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The Garden in the Machine: Grace Lee Boggs's *Living for Change: An Autobiography* and Detroit's Urban-Agrarian Future

In the final chapter of *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (1998), Chinese-American activist, elder, and icon Grace Lee Boggs articulates her vision for a revitalized Detroit: “To save the city, we have to bring the country back into the city.”¹ For Boggs and a growing network of food justice activists, urban gardening allowed Detroit residents to transform “more than eight thousand vacant lots” into sites of community sustenance, addressing food and infrastructural insecurity through grassroots practices of “collective self-reliance.”² Eighty-three years old at the time of publication, Boggs had sustained her consideration of Detroit over decades of residence, recording in detail the fallout of state divestment, de-industrialization, and infrastructural neglect.

Living for Change testifies to the apparatus of neglect in Detroit and calls for the transformation of place through agricultural recovery. “For the thousands of Detroiters affected by cutbacks in welfare and food stamps,” Boggs writes, “an alternative food system based on locally grown, processed, and marketed food is urgently needed.”³ By bearing witness to protracted state neglect, *Living for Change* opens up uncommon ground for Asian American literary inquiry in the twenty-first century. Its narrative content does not easily yield to analytics centered around racial authenticity, which, as scholars like Floyd Cheung and Stephen Hong Sohn have observed, remains the governing framework for Asian American autobiographical criticism.⁴ Instead, *Living for Change* demonstrates how ethnic American autobiography might respond to the death-dealing force of urban infrastructural abandonment, thus showcasing the pliability of a generic category that has often proven vexing for scholars of Asian American studies.⁵

This essay examines how Boggs's *Living for Change* engages infrastructural abandonment as a form of necropolitical violence and the effects of this engagement on Asian American literary critique. In drawing our attention to compromised city systems and the people dependent upon them, Boggs's autobiography elicits alternate ways of knowing a hyper-mythologized Detroit. In so doing, *Living for Change* expands our understanding of ethnic American autobiography's cultural and political imperatives.

My argument unfolds in three parts. First, I consider the ways in which Boggs's strategies of self-representation—which telescope a story of self through a history of place—might shift existing frameworks for apprehending Asian American autobiography. That is, given Boggs's dedication to place over and above ethnic identity, it argues for and elaborates upon a framework of *place-consciousness*. Then, I examine how Boggs's explicit engagement with insufficient infrastructures produce alternate forms of place-consciousness around the city of Detroit. Specifically, I identify the genres of life writing that emerge in the text to lend narrative form to infrastructural violence: urban environmental testimony and autobiographical manifesto. Boggs's narrated gardens serve a dual purpose: both to further her prescriptive vision of an urban-agrarian future, and to mark the largely invisible apparatus of state neglect that haunts her idyllic vision. My analysis of *Living for Change* thus frames autobiography as a genre capacious enough to apprehend contemporary regimes of racialized state violence, as well as to imagine and prescribe alternatives that we might inhabit.

The Subject of Asian American Autobiography

Autobiography, as Traise Yamamoto has observed, is “one of the most widely used genres in Asian American literature and the most controversial.”⁶ Understood as a vital

instrument of minority representation, the category of narratives grouped under autobiography—or more capaciously, life writing—populate anthologies, syllabi, and criticism across the field of Asian American studies.⁷ For many audiences, texts such as Carlos Bulosan’s *America is in the Heart* (1946); Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950); and most famously, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) represent key entry points to Asian American literary expression.

To apprehend *Living for Change*, then, it is necessary to first grapple with the legacy of Kingston’s memoir. *The Woman Warrior* and its accompanying critical firestorm set the parameters for Asian American autobiographical scholarship for years to come. In his 1985 essay “This is Not an Autobiography,” Frank Chin famously denounced Kingston’s memoir, along with Chinese American autobiography writ large. Chin reads the genre itself as a “peculiarly Christian literary weapon” instrumentalized toward the aims of confession—an irredeemable form used to seek out the judgment and “approval of others.” This confessional mode, he contends, “[tells] the same Cinderella story of rescue from the perverse, unnatural and cruel Chinese,” and as such, propagates dangerous stereotypes and “fake tradition.”⁸

Far from a unique perspective, Chin’s charges were echoed by other critics. In her oft-cited essay “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?,” Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong parses the uneven reception of Kingston’s memoir, deriving from these responses a set of expectations placed upon the Chinese American autobiographical subject. The ethnic autobiographer, according to Kingston’s detractors, “must provide a positive portrayal of the ethnic community through [their] self-portrayal” and “present a history in microcosm of the community, especially of its sufferings, struggles, and triumphs over racism.”⁹ Critics of the memoir felt affronted by what they viewed as Kingston’s fictionalization of her life and community, a crime intensified by

the classification of the work as autobiography: a genre popularly understood as “an unadorned factual account of a person’s own life.”¹⁰ According to Kingston’s critics, Chinese American autobiography should operate in the service of dismantling stereotypes and “[disabusing] white readers of their oversimplified preconceptions.”¹¹ Yet, as Wong astutely observes, the imperative to produce a sufficiently *authentic* account of one’s own life paradoxically turns the autobiographical effort into an exercise in fictionalization, in which “language loses its innocuous transmitting function and assumes the unruly power of transmutation.”¹²

