



Living For Change: An Autobiography

Grace Lee Boggs, Ossie Davis (Foreword by)

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"More than a deeply moving memoir, this is a book of revelation. Grace Lee Boggs, Chinese American, middle class, highly educated, discovers through her encounters with remarkable rebels, blue collars as well as philosophers, where the body is buried: who is doing what to whom in our society. It is an adventure that is truly liberating". Studs Terkel"Grace Lee Boggs has made a fundamental difference in keeping alive the traditions of the struggles for freedom and democracy". Cornel West

Living for Change is a sweeping account of the life of an untraditional radical from the end of the thirties, through the cold war, the civil rights era, and the rise of Black Power, the Nation of Islam, and the Black Panthers to the present efforts to rebuild our crumbling urban communities. This fascinating autobiography traces the story of a woman who transcended class and racial boundaries to pursue her passionate belief in a better society.

Grace Lee Boggs was raised in New York City during a time when her father was not allowed to buy land for their home because he was Chinese. Educated at Barnard and Bryn Mawr, Boggs was in her twenties when radical politics beckoned, and she was inspired to become a revolutionary focusing on the black community.

During her early years as an activist in New York, Boggs began a twenty-year friendship and collaboration with C. L. R. James, the brilliant and influential West Indian Marxist to whom she devotes a revelatory chapter of this book. In 1953, she moved to Detroit where, she writes, "radical history had been made and could be made again". It was also the home of James Boggs, an African American auto worker (and later author and revolutionary theoretician) who would become one of the movement's freshest and most persuasive voices, as well as Grace's husband. Beginning with their work together on the newsletter Correspondence, Grace and James formed the core of a network that over the years would include Malcolm X, Lyman Paine, Ping Ferry, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, Kwame Nkrumah, Stokely Carmichael, and inner-city youth.

Rich in the personalities and anecdotes of twentieth-century progressive activism, Living for Change is an involving and inspiring look at a remarkable woman who continues to dedicate her life to social justice.

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From Reader Review Living For Change: An Autobiography for online ebook

Cale says

great picture of a woman whose 60 + year trajectory as an activist in the civil rights struggle should inspire us all. the description of the unfortunate schisms and splits in the radical left of the 30's 40's and 50's is sad but instructive.

Linda says

Didn't agree with everything, but there are lessons and important history to be gleaned. Grace does a great job at capturing the complexities of people in her life; she doesn't romanticize anyone. I wonder if/how Vincent Chin's murder affected her and I almost wish this was discussed (it seems begging to be asked given their proximity and his murder a few years before she went to China), although I'm not surprised it wasn't as she did not lean into Asian-American identity until the 1990s.

Grace/Jimmy's core tenets (if you will):

- not buying into minority/oppressed thinking
- revolution is about becoming more *human* human beings
- "dialectical humanism" expanding marxist economic development to emphasize need for moral, political, spiritual development

"In those days, it was assumed that the Chinese in this country were only '*sojourners*,' that we/they would be going back home after making and saving enough money. In fact, as a child I thought *going back* was one word." (1)

"...I decided to go down to the Socialist Party headquarters. It didn't take me long to conclude that I didn't want to join them. After learning that I had a Ph.D. from Bryn Mawr, the young man I spoke to suggested that I speak at one of their upcoming meetings. Groucho Marx said he didn't need to be a member of any club that would have him as a member. In the same spirit I couldn't see myself joining a group that could overlook my obvious ignorance because of my academic credentials. Because of that experience, I have steadfastly refused over the years to identify myself as a Ph.D." (34)

"What is the purpose of revolution? To restore the sense of time? To create a new relationship between necessity and choice?...How should people spend their lives? What is the relation between wants and thoughts? Between masses and revolutionists? What kind of vision of themselves and of society could transform rebels into revolutionists?" (149)

"Masses have wants; revolutionists must have thoughts. They can't just rely on the wants and spontaneity of the masses." (149)

"Being a victim of oppression in the United States, [Jimmy] insisted, is not enough to make you a revolutionary, just as dropping out of your mother's womb is not enough to make you human. People who are full of hate and anger against their oppressors or who only see Us versus Them can make a rebellion, but not a revolution. The oppressed internalize the values of the oppressor. Therefore, any group that achieves

power, no matter how oppressed, is not going to act differently from their oppressors as long as they have not confronted the values that they have internalized and consciously adopted different values. Precisely because the United States is so advanced technologically, precisely because it has developed an economic apparatus so productive that not only our needs but our wants can be satisfied, we cannot make a revolution without developing our human capacity to distinguish between needs and wants and to make responsible choices." (151-152)

