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Grace Lee Boggs’s Person-Centered Education for Community-Based Change: Feminist Pragmatism, Pedagogy, and Philosophical Activism

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Abstract

This paper offers an overview of Grace Lee Boggs’s community-based and person-centered philosophy and pedagogy, highlighting how education can foster social responsibility and create democratic habits in students, better equipping them to create radical change within their communities. The essay demonstrates Boggs’s commitment to philosophical-activist pedagogy and its alignment with a feminist-pragmatist approach, which emphasizes lived experience, pluralism, complexity, and equality, as well as praxis. The essay then considers how Boggs’s philosophical activism can be enacted inside and outside the traditional classroom, concluding by describing an educational and activist project called Narrative 4.

In 1992, a high-school student named Julia Pointer (now Putnam) found herself on the brink of dropping out of her Detroit high school—unsatisfied, disillusioned, disaffected, and frustrated. Her grades were good, and she knew how to navigate school well, but she was utterly miserable. That spring, she was invited to participate in the Detroit Summer Program—an educational program developed by Grace Lee Boggs and Jimmy Boggs to enlist young people to revitalize Detroit, which was at the time thought of as a “dead city,” devastated by poverty and blight. The program was based on the Boggses’ contention that in every great social movement in this country, “young people had been the defining factor” (Boggs and Kurashige 2011, 58). Participation in the Detroit Summer Program was a pivotal experience for Pointer. She recalls, “I had not even known that I craved being asked to do something important until I was actually asked” (58). She had known enough to recognize her dissatisfaction with her education, but she had not yet realized that the educational system she was a part of had locked her out, to use the language of the poet Mari Evans (Evans 1989), all while requiring her to be there.

The late Grace Lee Boggs argues that our current model of education is a violence to humanity (142). The claim is bold and unapologetic, as Boggs tended to be. In that

characteristic manner, she maintains that the struggle against this model of education in the United States is ultimately “a struggle for democracy,” because this ordinary model operates on the “antidemocratic belief that only experts are capable of creating knowledge” (142). It holds that teachers are those experts, and that students have learned when they can give back the information their teachers have given them in the form of testing (142). This model not only fails to create active, engaged citizens; it is also profoundly dehumanizing, according to Boggs—actively suppressing the possibility for self-determination and creativity as it suppresses the potential for meaningful and efficacious community-based change.

This is what that young student, Julia Pointer, was to discover as she spent the rest of her adolescence participating in Detroit Summer and as she ultimately went on to develop and run the Boggs Educational Center, a Detroit school founded upon the educational philosophy of Grace Boggs: Our current system is dehumanizing, locking out the creative potential of students and the potential for meaningful change in our communities.

I use Pointer’s story here as an introduction to the philosophy of Grace Boggs, which I situate in the context of feminist-pragmatist pedagogy. Boggs has received scant attention in the context of American philosophy and in the context of feminist pragmatism, although her work is both philosophically sophisticated—thoroughly grounded in the work of George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, and Jane Addams—and socially significant—highly influential to substantive, successful social movements in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I offer Boggs as an exemplar of feminist pragmatism enacted through pedagogy.

This essay begins by providing an overview of Boggs’s community-based and person-centered philosophy and pedagogy, highlighting how education can foster social responsibility and create democratic habits in students, better equipping them to create radical change within their communities. The essay next demonstrates how Boggs’s commitment to philosophical-activist pedagogy aligns with a feminist-pragmatist approach, sharing its emphases on lived experience, pluralism, complexity, and equality, as well as praxis. The essay then highlights how Boggs’s philosophical activism can be enacted inside and outside the traditional classroom, concluding by describing an educational and activist project called Narrative 4. Narrative 4 is a global nonprofit that uses a particular method of story-exchange to help build empathy and equip young leaders.

