

LESSONS FROM



TO



LEARNING & DIALOGUE, FROM GHETTO TO
GHETTO

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My brothers and sisters from the ghettos of Haiti,

we are not alone.

We have been told that we are nothing but gangsters and ghosts. We have been told that we are dirty, while the rest of the city dumps their trash on our streets. We have been told that we are violent, yet we have been given only a dozen police officers for a city of over 300,000 people. We have told that we are poor, yet we are getting by with no investments or jobs inside the city.

This is a kind of structural trauma that has changed the way we think about ourselves and our communities. This has stigmatized us so badly that many of us are afraid to say we are Soleyans. And this has changed our dreams from saving Cite Soleil to wanting to leave Cite Soleil - all of our talented young people look for the first chance they can to leave their neighborhoods behind. This is true not only for Cite Soleil, but for our sister ghettos: Martissant, Belaire, Jalouzie, Fontamara, and the others. And this is not just true for our brothers and sisters in the ghettos, but those that are in the countryside, trying to feed their families off of tired and barren land.

So they go to Tabarre, Croix des Bouquets, or even Petionville. But when they get there, the misery chases them, and so they dream of running away to the United States. And that is the dream of every Haitian, isn't it? To go to the promised land, where everyone has money and peace of mind and security? To risk overstaying a visa or even risking their lives on a leaky boat on the open ocean?

But the reality is not so simple: Every country has their problems. Every country has their ghettos. Every country has their abandoned countryside. Every country has their own scars. But every country also has something to teach us.

We had the chance to visit Detroit, a city in the state of Michigan. In the past, Detroit was the symbol of the American

Dream. It was a place of industry, with car factories that provided everyone who was willing to work with a good life. Tens of thousands of poor Americans from the South migrated to Detroit to search for a better life, and hundreds of thousands were employed in the factories. Detroit was once home to 2 million people, all of them working.

Imagine: this was just like the beginning of Cite Soleil. There were the big factories that brought thousands of people from the countryside to work. There were functioning ports that brought in ships from La Gonave. There was the Babette cinema, the stores by the seaside, the Brooklyn market that was open 24 hours a day, and the most beautiful marketplace in Haiti: Boulos Market.

The way we were happy in our way, Detroit was happy in its way. But today there is a different story: the factories in Detroit began to close down, leaving people without work. Those with privilege moved to the suburbs. Tensions and violence rose in the city.

Today, Detroit looks different: there are thousands of people without access to good jobs. There are over 60,000 abandoned houses. Only 25% of young people finish secondary school. Detroit has become one of the most violent cities in America. Imagine: the way that the elite understand us in Cite Soleil, this is the way other Americans see Detroit: a place of crime, urban blight, and hopelessness.

But let us explain how we saw Detroit. Yes, we saw abandoned houses with shattered windows. Yes, we saw young men in the street. But from the moment we stepped out of our van on Wabash street, we were welcomed with a warmth and a spirit that we could not describe.

We entered into a house that was also a museum to the struggles of African Americans throughout history, with people wearing clothes that reflected their African heritage. The heads of this house, Baba Charles and Mama Sandra, introduced Detroit to us like this: they see themselves as warriors, fighting for a new kind

of life. Who are their soldiers? Families who have chosen to stay, mothers who are struggling to feed their families, students who brave gunfire to get to school, neighbors who cultivate urban gardens.

See, the people of Detroit see their misery different than we do: they see it as a battle they are waging on behalf of all of America's cities. They see that what has happened to them can happen to any other city. They are taking a risk to see if they can transform the struggles of today into a different kind of tomorrow. They are pursuing what they are calling: the New American {R}evolution.

There is a 96-year old activist, Grace Lee Boggs who has been fighting for justice in Detroit for 60 years: she says she feels sorry for anyone who doesn't live in Detroit because they are not witnessing the great transformation taking place here. Among all of the destruction is great possibility - a possibility to examine what it means to be human.

Why can't we see ourselves like this? Why can't we start up the New Haitian {R}evolution? Here we will present to you a few lessons we learned from Detroit, and how we may be able to use them in Haiti...