As the *Woman Warrior* debates make evident, questions of authenticity and group representation served as the crux of the controversy around Chinese American autobiography. Even beyond Kingston’s seminal text, these questions have driven critical conversations around the autobiographical genre. As Floyd Cheung observes, critics such as Frank Chin and Amy Ling have been “delimiting the criteria necessary for works to qualify as authentic or inauthentic” for the past few decades, with authenticity measured “not only in the word’s usual sense of factual or experiential verifiability but also in terms of what facts or experiences count as valuable or dismissible.”¹³ This mandate of authenticity can at least be partially attributed to the tendency to read Chinese American autobiographies as ethnographic or historical documents, and the narrating subject as cultural ambassador for a broader community. Asian American autobiography—both in its reception and production—bears the burden of ethnic representation and its attendant imperatives, even as the texts themselves “self-consciously resist and radically destabilize the notion of a discrete self whose singular ‘life’ is commodifiable or reducible to dominant stereotypes of Asian Americans as exotic foreigners.”¹⁴ That is, despite the “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” of the genre, Asian American autobiography is

nonetheless charged to speak “truth” about ethnic American experience, or at the very least, to mediate meaningfully on the shaping presence of racial difference.¹⁵

With the opening lines of *Living for Change*, Grace Lee Boggs seemingly positions herself as an inheritor of Chinese American autobiographical tradition:

I consider myself blessed to have been born a Chinese American female with two first names, Grace and Jade Peace . . . Had I not been born female and Chinese American, I would not have realized from early on that fundamental changes were necessary in our society. Had I not been born female and Chinese American, I might have ended up teaching philosophy at a university, an observer rather than an active participant in the humanity-stretching movements that have defined the last half of the twentieth century.¹⁶

Boggs introduces herself through the language of difference, establishing her “outsider within” perspective from the outset.¹⁷ As Jennifer Jung Hee Choi observes in one of the few essays on Boggs’s autobiography, Boggs’s self-introduction prompts the expectation that the text will centralize her experience as a Chinese American woman, as well as the impacts of the Asian American movement upon her storied activist career.¹⁸ The emphasis on the self-proclaimed category of “Chinese American female,” along with the Chinese characters prominently printed in the margins of each chapter heading and title page, quite literally foreground her ethnic American identity, positioning it as the point of entry into her life’s story. And certainly, given its publication during the turn-of-the-millennium memoir boom, Boggs’s autobiography emerged in a market eager for confessional stories of racial otherness: the very category that Chin railed against in his infamous polemic.¹⁹

Yet, *Living for Change* soon makes evident that the “Asian American experience has never been central to Boggs’s political or ideological development.”²⁰ This can partially be

attributed to the fact that Boggs entered into revolutionary movement-building far before the Asian American movement ever came into being, and her intellectual energies were primarily devoted to African American and labor-based struggles. Following her upbringing in Providence and New York City by a successful restaurateur family, Boggs earned degrees in philosophy from the elite Barnard and Bryn Mawr Colleges, receiving a doctorate from the latter in 1940. Yet, upon realizing that it “would have been a waste of time for me, a Chinese woman with a Ph.D. in philosophy, to apply to a university for a teaching job,” she relocated to Chicago and became involved in Trotskyist organizing through the South Side Tenants Organization and the Workers Party.²¹ Boggs recalls how, after the March on Washington movement, she discovered that “what I wanted to do for the rest of my life was become a movement activist in the black community.”²² From that point onward, *Living for Change* documents over a half century of involvement in many of the postwar era’s major social justice movements, including collaborations with major figures like Marxist theoreticians C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya. Most significantly, her move to Detroit in 1953 leads to a lifelong residence in the city and her most meaningful intellectual partnership, her marriage to Chrysler worker and organizer James Boggs. While much of the autobiography recounts her political activity in Detroit, it does contain one chapter detailing a trip to China and her work founding the Detroit-based Asian Political Alliance, which, as Karin Aguilar San-Juan notes, only “[filled] a brief minute compared to her much more sustained and visible work with African Americans.”²³ And while Grace Lee Boggs has enjoyed prominence as one of the most notable Chinese-American activist figures of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, her status within the field of Asian American studies has proven more marginal—due in large part to her ambivalent and tenuous relationship to Asian American activism.²⁴

What do we as Asian American literary scholars do, then, with Boggs's *Living for Change*, a Chinese American autobiography that ultimately marginalizes Asian American politics and experience?²⁵ Of course, portions of the text certainly draw upon Asian American literary tropes: the "inter-generational ruptures between Asian immigrant parents and their more Americanized children," the "challenges of defining identity when an Asian American travels back to a land of ethnic origin," and the depiction of a "specific social history in which individuals of various ethnicities have faced discrimination due to perceptions and laws that designated them as aliens."²⁶ Further, as Boggs herself notes, it was *Living for Change* that brought her into the fold of a new generation: "It was not actually until I wrote my book . . . that people, young people particularly, looked to me as some sort of model, as an Asian American. I'd never had thought of myself as that!"²⁷

Yet in many more ways, her autobiography frustrates extant frameworks for parsing ethnic American life writing. As I have suggested, it does not corroborate the "authenticity paradigm" that presumes exact correspondence between authorial identity, perspective, and narrative content—this is no autobiography as "guided Chinatown tour." And even beyond the question of racial "truth" brought into relief by the *Woman Warrior* debates, Boggs's life story largely bypasses questions of ethnic belonging, electing instead to bear witness to cross-racial political organizing, as well as the systematic neglect of a once-thriving American city.

