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Teaching Grace Lee Boggs (1915–2015)

Toward an Antiracist[1] Transnational Asian Studies Pedagogy

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Grace Lee Boggs (1915–2015), a second-generation Chinese American, was a prominent Marxist philosopher and civil rights activist. Along with her partner James Boggs (1919–1993), an African American labor activist, she continued her seventy-years of activism throughout the twentieth century to the first decade of the twenty-first century. Renowned figures such as C. L. R. James (1901–1989), Raya Dunayevskaya (1910–1987), Richard Wright (1908–1960), Katherine Dunham (1909–2006), and Malcolm X (1925–965) were among the activists who crossed paths with the Boggs. While the life of Grace Lee Boggs provides an ample opportunity for students to learn about the history of twentieth-century progressive political movement in the United States, there is much to be gained by considering the pedagogical implications of teaching her in classrooms, particularly in the context of an antiracist transnational Asian studies.

In a conventional disciplinary categorization, teaching Grace Lee Boggs would fall under Asian American studies or an Ethnic Studies curricula, since she was an Asian American whose activism aimed at dismantling the white supremacist racial hierarchy of the United States and beyond. However, after teaching about the life of Lee Boggs in multiple classes, I realized that her story also serves as a point of

connection between Asian American history and Asian studies, particularly in a pedagogical setting. In this short essay, I argue that such materials that are typically categorized under Asian American studies can and should be more actively utilized in Asian studies classrooms to render Asian studies relevant to younger generation of students—as well as to the ongoing interdisciplinary academic research agendas. In addition, I argue that the confluence of Asian studies and Asian American studies is different from merging the disciplines, considering that this becomes collaborative research, as well as a pedagogical model. Hence, the respective disciplinary boundaries, which are the products of particular history of the twentieth-century U.S. academic institutions (Lee and Shibuwasa, 2005; Ryang, 2021),[2] should be critically acknowledged. I call this collaborative research and pedagogical practice *transnational Asian studies*, concurring with Sonia Ryang's recent suggestion (Ryang, 2021). This practice will be useful to address following points: when a classroom discussion explores a case that a foundational historian of modern Korea, Bruce Cumings (1943–) was included in a "Professor Watchlist" by an American ultra-conservative political group,[3] should it be considered to be only an American phenomenon, or should it be understood in the transnational history of the Cold War and the place of Korea therein? Or, when a South Korean film *Parasite* received multiple Oscars in 2020 despite the fact that Asian American filmmakers have been largely ignored by the white-dominated film industry, how do Asian and Asian American studies together make sense of such disparate treatment between the Asian (Korean) and Asian American cinema?[4]

In what follows, I articulate my argument for transnational Asian studies using examples from my teaching autobiography of Lee Boggs and the influence of my own positionality as an international woman scholar in the United States. First, I introduce the life of Lee Boggs and the course context of teaching her autobiography. In this part, I demonstrate how the Asian American immigration history and contemporary transnational conditions translate into transnational Asian studies pedagogy. Second, I illustrate the significance of positionality-oriented reflection in the pedagogical practice of transnational Asian studies. That is, I argue that discussions of immigration, diversity, and racism in the United States *necessitate* transnational perspectives that are reflective of the positionality of the instructor and the students. Lastly, I provide the envisioned aims and effect of antiracist transnational Asian studies pedagogy along with examples from the classroom.

Grace Lee Boggs in the Classroom

Lee Boggs was born in Providence, Rhode Island above her father's Chinese restaurant. Her father ("Mr. Chin Lee") was an immigrant from a peasant village Toishan in Guangdong province. It seems that he entered the United States after

the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) took effect, thus Lee Boggs wrote that "my father never told us how he got around the restrictions of the Exclusion Act."[5] The family's restaurant business thrived when they moved to the New York City. The Chin Lee restaurant in 1064 Broadway Street was a landmark establishment of the city until its closure in 1949. Although Mr. Lee was a remarkably successful businessman, the family could not own land in Jackson Heights where their house stood due to a restrictive law that prohibited non-Caucasians to own a piece of land. Instead, they had to put an Irish contractor's name in the deeds.[6] Lee Boggs later attended Barnard College as one of two non-white students in her class of 1935, and she continued her graduate studies in Philosophy at Bryn Mawr. After graduating with a Ph.D. from Bryn Mawr in 1940, she began to engage in the Socialist Worker's Party (later in the Worker's Party). Her background in Philosophy led her to work closely with Trotskyists in the party, resulting in the formation of Johnson-Forest tendency that advocated Marxist Humanism. C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya were her core colleagues with whom she translated Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* into English.

