

INTRODUCTION

The Making of a Revolutionist

Asked during a 1975 interview how he identified himself, James Boggs replied, “I describe myself as a revolutionist.” This was for Boggs a characteristically bold pronouncement, but it was not the posturing or empty rhetoric of a self-aggrandizing militant. In claiming to be a “revolutionist” Boggs did not mean to simplistically situate himself alongside Mao Tse-Tung, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Amilcar Cabral, Ho Chi Minh, or the other revolutionary icons of the day. Nor was he suggesting that he possessed insights or abilities unique to himself—“everybody,” he told the interviewer, “has the potential to be a revolutionist.” Rather, Boggs’s self-ascription reflected his vision of an activist and theoretician who self-consciously assumed responsibility for grappling with fundamental social and political challenges of the day. He had, by the mid-1970s, derived this self-concept from more than three decades of political activity, and by calling himself a *revolutionist*—as opposed to a *revolutionary*—he was making a clear distinction, one that his activist experience had taught him was important. “A lot of people are revolutionary,” he explained, “that is, they have radical views they think ought to be interjected into society and they believe that society should be motivated by these views.” However, a revolutionist not only is “revolutionary” but also accepts the responsibility of leadership. This, he said, involves projecting a philosophy of change, developing a method or form of struggle based on a new ideology, and organizing to change society along the lines of this new ideology.¹

Boggs’s self-definition as a revolutionist is a useful starting point for an assessment of his historical significance because it highlights two important dimensions of his intellectual and political work. First, his readiness to claim the label revolutionist is an example of his intellectual confidence and self-assuredness, characteristics that led him to take bold political positions and make grand theoretical projections. Speaking to a university class in 1991, he shocked his youthful audience by asserting: “I don’t believe nobody in the country knows more about running this country than me.” The students immediately broke out in laughter, causing Boggs to pause for a moment before he went on to explain: “I’m not being egotistical, I’m saying you better think that way.” He had an unwavering belief in his capacity to not only analyze but also help transform society, and he encouraged the same in others, particularly young people. “Everyone is capable of going beyond where they are,” he told the class, “and I would hope that everybody in this room thinks that, OK? That’s going to be one of the biggest challenges, to believe that you can do what has not been done yet.”²

Second, Boggs’s identification as a revolutionist reflects the centrality of revolutionary change in his thinking and political practice. As we will see, a consistent objective in his activism and writing—perhaps the driving theme of his work—was his attempt to develop

a concept of revolutionary change appropriate for the late twentieth-century United States. With his wife, workmate, and comrade, Grace Lee Boggs, he came to see revolution as reaching a new stage in the evolutionary advance of humanity. They arrived at this conception through their participation in the labor movement, the left and the post–World War II African American freedom movement, decades of activism and theoretical work in which the Boggses steadily refined their thinking about revolutionary change. Ultimately, they understood revolution as more than a struggle to take power, to claim rights, or to improve material conditions; it was a struggle toward the conscious creation of a new expanded human identity. “A revolution is not just for the purpose of correcting past injustices,” they wrote in their 1974 book, *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*. “A revolution involves a projection of man/woman into the future. It begins with projecting the notion of a more human human being, i.e., a human being who is more advanced in the specific qualities which only human beings have—creativity, consciousness and self-consciousness, a sense of political and social responsibility.”³

The writings in this volume chart James Boggs’s development as a thinker and activist who continually pushed toward an ever greater understanding of revolutionary possibilities and who particularly concerned himself with the purpose and means of an American revolution. These selections also necessarily document the remarkable intellectual and political partnership he shared with Grace Lee Boggs. As they worked and struggled together over the course of forty years, they generated a rich body of ideas, writings, and organizations. To contextualize this body of work, we turn now to a brief snapshot of James Boggs’s political style. This is followed by a review of his early experiences and influences. The remainder of the introduction lays out the major political currents within which he participated and illuminates the contours and central concerns of his thinking.

The Man Who Would Not Be King

While his intellectual and political work was fixed on the revolutionary transformation of society in the broadest sense, the foundation of James Boggs’s activism was essentially local. That is to say, he was rooted in the experiences, problems, and struggles of the specific communities to which he belonged, and his activism grew from those realities. From the 1940s to his death in 1993, Boggs cofounded or helped build dozens of organizations, participated in countless marches, picket lines, and meetings, wrote numerous essays, leaflets, and manifestos, and touched many struggles large and small. He shared platforms with Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, though his political meetings typically took place in living rooms, in basements, or around kitchen tables. During the 1950s and 1960s he built organizations with well-known figures such as C. L. R. James and Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr., but he derived equal if not more satisfaction from his work with lesser-known activists and the groups he founded with them, such as the National Organization for an American Revolution (NOAR) in the 1970s and 1980s and Detroit Summer, the youth program founded the year before his death. He carried on political dialogues with international figures, including Kwame Nkrumah and Bertrand Russell, but these were secondary to the discussions and

debates he carried on with neighbors, fellow Detroit activists, and grassroots organizers in numerous community settings. His books reached a wide audience among leftists and black activists and were translated into several languages, but this was not the whole of his intellectual production. Indeed, books represented only one dimension of his intellectual output: one might just as likely encounter his ideas through his self-published pamphlets, his contributions to community newsletters or letters to the editor, his articles in local black nationalist newspapers or obscure leftist periodicals, or the many speeches he gave to university students and other audiences. Even when engaged in national movements, Boggs's activism was rooted in local experience and generally operated through grassroots struggles, community-based relationships, and activist networks that he continually built over decades.

Another important dimension to Boggs's political practice was his generous and compassionate way of engaging people. "Jimmy," as many people called him, was a decidedly political person, but his political passions were frequently and perhaps most clearly expressed through social interactions and interpersonal relationships. Detroit poet Willie Williams captured this in his poem "The Man Who Would Not Be King (for James Boggs)," a tribute to Boggs written for his memorial service. Williams described Boggs in the following way:

The right question asker
in a closed-mouthed society
asking them even of himself
Activating activists
across state lines
across gender lines
across generational lines
even beyond the grave
A hate hater
lending love to the struggle
by example.⁴

Many of Boggs's political collaborators have similarly commented on the centrality of love to his political work. Indeed, such commentary can provide specific insights into the character of Boggs's political activism, so it will be instructive to review the remarks of various people—activists representing distinct stages and sites of struggle over forty years—reflecting on Boggs's life and legacy. These statements testify to Boggs's down-home manner, the power of his plainspoken yet profound ideas, the wide array of people and movements he touched, and the imprint left by his many years of activism.

Consider the powerful reminiscences from two of Boggs's former comrades from the 1950s. Selma James (the third wife of C. L. R. James) praised Boggs as "that rare being, a civilizer in politics." Thinking back to when they first met in 1952, she recalled that "Jimmy's wealth of information about how society actually functioned, his warm and sweet tempera-

ment and his enormous social gifts were all already prominent then, and these clearly never left him. He was in training to be the community teacher others knew later.”⁵ Filomena D’Addario, whose association with Boggs extended over decades, praised him as “a rare human being” and spoke in particular to his humanizing leadership style and the ways in which personal relationships and a communal sensibility consistently undergirded his intellectual and political work.

[H]e was a leader in thought and action. But I believe his distinction as a leader was reflected in his deep concern and feelings for the human condition. His writings speak to us about the human condition in general. But anyone who met Jimmy and was moved by him can speak of how he touched their lives in particular. We are accustomed to hearing that the foremost quality for leadership is charisma. But charisma is lackluster when compared to Jimmy’s genuine concern for everyone he met and with whom he unhesitatingly compared and shared ideas.⁶

The historian, activist, and theologian Vincent Harding, whom Boggs met in the 1960s, also noted Boggs’s balancing of political questions and human relationships. He appreciated that Boggs’s “powerful politics never overcame [his] powerful humanity” because he “always found time to be the loving compassionate uncle, brother and constant friend to us all.” In the process, he “constantly reminded us that one of the central purposes of all our political struggles was to create space, time, and environment for that kind of profound and humane caring.”⁷

These qualities were especially evident in Boggs’s relationships with and mentorship of younger activists. One of these was Bill Strickland, an activist and radical intellectual who was active in the civil rights and Black Power movements during the 1960s and 1970s and who spent time with the Boggses throughout the period. “Few memories are as lasting, or as fond, or as important to me intellectually,” Strickland wrote, “as are my memories of those talks on the phone or talks in Jimmy and Grace’s living room; grappling with the latest developments in ‘The Struggle.’ These discussions enlarged my capacity to know and think and act less blindly. They also gave me a lesson in how a revolutionary intellectual thinks with clarity, reflects with humor, and speaks out in courage.” Referring to the Boggses east-side Detroit home, Strickland added that “[t]he Boggses University on Field Street was a great place to learn and be warmed in the fire of a politically exciting intellectual hospitality whose like I have not encountered since.”⁸

Activist and poet Gloria House (Aneb Kgositsile), who was a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) when she met Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs “in their warm expansive house” in 1966 or 1967, gives further evidence of Boggs’s role as movement elder and mentor.

What was it about Jimmy that made it possible for him to give such inspiration to fellow-fighters? It was his deeply-rooted belief in himself and the kind of life he had chosen that enabled Jimmy to support others who made revolutionary choices. Fully centered in the integrity of his own cultural heritage, his political direction, his personality and character, Jimmy was free to be intensely involved with social problems, emerging ideas and proposed actions. He seemed to be striving always to understand, respond to, be a part of social change that moved us closer to fulfilling our humanity.

As a revolutionary Jimmy showed us that one's life can be an integration of physical labor, grassroots activism and intellectual production—a way of living that challenges the traditional elitism of the American left, thrives on the love and support of family, friends and comrades, and points the way to the community building of the future.⁹

It was this combination of attributes that drew many activists to Boggs and that allowed him to lead by example, to teach and instruct and challenge people to grow and continually push themselves to new frames of thought and new levels of political commitment. This was especially the case during the 1970s and 1980s, when the end of the Black Power movement and a general rightward shift in the nation's political culture seemed to stifle the exploration of radical ideas and foreclose the possibility of progressive social change. With his nearly four decades of movement experience and his continuing commitment to revolutionary change, Boggs could offer counsel and perspective to the younger activists he encountered and worked with, activists who had come of age in the 1960s and wanted, either implicitly or explicitly, to extend the struggles of the black movement and the new left. Boggs helped them develop a practice of critically examining and learning from previous struggles to fortify their analysis of contemporary conditions for the purpose of projecting a new vision of change. It was in this context and for this purpose that Boggs and others created NOAR, through which Boggs influenced and nurtured many activists.

