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Bully Pulpit: Dream Projects

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In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his powerful “I have a dream” speech on the National Mall in Washington, DC. More recently, Deray McKesson, a leader of the Black Lives Matter movement, has regularly sent an end-of-day message to his Twitter followers: “Sleep well y’all. Remember to Dream.” I hear a recording of the former, and I weep. I read the latter, and I weep. There is yet so much dreaming to be done; there is yet so much *work* to be done, added to what is surely an unfathomably large accumulated burden already carried by people of color. I consider these dreams during the month that marks the opening of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American Culture, a space of black pride and memory, claimed out of a white space that was partially constructed from the forced labor of black bodies. Bookends from the National Mall: a speech about a dream delivered at one end; a museum opening fifty-three years later, and not even one mile away, that helps us recall lived nightmares of bondage as well as the beckoning call of hope. On our phones and in our minds: an activist who reminds us that without dreams, the struggle for justice dies.

As scholars, we also reach and grasp for dreams that may remain elusive. I am now a university dean, but I am also and always a scholar, a historian of the built environment. My dreams now must necessarily weave my scholarship into the fabric of my administrative work—and vice versa—a conjoining of the social justice objectives of my scholarship with my daily endeavors on a large, public university campus. For nearly thirty years, I have been studying and writing about spatial segregation and exclusion and their links to

privilege and power as these are expressed in the built environment, both now and in the past. I have examined uncomfortable topics from the privileged safety of a tenured academic position, and as a white woman in the academy. I have imagined “my work” as the research and published scholarship I have produced outside the classroom, created from jealously collected fragments of time away from teaching and service. But as my administrative life has taken on larger and surprisingly fulfilling dimensions, I have begun to realize two things: first, “my work” will no longer happen unless it is integrated into my life of teaching and service; second, “my work” can move from the printed page (where I analyze problems) to the campus (where I and others address them), and only if it becomes a collaboration among committed partners of faculty, students, staff, and administrators. We must dream together.

In addition to laboring in archives and libraries, I now also work in offices where I study budgets, talk with potential donors, collaborate with like-minded and creative colleagues, and listen carefully to the concerns and experiences of those around me. I dream about and then work to make the student, staff, and faculty populations of my campus as diverse as possible, a welcoming environment for all. But, from my research, I know too much about spatial exclusion and the many obstacles posed by social injustices to imagine we are near that goal. I still study and write about race and space, suburban exclusion and housing segregation, but I also now apply what I know about these subjects to find ways to guide under-represented and first-generation students toward our campus, and toward study in the humanities. I dream about a world in which access to knowledge, to advanced intellectual challenges, and to the creative joys of a humanities education are possible for anyone who shares the dream. The façade of our campus library exhorts me daily to “IMAGINE” in letters the height of a four-story building. So imagine I must.

As a consequence, my scholarship and my administrative work are becoming a single endeavor, propelled by a single vision that rests on the conviction that we must overcome the racist structures that have shaped our scholarship and our classrooms; our admissions processes and our housing policies; our syllabi and our sidewalks. I can collaborate with others who make these issues a priority, to create structures and apparatuses to realize a dream. This is not easy work, nor does it come without cost. It moves at a pace that

requires more patience than I have been given, so I look to my collaborators as better models of quiet persistence that inspire me to press on. It requires resources in a resource-scarce environment. It remains a struggle in the face of powerful forces. And yet, we must imagine, we must continue to dream.