Memory Work for All:  
Getting Beyond Neoliberalism’s Racialized Politics of the American Dream

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Thus the American dream is an impressive ideology. It has for centuries lured people to America and moved them around within it, and it has kept them striving in horrible conditions against impossible odds. Most Americans celebrate it unthinkingly, along with apple pie and motherhood; criticism typically is limited to imperfections in its applications.¹

The idea of the “American Dream” lives powerfully in America’s cultural imagination as an aspirational trope. Although the nature of the dream varies, its accomplishment is universally viewed as a worthwhile goal.²

Ta-Nehisi Coates offers a racial hermeneutic of the term.³ Indicting its symbolism, Coates claims that it masks the complicity of its acquisitive aims by abetting racialized violence and oppression in the United States. “The Dream” is the very ideation of white materialist achievement and all of its accoutrements.

This paper argues that neoliberalism is most implicated in such a dream—a dream in which scarcity of resources, competition, and commodification that encourages consumerism are all axiomatic. As a corollary, it underwrites the privileging of private consumption and an individualistic prosperity as primarily being “for me and mine.”

² Hochschild and Seovronick detail the conflict between individual benefits and the public good that is taking place in public schools and that lead to a growing opportunity gap for the least advantaged students.

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“The Dream” is the metaphor within which these claims are justified and made legitimate. Animated by claims of meritocracy, colorblind ideology, and a white-washed history, the idea of the American dream functions much like an opiate—one that neoliberal advocates have lately administered to the masses. It justifies the increasing corporate influence on the institutions of democratic society and the ceding of increasing aspects of our lives to market forces.

This paper also explores, then, the differential cultural wages of neoliberal ideology. By couching itself in a discourse of colorblind individualism, and by placing an inherent value
on laissez faire economics, neoliberal economic and educational policies have advanced a ruthless “single story” of American aspirations.\(^4\) Desire itself is co-opted under such a regime.

The possibilities for achieving racial commons in the American context goes beyond this singular and materialist conception. It might go instead to a shared experience of the struggle for, and the joys of, a meaningful life. Such a vision would make sense of the complex attachments to places in American geography, their histories, and the journeys that individuals and families made across states, regions, and countries to acquire a new sense of belonging on American soil.

The individual and collective cultural processes of memory work hold promise for fostering an American dream predicated on personhood and the recognition of diverse forms of group identity. Appealing to bell hooks, Theresa Edlmann, and Rebecca Martusewicz, this paper explores the possibilities for a dream rooted in connections to places, spaces, and their history. This work proposes that the forms of migration that are inherent in the American story can make possible the common, continual, and forward march of our society towards a more unifying vision of American aspirations.

Ultimately, these journeys and the way that they mediate forms of identity are essential to cultivating a shared sense of place. In this way, they can treat the racial animus and counter neoliberal individualist ideology.

**Coates & the Neoliberal Appropriation of the American Dream**

As an ideology, the American dream has powerfully motivated both creative and reformist discourses.\(^5\) Nominally related to basic principles for being successful, the American dream is a construction that can direct one’s life goals towards the achievement of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.\(^6\)

Paradoxically, the lived disparity between the reality and the ideal has given rise to revisionist critiques and interpretations. Ta-Nehisi Coates’ Between the World and Me represents the American dream or “the Dream” as complicit in the historical oppression of black and brown bodies. For, indeed, the sustained, deleterious effects of economic and social policies on the black community are a thread that runs through the narrative—and, perhaps, undergird the very possibility of the narrative itself.

Coates’ work, as has been widely acknowledged, is written as in the intergenerational epistolary discourse—a discourse that Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time made famous.\(^7\) The letter addresses his 15-year-old son, Samori, on the occasion of the news that the officers responsible for the shooting of Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, would not be charged with a crime. When “a journalist asked [Coates] what it meant to lose [his] body,”\(^8\) he awoke to the burden to “awaken her from the most gorgeous dream.”\(^9\)

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\(^{4}\) This concept of a “single story” has been popularized through the 2009 TED Talk of the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).


\(^{9}\) Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 5.

\(^{10}\) Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 11.
Coates reveals that there is no escape from this harsh reality for blacks, who must live daily under this cloud. Coates remarks that, as a child, he recognized this difference between his way of life and the one in the popular media—all too clearly associated with bright hopes.

Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that fear was connected to the dream out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets. But how? Religion could not tell me. The schools could not tell me. The streets could not help me see beyond the scramble of each day. Coates contrasts the sonorous images of holiday cookouts, picket fences along, peppermint, and strawberry shortcake with the brutal acknowledgement that he did not have the luxury to find escape and comfort in these cultural artifacts.

For “the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies.” It is this linking of the Dream to the exploitative economy that Coates details.

The Neoliberalization of the American Dream as Racial Differentiation

Neoliberalism has increasingly co-opted the American dream. Coates helps us see this. Neoliberalism is an economic system of controlling markets and fostering competition in industries and the private and public sectors. Neoliberals seek less federal interference in daily lives and more privatization. Maintaining that everyone is on a level playing field, neoliberals promote performance-based economic accountability and meritocratic policies, practices, and discourses.

Under the presupposition that any American citizen can compete equally under such a system, neoliberalism favors a colorblind approach to public policy, while covertly dismissing social justice critiques of racial inequality in mainstream politics. This ideology is manifested in schools in the form of the corporate control of public schools and the proliferation of charter schools.

Coates writes, “the myth perpetuated by the conservative American dream was an opportunity ripe for the talented few who could seize and exploit that opportunity.” Among that which was seized on as “opportunity” was black lives and black bodies—plundered and economically exploited to advance the dream of the few. This is a story that dates to 1619.

The nature of the profiteering has changed over time. Current neoliberal policies can obstruct, bind, and silence the human body through forms of corporate privatization of public services—such as in the case of the privatized prisons, charter schools, and contracted armed services.

Coates calls on this same history when he confronts whiteness. His evocative phrase—one that asks the reader to question who is white and why—is “the people who believe that they are white.” Colorblindness is, in this way

11 Coates, Between the World and Me, 29.
12 Coates, Between the World and Me, 11.
13 Coates, Between the World and Me, 151.
14 Coates, Between the World and Me, 7.
tied up with neoliberalism. It hides the ugly truth of white supremacy, allowing European Americans to live under a cloak of invisibility while other Americans are forced to live in its margins. Whiteness has become a market factor in a system that carries privilege and power.

Neoliberalism, therefore, is complicit in, sustained by, and therefore perpetuates white supremacy. The only people able to passively ignore whiteness are European-Americans. They do so as a tenet of their unmerited white privilege. All other ethnic groups in America, especially black Americans, live with the irrefutable reality of whiteness and white privilege every day.

Coates exemplifies this point in his discussion of the ever-present condition of fear of black youth in America. He argues that the fear of violence, fear of death, or fear of disembodiment is an inescapable reality of being black in this America. “The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear.” The fear is old, as are the policies meant to produce them. The question is how they have been re-shaped by neoliberalism—how the social and political realities of black life in America are related to the opportunities offered to European Americans under the neoliberal market system.

Coates solidifies this element of his argument by detailing the benefits granted to white Americans that allow them to be more profitable players within neoliberalism.

But a society that protects some people through a safety net of schools, government-backed home loans, and ancestral wealth but can only protect [a black male child] with the club of criminal justice has either failed at enforcing its good intentions or has succeeded at something much darker.16

Neoliberalism purchases and sustains the dream of meritocracy for white Americans by way of its subversion of black reality, subjugation of the black body, and violence in black communities. Similarly, even though neoliberals may reject white supremacist intentions, dismissing race as a factor upholds white supremacy by allowing some to silently accept its privileges.

Coates exemplifies the contradictions and risks of conceding race as a factor in neoliberalism while calling out the passivity that allows white supremacy to thrive unrecognized. “No one directly proclaimed that schools were designed to sanctify failure and destruction. But [in my childhood] a great number of educators spoke of ‘personal responsibility’ in a country authored and sustained by a criminal irresponsibility.”17 The reference to personal responsibility is likened to the neoliberal call for a narrowing of the social safety net so that a greater burden is placed on the individual to secure his or her future, even in the event of circumstances over which he or she had no control.

Additionally, it hints at a “blame the victim” regime that allows the state to deny responsibility towards its citizens. By comparison, white Americans are allowed to dismiss all responsibility for the violent, discriminatory practices imposed on generations of black Americans that disenfranchises and disempowers them. Ignoring race and dismissing it is a tactic of oppression for all engaged.