Kenneth Snodgrass, a Detroit activist who began working with Boggs as a teenager in the late 1960s, was one of them. Over the course of two-and-a-half decades they "developed a close relationship—one that, at varying times, was father-son and mentor-mentee," through which Snodgrass came to value the impactful roles Boggs played for him and others, "from giving advice to providing leadership to developing ideas."¹⁰ Another NOAR member, Rich Feldman, was a 1960s student activist turned Detroit auto worker and radical community organizer who met Boggs in the early 1970s. He similarly cherished his experiences with Boggs, who grew to be a friend, mentor, and teacher to Feldman. Among the lessons he took from Boggs, Feldman recalled that whenever Boggs spoke, "at the university or at a high school, a church or a union hall, in a living room or on TV or radio, [he] respected each individual and squeezed out a lesson to teach, inspire, and empower." Feldman also learned from Boggs "to demand the highest human standards of all people" and to build political analyses and programs that were "always looking forward."¹¹

Sharon ("Shea") Howell, who also met Boggs as a young radical in the early 1970s, is another NOAR member who counts Boggs as a passionate and powerful teacher as well as a dear friend. She became one of the Boggses' closest comrades ("we were inseparable," Grace recalled),¹² and the time they spent together, both in political work and socially, impacted her in multiple ways. Here she highlights the role of love in Boggs's political vision and practice.

Jimmy taught me that revolutions are made out of love for people and for place. Love isn't just something you feel. It's something you do every day when you go out and pick up the papers and bottles scattered the night before on the corner, when you stop and talk to a neighbor, when you argue passionately for what you believe with whomever will listen, when you call a friend to see how they're

doing, when you write a letter to the newspaper, when you give a speech and give 'em hell, when you never stop believing that we can all be more than we are. And he taught me that love isn't about what we did yesterday; it's about what we do today and tomorrow and tomorrow.¹³

By the mid-1980s another generation of activists gained mentorship, inspiration, and political wisdom from James Boggs. Errol Henderson, who had been a student activist at Wayne State University and later a community activist, worked with Boggs in Save Our Sons and Daughters (SOSAD), a grassroots organization combating youth violence in Detroit during the 1980s and 1990s. Henderson remembered Boggs this way:

Mr. Boggs remained relevant to each subsequent generation he came into contact with. He would consistently challenge you on your own terms and then transcend your terms. He understood and practiced a philosophy that even the most militant and adversarial conflicts must be organized around principles rooted in love, mutual respect, and freedom from all relationships of domination. He never rested on the laurels of struggles past. He would never accept, especially in his later years, those who spoke of struggling in their time. He felt any time and all time was our time, and he seized it, shaped it, and helped to mold so many of us into conscious agents of human liberation.¹⁴

It is appropriate to turn finally to Grace Lee Boggs for insight into the ways that relationships grounded James Boggs's political activism and community-based work. "People in the community came to him for advice on community issues . . . [and] with their personal problems," she recalled in her autobiography. "[H]e helped them write for their birth certificates or process a grievance at work. They listened to his advice on how to cope with their cars, their children, or their spouses as if he were their minister. He loved being a notary public so that he could certify documents for friends and neighbors, never accepting payment."¹⁵ Throughout their four decades of marriage and political partnership, Grace observed Jimmy's unwavering commitment to a community-based political practice.

Jimmy was especially caring toward young people and elders. We watched three generations of young people grow up on Field Street, where we lived for more than thirty years. He called them "my girls" and "my boys," kept track of how they were doing in school, and was always ready to help them with their homework or with advice about a summer job or how to get a loan. . . . During the Vietnam War he counseled hundreds of young Detroiters on how to register as conscientious objectors. To this day I receive phone calls from some of those whom he counseled, asking if there is anything they can do for me because they have never forgotten what he did for them.¹⁶

These statements attest to a generosity of spirit at the heart of James Boggs's political commitments. This generosity had many sources. Its root lay in his southern upbringing, where it was nurtured and fortified. It then flowered through his experiences in the labor movement during the 1940s, his participation in black struggles of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and his involvement in community-based struggles during the 1980s and early 1990s. In 1992, a year before his death, the *Detroit News* ran a profile on James Boggs celebrating this long record of committed activism. It dubbed him "An American Revolutionary" and both Boggses "philosopher kings of Detroit's social left."¹⁷ For his part, Jimmy reconfirmed

the identity he had claimed for himself decades earlier: "I call myself a revolutionist." To elaborate, and to explain the wellspring and foundation of his many political efforts, he added: "I see myself as a person imbued with the mission of advancing humanity. My ideology is changing with one constant cornerstone: it must always advance humanity."¹⁸

His ideas for advancing humanity were by this time, with the twentieth century coming to a close, focused on rebuilding communities in post-industrial Detroit. But he had learned his first lessons on community building and social struggle in a very different setting: rural Alabama during the early part of the twentieth century.

Southern Roots: Making a Way out of No Way

James Boggs was born on May 27, 1919, in Marion Junction, Alabama, about twelve miles west of Selma in Dallas County.¹⁹ He often described his place of birth, then a mostly black town of about 1,100 people, as a place "where white folks were gentlemen and ladies by day and Ku Klux Klanners by night." It was a place, he added, where "they hung someone nearly every weekend so that we would be nice fellows the rest of the week."²⁰ If Boggs exaggerated the frequency of lynching in his hometown, he nonetheless captured the pervasive threat of such violence in the world to which he was born, one marked by racial terror. Across the country, seventy-eight black people were murdered by lynching in 1919, the year of Boggs's birth. Indeed, his birth occurred at the beginning of what came to be known as the "Red Summer" of 1919, when white mobs attacked black citizens and communities in twenty-five cities and towns across the nation between April and October.²¹

But racial terror was not the sole or even the dominant force in James Boggs's young life.²² His family and community provided a nurturing environment in spite of and as a counter to the oppressive social climate of Jim Crow and white supremacy. The youngest of four children born to Ernest and Lelia Boggs, young James picked blackberries and worked in cotton fields as a child. He attended school in Selma and then Bessemer and at an early age became something of a scribe, penning letters for elderly people in the community who had not learned to write.²³ Throughout most of his adult life as an activist, he credited the community in which he was raised for instilling in him a sense of responsibility and an appreciation for struggle, a sensibility that is captured in the African American folk saying "making a way out of no way."²⁴ Speaking to a group of friends and fellow activists in Detroit at the beginning of the 1990s, Boggs recalled: "The environment which I grew up in said to me very early that listen, 'you have to make a way out of no way.'"²⁵ He credited this lesson from his childhood with instilling in him a personal and communal sense of struggle, a resolve in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Reflecting a sensibility forged in the post-emancipation and Jim Crow South and passed down through subsequent generations, the phrase "making a way out of no way" signifies both a collective cultural consciousness and a credo of individual behavior built upon a shared experience of faith, resilience, and hope in African American communities.²⁶ Boggs's invocation of the phrase not only highlights the importance of this tradition in his early life but also signals that it was a central ingredient of his political identity.

The person in his life who perhaps most exemplified this tradition was his great-grandmother Big Ma. She was born into slavery during the early 1850s and lived into her nineties. Thus, her life had been touched by the brutalities of slavery, the coming of emancipation, and the many hardships that arrived in its wake. And she shared these experiences through an intergenerational dialogue with young James and his siblings. She told them about the spirituals sung by the enslaved and about the brutality of masters toward enslaved children. She told them about the origins of the “buck dance,” when “white people would come up and say ‘N——r, dance,’ and then start shooting around the feet of blacks so that they would dance like everything.”²⁷ As an elder, she was a source of historical knowledge and an important presence in James’s childhood and adolescence. She was able to give him a unique and powerful sense of historical change, and he learned from her the centrality of struggle in the lives of African Americans. “When she talked about slavery,” Boggs recalled, “she always talked not about how they freed the slaves, but about how [slaveholders] surrendered. There was a big difference. She saw the change as something that had been won by somebody, not something that had been given. She realized that there had been a struggle and that somebody had to lose.”²⁸ This historical sensibility—and especially an understanding of the continuity of struggle in black people’s lives—proved to be a foundation for Boggs’s intellectual development and political thinking.

Urban Groundings: Coming to Detroit

If James Boggs learned his initial political lessons from his family and rural community in the black belt of Alabama, he came of age politically and intellectually in the rapidly expanding urban black community and industrial landscape of Detroit. In 1937, at the age of eighteen, Boggs decided to trade Jim Crow for a chance in the big city. Well over one million black southerners had made that decision during the preceding two decades, many of them during the World War I-era Great Migration. This mass migration had already propelled enormous growth of black urban communities outside the South. The existence of these communities and the experiences of migrants—related through letters, visits home, and reports in the black press, among other ways—seemed to provide irrefutable evidence that in the North could be found a new racial order and prospects for a better life. Thus, for Boggs and many like him, the decision to leave the South came relatively easily. “Every time someone went north,” Boggs explained years later, “they came back talking, telling a bunch of lies about how good things were there . . . you didn’t come back until you had a big car and other stuff to let people know you were doing well up North. I believed all those lies, too.”²⁹

Of course, the promise of the North was reinforced by its corollary: southern repression. “You have to remember,” Boggs told an interviewer, “I was born in the South and could see, on a day-to-day basis, the oppressive conditions and the aggressive measures that whites used in order to instill their form of domination in the minds of blacks. It’s out of that context that I became a rebel. Or, to be more exact, a renegade from the South. By ‘renegade,’ I mean that I was one of those who left.”³⁰ Among the renegades preceding him

were his two older brothers and some of his uncles, who settled in Detroit and found work in the auto industry.