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REVOLUTION AND {R}EVOLUTION

Our ancestors sacrificed their lives in the greatest slave revolt in history - the Haitian Revolution broke the chains off of our feet and made us into the First Independent Black Republic of the New World. This revolution inspired countless others across the world to rise up and remove the chains from their nations too.

But what have we done since then to honor that great legacy? *Coup d'etat*, revolts, riots, corruption. Where does that leave us? We are always calling out "down with this", and sometimes yes, we as a people need to bring a bad system down, but we always seem to replace a bad system with another bad system, and in a few years' time we are yelling, "down with this" again.

Detroit has lived this too: many times the people have come together to take down a system, and even put one of their own in power, and yet somehow things continued to get worse. And they were thinking that this was revolution. We also thought our protests were revolution. We think revolution is taking power from the top. But if this was truly revolution, why didn't it give us freedom?

The activists in Detroit have started something new: {R}evolution. What do we see inside this word? We see not only revolution, but the word evolution. So {R}evolution means to start to create the reality we want to see at the grassroots, without waiting for the top to change, and grow it until it has transformed the entire society. Change is not given to anyone, change is built, brick by brick, person by person. Here are some examples of {R}evolution:

CULTIVATING {R}EVOLUTIONARIES

We in Haiti are dreaming of factories, of big buildings and projects and NGOs and the state to do things to develop us. Detroit has lived this already, and it hasn't helped them at all. They have seen big factories be built and stay half-empty. They have seen big buildings constructed that are now abandoned and crumbling. They are dozens of schools that were built and are now closed. The people of Detroit have learned that buildings can never save them.

Instead they have seen they need to build people, a new generation of people that take their responsibility for change seriously. Their victories are not counted in houses or projects, but in how many people stay to fight for their city. And you see this in everything they do:

People refer to each other as "brothers" and "sisters". People know the stories of the battles their neighbors have fought and honor them for it at every introduction. The stories of the elders are respected and valued. Children are spoken to like adults and given responsibilities in their neighborhoods. Every backyard is a stage to highlight the talents of ordinary people. And poetry and hip-hop are used to chronicle the everyday battles of everyday people, giving them almost biblical importance. The community does not always agree, but they respect the battles that each other are fighting.

They have even brought this to the schools: even though every American child has free access to school, the community saw that the schools were not responding to the needs of the community. They created their own school that teaches children not only how to

read and write, but how to take responsibility for their communities, how to analyze their past and dream about their future. On the day we visited the Grace and James Boggs School, the children weren't even there: they were out learning from urban gardeners and community service programs.

REIMAGINING DEVELOPMENT

Since we were young, we have seen "development" on television: large factories, big highways, and tall buildings. But that vision of development came from other countries, and they have been defining development for us for a long time. Have we as Haitians ever sat down and had a discussion about what development means for us? If we are re-thinking revolution, we need to re-think development as well.

If development is something they bring to you, it is not sustainable, because it is not yours. The factories in Detroit were not for the people of Detroit (they just worked inside of them), and so when the factory owners decided to move the jobs overseas, the people were left without jobs. This is when the people saw that this development was not sustainable.

And there were multiple generations of people who had been working in the factories, and they had begun to lose the knowledge their ancestors had of working the land and of starting their own businesses - many only knew how to wait for a job. So when the jobs left, people didn't know what to do.

But there were some people who listened to their grandmothers and grandfathers and knew about planting food. There were some people who were still fighting to hold onto local businesses. There were some people thinking about how to create jobs, not just work jobs. And this has given rise to a new kind of thinking about development means in Detroit: that development is built by communities for communities, that it is based on relationships of trust instead of relationships of exploitation.

A good example of this is the urban gardening movement: with so much abandoned land, people stopped seeing it as blight and started seeing it as opportunity. Neighbors work together to take abandoned land and transform them into gardens, seeing the land not for its monetary value but for its potential human value. They take abandoned houses and paint them with positive messages, turn them into community centers, local workshops for professionals, artistic spaces, community schools. Their motto is to share what you have: if all you have is a living room, offer the living room for children to learn something new, or to hold community discussions. The activist Grace Lee Boggs transformed one floor of her house into a center for promoting community leadership. People are creating a local economy from the wreckage left behind of the globalized one.

