

GRACE LEE BOGGS: [00:00] My name is Grace [Lee Boggs?]. I'm 91 going on 92.

Today is June 1, 2007. We're at the Museum of African History in Detroit, and my partner is Ron Scott whom I've known for 40 years and who is a fellow activist.

RON SCOTT: My name is Ron Scott, and I'm age 60, and today's date is the -- where do I get the date? This is the first of June, of course, first of June 2007. And the location is the Charles Wright Museum of African American History. And Grace is a friend and a comrade, and I've known her for 40 years also when I was just a younger fellow. And so that's what's happening. That's where we are. You know, Grace, it was interesting because I was reading exactly what you had given me about Jimmy, your late husband and fellow activist, observations some 35 years ago about what we were dealing with because we were talking about -- for instance, what I found intriguing is I was looking at one part where he talked about military bases in Africa, I just sort of went to that. And that's exactly what we're looking at today, we're looking at things like that. And that's the international aspect of thing. But also on the local aspect, we're talking about young people and how the struggle of African Americans wasn't just about us, but it was about the transformation of America and the world.

GLB: Well I think what's really important about Jimmy, you know we were married for 40 years and we were active together until he died in July 1993, is that he came from that generation of African Americans who grew up in the South. And he had -- he worked in the plant then in Detroit for 28 years. And he was working in the plant during World War II and after World War II when the technology from World War II was introduced in the plant and the industrial work which had become a part of his life and had become part of lives of African Americans was being eliminated and he began to see that we were

entering into a completely new epoch, that just as the agricultural epoch had been succeeded by the industrial epoch, we were entering into a post-industrial epoch, where we had to redefine what it meant to be human beings, redefine what it meant to be in the city, redefine what work is as contrasted with labor.

RS: You know it's interesting, I mean everyone talked about labor, but it's funny I always every time I came by your house. And I saw you and Jimmy together, when the two of you were talking. I mean, here you are, you're a North Easterner, Asian background and so forth, but you graduate in 1938, I think I got --

GLB: I graduated from college in '35.

RS: Oh, '35, OK I gave you three years. So graduated and here you are and it's like if people would have just look at it on the outside they would say, "Here are two totally different human beings who ran into each other, or found each other, who were engaged and struggled together." But the thing I always find interesting was that how you and Jimmy used to always agree then disagree, and agree and disagree. It was funny, it was hilarious because out of that came a synthesis. And I always thought about that every time I would think about discussing something with somebody I would say, "Woah" -- yeah because I would do my worst impression of Jimmy disagreeing with you. And that always led me to reevaluate what my thinking was. It was interesting.

GLB: I think what's so amazing about Jimmy, and also much to our relationship, is that he was a country boy. I mean I always say the expression, "You can take somebody out of the country, but you couldn't take the country out of him." I mean that expression might have been coined for him. And yet he had -- because he had lived through so much, because he was able to think historically about these different epochs, he was a thinker.

Far beyond what I as someone who was raised in the city, you know in the Big Apple, and who had a lot of education could understand. And this is what is so important but has been lost in the cities today, that contact with the older generation who knew what it was like to make a way out of no way because that's what we have to do today, we have to begin making a way out of no way instead of trying to beg for the jobs with the corporations that exported overseas, instead of trying to bribe them to come back to exploit us to do work that is meaningless for which we get paid, but between know are producing things that people don't need, and that are destroying the planet. We have to be thinking about what is a new way of making a living. What is a new way of living, which in many respects goes back to the old way where we lived closer to the earth and closer to one another.

RS: You know you right, because I remember, Grace, when I was a kid when moved from Chicago -- you know having been born in Chicago, Illinois and living there on 47th Street and King Drive which was [Old South Park?]. Living there and coming from that area and living on [Vernor?] Highway and Saint Aubin and Old Black Bottom, I remember during the summers -- because what you said about Jimmy's absolutely correct. My mother and father were from Louisiana, from rural Louisiana. We lived in a house where we took in people who came from the south. Like everybody else we had somebody from Mississippi who was there, another person from Memphis, Tennessee, and then when they got, you know sort of on their feet so to speak, then they would move on. And we lived with people when we first got here who had been here since the 1920s. And I remember as a kid, five years old, I just remember the names of the people, Mr. and Mrs. Harris. They had in the backyard, there were two -- it was conjoiner -- and you

remember this, Grace, remember when we had grassroots organization workers,
[Howard?]?