Early one June morning in 1937, James Boggs arrived at the home of his uncle in the African American enclave on Detroit's lower east side. Weeks earlier, after their graduation from Dunbar High School in Bessemer, Alabama, Boggs and a friend from Marion Junction, Joe Perry, climbed aboard a freight train headed north. With no change of clothes and one dollar between them (they ran out of money on the second day), Boggs and Perry "bummed" for food in places like Cincinnati and St. Louis as they "hoboed" their way to the Motor City. This is how Boggs describes his arrival: "I came in on a train from Toledo. Got off at the Ford River Rouge plant, and I walked down Michigan Avenue to downtown Detroit, asking the police in Dearborn and all down that route where was Theodore and Hastings. That's where my uncle was living." On his way to his uncle's home on Hastings Street, the heart of Detroit's black community, Boggs immediately became aware of the scale and novelty of his surroundings, the place that would be his new home. "This is the first time I had ever been to a big city," he reported. "I had been to cities like in Alabama, but they wasn't nothing like Detroit. Detroit was the first big city I'd ever been to."³¹

Indeed, Detroit was "the big city." When Boggs arrived it was the fourth largest city in the nation and was in the midst of a tremendous period of growth. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Detroit ranked thirteenth in population among American cities with 285,704 residents. A decade later, the city had the ninth largest population, at 465,766 people. Between 1910 and 1920, the population more than doubled to 993,675, and during the 1920s the population continued to grow, adding nearly 600,000 people. By 1940 Detroit was home to 1,623,452 residents; only New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia had more people. Both black and white migrants from the South fueled the city's population boom, and while the number of whites was larger, African Americans migration significantly changed their proportion of the city's total population. Between 1910 and 1920, which includes the World War I-era Great Migration, the black population increased nearly eightfold from 5,741 to 40,838. During the 1920s the black population in the city tripled to 120,066, and during the depression years the number climbed to 149,119. In 1910 African Americans made up 1.2 percent of Detroit's population; by 1940 they constituted 9.2 percent of the city.³²

The driving force of this surge in population was Detroit's booming industrial economy, led by the automobile industry. When auto production in the city began at the turn of the twentieth century, plants required relatively little capital and were operated by small-scale designers and assemblers. Before 1913, when Henry Ford first deployed the assembly line, most auto workers were skilled workers. Over the next two decades, however, technological innovations transformed the automobile industry and demand for automobiles skyrocketed. The industry came to be dominated by large manufacturing companies and skilled workers were replaced by low-skilled and unskilled assembly-line workers. By 1920, the auto industry employed 135,000 workers, many of them at wages well above the national average, and the city's economic and social landscape was transformed.³³

While Detroit earned its label as the Motor City during the first two decades of the century, it was in the 1930s that the city established itself as a union town. During the economic boom of the 1920s Detroit remained a solidly “open shop” city with a fragmented and relatively weak union movement, but the massive unemployment and economic malaise of the depression—along with the active mobilization of the Communist Party, among others—fueled a rising militancy and spurred collective action. The emergence of Unemployed Councils in 1930–31, the Ford Hunger March in 1932, and a wave of strikes in 1933 signaled the arrival of mass labor activism in Detroit and helped set the stage for the consolidation of industrial unionism with the formation in 1935 of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).³⁴ The next year, the UAW launched a “sit-down strike” against General Motors in Flint, about sixty miles north of Detroit. Workers occupied plants of the leading auto producer for forty-four days, resulting in a union victory in February 1937. The Flint sit-down further galvanized the labor movement in Detroit, as a wave of sit-downs spread across the city in March 1937. Thousands of UAW members and supporters occupied Detroit’s major automobile plants as well as nearly 130 offices, stores, and factories in a range of industries throughout the city, large and small. On May 26, 1937, just days before Boggs’s arrival in Detroit, the escalating conflict between labor and employers found bloody expression in the “Battle of the Overpass,” where UAW organizers attempting to leaflet the Ford Rouge plant suffered a severe beating at the hands of Ford Service Department men.³⁵

Thus, when James Boggs hopped off a freight train in Dearborn and walked into Detroit in June 1937 he faced the great promise and potential peril of a major American city. It was a city of sprawling factories and newly constructed skyscrapers—two very different symbols of the city’s recent economic boom—but it was also a city bursting at the seams, straining to meet the basic needs of its expanding citizenry. It was undoubtedly a city of opportunity, but many of the newcomers were unemployed and hungry, nearly all of them jostling for space. It was, too, a city soon to be swirling with racial tension and antagonism as the mass migration of African Americans into the city pushed against (and would eventually transform) the city’s racial boundaries.

Indeed, the two terminus points of Boggs’s initial trek into the Motor City—the Ford River Rouge plant and Hastings Street—were especially apt symbols of the city’s competing and contradictory realities. The Rouge plant, situated in the city of Dearborn on the southwestern edge of Detroit, was a grand icon of the automobile industry and an awesome symbol of industrial might. Built between 1917 and 1925, the massive Rouge factory complex stood as a ready example of the promise of mass production. The Rouge plant would also come to symbolize Detroit’s powerful labor movement, as it was the site of the bloody Battle of the Overpass and the target of the UAW’s bitterly fought but ultimately successful drive to organize Ford workers in 1941 (which was largely responsible for solidifying the city’s labor movement). Moreover, the Rouge was home to UAW Local 600, one of the largest and most progressive local unions in the nation.³⁶

Hastings Street, meanwhile, was both sign and substance of black Detroit. It was the major thoroughfare and economic lifeline of Black Bottom, Detroit’s main African American

neighborhood. Located on the city's increasingly cramped lower east side, Black Bottom showed a distinctly different face of Detroit's industrial economy. Beset with the vice and squalor of a segregated black ghetto, the area also boasted a thriving business community and the bustling nightlife of Paradise Valley, the black entertainment and commercial district. Hastings Street, which ran through Paradise Valley and extended northward for several blocks, represented all these aspects of black life in Detroit.³⁷ Along Hastings could be found bars and nightclubs, churches and grocery stores, apartment buildings and hotels, funeral homes and illegal gambling houses—nearly all manner of business activity, entertainment, and social life.³⁸ Celebrated and memorialized in the artistry of blues musicians and poets, Hastings became black Detroit's most famous street.³⁹ It both resulted from and symbolized a rapidly growing urban black community, women and men building institutions and cultural life in the context of—and against—the adversity of racial discrimination and economic privation.

Black Radicalism in the Big City

This was the black community in which James Boggs would make his home and, ultimately, make his mark. His first destination in the city, his uncle's home at Theodore and Hastings, sat just a few blocks north of the renowned Forest Club, a sprawling entertainment complex at the corner of Forest and Hastings. Under the ownership of Paradise Valley icon Sunnie Wilson, the Forest Club was one of the area's most popular destinations throughout the 1940s. But it was not the city's nightlife that brought Boggs to Detroit; it was the promise of good wages in the auto industry. His uncle had been the first African American to be hired at the Budd Wheel plant on Charlevoix, and Boggs expected to land a job there as well. He did not, however. Employment in Detroit's auto industry during the depression proved hard to come by, especially for African Americans. Instead, he found occasional employment doing day work, painting houses, and at car washing establishments before eventually landing a Works Progress Administration (WPA) job digging curbstones in the northwestern area of the city. He returned to Alabama in 1938 to marry to his first wife, Annie McKinley, and then came back to Detroit where he continued working for the WPA. As part of the WPA work program he completed eighteen months at the George Washington Trade School where he trained to be a template maker.⁴⁰

In 1940 Boggs took a job at the Chrysler assembly plant on Jefferson Avenue, where he would work for twenty-eight years. Boggs's opportunity to work in the auto industry did not come from his trade school training but from the economic impact of World War II. As he would later say, "Hitler and Tojo put me to work in the plant."⁴¹ His seemingly sympathetic reference to the leaders of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan was not meant to signal approval or endorsements of the Axis Powers of World War II but to highlight the link between the conflict abroad and the sweeping changes in the American economy, specifically in employment practices in Detroit's auto industry. In his first book, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*, published in 1963, Boggs laid out the analysis more explicitly.

With the coming of the Second World War, Negroes up North made use of the opportunity created by the weakness of American capitalism to organize the March on Washington movement. Out of this movement came Executive Order 8802, opening up jobs in defense industries to Negroes. Negroes did not give credit for this Order to Roosevelt and the American government. Far from it. Recognizing that America and its allies had their backs to the wall in their struggle with Hitler and Tojo, Negroes said that Hitler and Tojo, by creating the war which made the Americans give them jobs in industry, had done more for them in four years than Uncle Sam had done in 300 years.⁴²

This passage is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the incisive language provides an example of Boggs's rhetorical style. Second, the passage suggests Boggs's sense of historical development, which was an important element of his intellectual and political work. He identifies his own experiences as part of broader changes in society, namely the impact of World War II on black workers in Detroit, and constructs historical meaning for African Americans out of these developments. Indeed, the tremendous demand for military production during the early 1940s led Detroit's automakers to convert their plants to the mass production of military goods such as airplanes, tanks, and other equipment. As a major center of wartime production, Detroit became an "arsenal of democracy," and one consequence was the opening up of industrial jobs to African Americans in much greater numbers than in any previous period. Historian Thomas Sugrue describes World War II as "a turning point in black employment prospects" in Detroit's industrial economy as a "chronic shortage of labor forced manufacturers to hire blacks and women for jobs that had been restricted to white men."⁴³

In addition to a tight labor market, the agitation and activism of civil rights organizations, black community leaders, and the UAW helped open up jobs for African American workers during the war years.⁴⁴ Indeed, the early 1940s saw the emergence of an alliance between black Detroit and the UAW. This alliance proved critical for the consolidation and success of the union and was an essential feature of an increasingly strong and visible black working-class political presence.⁴⁵

Thus, James Boggs's entry into factory work and Detroit's industrial economy coincided with a pivotal historical juncture in the development of the labor movement and black politics in the city. He joined Chrysler Local 7 of the UAW and became active in union politics. He was a member of the local's organization committee, generally known as the "flying squadron," which provided protection and support for striking workers throughout the city. According to B. J. Widick, members of UAW flying squadrons were "colorfully garbed union militants chosen for their aggressiveness in defending picket lines."⁴⁶ Boggs was also very active in the anti-discrimination efforts of Local 7's Fair Practices Committee, for which he served as secretary throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. By the early 1960s, Boggs was a strident critic of the UAW and the labor movement, but he was nonetheless clear that it was in the labor movement that his politics took root and began to flourish. "My early experience was in the union," he told an interviewer decades later, "and that's where I got my real organizing skills—in strikes, wildcats, picketing, goon squads, stuff like that."⁴⁷ And he was not alone. The labor movement provided an important space for many black activists.

"Black workers," Boggs continued, speaking of the World War II era, "began to create a new social milieu and an arena of struggle inside the plant."⁴⁸

More broadly, the overlapping and intersecting political worlds of 1940s Detroit—industrial unionism, left-wing politics, civil rights activity, and a black community growing in size and militancy—provided the space for Boggs's political development and maturation. Boggs was part of a generation of black workers who found in the UAW a platform for various forms of working-class black activism. They developed organizing skills, gained exposure to many currents in radical thought, and used the union as a political base from which to mount efforts to address racial discrimination both inside and outside the plant. Boggs thus joined other black UAW members who, as they moved in and out of other black institutions, constructed significant networks of black political activity.⁴⁹

Boggs's participation in the NAACP's efforts during the 1950s to fight racial discrimination in restaurants and other public places serves as an illustration of how these networks formed and operated, while also providing a window into Boggs's political trajectory and development. In October 1949, after receiving numerous complaints of discrimination in restaurants along Woodward Avenue and in the downtown area, the Detroit Branch of the NAACP formed a committee on restaurant discrimination (popularly known as the Discrimination Action Committee, or DAC). Many black UAW members, including Boggs, joined the committee. Combining direct action tactics with legal challenges, the committee met Friday evenings at the St. Antoine YMCA to organize interracial teams of volunteers sent to challenge the practices of restaurants known to refuse service or otherwise discriminate against African Americans. The DAC eventually expanded its efforts to include other public spaces such as roller rinks, bowling alleys, bars, and hotels, ultimately forcing dozens of establishments to comply with Michigan's public accommodation statute, the so-called Diggs Act barring discriminatory treatment by public facilities.⁵⁰