And in Haiti, we have already been obligated to start to do this. And while everyone has the right to look for a job because jobs provide stability for families, we also have to be honest with ourselves that Haiti may never be able to provide even a half of us with jobs, and less likely to provide us with decent jobs that treat us and our communities well. So in the meantime, what are we doing with our talents and energy?

In some ways we are luckier than Detroit: almost all of us were either born in the countryside or are the sons and daughters of those born in the countryside - we all know someone who grew their own food at some point. And we all know how to run small businesses - our mothers raised us by selling home-made rice and beans off our front porches, or selling used clothes at Croix des Brossales markets. And even more, we do not have the same amounts of restrictions and regulations that the people in Detroit

have: people in Detroit cannot even plant a garden without getting a permit from the state. So let us build on this local economy of neighbors selling to neighbors: it is not easy, but it is the only thing that is for us. How do we make it stronger?

Instead of investing in quality education, roads, social enterprises, supporting local agriculture that could help to grow a resilient local economy, they engage in petty politics. And when they find an opportunity, they will construct big factories such as Caracol that will provide quick jobs. But what if what happens to Detroit happens to Haiti and these factories close - what will be left behind? Another Cite Soleil. People with no land and no skills to make money for themselves and their families. And factories like Caracol take up hundreds of acres of good farming land - and have we thought yet about what will happen when there is no more food from the countryside coming into Croix des Brossales?

Imagine if they took the peasants and reinforced their agricultural practices, opened roads to transport them into modern markets. Factories are not necessarily a bad thing, but they are also not the solution to every economic problem. Imagine if we constructed economies based on the resources and strengths of each area, where communities could participate in the imagining and realization of their own futures?

We cannot wait for them to give us a voice in their version of development - we need to start with what we have, and have conversations about what development means to us. We can build a new economy that is neither communist nor capitalist, but is based on the principles of *konbit* in every domain. Let us re-imagine development.

RE-IMAGINING PEACE

People tend to think of peace as the absence of war - that is why the world has invested millions in a UN army with tanks, soldiers, and guns to bring peace to our country. But you cannot bring peace somewhere - peace has to be built. And peace has to be defined by each community, the same way we need to define what development means to us. So we need to ask ourselves: what should peace mean for us?

We can take some examples from what we learned about America during our visit. America has a greater percentage of its people in prison than any other country in the world, and every year spends tens of thousands of dollars on keeping that person in prison. The money they spend on keeping prisoners in prison is more than they spend helping young people to finish university. Is locking up a generation of young people a good vision of peace? Are there resources being invested into changing the conditions of life that force young people to steal and murder? Most of these young people will come out of jail at some point, and they can't find jobs because of their record - so what will prevent them from committing crimes again?

And we know this reality too: we may not know the statistics about the money spent on the police and the number of young people in prison, but we know that there are 9 million Haitians living in Haiti and less than 10,000 police. Across Haiti, Haitians are building their own peace, giving each other security in places where the police are few and far between.

If we take the example of Cite Soleil, there are more than 300,000 people and about a dozen police officers and police stations that are almost vacant. And yet we have this reputation of being very violent. But let's talk about peace: they took our biggest and most beautiful marketplace and transformed it into a police station, putting the merchants out onto the street. Think about what that tells people: we would rather spend money on putting your children in prison than making sure there is a good environment to ensure they don't need to turn to crime to survive. The world has invested a lot of money in sending UN soldiers to police Cite Soleil, but no one is investing in creating options for young people. There are no professional schools, and our state schools, which were already too small for the thousands of Soleyian children, were damaged in the earthquake and never repaired. If there are no options for these young people, you are almost telling them to become criminals.

If peace includes justice, then we need to think about what justice means. Think about this situation: a young man, either in Detroit or Cite Soleil or Martissant, grew up in a violent community and began to sell drugs and participate in gang activity to get by. He gets thrown in prison, spends 5-10 years in prison, and gets let out. How does he rebuild his life? How does his community see him? Was there ever healing for the people he hurt? Does he see himself as a victim of community betrayal or someone who needs to seek forgiveness? In the traditional justice systems, things stop mattering as soon as he is no longer a ward of the state. But is that the kind of justice we want in our communities?

