

INTRODUCTION

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These are perilous times, shaped by economic meltdown, wars, persistent social divisions, and the prospect of environmental calamities for whose full extent few are remotely prepared. A view of the modern world driven by American dominance, cheap oil, easy credit, and conspicuous consumption is rapidly unraveling before our eyes. In the face of such crises, the institutions of the status quo appear increasingly outmoded and ineffective.

Because the future is more uncertain than ever, these perilous times are also precious times. Collectively, we have a window of opportunity to rediscover the nonmaterial things that bring us joy and fulfillment. I have learned to savor every minute of time with my four-year-old daughter not only because I know how quickly children grow up but also because I have no idea what state the world will be in when she is my age. Will it be a world torn apart by famines, pandemics, and wars over vanishing supplies of oil and freshwater? Will crises for humanity prompt a resurgence of racism, patriarchy, jingoism, authoritarianism, or other forms of dehumanization we once thought anathema to a modern sensibility?

Time is most precious, however, because we can still act to avert the worst consequences of human-induced catastrophe in the twenty-first century. As terrible as the walls crumbling around us look and feel, we must avoid falling into total dismay. And we can rest assured that the challenges of the new millennium will prompt a great deal of soul searching and unforeseeable expressions of love and creativity.

It is in contradictory times like these—the best and worst of times—that the voice of a movement elder like Grace Lee Boggs proves invaluable. Here is a voice that can help guide us to the next stage, one in which we move from reacting to crisis to creating alternative modes of work, politics, and human interaction that will collectively forge the next American Revolution.

AN UNLIKELY JOURNEY

Few of us will be lucky to live to ninety-five years of age with our faculties, let alone the full and vigorous abilities with which Grace Lee Boggs continues to approach her political and intellectual life. Indeed, for many of the youth she regularly encounters, Grace must come across as older than history itself. She entered this world during the tumult of the Great War (before humankind knew it would be the *First* World War), a time when Jim Crow was the law of the land, the cars and planes that would define twentieth-century life were still novelties, and electrical appliances were at best household luxuries. Grace was born two years before John F. Kennedy and ten years before Malcolm X. When she was completing her PhD, Martin Luther King Jr. was still in grade school. Is there any other figure in the United States today who can reflect on seven decades of activist life and history with the vibrancy of Grace Lee Boggs?

As James Boggs (1919–93)—Grace’s life partner, intellectual collaborator, and political comrade for forty years—was wont to say, “Just coming out of your mother’s womb does not make you a human being.”¹ Jimmy Boggs urged us to recognize the role creative thinking and responsible action play in advancing humanity. To understand what Grace represents to us today, we might add, “Just getting old doesn’t make you wise.”

Grace’s political and humanitarian vision draws from both a rich lifetime of experience in struggle and a rigorous commitment to critical thinking. It emanates from the meeting ground of continuity and change: the wisdom to highlight the vital components of our history, culture, and tradition that have sustained community across countless human generations, combined with the radical spirit to think and act anew, rise to new challenges, and overcome that which is discordant and malignant in society.

Her vision and practice are also the product of a most unlikely journey, one in which she has consciously grounded herself within a tight-knit community while opening herself up to influences from diverse and varied sources of inspiration. We need to appreciate how the personal and political identifications that consigned Grace to the margins of twentieth-century politics and scholarship now uniquely position her to speak to the dilemmas of twenty-first-century America.

Grace began to leave her mark on the world in 1940, when she completed a PhD in philosophy from Bryn Mawr College—an unprecedented achievement for a U.S.-born daughter of Chinese immigrants. But finding no home in an academic order still dominated by the old white boys’ network, she soon took to the streets, landing on the South Side of Chicago near the end of the Great Depression, just as the African American communities of the urban North were awakening to their collective political

power. Grace had discovered her mission in life: to be a movement activist.