GLB: Howard, Over on Buchanan?

RS: Right and then Jim Shafers, they did that design where they talked about allies as connection points for communities. Well in those days we had a connection between the back of Vernor Highway and I think the street was [Hendricks?] and [Dubois?]. We would come out in the ally on the days, the holidays, and we would have big parties. You know somebody would play the blues and we'd have a picnic right there in the ally, we didn't have to go anywhere. And everybody in the community knew everybody. And we as children related to that. And we felt the connection of community. And today I hear more and more, especially with young people talking about that lack of community, that connection, that reaction. And the anger really --

GLB: Yeah, and our communities have turned into warzones. Our neighbor hoods have turned into hoods and our children are suffering so much for that, and the whole city is suffering for that. There's so much anger bottled up in people and so we react to each other in very hateful ways which are not really what it means to be a human being and how do we recover that? I remember when I first came to Detroit, young people were still going South to spend the summer with relatives. And I remember some of those parties. We had communities because they were very intergenerational and they were intercultural, they were multicultural. The city people learned from the oldest, elders, and the elders learned from the younger people. And to create that again is our challenge because you cannot be a human being just living in the asphalt jungle.

RS: Right, right exactly.

GLB: And that's what we have created for our children, and that's why they are warring with each other, that's why they warring against their own selves, and that's what -- I mean that's the kind of transformation we have to imagine and then begin to create ways to reproduce.

RS: Well you know you're right because when you talk about Jimmy, you remember when we were both working with Save Our Sons and Daughters and [Clementine Barfield?] had asked me to go over and work with some young, supposedly ex-drug dealers, gang members who were really upset about one of their friends who had been killed in Coney Island. And after working with them, having been a member of the Black Panther party, they gave me what they call street cred today. So they wanted to hear what I had to say, but not just because the Black Panther party, but because I was an elder, I was older, and they wanted to know -- they didn't know how to do a demonstration. They wanted to do a demonstration in front of this Coney Island because they were upset that their friend had been killed. And the loss of their community, or that connection with community, and then the discussion we had with the young people, I said to them, I said, "Well you know, you want to talk about your friend being killed, but many of the people in the neighborhood where you grew up, they're afraid of you." People had been shooting, [10:00] people had been doing very, very, very negative things. And I said, "You have to restore the relationship with your community." They said, "Well how do we do that?" I said, "Why don't you do something simple? Why don't you just go in front of a store, in front of some neighborhoods, clean up the block. Why don't you work with the people to clean up the block." And they started that. And I said, "Why don't you support one of the businesses in the neighborhood. Why don't you go there." And they said, "Oh yeah,

we know a place where people have breakfast every day.” And it was the typical thing, Grace, you can relate to it, they had the older guys who were sitting there who retired from a job and some of the other people who would come in. And these young guys and they started going to this restaurant. And this woman prepared, it had a Southern flavor, she made homemade biscuits. And they would go in there and they’d sit, and they’d eat, and they’d talk. They made it the effort to support this business. And as a result of their support and encouraging others, that business is there today to the point that when I go in there they say, “Oh yeah, well thank you. You’re the persons that made it possible. These two women afforded to survive.” And as a result of that the neighborhood began to refocus on these young people, not as gangsters but as the young people they work with. And when they met with Jimmy, I’ll never forget here it is Jimmy at the time he must have been 70 something and when he talked to them there was no difference. He asked them about what time it was on the -- you know his favorite (inaudible) he said, “What time is it on the clock of the world?”

GLB: That’s right I remember that.

RS: And the young men they began to think, “Well wait a minute what time really is it?”