There is another way of looking at justice called restorative justice. The idea behind restorative justice is not just to punish a person for bad behavior - it is to understand why that crime happened, how to

mend the broken relationships in the community, and how to make sure it doesn't happen again. It means solving the roots of the problem, not just dealing with the symptoms. That looks different in every situation, but it allows communities to define what justice means for themselves.

A young man named Sterling in Detroit told us that "any action less than loving comes from suffering". That means that the root of violence is often some other kind of violence, and violence doesn't always need to be physical. People's dignity and pride can be hurt, their culture can be hurt, their minds can be hurt. So how do you break the cycle of violence?

We saw a good example in Detroit. Yusef Shakur was a gangster in an area called Zone 8. His father was in prison and his mother sold drugs. He joined a gang very young and by age 15 he had shot up a church. He was sent to prison later, and had the chance to meet his father in prison. He decided to take his time in prison to transform his life, to read and educate himself and educate others. He realized how he hurt his community, and wanted to transform his life. But when he got out, things were difficult for him: as a former prisoner, he couldn't get a job, people still saw him as the criminal who had gone to prison, and he was on the verge of going back to the criminal way of life just to get by. But he stayed committed to his decision, and found certain people in the community who were willing to give him a chance. He began speaking in schools about his life, helping them understand there were other ways besides that of the gangs, and becoming a true activist for his community. He is now a respected community figure and father, and runs his own small business and bookstore in the middle of the ghetto.

Imagine if some of the young gangsters coming out of prison could find this kind of chance to become valuable members of their communities. All of the big name gangsters of the past: Dread Wilmer, Amaral, Evans, they were all leaders, but very misguided leaders, and they are dead or in prison today. There are many other young people who are using violence to find their way in life who have told us that they want to change, they want to put down their weapons and become a citizen but they don't know how. And our communities and our justice systems are not ready to help them make that transition.

Like it or not, these young people are a part of our community, and we need to find a way for them to be a productive part of our community. In the Boggs Center there is a sign that says, "Young people are not the problem, they are the solution". We have a Haitian proverb that says, "The elders have failed, and the youth have gone crazy". We need to work with the angry and often violent young people in our communities and find a way to help them be a part of the solution: Young people have energy, and if we don't help them find something constructive to do with it, they will do something destructive with it.

Another model in Detroit was something called a "Peace Zone". A Peace Zone is a neighborhood that has decided it is going to be responsible for cultivating peace on its own streets, creating opportunities for everyone in the community - young and old, school children and returning citizens - to contribute. They started these zones because whenever there was a conflict in the community and they called the police, someone ended up dead. So they decided to create areas where ordinary people were

empowered to prevent and transform conflicts in their communities.

When we learned about Peace Zones, we immediately thought about home. We have things like this in Cite Soleil, just by a different name:

- There is a social movement called Konbit Soley Leve. It was a movement for neighborhoods to take responsibility for themselves, to paint houses and put up positive graffiti and hold social activities for young people and even open up space for people with guns to make positive impact in their communities. While it was at its strongest, the streets were cleaner, the violence was less, and neighborhoods that were formerly fighting were coming together.
- La Difference is a model peace zone: a small corner of Cite Soleil where the residents have been taking responsibility for their streets for almost a decade, keeping their streets clean and beautiful, providing structure for children, and being a model of what Cite Soleil could be one day
- We have our own Peace Zone in a way, this is SAKALA in Michicot. Daniel Tillias and the Pax Christi Haiti team transformed an abandoned factory that used to be used as an execution ground for gangsters into a safe community space where children learn peacebuilding through sports, urban gardening, and cultural activities.
- There is ID-Haiti in Soley 4 and Metanoia in Ti Haiti, using sports to teach skills of conflict resolution and community building to young people

- There is Cyborg Dance, teaching self-confidence and peace through breakdancing and hip-hop culture.
- There is RAJEPRE in Bwa Nef, trying to develop a new kind of education that engages young people in their communities, teaching them how to grow urban gardens, plant tree nurseries, and keep their streets clean.
- We have Radio Boukman, our very own community radio station in the heart of Cite Soleil, engaging local youth in journalism to represent the true face of Cite Soleil and promote peace on our streets.
- There is the Ministry of Pastor Enoch that is dedicated to promoting social work.
- There is LIVOCS, using voodoo culture to promote social justice and an understanding of Haitian heritage.

