

An Asian American Icon?

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Four decades after the publication of *Conversations in Maine*, Grace Lee Boggs appeared before an overflow auditorium at U.C. Berkeley alongside Angela Davis, also an activist and philosopher. The event was called “On Revolution: A Conversation.” In their exchange on violence and nonviolence, Grace stressed that nonviolence is “an important philosophy because it respects the capacity of human beings to grow . . . and we owe that to each other.” It was a view, she added, that took her a long time to learn. She interrupted the appreciative audience, with a gleam in her eyes: “All of you who are clapping—I suggest you do some more thinking!”¹ Captured in *American Revolutionary*, the Peabody Award-winning film by Grace Lee, the scene is illustrative. Grace appreciated ideas that evolved.

Reading these four veteran activists today as they reexamine their own evolving ideas allows us to reexamine our own. Their exchanges about Marxism in China and one’s responsibility as an activist have impacted my own perspective. The rest of this essay sketches my observations as I have, over several decades, connected and reconnected with the Boggses and their views.

I heard Grace address what was her first large audience of Asian American activists at a 1970 conference in New York City. She spoke about mistakes in movements, and of her own. She critiqued Americans for our tendency to think quantitatively and individualistically. She encouraged us to draw from Asian culture “that sense of a continuing history which helps you to think dialectically.”² I am still struggling with what she meant for my own view of history.

In 1974 I led a campaign in New York City against racially discriminatory hiring practices in the construction industry and for the hiring of Asian American construction workers. Multigenerational picket lines encircled Confucius Plaza, a forty-story apartment tower rising in the heart of the Chinatown enclave, with youth alongside immigrant Chinese women garment workers and the elderly. Tensions escalated with the arrest of fifty-seven protesters. I wrote then: “Once the idea of fighting against racial oppression was grasped by the communi-

ty, sweeping changes and powerful forces were set in motion.”³ Quoting me in her 2016 social history, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties*, Karen L. Ishizuka noted how this characterized a period of what has been recognized as the Asian American Movement.

The following year, I met James Boggs and Grace at their home in Detroit with members of my political collective. In our study of their writings and our discussions, we had completely missed the vision they had developed in *Conversations* and articulated in *Revolution and Evolution* of a uniquely American revolution—the first revolution to require the people to make material sacrifices.⁴ We left going our separate ways. My own path eventually led to years of disillusionment and cynicism with activism.

It took thirty more years for me to reunite with Grace. This was when I first learned about *Conversations*. Reading it, I could in retrospect sense the questioning yet great attention given by them to the Chinese people and Mao. Ideas change reality, and reality changes ideas. Their discussion called “Chiding” foreshadows the 2012 audience interactions in Berkeley: using discomfort to awaken people to their own potential, showing people that “their struggle is infinitely richer than they think it is, infinitely larger than their present selves.”

The audiences for *Conversations* have changed and broadened since. Grace has come to be regarded as a public intellectual and, especially for Asian Americans, an icon. New generations of Asian American writers, intellectuals, activists, and media makers have fostered this acclaim by directly attributing their ideas and work to her inspiration. As Scott Kurashige notes in *American Revolutionary*, Grace represents the uniting of people from different races and backgrounds in a way that is now defining America. Grace Lee, now a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences and a Korean American, toured the United States with Grace Lee Boggs and their biographical film, which connected thousands in person and a great many thousands more through major network broadcasts. Another telling scene in the film is when Grace, commenting on her celebrity, protested with a laugh, “But I am *not* an Asian American icon.”⁵

Both apart from and due to this strange status, Grace continued to expound that Asian Americans have a distinct responsibility. She wrote that “because Asian civilizations are so ancient and because the global role of the East is growing so fast, Asian Americans have

a unique contribution to make to the next American Revolution, although only time will tell what that role will be.”⁷

Movements in today’s global capitalism differ from the period in which *Conversations* was published. Rather than a single class driving democratic change, we consider the multitude through the lens of intersectionality. The racist legacy from the enslavement of African Americans in the United States remains, but is now disrupted by new liberatory movements expressing a new humanity. We seek visionary organizing, not just protest organizing.

Grace Lee Boggs personified the activist-philosopher over generations. As an Asian American woman, neither black nor white, she created new ideas and lessons to pass on. The vision and challenge she and James Boggs shared remain for those who propose to transform institutions, participating in “the continuing reflection and transformation that . . . all revolutionaries need to undergo as reality changes.”⁸

Their examples in life are part of what propels me to grapple with new social realities in my life. I take to heart Grace’s suggestion that we “do some more thinking.”

NOTES

1. See *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs*, directed and produced by Grace Lee; producers, Caroline Libresco and Austin Wilkin, LeeLee Films, 2013.

2. Grace Lee Boggs, *Asian-Americans & the U.S. Movement* (Detroit: Asian Political Alliance, n.d.).

3. Karen L. Ishizuka, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (London: Verso, 2016), 180.

4. James and Grace Lee Boggs, *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 140

5. For a discussion of chiding, see this volume, the chapter titled “New Questions for an American Revolution.”

6. *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs*.

7. Grace Lee Boggs, with Scott Kurashige, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), xix.

8. *Ibid.*, 80.

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The Humanity of Conversation: Walking the Talk Together

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Let me exercise the prerogative of a movement pastor and go some what theological in this reflection.

To begin with, during the years of these conversations in Maine, I was a seminarian in New York City just beginning my own conversations—biblical, political, communitarian—with three mentors who would become lifelong friends. Indeed, I was joining their conversation. They were Daniel Berrigan, the poet and priest just then released from federal prison for liturgically burning Vietnam draft files in Catonsville, Maryland; William Stringfellow, Harvard trained street lawyer who broke open the New Testament language of “principalities and powers”; and Walter Wink, activist-scholar who, following Stringfellow’s lead, developed a new and renewed theology of nonviolence, with a magisterial trilogy to explicate it.¹ By coincidence, many of those conversations transpired on an island off the coast, where Berrigan had a hermitage on the bluff. (Could it be the wind and the waters are somehow themselves sacred conversation partners?)

Let it be said that a question mark is the most prominent form of punctuation in the collectively written *Conversations in Maine*. Questions provoke the conversation and are multiplied by it. So, no surprise that connecting these two conversations (my mentors’ and Maine) is an underlying and recurring question: What does it mean to be human—in this present moment? Notice that another question, “What time is it?,” is fused and allied, inseparably, making humanity a dynamic, rooted in place and time, not fixed and universally answerable. Even in this short period of years it is striking to see the conversation transform the language itself: “Man,” “the new man,” “man/womankind,” “Human Spirit,” “human beings.”

Stringfellow, in his formulation, made this very question key to theological ethics: What does it mean to live humanly in the midst of death? He also framed reflection within the location of history. Recalling resistance to Nazism as small, fragile, audacious, even