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Ryan A. McCarty

University of Montana, Missoula

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BEYOND NATIONALISM

JAMES AND GRACE LEE BOGGS AND THE BLACK RADICAL TRADITION IN 1980S

DETROIT

By

RYAN ANDREW MCCARTY

Bachelor of Arts, University of Montana-Western, Dillon, MT, 2016

Thesis

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Approved by:

Ashby Kinch, Associate Dean of The Graduate School

Dr. Tobin Miller Shearer, Chair
History

Dr. Anya Jabour
History

Dr. Daisy Rooks
Sociology

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A Note on Language and Form

Throughout this thesis, I will often refer to James and Grace Lee Boggs by their first names to avoid confusion regarding their shared surname. Similarly, when referencing C.L.R. James, I will use his entire name to differentiate him from James Boggs. Secondly, I have refrained from capitalizing racial identifications such as black and white. I will, however, capitalize the Black Freedom Struggle, the Women's Liberation Movement, Black Power, and the Black Radical Tradition as they are historic terms that represent a wide swathe of ideology and historic study. Lastly, I have made a distinction between the terms laborer and worker. For the purpose of clarity, worker will be applied broadly to skilled and unskilled labor. Laborer is used to note unskilled, manual labor.

Introduction

The Black Radical Tradition

My writing and the kind of politics to which I've been drawn have more to do with imagining a different future than being pissed off about the present. – Robin D. G. Kelley¹

In 2010, Dr. Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, an associate professor of African-American Studies at the University of Illinois, deemed the 1980s the genesis of the “new nadir in African-American racial formation.”² The disintegration of the Black Power movement, coupled with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, cemented the country’s shift to conservatism, leaving little to no room for black, radical politics. However, the activism of James and Grace Lee Boggs during the decade represents just that: black radicalism outside of the electoral arena. James Boggs’s involvement with black radicalism dates to the 1940s and was consistent until his death in 1993; his career is a useful case study for the trajectory of the Black Radical Tradition. His initial foray into Marxism, unionism, and civil rights followed by a period in which he was a respected Black Power theoretician mirror the path of the Black Radical Tradition from the late 1930s until the mid-1970s. Additionally, Grace Lee Boggs’s early years as a political activist were greatly influenced by the emerging Civil Rights Movement. In it, she saw “the power that the black community has within itself to change this country when it begins to move.”³ The years following the collapse of the Black Power movement, roughly 1975-1993, demonstrate a pioneering role for both James and Grace Lee in African-American revolutionary rhetoric.

¹ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 3.

² Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, “The New Nadir: The Contemporary Black Racial Formation,” *The Black Scholar* 40, no. 1 (2010): 38-58; “racial formation” refers to the notion that race is socially constructed and thus, racial importance is based on social, economic, and political factors.

³ Grace Lee Boggs, *Living For Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 39.

James and Grace Lee Boggs were an intellectual duo. Interpreting their respective individual writings and speeches can, at times, make analysis of their words confusing and seemingly separate; that is not their history. The two worked in constant concert. Though publications and speeches will be credited to the author, they must be understood as dually produced. Both James and Grace Lee lived remarkable, activist lives. However, isolating either member of the duo is a disservice to their collective ideology and will leave gaps in the intellectual journey they experienced together. To fully understand their evolution, it is imperative that they be studied in concert. Grace Lee taught James and vice versa, and together they critically analyzed the social, economic, and political place of African Americans in the United States.

Further, the post Black Power era of the couples' activism expands the temporal boundaries of the Black Radical Tradition through the 1980s and into the early 1990s. As the radical left mourned the death of the liberal consensus, the couple continued to organize, speak, and publish revolutionary material through the 1980s. They spent the post-Black Power period mobilizing for the second American revolution that would bring the destruction of the capitalist system—the same system that had created the social and political hierarchy that perpetuated the oppression of African Americans.⁴

The radical life of James and Grace Lee Boggs can most easily be compartmentalized into four distinct periods that reflect their ideology at specific times while simultaneously

⁴ For more information on James Boggs's affiliation with the Black Radical Tradition, consult *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook: A James Boggs Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Ward (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2011); Nyanza Bandlele, "Changing Ideas for Changing Times: Revolutionary Praxis and the Political Thought of James Boggs," *Souls* 13, no. 3 (2011): 340-52; Robeson Taj Frazier, "The Routes Less Traveled: The Great Transformation of James Boggs," *Souls* 13, no. 3 (2011): 256-78; Stephen M. Ward, "An Ending and a Beginning: James Boggs, C. L. R. James, And The American Revolution," *Souls* 13, no. 3 (2011): 279-302; Stephen M. Ward, *In Love and Struggle The Revolutionary Lives of James and Grace Lee Boggs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

illustrating the evolutionary nature of their career. James and Grace Lee Boggs's activism began with the Marxist organization Correspondence. Though both were members in activist circles prior to Correspondence, their membership and subsequent leadership roles in the organization helped launch their careers as theoreticians. The genesis of their political activism was traced directly to Marxist theory. However, they did not wholly abide by orthodox Marxism; James published ideology that met at the intersection of race and class, relying on his personal experience as a black industrial worker for a weekly column.⁵ As the modes of resistance shifted from the 1950s to the 1960s, the Boggses' activism adapted accordingly to fit the contemporary circumstances. The second period of the couple's career was their interjection into the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 70s. During the Black Power era, James's speeches, writings, and individual publications rose to the forefront amongst the black intelligentsia. In the same time frame—the early to mid-1970s—Grace Lee's rhetoric shifted toward education and social reform. The Black Power era was the beginning of the Boggses' foray into political leadership. They developed their own questions, divorced from individual organizations, and set about building their movement to answer them. James and Grace Lee served the movement as mentors and theoreticians, spreading their thoughts and questions in a variety of sources including speeches, conversations, weekly columns, op-eds, and self-published newsletters and books. In the latter half of the decade, James and Grace Lee moved away from strictly Black Power rhetoric and cofounded their own organization, the National Organization for an American

⁵ Correspondence, largely aided by the writing of James Boggs, broke from traditional Marxist notions of the role of a vanguard party leading the working class. Rather, the organization emphasized the revolutionary roles of other groups—namely women and African Americans—in restructuring the political economy through self-activation.

Revolution (NOAR) in 1978, signaling their third and most ambiguous evolution.⁶ Lastly, during the 1980s, they focused their activism at the grassroots level, attempting to disassociate with electoral politics entirely, asserting that the future of the nation was dependent on the restoration of urban, African-American communities.⁷ This period demonstrates the continuation of radical ideology in a decade previously understood through the lens of partisan politics.

Grace Lee was devoted to the Black Freedom Struggle. In her 1998 autobiography, *Living For Change: An Autobiography*, she recalled that she saw the black community as the conduit to change and aligned herself with black radical politics: “I decided what I wanted to do...was to become a movement activist in the black community.”⁸ Grace Lee, a Chinese American, was largely accepted by the black radical community. Angela Davis praised Grace Lee’s activism, saying, “Grace Lee has made more contributions to the black struggle than most black people have.”⁹ Grace Lee’s influence was most palpable in the pre and post Black Power eras, guiding their understanding of Marxism and drastically affecting the community organizing strategies implemented by the duo. Thus, James’s evolving ideology was predicated on Grace Lee’s study of Marxism and merged with her organizational methods and political ideology in the late 1970s and through the 1980s. In short, this is a study of the evolving nature of James and Grace Lee Boggs’s activism inside the Black Radical Tradition. Grace Lee’s influence on James’s understanding of the inextricable link between economic, racial, and gender disparities

⁶ Stephen M. Ward, “Introduction to Part IV,” in *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook*; The ambiguity of NOAR’s racial politics is directly attributed to the organization’s multi-ethnic approach to revolution, momentarily removing the couple from their previous adherence to strictly black radicalism.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Boggs, *Living for Change*, 39.

⁹ *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs*, directed by Grace Lee (2013; Arlington, VA: PBS, 2013).

was integral to his evolution. James's experience as an industrial worker provided Grace Lee with the opportunity to experience the struggle in her own home, through the lens of her husband. Rather than focusing on high-minded theories that were divorced from the rank-and-file, the duo combined traditional academic training with labor activism to guide their ideology.

The adaptation of the duo's theories and mobilization strategies serve as a case study in the Black Radical Tradition. Their evolving ideology tracks points of convergence and divergence from the understood path of African-American insurgency. Simultaneously, James and Grace Lee's continued activism in the late 1970s and 1980s charts a new path of study for black radicalism after the state sanctioned destruction of the Black Panther Party and the unofficial death of radicalism. The activity of James and Grace Lee in the three prior decades clearly illustrates their interjection into the Black Radical Tradition, and the couple's grassroots organizing demonstrate a continuation of the tradition, modified to fit contemporary circumstances. James and Grace Lee's continuation of radical rhetoric in the 1980s challenges the consensus that radicalism was a phenomenon strictly of the 1960s and 70s. Their extra-political radicalism adds nuance to the African-American experience of the 1980s, demonstrating the variety of African-American resistance to the rise of American conservatism.

Properly tracing the historiography of the Black Radical Tradition, as Herb Boyd has noted, can be a daunting task because it requires the definition of *radical* and *resistance* from the onset.¹⁰ Boyd demonstrates African-American resistance from enslavement to the 1970s and relies on Richard B. Moore's definition of radical: "a program which proposes basic change in the economic, social, and political orders."¹¹ Boyd asserts that the Black Radical Tradition in the

¹⁰ Herb Boyd, "Radicalism and Resistance: The Evolution of Black Radical Thought," *The Black Scholar* 28, no. 1 (1998): 43-53.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

United States traces its roots to the Atlantic Slave Trade when enslaved Africans resisted white supremacy by “stealing away,” breaking tools, and, at times, committing suicide.¹² The progress of black radical thought in the United States, according to Boyd, evolved from the Atlantic Slave Trade until the demise of the Black Panther Party in 1975.¹³ Boyd ends his evolution in the mid-1970s, arguing that black radicalism in the 1980s “did not bear fruit.”¹⁴ Using Boyd’s loose guidelines for specific periods of the Black Radical Tradition, “Beyond Nationalism” endeavors to place James and Grace Lee Boggs firmly into the evolving nature of black radical thought in the United States and to expand Boyd’s timeline, adding nuance to black radicalism and black activism in the 1980s.¹⁵ This study is not a biographical sketch of the couple. Rather this study uses James and Grace Lee Boggs as a case study of the evolution of black radicalism in the United States, and arguing that their community-oriented efforts in the 1980s and 90s demonstrate a continuation of black radicalism, complicating the existing scholarship.

The subsections—often overlapping—of the Black Radical Tradition that James Boggs intersected with were Marxism, labor unionism, civil rights, and Black Power. The evolution of Boggs’s ideology closely follows historians’ interpretations of black radicalism from the 1930s through the 1970s.¹⁶ After the demise of the Black Power movement, most historians agree that

¹² Ibid., 43; Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1963).

¹³ For more on the FBI’s infiltration of the Black Panther Party, consult Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting ‘til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2006); The Black Panther Party officially disbanded in 1982.

¹⁴ Boyd, “Radicalism and Resistance,” 53.

¹⁵ Boyd loosely categorizes the Black Radical Tradition from the 1940s-1975 as Marxism, unionism, civil rights, and Black Power.

¹⁶ For more information on the evolving Black Radical Tradition, consult these texts in order: Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008); Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012); Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting ‘til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2006).

the 1980s were a reactionary period, in which black radicals devoted themselves to the anti-apartheid struggle in Africa.¹⁷ To the extent that they acknowledge African Americans' continued resistance, historians focus on the electoral political activity of 1980s. This study places James and Grace Lee Boggs's radical, anti-electoral political activity in the 1980s into the existing literature of the Black Radical Tradition, extending its temporal boundaries and disputing its explicitly partisan nature.

In addition to expanding on the scholarship of the Black Radical Tradition, "Beyond Nationalism" will add complexity to the extant scholarship on race relations in the 1980s. Much of the historiography surrounding race relations and policy in the 1980s demonstrates how the rapid rise in conservatism beginning in the late 1960s undermined the progress of various civil liberties groups.¹⁸ It concludes that the 1980s were dominated by conservative values and politics, largely excluding African Americans. Amy Elizabeth Ansell analyzes the election of Ronald Reagan, arguing that "Reagan broke with the general trajectory of racial progress that marked the post-war period. Although Reagan's electoral victories...should not be read simply as a popular mandate for his racial politics, it is clear that a profound shift was under way."¹⁹ Dr. Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua takes this assertion further, claiming that the "new nadir of racial formation" began with the election of Ronald Reagan.²⁰ This subset of the historiography of race in the 1980s highlights the oppressive nature of federal racial policy.²¹ These histories

¹⁷ Boyd, "Radicalism and Resistance," 53.

¹⁸ Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

¹⁹ Amy Elizabeth Ansell, *New Right, New Racism: Race and Reaction in the United States and Britain* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 193.

²⁰ Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, "The New Nadir: The Contemporary Black Racial Formation," *The Black Scholar* 40, no. 1 (2010): 38-58; "racial formation" refers to the notion that race is socially constructed and thus, racial importance is based on social, economic, and political factors.

²¹ For an in depth understanding of African-American oppression in the 1980s, see Ansell, *New Right, New Racism*; Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 149-155; Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes*

provide little room for African-American insurgency, assuming black passivity in the decade; “Beyond Nationalism” disputes this assumption, arguing that James and Grace Lee Boggs, as a representation of the Black Radical Tradition, carried black radicalism through the “new nadir” and into the 1980s and 90s.

Existing scholarship on African-American resistance in the 1980s largely follows a singular pattern: the era belonged to the conservative right and African-American resistance to the counterrevolution rested in the electoral arena. Katherine Tate argues that “by the mid-1980s, public opinion surveys revealed a distinctive shift toward political moderation...based on the transformation of African American politics, away from radical challenges to the political status quo toward inclusive, bipartisan electoral politics.”²² The thrust of Tate’s argument focuses on the unshakable liberal consensus among African Americans during the country’s largest political swing in four decades.²³ Manning Marable furthers this notion in *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990*, by centering his analysis of the decade on black partisan political resistance.²⁴ Marable cites anti-apartheid demonstrations of a small group of progressives and the presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson

on American Politics (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 172-197; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); Stanley Greenberg, *Middle Class Dreams: The Politics and Power of the New American Majority* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011); Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016). These scholars do not muddle the point: the end of the 1970s through the 1980s was an oppressive period for African Americans both locally and nationally. Further, the ruling of *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717 and the backlash surrounding *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 clearly demonstrate a national retreat from Great Society liberalism to racist politics. Finally, Ronald Reagan’s infamous “welfare queen” allegory firmly fixes this ideology to the commander in chief.

