

# A MOTHER APART

A FILM BY LAURIE TOWNSHEND



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE





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# Film Summary



In a poignant story of healing and forgiveness, Jamaican-American poet and LGBTQ+ activist Staceyann Chin explores how to raise a child after being abandoned by her own mother. Known for her work in *Def Poetry Slam* and shows like *MotherStruck!*, Chin embarks on a journey across Brooklyn, Montreal, Cologne, and Jamaica to find her mother, ultimately creating a new sense of home with her daughter.

# Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and is designed for people who want to use *A Mother Apart* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness—spaces where people listen deeply, share personal stories, and seek to understand one another.

The guide encourages critical reflection, embodied engagement, and personal storytelling as ways to connect lived experience with the film’s themes. It also aims to facilitate what media literacy educators call “deep listening” and “deep viewing”—approaches that slow down perception and invite participants to attend more closely to what they see, hear, and feel, both within themselves and in community.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues raised in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. Be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps—whether through family or community-facing initiatives or moments of radically honest introspection—can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even when conversations have been challenging.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

## A NOTE TO FACILITATORS

Dear POV Community,

We are so glad you have chosen to facilitate a discussion inspired by the film *A Mother Apart*. Before you facilitate, please prepare yourself for the conversation, as this film invites you and your community to discuss experiences of Caribbean and Black diasporic families, migration, queerness, motherhood, healing, and intergenerational storytelling. These conversations require learning truths about society, culture, and political motivations that typically have not been taught in schools. We urge you, as a facilitator, to take the necessary steps to ensure that you are prepared to guide a conversation that prioritizes the well-being and safety of Black women, LGBTQ+ people, immigrants, and youth in your community. Importantly, this film shares experiences through a lens of joy and resilience, rather than focusing on trauma, and we hope this guide will aid you in conversations that expand understanding while maximizing care, critical curiosity, transformation, and connection.

## Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

# Share Community Agreements

## Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. [Here is a model](#) of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

## Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- Pass around sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- Allow time for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- Go around in a circle and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- Go around two to three times to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- Read the list aloud.
- Invite questions or revisions.
- Ask if all are satisfied with the list.

## COMMON CONCEPTS & LANGUAGE

### **Barrel Children**

A term coined by Dr. Claudette Crawford-Brown, “barrel children” refers to children in the Caribbean whose parents have migrated abroad—often to North America or the United Kingdom—for work. These children are left in the care of extended family members and receive financial support and gifts shipped in large barrels. While the barrels bring material goods, they also symbolize absence: the physical distance between parent and child, and the emotional complexities of transnational family life. Barrel children often grow up navigating feelings of abandonment, pride, longing, and resilience as they learn to love parents they may only know through phone calls, remittances, and packages from afar.

### **Chosen Family**

Chosen family refers to a group of people to whom one is emotionally close and considers “family” even though they are not related by blood or marriage. These intentional kinship networks are especially significant within LGBTQ+ communities and among those who have experienced family rejection, migration, or separation. Chosen families provide care, support, emotional intimacy, and belonging—fulfilling the roles that biological families may be unable or unwilling to perform. The concept challenges traditional definitions of family and affirms that kinship can be something we create, not only something we inherit.

### **Colonization**

Colonization refers to forms of invasion, dispossession, or subjugation of a people. The invasion need not be

military—it can occur through agricultural, urban, or industrial expansion that intrudes upon Indigenous lands. This process leads to the dispossession of land from its original inhabitants, often legalized after the fact. The long-term result is institutionalized inequality. The colonizer–colonized relationship is inherently unequal, benefiting the colonizer at the expense of the colonized.

Ongoing and legacy colonialism continue to shape power relations across the world today. For example, white supremacy as a philosophy emerged largely to justify European colonial exploitation of the Global South—including the enslavement of African peoples, the extraction of resources from Asia and Latin America, and the elevation of Whiteness as a cultural ideal in both colonizing and colonized nations.

## **Discrimination**

Discrimination is the unequal treatment of individuals or groups based on race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, or other categories. In the United States, it is illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex. The law also prohibits retaliation against anyone who complains about discrimination, files a charge, or participates in an investigation or lawsuit. Additionally, employers are required to reasonably accommodate applicants' and employees' sincerely held religious practices unless doing so would cause undue hardship to the business.