I. Boggs’s Humanity-Stretching Philosophy and Philosophical Activism

Grace Lee Boggs was born in 1915 in Rhode Island, the daughter of Chinese immigrants. She studied philosophy at Barnard College, focusing on Kant and Hegel. Later she earned a PhD from Bryn Mawr College, writing and ultimately publishing a dissertation on George Herbert Mead. According to Boggs, trying to secure an academic position after completing her PhD would have been “a waste of time” for her, as a Chinese-American woman (Boggs 1998, 34). So Boggs began working at the University of Chicago philosophy library, where she became involved with activist movements such as the tenants’-rights movement. She joined the Workers Party at that time and, ultimately, abandoned any previous interest in formal academic work, committing herself instead to a life of activism informed by her philosophical background. She credits Mead, in large part, for this direction in her life’s work, claiming his philosophy of the social individual as her inspiration and motivation to move her work outside the confines of the life of the mind and into a life of activism. In addition

to Mead, Boggs's work would be deeply influenced and shaped by other important figures and movements of which she was a part, including C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, co-founders of the Marxist-humanist Johnson-Forest Tendency, and her husband James Boggs, an influential figure, along with Grace, in the Black Power Movement.

A Chinese-American, Boggs was keenly interested in American identity. In her writings, the persistent question "what does it mean to be an American?" is second only to the question of what it means to be human. What it means to be a woman follows closely. This inquiry into American identity, particularly such identity in a given place and time and in our particular bodies, was central to her philosophy. She constantly asked questions about who we are and what we must do in order to become human. This recurrent inquiry was grounded, in part, in her understanding of Mead as the preeminent philosopher of the social individual. Drawing on Mead, Boggs claimed that Americans were distinctive in their understanding of the country's founding and the contradictions and challenges embedded in that story. Because of this, she maintained, "we are constantly in the process of creating and re-creating ourselves" (Boggs and Kurashige 2011, 183).

Throughout her life of activism, these themes of re-creation and evolution of our country and our communities cohered and persisted. Re-creation and evolution, Boggs argued, take place through social processes. Informed by Mead's community-oriented perspective and Marx's belief in the creative power of the people, she held that conflicts among diverse individuals are the potential sites of idea-formation and that working to understand one another through language, "the great universalizer of experiences," can lead to greater social cooperation (Lee 1945, 10).

Living to 100 years old, Boggs participated in the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, the women's movement, the Asian American movement, the environmental justice movement, and the antiwar movement—all movements she deemed "the great humanizing movements" of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Boggs and Kurashige 2011, 29). These were humanizing movements because they enabled participants to see themselves as agents rather than mere victims, to connect self to others, and to actively engage rather than remain passive observers of suffering (34). Creative thinking and responsible action are "humanity-stretching," in Boggs's words, and creating rich, intentional, and inclusive community is the means by which we do such stretching.

An ardent feminist in her mid-to-later years, Boggs claimed that the women's movement was the ultimate humanity-stretching movement of her time, even more so than race- or class-related movements to which she was also unwaveringly committed. There is much to be considered behind this claim, to be sure, but it is nevertheless a powerful one to consider. Careful to avoid essentialism—although sometimes imperfect in doing so—Boggs maintained that the women's movement was distinctly humanizing because it represents a microcosm of a larger problem. The problems that the women's movement identifies are reflective of larger cultural problems. She writes, "It is no longer just a question of the particular grievances that we have as women. What is involved now is the evolution of human beings to a higher level of relationships with each other"—to recognizing shared humanity (Boggs 1978, 5).