"At the same time, it seemed to me that the Chinese were getting practice in making the hard choices that everyone on this planet will have to make in the next century. An important part of our underdevelopment in America, which is weakening us for the future, is that we think our rights are unlimited, that all possibilities are or should be open to us." (207) (in reference to one-child policy)

"I finally concluded that with more than a billion Chinese in China speaking Chinese, I didn't have to feel guilty about not speaking it myself. It was a very liberating conclusion." (208)

"We have to get rid of the myth that there is something sacred about large-scale production for the national and international market...We have to begin thinking of creating small enterprises which produce food, goods, and services for the local market, that is, for our communities and our city." - James Boggs, quoted in Lee Boggs (220)

"Radicals will spend years working with workers and/or blacks with very backward ideas because according to their ideology these are the revolutionary social forces, but even though they themselves very often come from the middle classes they have unable to exercise the same patience with people like themselves. On the other hand, I am increasingly convinced that to create twenty-first century cities and a twenty-first-century civilization out of the chaos in which we are now engulfed, it is going to take the imaginations, the skills, and the commitment of very diverse people from many different ethnic groups and very different backgrounds." (251) (in reference to not seeing radical groups involved in Healthy Detroit, a WHO initiative)

K. Zhou says

Yes! Found this book to be incredibly inspiring, just so much wisdom. During the course of reading this book, found myself constantly quoting from it in conversations.

John says

I watched Grace Lee Boggs on *Bill Moyers Journal* . She's been involved in most of social movements post the Depression.

Unfortunately, this book suffers from three problems.

- 1) She provides many details describing the nuances of the debates between the groups involved in the social movements without providing the context so that one can understand the nuances. The result is boring and long-winded. This is particularly true in chapter three while she talks about the communist movement.
- 2) Her writing is plagued with too many tangents, much like talking with your grandmother. At one point, she discusses various people involved with the start of the Detroit black power movement. At the end of each

paragraph she mentions what the person is doing now; it breaks up the story.

3) There's a bit of petty, personal attacks throughout the book. I understand that there are personal differences that arise throughout life and within social movements but her tone detracts from the story.

Colin says

I really got a lot out of this book...I especially liked the way Grace Lee Boggs' lifelong experiences at the center of radical activism in Detroit illuminated the historical discussions in Robin D.G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams*, which i really love.

Boggs also had a helpful analysis of the nature of organizing as related to social justice, seeing it as dialectical, or always changing and rife with conflict. In this way, she showed that what are often perceived as "failures" of the left--splinters, organizations starting and ending, a lack of "unity" in struggle, are not necessarily failure, but rather typical of the ever-changing nature of the world. I liked that.

My favorite chapter was the last, where she discussed the community-centered gardening movements she helped start in Detroit (such as Detroit Summers and Gardening Angels) and ties them to the larger movement for Environmental Justice, and again it's easy to see the relationship between her work and Kelley's when she explores the necessity of hope and dreaming in recreating the world as activists with community at the center.

Stylistically, I had a bit of trouble with the structure of the book as I felt it lacked an overall "arc." Each chapter was relatively disparate, and the transitions between them were somewhat jarring. Also, the book is a bit meandering when she takes note of a lot of seemingly pointless details such as "I remember I was really hot in that room."

That aside, though, Grace Lee Boggs is an amazing activist who everyone should know about. Read it!

Victoria Law says

She concentrates on her political relationships with people, including her husband Jimmy Lee Boggs. I would have liked to have known more about the personal dynamics of some of her relationships over the years. Still, an interesting read and an eye-opener of Detroit activism and organizing from the civil rights era to the present.

Leslie Reese says

I have owned this book for many years (I found the original receipt for its purchase stuck in the middle pages) but didn't have the temperament, attention, and interest to begin a serious reading of it until now.

Nkenge Zo!@ was a comrade in radical community politics in Detroit with James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs, and when I met her in the 1980s she would often make references to NOAR (National Organization for an American Revolution) but I was young and not particularly interested in becoming involved. A few times I attended a program or two put on by NOAR, or maybe there was a community arts program with NOAR representatives in attendance, bringing attention to grassroots actions taking place and encouraging participation.

These days I am very interested in looking into and learning about people whom I had access to in Detroit, and whose artistic, cultural, social, and scholarly work cut a path for me to walk through. I also have an interest in reading about the lives of unconventional women, and Grace Lee Boggs is certainly one such woman. She is still “alive and kicking,” lucid and wise---June 27, 2015 will be her 100th birthday! Her boundless idealism and optimism seem powered, in part, by a flow of regenerative energy that comes from being active (---rather than non-participatory---) in collaborative struggles for social, political, and environmental change; and testing the limits of her ideas and ideals.

If you aren’t already familiar with Grace Lee Boggs, you can check out a 2-minute trailer for a documentary about this 99-year-old philosopher and life-long community activist at <http://americanrevolutionaryfilm.com>. “American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs” was produced and directed by a much younger Asian American filmmaker, also named Grace Lee.