It is my contention that *Living for Change* opens up new terrain for the analysis of Asian American autobiography in an era of accelerating state neglect. The text positions Boggs as primarily belonging to the city of Detroit, the place in which her political life and philosophy took root. As such, it enables us to think through forms of belonging both alongside and in excess of ethnic self-identity. In Detroit, she was "no longer a nomad but a citizen"; after time

Detroit had become “[her] home, the place and the city for which [she] felt responsible.”²⁸

Boggs’s dedication to place, over and above ethnic community, thus opens up questions of “how and under what conditions we can or must circumvent the politics of identity in favor of what might be called ‘a politics of shared human liberation.’”²⁹ “[I]f we want to follow in the footsteps of Grace Lee Boggs,” writes Karin Aguilar San-Juan, “we need to look more deeply into place and ‘place-consciousness.’”³⁰

In revisiting the opening lines of *Living for Change*, the thematic of place-consciousness comes to the forefront. Here, racial and gender categories operate less as nouns, or attributes that someone *has*, and more as prepositions, or categories that determine one’s location in space and time, and that place the subject in relationship to a set of historical, social, and economic circumstances. Boggs’s racial-gendered identity thus operates less as a property of the self—something one has and is—than as a vantage point from which to consider a primarily black American city ravaged by corporate capitalism, and from which to know it anew.

The concept of identity-as-vantage point, as place rather than property, further underscores the tension between Boggs’s simultaneous emphasis upon and disavowal of her Chinese heritage, a tension that illuminates larger questions regarding the problematic of place in Asian American histories. From Japanese internment to the erasure of Chinese workers from the history of the transcontinental railroad, Asian Americans have been either displaced from places or forcibly removed from them. As perpetual foreigners on U.S. soil, we are never understood as belonging to any place in particular. This persistent condition of alienation is one significant context through which to consider Boggs’s commitment to place; her insistence on *emplacement* marks a key intervention into a collective experience conditioned by *displacement*. The rubric of place-consciousness, then, diverges from the category of perpetual foreignness that has long

anchored and circumscribed the field of Asian American studies, welcoming another scholarly orientation to place that encompasses the possibility of familiarity, intimacy, and belonging.

In foregrounding place as a site of possibility rather than estrangement, then, this rubric necessitates a re-consideration of the formal properties of self-authorship in Asian American autobiography, insisting that literary inquiry reach beyond the interpretive paradigm of authenticity. Following San-Juan's discussions, I understand place-consciousness to describe the cultivation of a "shared sense of belonging in a place" that both "deals with divisive histories of conflict" and envisions a "future bound up with others."³¹ Place-consciousness shifts the locus of belonging beyond ethnic community and a sense of homogeneity, imagining forms of kinship, affiliation, and collectivity grounded in a shared geographic commons rather than in supposed biological sameness. It also refers to the forms of knowledge generated about a specific place; that is, the ways in which one might come to know, inhabit, and navigate the city of Detroit. In the following sections, I identify two generic forms employed by *Living for Change* that enable alternate modes of place-consciousness around the city of Detroit: urban environmental testimony and autobiographical manifesto. Through the deployment of testimony and manifesto, Boggs's autobiography offers new ways of knowing a city that is simultaneously narratively overdetermined and largely unknown.

The Testimonial Imperative: Haunted by Infrastructure

Throughout the latter half of the book, Boggs bears witness to Detroit's crisis of infrastructural neglect and the need to transform the city into a space that supports, rather than erodes, racialized life: "[W]e need a new vision of the city as the organized cooperative form that people can use to serve one another more effectively."³² The chapter "New Dreams for the

Twenty-First Century,” which details Boggs’s pivotal shift to the political philosophy of her later years, begins by describing the shortcomings of the city’s Neighborhood Services, which then inspired the launch of the “Detroiteurs for Dignity” group. It then dilates outward to document other industries and institutions in the aftermath of de-industrialized Detroit, such as the municipal funding of casino gambling downtown. By bearing witness to compromised city systems, *Living for Change* attunes its readership to slow, attritional forms of state violence—the kind of gradual harm that, as literary ecocritic Rob Nixon has argued, poses particular “representational . . . challenges” due to its “relative invisibility.”³³ In so doing, she offers her testimony of the kind of infrastructural violence that, due to its seeming mundanity, so often fails to register in our collective consciousness.

In the oft-cited *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman defines testimony as the process “of bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma.” “To testify,” writes Felman, is “to *vow to tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one’s own speech as material evidence for truth.”³⁴ By bearing witness to Detroit’s crises of infrastructure, *Living for Change* combines testimony’s political imperative of bearing witness with the place-consciousness of “ecobiography,” a form of life writing that “interweaves the story of a protagonist with the story of the fortunes, conditions, geography, and ecology of a region.”³⁵ In this way, the work deploys a hybrid genre that I term *urban environmental testimony*, in order to generate a kind of infrastructural imaginary that highlights, rather than obscures, racialized violence. In Boggs’s Detroit, failing city infrastructure and municipal services occupy the forefront of readerly consideration.

