

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Grace Lee Boggs
Interviewer: Emily Lawsin**

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**University of Michigan
Institute for Research on Women and Gender
1136 Lane Hall
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1290
Tel: (734) 764-9537
E-mail: um.gfp@umich.edu
Website: <http://www.umich.edu/~glbfem>**

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Grace Lee Boggs is an activist, writer and speaker whose 60 years of political involvement encompasses the major U.S. social movements of the 20th century—labor, civil rights, Black power, Asian American, women’s and environmental justice. A daughter of Chinese immigrants, she was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1915. In 1953, she came to Detroit where she married James Boggs, labor activist, writer and strategist. Working together in grassroots groups and projects, they were partners for over 40 years until James Boggs’ death in July 1993. The Monthly Review Press published their book, *Revolution and Evolution in the 20th Century*, in 1974. In 1992, with James Boggs, Shea Howell and others, she founded Detroit Summer, a multicultural, intergenerational youth movement program, to rebuild, redefine and re-spirit Detroit from the ground up. She spreads her ideas by writing a weekly column in the *Michigan Citizen* newspaper. In 1998, the University of Minnesota Press published her autobiography, *Living for Change*. A plaque in her honor is displayed at the National Women’s Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York. Boggs has also received the distinguished Alumna Award from Barnard College, the Chinese American Pioneers Award, from the Organization of Chinese Americans, and a lifetime achievement award from the Anti-Defamation League.

Emily P. Lawsin, lecturer in American Culture and Women's Studies, is a second-generation Pinay originally from “She-attle”, Washington. She teaches Filipino American history and literature, Asian Pacific American Women, Oral History Methods, and Community Service-Learning courses. She joined the U-M faculty in 2000, after she completed her Master of Arts degree in Asian American Studies at UCLA. From 1994-2000, she taught Asian American Studies at California State University, Northridge, where she won awards for her dedication to students. She serves on the Board of Trustees of the Filipino American National Historical Society (FANHS) and volunteers with Detroit Summer, the Detroit Chinatown Revitalization Committee, Detroit Asian Youth Project, Paaralang Pilipino Cultural School, Filipino Youth Initiative, Asian American Center for Justice, and the Japanese American History Project of Michigan. Professor Lawsin is the co-author, with Joseph Galura, of *Filipino Women in Detroit, 1945-1955: Oral Histories from the Filipino American Oral History Project of Michigan*. Her poetry and essays on war brides, students, and writers have been published in numerous journals, newspapers, and anthologies. An oral historian and spoken word performance poet, she is a member of Ma’arte Tribe Artists Collective, and has performed on radio and stage throughout the United States and Manila.

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*¹

Emily Lawsin: Well, welcome to the University of Michigan, Grace. We're very happy to have you here. Could you...we'll start out by asking you a few questions. Could you tell me a little bit about the place where you were born?

Grace Lee Boggs: Well, my father had a little Chinese restaurant in downtown, Providence, Rhode Island. And I was born above the restaurant. And I think that was when I first began to learn about how...the changes that we need to have in this country. Because the waiters in the restaurant, whenever I cried, they would say, "Leave her on the hillside, she's only a girl child." And so I got some idea of the kind of changes that we needed to make [laughs] in this world, and I think that was my first indication that my women's consciousness...as a baby.

Emily: Hmm. That's great. So...

Grace: And I think also I should say that my...my mother came from a little Chinese village in southern China, and she never learned how to read and write.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Because they had no schools for females in that village. And she used to tell us stories about how she was sold as a slave by her uncle. She...her mother was a single mother. And she was sold to the big house and how she had to run away. So that gave me an idea also that these changes had to be made all over the world.

Emily: Hmm! Um-hum. Yeah. And so then how were you raised?

Grace: Well, actually, I was...we lived in an all-Caucasian community. And my father had to buy the land for our house in the name of his Irish contractor, because there were restricted covenants there. So I was raised in a Caucasian community with the idea that education was really important. And my father felt that way about education for girls as well as for boys.

Emily: Hmm!

Grace: And I think that was the...my first attempt at having some sort of independence, was I figured that my mother was so powerless because she had no education, and that I was going to get an education. So I think that was why I really pursued my studies.

¹ These lyrics from "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

Emily: Um-hum. So your mother was very supportive of this, too, then?

Grace: Ah, you know, the...this question of the relationship between mothers and daughters is very complex, as you know.

Emily: Yes, I know [laughs].

Grace: I was never quite sure whether My father was really more supportive than my mother, because my mother always felt, I think envious that I had so much freedom as contrasted to her having none.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: My, my sister, my older sister was born in steerage, actually, on the boat from China in 1911. And my mother had no doctor, had no care. And by the time I came along, I think my head was too big and she really suffered a lot in my birth.

Emily: Oh.

Grace: And so we always had a kind of funny...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...relationship.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. So you were talking about your educational experience. Can you tell us a little bit more about what that was like?

Grace: Well, I started college in 1931, with Barnard College, which is a all-women's college. And I was very act—oh, I...the first year, in 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria. So the first thing I thought I'd do, I was go... I would to into International Diplomacy. That's the first class. And then I...I had a wonderful class with a guy by the name of Crampton, who was born and educated in the 19th century and was a Darwinian. And I had NEVER been introduced to Darwinian ideas at all. And so I got very excited about that, so I thought I'd go into science. And then I found that science took so much time in the afternoon in laboratories, so I thought [laughter], I thought I would drop science and go into something else. And so at the end of my sophomore year, I dropped all the classes and decided I'd go into philosophy and that's what I did for the rest of my undergraduate work. And then I...I was lucky. I got a...One...one of the things I was determined not to do was to take a woman's role. In those days, if you were a woman, you were supposed to be either a teacher or a nurse. And I was determined to be neither one of those.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: So, when people ask me, you know, "What will...what will you do as a philosopher?" I hadn't the vaguest idea what I would do. But I found it very satisfying

because it gave me an opportunity to exercise my mind and think about things. So that's why I went into philosophy.

Emily: Um-hum. Were you the only woman in that philosophy department?

Grace: That's a long time ago.

Emily: Yeah [laughs].

Grace: No. As a matter of fact, one of the things that I could tell folks and they...they're...it's very hard for folks to understand this, for those of you who are much younger, the philosophy for much of the period that ... of the 19th and the early part of the 20th century was a question of very upper class folks talking about very abstract questions, mostly male.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And it wasn't the sort of thing that I was particularly interested in, and so I had to begin figuring out what I was in philosophy for.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: So that's been part of what my whole life is about, what am I doing, whether I'm thinking about this world, but why am I doing it?

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. And did you ever get to use the philosophy degree in a...or in an academic setting or...?

Grace: Well, I was very lucky that at Bryn Mawr College, my professor was a man by the name of Paul Weiss. He was Jewish, he was very young. He was very, very alive. People have written about him, his book. He was like Socrates down on the Lower East Side of New York, going with a Jewish accent.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: But, but he did, was he...he helped me very much to think speculatively, and to ask questions. And he introduced me to Hegel and to dialectical thinking² for which I am very grateful.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: So, and that's been...that's held me in good stead for most of my active life.

² *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel* (1770-1831) was a German philosopher. Dialectical thinking is, literally, a process of thinking by means of dialogue, discussion, debate, or argument. For Hegel, dialectical thinking meant the inevitable transition of thought, by contradiction and reconciliation, from an initial conviction to its opposite and then to a new, higher conception that involves but transcends both of them.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: To think dialectically. That's, that's the biggest challenge I think we all face.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. So after you left Bryn Mawr, where did you go after that?

Grace: Well, ah, now we're talking about 1940.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: In 1940, if you went even to a department store, they would come right out and say, "We don't hire Orientals."

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So after I got my Ph.D., the idea even of applying for an academic job was, you know, crazy. Wouldn't even think about...So the last person, the person under whom I did my dissertation, George Herbert Mead³, had taught at the University of Chicago. So I decided to go to the University of Chicago and see what I could learn there.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And I went there and I got a job in the philosophy library for \$10 a week. And I looked for a place to live, because you couldn't get very much...I mean, actually, by the way, \$10 a week was not so horrendous in those days, because a lot of people only made maybe five hundred dollars a year or a thousand dollars a year. But it still wasn't very much. You couldn't pay much rent with it. So I went up and down the street trying to find a place to live. And I was very lucky. I...there was this little Jewish woman took pity on me and said I could stay in her basement rent free, and I leaped...I leapt at the chance. And the only obstacle was that I had to face down a barricade of rats in order to get in from the alley into the basement.