We have all of these great examples, and so many more that we didn't have space to list - these are the seeds of peace in our communities. If we can nurture them, and whatever seeds of peace exist in Haiti's other areas, we can grow a sustainable peace in our communities.

But we don't seem to give these initiatives any value - these seeds take a long time to grow, and we still think about peace as something the UN and the government and the NGOs can give to us. But they can't give it to us. They have been trying to give it to us for years, and look where we are. We have been waiting for them to lead us to peace, but it is we who need to start walking. This is our home, these are our streets, and this is our responsibility: as Grace Lee Boggs said, "we are the leaders we've been waiting for".

RE-IMAGINING OURSELVES

The biggest problem of those of us living in the marginalized corners of Haiti is not the way other people treat us, or the stigma other people assign to us. It is the way we see ourselves. We have accepted and internalized the stereotypes. We have stopped believing we can be anything else than bandits and poor people. We hide the fact that we live in Cite Soleil and register to vote in other areas so that our ID cards don't say where we come from. We as Haitians speak French instead of creole to distance ourselves from our maternal language and culture.

And it is hard: when you say you are from Cite Soleil, people shut doors on your face, call you a gangster, rip up your job application. We have been the victims of this. But we are the only ones who can change this:

The young men at ID-Haiti entered a basketball team from Cite Soleil into a Division-2 championships. The first few matches, they suffered much verbal abuse. People yelled out: "you don't know how to play basketball, you only know how to hold guns" or called at the referees to pat down the players to make sure they weren't carrying weapons under their uniforms. But the players held up their heads and played with discipline and dignity, and eventually won over the hearts of the crowd and the officials. At a later game, someone went to insult the players, and the crowd turned around and shamed the person into silence. These young men are heroes in their own way.

As the founder of La Difference, Stephen Italien, said: "it is not the neighborhood that makes the person, but the person that makes

the neighborhood." We need to stop letting us be defined by our neighborhoods but instead transforming our neighborhoods to fit our dreams.

Detroit experiences similar discrimination to us: there are some people who are afraid to cross into the limits of the city because of the stigma they carry. But there is an incredible amount of pride in the people of Detroit - people wear T-shirts declaring they are proud Detroit natives, write poetry and music about their city, and travel over the country to represent their city. They see themselves as warriors, fighting not just for their future but for the future of America's cities.

Brothers and sisters, we are sharing this with you because we see you as warriors fighting for the future of Haiti. We have seen people just like you stand up and take responsibility for their homes, their streets, their communities. Remember where you come from: your ancestors were the first people to throw off the yoke of slavery in 1804. Today, it is up to our generation to throw off the yoke of mental and economic slavery that we find ourselves in today.

It will take a revolution of course, but not the kind of revolution that Dessalines and Toussaint were obliged to use. Because if we used the "cut the heads and burn the houses" kind of revolution of the past, we would be killing our brothers and sisters because today, we are the colonizers and the colonized. No, it will take a {r}evolution, where we grow our own freedom, our own development, our own peace from what we have. We like to say that "freedom is not given, but taken" - but now we would say that freedom is neither given nor taken, but grown. It will not be easy, but freedom demands sacrifice. Let us start to imagine the New Haitian Revolution.

Now it's your turn: use this booklet to start your own {r}evolution. Sit down with your family, your neighbors, your organization, and even yourself, and start to have a conversation about change. Because the first step on the route of change is to imagine it, and share with others to begin to develop a shared vision of the future you deserve. Here is some space to write:

DESCRIBE THE DEVELOPMENT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE IN YOUR COMMUNITY:

NOW START

If you have questions, comments, or suggestions, please contact us at robillard.louino@gmail.com or (509)-3844-8172 or sabina.carlson@gmail.com or (509)-4643-3922.

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...and all of the others that we don't have the space to mention.

Mesi anpil, e bon kouraj - thank you and have courage.