Schools as Context for the Neoliberal Suppression of Black and Brown Dreams

15 Coates, Between the World and Me, 10.
16 Coates, Between the World and Me, 18.
17 Coates, Between the World and Me, 33.
Giroux and Giroux maintain that youth of color are especially under attack in our society, through neoliberal school reform that treats these youths as dangerous and in need of containment.\(^\text{18}\) Black youth are now blamed for their social problems and treated as criminals—as opposed to victims of their condition. Thus, schools that serve children of color in low-income communities under a neoliberal system are privatized and militarized in ways that punish these students. Furthermore, neoliberal policies advocate legislation that supports and promotes the criminalization of children of color under the gaze of color-blind policy.

Coates chronicles the contemporary experiences of young black male children for whom school is parallel to juvenile detention centers in its physical structure, curricular design, and hidden curricula. For example, Coates maintains that the black child is not asked to be curious, but merely to fit neatly into the narrow confines of public school contexts that may see his existence as irrelevant to the specific functioning of the school system, and, more broadly, American society.

Under the veil of whiteness, Coates argues that his own “schools did not reveal truths, they concealed them.”\(^\text{19}\) Thus, black identity and experiences are silenced and excluded from the curricula. This exclusion perpetuates narrow conceptions of who can be known and valued in American schooling to singularly Americans of European descent. This aids in the invisibility of whiteness and, in turn, white supremacy is tacitly endorsed as the normalized way of life.

Doing Memory Work for a New Ideal

Coates argues that, in this contemporary historical moment of the last half-century, neoliberal policies have contributed to the emergence of a racially colorblind and yet differentiated iteration of the American dream. It is an ideological preoccupation with individual material success and achievements. It is an endorsement of policies at every level of government that accommodate this ideal of the American life journey.

Quality of life studies of the political landscape suggest that this ideology has spread while the citizenry has, by in large, not been able to make satisfactory social mobility gains. Therefore, deep levels of dissatisfaction with material conditions afflict not only the white working class, but also all of the middle class.

Further compounding the social crisis is that African-Americans generally recognize, at the local level, the structural and systemic sources of this newly broadened inequality that has arisen and have been maintained because of these very policies. As Hochschild explains,\(^\text{20}\) because the complaints of the black population are situated within calls for racial justice, the white working class are inured to claims of social inequality.

Coates’ work illustrates the wide-ranging and overarching historical narrative that warrants the indictment of this account of the American journey. As such, it is a kind of

\(^{18}\) Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 137.
\(^{19}\) Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 27.

memory work for Coates and for his son, Samori. This section of the paper explores the possibilities of grand remembering, or “memory work,” as a way of countering the neoliberal iteration of the American dream.

We argue that a cultural understanding of the places and spaces of self-association and the history that accompanies them hold the promise of resituating the American dream. It can be viewed as a struggle for the establishment of a new commons around the moral complexity of both American glories and its acts of hegemony—both of which inhabit its past, particularly as they have been lived out in the groups with which one identifies.

Coming out of the scholarship of anthropology, history, and, lately, of peace studies, the concept of memory work broadly refers to the “cultural shaping of memory.” It is premised on the idea that the prevailing cultural knowledge of an ethnic group indicates the fluid remembering and forgetting that collectively shapes the group’s identity.

According to Jennifer Cole, this notion of social memory refers to “the means through which a group reconstructs, assimilates, and understands its past, and its role in the formation of the group’s contemporary identity.” Cole’s work explores the role of memory in everyday life, habits, and practices, specifically in redress to the harms of colonization. In conjunction with Coates’ critique, and with consideration of the mediating factors in the American context (e.g. centuries of chattel slavery and pervasive settler exploitations and practices), such notions can point the way towards possibilities for a morally legitimate and more inclusive account.

At issue in Cole’s work is the extent to which people are able to fully realize a sense of their own subjectivity. In light of prolonged subjugation, hardship, and suffering of colonial regimes, how do such societies erect or reestablish a meaningful sense of survival and continuation?

“To remember is more than simply to recall a specific event or fact. It means defining [a] place and position in the world, asserting links with particular people and places while rejecting others.” It is a work of memory that is a collective and continual. As such, it can be characterized as an ongoing journey of meaning-making in which there are culturally intentional choices of identity formation. In this way, “it is important not to reduce memory to politics by other means but to see it as a moral practice, drawing on affect and on deep struggles for personal and collective meaning.”