Originally published in 1998, **Living For Change** is easy to read and by that I mean it is engaging and full of historical details and linkages. Boggs is always weaving back and forth between practice and theory, past with present, and cross-pollinating principles and ideas from a range of voices and movements. Ideas and active engagement are constantly evolving in the person and in the world, and this resonates with me. One thing **Living For Change** does not do is talk about Grace Lee Boggs’ emotional self, nor does she reflect on her life’s events with a sense of longing or holding herself accountable for particular choices or behaviors. While I kind of miss that, I am interested in the construction of a narrative that doesn’t rely on these things, yet creates a feeling: a sense of deep love and care seem implicit to the values practiced. More echoes of this are described in the work and character of her husband, Jimmy Boggs (1919-1993) political activist, auto worker, and essayist; an African American and Alabama native, whom she writes about extensively. C.L.R. James also has his own chapter.

To me this book IS NOT excellent as an autobiography, but, rather for it’s tracing of a real person’s walk through activist development intellectually, spiritually, and through tangential experience. Her book sheds light on the tensions, limitations, commonalities and divisions between capitalist, communist, and socialist systems---which I think is so important because even though its been 60+ years since McCarthyism, people tend to have knee-jerk, fearful reactions to these “hot button” words without understanding that these are not systems-for-life-written-in-stone. She also discusses the difference between rebellion and revolution. The book is also important for the way it joins country with city, youth with elders, and illustrates some of the ways in which generations of multi-ethnic Detroiters from all walks of life have formed organizations and committees and taken actions to put progressive ideas into motion and not just to theorize and talk about them. It pains me whenever I read about Detroit and lazy journalists merely re-hash words describing decades of racial strife, yet never dig into the history of those Detroiters who have enjoyed friendships AND built coalitions to confront social, political, and environmental wrongs. This book is also important for people wanting to know how grassroots activists took up Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ideas to “explore strategies that would involve young people in ‘direct self-transforming and structure-transforming action’ in ‘our dying cities’...” (page 155) leading to such things as the conception of Detroit Summer; and movements to eradicate violence, champion health insurance for laid-off workers, shut down crackhouses, create public murals and cultivate community gardens.

Chance Grable says

This book provides insight into Boggs personal, political and ideological development throughout a significant chunk of the 20th century. Through decades of experiences as a participant in the American Left and Black Liberation Movements, Boggs life also reveals the ideological and political evolution of these movements. Her experiences often show a unique perspective of America social movement history because she participated in parts of movements that were less central to the broader movement, for example, the Black faction of the Old Left and the Leftist faction of the community anti violence movement. Throughout her life of transition from one idea or movement to the next, she took lessons and ideas with her and applied the current work and her growing ideological foundation that guided her. Overall, this book helped me better understand the relationship between ideas and activism.

Like most autobiographies I have read, this book has many parts that are largely irrelevant to the outside reader but were certainly substantial to the author especially her detailed accounts of her interpersonal relationships. I found that the meat of this book, where most of the ideas are is in the middle.

Marietje says

Grace Boggs gives the reader an inside view of not only the Civil Rights Movement, but of the struggle to rebuild Detroit through grassroots efforts. I agree with other reviewers that it is more of a history than an autobiography. I also feel that Grace Boggs writes more about other people's efforts than about her own. I hope that somebody else will come forward to write more closely about Grace's role in all the causes she fought for and still fights for, even at the age of 100.

Anna says

As other reviewers have mentioned, Grace Lee Boggs speaks very little on her feelings and regrets over the past 80-some years, but that by no means diminishes the value of the book. In describing her childhood and the influence of Chinese values on her personality, she talks about waking up from anaesthesia after a tonsil operation and immediately asking "How are the others?" instead of worrying about herself. Her autobiography is similarly concerned with what was going on around her, and she often speaks almost as a standby observer in her own life. At the same time, she is the kind of meeting-crazy activist who has filled her life to the brim with her passion for change and adaptation, and as she said in the documentary, she and her husband rarely talked about anything besides activism anyway! So it's not surprising. I wish the last section of the book, after James Boggs' death, was a bit more filled out, because it was the period in her life when she finally stood on her own.

That said, I've never read a better "timeline" of the Left over the past century. As a young-ish person, it's hard to understand when and how things shifted around, and Grace is an excellent guide, building in her own narrative into the changes.

Her sadness as the dissolution of NOAR, her confusion and lack of direction in the period after the 1967 Detroit rebellion, are part of what makes her story so inspiring. She is so open about her failures but eternally committed to adaptation, which I think we can all benefit from.