Ernest Dillard, a member of the NAACP board of directors as well as a General Motors employee and active member of UAW Local 15, organized and chaired the DAC.⁵¹ Dillard's leadership in this effort (as well as the participation of Boggs and other UAW members) points to a defining feature of black politics in postwar Detroit, namely the overlap and exchange between civil rights agitation and the labor movement. Furthermore, both Boggs and Dillard were associated with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), one of the groups active in the Detroit left. That these (and other) black auto workers were simultaneously involved in these seemingly disparate political arenas—the NAACP, the labor movement, and the left—was not especially unique or surprising. Rather, it reflects the fluid activist community and political environment in which black workers and others operated. This is not to say that no ideological differences (or class divisions) existed among these political formations; certainly they diverged in key aspects of their analyses and proscriptions. But these differences were not insurmountable—at least not in this particular historical moment—and did not preclude some measure of overlap and even collaboration.⁵²

Explaining his participation in the DAC to an interviewer years later, Boggs remarked that he and the other UAW members "called ourselves infiltrating the NAACP in order to

make them carry out a more aggressive campaign.”⁵³ Thus black workers such as Dillard and Boggs—who lived and worked and struggled within the mutually reinforcing racial economy and political economy of postwar Detroit—apparently felt no contradiction in going back and forth between meetings of the middle-class-led NAACP, the working-class culture of the union hall, and the revolution-minded SWP. More to the point, they saw each of these as a viable vehicle or means of struggle.⁵⁴

This, then, gives us a snapshot of the intellectual and political milieu in which James Boggs developed into a radical. Indeed, through his affiliation with the SWP, Boggs came in contact with and eventually joined a small Marxist collective known as the Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT). As a member of JFT and its successor group, Correspondence, he would develop some of his most important political influences and collaborators—most notably Grace Lee Boggs.

Correspondence and Grace Lee Boggs

Taking its name from the pseudonyms (or “party names”) of its two leaders, Trinidadian C. L. R. James (J. R. Johnson) and Russian-born Raya Dunayevskaya (Freddie Forest), the Johnson-Forest group began in the early 1940s as a faction within American Trotskyism (initially in the Workers Party and later in the SWP). James, the group’s most prominent figure, was one of the foremost Trotskyist theoreticians as well as a major international participant in Pan-African politics. Dunayevskaya, who had served a translator and personal secretary for Leon Trotsky, and had been active in radical politics since the 1920s was an impressive intellectual and Marxist theorist with a profound understanding of political economy. With their innovative formulations of Marxist theory, these two formidable intellectuals drew adherents of the Tendency (who were also known as Johnsonites), forming an energetic collective based in New York City with a loose network of members in other cities, including Detroit.⁵⁵

A key figure in the group, in effect its third leader, was Grace Chin Lee (whose “party name” was Ria Stone). The daughter of Chinese immigrants, Lee was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1915 and raised in New York City. At the age of twenty-five, she earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from Bryn Mawr College. Rather than pursue a career in academia, she moved to Chicago in 1940—the same year that James Boggs began working in the auto industry—and quickly plunged herself into the intersecting worlds of World War II-era racial and radical politics in the nation’s second largest city. Lee lived near the University of Chicago on the edge of the city’s south side, the so-called black belt where the vast majority of African American Chicagoans lived, and she was greatly influenced by powerful mass black political mobilization that she observed. She was especially influenced by the March on Washington Movement. She joined the Workers Party (WP) and worked with its South Side Tenants Organization. In the WP she met C. L. R. James. He was the group’s leading theoretician on the “Negro Question” and had recently formed JFT. By 1942 Lee had moved to New York to become an active member of the Tendency. Over the next decade, she played a central role alongside James and Dunayevskaya as the group engaged in a

rigorous and sustained study of Marxist theory and philosophy. Collectively they produced a dazzling body of writing on revolutionary theory, the Soviet Union and the development of international socialism, the labor movement, the American working class, and the revolutionary potential of the independent struggles of African Americans for democratic rights.

James Boggs became an active member of the group after it broke from the Trotskyist movement and relocated its base to Detroit in the early 1950s. As a newly independent Marxist organization, the group renamed itself *Correspondence* (taking its name from the Committees of Correspondence from the American Revolution) and began publishing a newspaper of the same name. To be written, edited, and circulated by its readers, the paper was conceived as a unique experiment in democratic participation and intellectual exchange. As the editorial statement in the first issue states: "CORRESPONDENCE is a paper in which ordinary people can say what they want to say and are so eager to say. Workers, Negroes, women, youth will tell in this paper in their own way the story of their lives, in the plant, at home, in school, in their neighborhoods, what they are doing, what they are thinking about."⁵⁶ The paper's orientation and focus on these social groups reflected the organization's political analysis of American society and its position that revolutionary social change could only come about through the self-activity and mass mobilization of the working class—led not by organized labor but by rank-and-file workers with the active participation of other marginalized or disaffected groups, namely African Americans, youth, and women. Jimmy Boggs, therefore, was an ideal member of the organization and the perfect candidate to work on the paper.

For his part, Boggs found in the J-F and especially in *Correspondence* an organization that was ideologically consistent with his experiences and his primary political concerns. Indeed, he was witness to the sapping of revolutionary potential of the labor movement that *Correspondence* theorized: he had been in the left-wing caucus of the UAW led by George Addes and R. J. Thomas; he saw the rise of Walter Reuther's faction after World War II and the subsequent purging of radicals from the union; and he experienced the Reuther group's heavy-handed steering of the UAW, riding the waves of McCarthyism and cold war liberalism toward the Democratic Party and away from the insurgency of the union's recent past.⁵⁷

Grace Lee moved to Detroit in 1953 to work on the paper, and the next year she and James Boggs, whom she had met two years earlier in New York, were married. In midcentury Detroit, a city with a small Asian American population and still quite resilient patterns of racial segregation, James and Grace Lee Boggs no doubt made an unlikely and uncommon couple. Nonetheless, they settled in a black neighborhood on the city's east side—where they eventually became well-known community activists—and were recognizable figures in Detroit radical politics. Over the next four decades, James and Grace Lee Boggs created an unconventional yet amazingly generative personal, intellectual, and political union.

If socially theirs was an uncommon paring, the Boggsses were also somewhat of a political anomaly. As a black factory worker from the rural South and a New York–raised Asian American woman with a Ph.D. in philosophy, neither of them fit the standard profile of

Marxist radical. Certainly, they were unlikely candidates for leadership of a small revolutionary socialist organization. Yet, by 1957, with C. L. R. James living in London and Raya Dunayevskaya no longer a member of the group, the Boggses assumed the primary leadership of *Correspondence*. Grace was by then editor of the paper, which comprised the group's primary activity, and Jimmy⁵⁸ was elected the group's chairperson.⁵⁹ He also did a substantial amount of the writing for the paper, including a column he wrote under the pen name Al Whitney, which appeared on the "Special Negro News" page.⁶⁰

Through these columns Boggs presented commentaries and analyses of black political life, both in Detroit and nationally. A common thread in nearly all of his columns during the mid-1950s was a focus on the everyday struggles of ordinary black people, and he frequently asserted that through such struggles, "Negro rank and filers" were bypassing an inept, self-serving black elite leadership (which he often called "the talented tenth"). Some columns connected contemporary political dynamics to historical subjects, such as resistance to slavery (one column refers to the case of Margaret Garner, whose act of infanticide in the 1850s inspired Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*).⁶¹ Boggs also wrote about the relationship between African Americans' struggle for democratic rights and the labor movement. He frequently used his column to criticize the UAW for its failure to adequately respond to the demands of black workers, chiding the union for failing to close the gap between its anti-discrimination rhetoric and its dismal record on actually rooting out discrimination in the union and in employment.

His condemnation of the union was in part a reflection of the ideological position of *Correspondence*, but it was also born of experience. The organization's particular interpretation of Marxism (especially its theory of revolutionary change) and analysis of the American labor movement led its members to reject unions (and all bureaucratic structures) in favor of the "self-activity" of the working class as the true agent of change. For his part, as an auto worker and union activist since 1940, Boggs witnessed firsthand the UAW's steady retreat from the great promise of cross-racial worker solidarity heralded by the CIO's militancy during the late 1930s, the apparent triumph of interracial trade unionism in the 1941 Ford organizing drive, and the World War II upsurge of black demands for defense jobs and industrial democracy. Furthermore, he served for several years as the secretary of his local's Fair Practices Committee, which tried to push the union toward stronger anti-discriminatory action. Thus, he knew well the UAW's failure in the eyes of black workers during the 1950s. As he recalled years later, with the struggles against Jim Crow intensifying during this period, black "UAW members began to kind of transfer their interests from the union to working in the civil rights movement."⁶²

With the dramatic civil rights campaigns of the early 1960s—namely, the sit-ins in 1960 and the freedom rides in 1961—Boggs emphasized not only the failure to eliminate discrimination in the union but also the union's lackluster and conditional support of the broader civil rights struggle. For example, his June 3, 1961, column, "The First Giant Step," chastised the "great American labor movement" for "standing by, doing nothing" as others in the nation mobilized to support and aid the freedom riders. Boggs sent a telegram to UAW president Walter Reuther (which was reprinted in Boggs's column), urging the union to actively support the Freedom Rides.

In the name of common humanity and as an expression of labor's support of the cause of freedom and equality at home, urgently request that the UAW-AFL-CIO immediately organize and send a fleet of integrated buses of freedom riders to Alabama.

James Boggs, Chrysler Local 7
Fair Practices Committee⁶³

It is doubtful that Boggs expected Reuther to implement his idea or that he believed his telegram would compel the UAW to find other ways to more actively participate in the black struggle for full citizenship. More likely, Boggs's aim was to publicly register his contempt for the union's anemic commitment to racial democracy. Also, Boggs's call to the union to engage in the civil rights struggle was an implicit statement of his view that the UAW was no longer, as it had been in the 1930s, a force for social change.⁶⁴

Indeed, as strident as his critique of the UAW's racial politics was, Boggs's strongest indictment of the union was his declaration of its obsolescence. In April 1961 he gave a speech titled "The State of the Union—The End of an Epoch in the UAW," which outlined, as he saw it, the rise and fall of the union. Anticipating the analysis he would make in *The American Revolution*, Boggs told his Detroit audience that during the 1930s the CIO dealt a "crippling blow" to "the domination of American life by the Almighty Dollar" when it organized militant workers ("the ranks on the shop level") to take control of the factories and in the process create new relations between workers and management.⁶⁵ But these gains were eroded during and after World War II when a series of developments, including the no-strike pledge and collective bargaining, transformed the union from a vehicle of worker insurgency and progressive social action into a bureaucratic interest group.