## **Equity**

Equity means ensuring fairness for everyone. An emphasis on equity seeks to deliver justice by examining and addressing the structural factors that advantage some social groups and harm others. At times, achieving equity

requires an unequal response to account for historical and systemic disparities.

## **Maternal Migration**

Maternal migration refers to the movement of mothers or women caregivers across national borders—often leaving children behind for periods of time—driven by economic, social, or immigration-policy pressures. These migrations have deep and lasting impacts on families, children, and communities in both the sending and receiving countries.

## **Othermothering**

Othermothering refers to the practice of women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities. Rooted in African and Caribbean traditions, othermothering became a critical survival strategy during and after slavery, when family structures were deliberately fractured. In these communities, care work extended beyond biological relationships—grandmothers,

aunts, neighbors, and chosen kin stepped in to nurture, protect, and raise children collectively. This practice reflects an understanding that mothering is not solely a private, individual act but a communal responsibility that ensures the community's survival, continuity, and well-being.

## **Transnational Family**

A household stretched across borders, held together by care, memory, and hope, even as policies and distance conspired to keep it apart.

# Participants

## **Staceyann Chin**

The central figure of the film and a Jamaican-American poet, performer, and queer activist who was abandoned by her mother when she was a child. In the film, she is both mother to her daughter and “daughter” in search of her missing mother.

## **Zuri Chin**

Staceyann’s daughter, whose presence and relationship with her mother are key to the story.

## **Hazel**

The elusive mother of Staceyann. Though less visible as a speaking participant, her absence is a driving force in the story: tracing where she went, why she left, and the emotional legacy of her departure.

# Key Issues

*A Mother Apart* is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- mothering/remothering
- activism
- immigration
- intergenerational healing
- forgiveness
- family storytelling
- chosen family
- queerness & Caribbean families
- inner child work

# Background Information

## **The West Indian Domestic Scheme: A Pathway and a Partition**

Between 1955 and 1967, roughly 3,000 women from English-speaking Caribbean nations—Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, among others—made their way to Canada through a little-known immigration program called the West Indian Domestic Scheme. It was one of the only legal routes available to Black women from the Caribbean to enter and settle in Canada during a period when the country’s immigration policy still largely favored white, European migrants.

The program was both an opening and a constraint. Applicants were required to be single women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, possess at least an eighth-grade education, pass a medical exam, and agree to work as live-in domestic servants for a full year. After completing that year, they could apply for landed immigrant status, opening the door to other forms of employment and, eventually, to sponsoring family members.

For many, the promise of migration held the hope of stability and opportunity—steady wages, a chance to send remittances home, and a pathway to build a new life in a new country. Yet the reality was often starkly different. The work was physically demanding and emotionally isolating: long hours caring for other people’s families while their own children remained thousands of miles away. Many women endured racism, cultural alienation, and the loneliness of displacement, even as they forged new communities in Canada’s cities.

The West Indian Domestic Scheme ended in the late 1960s with the introduction of Canada's points-based immigration system, which moved away from gender- and race-specific recruitment. But the program's legacy remains profound. For countless families, it was the beginning of a transnational story—a story of maternal migration shaped by both sacrifice and resilience, of mothers who left in order to provide, and of children who grew up learning to love across distance.

## **Family Reunification and Child Separation**

For many women who came to Canada through the West Indian Domestic Scheme, migration meant not only the promise of opportunity but also the pain of separation. Because the program required applicants to be single, countless women left children and other family members behind in their home countries, trusting that their sacrifice would one day open doors for the next generation.

Life in Canada, however, offered little time or space to grieve that absence. Domestic work was demanding as it meant long hours spent caring for other people's homes and children, with limited wages and few social supports. Many of these women were newcomers navigating unfamiliar cities, often facing racism and isolation while trying to make enough to send remittances home. Reuniting with family required both financial stability and the bureaucratic means to sponsor dependents, a process that could take years.

Across those years, family roles quietly shifted. Mothers abroad became voices on phone lines or signatures on letters and money orders—and address lines on shipping barrels. In Jamaica and across the Caribbean, children left behind by migrant parents came to be known as “barrel children,” a term coined by Jamaican psychologist Dr. Claudette Crawford-

Brown. The barrels—large shipping containers filled with clothing, food, toys, and other goods—arrived as tangible proof of a parent’s love and labor from abroad. Yet they also symbolized absence. What the barrels could not carry was presence: the daily intimacy of care, the comfort of a mother’s touch, the ordinary rituals of family life. Children were raised by grandparents, aunts, or older siblings, learning to love a mother they could not see.

