

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR NELLIE Y. MCKAY

Nellie McKay, Bascom Professor of English and Afro-American Studies and an affiliate member of the Women's Studies Program, died January 22, 2006, in Fitchburg, Wisconsin. She had previously held the Jean Wall Bennett Professorship in American Studies and the Evjue Professorship in Afro-American Studies. A native of New York City, Professor McKay earned a B.A. in English from Queens College in 1969, an M.A. in English and American literature from Harvard University in 1971, and a Ph.D. in the same field from Harvard in 1977. Between 1972 and 1978, she taught at Simmons College in Boston before joining the faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1978.

A central figure in establishing black women's studies in academic and intellectual life, Professor McKay's work combined the highest scholarly standards with an ability to communicate to people outside academia. As co-editor of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, which was nominated for the NAACP's 1997 "Image" award, she was instrumental in defining the canon of African American literature for the 21st century. The *Norton* has become the standard text in African American literature courses and has reached a large readership among the general public, as the 200,000 copies sold attests. The author of many essays on black women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Jacobs, Professor McKay was instrumental in bringing serious scholarly attention to the work of Toni Morrison. In addition, she organized and presided over two of the benchmark conferences in the field of African American Studies, a 1994 conference on "African American Studies in the 21st Century" and a 2003 conference celebrating the Centennial of the publication of W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Professor McKay's impact extended far beyond the field of African American Studies. She was a member of the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association and narrowly missed being elected to the presidency of the organization. She served on the editorial boards of influential journals including *American Literary History*, *African American Review*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Legacy: A Journal of Nineteenth Century American Women Writers*. Her work addressed crucial issues in the fields of Women's Studies and American literary studies. Her 1998 article in *PMLA*, "Who Shall Teach African American Literature?" sparked a fruitful discussion of the need to diversify faculties while opening the field of African American literary studies to qualified scholars and students of all races. She was especially dedicated to nurturing students and young scholars in the field of African American literature. Her efforts resulted in the creation of a "Bridge Program" that allowed students to move directly into the Ph.D. program in English after completing an M.A. in Afro-American Studies. Her books included: *Jean Toomer, Artist, A study of His Literary Life and Work, 1894-1936*; and the edited volumes *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*; *Toni Morrison's 'Beloved': A Casebook*; and *Harriet Jacobs' 'Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl'* (co-editor Frances Foster).

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