Perhaps the most significant development responsible for the union's growing futility and eventual demise, according to Boggs, was the advent of automation. As large-scale manufacturers increasingly automated their production facilities during the 1940s and 1950s, this labor-saving technology allowed them to increase production while decreasing their workforces, resulting in the reduction and in some cases elimination of job categories in a range of industries. The problems of displaced workers and unemployment consequently grew into national concerns, and by the early 1960s a national debate among politicians, labor leaders, business executives, and intellectuals emerged over the impacts of and appropriate responses to automation.⁶⁶ Boggs argued that the technological advances represented by automation signified a new mode or stage of production in American industry that was eliminating the need for the mass worker. In this "new Age of Abundance," he boldly proclaimed, "enough could be easily produced in this country so that there would be no need for the majority of Americans to work."⁶⁷ But the UAW and other labor unions were stuck in the framework of a dying era. "Today in the Sixties," Boggs wrote, "the American labor movement has reached the end of the road."⁶⁸

Boggs's commitment to dialectical thinking drove his analysis of automation and led him to his conclusions about the end of the labor movement. "To think dialectically," he explained, "is to recognize that reality is constantly changing and that new contradictions are constantly being created as old ones are negated."⁶⁹ He therefore insisted on the need to create new concepts to fit new realities and political circumstances, and he argued that

ideas which at one point are progressive can become reactionary at another point. Thus, he could conclude in March 1963 that labor unions' call for full employment was "as reactionary today as 'rugged individualism' was in the 30s."⁷⁰ He believed that automation was ushering in a new stage of economic development. Indeed, he saw it as a new era of production in the process of replacing the system of mass production (and mass employment) from which industrial unionism sprang. The need for mass labor was vanishing, he said, and the union had no answer to this profound change.

The American Revolution

Boggs's dialectical thinking led him in the early 1960s to break with Marxist orthodoxy. Based on his analysis of the political and economic development of the United States during the years following World War II, including in particular his assessment of automation, organized labor, and the rising African American struggle for democratic rights, Boggs argued that changes in the United States called into question Marxist concepts of class formation and revolutionary change. Specifically, he came to reject the idea that the industrial working class (and the American working class in particular) would be the agent of revolutionary change, a basic tenet of Marxist theory. Boggs saw the decline of the labor movement and the upsurge of the civil rights movement as simultaneous developments of the postwar United States, which together signaled a profound shift in political alignments and possibilities. He was convinced that whatever revolutionary initiative the labor movement claimed during its heyday of the 1930s had now passed to the black struggle. That is, Boggs argued that African Americans, through their organic struggle for equal rights and full citizenship, were bumping up against the basic structures of American society in a way that could potentially shatter the entire social, economic, and political system; during the postwar era the black struggle, he said, had usurped the American working class as the agent of revolution.⁷¹

Boggs presented his critique of Marxism, along with his analyses of automation and the black struggle, in *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*.⁷² Published during the summer of 1963, this book reflects Boggs's attempt to explore, in his words, "the potentialities of the American revolution."⁷³ He said that the traditional Marxist scenario of revolution was appropriate for the nineteenth century (when Marx and Engels made their analyses of capitalism) and had even been able to some extent to predict the rise of the CIO during the 1930s. But it was inadequate for the mid- and late twentieth-century United States. Given its economic and military power, the United States stood as "the citadel of world capitalism today,"⁷⁴ a counterrevolutionary behemoth at a time of growing social upheaval at home and revolutionary ferment abroad. Marx and Engels foresaw a long period of industrialization that would produce a constantly growing and increasingly concentrated working class whose conflict with capital would lead ultimately to social revolution. But this scenario had to be updated, Boggs argued, in light of capitalism's recent development. "Today when automation and cybernation are shrinking rather than expanding the work force," he said, "a new theory must be evolved."⁷⁵

He was in effect grappling with the emergence of what we have now come to call the “post-industrial” economy. He recognized the process of deindustrialization as it was happening in Detroit and elsewhere in the country, and he attempted to analyze not only the social impacts of these changes but also their political implications. He wrote of a “growing army of the unemployed” made up of production workers displaced by automation as well as a new generation of young people without work “who have never been and can never be involved in the system.”⁷⁶ This was not simply a problem of temporary or structural unemployment (to be addressed through job-training programs, public works projects, or similar means) but the much more severe problem of a large group of people for whom there is quite literally no place within the economic order. Boggs labeled such people “outsiders.” While he may have overstated the impact of automation, or perhaps he failed to foresee American capitalism’s ability to adapt and reconfigure itself into an information and service economy, Boggs nonetheless captured an important development and enduring dynamic, namely, the transformation of social and economic life as a result of the severe reduction in mass industrial employment. “This,” he wrote, “is the dilemma of the United States: What is to be done with the men and women who are being made obsolete by the new stage of production?”⁷⁷ To face this dilemma, he asserted, required “a much bolder and more radical approach to society.”⁷⁸

Boggs found the seeds of this radical approach in the post–World War II African American freedom struggle. Tracing the development of the civil rights movement from the 1940s through the early 1960s, he concluded that “the development and momentum of the Negro struggle have made the Negroes the one revolutionary force dominating the American scene.”⁷⁹ Its revolutionary content, he stressed, was not simply in seeking rights or addressing economic grievances but in the ultimate directions that the struggle would be forced to turn and objectives it would pursue: “The strength of the Negro cause and its power to shake up the social structure of the nation comes from the fact that in the Negro struggle all the questions of human rights and human relationships are posed.”⁸⁰ In particular, Boggs anticipated that the civil rights struggle would soon identify the need for political power as a central task.

The struggle for black political power is a revolutionary struggle because, unlike the struggle for white power, it is the climax of a ceaseless struggle on the part of Negroes for human rights. Moreover, it comes in a period in the United States when the struggle for human relations rather than for material goods has become the chief task of human beings.⁸¹

This statement is suggestive of two significant strands of James Boggs’s thinking: it points to his theoretical engagement with the Black Power movement as it emerged during the mid-1960s, and it forecasts the concept of revolution that he and Grace Lee Boggs would develop over the next decade culminating in the publication, in 1974, of their jointly authored book, *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*.⁸² In that study, the Boggses synthesized and refined ideas about revolutionary struggle that they developed through their participation in the labor movement, the JFT and Correspondence group, and especially the “black revolution” of the 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, the path they

traveled organizationally and theoretically during the decade between publication of *The American Revolution* and *Revolution and Evolution* provides a revealing map of black political developments of the era. For example, tracking their intellectual and political activities helps us see how the civil rights movement transformed during the middle of the 1960s into a movement for Black Power. Furthermore, their work through the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s—and the networks of activists and organizations that it touched—reveals some of the often obscured dynamics of the Black Power movement that lay beyond the sensationalized images of gun-toting, would-be revolutionaries, dashiki-clad militants, and central cities up in flames. As the writings in this volume demonstrate, the Boggses' intellectual and political trajectory saw them assume the interchangeable roles of activists, analysts, and even architects of Black Power. We can therefore gain valuable insights into the movement's history—its sharp rise and great promise, its intense ideological debates, and some of its stumbling blocks—by tracing the Boggses' trajectory.

Seen in this light, *The American Revolution* represents both an ending and a beginning for James and Grace Lee Boggs. Their ideological break with Marxism led to an organizational break within *Correspondence* in 1962, and the publication of the book the following year served as a public expression of the end of the Boggses' political relationship with C. L. R. James. At the same time, the book inaugurated a new stage of their political activism. From the early 1960s onward James and Grace Lee Boggs were what we might call movement intellectuals; that is, their intellectual activities grew out of and responded to their specific political activities, and they consciously and consistently carried out the type of intellectual work they deemed necessary to build a social movement.

By the early 1960s, even before the publication of *The American Revolution*, the Boggses had developed an ever-widening network of black activists in Detroit and nationally. In Detroit this included Rev. Albert B. Cleage, Milton Henry, Richard Henry, and their organization, Group on Advanced Leadership (GOAL), as well as the young activists associated with the group UHURU.⁸³ Local collaborators also included Reginald Wilson and Conrad Mallet, politically conscious teachers who were attracted to the Boggses' analysis of American society and racial oppression and began working with them during the late 1950s. By the beginning of the 1960s, they along with their wives, Dolores Wilson and Gwen Mallet, had joined the Boggses in writing and publishing *Correspondence*.

Among their national political connections of the early 1960s, perhaps the most noteworthy is Robert F. Williams.⁸⁴ The Boggses' relationship to Williams began in 1959 when *Correspondence* started their extensive coverage of Williams and the struggle he led in Monroe, North Carolina. This coverage continued through 1961 and included carrying reprints from Williams's own newsletter, *Crusader*, and other writings by Robert as well as his wife, Mabel Williams. The Boggses helped organize support efforts, among other things by sending members of *Correspondence* to Monroe, both to report on the black community's efforts and to bring supplies (including weapons).⁸⁵ After Williams and his family fled the country in 1961, the Boggses continued their support efforts as leaders of the Detroit Committee to Aid the Monroe Defendants (CAMD) and in collaboration with activists and organizations in New York.⁸⁶ In 1962, *Correspondence* published a pamphlet on Williams

and the Monroe story consisting of two speeches by Conrad Lynn, a mutual political ally of the Boggses and Williams and the attorney for Williams and the other Monroe defendants. Titled "Monroe, North Carolina . . . Turning Point in American History," the pamphlet began with a foreword by James Boggs. The foreword mostly rehearses ideas that Boggs articulated in his writings of the period (particularly *The American Revolution*), but Boggs is nonetheless clear regarding the importance he assigned to the Monroe case: "Monroe, North Carolina, is not the whole United States; neither was Emmet Till the only Negro boy ever killed in Mississippi. But just as Till's lynching and the barefaced acquittal of his lynchers in 1955 were the signal for the Negro people to start their offensive for rights in this country, so Monroe represents the turning point at which Negroes have decided that they must convict their attackers on the spot."⁸⁷

This turning point that Boggs identified—a new militancy reflected by the rejection of nonviolence and embracing—was indeed in ascendency in the early 1960s and by mid-decade helped transform the civil rights movement into a movement for Black Power, a transition both Williams and Boggs helped envision during the early 1960s. Williams's exile, first in Cuba and then in China, prevented a closer collaboration between him and Boggs as Black Power emerged, but they maintained a connection to each other as they continued along parallel and at points intersecting paths within the larger black radical network of the 1960s.⁸⁸ From their respective locations, each man played an important role in the development of the Black Power movement—Williams through his historic example of armed self-defense, as a powerful icon of international solidarity, and as a figurehead for the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and the Republic of New Africa (RNA) while abroad; Boggs through his writing, the organizations he helped build, his mentoring of younger activists, and other efforts in Detroit. All of this grew his reputation as an important voice of revolutionary change and his ability to bridge generations of black radicals.

