A Conversation with Grace Lee Boggs at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum

GRACE LEE BOGGS

Lisa Yun Lee: Welcome to the Jane Addams Hull House Museum. My name is Lisa Lee, and I am the director here. For those of you who may not be familiar with the work of Jane Addams or the museum, Jane Addams is best known as America’s first woman to win the Nobel peace prize, which she won in 1931, not just for her work opposing militarism worldwide, but also for her efforts to create the conditions for peace to flourish in our neighborhoods and communities. Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Star founded the Hull House social settlement on Chicago’s multi-ethnic immigrant near west side neighborhood in 1889. And from the Hull House, she lived and worked until her death in 1935. Addams and the residents of the Hull House created opportunities for civic discourse and dialogue and advocated for public health, fair labor practices, full citizenship rights for immigrants, juvenile justice reform, public education, recreational public space, public arts, and free speech. Along with Florence Kelly, Alice Hamilton, and Julia Leithrep—just to mention a few of the extraordinary residents who lived here and ate in this very historic room that you are sitting in—Ida B. Wells, John Dewey, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois, Eleanor Roosevelt, and more recently peace activist Kathy Kelly, and dancer Maria Tallchief have been in this room. They all passed through these doors, sat in this room, and debated—argued with one another and engaged in civic discourse. And, most importantly, they believed that the world could be made a better place through collaborative thinking and collective action.

One of the reasons I’m so thrilled about hosting Grace Lee Boggs in this space, is that Grace, like Jane Addams, understood that social change is a process—coalitions of people working, thinking, and reflecting with one another, bridging theory and practice to affect social change. And that it is in solidarity with, not in service to, the people that this change can come about. One of my favorite quotes from Jane Addams is the following: “Social advance depends as much upon the process through which it is secured as upon the result itself.” This is something Grace Lee Boggs understands so well. Her life has spanned virtually all of the most exciting and important social movements in recent decades, and her work tirelessly continues.

We are grateful and lucky to have professors Helen Jun and Minkah Makalani join us today. Their work is exemplary of engaged scholarship that crosses not only disciplinary boundaries and barriers but also of the work that crosses boundaries of race and ethnicity.
and intervenes in critical contemporary issues. Before we welcome our speakers, I want to thank the wonderful Hull House staff, our co-sponsors: Access Living, the Asian American Resource Center at UIC, and the Public Square. This program will also be available to be podcast and downloaded because of our partnership with Chicago Amplified, a project of WBEZ Chicago Public Radio.

Helen Jun: Grace, we’re so excited to have you here today in Chicago, and it’s such an honor to have you come and share your vast experiences of political organizing.

Grace Lee Boggs: I am very glad to be here, and I thank you all for coming. The last time I was in Chicago speaking, I was three years younger, much more mobile, had more teeth, and could hear a lot better. But I think I still have most of the same marbles as I had three years ago.

Minkah Makalani: When Helen and I were talking yesterday about this conversation, we quickly found ourselves in almost a three-hour conversation about a myriad of things based on your life and your writings. I was wondering if you could talk about some of the more vibrant political formations that you made. I’m thinking about the Johnson-Forest Tendency but also the things that came after that, and the kind of work you’re doing now in the Boggs Center in Detroit and how that speaks to the kind of political organizing and community organizing that you’re talking about.

Grace Lee Boggs: I didn’t know we were going to go all that way back.

Helen Jun: Just as a summary, there are people in the audience who don’t have a full sense of your background.

Grace Lee Boggs: I was born 91 years ago on top of my father’s Chinese restaurant, in Providence, Rhode Island, of Chinese immigrant parents. I had no idea at that time that I would be active in the Black Power movement. I had no idea that my twilight years would be spent trying to rebuild, redefine, and re-spirit a city that is a symbol of world industrialization and decline.

But I was lucky in the sense that in 1941, when I left the university with a PhD, no one wanted to hire a Chinese woman philosopher, so I went to Chicago where George Herbert Mead, on whom I’d done my dissertation, lived. And I was very lucky to come to this city and get a job at the University of Chicago philosophy library for $10/week. Now, I’ve been looking at gentrification and hearing about apartments that cost $1,000 a month and condos at 280–290 millions of dollars. You know, $10/week in 1941 wasn’t all that bad. You could buy a beer for a nickel, you could ride a trolley for a nickel, but it still didn’t go very far. So, I was very lucky when a Jewish woman, right near the university, offered me an opportunity to stay in her basement rent-free. And I jumped at the opportunity, and the only obstacle was that I had to face down a barricade of rats in order to get into the basement. That brought me in contact with the South Side Tenants Committee, which was battling rat-infested housing in the Black community, and it was my first contact with the Black community.