As she recounts in these pages, Grace had the great fortune to be not just a witness to but also an active participant in the humanity-stretching movements of the twentieth century, including the civil rights movement, labor movement, women's movement, Black Power movement, Asian American movement, and environmental justice movement. During her seven decades of struggle, her close associates have included people who changed the course of history, such as the legendary actors Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, the Pan-Africanist and Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah, and the pioneering black Marxist C. L. R. James. Grace once met with Malcolm X to propose that he join the revolutionary organizing activities she was undertaking with other Black Power activists in Detroit.²

Still, the most formidable figure in her life has undoubtedly been Jimmy Boggs. An autoworker and autodidact from the Deep South, Jimmy was born in the age of sharecropping and joined the Great Migration to the industrial North. There he lived to see the devastating effects of automation, deindustrialization, and capital flight on the labor movement, the black proletariat, and the Motor City that became his adopted hometown. The consummate organic intellectual, Jimmy Boggs drew insights from his personal experience through three great epochs (agriculture, industry, and automation). But he also sought new modes of understanding from book knowledge to tackle unsolved problems, always working to make his radical ideas accessible and persuasive to the people in the community surrounding him. Jimmy possessed a unique ability to both appreciate and transcend Grace Lee's world shaped by university philosophers, left-wing polemicists, and radical agitators. Just a

couple of months after she moved to Detroit in June 1953, they became engaged. Grace would later remark that her partnership with Jimmy helped to make her a whole person.

If it is possible to pinpoint one characteristic that distinguishes Grace, it is that she embodies the unity of theory and practice in a manner that has become increasingly rare. In the United States we have a disturbing tendency to reduce the production of ideas and knowledge to academics. Americans go to school for a finite period of time to “learn things,” then they go out into the “real world” to put what they have learned into practice. Many U.S. activists are too quick to view intellectual work as the domain of those with academic jobs, deeming it elitist in general, and too prone to discount the role creative thinking plays in movement building. To this brand of activist, signs of inequality and injustice seem obvious, as does protesting the status quo and demanding the redistribution of resources and power.

By contrast, Grace has continued to devote much of her time to study and reflection even as she parted ways with the academic world for a life of organizing. Reflecting her belief in “the power of ideas,” books and publications can be found stacked from floor to ceiling in every room of her modest flat, and over the past decade she has spent an increasing amount of time surfing the best writings and videos on the Web. Unlike those radicals devoted almost exclusively to action in pursuit of an “old truth” they discovered during their political awakening, Grace is constantly seeking to make sense of new developments and conditions, tracking changes both within the dominant culture and the forces of resistance.

This behavior is consistent with her imperative to “think dialectically”—a maxim drawn from her study of the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. Because reality is constantly changing, we

must constantly detect and analyze the emerging contradictions that are driving this change. And if reality is changing around us, we cannot expect good ideas to hatch within an ivory tower. They instead emerge and develop through daily life and struggle, through collective study and debate among diverse entities, and through trial and error within multiple contexts.

Grace often attributes her “having been born female and Chinese” to her sense of being an outsider to mainstream society. Over the past decade she has sharpened this analysis considerably. Reflecting on the limits of her prior encounters with radicalism, Grace fully embraces the feminist critique not only of gender discrimination and inequality but also of the masculinist tendencies that too often come to define a certain brand of movement organizing—one driven by militant posturing, a charismatic form of hierarchical leadership, and a static notion of power seen as a scarce commodity to be acquired and possessed.

Grace has struck up a whole new dialogue and built relationships with Asian American activists and intellectuals since the 1998 release of her autobiography, *Living for Change*. Her reflections on these encounters have reinforced her repeated observation that marginalization serves as a form of liberation. Thus, she has come away impressed with the particular ability of movement-oriented Asian Americans to dissect U.S. society in new ways that transcend the mind-sets of blacks and whites, to draw on their transnational experiences to rethink the nature of the global order, and to enact new propositions free of the constraints and baggage weighing down those embedded in the status quo.

Still, Grace’s practical connection to a constantly changing reality for most of her adult life has stemmed from an intimate

relationship with the African American community—so much so that informants from the Cointelpro days surmised she was probably Afro-Chinese.³ This connection to black America (and to a lesser degree the pan-African world) has made her a source of intrigue for younger generations grappling with the rising complexities of race and diversity. It has been sustained through both political commitments and personal relationships. Living in Detroit for more than a half century, Grace has developed a stature as one of Motown's most cherished citizens: penning a weekly column for the city's largest-circulation black community newspaper; regularly profiled in the mainstream and independent media; frequently receiving awards and honors through no solicitation of her own; constantly visited by students, intellectuals, and activists from around the world; and even speaking on behalf of her friend Rosa Parks after the civil rights icon became too frail for public appearances.

