

Trotter Review

Volume 12
Issue 1 *Women of Color and Economic
Development*

Article 13

January 2000

Race, Poverty and Education in the 21st Century

Joan Wallace-Benjamin

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Social Policy Commons](#), [Urban Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wallace-Benjamin, Joan (2000) "Race, Poverty and Education in the 21st Century," *Trotter Review*. Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 13.

Available at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol12/iss1/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the William Monroe Trotter Institute at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Trotter Review by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.

Race, Poverty and Education in the 21st Century

By Joan Wallace-Benjamin

The following is a transcript of the speech delivered by Joan Wallace-Benjamin at the 121st Annual Meeting of the Women's Educational and Industrial Union held on September 16, 1998.

I am here as the president of the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts. I am here as a woman. I am here as a partner in the struggle for equal opportunity and access for – women, men, young people, the elderly, Black, white, Latino and Asian, who are not able to fully enjoy the educational, economic and social benefits of our American society. I am here as a colleague of Mary's, [Mary Lassen, Executive Director, Women's Educational and Industrial Union] who works with commitment and passion on these same issues and with whom I have collaborated and will continue to collaborate to make our city and state the best in the nation in which to live, work and raise a family. I am also here as a mother of two beautiful boys (although my 15 year old will tell you he is a young man), in fact Mary and I met years ago when our sons were pre-schoolers at the Dorchester YMCA pre-school program. Over the years, we have kept one another abreast of Kellen's and David's progress, growth, funny things they say and do, and what our hopes and dreams for them are as they develop into great young men. We are working hard to develop them into good husbands, fathers – in that order, workers, and contributors to the community and the city at large.

The women's educational and industrial union is so fortunate to have Mary Lassen as its executive director. You could not find a more focused, committed, serious, thoughtful, smart and compassionate professional leader. And your dynamic volunteer leadership in Carmen Dillon as your new board chair and outgoing chair Ann Vernon, has made and will make for a tremendous leadership team to take this agency into the next millennium.

For those of you that are not familiar with the Urban League, let me just tell you briefly who we are. We are the second oldest civil rights organization in the nation.

Founded in 1910 in New York city, it came into being to assist African-American migrant and West Indian immigrants transitioning from the South and West Indies into the industrial North and the cities of America. The challenge in the early 1900s was how to take, basically farmers, and give them the support they needed to make the transition to big city life – how do you act in a city, where do you shop, how do you dress, where do you live, work and educate your children? The national Urban League, in New York, and seven years later, in 1917, the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts (ULEM) in Boston and over the subsequent years in 114 other cities and communities across the nation, were founded to answer those questions, and assist men and women with agrarian roots and roots in slavery with this difficult and challenging transition. For the past 81 years the ULEM has been providing programs of service and advocacy in the areas of education, employment and training. We are located in Dudley Square, Roxbury, in the hub of the commercial district of the African-American community.

The Urban League believes and has always believed that a quality education and gainful employment are the pathways to economic self-sufficiency and stability. We operate a number of adult employment and training programs, and youth education and parent education programs primarily for parents of Boston public school children. The majority of the people we serve are low income parents, and need educational and employment readiness support if they are to be successful. Our history of service in the community draws to us those of our community most in need.

Local community-based organizations like the Urban League and the Women's Educational and Industrial Union are needed today even more than they were in years past. Our nation, as well intentioned as many of its people are, has not adequately come to terms with how to ensure a quality education, gainful employment with a living wage, decent housing, quality child care and health care for all of its people. Women, as we know, are often the ones on the most difficult end of managing these challenges and juggling the responsibility for themselves and most importantly for their children.

As we think about the new millennium and the promise we all wish for it to hold for all Americans, there are some fundamental conversations we need to have as citizens, policy makers, clergy, providers and neighbors.

The new millennium conversations need to be about values: what the forecasted numbers and statistics are is really not the issue. We know what the demographics are and will be. We know what we think might happen with the economy – we know great times do not last forever. We know what a child must know and be able to do if he is to work and succeed in the new millennium. And we know how his or her parents need to encourage and support him. We have more than enough data than we know what to do with. What we care about and what we believe in are the questions – the answers of which create the forecast for the future.

The current set of concerns and controversy about both the concept and implementation of welfare reform is a great example of an idea in which everyone can agree – that is, that able-bodied men and women should and must work. The right to work is a right to which every American is entitled. The right to work is a fundamental component of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in my opinion. Not only is work necessary because if I work, you should work – which is often where the argument in the political debate and the media discussions begins and ends; but instead, work, a method for one's economic survival, also creates the belief in one's own value to the larger societal construct. It orients one's time and imposes a set of parameters on family life; on children's lives – when you eat, sleep, shop, and recreate. Work gives people a reason to get up each morning, and answers for people the question of “what is my role?”