But that, in turn, led me to the March on Washington movement, led by A. Phillip Randolph, which was mobilizing tens of thousands of Blacks to march on Washington to demand jobs for Blacks in the defense plants. In 1941 the Depression had ended for White workers in the defense industry but not for Black workers who were still excluded. When A. Phillip Randolph had these tens of thousands of Blacks ready to march on Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt couldn’t afford to have that happen because he was getting ready for the war against Hitler, against racism in Europe, so he issued Executive Order 8802, which barred discrimination against Black workers in the defense plants. I was so excited by what a mobilization of people could achieve that I decided that’s what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.
Now, I think that it’s important to understand that in 1940-1941, if you wanted to fight the system, you became a Marxist in one form or another. Richard Wright did from here. You have the idea that the thing to do is to get rid of capitalism, and it was the way we thought. It is the way people thought, so I joined the Worker’s Party, which was a Marxist party, and worked very closely with C.L.R. James and the Johnson-Forest Tendency, and what we tried to do mainly was emphasize the humanism of Marx, that Marx was not just an economist, but he was talking about the relationship between people. It was a very important step for me as I started studying a lot of Marx, but it was still too much like what I’d been doing in the university, so when we heard that Black workers in Detroit were beginning to look for a radical movement of some kind, we issued a little newsletter called Correspondence, that was written and edited by the workers, Blacks, women, and youth who we identified as the main social forces.

I went to Detroit to work on it, and I found that Jimmy Boggs, who was a Chrysler worker and had thought of himself as a writer ever since growing up in his little Alabama community where nobody or few people could read and write. He had become the writer of the community. I found myself very attracted to him, among other reasons because he was so different from me. I had spent most of my life in university; he had never been to university. I had grown up in New York, the Big Apple; he had grown up in this little town called Marion Junction in Alabama, where there were two stores over Main Street. He liked his vegetables done to death the way most people do in the South, and I like my vegetables crisp the way Chinese do. And I had spent so much of my life with books, and he was so much a person of the community, he was the person to whom the people of the plant and the community came for advice for all sorts of things. When he asked me to marry him on our first date, I didn’t hesitate for a moment. It was really a very propitious move on my part or on his part. I’m not sure how you would decide that.

But I think that this was 1953, and the movement was just really beginning to simmer. The Bandung conference had been held in April of 1955, announcing that the struggles against colonialism were taking on momentum; Emmett Till had been killed in September 1955, which had aroused Black consciousness all over the country; and in December, the Montgomery bus boycott began under the leadership of Martin Luther King. So we were in Detroit, and all of a sudden, the world began to change for Detroiters. After that time, most people that I knew who had come from the South, thought, “Oh, those poor, backward people, Blacks who stayed down South. We were the advanced ones who had moved out of the South into the cities.” When Montgomery started, people realized that Southern Blacks had emerged, and the world was about to change. So, we didn’t know exactly what we should do in Detroit. I can remember after the four students sat down at Woolworth’s on February 1, 1960, marching up and down in front of the Woolworth’s on Woodward Avenue in Detroit because we wanted to show solidarity.

And so, we had to begin to look at what were the actual conditions that we were facing in Detroit. And what was happening was that in 1953, two freeways had been built in Detroit—on the west side, the large freeway and on the east side, the Chrysler freeway. This enabled White people to begin fleeing the city to the suburbs. And so, the population was beginning to shift, and people were beginning to wonder why, if Blacks were becoming such a large number in the city compared to Whites, why should everybody who runs the city—the mayor, the city council, the school board, the police chief—why should they all still be White? So, the concept of Black political power emerged out of a very real situation. And we did a lot of things in order to talk about political power and to get Blacks to think in these terms. We organized. We marched and picketed in front of the Apprentice Training
School where they only allowed a few Blacks to be trained in skilled jobs. We organized a march down Woodward Avenue on June 23rd, 1963, with Martin Luther King, with people from all over the state. And a few days after that march, we were able to stand outside the supermarkets and demand manager jobs for Blacks and have the management ready to negotiate with us in a few days. And so, we were beginning to feel that there were things that we could do.

In the summer of 1963, a Black prostitute had been killed—her name was Cynthia Scott—by a White cop, and we mobilized 5,000 people to march around police headquarters shouting, “Stop, kill the cops!” The police were huddled inside the building wondering whether and when we were going to rush. And I remember us thinking, “What should we do?” We decided that what we would do was divert the demonstrators from that spot to the spot not very far from there, where Cynthia Scott had been killed, in order to avoid a confrontation. But the tensions in the city were so great that among the demonstrators I can remember some of them saying that they were very angry at us for diverting the march because, even if they had been killed, they would have shown the police how angry they were.

