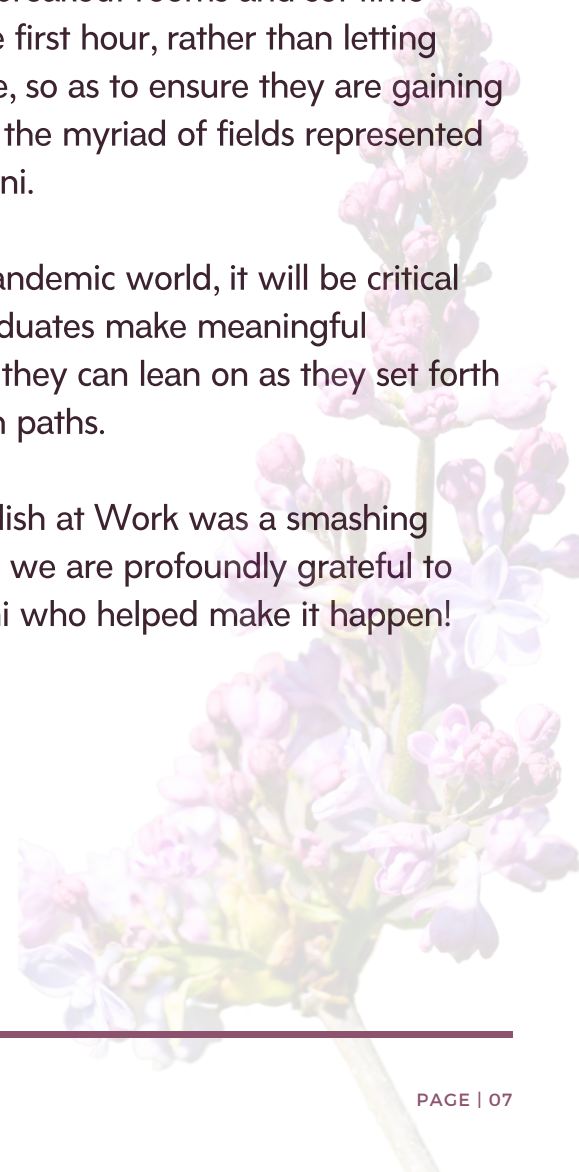
Due to COVID restrictions, English at Work was held entirely online—a first for a departmental career event. Past versions have typically involved in-person discussions with alumni in the area, as well as free food to entice student turnout.

In many ways the online version was an improvement: because alumni could participate remotely, it allowed for national and even international participation. Additionally, students could easily and comfortably attend from the comfort of their own homes.

On the other hand, we found the online event to allow for more passive participation as students could easily turn off their mics and cameras, which impacted the networking aspect of the event. Should we continue with an online format, we plan to find ways to encourage more active exchanges between students and alumni—as we know networking to be invaluable in enhancing career outcomes. We will also randomly assign students to breakout rooms and set time limits for the first hour, rather than letting them choose, so as to ensure they are gaining exposure to the myriad of fields represented by our alumni.

In a post-pandemic world, it will be critical that our graduates make meaningful connections they can lean on as they set forth on unknown paths.

Overall, English at Work was a smashing success, and we are profoundly grateful to those alumni who helped make it happen!



IN CONVERSATION WITH KASSIA SHAW

Composition and Rhetoric PhD candidate, Kassia Shaw, recently received the Humanities HEX award for her project. The purpose of the Humanities Exchange (HEX) award is to advance the Wisconsin Idea. Shaw's project is called:

"Sharing the Stories That Inspired 'Earth, Sky, Water:' A Ho-Chunk Ceramic Mural Installation in Maa Wakąčąk."



In 2014, Maa Wakąčąk ("Sacred Earth") was given back to the Ho-Chunk Nation as part of the landmark Badger Reuse process. It is a significant spiritual and ancestral landscape that extends from Te Wakąčąk (Devil's Lake State Park). In October 2020, local Ho-Chunk artists unveiled the "Earth, Sky, Water" ceramic mural on the Great Sauk State Trail, which visually records their connection to the landscape. Kassia's project will work towards collecting and editing the stories of those who contributed for publication on an official trail website and physical trail marker, in collaboration with Little Eagle Arts Foundation (LEAF) and River Arts Inc of Sauk Prairie.

HOW WILL THIS PROJECT CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR FUTURE WORK?

I think the biggest way this project will contribute to my work in the future is by having an opportunity to build relationships and give back to the Ho-Chunk community. Personally, and through my research, I am grateful to the Nation for their continued presence and survival in the Dejope (Madison) landscape, and I have deep respect for the wisdom they hold through generations of stories and history.