Emily: Whew [laughs].

Grace: But that turned out to be a blessing because it brought me into contact with other people who were sort of fighting rat-infested housing in ... on the South Side of Chicago, and those were mostly Black people, and I had never had any contact with Black people before, and I began working with this tenants group, and as a result when A. Phillip Randolph⁴ announced in 1941 that he was going to march on Washington to demand jobs for Blacks in defense plants, I was there. So I...most folks don't know, but back in 1940,

³ *George Herbert Mead* (1863-1931) was major figure in the history of American philosophy. He taught at the University of Chicago from 1894 until his death.

⁴ *A. Phillip Randolph* was a trade unionist and civil-rights leader who was a dedicated and persistent leader in the struggle for justice and parity for the black American community. (1889-1979)

'41, the Depression was over for whites, but not for Blacks, so Blacks were still banned from the decent jobs in the factories. So out of the march on Washington, which actually didn't materialize as a march, but really galvanized the community, the Black community and ... who were ready to go to Washington. Franklin D. Roosevelt who was president had to issue Executive Order 8802, which banned discrimination in defense plants. And it was, it was a real sense of a movement about the march on Washington. And as a result, I had some...I got a glimpse of what a movement was like, and I decided I would become a movement activist in the Black community, and that's what I did mostly.

Emily: In the Black community, as opposed to ...you're Chinese American. As opposed to the Asian American, the Chinese American community?

Grace: Well, we...you know, the Asian American movement⁵ is a very recent thing. I was part of it partly during the anti-Vietnam War movement. We were...we had a group called the Asian Political Alliance⁶. But the really big movement, from 19, say, '40 to 1960s and 1970, was the Black movement. I mean, the whole business of fighting for democracy both at home or abroad, "Double V for Democracy"⁷, was such a...it's hard for you people to understand that now, what...what an inspiring force it was for the whole country, and how...how ridiculous it was that we should be fighting for democracy overseas, and that people here should be banned even from going into a restaurant or into a motel or into a theater. And it was such a glaring contradiction that...And, and folks tell...You know, it gave me a sense that I was really a part of changing something really, really historic and really monumental. And so, the...the Asian American movement, you know how many Chinese there were in this country in 1940?

Emily: Huh?

Grace: About 130,000

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And if you compare that to the Asians in the country today, you can see a monumental change has taken place.

⁵ The contemporary *Asian American Movement* started in 1968 on US college campuses and in urban neighborhoods. Young Asian American students fought for the development of Asian American studies programs and joined other Asian Americans involved in national and international campaigns for justice and social equality.

⁶The *Asian Political Alliance* was credited for the creation of a new "Asian-American identity". Grace Lee Boggs is one of the founding members of this organization created in Detroit, Michigan between the years of 1969 and 1971. It was patterned after the black movement and consisted of Chinese and Japanese people born in the United States and abroad.

⁷ "Double V[ictory] for Democracy" was a World War II-era slogan referring to the need not only for an Allied victory in war but for a victory for civil rights in the United States as well. The slogan emerged in response to the racism experienced by African-Americans in the United States, and in particular the segregation and harassment of African-American soldiers during the war, and served as a reminder that even as the U.S. fought for democracy abroad, our own democracy was deeply flawed.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. And were you ever treated differently in the Black movement because you were Chinese American?

Grace: Well, people always ask me that question.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And it's...I think for folks who were much younger, who remember the nationalist phase of the Black movement and the extreme race consciousness that has developed ever since, say, 1960, I find it difficult to recall that in the 1940's and 1950's there was not that sense of color consciousness in the Black community. A lot of folks, say, in Detroit, for example, many of the people who were in Detroit, lived in Detroit, had come from down South, and they lived side by side almost, even though there was this...this huge, you know, color bar in the South. And I was strange to people. I mean, they...they considered me a person of color, but I wasn't Black, and kids used to come up and touch my hair and say, you know, what nice hair you have, because it was so straight, and black like yours. And so it was...the...there wasn't that...people I think accepted me. Particularly, because, you know, I was married to Jimmy and we lived in the Black community.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And I had a wonderful time. It was the first community I had ever really belonged to.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: Because I...I didn't live in Chinatown. I wasn't raised in Chinatown. It was a Caucasian neighborhood in which we lived. And I was welcomed and enjoyed myself.

Emily: Um-hum. Okay. I'm going to take a little...back a little bit. You mentioned you joined the tenant housing and went to the march on Washington in the 1940's. And after that, what led you here to Michigan?

Grace: Well, I...I...I joined the Workers Party⁸ where I met C. L. R. James. And C. L. R. James was a West Indian Marxist who introduced me to Marx and introduced me to a number of the people who were fighting for independence in Africa and the West Indies. And also we had a...we called ourselves the Johnson Forest Tendency⁹. Johnson was C. L. R. James' Party name. And we thought that the most important struggle taking place...not the most important, that's wrong. That the so-called Negro Struggle

⁸ *Workers Party* was founded in 1940 by Max Shachtman and other Trotskyists who had broken from the Socialist Workers Party of the USA.

⁹ *Johnson Forest Tendency* was initially a subgroup in the 1940s of the Workers Party, the official Trotskyite party in the USA at the time. The two main leaders: C.L.R. James, who wrote under the pen name of J.R. Johnson, and Raya Dunayevskaya alias Freddie Forrest, hence the Johnson-Forrest label. Grace Lee Boggs became the third leader when she joined the two in the mid-1940s.

should...had a tremendously important role in bringing about all the struggles in this country. And that is important to defend the...and encourage it. And in 1951, we decided that the main social forces to bring about social change in this country were Blacks, rank and file workers, women and young people. And we heard about how Blacks going through the experience of the union in the war plants had come out and were looking for something more radical than the union. So we decided that we would come...we would put out a newsletter called *Correspondence*, and that we'd move to Detroit in order to put it out. So I moved to Detroit to work on *Correspondence*.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And there I met Jimmy and we got married.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. Okay. Well, you want to talk a little bit about meeting Jimmy.

Grace: [laughter] I talk...yeah, this is very funny. Jimmy was...had come up from the South after he graduated from high school in Selma, Alabama. And he came up to Detroit where his brothers were, and worked in the...on the WPA¹⁰ and so forth until he got a chance to go into the plant at the beginning of the War. And he worked on the motor line at the Chrysler-Jefferson plant¹¹. Actually he worked there for 28 years. And he was...he was...he was a writer. He was an activist and he was a writer. But he was a writer in a very interesting way. When he was eight years old down South, people in this community didn't know how to even write.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So at eight years old, he became the scribe for the community, to write the letters in the community and so forth. And that set him on the path of writing. And he did much and almost most of the writing for *Correspondence*, which was very exciting to me. And he was...he also...By the way, in those days, the Black community was very suspicious of women radicals.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: Because there was a thing going around that the Communist Party allegedly sent white women into the Black community in order to recruit men to the Party. So Jimmy didn't want to have anything to do with me, because he thought that I was...I don't know...

¹⁰ *Works Progress Administration* was a Depression-relief measure established by President Roosevelt in 1935, it offered work to the unemployed on an unprecedented scale by spending money on a wide variety of programs, including highways and building construction, slum clearance, reforestation, and rural rehabilitation.

¹¹ *Chrysler-Jefferson plant* was automobile plant in Detroit, Michigan.

Emily: A spy [laughs].

Grace: So, but...but he didn't...I had a car. Whenever I went into a city, I would buy a car. And I bought this Plymouth, 1938 Plymouth for a hundred dollars. And after meetings I would drive him home. And he would sit way over on the passenger side and answer everything I asked him monosyllabically. So one night I invited him to dinner. And he came late. He...

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: ...he didn't like the food that I prepared; he didn't like the music that I played. But in the course of the evening, he asked me to marry him. [Laughter] This is our first date. It was the first date which he...

Emily: What did you put in that food?

Grace: ...not sitting around, and he edges the door of the passenger seat. And I said yes. I had no idea that was going to happen.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: I had no idea I was going to say yes. But I said yes. And it's probably the most important thing I did, ever did in my life.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: It was really...it was amazing. We worked together, you know, for 40 years. And a lot of things changed for me during that period.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Because I think we were able to work as partners in a way that few people have an opportunity to do.

Emily: Hmm. Hmm. Let's hear a little bit more then about that. What were the kinds of things that you and Jimmy and others worked in?