Black Power and Beyond

The publication of *The American Revolution* brought Boggs national (and to some extent international) recognition as a provocative and original thinker, and this helped further expand his network of fellow activists and thinkers. This notoriety also led to numerous invitations for Boggs to speak, participate in forums, and publish his writings. As a consequence, he became an increasingly active figure within mid-1960s black radical political circles, contributing to ideological debates and helping build organizational networks that pushed against the boundaries of civil rights discourse. Indeed, while media attention focused on the efforts of national civil rights organizations to dismantle segregation during the first half of the 1960s, an emergent political perspective among many black thinkers and activists across the country challenged the efficacy and even legitimacy of liberal integrationist politics. In his speeches and writings during the years 1963–66, as the civil rights movement was transforming into a struggle for Black Power, Boggs set out to do the theoretical work for this next stage of the black struggle.

He was also an activist. Along with his intellectual work, Boggs participated in or helped form several political organizations during the 1960s. Indeed, his writing and organizing frequently went hand-in-hand, one being influenced by or growing out of the other. And he undertook most of these efforts in collaboration with Grace Lee Boggs. During November 1963, they helped organize the Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference in Detroit, a gathering of black militants and radicals from across the country, where Malcolm X gave one of his most famous speeches, which has come to be known by the title "Message to the Grassroots." Grace was named secretary and James chairman of the continuation committee. The next year, they were key figures in the Michigan branch of the Freedom Now Party (FNP), an all-black political party based on the principle of independent black political action (a principle that would become, within two years, one of the primary political commitments of Black Power). In 1965 the Boggsses convened a meeting of activists and leaders from several radical black organizations to build a coalition group that could push the civil rights struggle in new directions. The two-day affair, which took place in the basement of the Boggsses' east-side Detroit home, led to the formation of the Organization for Black Power (OBP) in May 1965—a full year before the Black Power slogan erupted onto the American political scene. During 1964–65 the Boggsses also worked closely with Max Stanford (Muhammad Ahmad) and RAM, whose internationalist and revolutionary nationalist program prefigured (and in some ways helped launch) Black Power.⁸⁹

Each group was short-lived and, if measured by the size of its membership roles or its immediate impact on the movement, could be judged unsuccessful or ineffectual. However, such an assessment misses the significance of these and similar efforts. They were important attempts to work out new political forms, develop and implement new ideas, and devise coordinated strategic approaches. Furthermore, they were forward-looking attempts to assess the new political circumstances emerging from the gains (and failures) of the civil rights movement. Thus, these activities were important steps in the process of movement building and the emergence of Black Power.

Their experiences in organizing the Grassroots Leadership Conference, the FNP, and the OBP informed the Boggsses' jointly authored essay "The City Is the Black Man's Land." Published in April 1966 in *Monthly Review*, the essay argued that, with African Americans soon to become a majority in many of the country's largest cities, the black movement should focus on establishing urban political power.⁹⁰ In addition to these demographic changes, they cited the recent expansion of the civil rights movement beyond the South and the Watts uprising in August 1965 as significant changes requiring the movement to develop new strategies, programs, and objectives. Moving beyond the call for self-determination and community control of black areas within cities (which would be heard frequently during the late 1960s and early 1970s), the Boggsses called for black people to claim control over the administrative functions of cities as a whole (as opposed to black sections or communities within cities). "The war is not only *in* America's cities," they asserted, "it is *for* these cities."⁹¹ Essentially, they theorized a program of black political power in the nation's urban areas as such: "self-government of the major cities by the black majority, mobilized behind leaders and organizations of its own creation and prepared to reorganize the structure of

city government and city life from top to bottom.”⁹² The essay was, in effect, an attempt to deepen the movement’s theoretical basis by formulating a revolutionary theory of black urban struggle that would reorganize not just black communities but American society.

“The City Is the Black Man’s Land” was the Boggses’ first published collaborative work, and as such it is an important marker of their intellectual and political partnership. The essay is an early example of what Jennifer Jung Hee Choi has characterized as the Boggses’ “increasingly inseparable ideological and political collaboration.”⁹³ Grace Lee and James Boggs shared a fundamental political outlook, but they frequently differed on specific political questions and at times took opposing positions. Also, their divergent backgrounds and distinct styles often produced compatible but different analyses. This resulted in a generative process of give-and-take in which they learned from and challenged each other. Thus, the nature of their collaboration was such that by the mid-1960s, if not sooner, ideas and concepts flowed freely between.

The essay also reveals another essential component of the Boggses’ collaboration, namely the fluid and reciprocal relationship between their theoretical work and political activism. That is, their intellectual and theoretical work was organically connected to their political work, with each informing the other in a dynamic process of mutual generation. Because it both grew out of and critically assessed OBP and other political developments, the essay is a ready illustration of how the Boggses’ intellectual and political work fused together. The essay is among those collected in Jimmy’s second book, *Racism and the Class Struggle: Further Pages from a Black Worker’s Notebook* (several of which, including “The City Is the Black Man’s Land,” are included in this book). Published in 1970, the book includes essays and speeches from 1963 through the end of the decades, and together they provide informed commentary and critical analysis from within the Black Power movement as it was unfolding.

The Black Power slogan erupted onto the American political landscape in June 1966, two months after the publication of “The City Is the Black Man’s Land.” Many saw the introduction of the slogan during the Meredith March by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activists Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Willie Ricks (Mukasa Dada) as sudden and dramatic, instantly drawing sharp and antagonistic responses. But for people in black communities across the country, the slogan captured a mood that already existed and a political perspective already in the making. Cutting even deeper into an already fractured American racial order, the introduction of Black Power and the emergent militancy that it represented marked the beginning of the end of the civil rights movement. In the turbulent weeks and months to follow, black activists across the country quickly took Black Power as their mantle. New formations such as the Black Panther Party, which was formed in October 1966, sprung up almost immediately, while existing grassroots groups across the country continued their work with renewed vigor under the banner of Black Power. At the same time, two of the most prominent national civil rights organizations, SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), declared themselves Black Power organizations. SNCC and CORE had already begun to question their commitment to nonviolence and liberal integrationism, and both organizations were in the midst of an ideological

transformation by the summer of 1966. So the arrival of the “Black Power” slogan put a name to a sentiment that was already there; it articulated for many members of SNNC and CORE—and for the countless others who joined the movement—a new political perspective already in the making.

Commentators of all stripes immediately seized upon the slogan, and within weeks a national debate emerged over its meaning and its impact on the civil rights movement and on the nation. Opinions varied widely, even as to the definition of the term, but all recognized that Black Power represented a fundamental challenge to the precepts and goals of the civil rights movement—that is to say, however amorphous and slippery the concept of Black Power was, it nonetheless represented a new movement. James and Grace Lee Boggs emerged as active and influential participants in the new movement. In an era that produced larger-than-life personalities, the Boggses certainly were not recognizable Black Power figures. Nevertheless, by mid-decade they were widely known within movement circles. Indeed, the Boggses had helped lay the groundwork for the emergence of Black Power both theoretically and organizationally during the early 1960s, particularly in Detroit.

James Boggs emerged as one of the most thoughtful and insightful theorists of the movement.⁹⁴ He wrote several articles during the second half of the 1960s, engaging in and trying to shape political and ideological debates of the movement. For example, in “Black Power: A Scientific Concept Whose Time Has Come” and “Culture and Black Power,” both originally published in 1967 and collected in *Racism and the Class Struggle*, he foresaw some of Black Power’s ideological pitfalls and urged its adherents to base their struggles on a serious analysis of historical and political dynamics, not just the immediacy of the moment. He saw Black Power as a new stage in the historical development of the black movement, and in much of his writing he attempted to develop a theoretical framework for understanding that new stage and advancing the struggle toward revolutionary action. In “The Future Belongs to the Dispossessed: King, Malcolm, and the Future of the Black Revolution” (1968), he exhorted Black Power adherents to recognize that

[w]hen Black Power took over the center stage of the revolution, it was not just a new stage of development. It also required new insights into the positive objectives of the movement different from those defined by King, and a concrete organization to achieve these objectives which Malcolm did not have the time to organize. Black Power now has the responsibility to structure and state its demands and to organize its struggles just as King did for his stage of the movement. When a movement moves from a reform stage to a revolutionary stage, it requires not only people who have developed out of the past but a clear concept of the further development of goals and struggles to achieve these goals.⁹⁵

While James Boggs wrote these and other essays for national audiences, and he intended them to engage broad debates within the movement, he and Grace also attempted to apply and refine their ideas through local grassroots organizing. For example, in October 1966 (the same month the Black Panther Party was formed) the Boggses teamed up with Rev. Albert Cleage, one of Detroit’s most militant and high-profile Black Power activists, to form the Inner City Organizing Committee (ICOC). The Boggses had worked with Cleage since the beginning of the decade on several efforts, including the Freedom Now Party,

and the ICOC grew out of this relationship and their continuing efforts to build a grassroots political movement in Detroit. It also represented one of the many localized expressions of Black Power politics that arose across the nation in the wake of the Meredith March. Conceived as “a disciplined organization whose responsibility shall be to promote the welfare, organize the power and expand the rights of the people of the Inner City,”⁹⁶ the ICOC expressed this emergent political consciousness of the historical moment. Like many other local groups that would emerge during the Black Power era, the ICOC attempted to identify and deal with the specific needs and circumstances of black urban communities. However, the group was somewhat unique in that it asserted that residents of the inner city not only had “the right and responsibility . . . to organize for their power, protection and benefit” but also that their struggle took on a broader political and historical significance. This task had “never been more urgent,” stated the group’s constitution, “than at this stage in history when the vast majority of the population in this advanced country have become urban residents and when all the problems that face mankind in the Twentieth Century are concentrated in the Inner City.”⁹⁷

The organizing of the ICOC during the fall and winter of 1966 was part of a wider network of activity among activists building a grassroots movement for Black Power in Detroit. Indeed, the political and cultural activity among African Americans in Detroit leading up to and during 1966 suggests the concept of Black Power had arrived in Detroit before the slogan became a part of the political landscape in June 1966. Expressions of this activity included a militant student group named UHURU (“freedom” in Swahili), GOAL led by Richard Henry, Milton Henry, and Reverend Cleage, an active presence of RAM, Vaughn’s Bookstore and its black nationalist collective and study groups, Forum ‘65, Forum ‘66, and Forum ‘67, and Cleage’s militant community newspaper, *Illustrated News*.⁹⁸ Furthermore, by the summer of 1966 Detroit had also emerged as one of the centers of the Black Arts movement, which was described by Larry Neal, one of the movement’s key figures, as the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the black power concept.”⁹⁹

For these activists, as well as for the city (and to some extent the nation) more generally, the concept of Black Power achieved a new level of intensity with the Detroit rebellion in July 1967.¹⁰⁰ Sparked by a police raid of an after-hours drinking establishment (called a blind pig) in the 12th Street area, one of Detroit’s largest black neighborhoods, the disturbance lasted five days and claimed forty-three lives (thirty killed by law enforcement officers).¹⁰¹ In the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, city officials and civic leaders scrambled to make sense of the violence, anger, and deep-seated resentment unleashed during the nearly weeklong uprising, and they quickly crafted a range of responses designed to ensure that the city did not experience a recurrence going forward. Meanwhile, the uprising had squarely focused the city’s attention on the various “black militants” who were now seen as an unavoidable if unsettling and even frightening piece of Detroit’s social and political landscape. In a series of columns on the rebellion in the *Detroit News*, Louis Lomax, a relatively prominent black journalist, identified six people as most responsible for Black Power activity in the city: James and Grace Lee Boggs, Reverend Cleage, Milton Henry, Richard Henry, and Ed Vaughn.¹⁰² Ostensibly written to explain why the uprising

occurred, Lomax's columns were an inflammatory and factually flawed effort, succeeding only in adding to the speculation among newspapers, police, city officials, and others who thought (incorrectly) that the civil disturbance might have been the result of a conspiracy or an organized effort by Black Power militants. The Boggses were in California during the July 23–28 eruption, and they certainly played no role in instigating the rebellion, nor did they have any impact on its course or direction. The rebellion did, however, have an effect on them, as it did activists throughout the city.