When reunification finally came, it was not always simple. Both sides had changed—mothers shaped by migration, and children shaped by absence. Scholars of migration call this the “transnational family”: a household stretched across borders, held together by care, memory, and hope, even as policies and distance conspired to keep it apart.

## **Legacies of Maternal Migration on Families**

The legacy of maternal migration ripples across generations. For many families, the years of separation created a sense of emotional and relational “catch-up.” Children who grew up apart from their mothers sometimes carried complex feelings of longing, resentment, or guilt—grappling with both the opportunities migration had provided and the emotional costs it exacted. Mothers, too, bore the weight of these absences: the ache of missed birthdays, first steps, and the daily intimacy of raising a child.

When reunification finally occurred, it often brought its own challenges. Mothers and children had to renegotiate their relationships in a new social and cultural landscape. What had once been imagined reunion could feel, at least at first, like meeting a stranger. Yet through these difficult adjustments, families forged new forms of closeness—learning, once again, how to belong to one another. Of course, reunification was not always successful, leaving some families separated.

Beyond the personal, these women helped lay the foundation for thriving Caribbean-Canadian communities. They built churches, social clubs, and cultural associations in cities like Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa—spaces where newcomers could find kinship and belonging. Their labor and leadership seeded the networks that future generations would inherit.

Still, the structural inequities that shaped their migration cannot be overlooked. Domestic work, while offering entry into Canada, was undervalued and precarious. Economic advancement was often constrained by racial and gender hierarchies that limited women’s mobility long after their arrival. The very policies that enabled migration also institutionalized separation, reminding us that “family” under such regimes was never a simple or static unit—it was a living, transnational web of love, labor, and endurance.

### **Othermothering, Chosen Family, and Remothering Through Art**

Across the Caribbean and its diasporas, the act of mothering has never been confined to biological ties. In the wake of colonial disruption, economic migration, and systems that scattered families across oceans, care often moved through extended networks—grandmothers, aunties, neighbors, and friends who stepped in to raise children as their own. This practice, known in Black feminist and Caribbean scholarship as othermothering, became a form of collective survival. It reflected an understanding that mothering is not only a private act but a communal responsibility—a way to ensure continuity, protection, and belonging in the face of separation.

For women who migrated through programs such as Canada’s West Indian Domestic Scheme, othermothering took on transnational dimensions. When mothers left children behind, others at home—sisters, cousins, godparents—stepped into the role of caregiver. Bonds of affection and accountability stretched across borders, redefining what family could

mean. Migration demanded this kind of flexibility: love had to travel, and mothering had to multiply.

In many diasporic communities, especially within the LGBTQIA+ Caribbean diaspora, these expansive kinship practices have continued to evolve. When biological families fracture—through distance, disapproval, or silence—chosen families often emerge to fill the void. Within queer communities, mothering becomes a metaphor and a practice: to nurture, to guide, to protect one another in spaces where traditional acceptance may be withheld. These networks of care mirror the same resilience and inventiveness that earlier generations of migrant mothers embodied. They offer a reminder that family can be something we create, not only something we inherit.

Within this broader lineage of care, art and storytelling become powerful acts of remothering—ways to reconnect with what migration, trauma, or silence may have taken away. Through creative expression, individuals and communities reclaim their narratives, tending to wounds that official histories overlook. Storytelling offers both witness and restoration: to speak the unspeakable, to name the losses, and to find language for love across distance and difference.

In *A Mother Apart*, these threads intertwine. The film reflects not just on the historical realities of maternal migration, but on the emotional and creative labor of repair. It asks how we mother one another in the aftermath of separation—how we build chosen families out of fracture, how we turn grief into art, and how, through telling our stories, we come home to ourselves.

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# PROMPTS & ACTIVITIES FOR COMMUNITY SCREENINGS

NOTE: This discussion guide offers *many* opportunities for engagement, including multiple writing prompts, reflection and connection questions, and activities. Please review the entire guide and select the option that is most appropriate or meaningful for your community.