That anger exploded in July of 1967 in the rebellion, what we call the rebellion and what the media called a riot. And that rebellion was very important. It began because the cops raided a blind pig. When they did that, all hell broke loose. Young people poured into the streets looting and burning. Detroit went up in flames. Before it was stopped the National Guard had been called in and 43 people had been killed. That was so much more than the organizing that we had done and much more than the agitation and propagandizing that we had engaged in. It was what brought Black political power to Detroit because the White establishment recognized that White political power could no longer maintain law and order.

While people are going to have their 40th anniversary next summer of that rebellion, I think what we are going to try and do is to ask ourselves, what emerged from that rebellion that we have to reevaluate? Is it enough to be angry? Earlier today, they were talking about how we have to increase the anger, the indignation of people who are oppressed. But how do we get them beyond anger to be engaged in creating something new? And I think we’re at a turning point in this country and in the world, that up to now, we have thought there were only two alternatives before us. Either we patch up and do the reform of what exists, or we carry out what we consider to be a revolution by violent means. And those have seemed like the only two alternatives.

But I think we’re at the point that we have to see there’s another alternative. Another world is possible. That the World Social Forum and the mobilization of people at the Battle in Seattle, all kinds of people, and the creation of small groups all over the world and this country, some people estimate there are hundreds of thousands of people trying to retain or regain their humanity in the midst of this global corporation, this global capitalism, which is dehumanizing us and destroying the environment, that they are trying to create some form of humanity. There are what Martin Luther King, Jr. called beloved communities emerging in the world, that they are maybe small, but their essence is so profound that in the 21st century, our mission has become to create a new humanity because global capitalism is so dehumanizing. It is so determined to transform us into nothing else but consumers, and we have to begin to imagine, we have to begin to implement, we have to begin to create forms of working together that recreate, reconstruct our society, and reconstruct our humanity and not be worried about how small they are. To understand that basically what we’re struggling against is an economic system whose values are so dehumanizing that our challenge is to create another humanity.
So, one of the reasons I’m here this weekend is because I belong to this beloved community group. What we are doing is visiting the Center for Independent Living as an example of what people are doing to rehumanize our society. I’d like to leave that with you as what each of us, wherever we are, can do.

**Helen Jun:** Generally you are associated with the Black Power movement, and right now you’re invoking King’s notion of beloved communities, and I feel like you’re making a move here in terms of countering this notion that King’s political ideologies were too liberal, too integrationist, and not quite radical enough. And I was interested in this notion of beloved communities and about what you were recuperating, and how this is getting enacted in terms of how you understand political organizing.

**Grace Lee Boggs:** I’m glad you asked that question because I think, first of all, most folks are not aware that Malcolm died, was killed, on February 25th 1965, six months before all hell broke loose in Watts. In other words, he never experienced a rebellion. He was never challenged with what happens when violence is the only answer that people feel that they are able to resort to. And, even at the end of his life, he knew that he had to develop another ideology, because he had broken with the Nation of Islam, and he said: “All I know is that I am a Muslim. I don’t know what I think. All I know is that I am an African American and a Muslim, and I must crawl before I walk, and I must walk before I run.”

King had the great advantage that he was alive when Watts erupted. It was just a few days actually, after celebrating the victory of the Voting Rights Act and signing it with Lyndon Johnson in the White House that Watts erupted, and King flew to Watts immediately. And he was astonished that the young people there had never heard of him and that they’d never heard of non-violence, and he took that very seriously. In 1966, he moved to Chicago and rented an apartment there so he could talk to the young people and find out what they were thinking and why they had erupted. And out of that discussion with young people, he developed the ideas of the last three years of his life, which very few people are acquainted with. It was put forward in his pamphlet, *Where Do We Go from Here: Community or Chaos?*, and in his anti-Vietnam war speech: *Time to Break the Silence*—one published in early 1967 and the other made in April 1967. What he recognized was that we needed a radical revolution in values, that racism was part of a giant triplet with militarism and materialism. He said that the immediate task of African Americans is to restore to our young people a sense of self-esteem and to give them a vision. And that is what I think we have done up to now.