GLB: I’m going to use that as a title of a column, because really what time is it on the clock of the world. I think Jimmy had that understanding of human kind evolving. You know we think about evolution mainly in terms of physical and anatomical changes. But evolution takes place in our developing our humanity in much more expanded ways. And Jimmy understood that, and that’s where we are, that’s what sort of point at which we have to say, “What does it mean? What do we have to do to restore our humanity?” And I think what’s so terrible about the school crisis is people don’t understand that the educational

system was created to take people out of the community, so that the ones who succeeded would become upwardly mobile. And so the rejects would be left behind. And that system had become out voted. And what we need to do is to involve our children from K to 12 in the community and doing things in the community. So from very early as a part of their natural and normal education they are building the community. They are becoming citizens. So education is not to remove you from the community, not to abandon the community, not to, you know, destroy the community but to build the community. And I think that's the only solution for the school crisis actually. And for young people to use this so that what you describe there does not become only episodic but becomes part of what we do normally and naturally which is what we mean by a system.

RS: Right and then the whole thing is that -- I think, you know, because I saw the tail end of what you're talking about in terms of moving away from, or disconnecting with community. Because I would go south for summers too, down to Ponchatoula, Louisiana population 2,000 and relate to my family who were out in the country and the relationship that they had to other people in their community. But now I see where that disconnect began to come about, whereas Detroit was booming, and you go back in the early '50s and leading up to the '60s people were working. So they depended on so many things, so many services, so much consumerism, all these kinds of things that just disconnected began to really, really shift that community connection. And I saw it rapidly people now are talking about in Detroit the '67 rebellion, Grace. And we're talking a lot about that. But I saw not just in terms of that rebellion, and I think you and Grace, I mean you and Jimmy, because I talk about you almost the same interchanging the name, you and Jimmy

mentioned this about the rebellion of '67, not only being a rebellion in terms of the question of power and access and influence, but also a testament to consumerism because people were taking things and they were grabbing things in terms of the meaning of things being interchangeable with their humanity. And I saw '67 and so forth begin to make that shift because I look back at my life as age 20 then and what that shift meant because after that particular point I saw with the way things develop we really got into really a lot more materialism.

GLB: Well that's why we issued that statement cry among our people and saw the rebellions as a turning point. But I think that the rebellions were also a cry for help from young people, and that we could not have expected them not to be overtaken by the consumerism, by the opportunities of taking goods and so forth and so on. But that we have the opportunity now four years later, to understand that the descent into crime and violence and consumerism, it was because we did not understand that the rebellions were a righteous uprising against the system. But they did not provide the solution, the answer, which is now our responsibility to begin providing. And to see what we are trying to do now in terms of community building and changing the educational system and providing opportunities for people to exercise their citizenship. And for some people who had left the community to come back and give back. So this is the challenge that we're facing today. And that what's happening now is such a continuity of the unresolved contradictions of the '60s.

RS: And you know you at 90, almost 92, like you said you can see over 50 year period. And now that I get older I can see, you know I used to think that things only in like, as you say episodic ways maybe two, three, four, five year increments. And now I can look back 25,

30 years and I can say, "Oh yeah, now I see what the transformation is." And that's one of the good things about age.

GLB: Well I think, Ron, that's one of the good things about you and me that we have been in continuous activity in Detroit for the last 40 years, that we have not left the community, that we have continued to try and face the challenges and to be defeated and to rise again and try to find another way.

RS: Yeah, in fact it's interesting because I was thinking about something in terms that when you were talking about unfinished in terms of community building. You know you mentioned recently you were talking about amnesty for the members of the Black Panthers party who were assailed and confronted and incarcerated as a result of the counter intelligence program. And having been a member of the Black Panther party I can think about that because some of the things that we were doing in the late '60s were just about that, were about building community when we were talking about what later became called survival programs, free breakfast for school children, independent schools, which now, Grace, you were involved in a few years ago in terms of freedom schools and other things like that. And those were efforts to do that. And before we actually institutionalized it, many of us ended up dead or in jail.