## INTRODUCTION ACTIVITY: ICE-BREAKER

*Suggested Materials.* Pens, pencils, lined paper, poster paper, post-its, markers

In circle formation, ask each participant to share their a) name, b) whose child or sibling they are (i.e., the name of any friend or relative who has “claimed” them as their own and/or played a meaningful parental role), and c) a food that feels like home...

Invite participants who feel comfortable to share their responses as a way of introducing themselves to the group. After individuals share, the rest of the group should simply say, “thank you for sharing,” and move to the next person.

## PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITIES: GROUNDING & REFLECTION

Before screening *A Mother Apart*, take a moment to pause and acknowledge what participants bring into the room—their stories, assumptions, and lived experiences. Explain that these writing prompts are meant to open the door gently to all of those things. You may choose to discuss them aloud and/or guide participants through a short, timed free-writing exercise (2–5 minutes each). Below you will find options for Timed Free Writing Exercises as well as Discussion Prompts to support conversation: please choose what is best suited for the community you are working alongside.

## Timed Free-Writing Exercises

The following questions and reflections are meant to prepare viewers/participants for experiencing the film with openness and thoughtful engagement.

Share these guidelines for Timed Free-Writing with participants:

- Keep your pen moving; don't stop writing.
- Repeat words or phrases if necessary, just don't stop to censor or edit.
- Follow the feeling, not the logic.
- There are no wrong answers.
- Sharing an excerpt will be optional.

Select one sentence starter and ask participants to write it at the top of their page.

Set a timer for 2–5 minutes and encourage them to reflect on the prompt in writing. Once everyone has finished or time is up, invite some people to share their reflections.

## Prompts:

### *OUR INHERITED STORIES*

- Think about the stories you've inherited about family, love, or belonging.
- Who told them to you?
- How might those stories shape the way you experience this film?

#### *Timed Free-Writing Prompts:*

- “The story I inherited about family is...”
- “In my family, we never talk about...”
- “If I could rewrite one story from my childhood, it would begin like this...”

### *MOTHERING AS A VERB*

- What does “mothering” mean to you? How might it differ from “being a mother”?
- Consider how people who aren't mothers in the traditional sense may also “mother” others.
- What did poet Audre Lorde mean when she said, “We can learn to mother ourselves”?

*Timed Free-Writing Prompts:*

- “To mother is to...”
- “Someone once mothered me by...”
- “If I think of mothering as a verb, I see...”

*CHOSEN FAMILY & BELONGING*

- Have you ever felt more “at home” with people outside your biological family?
- What made those relationships nurturing or transformative?
- What is the meaning and significance of chosen family?
- How has its role shifted or changed over time and across cultures?

*Timed Free-Writing Prompts:*

- “Home feels like...”
- “My chosen family looks like...”
- “I feel most at home when I’m with...”

*SILENCE AND VOICE*

- In many families and cultures, certain stories are left untold.
- What are some reasons people might stay silent about pain or family conflict?
- What might be lost—or protected—by that silence?

*Timed Free-Writing Prompts:*

- “The story we don’t tell in my family is...”
- “If silence could speak, it would say...”
- “I learned early that some things are better left unsaid because...”

## **ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT: QUESTIONS DURING VIEWING**

Encourage participants to hold the following guiding questions in mind as they watch *A Mother Apart*:

- **Witnessing Motherhood**

As Staceyann redefines “mother,” what moments show her both nurturing others and nurturing herself?

- **Home Across Borders**

Notice how place—Brooklyn, Montreal, Cologne, Jamaica—shapes identity. How does migration impact Staceyann’s understanding of home and belonging?

- **Storytelling as Healing**

Pay attention to how Staceyann uses performance and poetry to process her experiences. How do art and activism intersect in her mothering journey?

- **Generational Touchpoints**

How do the relationships between mothers and daughters—across generations—mirror or diverge? What gestures, silences, or words carry meaning across time?

- **Listening Beyond Words**

Notice moments when silence, gesture, or space tell a story more powerfully than dialogue. What emotions or ideas do you sense in these quieter scenes?

## **POST-SCREENING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

The following questions are meant for group dialogue. In a group discussion, pose any of the following questions for collective reflection, synthesis, and action—turning insight into dialogue and creative output.

### **Reimagining Mothering**

- How does *A Mother Apart* expand your understanding of what it means to “mother”?
- Whose stories of care and resilience might be missing from mainstream media?

### **Repair and Forgiveness**

- What does forgiveness look like in this film?
- Is it an endpoint, a process, or something else entirely?