²² Katherine Tate, *What’s Going On? Political Incorporation and the Transformation of Black Public Opinion* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 2.

²³ *Ibid*; For a detailed discussion on the disintegration of the liberal consensus in the 1970s, consult Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

²⁴ Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 214.

in 1984 and 1988 as the two most notable instances of African-American opposition to conservatism.²⁵ Perhaps the most sweeping account of the “dialectical oscillation” between Black Power and liberal reform is Cedric Johnson’s *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics*. Johnson contends that the “evolution of Black Power as a form of ethnic politics limited the parameters of black public action to the formal political world. Insurgent demands for black indigenous control converged with liberal reform initiatives to produce a moderate black political regime.”²⁶ Historians have largely overlooked the existence of black radicalism or nonpartisan black solidarity in the decade, instead focusing on institutional revolt—an electoral push to upend the status quo.²⁷ James and Grace Lee Boggs broaden the interpretation of political participation in the decade. Their activism and organizing were a demonstration of the myriad routes political resistance can take, including rejection of the contemporary electoral system.

“Beyond Nationalism” is an intellectual history, focusing on the evolution of the Black Radical Tradition and its ideologies. This study does not intend to uproot popular notions of the 1980s or black political activity in the decade. Rather, it will add complexity to the discussion of black radicalism and interject into the historiography of the Black Radical Tradition and race relations in the 1980s. The study of the Boggses furthers the notion of black radical ideology in a decade previously deemed devoid of it. The 1980s are largely understood in a partisan political context. “Beyond Nationalism” attempts to shift preconceived notions of the decade and allow space for black radicalism. Because this is a study of ideology, it largely avoids quantitative

²⁵ Ibid., 214-218.

²⁶ Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xxiii

²⁷ Robert C. Smith, *Ronald W. Walters and the Fight for Black Power, 1969-2010* (New York: SUNY Press, 2018).

measures, instead focusing on *how* and *why* the Black Radical Tradition—examined in the efforts of James and Grace Lee Boggs—took its form in the 1980s.

Further, this paper will contribute to the field by filling the void of the Black Radical Tradition in the 1980s, a time period that has been severely under researched. In addition, I attempt to add complexity to the discussion of the Reagan era by viewing it through the lens of black radicalism. The two central arguments surrounding race and the 1980s—political oppression and electoral, political resistance—are irreconcilable; if electoral politics were the source of oppression, then electoral resistance would maintain the status quo. The flaw, according to James and Grace Lee, was in the system; subverting the system was the only legitimate revolutionary act. Following that logic, this study focuses on radical activity outside of the electoral arena and reemphasizes the local, African-American community. This study departs from Katherine Tate’s assertion of a black Democratic consensus and examines wholly anti-electoral resistance, independent of partisan affiliation. The external forces of urban decay, political economy, and racial policy intersect with this study, illuminating the circumstances that advanced the duo’s constantly evolving radical theory.

This study is based largely in personal documents, speeches, letters, newspaper columns, and the Boggses’ published writing. In addition to consulting James and Grace Lee Boggs’s personal papers, “Beyond Nationalism” uses newspapers and publications from the National Organization for an American Revolution (NOAR) that the couple cofounded to articulate their strategy for propaganda. The in-depth analysis of James and Grace Lee as intellectuals will be complemented by examining sources from other black radical ideologues to see how and where they fit into the discussion of the Black Radical Tradition. Lastly, in placing the Boggses’

activism into the context of the Black Radical Tradition, “Beyond Nationalism” will rely on existing scholarship of the activist duo.

Because James and Grace Lee are the focus of this study, their personal documents will be important for a robust understanding of black radicalism in the 1980s. In addition, local and national newspapers, newsletters, and organizational pamphlets are necessary to understand the perceived impact of their writing. That is, those documents illuminated the effects the couple’s writing had on the community and nation. By examining James Boggs’s columns written in radical newspapers like *Correspondence* and *Inner City Voice*, this thesis will firmly position him in the Marxist and Black Power labor movements, respectively, that mark distinct periods of the temporal framework. Boggs’s columns are in the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University.

Manifesto for an American Revolutionary Party, NOAR’s ideological statement published in 1982, clearly illustrates the couple’s ideology during their time in NOAR. Though NOAR consisted of local organizations all over the country, James and Grace Lee were the cofounders, primary theoreticians, authors, and first chairs for the national committee. Their ideology in this time period is directly represented in the manifesto. To ensure that the manifesto is an accurate depiction of the Boggses’ thoughts, it is useful to compare it to their writing independent of NOAR in the same time period. These writings and publications come largely from their personal archive and *Conversations in Maine: Exploring Our Nation's Future*, a book published by the couple and two other revolutionaries in 1978. The ideology is easily traced through these three sources and clearly illustrates James and Grace Lee’s thought process in the mid-1970s and early 1980s. The two also self-published many books together. Following the theses of these books reaffirms my argument that their activism was constantly evolving. By

tracing the ideology through their publications, “Beyond Nationalism” will provide evidence for the sub arguments made in each phase of their lives.

James and Grace Lee’s extensive theoretical writings have been preserved in the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University in Detroit. In addition to the duo’s archival collection, historian Stephen M. Ward edited a collection of James Boggs’s work from the 1950s until his death, titled *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook: A James Boggs Reader*. These sources illumine James Boggs as an individual example of the Black Radical Tradition; his influences on the movement and his differing ideologies from other prominent leaders demonstrate his strict adherence to dialectic reasoning and the adaptability of black radicalism. Paired together, these sources provide a rich evidentiary base for understanding how James’s and Grace Lee’s ideology transformed over five decades, culminating in their community-driven work in the 1980s and 90s.

Newspapers, both local and national, establish the Boggses as respected and widely read theoreticians. *The Detroit Free Press* covered their community-based work and public disputes with governmental organizations. *The Detroit Free Press* was also crucial in providing the racial backdrop of Detroit. Articles taken from the 1950s-1990s demonstrate the city’s long history of segregation, racial inequality, and the racial aspects of union organizing. *The New York Times* will be used as a bridge to a national audience. *The New York Times* published articles written by James Boggs, disseminating his theories to the country and cementing him as respected Black Power theoretician. Additionally, *The New York Times* provides an important contextual backdrop. While the *Times* is not the arbiter of culture, its publication can shed light on the changing attitude of the United States. All newspapers referenced were accessed through Newspapers.com.

Lastly, in situating James and Grace Lee into the Black Radical Tradition, this project relies heavily on the existing scholarship surrounding the couple. Three scholars—Stephen M. Ward, Robeson Taj Frazier, and Nyanza Bandele—have contributed the bulk of the literature on the couple and their ideological transformations. However, these three scholars largely study them from birth to the foundation of NOAR, skip over the late 1970s and 80s, and conclude with James’s death. “Beyond Nationalism” contributes to this scholarship by providing analysis of the 1980s and how James and Grace Lee’s commitment to dialectic reasoning guided the final chapter of James’s revolutionary life.²⁸ Grace Lee’s life has been more thoroughly documented. She published an autobiography in 1998, *Living For Change: An Autobiography*. Additionally, she coauthored a biography with Scott Kurashige in 2012 titled *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* that examines her history and proposes the future of American radical politics.

The organization of this paper will be directed by chronology, following the evolution of the Boggses’ theories as they adapted to the political direction of Detroit and the country. The format is also thematic; because the Boggses were devout in their dialectic understanding—the understanding that as new circumstances create new problems, solutions must adapt—of race and class, their theories naturally evolved as time passed. As new events created new problems, their solutions evolved to meet the requirements. This paper will execute a twofold strategy in placing James and Grace Lee Boggs into the fabric of black radicalism and demonstrating that their continued radical rhetoric in the 1980s is a representation of the evolutionary capability of

²⁸ Nyanza Bandele, “Changing Ideas for Changing Times: Revolutionary Praxis and the Political Thought of James Boggs,” *Souls* 13, no. 3 (2011): 340-52; Robeson Taj Frazier, “The Routes Less Traveled: The Great Transformation of James Boggs,” *Souls* 13, no. 3 (2011): 256-278; Stephen M. Ward, “An Ending and a Beginning: James Boggs, C.L.R. James, and the American Revolution,” *Souls* 13, no. 3 (2011): 279-302.

the Black Radical Tradition, carrying it through a decade previously deemed devoid of anti-electoral black radicalism.

Chapter 1

Revolutionary Grounds: Place, Race, and the Political Economy of Twentieth Century Detroit

*Detroit is the city of problems...The city has become a living laboratory for the most comprehensive study possible of the American urban condition. – Lawrence M. Carino, Chair of the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce (1972)*²⁹

In addition to mirroring the various iterations of the Black Radical Tradition, the Boggses' activism also reflected their environment in Detroit. Detroit was the archetype of Rust Belt boom and decay. Once home to the highest working-class job wages in the country, by the 1980s, the Motor City typified the urban crisis: joblessness, concentrated poverty, physical decay, and racial isolation. Detroit was and is a case study of the urban crisis; a combination of race, place, labor, and political economy that provoked the downfall of the center of American industry and facilitated the creation of the urban “underclass.”³⁰

Detroit's industry reached its peak in the 1940s; with automobile manufacturing leading the way, the city increased its manufacturing output by 40% between 1940 and 1947, embarking on a path out of the Great Depression. Wartime demands for industrial goods pushed the city even further. Large manufacturing corporations looking to capitalize on the defense boom quickly transformed their assembly lines to mass produce tanks, airplanes, and other military hardware. Detroit's mass production in service of the US Army reached such a high volume, Franklin D. Roosevelt deemed the city the “arsenal for democracy.” The defense boom sparked massive migration to the city; hopeful newcomers, desperately seeking a reprieve from the Great Depression, flocked to Detroit from all over the Midwest and Southeast.³¹

²⁹ Georakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 1.

³⁰ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3-14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 18-31; Jay Mark and Virginia Leavell, “Material Conditions of Detroit's Great Rebellion,” *Social Justice* 44, no. 4 (2017): 27-54.

The influx of jobs and laborers triggered an equal reaction from labor unions. From the late 1930s through the 1960s, Detroit was the quintessential industrial city, illustrating the push and pull between management and labor that would shape the city's contours. In 1936, the United Automobile Workers (UAW) set up its headquarters in Detroit, and in February of 1937, General Motors recognized the UAW as the official bargaining agent for its employees. Over the course of the next four decades, organized labor would become one of the most powerful economic, political, and social entities in Detroit. Detroit, with the backing of one of the most powerful industrial unions in American history, firmly established itself as a labor town. The challenges facing the city—race, class, and politics—would play themselves out in the theater of organized labor.³²

World War II was the turning point for the convergence of race and labor in Detroit. Prior to the outbreak of war and subsequent manufacturing boom, major manufacturers in the city rarely hired African Americans. The increase in black industrial labor was threefold: the outpacing of demand required firms to open their doors to African Americans. Second, unions and civil rights worked together—albeit at an arm's length from one another—to alter the landscape of black industrial labor.³³ Lastly, Executive Order 8802—mandating nondiscrimination practices in war industries—was the most effective tool for racial equality in wartime Detroit. Between 1943 and 1944, Detroit industries employed more than twice as many African Americans as they had prior to the start of the war.³⁴ The factory floor opened the door

³² Mike Smith, "'Let's Make Detroit a Union Town': The History of Labor and the Working Class in the Motor City," *Michigan Historical Review* 27, no. 2 (2001): 157-173.

³³ While labor unions were integral in the incorporation of black labor, many unions had internal splits along racial lines. White members often disputed the promotion of black members, creating factions within the organizations.

³⁴ Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 28.

for racial optimism in wartime Detroit, but the end of the work day and commute home illuminated a blatant obstacle to racial equality in the exemplary industrial city: housing.

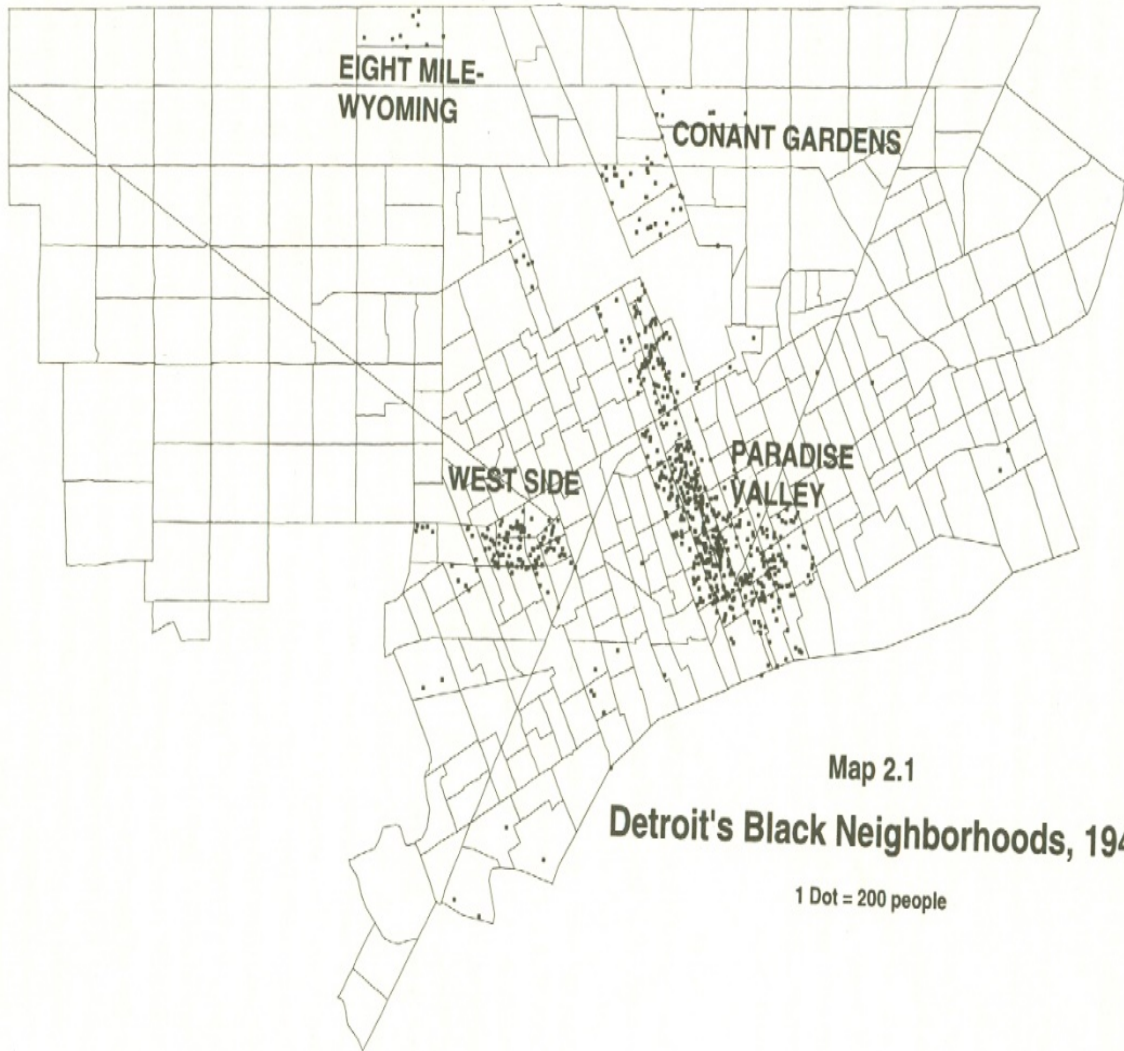
Detroit's housing crisis had its roots in the Great Migration—African Americans escaping the harsh reality of sharecropping, disenfranchisement, and racial injustice in the South.³⁵ Detroit's black population nearly doubled every decade from 1910 on, and the percentage of African-American residents rose from 1% in 1910 to nearly 80% in the 1980s.³⁶ The systemic barriers that interfered with black home ownership in Detroit were finances and racist gate keeping in the form of inflated rental prices and discriminatory lending practices. Black Detroiters were restricted to the lowest paying jobs, barring them from the city's finer housing districts. Landlords, seizing on the opportunity of the labor boom, raised rental prices. African-American newcomers were often forced to live two or three families to a home in order to save money. Nearly half of Detroit's black population lived in a multiple family home, trailers, or tourist cabins.³⁷ Subverting predatory tenant housing was virtually impossible to Detroit's black population in the 1940s. White real estate brokers ignored black clients, instead instituting restrictive housing covenants that barred black residency. In addition, bankers rarely, if at all, lent to black neighborhoods due to federal housing appraisal practices that deemed districts with higher concentrations of African Americans dangerous.³⁸ The culmination of these factors left black Detroiters strictly segregated in the city's worst housing.