Adding to such theoretical contributions to socialist philosophy, Lee Boggs began to concentrate on political activism with her partner, James Boggs (1919–1993), an autoworker and African American labor activist. They were married in 1953. Since neither of them were white, the anti-miscegenation law did not apply to them. Still, in their honeymoon, the couple was denied a lodging due to James Boggs' race. After their marriage they settled in Detroit and continued their local labor activism until their death. James Boggs's *American Revolution* (1963) gained fame during the civil rights movement, and FBI surveillance files on the Boggs were created. In the files, Grace Lee Boggs was described as "Afro-Chinese," a misidentification due to her intimate involvement with the civil rights movement and collaboration with African American activists. She penned her autobiography, *Living for Change*, in 1998 and *The Next American Revolution* was published in 2012. Her lifelong activism was celebrated in a PBS documentary, *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs* in the subsequent year. She passed away in 2015 but remains as a historic activist who lived through a century of transformation and multiple revolutions.

I taught her *Living for Change* in a course titled "Living for Change: Autobiographies of Women in Radical Social Movement" in a Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies program at Temple University in the Spring 2019 and Fall 2021 semesters. Each semester, I taught two sections of the course, and each section was capped at between twenty-five to thirty-five students. Demographics were diverse but mostly white—approximately 60% White, 20% African American, and 20% Asian and LatinX students. A majority of the students identified as a woman or a non-binary. The course satisfies the U.S. Society category among the General

Education requirements for the students. The curriculum, initially developed by Patricia Meltzer and Christi Brian, aims at teaching the radical women's social movement in the twentieth-century United States through their autobiographical narratives, including the anarchist, Black Power, American Indian, Asian American, and labor movements.[7] I based my curriculum on the overall structure of Meltzer and Brian, but switched readings and assignments in each semester. For example, I taught Emma Goldman (Russian Jewish immigrant Anarchist), Elaine Brown (Black Panther party president), Mary Crow Dog (AIM activist), and Maggie Nelson (Queer poet)'s autobiographical writings along with Grace Lee Boggs'. As an interdisciplinary scholar-teacher who has taught in religious studies, Asian studies, and gender studies courses, I approached this curriculum from a gender studies disciplinary perspective. That said, as I discussed and engaged the course materials with the students, I began to see the usefulness of Grace Lee Boggs' autobiography in teaching transnational Asian studies.

Conventionally, Lee Boggs's autobiography would be considered an Asian American studies or ethnic studies material since her activism primarily took place in the United States. When Lee Boggs accounts her family's origin story in the States, it could be read a quintessential American immigrant narrative. Is this truly the case though? How about the motivations and historical conditions that enabled the Chinese migrants' arrival to the United States at that particular time of history and their continued connection to the motherland? I doubt, along with my students ("What brought her father to the United States? What happened in China at that time? Why does Grace say that she was a perpetual foreigner?"), that Lee Boggs' life narrative is a single-handedly American story. Rather, her family heritage, entangled with the history of Asian immigration to the United States, constitutes a transnational narrative. It shows the interdependency of American and Asian historical contexts, requiring the knowledge and insights from both disciplines in understanding her life. Furthermore, the persisting racism and recent incidents of Anti-Asian hate during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States demand the critical understanding of immigration history and critical race theory, which has the potential to refine the racial narrative in the United States that has long been portrayed as a dichotomy of black and white races.

From this perspective, I suggest the category of Asia be considered not as a static region, but as networked points of connection where a transnational economy of human, material and symbolic capital, power, and affects are set in motion. That is, without inequality of power and resources between the Western colonial regimes and the Qing Dynasty, without the needs for plantation laborers after the Abolition of slavery in the United States and the social upheaval of the Taiping Rebellion in China, and lastly, without persisting Orientalist imagination and purveyance of pseudo-science of racial differences in the West, the pedigree of

Lee Boggs in the United States would have looked radically different.[8] In addition, the reason why Lee Boggs' autobiography is teachable for a transnational Asian studies classroom is due to the self-reflectivity of Boggs on her Chinese American identity and her overarching solidarity that challenged the existing inequality. It is her agency, activism, and reflective positionality that makes her life relevant for students in the classroom, not solely her ethnicity.

The Importance of Positionality: Asian or Asian American?

