



A Strategy of MetroMorphosis



Disrupting Dehumanization

Overview and Report

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INTRODUCTION

On August 29, 2019, MetroMorphosis hosted a cross-section of leaders from the Baton Rouge community at the Goodwood Public Library for a workshop entitled “Disrupting Dehumanization” led by Dr. Rhonda Bryant of Forward Promise. Forward Promise envisions “healthy villages and a larger society that empowers boys and young men of color (BYMOC) to heal, grow, and thrive.”¹ While the organization began nearly a decade ago with research and activism surrounding issues such as mass incarceration, practitioners quickly realized sustainable change required addressing the root of the problems faced by boys and young men of color, rather than symptoms. Dr. Bryant began her presentation with a summary of this root problem: “Too many boys and young men of color daily navigate a world where they are presumed dangerous and guilty, where their innocence, their potential, and their humanity are routinely questioned – simply because of who they are.” The strategy Forward Promise is using to address this root problem is to “create safe and supportive spaces for BYMOC; partner with systems to work with BYMOC rather than against them; [and] shape new narratives about the strengths and vulnerabilities of BYMOC.”

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In the room, more than 75 representatives from diverse fields in Baton Rouge such as law enforcement, government agencies, education, mental health, substance abuse, community nonprofits, the faith community, and youth programming gathered to gain a deeper understanding of the dehumanization of African American boys and men in Baton Rouge and to strategize ways to intentionally disrupt, and ultimately transform, the systems and structures in our city that propagate it. This workshop was part of the ongoing work of MetroMorphosis and one of its strategies, the Urban Congress, a coalition-based movement that seeks to establish long term, system progress towards enriching the state of African American males in Baton Rouge.

¹

Phrases in quotation marks throughout the report were taken directly from Dr. Bryant's presentation.

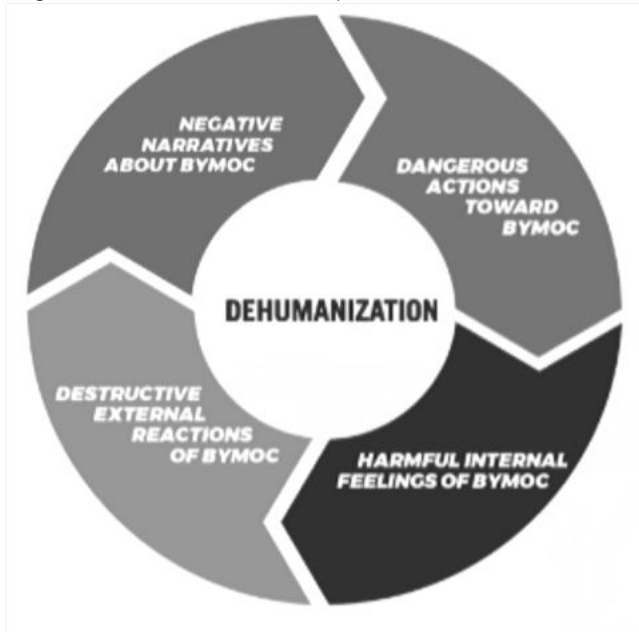
PRESENTATION SUMMARY

Citing several sources, Dr. Bryant gave a concise definition of dehumanization: “a persistent invalidation of humanity; a process by which an individual or group’s full humanity is denied either through perceptions of an individual or group or actual treatment.”

People of color in the United States experience dehumanization daily on a variety of levels. Dr. Bryant identified five aspects of racialized trauma that stem from dehumanization: historical, cultural/spiritual, social, emotional, and physical. She explained how these operate in the lives of boys and young men of color, using the cycle pictured below. It begins with negative narratives about boys and young men of color – for example, that they are more likely to commit violent crimes. These narratives lead to dangerous actions toward BYMOC.

If they are assumed to be dangerous, then random strangers in public settings are more likely to call the police, even when boys and young men of color are engaged in everyday activities such as hanging out in parks, shopping, and listening to music in their cars. BYMOC who live under the dense cloud of these narratives and the constant threat of the actions they produce often internalize harmful feelings toward themselves and their communities. Being consistently thought of and treated as dangerous can lead to the following thoughts: “my brothers’ and sisters’ bodies are threats. They can be sacrificed,” or “we are an inferior people. Suffering emotional abuse, pain, and loss is a normal part of my culture.”