³⁵ There is a wealth of scholarship on the Great Migration, but for a concise understanding, consult Joe William Trotter, Jr., "The Great Migration," *OAH Magazine of History* 17, no. 1 (2002): 31-33.

³⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population, 1910-1980* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office).

³⁷ Henry H. Burdick, "Negro Housing Task Is a Big Headache," *Detroit Free Press*, Jan. 25, 1948.

³⁸ Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 33-55; For a thorough interrogation into federal redlining practices, consult Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2017).



Map 2.1
Detroit's Black Neighborhoods, 1940

1 Dot = 200 people

Reiser/Sugrue

Image Courtesy of Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 35.

The most blatant example of the discriminatory practices in Detroit's housing sector took place in the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood. The neighborhood was a black enclave, surrounded by white districts. Eight Mile-Wyoming was also ripe for speculation. It was located on the path of commercial development and remained largely vacant of housing. Black Detroiters owned most of the land, but they had not yet begun to build.³⁹ New Deal liberalism—largely fueled by the FHA—created a new relationship between Americans and the federal government. Americans were now endowed with a sense of entitlement to governmental benefits, using governmental agencies as a new path to wealth.⁴⁰ Black residents of Eight Mile-Wyoming sought federal assistance in a similar manner as their white counterparts, but were unable to obtain federal or local subsidies for development. The ensuing battle over vacant land in Eight-Mile Wyoming was an assortment of racism, segregation, paternalism, compromise, and cognitive dissonance that did not meet the demands of anyone jockeying for leverage in the area.

The conflict in Eight Mile-Wyoming can be simplified to New Deal visions of homeownership vs. government sponsored public housing, with the backdrop of Detroit's black housing crisis providing key context. The landowners in Eight Mile-Wyoming, disheartened by repeated FHA and Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC) rejections, formed local community groups to approach the issue of local and federal assistance through collective action.⁴¹ The ends were homeownership and the means were New Deal-inspired subsidies. The community groups had an important ally in the Michigan director of the FHA, Raymond Foley,

³⁹ Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 64.

⁴⁰ When read in concert, both David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Random House, 2003) illuminate the guiding principle of the liberal consensus: governmental assistance and the lasting legacies of New Deal agencies and their effects in the postwar period, specifically as a path to white wealth, segregation, and suburbanization.

⁴¹ Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 65-70

who was a firm believer in New Deal Politics. On the subject, Foley said, “Inability of Negroes in the past to find financing for construction contributed greatly to the shanty-town appearance of such settlements as sprang up at Eight Mile and Wyoming.” Noting the fact that African Americans were overcharged and underfinanced and thus forced to build temporary houses and garages, he continued, “Since Federal-aided loans for home improvement have become available, and since federally insured loans for construction have been open to them, the district is building up rapidly.⁴² Foley’s optimism for New Deal homeownership in black communities was evident but not entirely realized.

At the same time, city-wide reform organizations had their eyes on Eight Mile-Wyoming for a different project altogether: public housing. The most influential group advocating for public housing—the Citizens Housing and Planning Council (CHPC)—used Eight Mile-Wyoming as a case study for housing conditions in Detroit. The report concluded that vacant land should be sold for white settlement in exchange for subsidized public housing because “these people cannot get jobs. Industry cannot care for the great number of workers it once enticed”⁴³ Ironically, many predominantly black reform groups sided with the CHPC. To them, the issue was one of quantity rather than quality. Local black chapters of the UAW promoted the public housing initiative—despite its undermining of black home ownership—to shore up the housing shortage. In short, a housing project could hold more people, thus making it the better option.⁴⁴

In the end, all parties involved outlined a compromise. The city built the Robert Brooks Homes—600-unit temporary war housing, and the FHA supported single-family, black homes.

⁴² James M. Haswell, “Builder of Negro Homes Product of War Times,” *Detroit Free Press*, Mar. 20, 1945.

⁴³ Marvel Daines, “Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum,” (Graduate Study, University of Michigan, 1940), 42.

⁴⁴ Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 71

The compromise cut the CHPC out of Eight Mile-Wyoming. The neighborhood became the mainstay for black homeownership and housing in Detroit. The irony of the result, however, was that Eight Mile-Wyoming was still strictly segregated. A literal concrete wall—constructed by white residents hoping to keep their housing values high—separated the neighborhood from adjacent white communities, a stark reminder of the racial conditions in the city despite this victory of black homeownership. Further, the compromise on public housing in a suburban setting laid the framework for public housing throughout the 1950s: overcrowded, urban projects.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Ibid., 80-88.



Concrete wall separating Eight Mile-Wyoming from surrounding white suburbs.
Image courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>

Housing segregation in Detroit, like many other urban centers, solidified the conditions for perpetual racial inequality. Blacks made less money, were over charged for tenancy, and were confined to the oldest houses in the poorest condition. Unable to obtain loans to repair their properties, black Detroiters were forced to look on as their neighborhoods deteriorated. In response, city officials condemned several areas to make room for municipal projects. Lenders and white homeowners used the decay of Detroit's black neighborhoods as evidence that African Americans were unaccountable and justification for discriminatory real estate and banking practices. The "racial rivalry" of Detroit's segregated neighborhoods, according to journalist Lester Velie, was "Detroit's time bomb."⁴⁶ These were the conditions awaiting James and Grace Lee when they relocated to Detroit.

Postwar federal oversight of Detroit's housing—both urban and suburban—fundamentally altered the city's political economy; in turn, white Detroiters' conception of race, place, and property shifted. Before the war, racism in urban centers was based largely on the racial myth that whites and blacks were ordained to be separated. After World War II, supported by a new alliance between the public and private sectors, white Detroiters defended their status through the framing of class.⁴⁷ Whites' postwar racial politics both changed and remained static in the interwar and postwar periods. While the modes shifted from outright declarations of racial hierarchy to justifying segregation using arguments about race, homeowners' rights, and neighborhood integrity, the ends remained unchanged—to create socioeconomic barriers that excluded African Americans from postwar prosperity.

⁴⁶ Lester Velie, "Housing: Detroit's Time Bomb," *Collier's Weekly*, November 23, 1946.

⁴⁷ David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy & White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 9.

Racialized employment practices contributed largely to the de facto segregation of Detroit in the immediate postwar years. Detroit's industrial sector was broken into two categories: primary sector and secondary sector based on their production. The heavily capitalized primary sector corporations integrated skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled labor in the same building. The majority of African-American labor resided in either secondary sector firms or unskilled positions in the primary sector—assembly and janitorial work, for example.⁴⁸ The culture on the manufacturing floor contributed to the racial labor divide, as well. Interpersonal connections between employees, their union representatives, and employers created a second layer of employment segregation. Simply put, if black workers could overcome the racist hiring policies of Detroit's manufacturing firms, they then had to overcome the barrier of internal promotion. Most employers were reluctant to promote black workers in fear of upsetting the status quo. Racial politics, culture, labor markets, and internal firm dynamics all interacted and contributed to the black employment experience. Together, these forces created a complex, multi-layered system that kept black labor largely in low-paying, unskilled jobs.⁴⁹

The automotive sector provided James his first arena for politicization and radicalization. Coinciding with the March on Washington Movement, black labor union members, including James, began to blur the lines between labor activism and racial activism, creating an intersection of labor, race, and equality. It was at this intersection that James formed the first iterations of his political ideology.⁵⁰ Membership in local UAW chapters gave James an opportunity to hone his ability to theorize, organize, and write. James began writing in the early 1940s for union papers, largely sticking to Marxist ideals and the means of production.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 90-93.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵⁰ Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 42.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

The 1950s were the turning point in Detroit's industrial economy and the merging of Detroit's political economy and white Detroiters' racial politics. Deindustrialization—closing, downsizing, and relocation—of Detroit's auto factories catalyzed white flight to suburban areas, supporting postwar racial politics that asserted socioeconomic status, not race, was the defining factor of the city's division.⁵² While many scholars of urban America have looked to the riot of 1967 as Detroit's watershed moment in racial politics, the systematic exclusion of African Americans from Detroit's housing market and booming wartime and postwar economy demonstrate that the urban crisis in Detroit has much deeper roots, nearly two decades before the riot.

The deindustrialization of Detroit was a drawn-out process, symptomatic of the United States's economic transformation that spanned from the New Deal to the mid-1970s. Progress in transportation, communication, and automation coupled with globalization and changing federal practice fueled domestic relocation of manufacturing—primarily to Sunbelt states—and decimated the landscape of urban centers. Some scholars associate federal targeting of the Sunbelt with the release of the “Report on the Economic Conditions of the South” in 1938.⁵³ Whatever the starting point, by the 1970s the Sunbelt had replaced the Midwest as America's “arsenal of democracy.” Like Detroit's boom in wartime manufacturing, the Sunbelt's federally funded rise to economic prosperity was directly linked to defense spending—namely, the Cold War era military industrial complex.⁵⁴ By 1976, the Sunbelt was enjoying a federal surplus of

⁵² Ibid.; Freund, *Colored Property*; This thesis explores Detroit's industrial economy through the lens of automobile manufacturing, James Boggs's primary source of income from 1939-1968. The automotive industry was emblematic of the problems that permeated Detroit's economy, but it is worth noting that this thesis will not explore every intricacy of Detroit's economy. The automotive industry's decline and subsequent urban crisis Detroit faced was integral to the revolutionary nature of James and Grace Lee. Thus, it must be explored to the extent that it shaped the duo's political philosophy.

⁵³ Bill Luker, Jr. “The Public Sector and Sunbelt Development,” *Challenge* 40, no. 4 (1997): 60.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 61.

\$51.6 billion, while “Frostbelt” states—the northeast and Great Lakes region—were experiencing a federal deficit of \$30.8 billion.⁵⁵ From the end of World War II to the late-1950s, General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler spent a combined \$6.6 billion on plant expansion. In addition to relocating to the South, major manufacturers fled the city for Detroit’s suburbs. In the same timeframe, the major three automotive manufacturers created twenty-five new plants in suburban communities, more than 15 miles from the city center.⁵⁶

While Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors were moving their factories to the suburbs, federal and local governments played an integral role in moving people, specifically white people, to the suburbs. The FHA insured construction of new suburban homes, and federal dollars were spent on suburban schools and highways connecting suburban neighborhoods to Detroit, using eminent domain to build them through black neighborhoods.⁵⁷ This federally incentivized migration further confirmed the racial politics of white suburbanites that the racial division was built upon socioeconomic status. In the 1950s, Detroit’s white population decreased by 350,000 while its black population rose by nearly 200,000.⁵⁸ Between 1940 and 1980, Detroit’s black population rose from 9.2% to 75.7%.⁵⁹ The immediate postwar period, catalyzed by capital mobility and federal spending, ignited the flame of white flight that burned—growing exponentially—for the next 40 years.⁶⁰

Automation of labor, used by corporations as an upper hand in union negotiations, was the most conspicuous obstacle for black industrial workers. Automation, lauded by executives as

⁵⁵ Diana Yiannakis Evans, “Sunbelt Versus Frostbelt: The Evolution of Regional Conflict Over Federal Aid to Cities in the House of Representatives,” *Social Science Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (1986): 108.

⁵⁶ Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 128; Locals referred to these new, suburban plants as “runaway shops.”

⁵⁷ Jay and Leavell, “Material Conditions,” 33.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

⁶⁰ From 1960-1970, Detroit’s black population grew from 28.9 %to 44.5%. From 1970-1980, it grew to 75.7%. These were the peak decades of white flight, but it started in the late 1940s and 1950s.

the ultimate expression of progress, simultaneously created unemployment and reduced the workers' leverage. Automation was largely implemented in labor intensive vocations, at times cutting the required manpower for specific functions in half. In the face of massive layoffs, Walter Reuther, the president of the UAW, signed a contract with Chrysler, General Motors, and Ford that forfeited workers' rights to strike and control of the plant floor in exchange for pensions, unemployment benefits, and annual wage increases. The Treaty of Detroit as it came to be known, signed in 1950, was the beginning of the gradual decline in unionized labor's efficacy. From 1953 to 1957, while workers' wages hardly paced with inflation, equipment spending in plants across the country rose 37%.⁶¹

James was highly critical of automation as a symptom of capitalism; he also used the idea as a social litmus test. To Boggs, the issue of automation had split industrial laborers into two camps: those with their fellow workers' best interest in mind and those selfishly seeking employment, writing, "this antagonism in the population between those who have to be supported and those who have to support them is one of the inevitable antagonisms of capitalism."⁶² Boggs contended that the line between those who would survive the automation boom and those who would not was drawn around race. Boggs predicted that the division between workers would create resentment toward union progress, sparking a counterrevolutionary force galvanized by the means of production and radicalized by racial tension.⁶³ James's denouncement of automation catalyzed his and Grace Lee's push for a classless future, asserting that capitalism's exploitation of work as the status quo was arbitrary. Workers, he argued, were the driving force behind a socialist revolution. Where he diverged

⁶¹ Jay and Leavell, "Material Conditions," 34-36; Sugure, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 130.