GLB: Well you know, when I think back to the black power movement which was so instructed. I was so active in it, folks thought I was Afro-Asian. But the Black Panther party had these two tendencies that were roughly Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton, it was a little confusing still but there was the sort of just violence thing of Cleaver. And there was also Huey with all his difficulties and confusion, but he taught dialectically. And he began to think in terms of how do we serve the community. And it was out of

that that came the breakfast programs that became more the leadership of women inside the Black Panther community. There were a whole lot of difficulties, contradictions, and so forth. But I think we need to recognize that. I think, for example, that amnesty for Black Panthers and a program and the struggle and the campaign for that would enable us to revisit that period, to understand how much violence was part of the climate, how JF Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm, King had all been killed, and how young people were caught up in that violence, and to begin to see how we have to have another concept of restorative justice, how do we give back, [20:00] how do we bring back. Instead of incarcerating young people and turning them hardened criminals, we find ways to evaluate them and for them to evaluate themselves and evaluate the community so the community can grow rather than the prisons.

RS: And it's really important now because a lot of young people, I find, are asking really in a way the same questions that we're talking about right here, "How do we build community? How do we restore relationships with one another?" And the image that you get on television is just that all of the young people are thinking about just how they can either shirk responsibility or kill one another, whatever, and that is not the case.

GLB: And they were not born that way if they're that way. Restoring the neighbor to the hood I'm sure is what they want just as much as older people want, but they are not able to articulate it. They are being brainwashed so much by the media and by the culture.

RS: You know it's interesting Grace because I said this -- because you do a lot of writing. And I to your challenge and others, I've been doing a lot more writing recently. It's interesting, a young woman that we were involved with whose husband was killed at a gas station, we were talking about something about neighborhood. And I said,

“Something about the neighborhood.” And she said, “This is not a neighborhood.” She said, “This is a hood.” I said, “Well what’s the difference?” She said, “A hood is a place where people live next to one another. A neighborhood is where people live with one another.” And this was interesting, she was in her 20s. And so she made that analysis and I think when we talk about restorative justice and we talked about really new framework of citizenship, it’s that kind of synthesis that we have to deal with.

GLB: See, what I see is that the black movement with all its contradictions began raising new concepts of citizenship at a much higher level than had been raised by the so-called Founding Fathers of the American Revolution that with the black movement and with all the movements that were generated through the black movement, women’s movement, ecological movement, and gay and lesbian movement, all of these were a new level of humanization that whereas the American Revolution ushered in a period of representative democracy and economic profit at the expense of blacks, of women, of Native Americans, and Americans we are now entering into a period when we can create a more participatory democracy from below in which all these folks who were excluded or exploited by the first American Revolution can begin to create a whole new level of citizenship and a whole new concept of what America must be, not only for our own sakes but for the sake of the world and so that we can live in safety and without fear because this whole world is not taking what we’re doing any longer, is not ready to accept it.

RS: It’s interesting Grace, you talk about -- with the book *Evolution and Revolution in 20th Century in America*, it was interesting in terms of talking about things like -- but you may have said it in that writing about mothers that the Civil Rights Movement was really a

movement about humanity and a lot of people talk about the Civil Rights Movement and they put it in a historical setting. But what we were talking about on our way over here, we're not just looking at linear history and we're not just looking at economics and politics, but we're looking at human development. And that's really what's the cry as they suggest in terms of the Civil Rights Movement was like that sign that they had when Martin Luther King was killed, the sanitation worker's, "I am a man." That's it, human beings.

GLB: And that's what I think Malcolm really meant when he talked about human rights as contrasted with civil rights, that civil rights was within the sort of constitutional boundaries where human rights are within the concept of what does it mean to be a human being. And that was what he was exploring and probing during the last two years of his life.

RS: I got to mention this Grace, just for me, how did that message to the grassroots effort come about in '63 when you and Jimmy and Milton Henry and others put together a grassroots conference in terms of bringing Malcolm X to speak?

GLB: I see Malcolm's grassroots leadership speech as the leap that he was making already in breaking from the nation even though the suspension for his statement, "Chickens come home to roost didn't come until several weeks later." The grassroots leadership conference at which he made his speech took place on November 10 and Kennedy was killed on November 22. He made the speech, "Chickens Coming Home to Roost." And [Ms. Marbury?] suspended from the nation. Previous to that, Max Stanford, who was the head of RAM used to spend --

RS: [Rebels in Action Movement?]