The teaching moments from Lee Boggs' autobiography often emerged during class discussions where diverse students ask questions which are not confined to U.S. history or Asian American history. Particularly, international students have expressed their surprise when confronted with the connections between Asian history and the life of an Asian American activist. For instance, students from China and Taiwan discussed how Lee Boggs' engagement with Marxist philosophy and her assessment of Maoism compares to their own, while contrasting the Black socialist movement to that of Asia. In addition, during the discussions of Asian American identity, a Korean American student and a Korean international student collaborated on researching the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, challenging an exaggerated narrative of African American and Asian conflict. While acknowledging the difference between the Korean diaspora in the United States and South Korean society, the students explored the distinctive but connected contexts of modern Korean history and the Korean immigration history. In the process, the U.S. society requirement course covered a much broader scope than the domestic history.

These moments are consistent with the pedagogical tools I employ. From the beginning of the semester, I suggested that they reflect upon their positionality and its connectedness to others in the classroom. In this reflective pedagogical practice, I use my own positionality to complicate the boundary-making between the academic disciplines such as Asian studies and Asian American studies. Once an international student from South Korea myself, I have permanently relocated to the United States. When does an Asian immigrant become a first-generation Asian American? Or, when does one assume the cultural identity of an Asian American, if legal citizenship does not fully account for one's belonging to the Asian/American identity? These are some of the questions I discuss with my students in the classrooms to understand the history of racism and immigration in the United States. I distinguish this practice from using one's identity as a resource to be exploited, or a cultural capital to expense; rather, it is a practice of "looking at where you stand (照顧脚下)" and making it a point of departure so that one can learn something that otherwise one would not be able to learn.

In conclusion, a transnational Asian studies classroom encompasses discussions of the politics of immigration, race, ethnicity, and cultures. Its

pedagogical anchor in positionality and a transnational approach are necessary, not optional, as Asia is not an isolated object of knowledge. This epistemological standpoint empowers the creation of solidarity for racial, gender, economic, and environmental justice between Asian studies and other disciplines. By acknowledging the connectedness of the Asian histories and cultures to students' social contexts, the transnational Asian studies pedagogy produces a relevant set of course contents and discussions. Lee Boggs' biography is one of the abounding examples of such pedagogy. For example, topics on comfort women and World War II, the nuclear power plants in East Asia and the transmission of the technology to the region through transpacific industrial network, reproductive justice in Asia, and transnational feminism can engender constructive discussions by considering multidisciplinary insights. In the following section, I will briefly discuss how such situatedness of transnational Asian studies can be useful in promoting antiracist perspectives.

Antiracist Transnational Asian Studies Pedagogy during and after the Pandemic

Among numerous possibilities of transnational Asian studies pedagogy, I find it effective in antiracist education in classrooms. Here, I am following Ibram X. Kendi's succinct definition of antiracist: "The one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea."(Kendi, 2019).[9] This simple but powerful definition suggests that an antiracist's goal should be a specific action (i.e., supporting antiracist policy). Transnational Asian studies teaching, in this respect, can provide the knowledge and understanding that might link to such actions when the class encountered the specific social events, including anti-Asian hate incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement following the brutal murder of George Floyd. The practice of transnational Asian studies primarily aims to illuminate flows of migration, cultural, social, economic exchange and network in and outside of Asia, therefore actively seeking association from other relevant disciplines. In an antiracist mode of teaching, the relevant discipline would be Asian American studies, critical race studies, and postcolonial studies to seek anticolonial/antiracist solidarity by analyzing and dismantling the transnational and domestic power structures. When a student has access to the transnational cartographies of power networks relations that eventually links back to themselves, the antiracist ideas and actions will have their foundations.

For example, I have met international students who feel disjointed from what they think are uniquely "American" debates on antiracism. To those who are new to racial dynamics in the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the following social conflict can be something to watch from afar, as a distant observer. Or, the call for antiracism and racial justice might seem like an element for their

cultural assimilation to the United States since they do not align their positionality to the struggle. In other words, they might have difficulty finding reasons to care. However, once they are informed that the twentieth-century immigration policy in the United States has been formulated through the domestic struggle and transnational forces, they can make connections that enable their entry to the country. The 1964 immigration reform, which was influenced by the civil rights movement and the consideration for racial equity, is one of the significant examples of the struggle against racism that resulted in legal changes that made a transnational impact. (Chin, 2008) The reflection on the U.S. immigration policy can also generate parallel discussions on the migrant workers who move between Asian countries (e.g., from Nepal to South Korea) as labor migration is a phenomenon that spread following the movement of the capital.