Grace: Well, one of the first things I'd learned, I remember I was looking out the window one day and I saw some kid on drugs. And I began thinking of all the reasons why he was on drugs—the system, racism, et cetera, et cetera. And Jimmy took a different stand. He said that what...he gave me an insight I think to the way in which people survived in the South under the worst conditions of segregation and discrimination and racism. People talked about the kind of values that they had to maintain in order to survive. And they held each other responsible in a way that I think few people understand and really appreciate. And that's...I learned that. I learned that being liberal and making excuses for people helps nobody. That's the first thing I learned from Jimmy. The second thing I

learned from Jimmy, which I did not have, was a kind of courage. I have a tape, a video, which was made for Jimmy's memorial in 1993. And it starts out with Jimmy speaking to a class at the University of Michigan. And Jimmy says to this class, "I don't believe nobody knows more about running this country than I do." And when the class responds with a kind of nervous laughter, he says, "You better think that way. You better not think like a minority. Because when you think like a minority, you think like an underling. Everyone is capable of going beyond their...where they are. And I would hope that everybody in this room thinks that way—that you think of yourself and believe that you can do what has not yet been done." And I...you know, that takes a whole lot of chutzpah¹². Which I didn't have, you know. I had a lot of book learning and, yeah, a pretty good mind. But that kind of audacity, that kind of belief in yourself I think is what we all need. And I think we particularly need it at this point. And I think...and Jimmy, I got some of that from Jimmy.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. Um-hum. That's great. You mentioned "Correspondence."

Grace: Um-hum.

Emily: And you mentioned the drug problem outside where you were living. What other movements and organizations did you join after you moved to Detroit?

Grace: Well, one of the things I...I think I need to say here, is that I was very much a part of the Black Movement. The...when I...I came to Detroit in '53. The Montgomery Bus Boycott¹³ took place. Well, first of all, Emmett Till¹⁴ was killed in September 1955, which began to mobilize the Black community. And then in December 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott started and lasted for a year. And it created such a spirit of hope and also of restlessness up north. Because a lot of folks up north in the Black community had begun to look down on the people in the South, that they were the ones who had stayed down there. We were the ones who had the guts to come up north and all that sort of thing.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And all of a sudden, here were the people in the South standing up, and we didn't know what we should do in order to stand up in the north. So it really was a challenge to us. What should we do in a city like Detroit? Now, Detroit, by the way, didn't pass the

¹² *Chutzpah*: A Yiddish term for courage bordering on arrogance, roughly equivalent to "nerve."

¹³ On December 1, 1955, a black seamstress named Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for not giving up her seat to a white man as the law required at that time. Local black leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., organized a bus boycott that lasted until November 13, 1956 when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a federal court's ruling, declaring segregation on buses unconstitutional. The boycott is seen as pivotal to the civil rights movement in the U.S.

¹⁴ On August 28, 1955 *Emmett Till* (1941-1955) was killed at the age 14 by two white men for allegedly whistling at a white woman in Money, Mississippi. The men were jailed and tried for the murder. On September 23rd 1955, although they had confessed to the brutal slaying of Till, the men were released when an all white men jury found them "not guilty."

public accommo—I mean, Michigan didn't pass a Public Accommodations Act¹⁵ until 1949. Until that time, you couldn't go into a coffee joint on Woodward Avenue and be served. And even after the Act was passed in 1949, Jimmy...and Jimmy and Jimmy was one of them, had to sit down and demand a cup of coffee and call the cops to enforce the law before they would be served a cup of coffee.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: This is Detroit now...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...in 1949. And the plant...and the bars around the Chrysler-Jefferson plant where Jimmy worked were exclusively white. Blacks couldn't go in. And we're talking now about Detroit, which is very much up South. So should we...On the other hand, you know, when...when the young people sat in on February 1st in 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina, and ... because they weren't being served a cup of coffee by Woolworth's, we would go into the Woolworth's on Woodward Avenue¹⁶ and get served a cup of coffee by then, you see. So we ... that wouldn't do.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: We tried sort of marching up and down in front of the Woolworth's on Woodward Avenue, and that seemed kind of silly.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: But what was happening in Detroit, we...I think that one of the most important things I learned in that period was that what you...how you struggle must depend very much upon the concrete circumstances where you are. And the concrete circumstances in Detroit were that...well, when I came...let me go back for that. When I came to Detroit in 1953, I sublet an apartment on 14th Street and Blaine, and ... which was all white.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: I sublet it from a friend. Now the houses in the neighborhood were owned by Blacks mostly, but the apartments were exclusively white.

¹⁵ *Public Accommodations Act* law that makes it illegal to discriminate against a person because of their race, color, sex, religion, ancestral origin, disability, age (18+), sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. The law covers places of public accommodation such as restaurants, theaters, public transportation, hotels, stores, gyms, hospitals, and any other establishment open to the public. Accommodations that are distinctly private in nature are not covered by this act.

¹⁶ *Woolworth's* (1879) was the first five-and-ten-cent chain in the United States, which sold discounted general merchandise at fixed prices. The stores eventually incorporated lunch counters and served as general gathering places. On February 1, 1960, four African American students sat down at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth's store. They were refused service, touching off six months of sit-ins and economic boycotts, which gained national attention. Woolworth's closed in 1997.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And, but when they created the Lodge Freeway¹⁷ on the west side...on the west side, and bulldozed Chinatown to create it and created I-75 on the east side and bulldozed the Black community in order to create it, what happened was that there was a way for white folks to escape the city.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So they took the freeways to the suburbs and they left all these vacant apartments. And what happened was the apartments...oh, I have to go back. In this apartment that I rented when Jimmy stayed with me, they threw me out, because Blacks weren't allowed.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And when we looked...went to look for a place, they were beginning to open up apartment houses to people of color but they doubled the rent. The rents went up from about \$40 a month to \$70 and \$80 a month. And that may seem like nothing now. But it was, you know, it was a very dramatic change. And you could see this happening in the city. So the circumstances were that whites were fleeing the city and Blacks were becoming the majority. But all the offices all the officials, all the politicians in the city were still white and the mayor was white, there was only one token Black on the City Council, the Superintendent of Schools was white, the Board of Education was white. So we began to say to ourselves, in the history of the United States, when a city becomes almost ethnically one group, what happens is the political offices are taken over by that particular group. So we began to create a Black Power Movement¹⁸ that would begin to address this situation, that when a certain group of people becomes the majority in the city, they should run the city. And I became very active in the Black Power Movement. I was the coordinator for the all Black Freedom Now Party¹⁹, which ran a full slate of

¹⁷ *Lodge Freeway*: A section of freeway, also known as "Chrysler Freeway," running through Detroit, Michigan. In order to build this freeway Black Bottom, one of Detroit's most distinct African American communities, was bulldozed in the 1960s. Black Bottom, also known as Paradise Valley, had more African American businesses along Hastings and Saint Antoine Streets than any other place in America. It was a predominately African-American neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan where Black migrants from the South were forced to live because of deed restrictions that made it illegal from them to own or rent property in most of the city.

¹⁸ *Black Power* was a political movement that rose to great prominence in the middle 1960s, which expressed a new racial consciousness among Blacks in the United States. The Black Power Movement encouraged the improvement of communities of people of African descent, rather than the fight for complete integration. One of the key concepts in the rhetoric and style of "Black Power" was the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms.

¹⁹ *Freedom Now Party*: An all-Black political independent party in Michigan that ran candidates in the general election of November 1964. A call for the Freedom Now Party was first made in August 1963 to the quarter million participants in the national civil rights March on Washington. While many people supported the call, it was only in Michigan that the new party mounted a serious electoral effort, running a slate of 39 candidates in the 1964 elections.

candidates in the 1964 election. I was the main organizer for Malcolm's²⁰ Grassroots²¹ Leadership Conference²² in November 1963. And I became so active in the Black Movement that the FBI, its records say, "She's probably Afro-Chinese." But that's how closely I became identified. And it was, it was...it was a tremendous learning experience for me.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: Because up to that time, my activities had been really peripheral. I had...I had engaged in things, I had been to meetings, I had protested and so forth. But here was something that actually organically happening to the city, and I was a part of it. And when the rebellions broke out in 1967, people said that I was one of the six people responsible, even though Jimmy and I were on vacation at that time in Los Angeles. But what happened was that the rebellion...up to that time, I had been in the radical movement for nearly 30 years, and Jimmy as well, and we had never tried to distinguish between a rebellion and a revolution. We had never felt it necessary, because the thinking of most people who were for social change or radicals at the time, was that if we...folks who were oppressed got angry enough, and, and acted, you know, went out in the streets and rebelled, the old society would be swept away and the people who were oppressed would represent a whole new set of values. And all of a sudden what happened was that the streets were filled with young people who were angry, legitimately so, at the fact that the police were sort of like an occupation army within the city, and also by the fact that the high tech, or what we called automation was eliminating the jobs which they had been able to drop out of school and get, you know, in the plant, and they were full of this anger. But there was nothing that they were going to replace it with.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: So they need...I think this is...this is probably the turning point of my political life—the need to distinguish between a rebellion and a revolution. And to recognize that young people had come upon the historical scene and had needs and frustrations and hopes, but had no idea of how they were going to fulfill these.