⁶² James Boggs, "The Challenge of Automation," in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 103.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

from Marxism was in the means of revolution. Recognizing that “Marx is dead and one cannot continue to quote him as an all-time solution for social problems,” Boggs advocated for an ideological revolution, a revolution in the way the working class viewed their relationship to wealth.⁶⁴

The 1950s were significant for James and Grace Lee for two reasons: first, it was the decade, largely fueled by the deindustrialization process of Detroit, that they began expanding their political ideologies. Secondly, they were introduced to one another through membership in the leftist organization Correspondence. Grace Lee was a founding member of Correspondence; James came to the group in search of radical hope. As the UAW proved ineffectual in garnering change for their black members, he branched out, looking for an organization that could address the intersection of race and labor in the United States. Having spent the last fifteen years as a student of leftist ideology, Grace Lee’s membership in Correspondence was the culmination of her education up to that point. Prior to Correspondence, Grace Lee was affiliated with Workers Party (WP), an offshoot of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Grace’s time in the WP greatly influenced her political leanings and her understanding of the relationship between the people and the state.⁶⁵

While in the WP, Grace Lee learned about the history of Marxism and political organizing from Martin Abern, a cofounder of both the SWP and the WP, two competing American Trotskyist organizations. Prior to Grace Lee’s joining, American Trotskyists were split over the definition of Stalinism and its role in Marxist progression. Briefly, the SWP viewed Stalinism as a post-capitalist, degenerated workers’ state. Thus, it was equal parts socialist victory and failure. It succeeded in nationalizing property, but Stalin’s bureaucracy had

⁶⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁶⁵ Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 88-100.

impeded progress toward socialism. They advocated for a political revolution to overthrow Stalin, but insisted that the USSR be protected from interference from outside imperialist states for fear that all progress toward socialism would be undone. A minority—roughly 40%—of SWP members held that Stalin’s regime was a bureaucratic collectivist state, placing the elite bureaucratic class at the top of the hierarchy. This faction eventually split from the SWP to form the WP, asserting that true socialists cannot support any part of Stalinism.⁶⁶

Grace Lee was initially drawn to the WP because of its activity in the black community. As WP leadership pressed forward with their debate about Stalinism, Grace Lee was exploring new theories alongside a new mentor: C.L.R. James, a Trinidadian historian and ideologue. C.L.R. James and his organization, the Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT), viewed Stalin’s regime as state capitalism, providing wealth and abundance for the state and defying the tenets of socialism. Further, JFT appealed to Grace Lee’s initial interest in political mobilization—black communities. JFT embodied what Grace Lee was looking for in the 1940s—Marxism applied to contemporary circumstances in the United States. She left the WP and moved to New York shortly after her initial meeting with C.L.R. James to join JFT.⁶⁷

Grace Lee’s final evolution prior to meeting James was the cofounding of Correspondence, an offshoot of JFT centered in Detroit. Simply, Correspondence was made up of a handful of JFT members but differentiated themselves by a complete disavowal of Trotskyism. The question of Stalinism and Russian Marxism had become tiresome and irrelevant to Correspondence members; they wanted to mold Marxism to fit the twentieth-century United States and incorporate marginalized groups, namely African Americans and women. Grace Lee’s political transitions—micro evolutions of existing organizations—

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

demonstrated a keen eye for nuance. Many of the political foundations of her various affiliations were quite similar. However, their respective primary focuses are what turned Grace Lee away from them. Grace Lee's focus was never how to implement Marxism in the USSR. Rather, she was interested in the ideology and how to apply competing ideals—vanguardism vs. populism and the role of state authority—to the United States. However uninterested Grace Lee was in the Russian question, her time in these various iterations of Marxist, Leninist, and Trotskyist circles informed her interpretation of revolution. The USSR was merely a simulation, a test run of what the revolution might look like. In the end, the influences of Abern and C.L.R. James informed her disillusionment with state power and would ultimately guide her views in the decades that followed.⁶⁸

As the 1950s gave way to the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement swept over the nation with rhetoric of freedom and equality. Liberal politicians and quasi-radical—at least regarding race relations—union leaders rallied around the message of Martin Luther King Jr. and praised Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. In fact, Johnson granted Detroit \$360 million in anti-poverty aid.⁶⁹ Detroit's black industrial labor force, however, felt the impact of federal funding only marginally, if at all. Chrysler, which had become Detroit's largest automobile employer in the wake of postwar deindustrialization and white flight, implemented an unwritten "90-day" rule, allowing plants to release workers at will before their contractual job security kicked in at 90 days.⁷⁰ Firing employees at the 89 day mark was a mutually beneficial practice for both plants and unions. The plants could generate an endless supply of insecure, cheap labor and the UAW received \$41 dollars in dues and fees for each 89-day worker.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Jay and Leavell, "Material Conditions," 37.

⁷⁰ Georakas and Surkan, *Detroit*, 28.

⁷¹ Ibid.

The exploitation of factory labor was exacerbated for black workers. The system of hiring and firing the workforce was only applicable to the lowest earning, least secure jobs. Black workers comprised the vast majority of insecure labor. The Dodge Main plant, according to sociological studies, is a useful representation of the racial breakdown of factory life: 99% of general foremen were white, 95% of all foremen were white, 100% of superintendents were white, and over 90% of all skilled tradesmen and apprentices were white.⁷² Skilled and secure jobs were apportioned to white workers, leaving nearly all of the black workforce fighting for insecure, low-paying, and dangerous jobs. Using the 90-day rule as its tradeoff, the UAW sold out black labor, leaving black employees in an endless cycle of being the last hired and the first fired. James's first column in *Correspondence* attacked Reuther and Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP and Reuther's liaison to the black community. Writing about White, Boggs claimed, "any time the pressure for Negro rights endangers his position, he capitulates...and his whole prestige is on the basis that he represents Negroes."⁷³

Detroit's racial kindling burst into flames the morning of Sunday, July 23, 1967. The starting point of Detroit's Great Rebellion—as it came to be known—was a raid on an afterhours black club. However, this incident was merely the breaking point. Detroit's racial tension had been festering since at least the 1940s and this particular raid of a black establishment was the final straw. The Great Rebellion, aside from its violence and destruction, served as a turning point in black radicalism in Detroit.⁷⁴ The city's growing housing crisis, postwar political economy, labor disputes, and growing political consciousness converged and exploded into a five-day rebellion that pitted Detroit's poor black communities against its police, a fitting

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ James Boggs, "Talent for Sale," in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 42.

⁷⁴ During the five-day uprising, 552 buildings were destroyed, 7,200 people were arrested, 43 people were killed, and injured 1,189.

representation of municipal authority. Reports in the immediate aftermath of the clash illustrate the willfully obtuse nature of Detroit's government and white middle class. On July 25, *The Detroit Free Press* printed an editorial titled "No Society Can Tolerate Contempt for Its Laws."⁷⁵ The staff at the *Free Press* expressed shock and contempt for the rebellion, asserting that "unlike Watts or Newark, Rochester, or Cleveland, Detroit has worked longer and harder...to see that it [rebellion] couldn't happen here."⁷⁶ The story went on to detail the "horror" of the "leaders of the Negro community, the ministers, the union leaders, the politicians," pitting "hoodlums" against "guardsmen" in an act of lawless anarchy divorced from the liberal struggle for civil rights.⁷⁷ The editorial staff's ignorance to the racial divisions in the city was echoed by Police Commissioner Ray Girardin who summarized the participants as "rebels with a vague cause."⁷⁸

The rebellion, though, was far more than an isolated uprising by "hoodlums." It represented a sea change in Detroit's radical politics. It brought Detroit's hidden racial politics to the surface and inspired a new wave of black radicalism in the city. The rebellion, contrary to the beliefs of the police commissioner and journalists, viewed the struggle through the lens of the people. According to Grace Lee, a rebellion can inspire a revolution only when working-class people "have assumed the role of subject in the precarious adventure of transforming and re-creating the world."⁷⁹ The Great Rebellion was the catalyst to black, bottom-up revolutionary rhetoric in late-1960s and 1970s Detroit.

James and Grace Lee Boggs were shaped by Detroit. The urban transformation guided their revolutionary path. Their radicalism was built in the context of Detroit and often as a direct

⁷⁵ Editorial Staff, "No Society Can Tolerate Contempt for Its Laws," *Detroit Free Press*, July 25, 1967.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Gene Roberts, "Police Chief Finds No Riot Conspiracy," *New York Times*, July 28, 1967.

⁷⁹ Boggs, *The Next American Revolution*, 95.

response to the urban crisis. They were revolutionists by nature, but the specification of their political activism was greatly shaped by the massive changes that occurred in Detroit in the postwar period.

Chapter 2

“Pages From a Negro Worker’s Notebook”: Black Radical Detroit

*The black struggle in the United States has the combined force and drive of a national revolution and a social revolution. – James Boggs*⁸⁰

James Boggs was born in Marion Junction, Alabama, in 1919, at a time when “white folks were gentlemen and ladies by day and Ku Klux Klanners by night.”⁸¹ The presence of the Klan, coupled with the undeniable weight of the Jim Crow South, facilitated Boggs’s development as a revolutionary. At the age of eighteen, Boggs traded his rural upbringing for a chance at economic prosperity in Detroit, working a string of industrial jobs before landing at Chrysler, where he remained until his retirement in 1968. His initial foray into resistance came in the form of membership in the Chrysler Local 7 chapter of the UAW, where he experienced firsthand that racial uplift and labor unrest had separate agendas. The 1940s provided a unique intersection of industrial unionism, civil rights activism, left-wing politics, and a growing black community in Detroit that would shape Boggs’s revolutionary path.⁸²

Boggs launched his career as a theoretician and writer for *Correspondence* in 1953, writing a weekly column for the group’s self-titled newspaper, *Correspondence*, and eventually serving as the editor.⁸³ Boggs’s time in *Correspondence* laid the foundation for his interjection into the Black Radical Tradition. His blend of Marxist ideology and African-American liberation placed him in a long line of black, radical activism.⁸⁴ His personal experiences as an

⁸⁰ James Boggs, *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*, in *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook*, 205.

⁸¹ Stephen M. Ward, “The Making of a Revolutionary,” in *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook*, 7.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Stephen M. Ward, “Introduction to Part I,” in *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook*.

⁸⁴ Cedric J. Robinson provides a thorough and well-documented argument for the history of Marxism and Communism in African-American activism in the last third of *Black Marxism*. Additionally, Robin D.G. Kelley’s *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* is an excellent monograph of the interaction between black radicalism and Communism.

auto worker placed him into a unique subsection of Midwestern black radicals, advocating for racial and working-class politics. Boggs's writings for *Correspondence* are similar in scope—the solution to racial equality and class equality are not synonymous. In a 1955 column, Boggs illustrated the disconnect between labor unions and racial uplift, writing, “All labor leaders, liberals, and radicals always say that the solution to the Negro question is with the class question.”⁸⁵ Boggs asserted the problem with this assumption lie in its inability to address race; to him, there was a division within working-class people that placed working-class African Americans below working-class whites. Applauding the work of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Boggs maintained that “the independent struggles of the Negroes goes far beyond the CIO.”⁸⁶ Boggs explicitly rejected the notion that class subsumed the plight of minorities—the prevailing notion that an orthodox Marxist, class-based revolution would in turn alleviate racial tensions. Boggs's weekly column portrayed the role *Correspondence* was trying to fill—a merger of labor unrest and civil rights.

Boggs's time as a columnist for *Correspondence* also illuminates the beginning of his critique of automation in industrial labor. To Boggs, the rapid automation of industrial factories was a significant catalyst to the corporate retreat from urban areas. Automation, according to Boggs, helped facilitate a shift in the power dynamics between employer and employee that labor movements had fought desperately to balance. In a 1958 critique, Boggs suggested that the failure of union leadership to oppose automation had created a situation in which “Dodge and Chrysler workers have been sent home twenty-three [times] before completing an eight-hour work day...Over a hundred men have been fired or given days off.”⁸⁷ Simply, automation was

⁸⁵ James Boggs, “The Stage That We Have Reached,” in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 50.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ James Boggs, “The Weakest Link in the Struggle,” in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 57.

not creating an environment conducive to a living wage. Boggs's critique of automated labor in place of manpower would shine through in the 1980s with his call for a humanistic government amongst widespread unemployment.⁸⁸

Grace Lee was the dominant ideological force behind early iterations of the couple's revolutionary rhetoric. While James's writing matured through publishing in *Correspondence*, Grace Lee had been a part of *Correspondence*'s predecessor, the Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT) and before that, the Workers Party in Chicago. Additionally, she received a PhD in Philosophy from Bryn Mawr College in 1940. Her academic life shaped her activism, introducing her to the Marxist theory that would guide her thought throughout the twentieth century. After the completion of her dissertation, Grace Lee moved to Chicago without clear direction. Her educational background had set her up for a life of study, but she saw little prospect in a Chinese-American woman getting a teaching job. Instead, she let intellectual curiosity guide her.⁸⁹

The early to mid-1940s provided the backdrop for Grace Lee's revolutionary career: extreme racial inequality and Trotskyism. Specifically, American Trotskyists adopted the notion of permanent revolution and opposition to Stalin's rule.⁹⁰ Grace Lee came to American Trotskyism through the WP and initially gravitated toward the WP's presence in black communities and antiwar position. After splitting with JFT, Grace and a handful of comrades formed their own Marxist coalition: *Correspondence*. Though the Workers Party and JFT were

⁸⁸ James Boggs, "Going Where We Have Never Been: Creating New Communities for Our Future," in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 324-330.

⁸⁹ Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 83.