That is why I think we have not taken King seriously enough, and that’s one of the reasons we’ve formed beloved community and are trying to understand. One of the things King said, for example, that our young people in our dying cities—by the way the phrase *in our dying cities* is King’s—need opportunities to transform their environment and transform themselves at the same time, and he proposed that education should be transformed to make this possible. And the failure of our public school systems to do that is the reason why so many of our young people drop out. They are tired of being tested and re-tested, and checked and discarded, and rejected and promoted on the basis of tests. They want to be part of society. They want to be of use, and that is what we have not understood as a really profound significance of the rebellions of the 1960s. And King understood that.

I would really urge people to think of how we can grapple with the ongoing educational crisis. You know that the Gates people say that the dropout of young people from our inner-city schools is the most serious civil rights issue of our day. And people have not been able to understand that what is necessary is a paradigm shift in education along the lines that King projected, to give our young people a sense that they matter. To matter, for a young person,
is perhaps the most important thing that one can give them, and we have failed to do that, and that’s why we are losing so many millions of our young people.

Minkah Makalani: I want to follow up on that because, as I mentioned before we started, I had an opportunity to ride around with someone on the board at the Boggs Center a few years ago, showing me some of the things that the Boggs Center, particularly through Detroit Summer, is doing with space and working with youth in Detroit in terms of community gardens, public art, and murals. Can you talk about how that has impacted and how that models a different kind of pedagogy for education? But also how that, or if, that has manifested itself in people becoming more engaged and invested in the politics of Detroit as a place.

Grace Lee Boggs: I wish you folks could all come from Detroit, but since you can’t, let me tell you something about Detroit. You know, Coleman Young, who was the first Black mayor of Detroit, was a very smart guy. And when he was elected into office in 1973, he was able to do something about racism in the sense of integrating the police force and fire department and the folks down at the city council building downtown. But he was not able to do everything about the fact that the corporations were abandoning the city. And so, GM asked him to bulldoze 1,500 houses and 600 businesses in order to build a GM plant, and Coleman did it for them, despite the protests of the community.

But that didn’t solve things, and in 1985 crack came to Detroit. Young people started saying, “Why should we go to school?” with the idea that, “One of these days we can make a lot of money, get a good job, when we can make a lot of money right now rolling?” With crack came violence, and with violence came disorder in the city, and Coleman hadn’t the vaguest idea what to do about it. So in 1988, he proposed that what we needed was casino gambling. That the casino industry would provide the jobs that the auto industry was no longer providing. We mobilized a group to defeat him, which we did.

But during the struggle, he asked a very important question, he said, “What is your alternative?” And we realized that we were being faced with a historic question: What do you do about cities, which, after a 150 years, have become deindustrialized? What kind of cities are we going to build? And so, we created this program called Detroit Summer, in which young people were involved in planting community gardens, in painting public murals, in creating poetry workshops, and in creating a back alley bike program for transportation. And this began to give us a sense of what another kind of city could be like. That in the 21st century, what we needed was sustainable cities. That we had to get away from this business that we were going to keep moving from the countries into the city, and living in bordellos or barrios or slums. If we actually enlisted young people in rebuilding the cities, along these lines, and gave them a sense from K-12 that this was their responsibility, then almost overnight, we’d have safer and livelier cities. And although Detroit Summer has not changed the politics of Detroit, nevertheless it has become a vision, and people come from all over the world to Detroit to imagine what could be an alternative vision for 21st century cities. So, I go back to what I said earlier, don’t check out a thing for size; check it out for imagination, check it out for vision.

Helen Jun: There’s a question that often circulates in terms of your still working primarily with African American communities. I think there have been emergent questions about what your relationship is to Asian American politics, to the Asian American movement that’s emerged since the 1960s.

Grace Lee Boggs: People always ask me what was it like to be an Asian American in an African American community, and they can’t understand why I felt so much at home in the Black community. I felt so much at home in the Black community because I had grown up without a community, and in the Black community, I felt a sense of belonging for the first time.
Now mind you, this was in 1953 that I came to Detroit, which was before Black nationalism had taken off, and I don’t know what would have happened if I had come later. But, what happened is that in 1969–1970, because of the Black Power movement, Asian Americans said, “Boy, that’s a good example to follow, why do we have to be a model minority? Why can’t we be difficult? Why can’t we go back and tell people about the racism that we have experienced?”

So, the Asian American movement had its first start in 1969–1970, when, as a result of many of the struggles they carried out, particularly in the Bay Area. The Third World Studies Program was initiated at San Francisco State University and other universities. Then in 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese draftsman who was about to be married, went to a bar with his friends to celebrate prior to the wedding, and two auto workers looked at him and said “those Japs are taking away our jobs.” This was 1982, when there was a lot of unemployment in the auto industry, so they beat him to death. The Vincent Chin case became the impetus for a whole new generation of Asian young people to become involved in the movement.

