

Eli Margolese-Malin  
State of Black Asheville  
Dr. Mullen  
Spring 2007

A Community Building Approach to Dismantling the Superhighway

The Covenant With Black America is full of eye-opening statistics, trends and racial practices that are damning, not only to those who actively perpetuate the systems and activities responsible, but also to all of us, myself included, who have let these injustices continue unchecked. The injustices—no, the inhumanity that many African Americans continue to face in all areas of American society: education, housing, law enforcement, health services, and employment, is completely unacceptable. Of course, it is easy to shake one's fist at the issue from the sidelines, and even easier to write a paper decrying it; it is much harder to attempt to even begin to change the current situation. Rather than simply decry the daily tragedies recounted by King and reiterated by Smiley, rather than condemn the utter lack of change, this paper will attempt to provide a starting point for a multilateral approach to addressing the inhumanity contained within our criminal justice system.

James Bell's metaphor of a "cradle-to-prison superhighway" (40) provides the perfect illustration for the need of a multilateral and comprehensive approach to bring about real change to the system. Bell describes the superhighway as "[...] a network of legislation, policy, practice, and structural racism that has fostered blacks being incarcerated at unconscionable levels at increasingly younger ages for increasingly minor acts" (49). To extend the metaphor, the superhighway has onramps and off ramps, which continually funnel African Americans, in particular young African American males into a spiral of no escape. The onramps are substandard housing, failing schools, a fractured

family and lack of economic opportunity. The off ramps, which are more like u-turns back into the system, are the lack of healthcare and rehabilitation opportunities after prison, and the lack of jobs. The current system of drug laws, racial profiling and other racist law enforcement tendencies ensure that those traveling the highway keep on the 'straight and narrow'. The highway metaphor isn't perfect, however, for it is not a linear cycle, and the cycle is repeated again with each generation. An adult who travels the highway will likely see his kids fall onto the same road through no fault of his own, especially when he leaves behind a broken family during his time of incarceration. "This *Covenant with Black America* represents a realization that there is a multi-headed, multi-tentacled monster out there devouring blacks who live in certain neighborhoods" (51).

Thus, to deal with an issue such as the over-incarceration of African Americans, one must not only look at the prison and law enforcement systems, though they certainly represent a primary factor, one must also look at all the various onramps that begin an African American on the highway and all the u-turns that keep him from getting off it again.

Marian Wright Edelman, the Covenant's Statement of Purpose, calls for the dismantlement of the "cradle-to-prison-to-death pipeline" in order to keep the "clock of racial and social progress is not to turn backwards." Imprisonment is indeed "the new slavery for the black community" (xiii). She describes the same set of onramps as Bell: children that lack healthcare, food, adequate shelter, parents who cannot afford decent housing, daycare, Head Start programs, etc.

Millions more children in our schools cannot read or write and are dropping out or being pushed out of school, enroute to juvenile detention and adult jail rather than

to jobs or college. And millions of children are struggling to grow up in working poor families [...] [who cannot] escape poverty or better themselves. (xiv)

The chapter: Correcting the System of Unequal Justice captures the multi-spectrum nature of the superhighway problem:

Reducing the high rates of incarceration is complex and must begin early. It is well established that getting a healthy start in life [...] [is] essential for keeping children out of trouble later on in life. Children who are frequently suspended or expelled from school, rather than provided with support [...] are often the children who grow up to become part of the incarcerated population [...]" (55)

In dealing with our "multi-tentacled monster," we cannot forget law enforcement itself. "Police are the entry point, the gatekeepers of the criminal justice system. They make discretionary decisions everyday about who is likely to commit a crime and who should be targeted by the criminal justice system [...] all too often, they are decisions informed by race" (74). Racial profiling, police brutality, excessive sentencing for drug crimes and the targeting of certain neighborhoods over others not only ensure that the justice system is unjustly full of minorities (especially black males) but also rightly further the community's fear of obtaining government services even when direly needed. Thus the police are directly responsible for perpetuating the "superhighway" system.