⁹⁰ The American Trotskyist split is often referred to—amongst Marxist groups—as the "Russian Question." How should Marxists interpret the Soviet Union? Was it a post capitalist state that had not been predicted? Was it still progress due to the successful overthrow of a capitalist state? The Workers Party, shortly before Grace got involved with the group, split off from orthodox Trotskyism and proclaimed that Stalin's bureaucratic state was an oppressive regime that contradicted socialism.

crucial to Grace Lee's Marxist views and applications, specifically in black communities, she viewed their mission as jumbled, too tangled with the history of Marxism and its application abroad. Correspondence, on the other hand, set its sights on the United States. The group viewed postwar America as ripe for a populist, working-class uprising. Most importantly, it was Correspondence that brought Grace Lee to Detroit in 1953 where she would meet her future husband and revolutionary partner, James Boggs.⁹¹

From 1953 to 1964—James and Grace Lee's tenure with Correspondence—the organization and, subsequently, the newspaper struggled to find a distinct platform and voice due to lack of resources and ideological conflict within the organization. The early publications from *Correspondence* were marketed as a labor paper, with a recurring column titled "Worker's Journal."⁹² The paper allotted an additional section for each of the three social groups they viewed as their core audience—women, African Americans, and youth. The early years of *Correspondence* were marked by a dedication to labor as an overarching issue that blanketed various "sub issues." As James and Grace Lee assumed more powerful roles, however, the paper shifted toward a racial politics.⁹³ By 1962, *Correspondence* had jettisoned its central theme as a worker's paper and promoted black activist politics.

The Boggses' perspective on the convergence and divergence of race and class was largely influenced by their environment: urban, predominantly black, working-class Detroit. The connection of race and class was evident to the couple, though they asserted that race was the most salient factor in discrimination. James and Grace Lee understood class struggles through the lens of race—to redistribute wealth would do nothing for the cause of African-American

⁹¹ Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 85-133.

⁹² Stephen M. Ward, "Introduction to Part I," in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 38.

⁹³ *Ibid.*; Grace Lee became the editor of *Correspondence* in 1957.

equality. This understanding, coupled with a strict devotion to dialectic reasoning and the racial atmosphere of Detroit, pushed them away from Correspondence and toward black political power in the early 1960s. The Boggses held their interpretation of dialectic reasoning—the understanding that as new circumstances create new problems, solutions must adapt—above anything else. This is a slight shift from a technical, Marxist/Hegelian understanding of dialectics. The Boggses adapted the thesis and antithesis model of history to fit Grace Lee’s already present Trotskyist tendencies. In ends, the two interpretations—Marxist/Hegelian and the Boggses’—were essentially the same in that they understand history, the present, and the future as constantly evolving toward a more equitable, humanist society. However, the Boggses, guided by Grace Lee’s extensive study of Marxist thought and its ideological successors and James’s experience working for Chrysler, practiced very different means. They emphasized the role that the black working class would play in progressing society. To James and Grace Lee, an antiquated theory could not be universally applied to contemporary circumstances. In 1964, they officially split with Correspondence to focus their mobilization efforts on black political power, inserting themselves into the emerging Black Power movement.⁹⁴ The Boggses’ time in Correspondence was crucial to the evolution and development of their radical ideology, providing an essential foundation—that capitalism was the enemy of the working class—for their ideology that would eventually culminate in community organizing efforts in the 1980s.⁹⁵ Additionally, Grace Lee’s beginnings as a Trotskyist firmly established the duo’s dedication to perpetual, evolving revolution as they constantly sought to further their understanding of what revolution meant.

⁹⁴ Stephen M. Ward, “Introduction to Part I,” in *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook*, 41.

⁹⁵ Stephen M. Ward, “Introduction to Part IV,” in *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook*; James Boggs, “Community Building: An Idea Whose Time Has Come,” in *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook*, 331-340.

James's first book, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Workers Notebook*, provided him notoriety in the developing Black Power movement. *The American Revolution* embodied Boggs's shift from unionism and labor activism to socialism and militant racial activism, calling the NAACP and other "old Negro organizations" a joke.⁹⁶ His contributions to the Black Power movement—roughly spanning the years of 1966-75—represent his second intersection of the Black Radical Tradition.⁹⁷ Boggs's first articulation of what would come to be known as Black Power came in the form of a 1962 review of *The Negro Revolt* by Louis Lomax. In "Liberalism, Marxism, and Black Political Power," Boggs critiqued Lomax's integrationist view of African-American liberation, writing, "His mind simply has not stretched beyond the idea of whites ruling and giving Negroes a greater share in this rule. He doesn't visualize that it could be the other way around, that it is in fact time for Negro political power to manifest itself."⁹⁸ Four years prior to Stokely Carmichael's call for "Black Power" and the subsequent removal of white SNCC staffers, James Boggs expressed a call for black political representation and denounced the Marxist and liberal approach that incorporated African Americans into a white vision for society and failed to broach the topic of race and resulting power dynamics. "Liberalism, Marxism, and Black Political Power" was an intellectual restructuring of the social and political norm, providing an avenue in which the Black Power movement could thrive.

⁹⁶ James Boggs, *The American Revolution*, in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 138.

⁹⁷ Black Power is an encompassing term. The near decade of prominence for Black Power ideology saw countless organizations and ideologues wave its banner. For general purposes, I refer to Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar's definition of Black Power from *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 2004), 191: "Black Power was an organic response to the limitations of rigid black nationalism and the civil rights movement. It embraced the notion that black people...deserved access to resources, employment, housing, and equal protection under the law."

⁹⁸ James Boggs, "Liberalism, Marxism, and Black Political Power," in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 161.

Boggs's second nationally distributed publication, *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party (MBRP)* built on his previous works and more clearly articulated his vision for black revolutionary politics. Published in 1969, *MBRP* combined traditional Black Power rhetoric with Boggs's earlier devotion to working-class politics. In the second chapter, "Who Will Make the Revolution?", Boggs laid out the conditions for the black revolutionary force. Traditionally, Boggs argued, a revolution in an advanced capitalist country would come from the working class. Boggs explained the unique role African Americans occupied in the revolution, writing, "The United States, however, is unique because its industrialization has taken place by a specific historical process in which various ethnic groupings have been successively exploited and integrated into the system."⁹⁹ These ethnic groups, according to Boggs, replaced one another in the sociopolitical hierarchy. African Americans, however, remained at the bottom, kept perpetually at the first rung of the ladder. He continued his argument by referencing labor uprising in the 1930s and their gains made inside the industrial workplace. He contended that the labor movements of the 1930s failed to evolve into a revolutionary movement, settling for fringe benefits and becoming co-opted by the capitalist system in the process. To this end, working-class whites were able to obtain the standard of living enjoyed by middle-class whites and adopt similar political attitudes, coming to side with the status quo, thus successfully undermining the utility of labor unionism. *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party* argued that blacks, due largely to their socioeconomic and sociopolitical standings, were the only minority willing and able to depart from the establishment. Boggs ended the manifesto by insisting that "parties of parliamentary democracy, such as the Republican Party [and] the

⁹⁹ James Boggs, *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*, in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 204.

Democratic Party” are incapable of being transformed. In the tradition of the origins of Black Power, Boggs argued for the creation of a black revolutionary political party.¹⁰⁰

The 1970s were a pivotal decade for the Boggses. They were asking themselves and their audiences new questions and attempting to find new solutions—independent of established organizations—for the future. In this timeframe, Grace Lee was in the nascent stages of developing her theory of a cultural revolution. During the early and mid-1970s, Grace Lee’s public activism—speaking at conferences, writing for other organizations and journals, and engaging graduate students—was largely aimed at theoretical, “new” questions.¹⁰¹ In 1972, at a teach-in at Cleveland State University, she argued that African-American activism of the previous two decades had clearly illustrated that the “melting pot” allegory was a myth, claiming that “the melting pot never melted.”¹⁰² Moving forward, she argued, the new question was whether a “melting pot” was an acceptable solution, politicking on behalf of a future that celebrated cultural pluralism and promoted interaction between cultural groups and undermined systemic racism. She asked her audience, “what outlooks to the future of humanity, what principles of the value of human beings relative to material things, and of the relations between...various communities...should we organize a new society [around]?” She continued, “these questions now cry out for discussion, for exploration, for debate, for direction.”¹⁰³ As early as 1972, Grace Lee was charting the path that couple would take for the next two decades, exploring the connection between race, class, and humanity.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 228; For the origins of a strictly black political party, consult Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

¹⁰¹ Grace Lee continued to write books with James and organize around core Black Power tenets, but the 1970s were a transitional period for the couple, specifically Grace Lee, in that she was exploring new questions and solutions to equality.

¹⁰² Grace Lee Boggs, “The American Revolution and the Evolution of Mankind,” April 14, 1972 [Box 6, Folder 10], 3. James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers, 1930s-1993, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit, Michigan.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 4.

Two years later, while speaking at Yale, Grace Lee clearly articulated an ideology for her pressing questions for the future. Grace Lee was a humanist, advocating for her understanding of humanity—charity, community, and cohabitation. She insisted that “all of us have to face the fact that the period is over when each individual or ethnic group could do its own thing.”¹⁰⁴ Grace Lee argued that, much like the labor unions of the 1930s, African Americans and working-class people had been adopted by capitalism, shucking radical reform for fringe benefits. She lamented the complacency, pointing out that “statistics could be introduced” that illustrated the disproportionate—in relation to population—rate at which African Americans were elected or promoted.¹⁰⁵ Her proposal was a restructuring of society at an individual level. With the oil embargo crisis as her backdrop, she implored the audience to take inventory of their own relationship with materialism and human dignity and assess their relationship to capitalism. In the 1970s, Grace Lee found her calling as an educator. Her mission was simple: write, speak, and propagandize for the restructuring of society around human interest rather than market gains. She wanted to radicalize the nation one speech at a time.

In order to promote the spread of her educational platform, Grace Lee also endorsed what she called “education by example,” which was community-oriented education outside of the public school system.¹⁰⁶ She heaped a portion of the blame of the country’s failure in public schools on the inability of adults and community leaders to take authorship of their neighborhoods and implement community, familial learning tactics. Grace Lee was deeply imaginative about what the future could hold once the shackles of complacency were broken. To

¹⁰⁴ Grace Lee Boggs, “The Search for Human Identity in America,” January 19, 1974 [Box 6, Folder 11], 6. James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Grace Lee Boggs, “Education to Build a New America,” January 24, 1976 [Box 6, Folder 13], 2. James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers.

Grace Lee, the solution could not lie in the problem. If the country's idea of secondary education was not meeting acceptable standards, then neither lobbying nor elections could solve the problem. Grace Lee's allegiance to an optimistic future devoid of federal and municipal blunders was, in and of itself, her plan for reconstructing an equitable, humanist society. She relentlessly believed in the good nature of humanity and was convinced that once the people—mostly working-class people—released themselves from an arbitrary status quo, they were the key to the future. Education was Grace Lee's argument for revolution in the 1970s.¹⁰⁷

Though most of Grace Lee's writing from the decade focused on black liberation and socialist politics, she occasionally spoke about gender issues. In addressing women, Grace Lee incorporated a humanist approach for the future, insisting that, like the Black Freedom Struggle, the Women's Liberation Movement—as she understood it—also presented an avenue to reassess society with a focus on the connection between humanity and materialism. In doing so, Grace Lee aligned herself with the emerging discussion about the intersection of race and gender. Grace Lee was not nearly as explicit in her argumentation as the Combahee River Collective, but she addressed the subordination of women under capitalism, arguing that a humanist revolution would cure all ills. While Grace Lee's analysis of gender dynamics may have been scarce, her numerous leadership roles from the 1950s on demonstrate that, at very least, the organizational descendants of the WP that she associated herself with and managed were willing to promote women.

James continued his rhetorical analysis throughout the early 1970s—melding Black Power and working-class politics—with his weekly column for *Inner City Voice (ICV)*, a

¹⁰⁷ This was also the reasoning behind the Bogguses' opinions about bussing in Detroit. They maintained that, if communities took control of education, bussing would no longer be an issue. While their argument largely failed to address the issues of funding and segregation, it does provide evidence of their belief in community cohesion and uplift.

revolutionary newspaper directly linked to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.¹⁰⁸ *Inner City Voice* was the vehicle of black radicalism in Detroit during the Black Power era. The paper set its sights on capitalism, taking aim at hospitals, police, and housing, escalating the rhetoric from reform to a revolution of the social order. *ICV* advocated a specific style of Black Power: an uprising of African-American workers that would not only subvert corporations and the UAW but highlight a path to anti-capitalist revolution. Opponents of *ICV* used rhetoric, violence, and censorship to silence the message. Initially, the American Legion and other right-leaning groups accused the newspaper of inciting violence, claiming that their publication called for the revival of the Detroit riot of 1967.¹⁰⁹ The next measure taken against the *ICV* was direct violence. Breakthrough—a subgroup of the John Birch Society, known for its physical assault of peace marchers—attempted to disturb the newspaper’s public meetings. *ICV* members met violence with violence. An *Inner City Voice* article chronicling the event read: “Lobsinger [the spokesman for Breakthrough] found one of his followers laying on the lavatory floor in a pool of his own blood.”¹¹⁰ Finally, *ICV* faced federal resistance. The FBI regularly visited printing shops that produced the paper, pressuring owners to stop printing a publication that they claimed supported division. As in the case of most Black Power organizations, it was federal intrusion that facilitated the demise of *ICV*.¹¹¹

Inner City Voice, and subsequently, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers demonstrate the variance of Black Power ideology during the late 1960s and early 1970s,

¹⁰⁸ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 17.

¹⁰⁹ *ICV* was within the margins of the Bill of Rights and therefore not legally silenced.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13-22.

particularly in the Midwest where industrial labor was the predominant occupation.¹¹² Black Power is often conflated solely with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party, but the League demonstrated socialist, Black Power ideology in action, focusing on the automotive sector. Boggs's time in *ICV* was formative to his activism of the 1980s. *ICV* advocated for a fundamental transformation of society, which would be the central theme of Boggs's organizing during the Reagan era.¹¹³

James and Grace Lee's most evident role throughout the Black Power era was that of educators. Their living room, frequently referred to as the Boggs School, was a testing ground for many black activists, most notably, Muhammad Ahmad, then known as Max Stanford, the founder of the Philadelphia branch of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). Ahmad could often be found in the Boggs home, plotting the black rebellion. According to Ahmad, it was James and Grace Lee that pushed his revolutionary thinking, asking him questions about what society would look like after the overthrow, pressing him to imagine what the government would look like, what the role of African Americans would be, and what labor would look like.¹¹⁴ The Boggses were well connected in black radical circles in Detroit and the country. They had comrades in and correspondence with, but not limited to, the Group on Advanced Leadership (GOAL), DRUM, the Nation of Islam (NOI), the Institute of the Black World (IBW), and US. James and Grace Lee kept correspondence with Vincent Harding of the IBW and Maulana—formerly Ron—Karenga of US throughout the 1970s. They took in a wide swathe of

¹¹² The League of Revolutionary Black Workers was a coalition of "Revolutionary Union Movements" that started at the Dodge corporation (DRUM) and permeated the automotive industry, moving to Ford (FRUM), and Chrysler (ELRUM).