²⁰ *Malcolm X* entered public life in 1953 as minister and national representative of the Nation of Islam (NOI), an Islamic Black separatist group that fought for a state apart from white people and taught that white society actively worked to keep African-Americans from empowering themselves and achieving political, economic and social success. His charisma, drive and conviction attracted an astounding number of new members, and X was largely credited with increasing membership in the NOI from 500 in 1952 to 30,000 in 1963. In 1964, X lost faith in the integrity of the NOI and broke with the group. From that point on, relations between X and NOI became increasingly sour. On February 21, 1965, X was assassinated by three NOI gunmen although it remains contested as to who really ordered the assassination—the U.S. government or the Nation of Islam.

²¹ *Grassroots* is often used to refer to organizations based on community leadership, particularly poor and marginalized members of society. This is contrasted to large bureaucratic organizations.

²² The "*Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference*" was held in Detroit in November 1963, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. It was organized partially as a protest after blacks were prohibited from speaking at a nearby, conservative, political convention. At the conference Malcolm X gave a talk that became known as the "Message to the Grassroots."

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And that the task, our task therefore as people who considered ourselves revolutionaries, was to begin to go beyond protests and to begin trying to define what work would mean, what education would mean, what community would mean, what all the fundamental aspects of a human existence would mean in the new society. And that's what I've been engaged with for the last 30 some years.

Emily: Hmm. So tell us a little bit about those organizations. I know that some of them, a lot of them are concentrated on this youth...

Grace: Um-hum.

Emily: ...the notion of youth, that you...you mentioned. So can you tell us a little bit about some of the earlier ones and some...

Grace: Well...

Emily: ...some of the more recent ones?

Grace: Well, in the 60's, one of the...one of our demands as part of a Black Power Movement was community control of schools.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And there was a very active movement on the national scale, particularly in New York, around this question of community control of schools. And I had taught briefly, during the 60's in the public schools, and it seemed to me that the question of education was not a question of who controlled the schools, but what was education all about.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: That we had come to a point in the history of this country when a system of education which had been created on the factory model at the beginning of the 20th century to prepare young people to become workers in the plant. That that was no longer satisfactory.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: That what had happened is that young people were now actors on the historical scene, and that some way that...the only way in which they could become really, say, citizens, who could play the role of self-governing, with the responsibilities of self government was if the educational system would provide that as a natural and normal part of the school curriculum. That from K to 12, the demo—the classrooms needed to be much more democratic, there needed to be a much more parallel relationship between teaching and learning. That teachers had to learn as well as...

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: ...as young people. And that young people should be engaged in activities, which affected their lives. And through that participation and that activity, they would learn things that would matter not just in a cognitive sense, but in a social sense, in a human sense. And this...this is the sort of schooling that they began to create in the South during Mississippi Summer²³ in 1964. So this is one of the most important things. For 30 years I'd been talking about a paradigm shift in education toward a more democratic ed—type of education, a more community-based education, and now I think the crisis in the school system has reached the point where people are ready to entertain it. You know, I think that has a lot to do...How do you build a movement? It seems to me that to build a movement, you have to...first of all, you have to be very rooted in the realities and in the contradictions of the society where you are, or the place where you are. And then you have to begin to create a vision of what the new values would be in a fundamental institution. And then you sort of have to wait till the crisis reaches the point where people are ready to consider it.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And what's been happening is that the school crisis has become so profound and Bush's No Child Left Behind Act²⁴ has turned into such a penalizing leg—form of legislation, that's created a condition of what they call zero tolerance in the schools...

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: ...that principals and teachers are so afraid that test scores will go down that they penalize kids for practically nothing. And the kids are beginning to rebel against it. And teachers are also beginning to rebel against this sort of a standardized testing, which doesn't give them an opportunity to be creative and relate to the children. And the

²³ *Mississippi Summer* is also known as the Mississippi Freedom Project (1964). In 1964 the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) organized its Freedom Summer campaign. The main objective was to try to put an end to the political disenfranchisement of African Americans in the Southern States. Volunteers from the three organizations decided to concentrate its efforts in Mississippi. In 1962 only 6.7 per cent of African Americans in the state were registered to vote, the lowest percentage in the country. This involved the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Party (MFDP). Over 80,000 people joined the party and 68 delegates, led by Fannie Lou Hamer, attended the Democratic Party Convention in Atlantic City and challenged the attendance of the all-white Mississippi representation. CORE, SNCC and NAACP also established 30 Freedom Schools in towns throughout Mississippi. Volunteers taught in the schools and the curriculum now included black history, the philosophy of the civil rights movement. During the summer of 1964 over 3,000 students attended these schools and the experiment provided a *model for future educational programs*.

²⁴ *No Child Left Behind Act* Controversial educational reform passed into law on January 8, 2002 by the Bush Administration.

Charter School Movement²⁵ is beginning, beginning to pull people out of the public school system so the public school system doesn't know where it's going. So a few weeks ago, Kilpatrick²⁶, you know mayor of Detroit, organized a two-hour televised town meeting, and at the end of the meeting, he said, "We need to be more radical."

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: We need...we...we're protecting the system. All over urban America they are crying out for solutions. We need people to talk about...everybody needs to be engaged. What are we doing or talking about doing that's going to be different?

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And so, I mean, there was the opportunity...

Emily: Yes.

Grace: ...now. And then he came out the other night, Tuesday night; I don't know how many people saw him. But he did a half-hour program on...on Channel 7²⁷. He said, "The answer is to put me in charge."

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: It's just...I mean people...I...you know, I...I go to a water aerobics class almost every morning. And most of the people in the class are retirees, they're mostly African American, mostly women. And they just said, he ought to be ashamed of himself...

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: ...asking for a radical change, asking everybody to be engaged in making proposals, and he comes out and says, "I should be the one who's in charge." Almost unbelievable. But the opportunity is marvelous. Because in the *Michigan Citizen* this week, what we're doing, we have a...we have a group that meets every couple weeks, of young people and teachers and educators. And we've been working on how to project this idea of freedom schooling, and meet with...We've been working with a group called Youth United²⁸, of young people. And they, in response to Kilpatrick's appeal, drew up a series of proposals...

Emily: Um-Hmm!

²⁵ *Charter School Movement* aim to have public schools financed by public funds, but which are governed by their own specific charter and not by the regular public school regulations or system. The first charter school legislation was enacted in 1991 in Minnesota and has been increasing at a tremendous rate.

²⁶ *Kwame Kilpatrick*, the mayor of Detroit, was elected in November 2001 and re-elected in 2005.

²⁷ *Channel 7*: A Detroit local television station part of the ABC Television Network.

²⁸ *Youth United*: An organization in Detroit dedicated to young people.

Grace:...asking what should be done. And that appears in this week's *Michigan Citizen*. And I urge people to get a copy.

Emily: Hmm. Okay. Well, I want to hear a little bit about Detroit Summer, because I know Detroit Summer is part of this Freedom School Movement, too, and you spent many years with that organization.