The rebellion galvanized Black Power sentiments and political energies in Detroit. Over the next two years several new Black Power groups were formed in the city, many of them organized by people who had been collaborators and allies of the Boggses in local Detroit struggles. For example, in 1968 former members of UHURU and other black auto workers formed the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), which by 1969 had grown to form the city-wide League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW). Also in that year, the Henry brothers (taking the names Gaidi and Imari Obadele) formed the Republic of New Africa. In yet another expression of black nationalism and Black Power militancy, Rev. Albert Cleage rechristened Central Congregational Church as the Shrine of the Black Madonna Church. Already a center of movement activity, the church and its doctrine of black Christian nationalism was emerging as an important institution in post-rebellion black Detroit. These and other expressions of Black Power politics reflected the intensity and variety of movement activity in Detroit following the July 1967 uprising.

As for the Boggses, Grace recalled that the rebellion "forced us to rethink a lot of philosophical questions."¹⁰³ The Detroit rebellion erupted just days after the Newark, New Jersey, uprising, and both took place in the still ominous shadow cast by the Watts uprising in 1965. Together, they demonstrated the powerful impact of urban uprisings on Black Power politics. For the Boggses, the urgency, anger, and outrage embodied in these rebellions led them to reevaluate and further develop their understanding of the revolutionary process and the place of urban black youth and spontaneous rebellions in that process. Thus, as they watched events unfold nationally and in Detroit, the Boggses felt the need "to draw a clear distinction between rebellion . . . and revolution."¹⁰⁴

Meanwhile, Jimmy continued to receive invitations to speak at universities and conferences across the country. In addition, *The American Revolution* had been published in Italian, Spanish, Japanese, French, Portuguese, and Catalan, bringing his ideas to an ever-widening international audience. In June 1968, as plans were under way to publish a collection of Jimmy's essays in Italian, the publisher invited him to speak to university students in several Italian cities. Thus, in the wake of the student and worker revolt in Paris, the Boggses traveled to Europe, observing political developments and sharing ideas with students and activists throughout Italy and in Paris.¹⁰⁵ From there, they spent a week with African revolutionary Kwame Nkrumah in Conakry, Guinea, where he had been living in exile since being deposed as president of Ghana by a 1966 military coup. In 1967 the Boggses had begun correspondence with Nkrumah, whom Grace had known since 1945, to arrange their visit. The week in Conakry gave them the opportunity to discuss the political situation

in both Africa and the United States, which they continued through correspondence and the sharing of writings until Nkrumah's death in 1972.¹⁰⁶

When the Boggesses returned to the United States at the end of June 1968 they revisited their concern with the theoretical difference between rebellion and revolution. The fast-paced and powerful developments within the Black Power movement (including the assassination of Martin Luther King, the subsequent wave of urban rebellions, and the rapid rise of the Black Panther Party) led them also to concentrate on "projecting and initiating struggles that involve [the oppressed] in assuming the responsibility for creating the new values, truths, infrastructures, and institutions that are necessary to a new society."¹⁰⁷ Shortly after returning to the country, they spent time with their longtime comrades Freddy and Lyman Paine on Sutton Island in Maine, where they had wide-ranging conversations about these issues. Through these discussions (which the four continued every summer for several years), the Boggesses began working through the theoretical concepts that would inform their next intellectual and political effort.¹⁰⁸

It was in this context, and responding to these circumstances, that Jimmy wrote, in early 1969, a pamphlet titled *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*.¹⁰⁹ The pamphlet continued his (and Grace's) efforts to develop a revolutionary program for the Black Power movement. The *Manifesto's* primary objective was to advance the proposition that a black revolutionary political organization—a "vanguard party"—was necessary to provide revolutionary leadership to the Black Power movement. The *Manifesto* begins with a preamble stating in brief the rationale and general tasks for a black revolutionary party, and then provides in four concise chapters a systematic analysis of the historical development and revolutionary potential of black struggle. Read carefully, and in light of the Boggesses' intellectual and political work up to this point, the *Manifesto* is both a record of the ideas they developed through the decade and a manifestation of their commitment, self-consciously as theoreticians, to grapple with the changing circumstances, challenges, and opportunities facing the Black Power movement.

By 1970, Grace and Jimmy were putting into motion their plans to build the type of cadre organization they had projected in the *Manifesto*. Such an organization would address the need to develop new kinds of leadership—leaders who were grounded in a revolutionary ideology and rooted in local communities rather than itinerant, larger-than-life public leaders such as Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. Toward this end, the Boggesses led "revolutionary study groups" with young radical black activists in Detroit. This led to the formation of an organization called the Committee for Political Development (CPD), which later took the name Advocators. CPD/Advocators worked in conjunction with a group of radical black activists in Philadelphia called Pacesetters. The two groups sought to assess the inability of the Black Power movement to respond to the various emerging crises in American political and social life during the first half of the 1970s. To advance their analyses, CPD/Pacesetters wrote and distributed statements on such topics as the Angela Davis case, the Attica prison uprising, Watergate, and the energy crisis. The primary goal of CPD/Pacesetters was to develop revolutionary ideology and disciplined leadership for the Black Power movement.¹¹⁰

Also in 1970, the Boggses gave a series of lectures titled "On Revolution" at Wayne State University's Center for Adult Education. These lectures, which grew out of the revolutionary study groups, probed the historical and theoretical lessons to be gleaned from a variety of revolutionary situations, including the Russian, Chinese, and Cuban revolutions, several instances of "the African Revolution" (Ghana, Kenya, and Guinea-Bissau, among others), the "People's War in Vietnam," and "the Black Revolution in the U.S." These lectures led to the publication of the Boggses' jointly authored book, *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*. Completed in 1973 and published the following year by Monthly Review Press, the book presented an original and provocative assessment of revolutionary movements at a historical moment that many people considered to be ripe with revolutionary possibility the world over.

Indeed, one of the key arguments of the book, which in some ways the Boggses began developing in the JFT and reworked through the Black Power period, is that those who would make a revolution in the United States should learn from other revolutionary situations but must also and always attend themselves to the specific character of the United States so as to build a revolution appropriate for the United States. "The revolution to be made in the United States," they wrote, "will be the first revolution in history to require the masses to make material sacrifices rather than to acquire more material things."¹¹¹ In this forward-looking analysis, they anticipated a strain of thought regarding the nature of progressive social change that has gained increasingly wider acceptance during the four-and-a-half decades since the publication of the book: "We must give up many of the things which this country has enjoyed at the expense of damning over one-third of the world into a state of underdevelopment, ignorance, disease, and early death."¹¹² Given the prominent role of U.S. consumption and production patterns in creating our current environmental and ecological crises, and with these patterns shamefully implicated in an increasing economic disparity between the global North and South, this passage is especially prescient.

The National Organization for an American Revolution (NOAR)

Revolution and Evolution arrived as the Black Power movement was coming to an end. By the mid-1970s, most expressions of the movement had either succumbed to the harassment and repression of law enforcement agencies, collapsed under the weight of corrosive organizational dynamics and internecine leadership rivalries, or fizzled out as activists moved on to other endeavors. The Boggses believed as well that the movement's inability to project a new vision for society in the face of significant changes in the nation's political economy contributed to the collapse of Black Power. For example, by the mid-1970s black mayors in Detroit and other major urban centers had come to power largely on the strength of black political mobilizations and continued migration to urban centers during the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, these electoral victories and emerging black urban regimes seemed powerless in the face of the disinvestment and deindustrialization in the devastating central cities. They similarly lacked a political program to deal with the persistence of urban poverty alongside an increasingly visible black middle class riding a wave of opportunity to

suburban neighborhoods and professional careers—a wave that was created largely by struggles for integration *and* for black power. More broadly, by the 1980s—with the election of Ronald Reagan, the deepening of urban crisis, and the radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s safely muted—radicals confronted a dramatically different and at times seemingly futile political landscape.

In this climate and context, the Boggses reconfigured and redoubled their efforts to build a revolutionary organization during the second half of the 1970s, culminating in the formation of the National Organization for an American Revolution (NOAR). Formally organized in 1978, NOAR's origins lay in previous groups such as the Committee for Political Development and Pacesetters, and it grew out of the networks of organizations that the Boggses had developed during the preceding decade and a half. Thus, NOAR in some ways was an organic continuation and extension of their Black Power activism, building on their experiences and theoretical work over the preceding two decades. Yet it was also an attempt to create a new organizational form and to forge a new movement. In NOAR, the Boggses and their comrades sought to build, on a national scale, a "cadre" (as opposed to a mass) organization composed of disciplined and dedicated members. Accordingly, the group was devoted to developing the potential of every member to give leadership and, collectively, to the patient development of revolutionary theory. With "locals" across the country, NOAR envisioned its task as laying the groundwork for dual or parallel power structures and localized self-government. They held public forums, carried out local organizing campaigns, and wrote pamphlets and short statements on contemporary issues and local concerns.¹¹³

NOAR produced an impressive body of literature of political and social analysis, which they distributed through self-published pamphlets, statements, leaflets, and occasional newsletters.¹¹⁴ The following statement appeared on all NOAR material:

We are American citizens who have chosen to become revolutionists out of our deep concern for the future of our people and our nation. Our members reflect the rich ethnic diversity of our country. At the same time we place special emphasis on developing Black Americans and other Americans of color into revolutionary leaders—because we know that there will be no American revolution unless those at the bottom are involved in the struggle for a new America.