The "cradle-to-prison-to-grave superhighway" is not new. Martin Luther King too, addressed the existence of this phenomenon in his Where Do We Go From Here? "Already, in childhood, their lives are crushed mentally, emotionally and physically, and then society develops the myth of inferiority to give credence to its lifelong patterns of exploitation [...]" (115). King too understood the multifaceted nature of the

superhighway system: “[...] Criminal responses are environmental not racial. To hem a people up in the prison walls of overcrowded ghettos and to confine them in rat-infested slums is to breed crime, whatever the racial group maybe.”

We know that to slay the “multi-tentacled monster requires a multilateral and multifaceted approach, but what does this mean? And what, exactly can be done? Both King’s and Smiley’s books provide the answers and necessary steps that must be taken, as does the recent State of Black Asheville conference held this past semester at UNCA. All three demand that any attempt to dismantle the highway begin with today’s children *and* today’s incarcerated. And all three point to an effective and possible solution: community building.

Crime, as King has stated, is environmental in nature, it is due to a lack of opportunity (when actually committed, racist bigotry certainly plays a role, and will be addressed later on). It is important, therefore, to understand the extent of a person’s environment. A person’s environment is his home, his family, and his society. It is the form of education available to him and it is the jobs that are available. His environment also consists of other people. It consists of his parents, his neighbors, his teachers and bosses, the police and his elected officials. A person’s environment is his community and society. And if one’s environment forces a person to commit crimes to survive and then places him onto the “superhighway”, there is something wrong with that community and with society as a whole.

How, then do we construct the type of society, community, environment that will end the “superhighway” once and for all? The “Superhighway” begins early; therefore, our efforts must begin early. Every statistic on the issue of crime and law enforcement

suggests that children who stay in school and receive an effective education are much less likely to ever enter the superhighway. Therefore, educating children must be a top priority if we are to end the epidemic of incarceration. The Covenant with Black America contains precisely the sort of steps needed to achieve the goal of effective education. It also points out, once again, how interrelated every aspect of the environment/community/life is. Keeping kids in school requires that the schools receive adequate funding, that the school employees well-trained teachers who care about teaching, that the children stay healthy so as not to miss classes, that the parents of children remain engaged in their children's schooling and that extra tutoring and financial assistance is available if needed. Of course, meeting these requirements brings into focus others. Parents who are able to adequately care for their children and can take interest in their children's schooling are those that don't have to work 80 hours a week at a minimum wage. They are also those that have not been imprisoned by an unjust system. To stay healthy enough to attend classes requires that children have access to healthcare. To attain healthcare, parents must again earn enough money, and they must have healthcare themselves. Everything is interconnected; therefore the solution must be just as broad spectrum.

That is what makes Smiley's Covenant with Black America and the State of Black Asheville event so important. They did not look at single issues or at single solutions. Building the kind of cohesive community required to end the "superhighway" requires efforts from everyone, black and white together. The State of Black Asheville highlighted the need for integrated community policing: police who not only have a relationship with the community they serve but are apart of that community. Schools and

the teachers who work in them must be supported. After school programs must be available, even if it takes community volunteering. Kids must have safe homes in which to grow up, community watch programs as well as community based social services are important. Parents must have support as well. Community childcare options must be available. Community food programs like co-ops must be available. The people living in each community must have control over local decisions that will affect their community and they must have a say in all other decisions that will affect their community. Community healthcare, family physicians and clinics must be available, as well as support groups for alcohol and drug abuse.

A close-knit and well-developed community where each person takes an active interest in the welfare of others may seem like a pipe-dream, but it can be achieved even without waiting for grand legislation or for the nation's public sentiment to shift towards a more populist and socialist leaning (though this may be becoming more likely). King's "The World House" is a call for a greater sense of community in the world at large, but it is just as applicable here in America.

I would say that other-preservation is the first law of life. It is the first law of life precisely because we cannot preserve self without being concerned about preserving other selves. The universe is so structured that things go awry if men are not diligent in their cultivation of the other-regarding dimension. 'I' cannot reach fulfillment without 'thou.' The self cannot be the self without other selves. (180).

King's call for other-preservation is at the heart of community building. And its achievement is more than just a dream. It begins with intercommunity dialogue. And it has begun, at least for Asheville, with the State of Black Asheville.