We believe that Between the World and Me exemplifies this sort of memory work. On this reading, Coates offers not merely a re-narration but imposes a discursive structure upon American history that is consistent with a moral ideal and its inherent order. In his historical reconstruction, he asserts the fundamental humanity of the embodied black race, even as he unflinchingly describes the horror of white supremacy that must follow as an implication.

Coates shows that it is possible to selectively limit the formative role that four centuries of slavery and de jure and de facto Jim Crow laws can have on a people’s group identity. It shows the way towards the invention of a generative post-slavery consciousness that endures and even triumphs in the face of oppression.

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25 It is worth noting that this practice of memory work is one that one could also associate with Womanist thinking as attributed originally to Alice Walker, Katie Cannon and Emile Townes. Coates models an interplay between
America is a nation where historical rootedness to a place is highly racialized and politically conflicted. As a result, a person’s social position is deeply connected to the body’s symbolic and material significance—as Coates maintains, in ways that arguably can supersede regional or local affiliation. If the aim is an American dream that does not pit one racial group against the other, below, we propose a preliminary account of symbolic lenses through which there can be racially situated memory work for all in the American context.

**Black and White Embodiment in Remembering of American History**

Coates offers racially differentiated tasks of minding one’s body in pursuit of carving out a meaningful existence: In his epistle, he explains to Samori that embodiment as a black person in America equates to compensating for the social import of one’s body in light of the American’s tradition of “destroying the body.”

Haile describes Coates’ orientation towards the body as “underscoring its capacities to both open up and close down material possibilities of life and death.” There is the equation of the likelihood of life fortunes and outcomes with the form of one’s racial embodiment. The black American’s charge in light of this history is to be engaged in the ongoing work of asserting one’s humanity. It is achieved through a historically grounded understanding and celebration of the meaning of black embodied identity as part of the African Diaspora. For as Coates tells his son, “you cannot arrange your life around them and the small chance of the Dreamers coming into consciousness.”

By comparison, the labor of white Americans vis-à-vis the body is only indirectly addressed and yet it implicitly runs through the entire work. There is a stark chronicling of historical and contemporary racial injustices that beg the question of the salience of the moral imperatives of the nation’s charter documents. Coates makes clear the interpretive gap between asserting equality and the way in which its realization is linked to the necessary racial and phenotypic criterion of whiteness.

What, then, needs to happen for white Americans? Acknowledging whiteness as real embodied racial identity in all of the evil that it has wrought while not foreclosing the possibility for reformation. Yet Coates is clear that he is not exactly concerned with the enactment of this particular memory practice. It is a task for this “other” to define.

As Coates explains.

Americans deify democracy in a way that allows for a dim awareness that they have, from time to time, stood in defiance of their God. … In fact, Americans, in a real sense, have never betrayed their God.

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29 Coates, Between the World and Me, 146.
When Abraham Lincoln declared, in 1863, that the battle of Gettysburg must ensure “that government of the people, by the people, for people, shall not perish from the earth,” he was not merely being aspirational … The question is … what our country has, throughout history, taken the political term “people” to mean.\(^{30}\)

America’s economic and political history has constructed racially opposed counterparts in blackness and whiteness and therefore interconnects a troubled heritage in which white dominant traditions and historical narratives simultaneously rest on embodied white supremacy and black subordination.

As Haile describes:

To be white, for Coates, means to be part of an encoded mind-body-world system that through symbolic and memory recollection reinforces certain beliefs within certain material orders and linguistic patterns. Coates is arguing from this moment that the “world” as such, that is, the determination of who was “white” and who was not, was merely meant to ignore a fundamental truth of its disclosedness: the world as such was a conscious, embodied construction of meaning value, space-time expression.\(^{31}\)

These mythologies of white America that Coates highlights inform the guidance that is provided for his son. Coates offers no final proclamation about the redemptive prospects for persons that he calls “the Dreamers.” However, the way forward clearly is indicated in an acknowledgement of these racialized harms.

Theresa Edlmann’s work in peace-making in post-Apartheid South Africa is, in this sense, instructive. Edlman characterized memory work there as taking place in settings where parties from different sides of political or ethnic conflict can listen to each other’s stories. This historical memory work is premised on the value that each person attributes to his or her own account of their lived experiences.