Figure 1. How Dehumanization Operates in the Lives of BYMOC



Thus, sustainably solving any problems that contribute to boys and young men of color’s failure to thrive in American society must intentionally disrupt, and end, dehumanization. Below, this report briefly summarizes each of the five forms of racialized trauma explored in Dr. Bryant’s presentation relying on examples of dehumanization and trauma she provided as well as examples discussed by those who attended the workshop during a table dialogue that followed.

Historical Dehumanization

Historical dehumanization is “thoughts, feelings, and actions that have led to mass destruction, punishment, or control of land and people.” The most obvious example is the enslavement of people of color.

Although slavery ended in the United States after the Civil War, historical dehumanization continued in the form of Jim Crow laws in the South and is ongoing today. In Baton Rouge, this historical dehumanization is most readily apparent in the segregation that keeps whites and blacks largely in different neighborhoods with Florida Blvd. emerging as a visible racial line in the city and the disinvestment in communities of color that results from this segregation. The development of “North Baton Rouge” can be directly tied to historical and political decisions made to exert control over land and people.

Additionally, the prison population in Baton Rouge and in the state of Louisiana as a whole is another example of “control of land and people” and of “punishment.” Boys and young men of color are given harsher sentences than whites for the same crimes, and in the juvenile and adult systems they are a majority of the incarcerated population. The school to prison pipeline contributes to mass incarceration in Baton Rouge – many youths in East Baton Rouge have their first contact with the criminal justice system because schools use law enforcement to bolster discipline practices. Furthermore, black youth are suspended and expelled at higher rates than other students and are more likely to drop out of school. Suspension, expulsion, and dropping out of school all increase the likelihood of incarceration.

Cultural and Spiritual Dehumanization

Cultural and spiritual dehumanization is “thoughts, feelings, and actions that demonize, disregard, devalue, or marginalize the cultural and spiritual practices of communities of color.”

Dr. Bryant gave an example of Go-Go music, which emerged in Washington DC in the 1960s in the African-American community and which had been played for the community to hear at a Metro PCS store on the corner of 7th street and Florida in Northwest DC for more than two decades.



Recently, T-Mobile, the parent company of Metro PCS ordered an end to the tradition of playing Go-Go music, disregarding the historical significance of the music to the community. After community out-cry, the music was reinstated and Go-Go was named the official music of the District of Columbia. With this designation, the Mayor must implement programs to protect the music and document its history.

In Baton Rouge, Southern University has a rich history, numerous traditions, and competitive academic programs. When local and national media feature Baton Rouge, however, LSU is typically highlighted. Southern University was founded in 1880, just two decades after LSU. Although the length of the histories of each institution is similar, Southern is marginalized in narratives of the state and city. This marginalization is a form of cultural dehumanization, a devaluing of the historical importance of Southern as well as its present academic, economic, and cultural significance in Baton Rouge.

Social Dehumanization

Social dehumanization is “thoughts, feelings, or actions that divert resources or fail to invest resources in communities of color [and/or] restrict the rights of these communities in the social, educational, or legal arenas.”

The forms of dehumanization are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are complex and multi-layered, which makes it necessary to consider significant points of intersection. As mentioned above, both historically and presently the incarcerated population in Baton Rouge has been / is predominantly African American. This over-investment in incarceration coupled with an underinvestment in schools and school- and community-based extracurricular activities for BYMOC is a pointed example of social dehumanization in Baton Rouge.

At the juvenile detention center – which houses juvenile boys and girls while they await trials and sentencing – according to Urban Congress delegates who work in the criminal justice system, between 95-98% of the boys are black.² young white males are more often issued a summons to return to court and allowed to stay at home, but black youth are arrested and held at the detention center.

²

Unless otherwise noted, statistics mentioned in this report are taken from notes provided by workshop attendees, some of whom were government officials, leaders in local nonprofit organizations, and experts in fields such as education and law enforcement.

Emotional Dehumanization

Emotional dehumanization is “thoughts, feelings, or actions that limit expressions of empathy toward communities of color [and/or] demonize these communities for their outcry in the face of negative experiences.”