In a speech given in 1977, Boggs provocatively claimed that women are not *whole persons*. They have been subordinated and have subordinated themselves to the interests of men and, thus, have been prevented from developing their creative capacities as actors in the world. This isn't exclusive to women. Men, also, are not *whole persons*, failing to develop the full range of human emotions, experiences, and capacities because

of what might be today be understood as toxic masculinity. Traditional gender roles have created divisions and hostility and, importantly, have resulted in partial selves. “Women,” Boggs writes, “no matter how advanced we may be, still see ourselves as adjuncts to men” (Boggs 1978, 1). Women, she argues, did not need to wait for men to begin enlarging their conception of humanity to include women. Women had to take the lead and begin doing that humanizing work themselves, and the social responsibilities that they had internalized in part because of their reproductive and caregiving positions could be lent to this task in the service of enhancing humanity for all. Women needed to stop seeing themselves as adjuncts. Here are Boggs’s words:

The ability which we as women have to subordinate self-interest to concern for the development of others, to see beyond the pleasures of the moment or the satisfaction of our egos, our sensitivity to the feelings of others, our ability to see in other individuals the potential for growth and to give them space necessary to develop their autonomy, to deal with each problem as it arises, flexibility without stereotyping—all of these qualities which we have been developing in the private realm are today the ones most urgently needed in the public realm. (Boggs 1978, 23)

In her final published book, written nearly thirty-five years later, Boggs remained concerned about the *adjuncting* of persons—the subordinating of some to those in perceived positions of power (Boggs and Kurashige, 33–34). She first saw women situated as adjuncts to men, but it is no less true, on her account, that men and women of all kinds were being situated or situating themselves as adjuncts to charismatic leaders or as victims of technological development and economic interests, rather than being whole selves in the world together, working toward common goals.

Although she recognized the tremendous strides women had made since her writing in the late 1970s, she continued to identify partial selves walking about in the world, waiting for others to act in their stead. The women’s movement called women and men to engage in order to enlarge their conception of what it means to be a human being. What it means to be human, she insists, must “include making choices and decisions as to how our society should be organized and how we should relate to one another, instead of seeing ourselves at the mercy of outside forces” (Boggs 1978, 21). The work of humanity-stretching is central to Boggs’s philosophy of education, to which I will turn in the next section, and is one of the key places in which the connections between Boggs and feminist pragmatism becomes evident.

II. Boggs’s Philosophy of Education: Person-Centered and Community-Based

Boggs is only now beginning to receive the scholarly attention she merits as either a philosopher or an activist. The marriage of the two sets her apart as exemplary, and as a feminist pragmatist. Boggs insisted that both active engagement in and philosophical reflection on community work are critical for the development of persons as whole selves. Philosophy is critical for contemporary movements because it provides a way of understanding the relationship between an idea and reality—lived experiences—and, as she writes, “philosophy begins when individuals question reality” (Boggs and Lee 1974, 197).

What is necessary during this pivotal time in American history and for the problems we face are spaces where individuals can question their social reality and find places and conditions in which to do that questioning. Boggs finds potential for creating those

conditions and spaces through education. Thus, philosophically informed activism serves as the basis for Boggs's philosophy of education, which continues its thematic engagement with the task of enhancing humanity.

One of the strongest contentions in her final published book is that our current model of education fails to build the humanity of students (Boggs and Kurashige 2011, 137, 140–41). The model of education under which we currently operate is obsolete, she explains, based primarily on the needs of the industrialization period, when students were groomed for participation in the workforce. Boggs insists that it is time for a paradigm shift in education. The imperative of such a shift continues to become increasingly clear.

The outdated model of schooling Boggs describes continues to be profoundly inadequate in the face of the sorts of problems students encounter today, such as dramatically increasing social divisions, military domination, and rapid anthropogenic climate change—wicked problems because of their complex and intractable nature. Students need more than routine and mechanical preparation for mere membership in the workforce, the kind of training that was once focused on preparing students to do repetitive tasks in factories—and these wicked problems need more than the kinds of students such education can provide.