The infrastructural imaginary detailed in *Living for Change* responds, in large part, to the endemic urban neglect that has become a metonym for Detroit itself. Infrastructural remains—

empty wards, vacant lots, crumbling schools, stations, roads—haunt the public image of Detroit, constituting a visual landscape of decay consumed by a voracious public. Enshrined in photobooks, blogs, think pieces, and documentaries, these scenes—commonly referred to as “ruin porn”—aestheticize poverty while simultaneously glossing over history and existing human presence. Yet, through its sustained engagement with compromised systems of civic support, Boggs’s *Living for Change* de-naturalizes overly familiar scenes of urban decay. To *denaturalize*, or “to make unnatural,” is to short-circuit the myth machine that oversimplifies neglect and imagine otherwise—it is testimony that makes the familiar strange. In this context, to bear witness is to disrupt the interpretive codes that condition our responses to cities like Detroit—that is, to disrupt how we see and interpret violence against black and brown bodies, or even what we conceive of *as* violence.

Boggs’s autobiography thus transforms the cultural and political imperative of witnessing itself, which has primarily been tried to a paradigm of trauma. In this paradigm, written or oral acts of witnessing work to reveal, contain, or exorcise inconceivable violence.³⁶ Here, the political imperative of witnessing is one of exposure, that is, of bringing to light otherwise obscured experiences of oppression. But *Living for Change* makes plain another kind of relationship between witnessing and violence, one that negotiates the condition of overexposure. The story of infrastructural neglect in racialized cities is not unknown, unseen, or psychically concealed. If anything, it is overly public, and tied to racist myths of cultural inadequacy. It is a story we think we already know.

Departing from trauma’s paradigm of revelation, then, Boggs offers a form of autobiographical witnessing that instead does the work of *haunting*. Sociologist Avery Gordon defines haunting as “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is

making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely.”³⁷ As opposed to “trauma, oppression, or exploitation,” haunting renders the familiar strange and signals “something is missing”; it gestures toward the shadows covered up by dominant ways of knowing.³⁸ In further distinction from the language of trauma, which conceives of violence as *exceptional*, haunting allows us to consider forms of violence—in this case, systemic resource deprivation—that are embedded in the everyday, and yet not legible to many *as* violence. Most significantly, haunting solicits an *excavation* of meaning. It compels us to name the forces that disappear subjects, communities, and sites, and to ask what these ghostly sites and structures might otherwise tell us.

Indeed, Boggs’s narrated gardens are haunted by the ghosts of infrastructure: cuts to food welfare; complicated welfare application procedures; and unreliable public transportation systems, which deliver transit-dependent Detroiters to the few full-service grocery stores in the city’s 138 square miles. Spanning the early 1970s to the mid-90s, the autobiography’s latter half documents numerous “urban institutions” that are “all falling apart”: “American schools . . . which . . . have become an industry”; the brutal police “decoy system” known as “STRESS (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets)”; and the “tearing down . . . of hospitals” by General Motors.³⁹ Following the devastating processes of de-industrialization and suburbanization, she describes the “cheese lines” of the Reagan years, where “every Thursday, in neighborhoods across the city, tens of thousands of Detroiters lined up in the snow and the sleet to get the cheese and other commodities they needed to survive.”⁴⁰ And as “[c]orporations [abandoned] cities and/or [blackmailed] city governments by demanding tax abatements and other concessions,” thus “making it increasingly difficult for municipalities to supply normal city services,” Boggs

narrates the need to accordingly “rid ourselves of the capitalist values and institutions which have brought us to this state of powerlessness—or suffer the same mutilation.”⁴¹

In her depiction of inadequate and actively harmful city infrastructures, as well as the residents dependent on scanty public provisions, Boggs cultivates a different kind of place-consciousness around a post-industrial Detroit, one that highlights the repercussions of capital and state divestment and that grants historical and social context to a devastation that so often goes unexplained. The testimonial work of haunting offered by Boggs, in which infrastructural ghosts signal “unresolved social violence,” disconnects blighted urban tableaux from myths of cultural pathology and links them instead to processes of state abandonment. Her narrative of the city’s devastation thus intervenes into dominant imaginaries around the city, which either attribute poverty and decay to individual and communal failure—the personal shortcomings of Detroiters themselves—or evacuate history altogether.