GLB: -- with Jimmy. And Jimmy would explain to him how we had to think in terms of internationalism and how we had to go beyond nationalism and how we had to see ourselves in terms not only of an American revolution, a black revolution, but Cuban revolutions, and revolutions for land. And Malcolm came to that November 10 meeting and he started out saying the usual things, they were usually just sort of parachuting from Mohammad. Then he changed completely. He says, "Now let's just talk heart to heart." We'd look at each other straight in the eye. And he began talking about revolution in different ways and made the distinction between house negroes and field negroes. It's a very, very important speech. If you look at how he's broken from the sort of mythology of the nation which had really helped him first make his transition from being a hustler. But he was now making another huge transition in terms of ideas and in terms of vision. And that growth that was undertaken, he was undergoing in the last two years of his life, people don't really spend enough time -- after he didn't have two years. He was killed in February 1965 and his suspension from the Nation took place on November 22, 1963.

RS: Well you know we recently did a program with Malcolm and we had some of the people that came out of some of the discussions that came out what you and Jimmy had talked about in terms of Detroit Summit. So the Detroit Summit youth were there. And we talked about that in terms of Malcolm and it was very interesting that we prefaced everything with -- we say the word backwards from his desk going backwards to where he was at various times as opposed to just starting just generally with, "Here's a history of Malcolm X." And the young people did poems and raps and other kinds of things about it. And it was a very significant kind of situation because you're right, I noticed some things because it had an impact on me as a younger person at that particular time. I

could just see that distinction between a house negro and a field negro. It was a major kind of class statement that nobody had been making at that point in time.

GLB: Well you know, what I'd like to us to understand going back to what I said about another second American Revolution is that Malcolm, Martin, and Jimmy were to this next stage revolution what we say George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams were to that first stage. Malcolm had that sense of you have to keep redefining yourself. You have to keep transforming yourself. You have to keep growing, that that is what it means to be revolution. And people reduce him to by all means necessary, I think is completely narrow and reductive. That Jimmy as a worker from the south was able to understand the need to go beyond labor to work that is humanizing, that Martin in the last three years of his life tried to understand the significance of the black rebellions beginning with Watts understood that this nation had pursued economic growth and technological progress at the expense of community and the participation of people and that the real significance of the rebellions was that the young people, particularly in the urban ghetto, were crying out for resolution of this contradiction.

RS: Yeah, absolutely. I can say that having been part of that generation, that that was the situation. I mean we were being trained in 1967 -- '65 when I graduated from high school. A couple friends of mine died in Vietnam, almost immediately. [30:00] I had been a ROTC. A couple friends of mine -- and so the idea was you'd grow up, you'd go to war or go to work. You can obviously go to the plant in Detroit. And that was it. And as part of the human context, that wasn't even in the equation.

GLB: See, the black movement, I think we really have to revisit the black movement and understand that it was bringing in a whole new dimension to what it means to be a human being and what it means to have a human society, that we have to focus on our relationships with one another rather than on economic growth, that the educational system that our culture has indoctrinated us to become a cog in the machinery of the economic system, a system which is on the verge of collapse. And as it comes to its end and shows how little it cares about people, about this country, about any kind of compassionate sense, a message from the seas, and all that and turns us into mindless consumers that this is the time to revisit the meaning of the black movement and see what Malcolm represented, what Martin represented, and what I think Jimmy also represented.

RS: What about what Grace represented because a lot of people, even though people think you're Afro-Asian, they talk a lot about the ways that you were involved in what we think of as the black movement now from the Shrine of the Black Madonna to the grassroots movement to even the term -- and I mention this because a lot of people don't really know it is that the term underclass, that was what you and Jimmy really initially talked about.

GLB: I have difficulties getting this clear. First of all, when I came into the movement, the black movement was the most important thing. It's only now that Asian Americans are becoming one of the biggest minorities. And when I was growing up, Asian Americans were so few and far between that we were almost invisible. So in the black movement I was learning from Jimmy most of the '60s and then -- it was very interesting -- I began to see how my just listening to him and not arguing with him was really doing a disservice to the women around because they were thinking it was a form of acceptance of

patriarchy. So I start arguing with him so much that people would have to sort of look at each other like at a ping pong match. But it has been a very interesting theory. And people are now writing books about Afro-Orientalism and use Jimmy and my experience as an example of what took place.