Rather, in order to address the complex problems that students face, they will need to be equipped to use their own powers of creativity and resourcefulness in order to address local and global problems, embracing pluralism and valuing diverse ways of knowing. Noting the resonance between Boggs and Addams as pragmatist feminists, Danielle Lake notes: “For Addams, intentional inclusion of local narratives and diverse perspectives helps to open us to the inherent perplexities of the situation” (Lake 2015, 256–57). Thus, the routine and mechanical preparation that creates a fact/value divide must be disrupted. Boggs writes: “The purpose of education . . . cannot be only to increase the earning power of the individual or to supply workers for the ever-changing slots of the corporate machine. Children need to be given a sense of the ‘unique capacity for human beings to shape and create reality in accordance with conscious purposes and plans’” (Boggs and Kurashige 2011, 137). In the same way that the women she addressed in 1977 needed to reject their roles as adjuncts to men and be emboldened to change their social circumstances, students too must be emboldened to make change.

The operative educational model in the United States, Boggs argues, fails to cultivate the creative capacity in students to directly influence the affairs of their local communities, instead perpetuating the antidemocratic notion that private citizens are waiting to be rescued from pressing crises by the government or corporate entities large enough to make a meaningful difference. Boggs and her husband, renowned Black Power activist Jimmy Boggs, resisted this cultural myth by envisioning and working to implement a more democratic educational system suited to the needs of their community and its particular challenges.

The Detroit Summer program, mentioned in the introduction, was one manifestation of their place-based education geared toward social change. Boggs describes her motivation for developing a co-curricular program of person-centered pedagogy:

Today's schools . . . teach passivity. What our children need most is a sense of themselves as agents of change and decision-makers. They don't only need academics. They need to become resourceful, independent and critical-thinkers, to see themselves in the context of community and practice that enhances community life, to recognize their worth because their input makes a difference. (Boggs 2000, 40)

The Detroit Summer Program was established to remedy that acquired passivity—to unlock the creative potential of students by inviting them to take part in revitalizing and re-creating their own city. Recall those words of Julia Pointer: “I hadn’t even realized that I craved doing something important until I was actually asked.” Our students, Boggs claims, are dehumanized, because they aren’t invited to participate in urgently needed inquiry, and they aren’t *asked* to take part in creating their own lives and their own communities. Thus, the humanity-stretching task of education is to create the conditions for them to engage in that creative work.

In the Detroit Summer Program, students were educated about the history of their city and offered a picture of its richness through multiracial, intergenerational dialogue. They were asked to identify problems as they experienced them in their neighborhoods and find ways to address them creatively through collaboration. Pointer remembers being asked about her fears about her own neighborhood: “What do you think should be done about gang violence?” adults asked. “What did *I* think? No adult had ever asked” (Putnam 2010, 9). In response to persistent problems like violence, food insecurity, and a soaring dropout rate, participants in the program organized speak-outs, pot-lucks, conversation, and community art projects. They planted urban gardens. They even had science lessons through projects working with and tending to urban farm animals. The majority of the students who participated finished school and went on to college, rather than dropping out as expected. And their neighborhoods began to come back to life (www.boggscenter.org). These projects grew out of Boggs’s contentions that global change comes from acting locally and that empowering young people to become decision-makers and change-agents in their own communities is the richest way to work toward that global change: “We need the kinds of schools that will provide opportunities for our children to learn not only through books but by carrying out productive community tasks in close relationship with people from all walks of life and age groups” (Boggs 1978, 26).

III. Grace Boggs: Feminist Pragmatist, Public Philosopher, and Philosophical Activist

In *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric*, Charlene Haddock Seigfried unpacks the largely unwritten history of the relationship between pragmatism and feminism. Broad, overlapping themes between the two approaches make them both compatible and fruitful. A critical and central task of feminist pragmatism is uncovering the contributions of the women who influenced pragmatism and who were influenced by pragmatism. Boggs, as a Mead scholar and as a thinker deeply engaging Dewey and Addams, certainly provides one such missing perspective that merits further attention in the historical recovery project of feminist pragmatism. “From the beginning,” Seigfried writes, “pragmatism appealed to women thinkers and activists who found in it a movement within which they could work for a new intellectual and social order” (Seigfried 1996, 19). Yet, for a number of reasons, many of these women have not been included in the canon of pragmatist philosophy. This was and is the case for Boggs, who found promise in the pragmatists she was engaging, and was drawn to the ways in which they complemented and developed her feminist perspective. Examining Boggs through the lens of feminist pragmatism reveals not only the richness and depth of her philosophical thought, but also informs our understanding of her legacy of activism, one that was thoroughly and inextricably informed by the philosophical commitments shared by pragmatists and feminists. Crediting Mead for this direction in