Grace: Yeah, let me...let me tell you how Freedom Sch—how Detroit Summer started. In...Coleman Young was elected, the first Black mayor of Detroit in 1973, a lot because of the rebellion. People realized that a white mayor would never be able to maintain law and order. So Coleman Young was elected. And Coleman is a...was a very, very smart man. He was a very devoted man. There was nothing ... nothing wrong with his head at all. He might have been a little bit blunt at time but...But anyway, he was able to do something about racism in the fire department and in the police department. He was able to appoint Black folks in charge and integrate both of the services. But he couldn't do anything about the exodus of the corporations.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: Which began very heavily right about the time he was elected—1973, 1974. So he tried desperately to try and bring back industry. In 1980, for example, he allowed GM²⁹ to create what was called the Pole Town Plant³⁰. And in order to do that, they demolished fifteen hundred homes, six hundred businesses, six churches. And there was a huge protest movement but GM said, "We'll create 6,000 jobs." So the UAW³¹ went along also, and there have never been more than 3,000 jobs there. But that didn't stop...I mean, 3,000 jobs even. But by the way, there are two other GM plants that were employing 35,000 people, were shut down...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...and replaced by this one plant. So by 1985—this was in 1980—in 1985, crack came to Detroit. And very shortly we began having a drug economy. You know, kids create, sell these little pellets for five dollars. And kids started saying, "Why go to school?" with the idea that some day you'll be able to make a lot of money, when you can make a lot of money right now on the street, rolling. And this is what they began doing, and it was right...there was a lot of violence, a lot of killings. In 1986, there were 47 young people killed in street violence and 365 wounded. And Coleman didn't know what to do.

²⁹ *General Motors (GM)*: A U.S.-based automobile company.

³⁰ *Pole Town Plant* is a GM plant (officially known as the Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Center) built in Detroit in the early 1980's. The construction required the bull-dozing of 1500 houses, 600 small businesses and six churches in an old Polish neighborhood to build a plant that GM promised would employ 6000 workers at the same time that it was closing down two other plants which together employed 30,000. The plant has never employed more than 4000 people.

³¹ Founded in 1935, The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) claims to be one of the largest and most diverse unions in North America.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: He said, “We’ve got to have jobs. He says we can’t depend on the auto industry for jobs anymore. We’ve got to have a casino industry³². That will create 50,000 jobs.”

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So we created an organization to...to struggle against it. And we actually managed to defeat him on this proposal, which had already been defeated three times. And we only have casinos now because Windsor created a casino, and people could literally see the money, swimming over the Canada.

Emily: Huh.

Grace: So they voted in casinos in Detroit. But during the struggle, Coleman said, “You’re just a bunch of naysayers. What is your alternative?”

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And that forced us to begin thinking about what is our alternative? What do you do with a city like Detroit, which is a beautiful setting on the Detroit River, has beautiful institutions—museums, universities? Has a population that mostly came from the country, but isn’t going back to the country? Which is now abandoned to such a degree that you...very often you see more prairie...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...than you see homes. So Jimmy wrote a document called “Rebuilding Detroit: An Alternative to Casino Gambling.” And, in it, he talked about how we need to see the 21st century city as a collection of communities that...and we have to bring the country back into the city. Instead of carrying on this process which has been going on for the last three, four hundred years, where you depopulate the countryside and, you know, urbanize everything, and, you know, and pave over everything green, and build higher and higher skyscrapers, what we need to do is to think about...begin thinking about the city in a different way. And he said the people who can begin doing this thinking are essentially the young people, that they...we can...we can involve them in ...in doing things that will begin to be an example of some different way to redefine and to re-spirit the city. And so we...Detroit...created Detroit Summer, partly in order to show how to rebuild the city and also to begin as an example of a different kind of education that really involves young people in things that matter to their lives. And that’s how Detroit Summer started. It’s now ...

Emily: Um-hum.

³² The *casino industry* constructs legal gambling establishments.

Grace: ...been in existence for twelve years.

Emily: Hmm. Um-hum. Since 1992.

Grace: '92

Emily: Yeah. So what are your favorite projects out of Detroit Summer?

Grace: Well, I think my favorite is the Bike Program.

Emily: The Back Alley Bikes.

Grace: Right. Back Alley Bikes. And this was created by the young people. You know, the things...one of the things we do, we started out with community gardens and public murals, which the young people paint in consultation with the community, in order to give the sense of public space and restore community. And then one of the young people came up with the idea of bicycles as a way for young people to get around. Because one of the problems that we were having with Detroit Summer was that young people had to be chauffeured every place that they went. We'd have to...we'd have to get a car to take them to the projects, the parents would have to bring them down, so forth and so on. And someone thought, well, if we got people to donate bikes that were used and in bad repair, and we offered these to young people if they would repair them, then they could own them. And so this program...they...it's amazing. There's a room in...we have a space called the Youth Space on Cass. It's a room this size, and all over the floor you see bikes in different states of repair. And you should see the young people walk in and say, "That's mine." And then take it and repair it. And, you know, just...just begin to have a form of mobility so they're...they're not dependent on their parents to chauffeur them every place they go.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And we're also, at the same time, reducing the emissions, so the air is more clearer, cleaner. And we're creating a form of community, because when young people are all over the streets in their bicycles, it makes a difference. Cars are like chariots. You know, they sort of isolate everybody.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: But bikes are a way to socialize. So that's my favorite program.

Emily: Um-hum. You know, I've volunteered with Detroit Summer for a few years now, and I've noticed that a lot of the leadership in the organization are women.

Grace: Um-hum.

Emily: Why do you think that's so?

Grace: Well, first of all, I think the time has probably come for women's leadership.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: The...you know, the last...two weeks ago, mayor Kilpatrick appointed a woman police commissioner.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Her name is Ellie Bowling Cummings.

Emily: Bowling Cummings.

Grace: And she's like Tiger Woods, she's of Asian and African American extraction. And when I went into my water aerobics class the next morning, everybody was talking about it. And one of the women in particular, her name is Nora, Nora Wheels, said, "You know, it's time for women to take over. We've been abused; we've been helping everybody now. They make such a mess, the only person who can lose it and clear it up are women." Well, I...I think that's going a little overboard.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: But I do believe that the sort of hierarchical, patriarchal way in which we're doing things has created such a mess that people to whom the more natural, informal ways of organizing around kitchen story...kitchen tables are telling stories and things like that, that that's a much more natural way of organizing as we move into trying to create something new. And I think that's basically why we have many more women than...than males.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: We do have some, and they're very nice.

Emily: Um-hum. Yes, yes. They are. So can you tell us a little bit then about your understanding of the term "Feminism." Because you've been talking about women's leadership here.

Grace: Well, I...I'm not an -ism person. I don't like -isms. And I also am very aware of the fact that my attitude toward sexism comes out of a very different period from yours.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: That I had to find my own way in a very individual way. When I was fifteen, for example, I read this book called *Women in Economics* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. And, you know, that...that book has a picture of it. She talked about, you know, I'm not sure

whether it had a picture or not, but she talked about how little girls sit on their daddy's knees and tuck them under the chin, you know, so that they get a doll or a new dress. And that...that image has never left my mind. I resolved that would not be the way that I was going to live.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: But I think that's very different from being part of a movement, the way that folks who came out of the 70's and out of the modern women's movement have become so...I...What I do is I try to think of all these various movements, not so much as isms, but as ways by which each section of our society that has been denied their humanity, is emerging to contribute their special strengths through the creation of a new society. And I think women have very special strengths that we can contribute, that is much more natural for women—I hope this doesn't sound like essentialism—but it's much more natural for women to think of doing things in a more informal way, to think of doing a whole lot of different things at once. They're not as linear in their thinking. And so there are a whole lot of attributes that we bring and values that we bring to the creation of a new society.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So I don't think...I...if I were to characterize myself as something particular, I would say I'm old. [Laughter] That's what I am more distinctively than...

Emily: Well, yeah, you're 88, yes [laughs].

Grace: And I have a lot to say about being old.

Emily: Okay. So would you consider yourself a feminist before you, or after you consider yourself being old?

Grace: No, I don't consider myself an -ist of any kind.

Emily: Okay, so tell us what you have to say about being old then [laughs].

Grace: Well, you know, very few people live to my age and still have their marbles³³.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: And I'm very, very fortunate that that's the case. I'm very fortunate also that by virtue of having been born in the first part of this 20th century, I've lived through most of the great events and had a chance to participate in most of the great movements of the 20th century. So I...I have a sense of the difference between centuries. I have a sense of how much of the first half of the 20th century was dominated by linear ideas. Like sci—

³³ “*Still have their marbles,*” is a colloquial term referring to a person's mental facilities. In this sense it refers to an elderly person being able to think and reason clearly.

scientific socialism for example, that had come out of 19th century thinking. And I was able, I came through the splitting of the atom, and this...this recognition that we had to change our ways of thinking because, as Oppenheimer³⁴ would have...human beings had experienced sin that the...all...that the way that we used to blame everything on everybody else and not see our own need for transformation, that we had to get beyond that. That a lot of what we had to do had to be a combination of transforming our environment, and at the same time transforming ourselves. That that old polarity and duality between the subjective and the objective could no longer hold. So I've...I...I not only lived through that period, but I also was so involved in the Black Power Movement that having gone through it, I'm able to look back on it and see what some of its limitations were. So I think about power very differently now than I thought about it in the 60's. And I think it...I think it's great to be an old person—and still have your marbles of course.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: If you don't, it's tough. But I, I think that our society...I think for example, you're always reading the statistic about how many more old women there are than old men. Well, they put that in front of me, and they think that you spend most of your time as an old woman looking for an old man.

