

## ***Grace Lee Boggs, Human Rights Advocate for 7 Decades, Dies at 100***

By [Robert D. McFadden](#) Oct. 5, 2015



Grace Lee Boggs in “American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs,” a film that premiered on PBS last year. Credit...LeeLee Films, Inc.

Grace Lee Boggs, one of the nation’s oldest human rights activists, who waged a war of inspiration for civil rights, labor, feminism, the environment and other causes for seven decades with an unflinching faith that revolutionary justice was just around the corner, died on Monday at her home in Detroit. She was 100.

Her death was confirmed by Alice Jennings, her friend and legal trustee.

Born to Chinese immigrants, Ms. Boggs was an author and philosopher who planted gardens on vacant lots, founded community organizations and political movements, marched against racism, lectured widely on human rights and wrote books on her evolving vision of a revolution in America.

Her odyssey took her from the streets of Chicago as a tenant organizer in the 1940s to arcane academic debates about the nature of communism, from the confrontational tactics of Malcolm X and the Black Power movement to the nonviolent strategies of

the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and finally to her own manifesto for change — based not on political and economic upheavals but on community organizing and resurgent moral values.

“I think that too much of our emphasis on struggle has simply been in terms of confrontation and not enough recognition of how much spiritual and moral force is involved in the people who are struggling,” [Ms. Boggs told Bill Moyers](#) in a PBS interview in 2007. “We have not emphasized sufficiently the cultural revolution that we have to make among ourselves in order to force the government to do differently.”

Many of her ideas were explored in [“American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs.”](#) a documentary that was part of a film project by the director Grace Lee about people who shared her name. It premiered on PBS in 2014.

Early in her career, Ms. Boggs translated works by Karl Marx. She joined and quit the Workers Party, the Socialist Workers Party and the Trotskyite movement, and collaborated with the revolutionaries [C. L. R. James](#) , [Raya Dunayevskaya](#) and others in tortuous dialectical analyses that described the Soviet Union variously as “a degenerated workers’ state,” a “state capitalist” system and “autonomous Marxism.”

In 1953, she moved to Detroit and married James Boggs, a black autoworker, writer and radical activist. The city, with its large black population, racial inequalities and auto industry in its postwar heyday, seemed poised for changes, and the couple focused on African-Americans, women and young people as vanguards of a social movement.

For years they also identified closely with Black Power advocates across the country. Malcolm X stayed with them on visits to Detroit. The Federal Bureau of Investigation was said to have monitored their activities. When arson fires and rioting erupted in the city in 1967, Ms. Boggs described the violence as a rebellion against rising unemployment and police brutality.

“What we tried to do is explain that a rebellion is righteous, because it’s the protest of a people against injustice,” she told Mr. Moyers. But the violence, she said, also became “a turning point in my life, because until that time I had not made a distinction between a rebellion and revolution.”



Ms. Boggs and her husband, James. Credit...LeeLee Films, Inc.

Ms. Boggs eventually adopted Dr. King’s nonviolent strategies and in Detroit, which remained her base for the rest of her life, fostered Dr. King’s vision of “beloved communities,” striving for racial and economic justice through nonconfrontational methods. As Detroit’s economy and population declined sharply over the years, Ms. Boggs became a prominent symbol of resistance to the spreading blight.

She founded food cooperatives and community groups to support the elderly, organize unemployed workers and fight utility shut-offs. She devised tactics to combat crime,

including protests outside known crack houses, and in columns for a local weekly newspaper, *The Michigan Citizen*, she promoted civic reforms.

In 1992, she co-founded [Detroit Summer](#), a youth program that still draws volunteers from all over the country to repair homes, paint murals, organize music festivals and turn vacant lots into community gardens. In 2013 she opened the [James and Grace Lee Boggs School](#), a charter elementary school.

Grace Lee was born above her father's Chinese restaurant in Providence, R.I., on June 27, 1915. Her father, Chin Lee, later owned a popular restaurant near Times Square in Manhattan. Although illiterate in English, her mother, Yin Lan Lee, was a strong feminist role model.

Grace Lee grew up in Jackson Heights, Queens. A brilliant scholar, she enrolled at 16 at Barnard College, graduated in 1935 with a degree in philosophy, and in 1940 earned a doctorate from Bryn Mawr College.

Influenced by the German philosophers Kant and especially Hegel, a precursor of Marx, she resolved to devote her life to change in a nation of inequalities and discrimination against minorities and women. In 1941, discouraged about prospects for a college teaching position, she found a library job at the University of Chicago, and she was soon organizing protests against slum housing.

In 1945 she published her first book, "George Herbert Mead: Philosopher of the Social Individual," about the American scholar regarded as a founder of social psychology.

Returning to New York, she immersed herself in radical politics, joined socialist groups and wrote for leftist publications. But it was her marriage to Mr. Boggs and her move to Detroit that transformed her political philosophies into life as an activist.

Ms. Boggs and her husband, who died in 1993, had no children. No immediate family members survive.

Her other books included “Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century” (1974, with Mr. Boggs), “Women and the Movement to Build a New America” (1977), [“Living for Change: An Autobiography”](#) (1998) and “The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century” (2011, with Scott Kurashige).

In her last book, Ms. Boggs aligned herself with revolutionaries in the spirit of Thoreau, Gandhi and Dr. King. “We are not subversives,” she wrote. “We are struggling to change this country because we love it.”