But though Grace has been associated with historical figures and has dined with luminaries on more than one occasion, her daily activities are primarily occupied by meetings and communications with people working at a grassroots level to transform blocks, neighborhoods, and cities. These new and renewing relationships with people and ideas particularly feed Grace's creative spirit and nourish her soul, for every narrative—of individuals or movements shared face-to-face, by e-mail, or through written publications—brings with it new lessons in life and struggle, new reasons to believe that humankind can achieve that which still must be accomplished. Be they artists or statesmen, shopkeepers or grandparents, elders are rightfully concerned with their legacy. Grace, however, still bristles with the energy of a twenty-five-year-old movement activist, and this is readily apparent to everyone who crosses her path. As a result, this book

draws lessons and meaning from the past, but it is clearly focused on the present and future.

And this is where my role in this project—both the writing of this book and its existence as a living document to be discussed and debated after publication—begins to take shape as a collaborator. I first met Grace in 1998, shortly after reading her autobiography, while a graduate student at UCLA. On the advice of the veteran organizer and professor Glenn Omatsu, I invited her to speak at an Asian American activism conference I had organized. Since 2000 I have worked as a professor of history and ethnic studies at the University of Michigan, located forty miles west of Detroit in Ann Arbor. In this sense my life trajectory departs from Grace's path. Although we are both American-born Asians, I am a product and beneficiary of the movements to democratize and diversify higher education.

At the most basic level, I have approached this project as a scholarly editor working to shape Grace's articles, columns, speeches, notes, and correspondence into coherent chapters. After moving to Detroit a decade ago, I began to interview her extensively and comb through the stacks and stacks of boxes holding a treasure trove of historical documents dating back to the 1940s. But I was quickly awed by how extraordinarily productive she remained as an intellectual—reading a half-dozen books per week while keeping tabs on a wide range of periodicals. Correspondingly, her weekly newspaper columns, e-mail missives, and frequent lectures bristled with insights that brought historical bearing on contemporary problems. I took it upon myself to keep an ongoing archive of these papers as well. Subsequently, I proposed to her that we work in tandem to reshape these materials into this book. Just as my initial encoun-

ter with Grace has turned into a protracted effort to reconstruct society from the ground up, my initial plan to gather a collection of Grace's various writings for publication turned into a protracted effort to construct a freestanding manuscript from the ground up.

At another level I see my role as that of intergenerational translator. Born at the height of the Vietnam War era and inhabiting a world transformed by it, I have through academic research and interpersonal dialogue devoted more time than most others my age to making sense of the sixties. At the same time, my professional and community-based work has continuously challenged me to understand and communicate with high school and college-aged youth, whose ability to connect with the past has been severely compromised by a post-MTV culture that reduces history to symbolism and iconography.

For much of the past decade, I lived in Detroit, about five minutes away from Grace's Eastside home, while undertaking various community activist projects and serving as a board member of the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership—an organization founded by friends of Jimmy and Grace in the aftermath of Jimmy's passing to carry on the development of ideas and actions consistent with their radical spirit. I moved to Detroit because I felt, just as Grace did in the 1950s, that making a connection to the movement-building activities going on in Motown was somehow crucial to my development as an intellectual and activist. Generally speaking, as Grace would say, I needed to become more whole as a human being. Now I see my task as seeking out those who want and need to come along and further this unlikely journey.

REIMAGINING THE AMERICAN DREAM
IN DETROIT

While only one chapter in this book focuses specifically on Detroit, it must be stated that the whole of this book has been molded by the city.⁴ Once hailed as the place that gave birth to the American Dream, Detroit has since been lambasted, ridiculed, and left to rot as the site of its demise. But as we wrestle with the unresolved contradictions of the industrial age and confront the new contradictions of postindustrial society, the current economic and environmental crises help us to appreciate how Detroit's fate is not exceptional but paradigmatic. Above all, Detroit is the place that has crystallized for us Martin Luther King Jr.'s call for a "revolution of values" against the "giant triplets of racism, militarism and materialism."