On July 5, 2016 Alton Sterling was killed by Baton Rouge police officers. In the wake of the tragedy, a lot of media attention (publicizing accounts of his past) was devoted to discrediting Sterling, creating a narrative of a less-than-innocent victim who deserved the violence inflicted on him by the police. The weaving of this kind of narrative is common when black men and boys are killed by law enforcement officers. It leads to victim blaming and the discounting of the pain felt by family members and friends as well as a dismissal of the pain and fear felt collectively within the African American community when wounds of this particular form of injustice are reopened over and over. Weeks later, when officers of the Baton Rouge Police Department and Baton Rouge Sheriff Department were murdered, the city mourned the loss of its heroes and neighborhoods hung blue ribbons in support of law enforcement. This sort of response – a humanizing outpouring of empathy and followed by tangible support – promotes individual and collective healing in times of tragedy. Much later, in August 2019, Baton Rouge Police Chief Murphy Paul made a public apology to Alton Sterling’s family and the city of Baton Rouge for the BRPD’s role in the death of Alton Sterling and mishandling of the investigation in the aftermath. Although the apology was overdue, Dr. Bryant stated that it was a necessary step in disrupting dehumanization and pursuing justice and healing.



than others. An important example that may go unacknowledged is the severe health consequences ongoing discrimination has for BYMOC such as higher blood pressure, body mass index, levels of stress-related hormones, symptoms of depression, and rates of chronic disease.

Physical Dehumanization

Physical dehumanization is “thoughts, feelings, and actions that place the physical bodies of members of communities of color at risk of harm.”

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as the death of Alton Sterling – are easier to see than others. An important example that may go unacknowledged is the severe health consequences ongoing discrimination has for BYMOC such as higher blood pressure, body mass index, levels of stress-related hormones, symptoms of depression, and rates of chronic disease.

While this list appears to be taken from medical charts of men in their 50s and 60s, Dr. Bryant presented evidence that these health issues are found in adolescent boys of color. The trauma experienced by BYMOC when they are consistently dehumanized affects both the body and the brain, increasing the likelihood of health problems as well as mental health conditions such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

During the table dialogue, representatives of the Baton Rouge community noted high rates of health and mental issues among black boys and men coupled with a lack of access to health care (e.g. the closing of Earl K. Long Charity Hospital in North Baton Rouge) and preventative options (e.g. fitness facilities). Conversations also highlighted the criminalization of mental health (many incarcerated youth and adults suffer from mental illness) and a desire for medical staff who are people of color and/or who have been trained to be culturally sensitive to the unique needs of BYMOC.

Disrupting Dehumanization in Baton Rouge

The final part of table dialogue revolved around three questions:

1. What changes are needed OR what new ideas need to be seeded to make a difference for boys and young men of color in Baton Rouge?
2. Who is currently working on this, and how can their effort be supported?
3. Who should have been here today, and how do we share the information?

What follows is a brief summary of responses to these questions.

Changes and New Ideas

The changes and new ideas that were identified can be divided into several arenas in which they occur: at home and in the community; at school; in the media; and in city infrastructure, including transportation and the business and recreational landscapes of the city.

Instead of demonizing parents or promoting narratives of broken families, attendees suggested supporting parents through classes, trainings, and other programs that provide resources they need to develop and lead healthy families. BYMOC spend a lot of time at home in the neighborhoods where they reside – roughly from 3pm onward each day – and yet, most programming currently available is during regular work and school hours.

An important change, then, is an increase in extracurricular and development programs for youth that cover after school hours, weekends, holidays, and summers. This can be accomplished by investing in existing programs and minimizing obstacles to participation (such as providing transportation) as well as investing local and federal money in the initiation of new programs based on feedback from boys and young men of color about what they desire and need. One participant summarized the goals of these initiatives well: “protection, connection, affection, redirection.”

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A major source of dehumanization in schools is racist disciplinary processes. Changes that promote alternatives to suspension and expulsion, thus increasing the likelihood of high school graduation, are necessary for disrupting dehumanization in schools. It is also important for the public school system to hire additional teachers and administrators who are people of color and to offer training for employees in cultural sensitivity, implicit biases, and navigating trauma. Accomplishing these changes will require an increased financial investment in the East Baton Rouge public school system. It is also important to highlight (and create, if needed) internship, vocational, and trade school options for BYMOC. Education is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor.

Professionals in Baton Rouge television, radio, online and print media – from executives to on air personalities and writers – would benefit from training in compassionately listening to and accurately telling the stories of BYMOC. The media often propagates (intentionally or unintentionally) harmful narratives of BYMOC, but this is not an unchangeable reality; the influence of the media can be consciously harnessed to promote positive narratives, restore pride and joy in Baton Rouge communities, and add force to calls for change in other arenas. Media, including social media, must be used to elevate the voices of BYMOC, giving them more determination in shaping and sharing their own narratives, and to challenge the popular, but false, narrative that “pro-black” is “anti-American.” Workshop attendees also expressed the need to gather, publish, and distribute lists of resources



(businesses, programs, work opportunities, etc.) in the black community in Baton Rouge. This is an idea that will require the utilization of the local media, and Raymond announced at the workshop that significant progress has been made to accomplish this task, after which Dr. Joyce Plummer with the City's ReCAST initiative reported that a website where these kinds of resources can be explored and accessed will be released soon.