Professor William Julius Wilson, the Malcolm Weiner Professor at the Kennedy School at Harvard and an Urban League board member, talks in great detail and with great evidence about the influence and importance of work in this book *When Work Disappears*.¹ He says, “the consequences of high neighborhood joblessness are more devastating than those of high neighborhood poverty. A neighborhood in which people are poor but employed is different from a neighborhood in which people are poor and jobless.” The union, the Urban League and other providers like ourselves, both historically and presently believe in people going to work, want people to work, and think it's good and healthy mentally and physically for people to work. We are in business to help them work and become self-sufficient. However, there is the right way that our nation should ensure that work and self-sufficiency happen for people; and there is a wrong way.

In affluent communities like the ones we all know and in which some of us live, interestingly enough, work includes the rearing of children at home. In poor communities, women are expected and required to work outside the home often irrespective of circumstances. If you are poor, do not work and are home caring for your children, you are somehow a major drag on the society – sitting home with Jerry Springer and Jenny Jones. For poor women, rearing children at home is not considered valid “work.” The only reason Jerry Springer is on in the first place, is because the poor woman does not have the resources to go the enrichment play group, music and French lessons, or the country club tennis classes after school. Don't get me wrong, I am not putting those activities down, I am saying, though, that in the new millennium, we need to think about what we value, who we value it for, and make sure that we send consistent messages as a society regardless of race and class. These are just some of the many kinds of contradictions that cloud the landscape of social policy around welfare reform. The mismatch is also the gap between the rhetoric about what the welfare reform law would accomplish and the reality of what is happening. It involves the difference between the strength of the national economy as a whole and the various strengths – and weaknesses of state and local economies. It involves the difference between the requirements of the national law and the laws of the various states, which in most cases are tougher. And it involves whether the level of education and the job skills of the welfare recipients can easily match the needs of the local job market. The fact is we are now learning that the mismatch is a great deal wider than the ballyhoo acknowledged.

These mismatches are indicative of a nation that has not considered thoroughly the important answers to the critical questions in our future. In Massachusetts as the two year time limit for welfare rapidly approaches, we estimate that as of December 1, there will be 2500 families whose time limit for welfare benefits will have run their course. If they are not employed by then, they will be without any form of economic support. Let us remember that the cash grant for welfare has always been determined by the number of children in a family. The time limit cutting off financial support therefore affects cumulatively many more children than adults.

What do families need in order to be successful and able to care for themselves? Commitment to a living wage is paramount among the success barometers.

Families must live beyond subsistence. We need to realistically look at what it takes to feed, clothe, and house a family, and commit to achieving that, in the 21st century for all American families. For example, a family of four on public assistance earns \$7,406 per year or \$618/month. If we truly believed in the values associated with work in this country, we would not tolerate the fact that a person working at the minimum wage for 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, earns only \$10,712 a year – placing them \$2,600 below the poverty line for a family of three. Yet our policy makers debate and fight as we watch them, each time an increase in the minimum wage is proposed. To further confuse the picture, the FY97 median income figures and the new Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) income limits issued by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), state that low income to them is defined as \$26,800 for a three person household; \$29,800 for a 4 person household. These figures are a far cry from \$7,405 or \$10,712. I spend roughly \$5200 a year on food alone for my family of four, with two growing boys and a husband and we're eating chicken, pasta, lots of rice, an occasional steak, milk, juice, cereal and bread. How could we think that a family could really live – feed, cloth, and shelter themselves adequately knowing what we all know it costs to live? Mary mentioned in her remarks the family economic self-sufficiency project in which the Union is in a leadership role. This project is asking the hard and truthful questions about what it takes to live and for a family to achieve self-sufficiency. What are the measures that go into determining what a family of three; a family of four needs to live? This project will be extremely valuable in elevating the discussion and clarifying our values for policy makers, decision-makers, voters and the public.

Everyone speaks about the 21st century and the new millennium. What needs to happen by then? Well, then is now. We need to tackle these complex issues before the year 2000, as aggressively as corporate America has mobilized its resources to convert billions of lines of computer code to meet year 2000 compliance. They realize that the conversion will save a collapse of their companies come January 1, 2000. And they are spending millions of dollars to make sure nothing detrimental to business happens.

What do children need to ensure family stability and success across generations? Wealth and poverty are often intergenerational. If your parents have left you

an inheritance, unless something catastrophic or unexpected happens, there is a pretty good chance you will leave your children an inheritance. Similarly, if you live in poverty, and opportunities are not there, you will probably leave your children in poverty. The operational word here is opportunity. Do we provide every child the opportunity he or she deserves? Do we believe that young people learn the value of work by having the opportunity to work and be able to climb from poverty? Then why do we allow the federal summer jobs programs to be cut? Do we believe and have evidence that good nutrition is key to academic and social performance in school? Then why do we quibble about food stamps and other subsidies for food? The money spent on food stamps for poor families is an infinitesimal amount of the federal budget each year.