We believe that eventually we will have to take power away from the capitalists who, in their determination to increase profits, are destroying our right and responsibility to govern ourselves. At this point, however, our main task is to create a movement in the hearts and minds of the American people—so that we can stop seeing ourselves as victims and start exercising the power within.¹¹⁵

Implicit in this statement are two ideas that emerged from James and Grace Lee Boggs's theoretical and political work during the 1960s and 1970s and which, along with their comrades in NOAR, they continued to articulate and further develop. One is the concept of "two-sided transformation," which emphasized the need for personal transformation along with structural transformation. For example, they said that revolutionary change required changes in capitalist values as well as institutions. Thus, the oppressed and radicals, those who would struggle to change the system, must confront their own individualism and ma-

terialism while simultaneously engaging in struggles to transform social structures. This idea was embodied in the phrase “Change Yourself to Change the World,” which served as the title of a NOAR pamphlet and which members frequently invoked. Second, NOAR called for “a new self-governing America” in which people accept responsibility for making social, economic, and political decisions rather than leaving these to politicians and corporations. This notion of a self-governing America—based on group members’ individual and collective experiences in the civil rights, Black Power, and antiwar movements, as well as a reflection of the Boggsses’ evolving concept of revolution—was an attempt to push beyond the familiar activist frameworks focused on struggling for rights or articulating grievances. It was also an explicit rejection of the Marxist- and anti-colonial-inspired models of revolution as a struggle solely to take power (as in taking over the state). Instead of thinking of themselves only as victims making demands on others (i.e., the system or those in power), citizens must make demands on themselves as well. Through these and other ideas, NOAR attempted to articulate a vision of revolutionary change in which people transform themselves into more socially and politically conscious citizens; the entire society is thus enriched by an expansion and deepening of human identity.

NOAR enjoyed a successful period of intense and effective leadership development, but by the mid-1980s the organization was falling apart.¹¹⁶ The collapse of the organization was a painful and bitter experience for many members, including the Boggsses.¹¹⁷ They did not, however, despair or retreat from political activity. Just as they had done after the breakup of previous organizations, the Boggsses used the NOAR experience as a guide to build new organizations and spaces within which they could continue their political work, seeking again to create new ideas and political practices to meet new circumstances. As NOAR wound down between 1983 and 1985, the Boggsses engaged in other activities, including community organizing with the Michigan Committee to Organize the Unemployed and working to close down crack houses. This activism soon grew to full-fledged involvement with grassroots groups and struggles, as they turned their attention squarely to these social and economic challenges that they saw in their own east-side neighborhood and all over the city.

These challenges—the unemployment, poverty, and crime in a city devastated by the flight of industry, an epidemic of youth violence, the frightful ravishes of crack cocaine—marked the post-industrial landscape of 1980s Detroit. From the mid-1980s to Jimmy’s death in 1993, he and Grace participated in or helped found a series of small, community-based organizations that responded in some way to an aspect of the crisis facing the city’s residents, who during the 1980s and 1990s were increasingly black and poor. Their efforts helped weave a tapestry of grassroots struggles in post-industrial Detroit.¹¹⁸ In the mid-1980s they helped organize seniors (primarily women) in a group called Detroiters for Dignity. In 1987 they became involved with Save Our Sons and Daughters (SOSAD), a new organization committed to mobilizing communities to combat youth violence founded by Clementine Barfield, who had lost her sixteen-year-old son in a shooting in the summer of 1986. Throughout the rest of the decade and into the 1990s the Boggsses worked with SOSAD to reduce violence, foster a culture of healing and hope, and create meaningful

pathways for young people's development.¹¹⁹ In 1988 the Boggsses joined with Dorothy Garner and other local activists to form WE-PROS (We the People Reclaim Our Streets), a city-wide network of neighborhood groups that held regular anti-crack marches in different neighborhoods across the city. Around the same time, they joined a coalition of groups named United Detroiters Against Gambling (UDAG), which successfully defeated Mayor Coleman Young's proposal to legalize casino gambling in the city.¹²⁰ The group evolved into Detroiters Uniting (DU), a multiethnic coalition advocating a vision for Detroit based on neighborhood empowerment and opposition to Young's developer-driven model of urban revitalization.¹²¹

In each of these efforts James Boggs brought his movement experience and his sense of politics as individual and collective human development to the specific struggles being waged. The practice of community building—the need to repair social connections and use these ties as the basis for tackling community problems and meeting community needs—was perhaps the guiding principle of his activism during this period.

Impact and Legacy

Boggs engaged much of this activity as he faced deteriorating health. In 1988, at the age of sixty-nine, he was diagnosed with cancer of the bladder, which required frequent medical tests and several operations, and in 1991 his doctors discovered a cancerous tumor in his left lung. He underwent chemotherapy, which successfully eradicated the cancer in his bladder, and radiation treatment sent the lung tumor into remission. However, another tumor in his lung appeared in 1992. Boggs nonetheless remained active. He gave support and counsel to community activists engaged in local struggles, wrote letters to the editor and columns for the SOSAD newsletter, and continued to speak to audiences of young people, sharing the lessons he had learned from five decades of activism. He shared with them his commitment to revolutionary change and his conviction that ordinary citizens have both the ability and the duty to bring about that change.

These exchanges and interactions with young people during the final years of his life reflect important qualities of James Boggs's political legacy. In particular, it is worth briefly highlighting two characteristics that were central to his intellectual and political identity. The first is his intellectual boldness. He saw himself as a theoretician capable of tackling the most pressing political problems and of projecting grand ideas. Second, he understood political struggle—that is, the task of imagining and shaping society—as available to everyone. Each member of society, he said, had the capacity—indeed, the responsibility—to participate in the life of the community and the broader society. In his final years, Boggs increasingly sought not only to teach and inspire young people but also to empower them, helping them see themselves as agents of change.

Perhaps the most enduring expression of his commitment to empowering young people is Detroit Summer, an "intergenerational multicultural youth program/movement to rebuild, redefine, re-spirit Detroit from the ground up."¹²² In January 1992 (just a year and a half before his death) Jimmy, Grace, and a few others developed the idea for Detroit Sum-

mer out of their analysis of what was needed to address the city's contemporary political and social crisis and, specifically, their belief that rebuilding communities was an essential component of rebuilding the city. As Grace recounts in her memoir,

Thinking back to how Mississippi Freedom Summer raised the civil rights movement to a new plateau by bringing young people from the North to assist in the Voter Registration Drive in 1964, Jimmy came up with the idea of bringing young people to Detroit to work with local youth in order to dramatize the idea that rebuilding our cities is at the heart of the new movement that is emerging as we come to the end of the twentieth century.¹²³

This provides another example of the important role that historical analysis played in Boggs's political vision. It also points up again his use of dialectical thinking. Especially attentive to historical change, he constantly assessed contemporary realities and political challenges and then devised new modes of political activity to bring about change.

Boggs's belief in the importance of dialectical thinking was part of his profound respect for ideas, which he frequently tried to impress upon young people engaged in their own struggles. This was the case right up to his last days. In February 1993, he was put on oxygen. The next month, however, he participated in a SOSAD workshop on movement building. Frail and moving slowly, he nonetheless spoke with a passion and conviction that conveyed his sense of commitment. "I believe ideas are life and death questions, and peoples oughta struggle over 'em," he told the group, in his customary "Alabamese." "My concept of what the duty of a human being is, the chief responsibility and duty of all human beings," he continued, "is to advance human kind to another level of evolution."¹²⁴

Four months after the SOSAD workshop, James Boggs died of lung cancer. His death was not sudden nor did it come as a surprise. In the middle of May he had entered a hospice program. Despite this, he continued to write, speak, and organize into the summer, though at a slower pace.¹²⁵ During his final days, his family and close friends attended to him while he received visitors. He passed away at home on the morning of July 22, 1993. His body was cremated, and two memorial services were held on July 31, the first a small family service and the second a larger gathering of family members and dozens of friends.

Three months later, friends and comrades from across the country gathered in Detroit for another memorial, this one a joyous celebration of Jimmy's long commitment to community building and activism. The memorial was called "Celebrating a Life" and included music, poetry, and remarks from friends, all of which was followed by a reception and a roundtable discussion titled "The Struggle for the Future," hosted by Detroit Summer.¹²⁶ Grace and two of Jimmy's Detroit comrades, Nkenge Zola and John Gruchala, composed a tribute booklet for the celebration titled *James Boggs: An American Revolutionary* that included dozens of messages from Jimmy's friends and comrades across the country. Their words expressed sadness and a sense of loss, but they also gave testimony to the broad impact of his five decades of political and intellectual work. They spoke of his plainspoken yet profound ideas, his down-home and compassionate manner, and the many ways in which he taught and inspired people. Many of them recalled how he constantly challenged them to think in new ways. And nearly all of them said that, above all, he touched people

because he was a kind, warm, and loving person. The booklet vividly captures the interpersonal relationships at the heart of James Boggs's political practice.

Among the attendees of the memorial celebration were Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, the artists and activists who had been friends of the Boggses since the mid-1960s. Dee and Davis, of course, were themselves a compelling study in marital, artistic, and political union. Over the course of their storied careers and marriage they carefully calibrated their shared commitment to being artists as well as principled and politically engaged citizens. In their remarks at the memorial, they credited the relationship they built with Jimmy and Grace as an important part of their journey. Just days before Jimmy's death, Dee had penned a long poem in his honor titled "For James, Writer, Activist, Worker" that expressed her gratitude for his political passion, theoretical insights, and generosity of spirit. By relating the affections that animated Jimmy's relationship with her and her husband, these two stanzas from Dee's poem eloquently underscore the sentiments expressed throughout the tribute booklet.

You, dear James, you and Grace, represent
 The nobleness of life
 Stalwart cheerleaders of the
 BETTER WAY contingent
 Water on the seed bed of exciting and
 Necessary choices
 You have certainly opened us—Ossie and me
 To horizons of thought and theory that
 Underline and
 Strengthen so much of what we have done and
 Hope to do in our remaining minutes in the
 Arts. You have taught us ways of thinking
 And looking at Life and its challenges
 That without you
 May have escaped us.

When you move through the glory tunnel
 My heart will track the journey with you
 Shouting
 LOVE, LOVE, LOVE. WE TRULY LOVE YOU.
 Best we so far know how.¹²⁷

These words, along with the many testimonies from others who worked with and were touched by James Boggs, invite us to consider the life and work of a self-proclaimed "revolutionist," an activist and thinker who, though relatively unknown today, was involved in some of the most profound movements for social transformation in the twentieth century. He spent decades thinking, writing, and acting to bring about the next American revolu-

tion. His understanding of this revolution—what its objectives will be, who will bring it about, how it will transform society, what struggles it will call forth—grew and evolved into something quite different from previous examples of revolution or standard visions of revolutionary change focused on seizing state power, claiming rights, or increasing material well-being. “The only struggles worth pursuing,” he was often heard saying, “are those which advance the whole society and enable all human beings to evolve to a new and higher stage of their human potential.”¹²⁸ By exploring how he came to this conclusion, we will not only gain insights into the historical periods of which he was a part but we might also open up new perspectives from which to fashion our own visions of transformation in light of the challenges we face today. The writings in this volume offer a place to begin this exploration.