Emily: Hmm! Um-hum.

Grace: Looking for a man.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And what I've experienced...Jimmy died in 1993, and it was tough.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: Because we had done so many things together for 40 years. But I've had now almost ten years on my own.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And I've had to do things on my own and think things through on my own. And that's been a great blessing.

Emily: Hmm.

³⁴ *J. Robert Oppenheimer* was the director of The Manhattan Project, where the Atomic bomb was invented and produced. He is commonly known as the "father of the A-bomb." Upon seeing the impact of the bomb, he advocated for more control on atomic energy, eventually having his security clearance revoked.

Grace: So, I...I've learned, I think about how things that are negative, not just seem negative, but that are negative, also are opportunities for...for going beyond where you've been. And I would hope very much that...because you're not, probably not going to speak to many old activists.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: And I hope very much that...that folks, when they leave this place or when they hear what I have to say, will think differently about the old people whom they meet. That they can...will think about how so much is being wasted when we are not asking some of these folks to give of what they've learned. And I spoke last week at a leadership conference, women's conference, at University of Michigan-Dearborn, and this was the burden of my speech—that there are so many women out there who have lived all these years who have time now to give and want to give, and we really need...our children need them so badly. And we have to find ways to engage them. It's not going to be easy, because, you know, people fall into believing that they're useless. And how to give people the idea that they have so much to contribute. And to...to recognize that when they put forward overtures indicating that they do want to serve.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: So that's what I've lived as an old person.

Emily: Hmm. Um-hum. Um-hum. You mentioned earlier how you've been on your own for ten years now, and you had to learn these new things about yourself. So what have you changed in the last ten years about your life?

Grace: Well, one of the most important things that happened to me was actually shortly after the publication of my autobiography, I went to a conference in UCLA³⁵, at UCLA organized by Scott Kurashige³⁶ who's Emily's partner/husband. It was called an activist...Asian American Activist Serve the People Conference. And I had a wonderful time! Prior to that I'd had very little contact with Asian Americans. And I spoke. And the young people asked questions. They asked questions about the difference between rebellion and revolution! And I'd been dying for somebody to ask me because I had so much to say about it.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: And so that...that brought me into contact with the Asian American young people in a way that I'd not been for many years. So that's been a very marvelous part of the last period.

Emily: Um-hum.

³⁵ *University of California, Los Angeles* (UCLA), is a public research university founded in 1919.

³⁶ *Scott Kurashige* is an assistant professor in the Asian/Pacific Islander American Studies Program, the Program in American Culture and the Department of History at the University of Michigan.

Grace: Ah, what else has been very important? You know, when you're...when you've been living with someone for a long, long time, you're so used to being able to share things. I mean, you go out and you see something and you not only experience it then, but you have a chance to come home and say, "Oh, look what happened today. Look who I heard," so on and so forth. And you miss that a lot. But when you don't have it, then you do a lot more thinking on...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...on...you have to find ways, you have to create ways whereby you share things. They're not just given. And that's been one of the things I've had to do during this last period.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And things just began falling into my lap. People asked me to do different things and I started doing them.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: So I've been almost more active the last ten years than I was...was in the previous period.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. Um-hum. So do you see...what is the connection that you see then between your activism and your scholarship? Or anyone's activism and anyone's scholarship?

Grace: Well, I...I talked earlier about how when I was at Bryn Mawr as a graduate student I was introduced to Hegel. And I used to really get...I didn't understand it particularly, but I used to read it almost like you listen to music.

Emily: Hmm?

Grace: I felt there was something in it that...that I had to sort of internalize. And what I've learned since then, as an activist, is how important it is to think dialectically, because that's what Hegel's thinking is characterized as, described as. The tendency for intellectuals, and for the human mind in fact, is to create a concept and then get locked into it. Everything becomes what Hegel called a fixed concept. A category. And we get so locked into it that we don't realize reality is changing. And what I've learned is how much reality has changed and is changing all the time, and how we're all always being challenged to break out of the boxes...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...that our minds tend to create. In the German, the two words are...I mean the English words are understanding and reason. And the German word is *verstand*, for understanding, and the German word for reason is *vernucht*. And the idea of reason as distinguished from understanding is to think beyond the polarities of the present.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And try to think of a new affirmation and then using that affirmation to help you to create things that enable people to open up their imaginations and move out and be free. Most people have an understanding of Hegel I think that is kind of narrow. What Hegel was talking about was how we could become self determining, how we could really understand that being human means being able to make choices, and how important it is not to see yourself as determined but as self determining, and to use the obstacles that emerge as springboards to get beyond determinism into self-determination.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So every time something doesn't work or something works too well, I say, "Got to get beyond that."

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Got to think beyond that, got to see every obstacle, every failure, and even every success as a challenge to go beyond. And that's why I think...So thinking and acting to me are so intertwined.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: They're not separate from one another.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And I think that's one of the difficulties. People say, you know, like a cliché, without theory there is no revolutionary practice, and so forth and so on. But it's very hard actually to practice this.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: You can't practice it unless you practice, obviously. But you also need to see obstacles as challenges and as opportunities and not give up so easily, which is the tendency to do. People...people get...I've talked to people who were very active in the 60's but don't see the present situation as an opportunity. The present situation is a tremendous opportunity to be creative and to be imaginative.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. You mentioned the slogan, or the notion of self-determination.

Grace: Um-hum.

Emily: And that was very much a slogan of the 60's.

Grace: Um-hum.

Emily: Of, you know, Black Power Movement, and even the women's movement. And so I was wondering how you see your work in relation to the women's movement?

Grace: Well, I don't have an awful lot...I don't have contact with many women's organizations. I may send a contribution in now and then, to this organization or the other. But I...I guess I don't believe in getting stuck...

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: ...in any one identity. I think that our tendency...it's so easy to become fragmented because we live in a fragmented...fragmenting society. It's so difficult to be whole.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: To see yourself as many faceted, to see how many possibilities there are in who we are. If, you know, here I've been Afro-Chinese; I've been Asian-American. I've been...I've had the...the opportunity to know so many different people and work with so many different people off all ethnicities and of all ages, and of all classes. And I...I don't believe...I think the tendency in much of the radical movement, certainly during the first half of the 20th century, was to believe that one class, one group, had all the answers. And that's impossible! Society is so complex. And humanity is so...you know, is evolving. You know, we may not be getting new thumbs or...or...toes or something like that. But we are just at the very beginning of human possibilities. We haven't even begun to explore those.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And that's why it's so important not to get stuck. And you can use philosophy to help you get unstuck.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: But philosophy can also trap you. I mean, ideas are a terrible thing.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: They can trap you as well as enlarge you.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. Hmm. Well, a few minutes ago, you had mentioned the notion of being able to practice, you know, being able to work as an activist. And many students after they read your autobiography, they often ask, how was she able to survive to pay the rent, and do her activism, and do her scholarship, and have her marriage? And so how were you able to...to do this?

Grace: Well, for one thing, everything in our house is second hand.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: All of my clothes come from, you know, something like that. Ah, and I was brought up in a frugal period, you know. I was brought in the period when if you didn't finish everything on your plate you were told about the peasants starving in China. So folks who have been raised in the post-War world, what happens is that you don't believe in being trapped in this society, but by the time you graduate, you owe so much in college loans, you have to buy a car in order to get to your job. You think you have to pay a high rent so you'll be safe for your job. And before you know it, you're in the rat race³⁷. And how people are people going to get out of the rat race I think is...is the challenge. I...what I did when I was in college, in addition to having a few scholarships, I used to type, and made my money by...by typing. And when I...all during the years that I was an activist, I was a Kelly Girl³⁸, basically.

Emily: Temporary.

Grace: Yeah. Temp—temporary worker, that is.

Emily: Office worker.