¹¹³ Manning Marable, Introduction to *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, ix.

¹¹⁴ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 59.

ideologies and interpretations and challenged the movement with questions of future governance and the role of the black population.

The Boggses' position as theoreticians and observers—removed from official affiliation with various Black Power factions—afforded them the unique ability to analyze the Black Power movement from the outside. This analysis often manifested itself in theories of development or improvement moving forward. In 1970, James published *Racism and the Class Struggle: Further Pages from a Black Worker's Notebook*. The final chapter, titled “The American Revolution: Putting Politics in Command,” offered a vision for the “black movement” in the coming decades. He asserted that black nationalism alone would not be the rallying force necessary to implement black political power. Up to that point, Boggs argued, activism had fallen short of a revolutionary force. He called for a new form of leadership that had clear goals and mobilization strategies to achieve those goals. To James, black nationalism—specifically the Black Panther Party—invested too much time and effort in its cadre building and lacked a clear, concise plan of action.¹¹⁵ Most pressingly, both James and Grace Lee disagreed with the role of socialism in the future. The Boggses lobbied for the intersection of race and class and they viewed black nationalism as an ideology with no future plans. Furthermore, the Boggses began to imagine a future free of economic emphasis, something many black nationalist organizations put at the forefront of their organizing. By the mid-1970s, the Boggses' disillusionment steered their activism away from black nationalism and Black Power.

The publication of *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century* in 1974 can be used as the bookend to the Boggses' adherence to the popular notions of the Black Power movement. Militarism, according to the duo, was not inherently flawed; however, its application

¹¹⁵ James Boggs, “The American Revolution: Putting Politics in Command,” in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*.

often led movements to a dead end. To this end, James and Grace Lee developed a unique ideology centered on the fluidity of revolutionary ideas and revolutionary practice. To them, a sustainable revolution was contingent on the organization's ability to float from theorizing to organizing and back again. Addressing the flaws of "young militants," James and Grace Lee claimed broadly that "they have no concept of the flow from revolutionary theory to revolutionary practice and then back again to enriched theory through the evaluation of systemic practice."¹¹⁶ The couple was struck with the idea of "disengagement," withdrawing from one's self or an organization in order to "make a reassessment or revaluation that may require a change" and "to build up one's own forces in order to pursue the same strategy."¹¹⁷ This was the backbone of their ideology moving forward; only intense evaluation and revaluation could revolutionize the nation.

The duo also used the publication of *Revolution and Evolution* to reiterate the importance of history, change over time, and futuristic optimism. They did this through a clear articulation of what revolution meant to them. To the Boggses, revolution was a constantly evolving process, marked and measured in its contradiction to the national culture. They set themselves apart from "rebellions" and "insurrections," instead opting to view revolution as an on-going process, never fully achieved.¹¹⁸ James and Grace Lee Boggs were true revolutionary theoreticians. Their focus for the majority of the 1970s would be on reflection and perfection—critical thinking and reapplication, with prospects about the future drawing much of their attention.

¹¹⁶ James and Grace Lee Boggs, *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 15.

¹¹⁷ Grace Lee Boggs, "Disengagement," [Box 6, Folder 12]. James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers.

¹¹⁸ James and Grace Lee lined out the various terminologies often conflated with their vision of revolution. Consult Boggs, *Revolution and Evolution*, 16.

Chapter 3

The Next American Revolution: James and Grace Lee Boggs in Post-Industrial Detroit

Detroit represents the end of the era of mass production...the end of the era when the unskilled and semi-skilled worker could make enough to support a family...the end of the era when workers could depend upon private capital to provide them with the means to make a living. – Grace Lee Boggs¹¹⁹

After FBI infiltration and the effective demise of the Black Power movement in the 1970s, the Boggs reinforced their vision of a two-sided revolution the mid-1970s, cofounding the National Organization for an American Revolution (NOAR) in 1978. The two sides to NOAR's strategy were to radically restructure the mechanisms of capitalism and to reform social values in communities. NOAR's intent was to coordinate the second American revolution and install a humanistic, decentralized government. James and Grace Lee wrote most of the organization's literature, drawing from their shared theory of dialectical humanism that placed politics rather than economics at the forefront of society. NOAR was a multiethnic organization that based its philosophy on previous work by James, but retracted statements concerning race. The couple's time with NOAR led them to de-emphasize racial barriers and rededicate themselves to the deconstruction of capitalism. The guidelines for the organization were published in 1982 in *Manifesto for an American Revolutionary Party*. The first chapter, "Naming the Enemy," explicitly states NOAR's adversary: "In its limitless quest for profits, capitalism has defiled our human relationships by turning them into money relationships: Health, Education, Sports, Art and Culture...have all become Big Business."¹²⁰ Additionally, NOAR identified a shift in revolutionary action from racial motivation to class motivation. In

¹¹⁹ Grace Lee Boggs, "Detroit: The End of One Era and the Beginning of Another," April 1, 1989 [Box 7, Folder 33], James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers.

¹²⁰ *Manifesto for an American Revolutionary Party* (Philadelphia: National Organization for an American Revolution, 1982), 1.

discussions of multinational capitalism, the organization's focus shifted to the creation of "giant corporations ...with the aim of controlling every aspect of production and distribution."¹²¹

NOAR attempted to transcend racial divisions and appeal to the working class that had been neglected in the economically pivotal 1970s. NOAR's mission was to reconstruct a popular front against capitalism and recreate the country in their own vision, using the devastating economy of the 1970s as their catalyst.¹²² The couple's time with NOAR was crucial to their later activism; their time with NOAR, though not racially motivated, helped them define the enemy of the 1980s: the counterrevolution. NOAR literature insisted that the "revolution and counterrevolution both involved social upheaval, but they are not equal opposites. The revolution creates the future; the counterrevolution seeks to maintain the present or restore the past."¹²³ In the Reagan era, James and Grace Lee Boggs's primary target was the counterrevolution: the rise of American conservatism.

Though NOAR was officially founded in 1978, its roots lead back to the early 1970s with two local organizations: The Committee for Political Development, later renamed the Advocators, in Detroit and the Pacesetters in Philadelphia. Both groups organized around the principles articulated by James Boggs in *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*. James and Grace Lee, along with James McFadden and William Davis in Philadelphia, combined the two organizations to take the mission national. Furthermore, the goals of the two organizations had transitioned away from what they saw as an "economist concept of Black Power" that focused too heavily on creating black wealth. The predecessors to NOAR viewed the struggle as

¹²¹ Ibid., 4.

¹²² See Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* for a more thorough interrogation of the economy of the 1970s and its effects on racial politics.

¹²³ Patricia Wendolyn Coleman-Burns, "A Rhetorical Analysis of The National Organization for an American Revolution," (Doctoral Dissertation, Wayne State University, 1987), 184.

inherently political, attempting to restructure societal values away from wealth and toward equality.¹²⁴

In 1978, the National Organization for an American Revolution was formed, holding a Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. The Preamble to the constitution highlights a constant focus of the Boggses: local self-reliance. The authors emphasized the importance of local self-government and revolutionary cadres with close ties to their communities as a foundational tool for a national organization. In addition, the constitution promoted self-reliance and a dependency on diversity. With these ideals in mind, the NOAR framers posed that the basic division of the organization would be local. While localities were essential, the constitution also recognized that a national coalition would be necessary to maintain unity, provide direction, prevent factions and sectionalism, and to organize each local unit together in the pursuit of new ideology. Lastly, the formation of a national party would allow NOAR to interpret national issues and, eventually, become a national, socialist political party.¹²⁵

While the NOAR constitution broadly described the organization's plan, the guiding publication for the group was the *Manifesto for an American Revolution*. The 56 page, self-published pamphlet explained what the future of governance through NOAR would look like. Leaning heavily on the *MBRP* and *Evolution and Revolution in the Twentieth Century*, the *Manifesto for an American Revolution* addressed decentralization, families, communities, education, energy, housing, health, work, and production. The first step in the national revolution was to decentralize national politics. As the constitution stated, NOAR members fully expected their national branch to dissolve, giving way to wholly communal governance. The

¹²⁴ "The Struggle Between Two Lines: The Detroit Split," [Box 5, Folder 2], James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers.

¹²⁵ *National Organization for an American Revolution Constitution*, September 24, 1978 [Box 7, Folder 1] James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers.

manifesto also highlights the importance of community values, insisting that “only people who are constantly being developed politically through the practice of principled politics at the grassroots level can create a national government...with justice, courage, and honesty.”¹²⁶ In their vision of a new self-governing America, NOAR placed a heavy emphasis on local education systems, as well. Community education, they wrote, would foster community pride. Community pride, in turn, would yield responsible communal living with the goal of preserving localities. In addition, the manifesto theorized about neighborhood responsibility and self-reliance councils, serving as the lone form of traditional governance. Community and family—biological and assumed—were at the center of NOAR’s platform.

NOAR’s national platform was an attempt to implement a legitimate socialist party platform. Though James and Grace Lee Boggs often invoked the “first American revolution” as a model, their platform was never of violent overthrow. NOAR attempted—through rhetoric, organizing, and propaganda—to implement a third party into the political system, a working-class party that rejected industrialization, automation, and capitalism and garnered its legislative strength at the local level. NOAR leaders focused on humanism, optimism, and self-reliance to usher in revolution. NOAR further insisted that their working-class politics were contingent on dialectic reasoning and perpetual revolution.

NOAR’s political model was built on the previous iterations of James and Grace Lee’s activist careers. They applied a dual approach to political revolution, arguing that alongside the institutional revolution, the nation would need to undergo a social revolution, addressing the conflicts of humanity that NOAR understood as inherent in capitalism. As in the early 1970s,

¹²⁶ *Manifesto for an American Revolutionary Party*, 14.

the Boggses approached revolution at an individual level, using education and propaganda to persuade the country.

From its inception to the early 1980s, NOAR experienced a period of successful leadership development through hosting conferences, hosting propaganda workshops, and publishing reading material for local branches. NOAR's primary tools for revolution were propaganda and publishing. They used the sales of their monthly newsletter, *The Awakening*, and books written by James and Grace Lee and published in-house to spread their message and fund their operation. At 20 cents per issue of the newsletter and a few dollars per book, NOAR was not a profitable organization. However, their methods were in sync with their political message that work was meaningful and the means of production should rest in the hands of the producers.

NOAR used its condemnation of capitalism to promote a vision of a humanistic community, a restoration of the moral and social fabric of the country. To the members of NOAR, the stagflation of the 1970s, coupled with the apparent cultural shift toward the New Right, had created circumstances that could not coexist with capitalism. The manifesto asserted that "social and Welfare programs are being ruthlessly dismantled; unions are being busted...the moral, environmental and civilized restraints on capitalist expansion which have been won only after decades of struggle are being abandoned."¹²⁷ NOAR's reconciliation with the dismantling of the liberal consensus—that the government was responsible for the welfare of its citizens—was revolutionary in its imagining of the future. Only a fundamental restructuring of society, deemphasizing capital gains and reasserting moral humanity, could protect the non-elites from "the same mutilation, the same destruction of our families and communities, the same loss of

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

national independence as over the years we have visited upon other peoples and other nations.”¹²⁸ Though the organization never ran a candidate on a ticket, their mobilization, education, and propaganda techniques allowed their mission to be disseminated across the country. NOAR’s overarching goal to implement a black socialist party never came to fruition, but it did reanimate the woes of racial capitalism, planting the seeds of dissent from Philadelphia to San Francisco.

This period of interracial activism was a crucial foundation for the Boggses’ call to humanistic community action in the 1980s. From 1970-78, the pair spent their summers in Maine with fellow activists Freddy and Lyman Paine, recording conversations about the future of the country.¹²⁹ These recorded conversations were transcribed and published in 1978 in *Conversations in Maine: Exploring Our Nation’s Future*. In the summer of 1974, the group theorized about what goes into forming a community and what makes a community radical. According to these four theorists, communities could not be created solely from geographic determiners. A community, in the eyes of the Boggses and Paines, rested in “actual interdependence, i.e., dependence upon each other for continued existence which includes material security, security of life and limb, psychological security.”¹³⁰ They furthered their notion of community by establishing qualifiers: sufficient agreement, structures that allow everyone to participate, and concrete residence.¹³¹ These qualifications rejected the notion of self-titled communities that had little to no physical interaction; a community must depend on one another and directly interact. This specific notion of community was radical to the Boggs

¹²⁸ *Manifesto for an American Revolutionary Party*, 5.

¹²⁹ (George) Lyman Paine was a former colleague of Boggs’s at Correspondence. Frances “Freddy” Paine was his wife and a fellow radical Marxist activist.

¹³⁰ James and Grace Lee Boggs and Freddy and Lyman Paine, *Conversations in Maine: Exploring Our Nation’s Future* (Boston: South End Press, 1978), 206.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 205-208.

and Paine families for its ability to accept and facilitate the growth of new ideas. In their idealized community, new ideas would not be forced out but accepted and cultivated. This understanding of community would fundamentally affect James and Grace Lee in the coming decade as they formulated their plan for a social revolution, placing community uplift at the center of their activism.

In late 1979, James Boggs delivered a speech at the University of Michigan in the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies titled “The Challenge Facing Afro-Americans in the 1980s.” This speech foreshadowed the future of the Black Radical Tradition after the eradication of the Black Power movement and the collapse of the industrial economy. Boggs applauded the successes of previous Black Freedom Struggle gains, announcing, “Today, as the result of courage and sacrifices of hundreds of thousands of Americans...we can go anyplace we want to. Blacks now hold all kinds of high positions, making \$25,000 and up a year.” However, Boggs was insistent that the fight was not over, following that statement with an indictment of the conditions of contemporary African-American communities: “Yet our neighborhoods are falling apart; in every block where blacks live, there are two and three boarded-up houses. Our schools are like jungles and security guards are everywhere—in our stores, in our hospitals, even in our churches.”¹³² Boggs asserted that this breakdown of communities that disproportionately affected African Americans was a direct result of post-industrial, multinational capitalism. To Boggs, capitalism expedited flight from urban areas, taking employment opportunity and hope with it, leaving despair in its wake. Boggs’s speech was equal parts African-American history lesson and call to action—deliberately attributing the economic success of the United States to African-American labor and ascribing the delegitimization of American institutions to “our [African

¹³² James Boggs, “The Challenge Facing Afro-Americans in the 1980s,” in *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook*, 306;

Americans'] struggles and our rebellions.” He implored the audience to turn its focus to “new contradictions that we have created.”¹³³

James and Grace Lee Boggs’s subsequent activity demonstrates a twofold approach during the 1980s: a return to black revolutionary rhetoric and an adoption of community-oriented activism focusing on the youth. To James, his failure to incorporate the marriage of racism and capitalism into the literature of NOAR was a glaring mistake. James and Grace Lee spent the majority of the 1980s promoting social black radicalism. In theory, they were writing about a quasi “community nationalism.” Community nationalism, according to Tommie Shelby, is the idea that because African Americans either already do or could represent majorities in certain neighborhoods, they could use that majority, if effectively organized, to institute changes in the way government approaches black interests.¹³⁴ Shelby’s analysis of community nationalism, however, asserts that its contemporary utility rests on voluntary residential segregation—communities of African Americans of all socioeconomic backgrounds living together.¹³⁵ Ostensibly, this theory assumes that community nationalism could create voting blocs. Additionally, these communities would have a robust black public sphere, allowing black issues to rise to the forefront of discussions. Lastly, affluent African Americans could invest in these communities and use their political clout to illuminate black issues. However, the Boggses lived in Detroit, a city that was involuntarily segregated throughout the postwar era. The history of Detroit does not perfectly represent Shelby’s vision of community nationalism that pulls African Americans from different backgrounds together; however, the Boggses’ community organizing and self-sufficient vision for black neighborhoods in Detroit demonstrated a

¹³³ Ibid., 310-11.