What do we really believe in regarding the safety of our children in schools, on our streets and in our neighborhoods in the new millennium? What is the crisis of values, of caring, that allows children to shoot their classmates, and their teachers, threaten to plant a bomb during graduation, kill their parents? Ask the families of West Paduka, Kentucky, or Springfield, Oregon, or Jonesboro, Arkansas, or Pearl, Mississippi. The saddest irony of all, is that in urban communities like the one in which we work, there is a feeling of hesitant relief that violence has hit rural and suburban America. Perhaps now, the nation will really do something about gun control; something about school and neighborhood safety – it's not only the Boston public schools that haven't been safe – it's not just Black and Latino children that are the victims of our nation in crisis.

How committed do we remain to quality public education for our children in the new millennium? Do we still believe that our country should provide quality education for all – that there is a value to everyone being educated at the highest level and that quality education should come through the expenditure of our tax dollars? Do we still believe that a high school diploma and higher is a goal to which everyone must strive? If so, then how do we explain our insistence that a poor woman transitioning from welfare to work, go to work, and not really care if she has a foolproof plan to ensure that she attain a high school diploma? Of the 2500 women for whom the time limit is up as of December 1, 1998, with 300 more women each month to follow, more than half have no high school diploma. Yet we tell them to get a job, any job, and then if you can swing it, figure out how to get your high school diploma sometime be-

tween 5-11 pm or 9-5pm if you work at night; arrange for child care for all those hours; support and nurture your children somewhere between coming in from school and work and serving dinner or putting them to bed. This schedule if one works all day, goes to school at night, gives mom roughly 1 hour of contact with her child; and if the child is school aged, perhaps no contact at all since by nine most young children should be in bed. Do we still hold public education for young people and adults as a value? The man from mars looking at the nation's public education system would not think that we hold value at all in this historical belief on which this nation was founded.

Do we really believe that all children can learn – or do we just mouth those words as politically correct rhetoric? If we truly believed it, we would not sort and select our children into slow, medium and high reading and math groups. We would not need advanced work or placement classes to separate out those who are “bright” because our goal instead would be to provide the most challenging work we could to all children. We would believe that they all could do it. We would not believe that intelligence is innate and fixed at birth – that some children have it and others don't; that some families have it and others don't; that some racial and ethnic groups have it and some don't. We would instead replace this belief with one that says that intelligence is subject to being developed; and that it is developed over a lifetime. The efficacy institute in Lexington Massachusetts has shown us that if a person is able to speak a human language by the age of three or four, they are intelligent enough to master the most challenging of intellectual work. All children could take calculus by the end of high school. Public education is in crisis in the city, in the suburbs, and on the farms across America. It's a crisis of values and a crisis of will. We are not really in crisis about knowing what children need, or what will work, or where the resources are in the academy, in schools or in communities to get it done.

The Women's Educational and Industrial Union, like the Urban League, comes out of a tradition of service; a tradition of assisting workers; a tradition of assisting families. While we were teaching our people how to live in the big city – you were opening a retail store for distributing crafts and foodstuffs that women made at home, operating the nation's first hot lunch program for public school students, and opening the nation's first credit union. Today, you operate a transitional housing program for battered and homeless women, a home

health care service and a work and family resource center.

Community-based institutions, in our new world of the 21st century, are key to the community landscape. They are where the people are. You have the benefit of age – 120 years old in this community. You are trusted, people know who you are, you have weathered the test of time. You have served the families of Boston in need, and served them well. You have earned your place as a key community institution; and for that, you deserve and must have financial and other support. The challenges of our communities and our nation are very complex and significant. The resolution of our problems requires civic commitment from all sectors – business, religious, political and our community-based organizations. Initiatives come and go – new programs spring up in response to overwhelming community need. However, we should never underestimate the importance of organizations like the Union and the urban league who have been around for over and nearly a century providing consistency around the issues; and providing places where people feel their needs are met by caring providers.

As we endeavor to figure out how best to serve families in the 21st century, we must always remember that the success of children is inextricably tied to the success of the responsible and caring adults in their lives. Those caring adults, are preferably their parents, however we know that they are also, many times teachers, clergy, extended family, and service providers from the variety of institutions with whom a family interacts. The measure of success of a community is the extent to which it is successful in developing its children. Children do not get raised in isolation – they do not get raised by institutions. They get supported by them. Thus organizations like this one focused on family wellness and stability are contributing to the most important work adults are placed on this earth to do – and that is the development of children to a 21st century standard of achievement and character.

We can only do that well, if we as adults answer the quality of life and equity questions that permeate our many political and social debates. We can only do that if we as adults confront our crises of values and of will. Our forecast for the new millennium has all the potential to be one that is bright and promising with only scattered clouds and moderate precipitation. We must decide which it will be. The Women's Educational and

Industrial Union is one of the important compasses pointing our way.

Dr. Joan Wallace-Benjamin is a former president of the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts.

Notes

¹ William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears* (New York: Knopf, 1996).