Marcy says

There is no doubt that Grace Lee Boggs was an extraordinary human and from her life as an activist there is much one can learn. Reading this book you get to witness her evolution in her organising work, filled with insightful observations about her setbacks and successes. It's refreshing to see someone who was able to devote her life to making the world around her a better place. It was also quite interesting to learn about her childhood years and her trip to China as an adult. The letters quoted in the book--especially from friends living in China--are quite revealing and illustrate quite a different take on what was happening in China in the 1980s. It's also wonderful to read about how environmental justice became a central part of her work towards the end of her life--including working on food security in Detroit. A fascinating read all around.

Spicy T AKA Mr. Tea says

I started this years ago, got to the last chapter and a half, and inextricably put it down. I recently picked it back up and finished it. It's a nice autobiography of Grace Lee Boggs and her husband Jimmy. Its focus is definitely socialism with a heavy nod toward the Marxist-Leninist strand. The politics weren't my favorite part, but it did offer some honest insight regarding this tendency in socialism as it is not an area of thought I'm dedicated to reading about. The last chapter offers some interest as she writes about her activism as an elder and her ability to stretch her wings and find her own way after Jimmy has died. I honestly felt like this autobiography was fairly narrow--name dropping the who's-who in Marxist-Leninist circles--people I've never heard of. Which is ok; it gave me exposure. The other interesting piece is the name of the book "Living for Change" which I contrast to say Emma Goldman's auto-biography "Living My Life." Whereas Goldman seemed to focus on doing and integration of her politics and her life, Boggs' seems to focus more on political arguments and theory sessions rather than doing or the integration of politics with life. But this is a somewhat vague recollection of the book. Still an remarkable woman who in her eighties and nineties is still going strong and still working to make Detroit a leader in the 21st century.

Rukshana says

I really enjoyed this book. I am surprised more people have not read it and written reviews on Goodreads. I was inspired to read it after Grace Lee Boggs visited Los Angeles and I heard so much about the conversations she had with local activists while she was here.

I haven't read many memoirs/autobiographies by political activists. It was fascinating to see how she lived her life as a self-identified revolutionary, how she created her life in that vision. The conflicts and ideological rifts between various "red" groups and her relationship with C.L.R. James was fascinating - endearing, frustrating, typical!

I hear some of the criticisms of other Goodreads readers that the book was very detailed, but being the dork that I am, I really loved those details. I actually want to hunt down many of the pamphlets and other publications she mentions (so many of them!).

Definitely full of lessons we can learn from today - lots of insight, struggle, and inspiring people. I found

James Boggs, her husband, an inspiration and amazing human being. The concept of "stretching one's humanity" as part of the goal and consequence of revolution resonated with me.

I think today's activists might have different analyses and language on violence and crime. The Boggs' intolerance for crime and consistent critique of the "victim mentality" in the black community may be off-putting to some. Grace's critique of the Black Panther Party was also something I had not often heard, since the BPP is generally (and sometimes uncritically) admired amongst today's generation of young activists. As with so many groups and activists of our movements, it is a complicated story, and not easily seen in black and white, right and wrong, effective or ineffective.

I would like to re-read this book someday and mark it up with notes - lots to reflect on here, especially what it means to dedicate one's life to social justice and how to persevere in that pursuit.

Nick Klagge says

Grace Lee Boggs is a fascinating person who I had never heard of until a friend recommended the movie "American Revolutionary," which focuses on her life (it's on Netflix; check it out!). GLB is a Chinese-American woman who was born in 1915, attended Barnard College and got a PhD in philosophy from Bryn Mawr, then became a political radical who spent her life in the black movement in the 50s, 60s and 70s, then in radical efforts to rebuild inner city Detroit from the 1980s through her death last year at the age of 100. Elise and I got this book from the library after watching the movie. While it definitely fleshed out some of the things that the movie necessarily had to skip over, it wasn't exactly what I hoped it would be. Her life is full of surprises--like how she identified so heavily with the black movement that she was basically totally uninvolved in the women's liberation movement or any Asian-American activism--but she is only minimally self-reflective about that kind of thing. As much as she is dedicated to revolutionary study, she very much comes across as a person dedicated to action, and not really inclined to deep analysis or reflection. Nonetheless, she was an amazing person and I'm sad that I only learned about her after she died.

Watch the movie! If you like it, you can also listen to the "On Being" radio episode about GLB.

Annie Shaw says

I cannot believe that I spent 63 years without hearing Grace Lee Boggs until I heard an interview with her on Pacifica radio (WPFW in DC). I immediately ordered this book and began this part of my education in social activism.

Ossie Davis calls this book "a feast for the hungering heart - or even a picnic". And so it is.

And, I find much to consider here... what I'm taking away right now is that we are each called to live in sustainable community and she's living that in her home of Detroit.