It holds that “analysing and clarifying the beliefs, attitudes and values that people hold dear, through mechanisms primarily aimed at listening to what people have to say, is central to making sense of current realities and complexities, while in the midst of conflict, and within a post conflict.”\(^{32}\) The narrative method that is used in the peace-building context is a form of reflexive engagement with the stories of others. The aim is to influence “the ‘inner dialogues’ of the members of the respective groups as well as the narratives that are woven throughout the way people engage in domestic and public networks and spaces.”\(^{33}\)

Historical memory work provides the opportunity for each participant to conceive of his or her narrative in direct dialogue with other perspectives and possibly see the “bigger picture” of a conflict. In addition, it involves multiple forms of expression, such as “mediation and victim support, workshops, public conversations, research, photographic and video work, as well as writing and research.”\(^{34}\)

**Memories of Embodied Journeys in Black and White**

Related to the moral and social significance of embodied racial identification, the differential political and social economies of the body underscore the transactional nature of freedom

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31 Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 499.
33 Edlmann, “A Reflection,” 231.
and autonomy. Under these systems, local, national, and international regimes and institutions constrain the freedom and control of one’s movements—or simply where one’s body is compelled to be.

For Coates, the iconic image of Michael Brown’s body lying in the street for multiple hours, uncovered, while police conducted an investigation, was a visceral reminder. Black bodies can often occupy the position of least freedom in this regard. These unequal economies produce varied odysseys to and in the United States. In contrast, the Dreamers are free to “plunder” land, sea, and people without explicit recourse of conscience.

Memory work that gets beyond the divisive politicization of the American dream to construct a more unifying identity seeks a common categorization. It transcends the experiences of voluntary and involuntary passages and their mitigating role in identity formation. In the notion of journeys in social memory, there is the assumption that one is defined by where one has come from as much as the place in which one is found.

Questions that such an exploration elicits include: What is essentially American across all the various passages? What must be remembered and what must we render to the dust heap of history in order that these values can survive? As such, forms of journeys are common experiences within which to understand the meaning of the American dream in terms of the politics of social and geographic location.

For example, Isabel Wilkerson offers a remarkable account of the Great Migration as a mediating factor in black identity. Motivated by an epidemic of lynching and the economic deprivation of share cropping, descendants of former slaves, by the millions, made the journey from the south to the American West, Midwest, and North in hopes of achieving their American dream. Their journey explains the distinct southern influence evident in these regions of the country. It also introduces further diversity and variation into the meanings of African American identity.

However, the (lack of) housing and discriminatory employment policies that these millions encountered at their destinations are also part of the narrative. The reception is part of the narrative and provides an explanation for the black urban hubs that exist today, generally abandoned by manufacturing and industry. They are part of Michael Brown’s story as well.

Similar narratives of journeys by members of the dominant racial group can also engage

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36 Richard Rothstein offers systematic historical evidence of the role of the federal government in advancing these racialized policies for most of the first half of the twentieth century. The resulting practices were so widespread in various geographic regions across the United States, Rothstein argues, as to qualify as de jure segregation. Richard Rothstein, The Color of the Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017).

with the politics of social and geographical location. For example, Timothy Lensmire’s recent work is an attempt to provide an account of journeying from—and then returning to—his rural hometown in order establish a common understanding with those that were left behind in light of the gap between his progressive beliefs and their more conservative ones.  

Lensmire’s work complicates whiteness in striving to reconcile his sense of both belonging and alienation. Considering forms of journeys can provide a framework from which a basis of individual common identity can emerge. hooks undertakes such a task in writing about issues of “space and location” as crucial in the evolution of her subjectivity.  

hooks identifies this effort with the movement in early post-apartheid South Africa, where the following statement was a mantra: “our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting.” In this sense, striving to make-meaning of the journeys of one’s life equates to an account of one’s social position relative to the broader culture.  

For hooks, being aware of her marginality as a youth is instructive in understanding the social divide that continues to occur in American society. From a marginalized position of Jim Crow Kentucky, hooks occupied a perspective of seeing “reality” as that which was both “from the outside in and from the inside out.” Her journey from rural Kentucky to a prestigious college in California to a leading academic asked her to engage with these early experience. Her aim should be ours: to articulate personal stories of the meaning of the American dream as it has been lived in connection with meaningful others situated in important places in the past—all the while working to reconcile tragedy with triumph.

