



American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs Discussion Guide

Director: Grace Lee

Year: 2013

Time: 82 min

You might know this director from:

Janeane from Des Moines (2012)

American Zombie (2007)

The Grace Lee Project (2005)

FILM SUMMARY

“I didn’t want to be different.” For all of her life, however, different is precisely what Grace Lee Boggs has been. A pioneering force to constantly be reckoned with, this first generation Chinese-American political activist and champion of the Black Power movement continued to blaze a fiery path until she reached 100 years old.

Of no relationship, yet sharing a name, director Grace Lee was drawn to Lee Boggs the first time she encountered her at UCLA in the early 21st century. Following her since then, Lee captures the fervent politics, the engaged compassion, and the inexhaustible devotion of Lee Boggs as she worked for equality and justice in both her adopted hometown of Detroit and across the world of international affairs.

At a mere 84 minutes, AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY could never hope to encompass the entire working life and political impact of the legendary Grace Lee Boggs, yet it artfully introduces us to her story. She was a minority in multiple capacities: an educated woman in the early 20th century, an Asian American, and a political trendsetter rather than a passive figure. She married James Boggs, an African-American Chrysler worker and political activist, moved to Detroit—where she remained until her death in 2015—and feverishly fought for black rights. Yet, as an unparalleled champion of equality and human rights, she never considered herself an icon.

A philosopher, a thinker, a conversationalist, a mover and a shaker, Lee Boggs continues to inspire others to change their world through proactive movements. She lived and died in her beloved Detroit household that has had many an activist pass through its door, actively involved in the turmoil and turbulence of an entire century. AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY provides a swift portrait of this tireless, emboldened, charismatic, and caring individual ever-devoted to human rights and the dissipation of truth and justice.

FILM THEMES

An Asian-American woman in a world driven by injustice and inequality, Grace Lee Boggs set out to alter the machine by becoming embroiled in many social movements.

EVOLUTION VS. REVOLUTION

Life is a constantly changing, shifting mechanism. If people remain stiff, static, and unchanging, life will do its work against us, leaving us in its wake. The ideas and notions of revolutionaries and activists must also be in movement, a flexible part of the flow. A gradual progression of events is what incites change and has lasting effects, and Lee Boggs proposes remaining open, receptive, and imaginative in the face of opposition and trouble. While revolution is a momentary blast, evolution—the slow, unfurling course of life’s events—has much to teach us along our way to a better world.

CONVERSATION AS ACTIVISM

By coming together with others and discussing our conceptions, Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs believed the world could be altered. “Ideas have their power because they are not fixed,” Lee Boggs stated, and she has kept the flame of political and social activism alive through the power of conversation. Those around us challenge us, offering us a perspective unavailable in solitude, and only by placing our thoughts and beliefs on the public cutting board of discourse can we carve a communal path to justice and well-being.

BLACK POLITICAL POWER

As a Chinese-American living in an all-black community with her African-American husband, Lee Boggs stated, “I saw myself as a part of and apart from the community.” Entering the world post-university, no jobs were available to her as an Asian-American woman, and the first movement to attract her, that of the black community where she was living, became her life-long mission. An underdog herself, she wanted what they wanted—control of the community by the community. In the words of Angela Davis, “Grace has made more contributions to the black struggle than most black people have.” Cutting a path somewhere between MLK Jr. and Malcolm X, her teachings have reached many.

STAYING PUT

Detroit is a microcosmic symbol of the evolution of the greater Western World, a place Grace Lee Boggs refused to abandon. When the mass exodus was underway, jobs disappearing, violence setting up camp where families once lived, she stuck around. Through her perseverance and staying power, she became a beacon of hope and possibility during Detroit’s darkest, direst days, lending the city her consistent, compassionate determination. Detroit, once the symbol of success that set the dreaming imagination on fire, was quickly abandoned once the industries began to collapse. She stayed. As a sort of peaceful protest against quick fixes and swift abandonment, she set an example by planting the seeds of tomorrow in the soil of the here and now, whatever shape and struggle today may present.

“History is not only a story of the past but of the future.”

Grace Lee Boggs

“You make your path by walking.”

Grace Lee Boggs

“Rebellion is an outburst of anger, but it’s not revolution. Revolution is evolution toward something much grander in terms of what it means to be a human being.”