Grace: And we lived very frugally, which is why I have so very few teeth now.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: You know, and just go to dentist and they sort of drill and fill.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: But I...I think that folks who are...who have grown up in the post-War world are so caught up in wants rather than needs. And how are they going to break from that, I don't know. I'm glad to say that many of the young people who are coming to Detroit Summer now, many of them after they graduate come to Detroit because they think there's the possibility of starting afresh, that you can begin producing your own food.

³⁷ The “*rat race*” is a colloquial term, which usually refers to a struggle to maintain one's position in work or life.

³⁸ *Kelly* provides temporarily clerical services and started by William Russell Kelly in October 1946, with an office in Detroit, Michigan, and two employees. “Kelly Girl” refers to the women that were typically employed by company. The “Kelly Girl” provided calculating and inventory services, typing and copying.

That you can begin living simply. That this is the chance not only to do something different with your own life, but to do different...something different for the whole society and begin creating a new model. And so that's one of the great gifts I think of Detroit Summer—to understand...Let me give you an example of what I mean. I've just written this column about how we need to use the lessons of the 60s for the present time. In 1963, the four little girls were killed in the bombing of the Birmingham church³⁹. We called for the boycott of Christmas. We said that when such an atrocity happens, we can't do business as usual. Today, with the Iraq war, with the ways that our young people not only losing their lives, but their humanity in what they're being asked to do. Dropping two-thousand bomb—pound bombs on neighborhoods. And in the way that we're treating Arab Americans in this country. We can't just celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas as usual. We can't just watch football games and not...and shop until we drop. We've got to think that we have choices. We can produce something different. Maybe it won't change your life for all time. Maybe it won't change society for all time. But each of us can choose to do something different, because we recognize that for our own humanity we have to.

Emily: Um-hum. Well, I just have a few more questions for you. And I like to ask these questions at the end of every interview I do. So you can indulge and say as much or as little as you'd like. And they're kind of trivial. But you're 88 now, and in your whole life what was the memor—most memorable moment of your life?

Grace: Well, I think when I said yes to Jimmy.

Emily: [laughs] To the proposal.

Grace: Ah, see, I don't know...I don't know whether it's the most memorable or a turning point. It certainly was a turning point...

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: ...in my life. Because it meant that I was...I entered into a life that I had never thought about...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...that I was quite unprepared for, and something that very few people up to now have had the chance to experience.

Emily: Hmm.

³⁹ On September 15, 1963, four white segregationists, angered by a federal court ruling to integrate Birmingham, Alabama's public schools, threw a bomb into the basement of the all-Black Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The explosion killed four young girls. In response, riots broke out and the authorities retaliated with great violence. City, State and Federal officials failed to bring the bombers to justice until the late 1970s, convicting only one of the bombers. The bombing united factional Civil Rights leaders.

Grace: Really to live with someone who is very different from you.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Different from you ethnically. Different from you in terms of education. Different from you in terms of background. I think that's beginning to happen more with young people today.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: I think that how we're going to experience diversity and really internalize diversity is something that we don't even know anything about up till now. But that's...that's what's going to happen.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Because I think that...First of all, I think that the way of life that, aside from the movements that Americans lived, have lived over the last 50 years, have been extremely damaging to our humanity. I think the way that we have not been able to distinguish between wants and needs. I think the way that we have felt that we needed things, and knew all the time that we are being seduced by commercials.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And felt that we would go along with that, rather than looking into ourselves and...and asking ourselves, what is that doing to us as human beings. Is that making us more human or less human? I think that's the big question. I think the question is not just...it's our human identity that's now under attack, that we now have to rescue, we now have to salvage.

Emily: Well, you've given a lot for us to think about and probably one of my last questions for you would be, if you could change *anything* in your life, anything at all, what would that be?

Grace: I can't think of anything I'd like to change.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: I mean, I guess...I don't know what that would be. Maybe that sounds...I don't know what that sounds like, but I know I've been extremely fortunate in the friends that I've had and the associates that I've had. I know that I've...I've been able I think to...to enjoy the best of what western society has contributed. One of the things that I think I...I think that a lot of people don't appreciate what it is like to be...to face the challenges of being an American.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: I think that to be an American and to recognize on the one hand the terrible things this country has done, but also to see that it's a challenge, it's a challenge to look at those things and to examine why they have taken place, and to understand that one of the main reasons why that has taken place is that we have put economic growth and development in the forefront and made that, given that a priority, and have not made human development a priority. But that's something that's recognizable. It's not something that's obscure. And we don't have to repeat that. No one is making us do that. We have a choice. Everyone has a choice. I got a letter from a young friend of mine who's been living in a Palestinian village. And she looks...she looks like she could be either Israeli or Palestinian. So she was talking to some of the Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint, and she says, "Why do you do this?" And they said, "We have no choice." And she said, "What about the Refuseniks⁴⁰?" It may be a hard choice, but you do have a choice. And I think that...the...the ism that we most have to struggle against is determinism.

Emily: Hmmm ... Hmmm.

Grace: The belief that we don't have a choice. And I think if we...if we could internalize that, internalize it as a philosophical concept, and as a practical thing, and begin applying it on our lives, that we could make a big leap.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And maybe only ... maybe only a few of us. But everyone who makes the leap is also helping to advance humanity.

Emily: Hmm. Okay. So this is the point where I ask you is there anything else you'd like to tell us or share that we haven't covered.

Grace: Why don't we have some questions and then maybe that'll be asking.

Emily: Okay. Well, we'll turn to our studio audience here...

Grace: Okay.

Emily: ..and ask them some questions. Okay. Do any of you have some questions for Grace? I know you do [laughs].

Audience 1: Um, do I need to stand up? My question is about, well, you were talking about your Hegelian theory and concepts. Am I talk—can you hear me?

Grace: I...

⁴⁰ *Refuseniks*: Reserve combat officers and soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces who refuse to continue to fight in what they call a "War of the Settlements". They have signed a letter declaring their refusal to serve in the Israeli occupied territories.

Audience 1: You were talking about your Hegelian...um, Hegelian theory and...

Grace: Um-hum.

Audience 1: ...and concepts, and I'm curious to know about how you use your understanding of those concepts to do multigenerational, multiethnic organizing, and how you recommend others to engage multiethnic, multigenerational organization and ... yeah, that's my question.

Grace: Well, ah, I referred to this earlier. I think...In Detroit, and my thinking has very much been shaped by the realities of Detroit. You know, I've lived in the same house for the last 41 years in Detroit, and, you see things change. And one of the things that Detroit does to you is it...the reality and the history almost forces you to think in terms of Black and White. The city itself is so segregated, its past is so racist, you can...you know, it's just like you can the...when the casino in Windsor was organized, was founded, you can see the waters swimming...the money swimming over. You can sort of see the...all these years you've been able to see the city polarizing itself—the Whites going to the suburbs, the Blacks ghettoized, I mean, all...you've seen the schools becoming all Black. And so you're mind gets to accept that as eternal. So how do you break through that? Because you know that while that's happening to Detroit, the world is changing. The country is changing. There are cities now in Detroit—in the country—Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, where the majority of the people are people of color, of different backgrounds—Latinos, Asians, South Asians, everything. And here we are in Detroit frozen in Black and White thinking. So one of the things that the young people of Detroit Summer have been doing, and Emily has been a very important part of this, is they're restoring the old Chinatown at Cass and Peterborough. They've created this mural in this neighborhood based on the Vincent Chin⁴¹ murder. And they painted this wonderful mural so there's people, Black and White and others, go past, they have a sense there, there's something different that they can think about, that they can talk about. So it's...that's, that's practical Hegelianism. That's refusing to be stuck in opposites. That's going beyond opposition—the German words are *gegensatz* and *venaspruck*, that's going beyond opposition—*gegensatz* where two people just sort of confront each other, to *venaspruck*, to driving toward some sort of resolution, to contradiction. That's theory, but it's also very practical, it's very real.

Audience 2: When you talk about Freedom Schooling, what direction would you like practical, I mean, what direction would you like public education to take and what kind of practical measures do you think need to be made?

Grace: What was the first part of the question?

Emily: Freedom Schooling.

⁴¹ Vincent Chin was 27-year-old Chinese American brutally beaten to death by two white men on June 19, 1982 in Detroit. The two men in this racially motivated murder received lenient sentences for their crime. This case is believed to be a watershed moment for the Asian Americans Movement.