Their forced removal from Maa Wakąčąk represents a painful time in history, and I am humbled that they would share the mural with the public today, as well as generously offer to share their stories behind its significance.

HOW DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED IN THE PROJECT?

I first saw the "Earth, Sky, Water" mural, which is located on the Great State Sauk Trail in the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant landscape, this past fall when it was unveiled to the public in early October 2020 as part of the Wormfarm Institute's "Fermentation Fest" and "Farm/Art DTour." At the unveiling, I talked to several people who had traveled from across the state to be part of the day, and who recognized the cultural and historical significance of the project. It is the first Ho-Chunk art installation in the landscape since the Nation was given back this section of their ancestral homeland in December 2014. I revisited the mural again in early January when there was snow on the ground from a few days prior and I was struck by the number of footprints that left the trail to look at the mural. Even in the middle of winter—it was, and still is, drawing crowds. I think it's fair to say that there is a real interest about its significance and what some of the images mean, making this project both timely and important to the broader Wisconsin community.

HOW MIGHT THE PROJECT ADVANCE THE WISCONSIN IDEA?

I am currently in the process of interviewing the families who created the mural, recording how the project represents their connection to the landscape. This is a traditional time for the Ho-Chunk community to tell stories when there is snow on the ground, so I believe that those told for this project carry additional significance. Once the interviews are completed I will then write an introduction to the project that includes footage of interview excerpts on the trail's website, which will hopefully be available in the late spring or early summer. The goal is to foster cross-cultural education by sharing some of the stories with the public. The interviews will then be archived for the purpose of cultural preservation. In the spirit of the Wisconsin Idea, I see my role in this project as being at the service of the Ho-Chunk community in recording and sharing their stories in whatever way that they see as most appropriate. Through this process, I hope to help raise awareness among state residents that Ho-Chunk Nation holds important wisdom about our landscape. When we take time to listen and sit with those stories, or appreciate art projects such as this one, there can be

significant implications on how we might connect across cultural differences and how we might begin the process of reconciliation. This is a theme that I try to communicate in my research as well.

In that spirit, I think it's important to recognize the numerous people and community groups who collaborated to make this project possible well before my involvement: The Eli Leonard, Joann Jones, Nela Stacey, Connie Lonetree, and Lenore Sweet families created the mural last summer. Melanie Tallmadge Sainz, Executive Director of Little Eagle Arts Foundation (LEAF) oversaw the mural's creation and installation, and Lindsey Giese, Executive Director of River Arts Inc., helped coordinate its sponsoring grant and is eventual website. Rural Urban Flow Artist in Residence Muneer Bahauddeen and Project Apprentice Martina Patterson also helped with the mural creation process. And of course, I'm grateful to the UW Center for the Humanities for their support on this project.



Photo credit: Kassia Shaw

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A CONVERSATION WITH SHANNA BENJAMIN, PHD

*Author of Half In
Shadow: The Life and
Legacy of Nellie McKay*

From 1978 until her death from cancer in 2006, Nellie McKay pioneered the study of African-American literature as a professor at UW-Madison. In addition to her institutional legacies both here and throughout the region (as President of the Midwest Consortium of Black Studies), she has left behind published articles, edited volumes, and the long-lasting impact of her teaching and mentorship. In honor of Professor McKay's legacy, UW-Madison provides a number of one-year research fellowships to outstanding junior faculty whose creative work, research, teaching, and service contribute to the diversity of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This past year, three of our faculty members, Professors Yanie Fécu (Global Black Literatures), Kristina Huang (Global Black Literatures), and Eileen Lagman (Composition and Rhetoric), held Nellie McKay fellowships.

A graduate from our department's doctoral program in Literary Studies and a former student of McKay's, Dr. Shanna Benjamin, has recently published a biography about her esteemed advisor. We interviewed Dr. Benjamin to find out more about her experiences researching and writing a biography about someone she worked closely with, and who has done so much to shape the way we experience literary studies.

WHAT WAS THE MOST INSPIRING THING YOU LEARNED ABOUT NELLIE MCKAY WHILE WORKING ON THIS BOOK?

