She May Very Well Have Invented Herself

And she had nothing to fall back on:
not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood,
not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself.
—TONI MORRISON, “What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib”

I was drawn to Nellie Y. McKay’s story because I know what it’s like to want something more, to know and believe that you have the tools to achieve more, even if you don’t know what “more” is.

In my freshman year of high school, my family moved from Willingboro to Cherry Hill, New Jersey. I received an outstanding education in Willingboro, but it is clear to me now, and was perhaps clear to my parents then, that the town’s halcyon days were drawing to a close. Between the recession that spanned 1980–1982, Ronald Reagan’s “war on drugs,” tax cuts for the wealthy, deployment of the “welfare queen” as stereotype and political dog whistle,¹ and an unemployment rate for Blacks that was twice that of whites leading into the 1980s,² African American communities such as those in my hometown were particularly vulnerable. Only seven exits along I-295 separate Willingboro from Cherry Hill, and, at the time, the differences between them could be measured in degrees: on the whole, Cherry Hill was whiter and wealthier, was in closer proximity to Philadelphia, and boasted one of the state’s top public high schools. In the long run, my family’s move facilitated greater educational access and deeper financial gains, another rung on Langston Hughes’s crystal stair. I made friends easily through choir, student government, and soccer, but the move came at a cost. I went from
being one of many Black students to being one of only a few, and this made it hard for me to feel that I belonged.

Soccer turned out to be a space of belonging where I would reinvent myself. Soccer taught me the power of teamwork, which involves acknowledging your role, playing your position, and pursuing excellence in the interest of advancing the whole. I learned to see my teammates' weaknesses better than they did. Not as a source of judgment but to be able to seamlessly support and accommodate. As team captain and sweeper, I led the team from the back, my perspective enhanced by my ability to see the entire pitch. I experienced the sensation of flight when my physicality matched the flow of the game, intuitive movement made possible by practice, repetition, or what Daddy calls “impressions on the muscles.” When I played, I felt perfect, capable, and strong. I could be aggressive, shrewd, and competitive, all of the things stereotyped portrayals of Black women and girls said I should not be. But in my mind, I was pitch-perfect. Soccer met a deep need; during the span of my high school years, I went from defining myself by my academic achievements to prioritizing my athletic ability. So much so that when the time came to apply to college, I focused more on the athletic programs and recruitment than on graduation rates and majors offered. I made my decision. In the late summer of 1990, I was off to New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the Rutgers University women's soccer team.

Rutgers was hard. Training camp and three-a-days—practice in the morning, practice in the afternoon, and a scrimmage under the lights at night—strained my capacity physically and mentally. Training camp was the first thing I ever wanted to quit. Every day, I said as much to my roommate and women's soccer teammate Sandy Dickson; and every single day, she refused to let me. For all that I learned during training camp—the power of one person to make a difference and finishing what you start—I still sought validation from Coach, imagining that even if I barely made it off the bench, I could work hard enough to win his approval. The season progressed. The validation I sought never came. I had a choice. Wait, perhaps in vain, for Coach's validation or validate myself. I chose the latter, and once I learned to play for myself, a new world opened up. I would shine on the inside with every well-placed pass, every expertly defended attack. In the process, I confronted a hard truth: I had no future in the sport. I had nothing to fall back on. Not soccer, and after a poor showing my first semester, certainly not academics. And out of this unmooring, I reinvented myself. I remembered Mill Creek and the crystal stair, Success Cards, love, and the belief others had in my ability to succeed. These stories provided
the confidence I needed to change course. And so, I transferred to my parents’ alma mater: Johnson C. Smith University (JCSU), a small historically Black college miles away in Charlotte, North Carolina.

At Johnson C. Smith, I met Nellie Y. McKay on the page before I ever saw her face. As a UNCF/Mellon Mays fellow, I researched the uses of folklore in Toni Morrison’s novels and came across her work while compiling an annotated bibliography for my research project. When Sandy Adell, a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin–Madison who attended a graduate school fair sponsored by JCSU’s Honors College, showed me a list of UW-Madison's Afro-American Studies faculty, I pointed: “I know that name.”

I knew your name. I was headed to graduate school because I wanted to be a college professor. I wanted to teach at an HBCU because I wanted students to see themselves reflected in the faculty. I was headed to UW-Madison because I sought a vocabulary to describe what I knew about myself and my people, Black people, but could not fully express. “My hand,” in the words of Gwendolyn Brooks, was “stuffed with mode, design, device. / But I lack access to my proper stone.” I was ready to reinvent myself and conjured memories of my younger days to fuel my pursuit of a life of the mind.

The desire to stretch and reach for something more is certainly not unique, but McKay’s approach to achieving against the odds is what makes her both singular and representative of women like me who imagine futures beyond their present-day circumstances, and who step out in search of some very vital missing thing.