Detroit’s failing infrastructures, rather than existing as standalone images, are further embedded in both Boggs’s history of a post-Civil Rights Detroit and the evolution of her activist ideology. Her movement activities in the 1980s, as the chapter “New Dreams” indicates, were by and large organized around the belief that “it was now ‘idealistic’ to expect the government or corporations to do the work that is needed to keep up our communities and to provide for our elementary safety and security.”⁴² The abandonment of Detroit by both state and capital, according to Boggs, required going beyond the oppositional practices of rebellion and toward the generative practices of revolution. The Detroit of this period unfolds in *Living for Change* through a collage of personal remembrance, poems, pamphlet excerpts and speeches, which track the transformation from Boggs’s passionate Marxism to an ideology she has termed “visionary organizing,” a movement “[focused] around the rebuilding of our cities.”⁴³ For instance, in an

excerpt from a 1990 speech delivered at the Schomburg Center, she advocates for a system of schooling for cities that emulates Gandhi's own ideology of education: "Education should be of the Heart, the Hand, and the Head. It should give people an understanding of themselves and where they stand in the world, and from there, their obligations toward their neighbors."⁴⁴ This vision echoes her husband Jimmy's condemnation of Detroit schools a page prior: "Since World War II our schools have been transformed into custodial institutions where our children are housed for 12 years . . . We have to create schools which are an integral part of the community, in which young people naturally and normally do socially necessary and meaningful work for the community" (221). Boggs's changing political ideology, which began to prioritize stewardship of place and community, thus assumed the shape it did in large part *because* of the city's inadequate support systems. Detroit's city infrastructures become inextricable from her process of textual self-fashioning, in which her narration of self is also at once a narration of "rebuild[ing], redefin[ing], and respirit[ing]" a city.⁴⁵

Boggs's urban environmentalist testimony, then, models an autobiographical practice that eschews the pressures of racial authenticity in order to bear witness to broad-based racialized violence. Rather than functioning as cultural wallpaper, infrastructural neglect becomes legible in *Living for Change* as a form of necropolitical violence: the systematic and state-sanctioned undoing of racialized populations through resource deprivation. The devastation of the city is written upon the compromised bodies of Detroiters—bodies that themselves testify to a metropolitan order constituted by uneven relations of infrastructural support. Further, Boggs's depiction of neglect remains urgent even twenty years after the publication of her autobiography, particularly given the protracted and unresolved issue of lead poisoning in nearby Flint,

Michigan, in which the intersection of state abandonment and environmental racism dredges up analogous problems of witnessing, violence, and representation.

As the next section will elaborate, Boggs contests systemic deprivation through autobiographical manifesto, which prescribes a future centered around urban agriculture. Through her urban-agrarian vision, she forgoes a politics of ethnic self-interest in order to explicitly craft a vision of “intergenerational” and “multicultural” community anchored in Detroit’s urban gardens: a prescription for the future that vitally shifts dominant ways of knowing, imagining, and belonging to the city.⁴⁶

The Autobiographical Manifesto: Detroit’s Urban-Agrarian Future

For Boggs, Detroit’s insufficient infrastructures produce the conditions of necessity for urban gardening and other similar community-based cooperatives. The final chapter of *Living for Change* envisions Detroit as a future “Garden of Eden,” a self-sustaining site that produces its own resources from scratch. Here, Boggs shifts from the genre of testimony to what literary scholar Sidonie Smith has termed autobiographical manifesto, an explicitly political type of life writing that contests violent histories and politics, propelling its subject into a future of her own imagining. Boggs establishes her “‘authority’ of experience” in the text’s initial chapters, which narrate decades of involvement in major postwar social movements. In so doing, she “invites the reader’s belief in the story” while laying the groundwork for her communitarian vision and, most importantly, its successful reception by its audience.⁴⁷ The genres of testimony and manifesto are not mutually exclusive. Through testimony, Boggs bears witness to the violence of infrastructural neglect, and through the genre of manifesto, forcefully advocates strategies for contesting such violence. In place of Detroit’s failing infrastructures, she proposes instead a

“human infrastructure of discipline and trust for a new cooperative economy.”⁴⁸ *Living for Change* situates the garden as a community-based system of infrastructural support, one that contests the ecologies of life and death currently operative in the city.

For Boggs and a growing network of food justice activists, urban gardening allows Detroiters to address food and infrastructural insecurity through the creation of informal support networks, enabling the creation of a “Healthy Detroit” through practices of “collective self-reliance.”⁴⁹ Indeed, Boggs’s vision for a future Detroit centrally emphasizes physical wellbeing—her activist practice, she states, “grows people as well as vegetables.”⁵⁰ Following this, the final chapter documents her ideological re-orientation around the principles of environmental justice, which work to contest the disproportionate exposure of poor people and people of color to environmental risk.⁵¹ Environmental justice, writes Boggs, “renews society from the ground up because it is rooted in the places where people live, work, and learn—their homes, streets, neighborhoods, workplaces, schools—and depends on the knowledge that comes from daily experience.”⁵² She further emphasizes the capacity of this framework to transform how we come to know and inhabit space: “I am awed by the potential in the Environmental Justice movement for deconstructing conventional concepts of knowledge, racism, and how we should make our livings.”⁵³ Following this, Boggs argues for re-visioning vacant lots as community gardens, contending that, again, “to save the city we have to bring the country back into the city.”⁵⁴