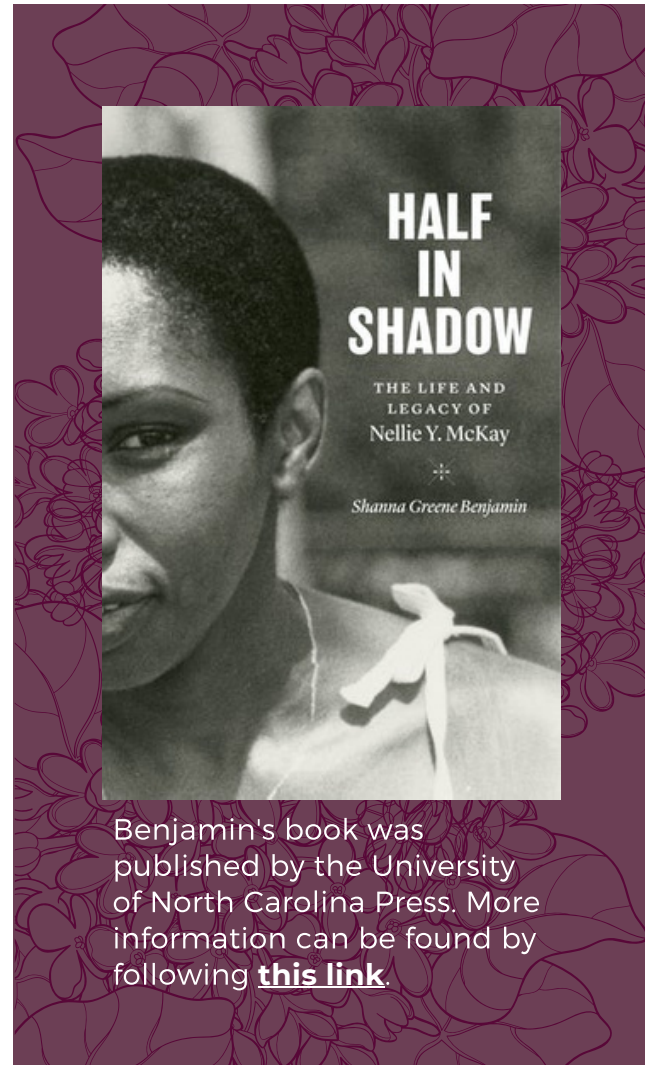
Before I started writing *Half in Shadow*, I viewed Nellie Y. McKay through the lens of my experience as her graduate student, which is to say that I saw McKay primarily as an academic who gave to the profession, to the department, and to her students as a scholar, as a teacher, and as a mentor.

Sure, writing the book gave me a new appreciation of who she was as a woman, complex and layered, but what inspired me the most was learning about her institution building and her absolutely brilliant brand of leadership. Having committed a good portion of my career to academic leadership (I directed Johnson C. Smith University's Honors College, served as an associate dean at Grinnell, and graduated from the HERS leadership program for women), I've always been interested in how decisions get made and how work gets done in the academy. It's easy to take for granted in African American literature as a respected and

integral part of any English department but it was McKay, as newly tenured faculty member, who shepherded the process that integrated African American literature (as a tradition, not just texts) into UW-Madison's English department. The steps she took to make that happen inspired me to imagine transformative possibilities in the spaces I inhabit.

WHAT IS THE #1 THING YOU WANT READERS TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT MCKAY AFTER READING THE BOOK?

Identifying one thing—my top thing—that I want readers to understand about McKay is hard because readers are multifaceted and, I expect, coming to my book for a wide variety of reasons. I wrote *Half in Shadow* for a broad audience, so I'll always cede space for interpretations or take-aways that have nothing to do with my overarching intention. But because this is for UW-Madison English alumni, I'd say that I want readers to understand who McKay was when she wasn't teaching her students or contributing to the institution. It's not uncommon for students to adopt a one-dimensional view of their professors based on what they do, not who they are. So, it's important to me that readers see McKay's interior, an unmistakably Black interior, and understand how the sum total of her life experiences made her a woman who was more than her career-long tenure at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. And if we're talking about limiting beliefs, Black women in the professoriate are too often praised for their service to an institution, as if their work defines them. McKay loved her job, yes, but she was more than her work. I certainly want readers to understand that.



TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE RESEARCHING FOR A BIOGRAPHY, SPECIFICALLY WHAT KIND OF "RELATIONSHIP" YOU DEVELOP WITH YOUR SUBJECT. ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE ALUMNI WHO HAVE HAD THEIR EXPERIENCES IN THE DEPARTMENT AFTER MCKAY'S DEATH, SHE SEEMS LIKE A FASCINATING PERSON WITH WHOM TO DEVELOP AN ACQUAINTANCE.

That's an important question, especially since the fifteen years since McKay's passing have gone by for me in a flash. For others, who as you say are just becoming acquainted with her, I imagine the fifteen years between then and now make the era when she was a fixture within UW-Madison's English department feel quite distant. The biography itself, and the act of researching it, then, is an effort to bring the past forward, to push against forgetting. To do McKay's story justice, I had to do more than acquaint myself with her life, I needed to become intimate with it. That closeness allowed me to imagine feelings beyond my source material and to render my subject with depth and nuance. From the very first day we met, I knew she was fascinating; after reading *Half in Shadow*, I hope others will feel that way, too.