her philosophical development, Boggs began to prioritize action over the purity of ideas and to “develop her analysis of how the self and society develop in relation to each other” (Boggs 1998, 33). And her emphases on creativity, evolution, and re-creation reveal syntheses with Mead, Dewey, and other major figures in the pragmatist tradition. Other core concepts that emerge through an examination of Boggs that resonate with pragmatism are the centrality of lived experience, equality, pluralism, complexity, democracy, and praxis.

Feminist pragmatists understand that “conceptual categories cannot contain lived experience” (Seigfried 1996, 9), and Boggs fiercely maintained this. As described earlier, she recognized the limitations of our conceptual categories about gender, about race—even about the academy and pedagogy. To that end, Boggs made conversation a key component of her own philosophical praxis, working diligently to invite the articulation of lived experience into community deliberations. As with the story told about Julia Pointer, Boggs made space to hear the stories of individuals and to take each individual’s perspective seriously. Making space for lived experience to be revealed and to be respected not only influenced the actions she took part in with her community, but also how her own thinking developed over time. Her own living room became a place for intergenerational, cross-racial, cross-difference dialogues, and for decades, her home was where pluralism was intentionally modeled and embraced. And all of this was aimed at the desired end of addressing complex problems democratically and effectively. Like Addams, who argued that democracy is “built upon dialogue, joint experiences and social equality” (Whipps and Lake 2016), Boggs understood that inquiry and reflection take place in actual historical, political, social, and cultural contexts and that rich, inclusive dialogue is necessary to foster the democratic inclusiveness that can lead to effective action. Boggs here embodies feminist pragmatism and enacts a social ethos that resonates with other significant figures in this approach, as Judy Whipps and Danielle Lake describe: “The ‘social ethics’ advocated by Dewey and Addams embraces equality and multiplicity, narrative and perplexity, fellowship and cooperative action, sympathetic understanding and the expansion of our ethical framework” (Whipps and Lake 2016).

In light of the ways she engaged with and promoted growth within members of her community, Boggs is an exemplar of a public philosopher, her activism fully informed by and explicitly tethered to her philosophical commitments, and her philosophical commitments fully informed by and explicitly tethered to her commitments as an activist.

IV. Enacting Boggs’s Person-Centered, Community-Based Philosophy in the Classroom and Beyond: An Example

With the lessons of Grace Boggs in mind, I turn in conclusion to an educational project underway around the globe and, in particular, at my own institution, Concordia College, which I believe combines pedagogy and activism in the spirit of Boggs’s humanizing work through the power of shared story. In Boggs’s dissertation, she credits Mead for a distinctive contribution to American philosophy “through his emphasis on communication through language as the chief mechanism for social control and social progress” (Lee 1945, 10). She writes: “In communication through language, the individual must, to some extent at least, adopt the attitude of the others of his group in order to be heeded. He must understand in order to be understood” (10). In what follows, I offer the Narrative 4 story-exchange project as an example of how we can enact Boggs’s

person-centered and community-based philosophy in the classroom and in the community. Like Boggs, Narrative 4 uses stories as “the great universalizer of experiences” (11).

Narrative 4 is an international nonprofit organization operating in schools at the K–12 and college levels, as well as in private and public workplaces, which utilizes a unique method of story-exchange in the service of—in the words of its mission—“building empathy and sparking collaborative change” (Narrative 4 2020). The work of Narrative 4, although supported internationally, is undertaken primarily at the local level, in order to specifically address the needs of each community in which it has a presence. The organization itself was founded by writers and artists who believe in the community-building power of language, including such prominent writers as Chimamanda Adichie, Terry Tempest Williams, Michael Ondaatje, and Colum McCann. The guiding idea behind the organization’s methodology is simple: knowing the personal stories of others enables us to better understand them, and better understanding can turn empathy into action. Boggs’s own practices of inviting in the stories of community members resonates here.