In addition to the point on immigration, students can also consider the history of racialization in the US and its lasting impact both domestically and internationally, finding their connection to an antiracist narrative. After the abolition of slavery and the influx of Chinese (and later Japanese and Korean) labor to the US, the racialization of both African Americans and Asian Americans occurred simultaneously, serving to define the boundaries of whiteness.[10] The anti-Chinese (and Asian) racial imagination and antiblackness in the United States have evolved and become embedded in US society and also influenced globally through popular media and cultural transmissions. As a result, the anti-Asian rhetoric during the COVID-19 and anti-blackness in policing are the consequences of US history, not an anomaly, to which figures such as Lee Boggs have combatted to render meaningful change. Therefore, the reflection on a student's positionality concerning the social and racial context is pedagogically useful and provides motivation for antiracist engagement.

In the case of BIPOC or minority students (both from the United States and elsewhere), there are two significant points to consider in antiracist transnational Asian studies pedagogy. First, the discipline of Asian studies has traditionally been dominated by white, Western, male scholars, catering primarily to a white-centered audience. (Ryang, 2021) Within this context, BIPOC students represent a relatively new audience in the field of Asian studies and may find the discipline's historical perspective and gaze unsettling. Second, as a result of this dynamic, the gap in social and ontological understanding between "Asian" and "Asian American" cultures is often left unexplained. While exoticized Asian culture and history are frequently celebrated as unique and rare knowledge, topics related to Asian Americans are often marginalized within the United States, struggling to find their rightful place as a discipline within academia.[11] The aforementioned case of the film *Parasite* symbolically highlights this discrepancy once again. Why is the position of Asian American films so distinct from that of a well-made Korean film?

How does the Korean film differ from an Asian American film like *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022), which garnered seven Academy Awards two years later? I argue that antiracist transnational Asian studies pedagogy can provide a vantage point for addressing these new questions posed by the emerging—and the future majority—student body.

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Notes

[1] I thank Dr. Rachel Pang for suggesting the pedagogical orientation I presented at the ASIANetwork conference panel discussion ("'Teaching Asia During Resurgence of Anti-Asian Racism," April 9, 2022) is antiracist. I did not have "antiracist" in the initial draft, but thanks to Dr. Pang's comment, I decided to edit the title and later part of this essay.

[2] Particularly, Lee and Shibuwasa write about: "But during the first decades of Asian American Studies as a formal field of study, Asian Americanist historians emphasized the U.S. side of their narratives. This was an understandable strategy at a time when our

professors and colleagues routinely confused Asian American Studies with Asian Studies." Erika Lee, and Naoko Shibusawa, "Guest Editor's Introduction: What is Transnational Asian American History? Recent Trends and Challenges," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8, no. 3 (2005): ix.

[3] According to the website: "Dr. Cumings placed most of the blame of North Korea's problems on the United States, while also whitewashing problems in Korea." Anonymous, "Bruce Cumings," Professor Watchlist (Turning Point USA), accessed April 16, 2022, https://professorwatchlist.org/professor/brucecumings.

[4] I also discuss the issue briefly in my essay, "*Parasite* as Parable: Bong Joon-Ho's Cinematic Capitalism." *CrossCurrents* 70, no. 3 (2020): 248-262.

[5] Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 3.

[6] Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 9

[7] Patricia Meltzer and Christi Brian, "General Education Course Proposal for Gen Ed Area U.S. Society" (Women's Studies Course Proposal, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, year unknown), p. 3.

[8] What I have in mind here is Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) since it is an example of transnational historiography that informs the lingering connections. In addition, I refer to Helen Heran Jun's idea that the racialization of Asian Americans and African Americans took place in the Americas in connected but distinctive ways. See Jun. 2011. *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America*. New York: New York University Press.

[9] Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (Random House Publishing Group, 2019), p. 13.

[10] Jun, *Race for Citizenship,* Chapter 1.

[11] For the critical review of the history of Asian American studies in the US, see Mark Chiang. *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Also see Tina Chen's compelling vision on "Global Asia" which considers the academic landscape of Asian studies, Asian American Studies, and Asian Diaspora Studies. Tina Chen, "Global Asias: Method, Architecture, Praxis." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 4 (2021): 997–1009. doi:10.1017/S0021911821001595.

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