Detroit brings into clear focus the relationship between the American Dream and MLK's giant triplets. It was twentieth-century Detroit's advanced technology and models of organized production—embodied by the Fordist assembly line depicted in Diego Rivera's epic *Detroit Industry* mural—that made the Motor City one of the world's great centers of wealth creation. Though he scorned the appropriation of labor power and maldistribution of wealth, the Marxist Rivera reveals through this mural how he shared with the captains of industry an unflinching belief in progress.

Even the Great Depression, although it severely curtailed corporate profits and sent stock shares plummeting, did not immediately overturn the vulgar materialist mind-set. It took the organization of the industrial union movement—one of the greatest and most influential social movements in history—to shake the foundations of the social order. The rights and ben-

efits that both union and nonunion workers have enjoyed over the past seven decades are due in no small measure to the courageous and imaginative actions of Michigan autoworkers and their community allies—from the martyrs of the 1932 massacre outside the titanic Ford Rouge plant in Dearborn to the heroes of the 1936–37 sit-down strike at the GM/Fisher plant in Flint. Threatened with a shutdown at the point of production, the Big 3 automakers would learn to respect the rights of their workers. Then both labor and management would join forces to build the engines propelling U.S. victories in World War II as Detroit became the nation’s “arsenal of democracy.”

Out of this age of movement building emerged the grand vision of social democracy. Grace considers herself fortunate to have first learned how to think from social democratic intellectuals such as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, who transcended the individualist strains of American ideology and philosophy to emphasize the ways that self-identity is constructed through engagement with community. She came to Detroit in the aftermath of World War II, a period of time when the prospects for social democracy seemed greatest because of the complementary functioning of three pillars of society. Through wise investments, industrial capitalists would put the resources of nature and the labor of man to increasingly productive uses. Through thoughtful intervention, the state would regulate industry and redistribute wealth to promote the general good. And through dedicated organizing, the workers and the masses would build institutions to ensure their collective power was felt at the bargaining table, in the halls of government, and even in the direct ordering of the production process.

There was at best, however, a tentative agreement among these elements. In truth, none of them fully embraced the idea of

social democracy: not the capitalists, who preferred to go about their dealings unfettered by a social contract; not the politicians, who grew wary of both Eastern and Western notions of “socialism” once the immediate crises of the Depression and World War II passed; and not even the U.S. workers, whose traditions of solidarity have always been complicated by race, gender, empire, and individualist notions of upward mobility.

The only certainty with capitalism is that it never stands still. It mandates that all who partake in the system engage in a process of constant and unending accumulation lest they be bulldozed in the path of creative destruction. Hence, the security, stability, and prosperity of postwar Detroit would prove fleeting or illusory. Indeed, Grace’s 1953 arrival would mark the dawn of the city’s most tumultuous period—and not coincidentally in the eyes of some observers.

In the quest for heightened productivity, the industries began replacing assembly-line workers with automated machines. At the same time, their desire for more cost-efficient plants, tax abatements, and greater leverage over the workforce led them to relocate production to the suburbs and to the Sunbelt, beginning a process that would eventually lead to international outsourcing. Not content with the proceeds of domestic sales, the Big 3 and other multinational corporations also supported an interventionist foreign policy whose “free market” objective was less the expansion of true democracy and more the capture of natural resources and expansion of outlets for U.S. goods.

The new contradictions soon sharpened within the trade union movement. In the aftermath of the 1950 labor-management accord, dubbed the Treaty of Detroit, too many trade union leaders began to fashion themselves as a labor aristocracy,

turning their backs on the movement-building solidarity that had been their key source of power and remaking “big labor” into an interest group guided by its own “business” pursuits. After joining forces to kick the Reds out of the unions, these sorts of union officials united with management to support the American pursuit of global hegemony, which both agreed was the key to ever-rising profits and wages.