As a form that fundamentally “wants to take action, to intervene,” the genre of manifesto enables Boggs to claim authority in determining a viable path of action for Detroit.⁵⁵ In these final pages, her language shifts from a mode of reflection to a prescriptive mode: exhortatory claims about what a future Detroit *should* look like. Indeed, *Living for Change* draws upon the

revolutionary properties of the manifesto form in order to seize power and agency in the midst of seemingly intractable state neglect.⁵⁶ According to Martin Puchner and Janet Lyon, the genre of manifesto is united primarily by the formal imperative to demand change, take action, and “fashion the future.”⁵⁷ As such, this form further authorizes Boggs to refuse the violence of the present and to demand something else entirely. Through manifesto, then, Boggs’ autobiography shifts from its orientation towards the past and present—what has happened—and toward “‘the possible;’ ‘the imaginable;’ and ‘the necessary’”—or what should happen.⁵⁸ And just as the autobiographical manifesto “[positions] the subject in a potentially liberated future,” one distanced from the conditions of the present, so Boggs dictates the ideal physical and social configuration *of* that future. She prescribes, circulates, and reproduces her future vision via the autobiographical act, shifting from the historic “we” of the manifesto to the “I” of the life narrative.⁵⁹ *Living for Change*-as-manifesto thus generates an “epistemological breakage of repetition” wherein Boggs’s narrated gardens make knowable and inhabitable a different future for Detroit, one that interrupts the systemic reproduction of black death, sickness, and abjection.⁶⁰

Centering black vitality, the autobiography’s final pages promote the work of care and of daily upkeep: basic sustenance, feeding and being fed, socializing children, and keeping up the community.⁶¹ While the feminized and racialized work of care is often undervalued, in Boggs’s autobiography the labor of social reproduction becomes the foundation for political transformation.⁶² And as manifesto, *Living for Change* further enacts the work of social reproduction advocated through the garden—that is, the work of intergenerational maintenance as well as daily life maintenance. Boggs explicitly names this function on the book’s final page: “I know that if I were to fall ill or die tomorrow, there is a new generation already in place

struggling for their own dreams of a better world, which will contain many of the ingredients of the vision that Jimmy and I have struggled to bring to life—and also expand it.”⁶³ The final chapters of *Living for Change*, then, function as a blueprint for Detroiters to sustain, maintain, and socialize the community at large: instructions to “[produce] for our own needs, [grow] our own food,” “thus setting an example of productive work for our youth.”⁶⁴

By offering sustenance through the garden as urban commons, Boggs promotes community support systems that challenge the uneven distribution of material resources, as well as the relegation of care to the family and private sphere. In her urban imaginary, Detroit’s future is rooted in the garden, and nurturing intimacies are freely shared. Here, care is a social project, a shared responsibility to be borne by all. Envisioned as open sites of social and cultural exchange, her gardens model relations of care not contingent on biological kinship ties or racial identification. Rather, they articulate forms of collective belonging borne out of a shared sense of stewardship for the city, offering alternate lines of affinity that cut across and through predetermined identity categories. Boggs’s concept of “community” is fundamentally “multicultural and intergenerational,” a collection of people “united in [their] conviction that revitalizing Detroit begins with producing [their] own food in community gardens and developing community markets. So we cooperate, interact, overlap, interlock.”⁶⁵ This vision, too, is transnational, as Boggs highlights the “tens of thousands of grassroots groups” in sub-Saharan Africa similarly practicing “collective self-reliance,” bringing to light cross-continental solidarities sedimenting around the ravages of transnational capitalism, as well as the global purchase of her blueprint.⁶⁶

Boggs’s urban-agrarian vision thus imagines a future for Detroit centered around an ethos of care for the city and its residents. Her narrated gardens contest the reproduction of material

insecurity for racialized communities, as well as the differential value placed upon life, labor, and landscapes by racial capitalism. At least on paper, they aim to sustain the lives that are overlooked, or—if the frequent casting of Detroit as a “blank slate” is any indication—not even registered as lives. The genre of manifesto, then, operates as a mode of production towards a Detroit that does not yet exist—a Detroit in which black vitality, rather than abjection, becomes a primary way of knowing the city.

Conclusion: Toward Place-Consciousness

Through its urban environmental testimony, *Living for Change* intervenes into the ruinscape that detach decaying infrastructure from lived experience. It highlights the residues of violence left by state divestment, dredging up the ghosts of infrastructure that produce and maintain necropolitical urban environments. And as autobiographical manifesto, it offers alternate economies of life value and social reproduction that contest racially uneven processes of resource deprivation. Through both of these generic modes, *Living for Change* demonstrates how Asian American life writing might extend beyond rubrics of ethnic self-identity in order to cultivate “multicultural and intergenerational” frameworks of political transformation. *Living for Change*, in this way, echoes other forms of emancipatory politics that arose in the aftermath of civil rights and decolonization, systems of thought that recognized the limitations in identity-based movements and sought out other forms of political alignment. In her discussion of Audre Lorde’s “Learning from the 60s,” Grace Kyungwon Hong offers insights that resonate in many ways with Boggs’s autobiography, which likewise aims to reflect on the legacies of civil rights, rebellion, and black nationalism. Lorde, according to Hong, “articulates a politics that is not based on the on the protection of self-interest or claims to injury, but on a critique of the uneven

but connected dispersion of death and devaluation that make self-protective politics threaten to render others precarious.”⁶⁷ That is, instead of shoring up claims to racial or ethnic solidarity, as was the strategy of civil rights and ethnic nationalist ideologies, Lorde instead elects to bear witness to the ecologies of value forged by state and capital, in which vitality for certain protected classes is contingent upon the devaluation of others. Boggs, too, offers her manifesto in service of proposing another possible rubric of life value: a rubric in which capitalist growth and development are not the only measures of worth. Like Lorde’s “Learning from the 60s,” *Living for Change* similarly bypasses the ideology of “identification and equivalence”—out of which the “authenticity paradigm” of life-writing operates—in order to conceptualize place-specific modes of affiliation and alliance.