Grace Lee Boggs

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Had you heard of Grace Lee Boggs before watching the film? If so, in which capacity? If not, are you now interested in reading any of her publications?
2. What is your definition of activism? Do you consider yourself an activist? Are there any simple ways in which the average individual can become more of an activist on a daily basis?
3. Grace Lee Boggs chose to not become a mother. How, in any way, did this affect her career? Do you think motherhood would have impacted upon her output in any capacity?
4. Grace Lee Boggs' 100th birthday was June 27, 2015 and she passed away October 5, 2015. What factors affect a long life? Is there something more than genes that has an impact upon longevity?
5. What five words come to mind when you think of Detroit? What, if any, personal experience do you have of this city?
6. In the words of Grace Lee Boggs: "If we stick to those categories of race and class and gender, we are stuck." Discuss. How are certain movements (black power, feminism, sexual rights, etc.) both empowered and debilitated by becoming category specific?
7. Grace Lee Boggs is a proponent of personal transformation as a powerful means of bringing about societal change. Discuss.
8. If you look back 50 years over the history of your community, do you see any similarities with the history of Detroit? How do the events of half a century ago inform current events in your community?
9. What is your definition of a revolutionary? Do you consider yourself to have a revolutionary spirit? Is there any difference between an activist and a revolutionary?
10. Do you believe in the power of conversation, or are actions the only real way to bring about change? Discuss the power of talk over the power of physical actions.

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- **AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY: THE EVOLUTION OF GRACE LEE BOGGS** won a number of awards, including both the Audience Award and Jury Prize at the 2013 Woodstock Film Festival.
- Director Grace Lee, of Korean heritage, grew up in a small college town in Missouri, where she was the only Grace Lee around. Once she moved to Los Angeles to study film at UCLA, she came across many others with her name—and was commonly mistaken for being another Grace Lee. This inspired her 2005 documentary “The Grace Lee Project,” which really began to take form once she met Grace Lee Boggs. In 2015 she worked on the PBS series “OFF THE MENU,” exploring Asian-American food culture.
- Born in 1919 in Alabama, James Boggs was the only person in his family who could write, and from the age of 8 was responsible for writing his family’s letters. After graduating from high school, he took a freight train north and eventually ended up in Detroit. He died in 1993.
- Grace Lee Boggs was born in Rhode Island in 1915, the fourth of six children. Her paternal grandmother lived to be 104.
- Founded as a French settlement in 1701, Detroit was controlled by the British from 1760 until 1796, following the American Revolutionary War. With its proximity to the Canadian border, Detroit served as a key stop for refugee slaves escaping through the Underground Railroad.
- Chinese settlers first arrived in America in 1768, reaching Hawaii the same year that Captain Cook set foot on these Pacific islands. In the mid-1800s, there was a large-scale immigration of Chinese to California during the Gold Rush and also for the construction of the First Transcontinental Railroad. As competition for jobs increased and wages decreased, animosity towards Chinese immigrants was on the rise, leading to the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. This law was in effect until 1943, and was the first law passed preventing a specific ethnic group from immigrating to the U.S.
- Yin Lan, Grace Lee Boggs’ mother, was born in China and sold into slavery as a girl. She escaped through an arranged marriage to a Seattle restaurant owner, Chin Lee, who was 20 years older than her. Giving birth to their first child on the ship’s journey from China to the U.S., Lan and Lee moved to the East Coast to escape West Coast violence against Asians.
- When **AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY** was to be screened at the DocAviv Intl. Documentary Film Festival in Tel Aviv, Danny Glover, Lee Boggs, and others who support the boycott against Israel issued a letter in opposition of its screening.
- Detroit has the highest population of African-Americans of any U.S. city, with 84%.
- Asian-Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the United States.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Give others the chance to learn from its story and help keeping the memory of Grace Lee Boggs alive. For help in hosting a fundraiser or house party relating to the film, email InLoveandStruggle@gmail.com.
2. **Learn** more about the work of the [James and Grace Lee Boggs School](#), an organization active in the Detroit area, working to nurture the spirit of learning and critical thinking. Consider giving to their mission.
3. **Read** “The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century,” written by Grace Lee Boggs, with a foreword by Danny Glover.
4. **Engage** in conversations and dialogue with the people about the things that matter most to you.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.