The American tendency—perhaps the human tendency—is to frame historical accounts from the point of view of the victor rather than those who were vanquished. Often lacking is reflection on relative social position as a function of the kinds of journeys made and an awareness of the forms of privilege that exist in the American social system. As hooks notes, “fragments of memory are not simply represented as flat documentary but constructed to give a ‘new take’ on the old, constructed to move us into a different mode of articulation.” This process is quintessentially aspect of memory work.
home and the place from which his identity as a black man received its greatest affirmation. However, throughout Between the World and Me, he names multiple physical homes. For example, he identifies his parents’ home, his city, Baltimore, and the space that he shares with his partner and son. Coates situates each of these locations in a broader story of the black identity that he inhabits. Such a practice suggests that the act of identifying a home on the transient and highly-contested American soil demands memory work.

Similarly, hooks frames remembering home as palliative for those hailing from the margins of society (but who are also striving for acknowledgement, belonging and full agency). Such a process first involves a narrative that connects the history of places to actual spaces within which one’s self was, is, and will be constituted. For instance, the small Kentucky town in which hooks lived as child exhibited the traits of Jim Crow segregation.

However, it was home. Its symbolic value inheres in that:

Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, and order that does not demand forgetting.43

Critically reflecting on one’s home as a privileged place is an important for memory work. For those in the dominant racial group for whom a sense of marginality is not evident, the recourse to “Dreamer nostalgia” can be disrupted by developing a politics of social and geographical location. As Coates explains, the meaning of a place can hold drastically different implications for black Americans versus those who are white—for whom home can evoke the very racially colorblind Dreamer-narrative of personal success that has been so historically pernicious.

Between the World and Me illustrates the meaning of memory for those who have been historically oppressed. The work of remembering home and those with whom it is associated provides impetus for resistance and the opportunity “to heal” or to simply live bravely in the face of the truth, as Coates promises to do.44

Coming to an American Dream of the Commons

In envisioning this reworked ideal of American dream, the recourse is therefore to journeys: journeys through landscapes that open possibilities for conversations—conversations that may evoke and invoke the social and ecological fate of those spaces.

For if the success of the individual is not sacrosanct, and if the various dilemmas introduced by the detaching from home are considered in the meaning of this reworked American dream, then important considerations are now up for discussion. These conversations can involve policies and interventions that can be undertaken to encourage sustainable living and working spaces where the American dream is achievable with due consideration to the meaning of home.

In Rebecca Martusewicz’s place-based understanding of flourishing, the construct of the commons encompasses the shared values around which a diverse community coalesces.45

43 hooks, Yearning, 148.
44 hooks and Mesa-Bains, Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism, 107.
45 Rebecca Martusewicz, “Toward an Anti-centric Ecological Culture.” Rebecca A. Martusewicz, Jeff Edmundson, and John Lupinauci, Ecojustice Education: Toward Di-
The commons-based approach, particularly as it applies to education, works:

as a reform [that] emphasizes two important tasks. The first is a close examination of the commodification of life systems by the globalizing forces of western economic and cultural systems, and the fundamental discursive and thus subjective or psycho-social positions that make this destructive behavior possible . . . The second equally important task . . . is to identify and reclaim those relationships, practices, and beliefs within our communities that do not promote or rely upon the system of commodification, and that thus pose important alternatives to the largely self-interested and exploitive practices generating consumer culture.46

We must resist individualistic and meritocratic values system that underwrite a consistent and widespread pattern of commodification. Community and school spaces devoted to exploring diverse journeys as a part of the politics of location hold the promise of being generative for community, group, and individual well-being.

In a 1965 meeting between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley, Jr., the subject was whether the American dream had been achieved at the expense of the black race.47 While it was not clear to Buckley that such a state of affairs was the case, Baldwin provided astute observation from his body of work to confirm the assertion. The conversation and Baldwin’s book, The Fire Next Time, demonstrated both the scope of the racial tensions confronting America and the solipsistic and narcissistic universe that white America inhabited at the time.

Unless white America can disengage from the narrative of the individualistic and meritocratic American ideal, they will not be able to secure either their own freedom or support that of their black and brown brothers and sisters.

Coates’ work underscores that the forms of progress since 1965 that are most visible in addressing racial tensions still lack the depth of reflection that are generative for a national consensus about race. Unless white America can disengage from the narrative of the individualistic and meritocratic American ideal, they will not be able to secure either their own freedom or support that of their black and brown brothers and sisters.

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