¹³⁴ The theoretical foundations of this project are indebted to Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

¹³⁵ Ibid., 102.

prioritization of black interests that was not reliant on an apathetic local government and a calculating, nefarious federal government.¹³⁶

In a speech delivered at Medgar Evers College in 1983 titled “It’s Time: A Call for Black Leadership,” James called for a new generation of black leaders to address the unique problems facing African Americans in the 1980s while simultaneously railing against the seeming indifference of the black middle class. He implored the students in attendance to repudiate the social norms of capitalism, asking them, “Is your main role in life just to get a job for yourself that will enable you to become a member of the black middle class? Or are you ready to give leadership in the struggle against both racism and capitalism?”¹³⁷ Boggs went further in the speech, illustrating the four main points of his post-revolutionary government: political self-reliance, a devotion to nature, an appreciation for labor as a means for human development, and decentralized production. This speech foreshadowed the political ideology he and his wife would champion in the 1980s—a decentralized, humanist country, spurred by the social revolution of the youth. Unlike any previous decade, the 1980s found James and Grace Lee Boggs serving as pioneers and ideological facilitators willing to turn the country over to the people.

James Boggs’s rhetorical questioning—aimed at young black students—clearly demonstrated his developing political thesis during the 1980s: black political leadership was uniquely positioned to advocate working-class politics. Black leadership, to James and Grace Lee, was not insular. Rather, black political power represented the culmination of political struggles between race and class. James and Grace Lee Boggs were proposing that black

¹³⁶ This is a blunt interpretation of federal policy in the “Long 1980s.” This conclusion was guided by court cases, newspapers, and other scholars. Refer to footnote 21.

¹³⁷ James Boggs, “It’s Time! A Call for Black Leadership. A New Vision for a New America,” December 3, 1983 [Box 4, Folder 10], James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers.

leadership could relate to and unite the myriad factions of the disenfranchised in the 1980s: Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and the white working class. James and Grace Lee's vision for black political power aligns with Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar's: a resolution to the limitations of the Civil Rights Movement and black nationalism. Rather than internalizing black leadership, the Boggses viewed black leadership as the path to socioeconomic equality for *all* disenfranchised groups.¹³⁸

One of James Boggs's most important contributions to the Black Radical Tradition in the 1980s and 90s came in the form of his essay "The Struggle for Black Revolutionary Leadership." This essay explicitly marked his and Grace Lee's return to black radicalism. Boggs explained that NOAR opened its recruitment to all races out of a concern for the forthcoming revolution—that, without a substantial number of people, the movement was doomed to fail. He defended NOAR's inclusion of other races, writing, "The decision to take the step of recruiting whites to our organization was a correct one. The revolution we projected...was to benefit not only blacks, but all the people of this country."¹³⁹ NOAR adopted its intellectual platform from Boggs's previous publication, *The Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party (MBRP)*. The *MBRP* stated three main priorities: "1) make clear that black liberation cannot be achieved except through black revolution. 2) establish and keep before the movement...revolutionary humanist objectives of the black revolution. 3) develop a revolutionary strategy and a revolutionary leadership to achieve these objectives."¹⁴⁰ NOAR often republished information written in the *MBRP*, removing any mention that it was intended to inspire an African-American revolution. Boggs neither recanted the mission of NOAR, nor did he condemn the multi-ethnic approach.

¹³⁸ Ogbar, *Black Power*, 191; see footnote 59.

¹³⁹ James Boggs, "The Struggle for Black Revolutionary Leadership," Box 4, Folder 11, James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers.

¹⁴⁰ James Boggs, *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*, in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 201-02.

Instead he asserted that the fatal mistake of NOAR was its intentional ignorance toward the matter of race amongst its members. Boggs attributed NOAR's inability to create a consistent, poignant platform to the organization's delegitimization of race, writing, "as a result of this unrealistic or idealistic approach, our politics began to lose its bite; it was neither black nor white but grey...blinding ourselves to the profound difference between the reality and history of black and white comrades, we also weakened our practice inside the organization."¹⁴¹

Boggs's retreat from the missteps of NOAR demonstrate a rededication to black radicalism but not a wholesale retreat from an integrated movement. James and Grace Lee now understood the impending coup as an American revolution catalyzed by African Americans due to their historic mistreatment at the bottom of the capitalist hierarchy. James theorized that the necessary remedy to the naivete of NOAR was "whole hearted commitment of all comrades to the philosophy of Dialectical Materialism/Dialectical Humanism and our ideology which projects the second American revolution...in which the pivotal role of African Americans is both ideological and strategic."¹⁴² Additionally, he insisted that the *MBRP* be reprinted and distributed to all members of NOAR and read alongside existing NOAR literature to demonstrate the theoretical foundations of the party and facilitate the discussion of race relations.¹⁴³ Boggs's reemphasis of the role of African Americans in the forthcoming revolution would serve his message of the 1980s—that African-American youth were the future of radicalism and that a restructuring of community values was necessary to fight the counterrevolutionary forces of the Ronald Reagan era.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

In addition to reasserting the importance of revolutionary black leadership, James and Grace Lee Boggs dedicated much of their work in the 1980s to community-oriented activism. They were inspired by their surroundings in Detroit, a city that had been devastated by deindustrialization, white flight, and the Reagan administration.¹⁴⁴ In 1986 at the St. Philip's Lutheran Church in Oakland, California, James Boggs highlighted the problems multinational capitalism had created in black communities. Boggs denounced the political system and its inability to control corporations that, by his estimation, had transcended the political realm and were now the driving force behind society. Boggs urged the congregation to abandon the notion that politicians were going to save them, arguing that the definition of citizenship was shifting. Voting for politicians that "make promises to the electorate based upon the concessions and bribes they make to corporations to provide jobs," according to James, was no longer a sufficient form of civic activism.¹⁴⁵ He went on to clarify that "city governments and state governments have no power."¹⁴⁶ The solution was a restructuring of social interaction—community pride, proper school funding, community education, and community service projects rose to the forefront of the couple's platform. This speech encapsulated the final stage of the couple's dialectical humanist approach to black radicalism—an independent, community-led restructuring of society to adapt to the reality of the 1980s.¹⁴⁷

The racial, social, economic, and political climate of the 1980s offer an explanation for James and Grace Lee's reassertion of an African-American led revolution and transition to community building; prior to Reagan's election, rustbelt cities like Detroit were more susceptible

¹⁴⁴ For a more comprehensive understanding of Postwar Detroit, consult Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*.

¹⁴⁵ James Boggs, "Going Where We Have Never Been: Creating New Communities for Our Future," in *Pages from a Black Radicals Notebook*, 327.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

to the deconstruction of African-American formation due to corporate, industrial retreat from urban areas with a large concentration of African Americans. Between 1966 and 1973, over two million jobs were moved out of northern industrial towns to the South, the suburbs, or out of the country.¹⁴⁸ During the 1980s, scholars attribute covert, systemic racism to the introduction of colorblind politics, allowing racist, neoliberal ideals to be veiled by sincerity and justified by policy. Studies of the era indicate that in the age of colorblindness de facto segregation increased, African-American incarceration rates increased while white rates decreased, African Americans suffered worse during economic recession, and African Americans' opportunity for federal relief decreased.¹⁴⁹ The "new nadir," according to Cha-Jua, had many antecedents but they all can be traced to the election of Ronald Reagan.¹⁵⁰

Scholars' criticism of civil rights efforts during the Reagan administration is a fair one, given that, as governor of California, Reagan opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, assailed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and proposed a repeal of the Rumford Act that barred homeowners from withdrawing on sale or rent due to racial or religious purposes.¹⁵¹ Additionally, the African-American community met the election of Ronald Reagan predominantly with uneasiness and fear.¹⁵² Reagan's hesitancy to extend the Voting Rights Act in 1982, saying that it "ought to cover all 50 states," paired with his voting history, left African Americans understandably concerned with the future of civil rights and federal aid.¹⁵³ James Boggs also felt the anxiety and expressed concern not only with Reagan's politics but their widespread acceptance and practice

¹⁴⁸ Keita Cha-Jua, "The New Nadir," 40.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid; Also see Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* for a thorough discussion of mass incarceration and its roots in systemic racism.

¹⁵⁰ Keita Cha-Jua, "The New Nadir."

¹⁵¹ Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 55-56.

¹⁵² Tate, *What's Going On?*

¹⁵³ Howell Raines, "Reagan Sends Mixed Signals on Civil Rights," *New York Times*, July 16, 1981.

by his constituents. Speaking at Santa Clara University, Boggs elaborated on his distaste for Reaganites at a demonstration in Detroit. Reagan was there to support William Lucas, the first African American to run for governor in Michigan. Boggs expressed skepticism about the president's supporters: "The Reagan-Lucas demonstration...was able bring 10,000 people, at least half of whom were high school students who had been bussed in from the suburbs. These kids hadn't the faintest idea what was going on."¹⁵⁴ Boggs's mention of the suburban high school students being bussed into urban Detroit was a direct reference to the long history of school segregation and class action lawsuits surrounding busing and state sanctioned desegregation in Detroit.¹⁵⁵

To James, Reagan's reign over the decade represented the country's nostalgic longing for the antiquated "American Dream," the thought that material excess represented happiness and fulfillment. Boggs asserted that this American Dream had allured the "counterrevolutionary right" and had "made it possible to virtually exterminate the American Indians, to enslave blacks and to colonize the Third World...justifie[d] turning millions of Americans into superfluous people by incorporating human skills and mental capacities into machines and robots."¹⁵⁶ Lastly, Boggs doubled down on his previously proposed solution to the counterrevolution, reasserting the four points of emphasis for the future of the country that he established at Medgar Evers College three years earlier: political decisions were the responsibility of the people, citizens must be curators of nature rather than dominating it, the fundamental understanding of work must be shifted to reflect human development instead of focusing on labor and capital

¹⁵⁴ James Boggs, "Reaganomics: End of the American Dream?," October 20, 1986 [Box 4, Folder 13], James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers.

¹⁵⁵ For an overview of school desegregation cases in Detroit, refer to Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*.

¹⁵⁶ Boggs, "Reaganomics."

exchange, and the need for a decentralized, humanist economy.¹⁵⁷ Boggs's devotion to humanist qualities was in stark contrast with the counterrevolution's commitment to capitalism and neoliberal, free market ideals.

The landslide reelection of Ronald Reagan in 1984 firmly planted the conservative consensus into the American ethos. In response, the Boggses' approach to mobilization shifted from national political radicalization to local, social radicalization. In the new nadir of African-American racial formation, James and Grace Lee Boggs attempted to wrestle away the control that the electoral political system had on African-American communities. They advocated for self-reliance and a wholesale rejection of the counterrevolution in all its forms. To the Boggses, the Reagan Administration embodied multinational capitalism, materialism, thinly veiled racial politics, and a centralized government that had aided in the economic decimation of black communities by endorsing and mandating deindustrialization and white flight. James Boggs expressed this sentiment in an open letter to fellow activists on September 20, 1984. In his "Letter to Friends and Comrades," Boggs predicted the reelection of Ronald Reagan and "four more years of a counterrevolutionary movement emboldened by success."¹⁵⁸ Boggs implored his fellow activists to join him in a new approach to social radicalism outside of the electoral realm, writing, "It should now be clear to all who are for human progress that all great advances must be based on social and political struggles outside the electoral arena."¹⁵⁹ Boggs relied on his own experience in the evolving Black Freedom Struggle. He stated that "having lived through the demise of the movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, we should be clear that once any movement allows itself to be incorporated into electoral politics, it cannot be resurrected."¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ James Boggs, "Letter to Friends and Comrades," in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 322.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

Boggs contended that the problem rested in complicity with the system, stating that “millions, pressed to the wall even to meet basic needs, are putting their hopes into catching the lottery.”¹⁶¹

This proclamation served as the pair’s departure point from the national direction of the Black Radical Tradition, the Black Freedom Struggle, and black solidarity, which were largely adopting liberal electoral politics as the means to equality. This letter was James Boggs’s declaration that the integration of electoral politics into the movement assumed its intentions futile; a co-opting of previous ideologies by the very system that deemed African Americans inferior would yield no progression. Instead, the couple advocated for collective self-reliance.

Grace Lee understood the revolution as cultural.¹⁶² Her distinction of a cultural revolution allowed her to differentiate the revolution she and James advocated for from previous revolutions by analyzing their respective primary contradiction: economics vs. values.¹⁶³ To Grace Lee, the second American revolution was a struggle for more than political or economic differences; it was a conflict between “two diametrically opposed ways of life or cultures.”¹⁶⁴ Grace Lee asserted that culture rested on three things that were inextricably woven together: social consciousness, conduct, and order. More simply, the culture of a specific community rested in the utility of its values, actions, and institutions, in that order. She and James were attempting to restructure the first step in the process, hoping that the next two would follow. By this logic, if the esteem of a community could be strengthened, the actions of community members could and should follow suit, finally creating governance based on the values and morality of the community. James and Grace Lee Boggs were advocating for an overhaul of the

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Grace Lee was careful to differentiate her interpretation of a cultural revolution from cultural nationalism popularized in the 1970s by Dr. Maulana Karenga and Us.