Partly because I’m Asian American, and a number of Asian Americans are very concerned about their relationship to African Americans, a number of young Asian Americans have come to Detroit to be part of this rebuilding. I think this is a very important development, and I’m very welcoming of it because one of the difficulties of Detroit, which I think is different from Chicago, is that it’s very Black or White. People think in very binary terms. They’re not really able to think in multi-ethnic terms, and when you plop down some Asian Americans in the city who are involved much more than, say, the Arab population or the Hispanic—both of those populations are more isolated in their own neighborhoods—it begins to create a different dynamic in the city. But that’s a very tricky thing. I don’t know what’s going to happen because Asian Americans are being incorporated at a very rapid rate in the power structure. It’s not only Elaine Chow, who is Secretary of Labor, but it’s all the Asian Americans who are the models, the anchor people, the people of color that you can use in non-profits, and so forth. Meanwhile China is becoming a power. Northeast Asia is now a very tricky section with China, Japan, North Korea, and so on. So, Asian Americans have to go through a lot of rethinking, and I don’t know where that’s going to go. What I’m very glad to see happen is the number of Asian Americans, young Asian Americans particularly, who want to be part of the rebuilding, redefining, and respiriting of Detroit.

How many of you read Martin Luther King? How many people know his pamphlet, Where Do We Go from Here: Community or Chaos? How many people know how seriously he looked at the concept of love? He said love is not some sentimental weakness but somehow the key to ultimate reality. He was, in my opinion, as a student of Hegel, about as serious a thinker as any country has witnessed. He said his favorite philosophers were Gandhi, Jesus, and Hegel. He said there were three kinds of love: There was Philia, which is love of friendship; there is Eros, which has to do with sexuality; and then there was Agape, which is the love that is willing to go to any length to restore community. I urge you to think about that as we look around us at the violence in our communities, at the alienation of young people, at the fragmentation that we are all experiencing. I think that if we begin to take concepts like this seriously and begin to think about how we can implement them and how we can practice them in our daily lives in our communities, we could go a very long way.

Let me tell you, for example, one of the groups we have visited is a group called Growing Power in Milwaukee. Do people know about it? Growing Power was founded by Will Allen, who was the first African American basketball player for the University of Miami. After he retired, Will remembered the farm on which he was raised in Maryland and that people in his community, he used to say, were “raggedy-assed” but at least they always had enough to
eat. So, he decided to buy himself a two-and-a-half-acre farm in Milwaukee, which had five
green houses on it, and what he has managed to do over a number of years, is create compost
with a combination of coconut shells and worms and sells them. What he has done has not
been alone; he has a manager. They have market-basket programs for everybody all through
that area, through which people can buy produce. What’s happened is that a community
very close to Growing Power, where the Harley Davidson plant used to be, where the houses
had become decrepit and abandoned, and where the streets are full of hookers and violence
is now being restored by people who live in that community and are creating rain gardens.
Instead of allowing the rain to go into sewers and pollute the rivers, they use them to grow
gardens. That has restored, brought about a whole different set of values.

You see one of the things we didn’t understand in the sixties—I’m glad I’m around to say
this, most of my peers are gone—we thought about power as something you grabbed with
your hand, you took hold of. It was a thing. We didn’t understand the concepts of empow-
erment or process. We didn’t understand how much we need to get away from the verti-
cal ways of patriarchal society and become much more participatory, horizontal, sensual,
deliberate. That’s the transition in which we are now engaged. We would not be here were
it not for the movement of the sixties and what they gave birth to in terms of the women’s
movement, the ecological movement, and all the different movements, but we are here. And
we are here for this incredible crisis, where the world hates us so much, that George Bush
competes with Osama Bin Laden for the most hated man in the world. This country not
only has to get rid of Bush and company, but we have to get rid of the conviction that we
can live the way we want and to hell with the rest of the world, and to hell with our relation-
ships with the rest of the world, and to hell with the environment. We’ve got to begin to live
more simply, so that others may simply live. We’ve got to add a spiritual dimension to our
struggle, which, in the north particularly, the Black Power movement was lacking. We’ve
got to begin thinking not so much just in material terms, but in spiritual terms and to rec-
ognize the wholeness of the person.

Notes

1. This is an abridged version of an interview event celebrating Jane Addams Day, December 10, 2006, at the Jane
Addams Hull-House Museum on the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago. The entire interview is
archived and is publicly accessible at the Chicago Public Radio’s Chicago Amplified: http://www.wbez.org/Con-
2. Special thanks to Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago graduate students Matthew Kirsch and Dalia Hoff-
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