RS: Once again I got to say Grace, I think the arguments were great because when I told you about the Panthers, we had similar arguments between women and men in the movement in terms of things like that. And it emerged in more women in leadership than had existed before questions that we never even thought about, situations in terms of sexism and so forth that people say, "Oh well I'm not a sexist. I mean I don't do that kind of thing." But those issues came about.

GLB: Well Ron one of the things I'm going to do while I still have most of my marbles, you are going to come over and see me and I am going to make you write down some of these things and hear your thoughts about that because it's really important that you do that. It's important that you came into the movement at the time that the Black Panthers emerged when you were a young person, that you have remained active, that you remain thinking, and that we're working together. That's important.

RS: I think one of the things is that we're talking now -- because we were talking about it on the way here -- working in terms of this coalition against police brutality. And I think you challenged me about wanting to look at the thing that we push peace stones for life because we realize we couldn't just talk about reacting to the deaths of people, we had to talk about what a sense of peace in a community looked like and how could people take the war footing that existed in a community and transform it into the development of peace. So what we're talking about is building institutions so that those institutions can

establish a basis of restorative justice, they can establish a basis of mediation and resolution of conflict because we found that when people felt that they had conflict, all they would do is call the police. And the police didn't come there to resolve conflict, if anything they created more conflict.

GLB: Yeah, I mean they sort of foster people to sort of kill each other as the only solution because they represent a form of violence.

RS: Right, absolutely. So that was an important point in terms of being challenged to do that. And that's another form of what is the relationship of new citizenship, how do we resolve conflict in our communities, and then when we resolve conflict how do we deal with the psychological and the social framework that creates the basis. Most of the battles that bring police into situations tend to be domestic violence. And why do people engage in domestic violence? And I would say, as we were talking about earlier, it's a relationship to work, that people are saying that they don't have a job and then they turn that into each other, "I'm angry because I'm not working for somebody so I'm going to hit you or fight you as opposed to what we can do to build our community."

GLB: If we start doing things even on a small basis, sort of cleaning up, picking up, planting community gardens, looking out for each other just to sort of build a new texture in our lives to realize that we're not robots, that while the system has reduced us to objects, that we are subjects, that we are growing, that we are developing, that we can develop, that we can create hope, and that we are the ones who have to create the hope. They are not going to do it for us.

RS: One of the things that I think especially when we talk about young people today is looking at the way that young people see race and racism in a different way than we may

have seen it in the past. And I look at that because I see a lot of young people of various backgrounds. There was a techno music festival here and there were young people from all over the world of all possible backgrounds gathering together on this music thing.

This ally media conference is going to be the same way. And they're dealing with issues of humanity. Not to say that they don't understand that racism exists and they don't deal with it, but I think they're trying to find ways to come together as young people to deal with some of these issues that we're talking about, going back and reanalyzing from 40 years ago.

GLB: Another thing, I was talking to woman for example who couldn't understand why her 18 and 24-year-old sons weren't as involved in the struggle against racism as she is. And I said, "Well if they grew up in a different world. They didn't have to risk their lives to sit at the front of a bus." And also they've grown up in the world of media. They've been watching TV since they were infants. And that creates a different relationship between the emotional side of the brain and the cognitive side of the brain. We during the period of the past, we used to talk so much about isms and their life is not so much isms, it's not that sort of analytic cognition that came in the old days. And that's what the ally media conference I think begins to understand and presents us with challenges.

RS: It's interesting Grace as I sit here and we think back, I think 40 years, and you can think back 60, 70 years. It's like a minute on the clock of history.

GLB: The clock of the world.

RS: The clock of the world, it's like a minute. And you see so much change but the one thing that I think is really good, if you continue to remain active, you continue to analyze -- and we talked about this in terms of some people that I started with. If you don't become

static, that you can use your development to really transform your humanity further than you might've ever thought you would.

GLB: In the old days people used to think that the only transformation had to take place in the system. The transformation also has to take place in us. It's a two sided transformation that we have to undergo.

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