Colum McCann, Narrative 4’s co-founder and president, insists that “the one true democracy we have is storytelling” (Narrative 4 2020, About), and it is from that democratic impulse that the organization identifies five key areas of concern— environment, identity, immigration, faith, and violence—to be addressed through its work.

Students, in particular, are well-situated to respond these intractable social problems. Through the Narrative 4 exchange process, students learn to value and demonstrate personal responsibility for the affairs of their community, enhance their cultural understanding, and develop empathetic, ethical behavior toward others. At the college level in particular, Narrative 4 affords students the opportunity to identify specific problems in their own communities and begin the important work of addressing them with concrete, shared efforts. Much like the Detroit Summer Program, Narrative 4 moves students to examine their own experiences and social situations and take part in creating a new reality in their particular context and beyond. At Concordia College, after being exposed to the methodology through classroom and community exchanges, students developed their own Narrative 4 student organization in order to address the problems and issues they found most pressing, and in order to continue the work begun in the classroom beyond the classroom. For example, students have hosted story-exchanges centering on topics like religious diversity, sexual assault, and racism on campus and, through those exchanges, have built relationships that enable them to further collaborate on policies and programs that continue to address those topics.

The standard Narrative 4 methodology looks like this, with a good deal of variation given the needs of the particular community: Self-selected participants, most of them strangers to one another, meet together, often sharing a meal. Typically, they have been drawn to participate based on interest in the topic of focus and have been given reading materials in advance as prompts to motivate them to think about their own individual stories. A rich introduction by a facilitator provides the background and justification for the Narrative 4 methodology and gives participants time to reflect independently and together on the risks and rewards associated with engaging across difference in this manner. They are reminded only to share what they are willing to share with their partner and more widely with the group upon return. Participants are then paired, randomly, intentionally, or by individual choice, depending on the context, and asked to share their story with their partner, with active and engaged listening skills employed. The listener takes notes quietly while listening, but never interrupts, only asking clarifying questions if necessary at the end. After the first partner has

shared, the same practice occurs with the second partner. Then the partners separate. The next part of the practice is the most important—the *humanity-stretching* part. All participants come back together and sit in a circle, partners sitting next to each other. Then, pair by pair, partners tell the story that their partner had shared, but this time in the first person, as if it were their own. Stories of remarkable difference and uncanny similarity are shared, bringing a different light to the multiple, complex experience of community members.

These exchanges aren't about debate. In fact, they are specifically designed to avoid debate. Rather, they are about humanizing the other and taking the place of the other in a structured way, aiming to understand by being understood. The results of these exchanges are usually striking—not because people change their minds about their deeply held beliefs (they may or may not)—but because the effects of this humanizing work are palpable. It is community-building because it centers on the experiences of members of the local community, people who may share common interests and concerns, but perhaps little else. Participants are moved to see one another—their neighbors—as human beings and as whole selves.

The philosophical connections between Boggs's Detroit Summer Program and Narrative 4, as well as Boggs's philosophy more broadly, are abundant, but particularly worth highlighting in conclusion is the consistent theme of humanity-stretching work at the local level. When we ask students how they want to learn, how they want to make a difference in their local communities, and what sorts of wicked problems they feel need to be urgently addressed—and when we give them the opportunity to engage with the diverse stories of other stakeholders in their communities—we empower them as whole selves to begin that work, building community with others they recognize as whole selves.

Boggs's philosophy, her pedagogy, and her activism are exemplary, but her legacy is only partial if it fails to recognize how each of these elements works together. Understanding Boggs through the lens of feminist pragmatism provides an opportunity to harness that work in the development of feminist-pragmatist pedagogies and humanity-stretching activism.

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