Given Boggs’s recent visibility—until her death in October 2015—as a left-wing media darling and spokesperson for Detroit, and further, her escalating status as an Asian American activist icon, the time has come for Asian American literary studies to grapple at length with her life and letters. This engagement, as I have argued, necessitates a reconsideration of the formal and political capacities of ethnic American life writing beyond rubrics of identity and authenticity. Of course, it also proves necessary to extend a critical lens toward the viral circulation of Boggs’s life and image, particularly in light of romanticized discourses of Detroit that frame the city as a potential utopia. “This [utopian] class of Detroit story,” John Patrick Leary observes, “chronicles Detroit’s possibilities, with a heavy emphasis on art and urban agriculture on abandoned land,” and posits the city as a haven for a hip, young, entrepreneurial class (“Detroitism”).⁶⁸ Certainly, Boggs’s narrative of Do-It-Yourself agrarianism aligns with a particular vision of renewal, one in which Detroiters generate their own resources out of thin air. This D.I.Y. spirit emphasizes the merits of consumer choice, autonomy, and self-support: “The

freedom to make important choices begins with producing your own food and other basic necessities so that you are not dependent on external forces beyond your control.”⁶⁹

In this way, Boggs’s emphasis on “collective self-reliance” upholds the ideologies of austerity that justified and undergirded the undoing of Detroit’s city infrastructures. Such ideologies present healthcare, education, and other life-sustaining support systems as individual issues rather than collective concerns as a means of limiting or eliminating outright the resources made available to the public. The autobiography’s promotion of “local Self-Government,” then, dovetails with the rhetorics of personal responsibility that enabled the large-scale decimation of public infrastructures and social safety nets via anti-welfare policy. The resonances of *Living for Change* with these individualist discourses may, to some degree, explain why Boggs’s image has reached a certain level of viral circulation. In Boggs’s garden, black and brown lives matter, but under certain conditions: that they work, that they do not demand material resources but create them from nothing, and that they do not make claims on the state or on capitalism. Just as haunting involves “telling more than one story at a time,” so *Living for Change* hinges the worth of racialized life on its capacity for physical labor and self-support (Gordon 25). This particular story, one that upholds rather than challenges the ideology of state neglect, further nuances the forms of place-consciousness generated through Boggs’s autobiography: her narrated gardens both mark and hold at a distance infrastructural ghosts, the phantoms of municipal support that leave traces of “unrepressed social violence” everywhere.⁷⁰ As such, *Living for Change* allows us to chart the tensions across multiple, simultaneous, and conflicting realities: the undeniable need for social and material sustenance, the inadequacies of city infrastructure to meet that need, the informal networks that arise to sustain unsupported lives, and the individualist rhetorics of self-support that allow certain visions of care to circulate widely.

Grace Lee Boggs's *Living for Change*, then, does not offer a tidy narrative of resolution, a one-dimensional account of urban resistance, or Detroit as "guided Chinatown tour." Instead, it shows us the ways in which processes of racialization, de-industrialization, and state divestment unevenly expose vulnerable populations to harm, while showcasing the multiple and competing forms of place-consciousness that offer an *otherwise* to the dominant mythos of Detroit. In this way, Boggs's autobiography demonstrates how Asian American life writing at the cusp of the twenty-first century—generated in and through current conditions of racialized violence—exceeds rubrics of authenticity, writing into the world other seams of belonging between each other and the places we inhabit.

Notes

¹ Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 253.

² *Ibid.*, 252.

³ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁴ See Floyd Cheung, "Early Chinese American Autobiography: Reconsidering the Works of Yan Phou Lee and Yung Wing," *A/B: Auto/ Biography Studies* 18, no. 1 (2003): 45, where he writes, "[i]mportant critical debates over Asian American autobiographical writing have centered on the question of authenticity." Similarly, in *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* (NY: New York University Press, 2014), 4, Stephen Hong Sohn discusses the "authenticity paradigm" used to assess Asian American writing, which has typically fallen into two camps: the "ethnoracial bildungsroman" and autobiography.

⁵ The Frank Chin debates emblemize the vexing nature of this generic category. For a fuller explanation of said debates, see Sau-Ling Wong, “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese American Autobiographical Controversy,” in *Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: A Casebook* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 29–56, as well as Traise Yamamoto’s “Asian American Autobiography/ Memoir,” in Rachel C. Lee ed., *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature* (New York, 2014), 379–91.

⁶ Yamamoto, “Asian American Autobiography/Memoir,” 379.

⁷ In the comprehensive volume *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 4, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson distinguish between autobiography, which they use to refer to “the traditional Western mode of the retrospective life narrative,” and life writing, which encompasses multiple forms of writing that “takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject. . . . Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical.” In this essay I will primarily use the term “autobiography” to refer to Grace Lee Boggs’s work, and occasionally use the more capacious term “life writing” for stylistic purposes.