The giant triplets had taken firm hold. Marked by the achievement of a middle-class standard of living for millions of workers, the American Dream had grown increasingly corrupted by crass materialism. The high-minded notion of the “arsenal of democracy” to defeat Hitler and Tojo was now clouded by the recognition that militarism was a profitable enterprise. And in a Detroit where the black population was rapidly expanding while racial segregation remained the norm and public authorities remained overwhelmingly white, racial conflict was ready to explode.

Jimmy Boggs was a firsthand witness to the entrenched racism that pervaded the plant. Although discrimination had been far from eradicated by labor’s winning of collective bargaining rights, the rise of the United Auto Workers (UAW) had carried with it rising expectations for African American workers and their families. By the 1960s, however, as automation was putting a halt to the expansion of opportunities, growing ranks within the black community became impatient with progress long stalled and bureaucratic structures that inhibited their democratic participation in the union. Hence, Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs, joined by young militants in organizations such as the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), encouraged protests against the old union leaders and called on blacks to seize the revolutionary role that only those standing outside of a corrupt and decaying system could play.

Racism was arguably more pervasive outside the plant. White flight from Detroit had been under way by the 1950s, producing racial and class segregation on a wider metropolitan scale. These white residents did not just follow the factory jobs to the suburbs. They were in large measure subsidized by the government to do so. Federal funding of the interstate highways, whose routes often deliberately tore through communities of color, literally paved the way for white flight. At the same time, federally guaranteed mortgages issued by the Federal Housing Authority and Veterans Administration made home ownership accessible to millions of Americans living in neighborhoods that were restricted to whites through overt measures such as restrictive covenants (contracts signed by property owners in all-white neighborhoods prohibiting the sale of homes to nonwhites) and through the stealthy acts of realtors and neighbors.

With Detroit on the cusp of becoming a majority black city by the mid-1960s, James and Grace Lee Boggs stood at the forefront of those issuing calls for Black Power. So when black frustration with racism, police abuse, and structural poverty erupted in the rebellion of 1967, the esteemed African American journalist Louis Lomax wrote in a feature for the *Detroit News* that “John [*sic*] Boggs and his Chinese wife, Grace Lee Boggs” were two of the six persons whom “Detroit’s responsible Negroes [were] casting a jaundiced eye at” for having incited the rebellion.⁵ With the rebellion hastening both white flight and black political ascendancy, Detroit elected its first black mayor. Coleman A. Young began his five terms as mayor in 1974, just as the city and the auto industry were entering a three-decade crisis of proportions few could envision.

Albeit urgent and overdue, black political power proved to be no antidote to the giant triplets. Racial tensions underlay

the low-intensity war between Detroit and its predominantly white suburbs, which became the new base of support for Reagan's militaristic rhetoric. And even as the wealth evaporated in Detroit, materialist aspirations drove a new wave of violence and alienation in city and suburb alike.

Confronting new challenges, the Boggesses' thinking adapted to a changing reality. They declared that the welfare state, the New Left, and the Black Power movement had all run their course. Thus, it was now necessary to move from redistributive justice to rebuilding our cities and reconstructing human relations from the ground up. This would mandate going beyond the politics of minority grievance to developing multiracial strategies to combat a system that was multinational in scope. And despite the rising domestic despair and global anger at Yankee imperialism, it was incumbent on U.S. revolutionaries to "love America enough to change it." This meant creating models of work, education, art, and community that would transform those rebels filled with righteous anger into productive change agents who understood that self-transformation and structural transformation must go hand in hand. As Gandhi said and King concurred, you must be the change you wish to see in the world. In words that will resonate throughout this book, we must define revolution both by the humanity-stretching *ends* to be achieved and the beloved community-building *means* by which to achieve those ends.

The Motor City, even dating back to the heyday of the domestic auto industry, has long been scarred by perpetual divisions of race, class, and geography. Today, with the Big 3 automakers a shadow of their former selves, the entire region lives under a dark cloud of insecurity while large swaths of inner-city Detroit—areas marked by an exodus of stable homes and businesses—have fallen completely off the radar screen of