Grace: Well, I'll tell you about some of the proposals that the young people made in this letter to the mayor. They said, first of all, get more youth input into the schools, create peer juries, have the board of education elected not only by citizens but include students in the elections, have them involved in the creation. I don't remember all the proposals but what I'm saying is that if education is not based upon the actual lives of the students then it's a form of slavery almost because what happens your what ... what you think should come out of your experiences it shouldn't come out of books. What you get out of books and give back on an exam you forget within a few months or maybe even a few hours. Now, and you know, one of my columns ... just think of how much safer and healthier our neighborhoods would become almost overnight if the curriculum were based upon the experiences of students and what young people did in their community. Just think of how much they could learn. For example there's a group called Creative Change in Ypsilanti which develops curricula that teachers can use that involve kids in the community and the teachers say teaching is so much more exciting and the kids think in terms of, many of them use inhalers by the way because so many kids have asthma and when they study the conditions in their community they learn science and they also learn about being able to do something for themselves. The worst part of living in this society is that you're constantly being disempowered. But what's worse is that we accept this disempowerment. We don't realize that there are very simple things that we can do in our daily lives and our schools to change that. They're not ... they're not esoteric. There's something that a kid could understand. It's adults who have their minds stuck. You know, I, I wrote a column called "Freeing our Minds from School." From the time that you are a little kid you play school, what do you think school is, school is you're there and you get all your brothers and sisters and neighbor kids there and you say "you mind me."

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: That's our image of school. And I was at a workshop on Freedom Schooling one day that involved young people, adults and so forth, and the teacher who's a member of our Freedom Schooling group and teaches fifth grade, brought in a lesson plan and she suggested the we choose the topic and someone chose hip hop and all of a sudden that image we have of school was blown away because we realized that the kids certainly knew as much as the teacher did and probably more about the subject and that there are many, many things on which the books and the teachers learning are not adequate to the reality. Now, I mean does—it's this question really of freeing our minds, it's not always the system that's there. If we begin freeing our minds, we can do things.

Emily: That's very similar to what the students are doing at the Catherine Ferguson Academy.

Grace: Oh, yeah.

Emily: You want to tell them about that?

Grace: The first thing about the Catherine Ferguson Academy—one of the groups that we work with Detroit Summer is the Catherine Ferguson Academy which is a public high school for teenage mothers on the southwest side of Detroit. These are young people who were dropping out of school because they were pregnant or because they were kids who had kids. Now the kids, there's a place for the kids in the school, there are nurseries. They have, the mothers have built a barn, they have planted a community garden, they are raising farm animals right in the city. And Norton, near Martin Luther Boulevard, and now whereas most of the girls were dropping out, 90% go on to college because raising their kids and raising animals and planting gardens and becoming self-sustaining has given them, has empowered them.

Emily: They even did the soil testing for lead.

Grace: Yeah. But the Detroit Summer, one of the Detroit Summer people worked with them to test the soil in the neighborhood for lead, to see whether they could plant gardens. And they will, they, they enjoyed it so much, because they got a sense of the history of the neighborhood they were able to make reports and they were serving the people in the neighborhood, by what they had done. It's just, people talk about self-esteem. And, and it's so ethereal what they're talking about. You don't know what they're talking about. Self-esteem comes from doing something that you think is meaningful.

Emily: Another question from our audience?

Audience 3: I'd like to follow up on something Emily asked you a bit earlier but put a different twist on it. Emily asked something about your, your life in activism and what relationship did you see with the women's movement. And what that got me to thinking about was your generation of women were sort of—and the experiences that you had as a young woman going to Barnard and then Bryn Mawr and then getting married in the 50s—parallel, to some extent, the kinds of experiences that Betty Friedan⁴² talked about in her groundbreaking book of the 50s where she talked about her generation of women who had gone to all these elite schools and, you know, graduated and they took their education and basically threw it away on housework. So, I'd like to know...[break in tape]...the marriages that these overeducated white women had to escape or felt they had to escape?

Grace: Well, people like Betty Friedan, as she makes very clear, were forced after the end of World War II to return to domesticity, and they live these sterile lives in suburbs, where they...for...had only each other to talk to and talked only about their babies and made complaints about their husbands or something like that. So they were ready for a form of liberation, which she describes. I had known from very early that I was not going to live that way. I was not going to do the equivalent of sitting on my husband's lap and

⁴² Betty Friedan (1921-2006) wrote *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and was a co-founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW); a civil-rights group dedicated to achieving equality of opportunity for women. Some credited her with sparking the "second wave" of feminism in the United States, although critics argue Friedan's book only spoke of the problem of white- middle-class, suburban housewives.

tucking him under the...the chin to get something for myself. That was not my life. And I think that my...I didn't get involved in any struggles during the 30's. I knew that the world was falling apart around me, because it was the years of the Great Depression. And some of my friends did join radical movements, and they did go to different kinds of meetings, which I did not. I...I think I was more interested in ... in doing things with my mind; I was more interested in theory. But what I think forced me to do something different was I was, all of sudden I was out on my own. You know, I ... what was I going to do in my life after I had a Ph.D.? And I...I'm hoping that some of you coming out of college will not find it as easy as it has been in the past to get a job. So you'll have to think, what do I want to do with my life.

Audience 3: Hmm.

Grace: And it's going to involve a lot of struggle. Fortunately for me, I didn't have to struggle with my parents to get some sort of...not to feel that they had been, you know, that they had sacrificed for naught. Most of you when, if you decide that you're going to give your life to something other than what you've been spending all this money and spending all these years preparing yourself for, will have to be able to say to your parents, "Thank you, but I've got to live my own life." Well, that's not going to be easy. I was already at the...you know, I was 25 when I got my degree, and I had already been living away from home for five years. I was not one of Betty Friedan's married suburbanites. But...Let me ask you, what do you think? What should you be talking to your fellow students about, about life and the future?

Audience 3: Well, maybe you should ask one of the graduate students or undergrads rather than...had a chance to speak yet? Rosa?

Audience 4: Should be talking to the fellow students. Or just fellow people, Maria's a professor and I've taken one of her classes, and she, much like yourself, is not necessarily just an educator, but a teacher. You said that you were not going to be a teacher, but from the sounds of the conversation that you've been having with us, you're very much a teacher. You're a role model certainly and ... I think that's ... in response to your question, that's what we need to talk about ... it's like who are our role models, and what can we do to not only emulate them, but carry on their work? So that's one of the conversations that I...that I often find myself having. It's just like, okay, people have actually carried us to this point, what can we do to show them that we're finishing...not finishing, but continuing on with their work.

Grace: Um-hum. Well, I think...I think your generation is going to face this question. Because this country...I mean, we're obviously coming to the end of something. We're going to have to begin thinking about much more basic questions than we have felt it necessary to talk about before. Not just political questions, not against what policy or for or what policy you are against. But what kind of a country do we want to be? Do we want to be a country that is feared? And that we...that we can only get allies by bribing or bullying them? What kind of people do we want to be? Do you want to be seen as, in our

own eyes and in the eyes of others, who value our humanity more than we value things? One of the things I'm urging people to do, Martin Luther King's⁴³ 75th birthday is coming up in a couple months. One of the things that he was urging at the end of his life was a radical revolution in values. That we see racism as part of a giant triplet that includes materialism and militarism. And that we begin to think of ourselves as global citizens who can only bring out the best of what is in the American tradition, by caring for people in the rest of the world the way that we care for our own families. We can celebrate King's birthday differently in the next couple of months. We can make a difference. You know, you don't have to overturn the world all at once.

Emily: Hmm [laughs].

Grace: You can begin to stand for something that is more self-respecting than what we have stood for.

Emily: Hmm. Um-Hmm. Ah, if there aren't...Are there any other questions?

Grace: I think we're probably coming to the end.

Emily: Okay.

Grace: We've been here almost...

Emily: Yes.

Grace: ...two hours.

Emily: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Grace: Well, thank you all for listening, being part of this.

Emily: Yeah.

Grace: I get carried away sometimes.

Emily: [laughs] Not at all, Grace. We want to encourage everyone too that Grace has a website you can look at.

Grace: Oh, yes. The Boggs Center dot org.

Emily: ... www.boggscenter.org, which is part of the James and Grace Lee Boggs center to nurture community leadership. And we want to really thank you once again for coming her to Ann Arbor to interview with us.

⁴³ *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* is one of the most recognized civil rights leaders in U.S. history and the most visible advocate for non-violence and direct action as methods for social change. King was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. On the 4th of April 1968, King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

Grace: Thank you, Emily.

Emily: Thank you so much.

Grace: It's always a pleasure.

Emily: Thank you for the audience too. Thank you.

[applause]

Emily: Cheers. [laughs].

The End