⁸ Frank Chin, “This is Not an Autobiography,” *Genre* 18, no. 2 (1985): 109, 110.

⁹ Wong, “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?” 37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³ Cheung, “Early Chinese American Autobiography,” 45.

¹⁴ Yamamoto, “Asian American Autobiography/Memoir,” 379.

¹⁵ I borrow this phrase from Lisa Lowe’s “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (University of Toronto Press), 24–44.

¹⁶ Boggs, *Living for Change*, xi.

¹⁷ See Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (December 1986): 514–32, where she theorizes black feminist standpoint theory through the perspective of the “outsider within.”

¹⁸ See Jennifer Jung Hee Choi, “At the Margins of the Asian American Political Experience: The Life of Grace Lee Boggs,” *Amerasia* 25, no. 2 (1999): 19–40.

¹⁹ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, along with other critics of autobiography, reference the twenty-first century memoir boom—or the intensification in demand for and production of life writing—in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*.

²⁰ Choi, “At the Margins,” 19.

²¹ Boggs, *Living for Change*, 34.

²² *Ibid.*, 39.

²³ San-Juan, Karin Aguilar, “‘We Are Extraordinarily Lucky to be Living in These Times’: A Conversation with Grace Lee Boggs,” *Frontiers* 36, no. 2 (2015): 95.

²⁴ As San-Juan writes, the Asian Political Alliance “dissolved within two years due to a lack of direct community engagement.” Further, “for most of her life, Grace Lee Boggs did not prioritize or investigate her own ethnic or racial identity, history or connections,” and “did not even discuss her APA work with Jimmy.”

²⁵ Using a term lifted from Yoonmee Chang, *Writing the Ghetto: Class, Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2011), 201–02, *Living for*

Change might be exemplary of works featuring a “postracial aesthetic,” or “literature written by Asian American writers that does not contain Asian American characters or address Asian American experiences.”

²⁶ Sohn, *Racial Asymmetries*, 1.

²⁷ San-Juan, “Conversation with Grace Lee Boggs,” 106.

²⁸ Boggs, *Living for Change*, 116.

²⁹ San-Juan, “Conversation with Grace Lee Boggs,” 96.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 97, 96.

³² Boggs, *Living for Change*, 223.

³³ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

³⁴ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge Press, 1992), 1, 5.

³⁵ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 268.

³⁶ See Felman and Laub, *Testimony*; Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996); Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001).

³⁷ Gordon Avery, “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,” *borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011): 1.

³⁸ Gordon Avery, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 178.

³⁹ Boggs, *Living for Change*, 176, 178, 179.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 209.

⁴¹ Ibid., 178, 181.

⁴² Ibid., 219.

⁴³ Ibid., 221. See, for instance, Matt Birkhold's "Living by the Clock of the World: Grace Lee Boggs's Call for Visionary Organizing," or Boggs's own "The Why and How of Visionary Organizing," where Boggs describes visionary organizing in contradistinction to protest organizing, situating it as a form of activist practice centered around creating something new rather than reacting to or operating within extant systems.

⁴⁴ Boggs, *Living for Change*, 222.

⁴⁵ Ibid., xi.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 252.

⁴⁷ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 33.

⁴⁸ Boggs, *Living for Change*, 261.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 256.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 233.

⁵¹ For a fuller definition of environmental justice and racism, see the scholarship of Robert D. Bullard, such as *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* (Boston: South End Press, 1993) and *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994).

⁵² Boggs, *Living for Change*, 248.

⁵³ Ibid., 246.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 253.

⁵⁵ Felicity Coleman, "Notes on the Feminist Manifesto: The Strategic Use of Hope," *Journal for Cultural Research* 14.4 (2010): 380.

⁵⁶ For a history of manifesto as revolutionary genre, see Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Cornell University Press 1999) and Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton University Press 2006).

⁵⁷ Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton University Press 2006), 2.

⁵⁸ Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, (Cornell University Press 1999), 16.

⁵⁹ Sidonie Smith, “Autobiographical Manifestos,” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 436.

⁶⁰ Sidonie Smith, “Autobiographical Manifestos,” 438.

⁶¹ I draw the concept of black vitality from the scholarship of J.T. Roane, “Locating Black Queer Pasts,” *Black Perspectives*, December 13, 2016, <https://www.aaihs.org/locating-black-queer-pasts/>. Roane defines it as “that ability to practice communion from within the spaces of death, the instigation of life where it is not supposed to be.”

⁶² I derive this concept from Evelyn Nakano Glenn, who defines social reproduction as “the creation and recreation of people as social, as well as physical, beings.” “From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor,” *Signs* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1992): 117.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁶⁴ Boggs, *Living for Change*, 267–68.

⁶⁵ Boggs, *Living for Change*, 252.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁶⁷ Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 6.

⁶⁸ John Patrick Leary, “Detroitism,” *Guernica: A Magazine of Art and Politics*, January 15, 2011, www.guernicamag.com/leary_1_15_11/.

⁶⁹ Boggs, *Living for Change*, 262.

⁷⁰ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.