¹⁶³ Grace Lee Boggs, “Notes for a Discussion of Cultural Revolution,” [Box 7, Folder 33], James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 3.

political economy—removing state interference—in black communities that centered on education, community service, and equality. Grace Lee’s call for cultural revolution was a call for decentralized communism by skipping the socialist phase. The tone of local and national politics informed her that a working-class revolution would not come to fruition. Decentralized, communal living—divorced from partisan outcomes—was the endgame of the cultural revolution.

Rejecting electoral politics, the Boggses turned instead to community activism, speaking and writing on behalf of myriad community organizations in Detroit. Among these were Save Our Sons and Daughters (SOSAD) and Detroiters for Dignity.¹⁶⁵ SOSAD consisted of local parents who had lost children to the violence that swept Detroit during the decade and Detroiters for Dignity focused its activism on the city government, specifically its inability to provide acceptable conditions for poor and homeless citizens in Detroit.¹⁶⁶ Additionally, they spoke independently of these groups to further the notion that the revolution was now one of social means, altering the morals and society of the underserved African-American communities in Detroit. The community was the epicenter of the Boggses’ proposed social revolution; they tethered the future of African-American liberation to community uplift, starting in their hometown.

James and Grace Lee Boggs’s dual approach to social revolution in the 1980s was guided by two principles: their rededication to black radicalism and their disillusionment with electoral politics. Their community-oriented solutions were contingent on these ideas. By the late 1980s,

¹⁶⁵ Richard Feldman, “Long Lines Can be a Bitter Cold Price for Food,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 20, 1985; Stephen M. Ward, “Introduction to Part IV,” in *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook*.

¹⁶⁶ In addition, the Boggses published essays and wrote speeches for the Michigan Committee for Organizing the Unemployed, a movement meant to galvanize the social revolution by incorporating the massive number of unemployed community members that consisted largely of former industrial laborers.

Detroit counted nearly 80% of its population African-American, and urban decay left the city in social upheaval.¹⁶⁷ The Boggses' proposed black community uplift coincided with their denouncement of electoral politics because electoral politics had abandoned Detroit. To James and Grace Lee, the African-American communities of Detroit had no option but to restructure their social lives—placing importance on self-sufficiency—for survival. The solution was for the African-American communities of Detroit to band together and socially govern themselves, ignoring federal and local politics that had annihilated their city and left them with no discernable escape path.

In the second half of the 1980s, the couple transitioned from emphasizing theory to proposing concrete solutions in the African-American communities of Detroit; these steps would prove to be the final evolution of the team's activist life. In 1987, James delivered a speech titled "Community Building: An Idea Whose Time Has Come" at an African-American leadership conference in Detroit. The title of the speech was a callback to Boggs's 1969 speech, "Black Power: A Scientific Concept Whose Time Has Come." The respective subtitles indicate Boggs's strict adherence to dialectic reasoning. Written nearly two decades apart, they each advocate for a specific idea in a given time based on the social circumstances. In "Community Building," Boggs provided tangible examples of his ideal neighborhood that he had only vaguely theorized previously. Due to the high rate of unemployment and inability to rely on government assistance, Boggs proposed that neighborhoods develop community gardens, recycling projects, daycare networks, dispute resolution panels, greenhouses, and bakeries."¹⁶⁸ To Boggs, this was the final solution for the political and economic system that had failed him and his community

¹⁶⁷Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 207.

¹⁶⁸ James Boggs, "Community Building: An Idea Whose Time Has Come," in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 339.

for over five decades. His activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s championed self-reliance for African-American communities because the harsh reality was that no one else was going to help.

The Boggsses' dedication to a social revolution in local communities was heavily influenced by James's time as a contributor to *Inner City Voice* and his association with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Though the actions of James and Grace Lee in the 1980s and the League in the 1970s were different, they shared a singular mission: to uproot the existing societal structure and create an equitable landscape for African Americans. James and Grace Lee took the ideologies of previous Black Power organizations and applied them locally, attempting to reframe how African-American communities in Detroit interacted. They applied revolutionary rhetoric at the grassroots level, eliminating the political intermediary. Their activism demonstrated a shift in the revolutionary vehicle from electoral politics to social values. To the Boggsses, the future of the revolution rested in the proper moral education of the youth and, through them, the radical could become the normal.¹⁶⁹

James and Grace Lee Boggs's stance on the future of education, when compared to their economic and social stances, was strikingly conservative. For example, the couple spoke out against busing black students to predominantly white, suburban schools, arguing that busing was an integrationist method to address declining graduation rates in Detroit.¹⁷⁰ Their revolutionary answer, largely written and articulated by Grace Lee, was the creation of community schools. The community schools imagined by Grace Lee were in harmony with her vision of a cultural revolution. Schools, in addition to regular curriculum, would need to adopt a morally informed

¹⁶⁹ James and Grace Lee's strict dedication to dialectical thinking pushed their ideology to focus on the future. Through what Robin D.G. Kelley calls "the black radical imagination," the couple was constantly imagining what an equitable future could look like and attempted to create a black utopia in Detroit.

¹⁷⁰ James Boggs, "Position Paper on Busing," [Box 4, Folder 2], Jams and Grace Lee Boggs Papers.

curriculum. She asserted that multinational capitalism had created the culture of underachievement in Detroit public schools; to rely on the same system to fix the problem was fruitless. According to Grace Lee, the moral education of communities would begin in community schools, eventually generating the community-wide cultural change for which she had been advocating since the early 1970s.¹⁷¹

James and Grace Lee Boggs's most enduring expression of community building was the formation of Detroit Summer, a program for local youth to interact with college students, volunteer teachers, and activists. The participants created parks out of vacant lots, planted community gardens, and educated themselves about the past and future of revolutionary activism. The couple was inspired by the SNCC Freedom Summer and implemented their own local, youth-driven organization. Detroit Summer was later transformed into the James and Grace Lee Boggs School, a K-8 charter school in Detroit. Detroit Summer, perhaps more than any other organization, demonstrated the culmination of the Boggses' mobilization strategy. Understanding that neoliberalism was overpowering rhetoric and rallies, they created a coherent, step-by-step agenda and implemented it in their community. James Boggs's lasting impact on African-American revolution was a dialectic shift toward the future, a proposal for a new social order piloted by Detroit youth.¹⁷²

The utility of Detroit Summer—a group that garnered 60 participants at its peak—was not in its ability to agitate change or garner legislative action, but rather in its imagining of what activism and political participation could look like. Detroit Summer created a new vision for community activism, specifically focused on postindustrial Detroit. Detroit Summer was the

¹⁷¹ Grace Lee Boggs, "Educational Myth and Changing Social Reality," December 11, 1970 [Box 6, Folder 10]; "Educating the Child as a Whole," [Box 6, Folder 11]; "Education to Build a New America," January 24, 1976 [Box 6, Folder 13]; "Shaping Our Educational Future," Box 6, Folder 14, James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers.

¹⁷² James Boggs, "Why Detroit Summer?," in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook*, 369.

epitome of James and Grace Lee Boggs’s political ideology throughout the 1980s—grassroots activism that promoted communal governance and explicitly rejected electoral interference. In 2011, reflecting on the creation of Detroit Summer nearly two decades earlier, Grace Lee Boggs argued that the connections of people and ideas created through Detroit Summer had resulted in “thousands of family gardens and more than two hundred community gardens” that had created a significant urban agricultural movement in Detroit.¹⁷³ Through the James and Grace Lee Boggs School and community projects carried out by Detroit Summer volunteers, the Boggses were able to create and implement a sustainable, bottom-up revolutionary ideology in Detroit throughout the 1980s. James and Grace Lee Boggs rejected the prevailing path of African-American resistance in the 1980s—electoral reform—and created a new avenue for black radicalism outside of the partisan arena.

¹⁷³ Scott Kurashige and Grace Lee Boggs, “Planting Seeds of Hope: How Sustainable Activism Transformed Detroit,” *YES! Magazine* (Summer 2011).

Conclusion

The Black Radical Imagination

James and Grace Lee Boggs's retreat from electoral politics in the 1980s illustrates a stark divergence from traditional African-American liberation movements of the decade. The 1980s are often portrayed as the blooming of African-American electoral involvement. Manning Marable uses the decade to illustrate what he calls "the conservative reaction to the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, and the apparent capitulation of both political parties to a more conservative and repressive social order."¹⁷⁴ His discussion of African-American politics reflects a largely reactionary response to the Reagan administration's "lukewarm" reception to civil rights.¹⁷⁵ While the era has been associated with the rise in African-American political leaders in city and state governments, revolutionary activism has gone largely undocumented. James and Grace Lee Boggs's rhetoric for a revolution of the social and political norms outside of the electoral arena charted a new path for the Black Radical Tradition. As the Democratic Party became the primary vehicle for black activism, James and Grace Lee Boggs maintained a spirit of challenging the status quo and imagining a new future for black communities.

From the inception of NOAR to the death of James Boggs in 1993, the couple's goal did not waver; they were set on instituting self-sufficient, communal governance. The mid-1970s and early 1980s demonstrate the optimism of James and Grace Lee. Retrospectively, their struggle to create a revolutionary political party in the midst of the nation's swing to conservatism can most accurately be described as idealistic. After Reagan's historic electoral victory in 1984, the couple's tone shifted drastically from electoral optimism to electoral dismissal. Nineteen eighty-four was the year that created Detroit Summer. Devastated by the

¹⁷⁴ Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 197.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

intensified demonstration of neoliberal values in the country, James and Grace Lee turned their back to the establishment. That election demonstrated American values, and the couple realized their national campaign was at its end. Rather than give up, they doubled down on their efforts to create self-reliant communities and implemented the very same values listed in the *Manifesto for an American Revolution*. James and Grace Lee Boggs subverted the establishment and carried out the mission statement of NOAR, if only in their own city. Simultaneously, James and Grace Lee demonstrated the varieties of political participation. Without casting a vote, they created a revolutionary ideology in Detroit that reverberates through the city today.

The couple's revolutionary career, viewed in its entirety, also illustrates their long, evolving fight against capitalism. James and Grace Lee extend Cedric J. Robinson's interpretation of black Marxism and its role in the founding of the Black Radical Tradition. The couple's devotion to new critiques of Marxism, centered around various intersections—namely race, gender, and age—extend the notion that “blacks [are] the negation to capitalism.”¹⁷⁶ Black social movements of the postwar period are largely founded in idea that Marxism was inherently insular, critiquing Eurocentric theories of capitalism. James and Grace Lee, however, put capitalism into a Western perspective, critiquing racial capitalism.

Furthermore, the couple's constantly maturing understanding of socialism opens a new path of study for black solidarity following the Black Power movement. As early as the mid-1950s, James and Grace Lee denounced the role of a vanguard party in socialist politics. Though NOAR was a national organization, doing the work of a vanguard party, the couple never deviated from their stance that the means of production belonged to the people. Grace Lee's background in the Marxist circles of Chicago, spending years closely studying theory and

¹⁷⁶ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 299.

participating in insular debates surrounding the Russian question, laid the groundwork for the couple's politics. NOAR was an attempt at a socialist political party, grounded in the revolutionary role of African Americans, but their intention was uproot the system. James and Grace Lee's relationship with C.L.R. James was crucial to this understanding. Grace Lee's break from the WP based on interpretations of Stalinism ensured that her political action would not allow any establishment to undermine the organization's goal: humanist, de-centralized governance. Rather than a vanguard party, NOAR members viewed themselves as true stewards of the people, particularly working-class African Americans.

After the reelection of Reagan in 1984, the couple shifted their means to accomplish the same ends. NOAR was an electoral failure, but the ideology was salvaged. Taking note of the temperament of the country, James and Grace Lee moved away from the electoral arena, but continued their vision of a humanistic government that placed the means of production into the hands of its people. The triumph of the Boggses' activism was in its rhetorical construction. For nearly fifty years, the couple evolved their critique of American capitalism and provided a platform for the people. The timing of the couple's pivot away from electoral politics seems obvious—at the marriage of American politics and capitalism. James and Grace Lee Boggs provided black socialist rhetoric specific to the early stages of neoliberalism. Their contribution to black activism was in their role as ideologues, illuminating paths of dissent.

James and Grace Lee's legacy rests in their unrelenting hope for the future. Throughout their careers, they remained dedicated educating the youth and challenging preconceived notions of revolution and rebellion. However, the measure of their impact on movement leaders like Muhammad Ahmad, Maulana Karenga, or Vincent Harding remains largely unexamined in the literature. The Boggses are often relegated to footnotes and quick references as comrades even

though their theories were often on the cutting edge of progress. Further, the Boggses' adherence to urban issues and Grace Lee's influence in the city of Detroit exposes the lack of literature addressing women's role in the development of urban spaces. Lastly, "Beyond Nationalism" sheds light on black radicalism in the middle of the country that has been understudied. Midwestern urban centers like Detroit, Cleveland, and St. Louis offer a unique perspective on the struggles of black radicalism and an interesting path for the historiography moving forward..

The revolutionary activity of the Boggses is a personified representation of the Black Radical Tradition in twentieth century America. Their commitment to educating themselves and adapting to new situations allowed them to stay relevant in the black radical community for over fifty years. Additionally, the Boggses relied heavily on their past ideological conclusions to guide their activism in the 1980s. Marxism, the destruction of capitalism, humanism, community development, and black empowerment all worked together to inform the duo in the 1980s. The evolution of James and Grace Lee's thought provides a representation of the Black Radical Tradition as its mechanisms evolved, often leaving once revered ideologies and leaders in the past. Their ability to continue organizing throughout the 1980s is a testament not only to their personal resolve but to the adaptability of black radicalism. In a decade dominated by discussion of conservatism and its debilitating effects on the African-American community, James and Grace Lee Boggs provide an example of resistance to the status quo, an unrelenting quest for a more equitable society. Through James and Grace Lee Boggs, the Black Radical Tradition carried on past the decade of Reagan and provided an alternative outlet for African-American agency in the new nadir of African-American racial formation.

The Boggses' vision for the future was an extension of what Robin D. G. Kelley calls the "black radical imagination."¹⁷⁷ The black radical imagination, from Martin Delany to George Clinton, from Exodus and Black Zionism to Black Nationalism, envisioned a new beginning for African Americans. Rather than "escaping" to a new land, as much of the previous literature suggests, the central tenet of the black radical imagination is a restructuring of the country, providing black spaces. The issue with leaving the modern "Egyptland" was that so many African Americans—enslaved and free—worked to create the United States. The progression of the black radical imagination subverted escapism and matured into imagining a future in the United States for African Americans. James and Grace Lee's relentless quest and endless optimism about the future of the country built on the various iterations of black self-determination that came before it. Though they may have disagreed about implementation, James and Grace Lee carried the tradition of black radical hope into the 1980s. Detroit was their Egyptland.

¹⁷⁷ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.

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