Infrastructure changes that workshop attendees discussed centered on transportation, public recreation facilities, and abandoned or vacant properties in black communities. Transforming the CATS transit system to make it more accessible to a greater number of people needs to be an important agenda item for Baton Rouge city officials. A robust and efficient system of public transportation will contribute to ending dehumanization of BYMOC by helping people move more freely between home, education, business and work spaces so they can maximize opportunities to pursue personal, family, and community development.

Baton Rouge officials must also be held accountable for ensuring more equal financial and business investment in each zip code in Baton Rouge, particularly those in North Baton Rouge where there has been active disinvestment in recent decades. One strategy for development in North Baton Rouge that was suggested was allowing residents or organizations to take ownership of abandoned properties, using them for locally driven development rather than allowing them to remain vacant and dormant. Enhancing parks and recreation sites in black communities was also suggested, with an emphasis on making them accessible and safe places where BYMOC can gather, outside-of-school programs can be housed, and individuals can pursue health and fitness goals.

Currently Active Stakeholders

- 29:11
- 100 Black Men
- 100 Black Women
- Barbershop Talks
- Big Buddy
- BRCC Equity Institute
- BREC
- BRYC
- BRPD Community Policing
- City Year
- Darryl Hurst
- Department of Corrections
- EWI at Brookstown and Capitol
- Fathers on a Mission
- Front Yard Bikes
- Gardere Initiative
- Healthy Start
- Hope Ministries
- Humanities Amped
- Innovation Network
- It's Your Choice (IYC)
- MetroMorphosis
- MOBB
- O'Neil's Barbershop
- Providence Road
- Ride Smart (New Orleans)
- TRUCE
- UREC
- Youth Empowerment Zone

Suggestions

- Reach out to Reilly Center and LSU to discuss media training
- Place a social worker in police substations for assessment at the time of the arrest so the person is more than a number
- Training for filling out job applications
- “Remove the box” – do not force formerly incarcerated persons to report history on job applications
- Workforce training in East Baton Rouge schools should begin early in student’s academic careers

Who Else Should Be Involved

Below are organizations and individuals who those in the room believed needed to be present as the work continues. In some cases, these entities were also listed above as already actively engaged in the work.

- Area Chambers
- Banks and credit unions
- BRAC
- BRAF
- BREC
- BRFC
- Business community
- CASA
- CEOs of hospitals
- Collegiate coaches
- Community Centers
- Community of St. George
- Corporate leaders
- CTEC Executive Director Summer Dann
- Current political candidates
- Department of Education
- EBR Housing Authority
- Executive branch policy team
- Fraternities and Sororities
- Foundations with funding
- Governor
- Humanities Amped
- Judges
- Lab 1
- Louisiana Workforce Commission
- Mayor
- Media as participants in training (not for reporting)
- Medical Professionals
- NAACP
- Open Table
- Parents
- PEAK Counseling Program
- Politicians
- School Board Members
- Social Services
- State Health Department
- School Health Centers
- Upward Bound
- University faculty
- White, faith-based institutions
- Youth
- Youth Build



Next Steps

Moving forward, the Urban Congress will seek to continue to identify and support those who are doing the work and connect with additional stakeholders who can join what is clearly already a “moving train” in Baton Rouge. It will be important to share valuable insights gained from Dr. Bryant’s presentation to help these entities articulate the way(s) dehumanization of BYMOC operates in Baton Rouge and partner to intentionally disrupt, and eliminate it.

Ending the dehumanization of BYMOC in Baton Rouge will require tangible action on multiple fronts. MetroMorphosis and the Urban Congress have been engaged in disrupting dehumanization by shaping and sharing positive narratives of black boys and men in Baton Rouge and leading an asset-based movement for change for several years now, but it was helpful – dare we say healing? – to listen to Dr. Bryant succinctly explain dehumanization and vividly articulate the shared experiences of boys and young men of color. It is the hope of the Urban Congress that the conversations that followed (at the tables) and those that emerge in the coming weeks and months are an important launching point for more focused efforts to eliminate dehumanization in our city, rather than simply to treat its consequences.

Acknowledgements

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For more information about Forward Promise, visit forwardpromise.org

For more information about MetroMorphosis and Urban Congress on African- American Males, visit metromorphosis.net