## **The Power of Storytelling**

- Staceyann reclaims her story through art.
  - What personal story would you tell if you had the same courage?
  - How might sharing it change you—or someone else?

## **Cultural Expectations and Queerness**

- How does the film challenge assumptions about family and queerness within Caribbean or immigrant contexts?
- What risks does Staceyann take in being fully seen?

## **Action & Continuity**

- After watching, what conversations do you feel called to start in your own circles—about healing, identity, or belonging?

# CLOSING ACTIVITIES

## OPTIONAL

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions or prompts:

- What new understanding of motherhood or belonging are you taking with you from this film?
- How can you practice “mothering” yourself or others in daily life?
- What conversations or actions feel important to continue after this screening?
- Write a letter to your “inner child” or to a family member you wish to understand better. You don't have to send it—just write.

# EXTENSION ACTIVITY

## Four Corners

Label each corner of the room with a stance (for example: *Strongly Agree / Agree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree*).

Pose the statement and allow participants a moment of silent reflection (they may jot notes).

Invite participants to move to the corner corresponding to their response.

In each corner, small groups discuss their reasoning (2–5 minutes).

If a participant ends up in a corner by themselves, as the facilitator, join them and discuss.

One participant or pair from each corner shares a summary with the group.

After hearing others, participants may choose whether to stay or shift to a different corner, and then share why or how their thinking has changed.

## Sample Statements

- Forgiveness is essential to healing.
- Biological family is more powerful than chosen family.
- Motherhood is the highest moral calling.

## TAKING ACTION

If participants have trouble generating ideas for next steps, consider these ways to continue engagement:

- Host a community storytelling circle centered on family, migration, or chosen family, using the film as a catalyst.
- Support organizations that work with immigrant or LGBTQ+ families, providing mentorship or mutual aid.
- Share your reflections publicly—through poetry, visual art, or social media—to keep conversations about care and belonging alive.

# Resources

## Audre Lorde Project

A community organizing center for LGBTQ+ people of color, advancing justice and empowerment through grassroots action.

## Black Women Radicals

An organization uplifting the political and social contributions of Black women and gender-expansive people globally.

## Family Equality

Advocates for LGBTQ+ families and works to ensure that everyone can form and sustain a loving family.

## Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community (1983)

This essential documentary explores the lives of Caribbean women who came to Canada as domestic workers, examining themes of migration, labor, community-building, and transnational motherhood that resonate deeply with *A Mother Apart*.

## Immigrant History Initiative

Promotes inclusive education by integrating immigrant and refugee histories into classrooms and public storytelling.

## PEN America

Supports artists and activists who use writing and storytelling to confront injustice and reclaim their narratives.

## Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines

A collection of essays, art, and poetry centering the voices of mothers of color and queer and gender-nonconforming parents. This text explores mothering as a site of radical world-making and directly inspired the creation of *A Mother Apart*. Edited by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams.

# Credits & Acknowledgments

**This Guide was Co-authored by Laurie Townshend and Courtney B. Cook, PhD.**



## **Laurie Townshend | Director, *A Mother Apart***

Writer, director, and former middle school Drama teacher Laurie Townshend believes that before we shape stories, stories shape us. Raised by a Jamaican mother—the family’s eloquent griot—she learned early that storytelling is both inheritance and power. Her award-winning debut feature, *A Mother Apart* (2024), follows poet-activist Staceyann Chin on a journey of healing and radical mothering. The film earned Laurie the DGC Allan King Award for Best Direction in a Canadian Documentary and, in addition to being part of POV’s 38th season on PBS, has screened at more than 20 festivals, including Hot Docs, BlackStar, DOC NYC, BFI Flare, and Frameline.

Laurie is currently developing *Tallawah*, a documentary about the young women of a burgeoning Jamaican basketball league, fighting for something beyond the game—a future of their own making. In 2025, *Tallawah* was one of 16 projects selected for the Chicken & Egg Films Research & Development Grant, supported by Netflix.

Her much-anticipated podcast, *That One Teacher*—a reunion series that brings together adult changemakers with the teacher who changed them—is scheduled to launch officially in 2026.

## **DISCUSSION GUIDE PRODUCERS**

Courtney B. Cook, Phd | *Education Consultant, American Documentary/POV*  
A. Yarbrough | *Education Editor, American Documentary/POV*