

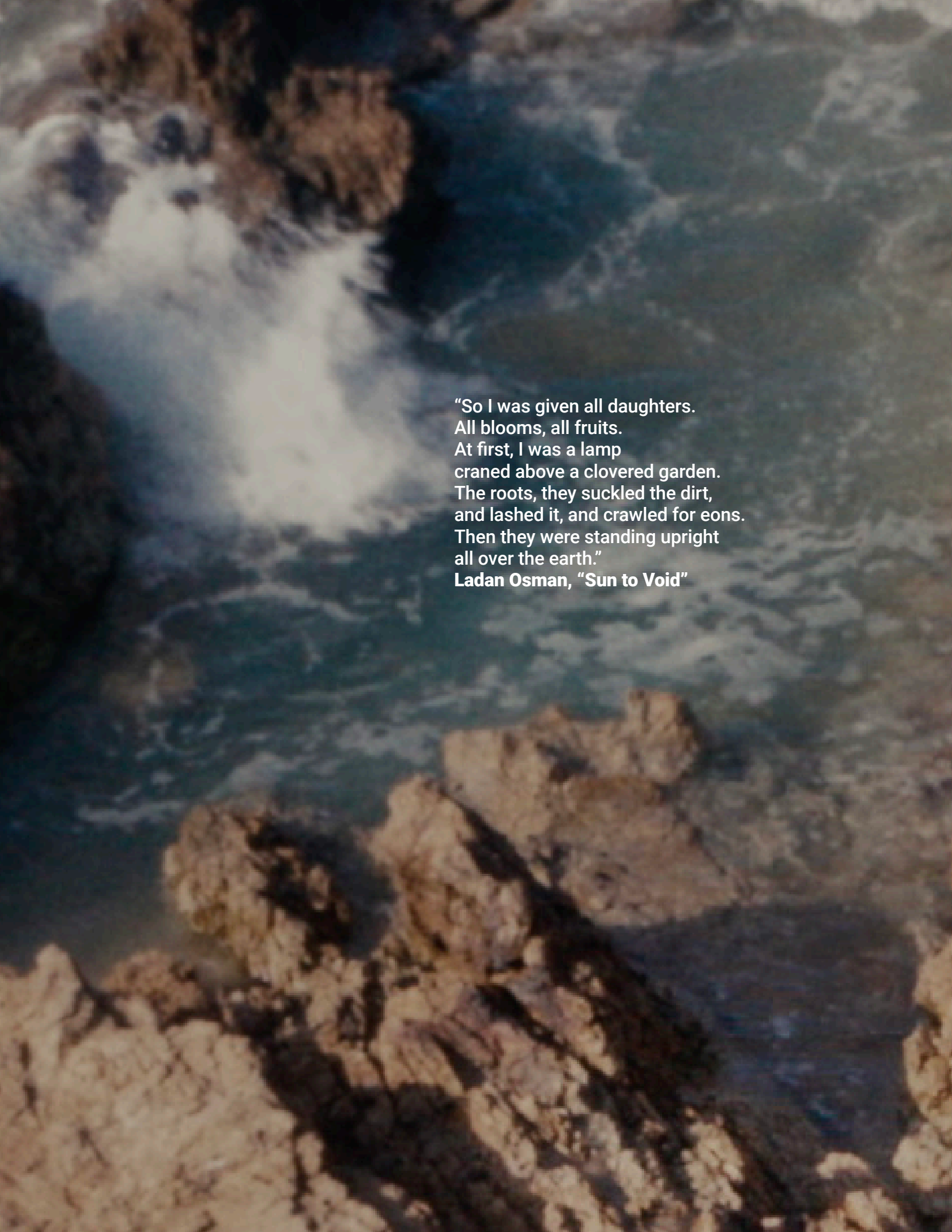
Still Waters

A FILM BY AURORA BRACHMAN



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE



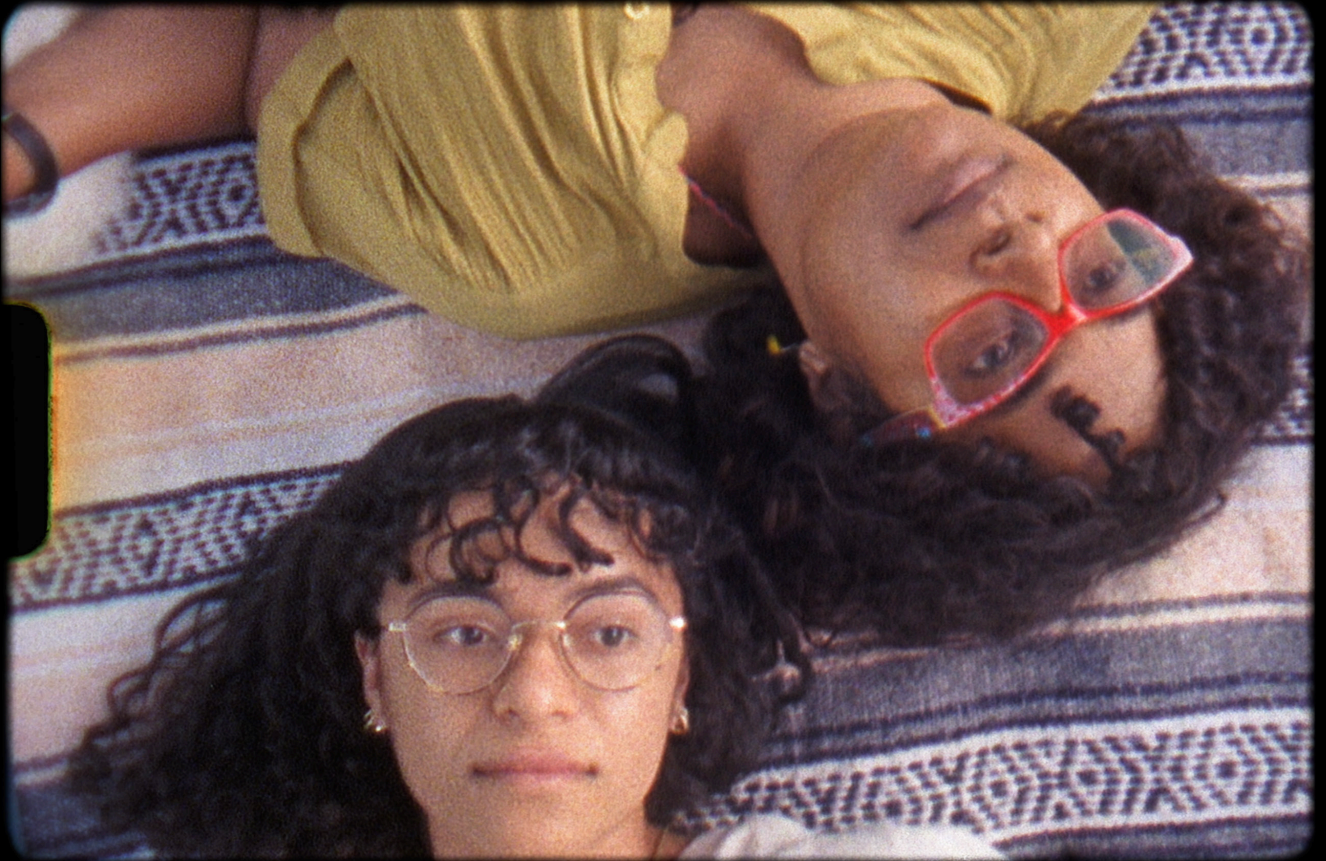
"So I was given all daughters.
All blooms, all fruits.
At first, I was a lamp
craned above a clovered garden.
The roots, they suckled the dirt,
and lashed it, and crawled for eons.
Then they were standing upright
all over the earth."

Ladan Osman, "Sun to Void"

Table of Contents

| | |
|----------------------------|----|
| Film Summary | 4 |
| Using this Guide | 5 |
| Share Community Agreements | 6 |
| Common Concepts & Language | 7 |
| Letter From the Filmmaker | 8 |
| Participants | 9 |
| Key Issues | 10 |
| Background Information | 11 |
| Sources | 13 |
| Discussion Prompts | 14 |
| Closing Activity | 17 |
| Resources | 18 |
| Credits & Acknowledgements | 19 |

Film Summary



Still Waters is an emotionally vulnerable portrait of a mother-daughter relationship as they explore shared personal history and create space for untold stories to come to the surface. This film is an excellent tool for thinking about our own personal histories and that of our loved ones, and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics.

Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Still Waters* 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 in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

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

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

Adult Attachment Theory

Adult Attachment Theory, rooted in the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, examines how early relationships and attachments influence emotional bonds and behaviors in adulthood. It posits that the quality of attachments formed during infancy shapes individuals' expectations, coping mechanisms, and relationship dynamics throughout their lives.

Adult Attachment Interview

The Adult Attachment Interview is a widely used diagnostic tool in psychology, designed to assess an adult's attachment style by exploring their early caregiving experiences. Developed by psychologist Mary Main and colleagues, the Adult Attachment Interview delves into the participant's memories and asks them to describe their earliest memories with their caregivers,

aiming to unveil the individual's internal working models that shape their expectations and behaviors in adult relationships.

Autobiographical documentary

With roots in 1960s avant-garde filmmaking, the genre of Autobiographical Documentary, or Autodocumentary, has been described by film critics John Katz and Judith Katz as films that showcase personal stories about oneself or one's family while demonstrating a level of trust, vulnerability, or intimacy not often pictured in other films.

Intergenerational trauma

Intergenerational trauma refers to the transmission of negative experiences—whether cultural, historical, or familial—from one generation to the next. If left unhealed and unaddressed, the experiences of parents or

ancestors can significantly influence the thoughts, behaviors, and worldview of their children. Research indicates that the origins of intergenerational trauma often stem from a parent's firsthand experience of trauma or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs encompass potentially traumatic events in childhood, including emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, as well as neglect, impacting the way parents raise their children.

LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

I made *Still Waters* because an unspoken awareness of something that happened in my mother's childhood colored my upbringing. It spilled into every corner of our lives but went unnamed. It was a story I was returning to constantly, in my filmmaking, in my romantic relationships, in my friendships. In one way or another it was always bubbling up and submerging everything it touched. In college, in an effort to understand my mother better, I pored myself into the pursuit of a degree in psychology, and ultimately specialized in attachment theory. In this field I found a framework for understanding how trauma can be transmitted intergenerationally.

In attachment theory research there is a diagnostic interview known as "The Adult Attachment Interview" which is the gold standard for determining an adult's attachment style. The interview is said to have the effect of "surprising the unconscious into revealing itself." In *Still Waters*, you hear a conversation between my mother and I that is the result of me interviewing my mother using the Adult Attachment Interview and having her share with me her experiences of being raised by her mother. She then interviewed me and I shared with her my experiences of being raised by her. I had initially set out to tell a story that was supposed to track my family's history for several generations, leading up to my mother and then eventually to me. But when my mom and I filmed the interview which narrates the film, she revealed to me for the first time the sexual abuse she experienced as a child, and it became apparent that abuse was the inciting incident that became a throughline in her life and mine. The film had an almost gravitational pull towards processing that specific narrative, and together we unraveled its cascading effects through both our lives.

I thought this film would function as a form of closure on parts of our lives that had been undisclosed and unprocessed. But in reality it was actually the beginning of something. It opened a space for a new kind of relationship, one of much greater intimacy and vulnerability than we'd been accustomed to. But I don't think we've always known how to continue to foster that closeness now that the door has been opened to it. So it's a constant learning process that I'm still in the midst of. But something shifted between my mom and I over the course of its making—I began to lean on her more than I had ever done as an adult or as a child. In many moments it felt like the only force that could quiet my overwhelming anxiety was her presence. And she was there for me. And she bestowed so much wisdom that soothed me in those moments that I return to for comfort to this day.

I hope this film can be the beginning of something for those who view it. I hope it opens closed portals that are in need of fresh air, water, and sunlight.

Participants

Aurora Brachman (our filmmaker)

Aurora Brachman is the documentary filmmaker of *Still Waters*, and the daughter in the film. Her presence and voice on screen allows viewers an intimate, firsthand window into the filmmaker's experience both telling and receiving this story.

Aurora's Mother

Aurora's mother is the other pivotal character in the film. Through her conversation with Aurora, we learn about an experience in her childhood that shaped her life, as well as that of her children.



Key Issues

Still Waters is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of particular interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Attachment Theory
- Blackness in America
- Family history
- Intergenerational storytelling
- Intergenerational trauma
- Memory
- Mother-daughter relationships
- Poetry + the moving image
- Visual narratives

Background Information

Still Waters and Untold Stories

“saint like above up lets your legs toddle alone
travel steps abaloneously you are slipping already
out of mother harbor baby blue your body
whorl struck by every knuckle ma ma ma
no daughter of pearl”

Jasmine Reid, “where all, we flowers”

Still Waters is a poignant, intergenerational portrait showing pivotal moments of discovery and care between a filmmaker and her mother. With a background in psychology and specialization in Attachment Theory, filmmaker Aurora Brachman was initially motivated to create a film exploring her family history across generations. However at the onset of the pandemic, she and her family relocated to live in close proximity, seeing each other daily after almost a decade of distance. The clinical and research-oriented film Brachman anticipated making suddenly took on a new urgency, and her creative compatriots encouraged a creative turn inward to interrogate what was really at the center of this story.

The Adult Attachment Interview

“My Mama moved among the days
like a dreamwalker in a field;
seemed like what she touched was hers
seemed like what touched her couldn’t hold”

Lucille Clifton, “My Mama moved among the days”

The heart of *Still Waters* lies in a series of candid and emotionally charged conversations between the filmmaker and their mother, facilitated by the Adult Attachment Interview. This clinical tool asks the participant to describe their earliest memories with their parents, first through adjectives and then through specific memories from early childhood that justify those adjectives. Though the interview framework does not ultimately fold into the final structure of the film, it becomes the conduit for a revelatory exchange about the mother’s experiences of childhood abuse and the subsequent impact on both their lives.

The conversation that unfolds in *Still Waters* opens a portal for new understanding within a lifelong mother-daughter relationship, giving space to the importance of acknowledging intergenerational trauma and its effects—and further, the possibility of healing together. Viewers are witness to the intensity of truth-telling and the process of learning how to hold each other in that experience, yet also to moments of great tenderness and resolve. Visually layered over the conversation between mother and daughter are scenes of caretaking, exploring together amidst a rugged, sublime ocean shore, and building a fire in the sand alongside each other as night falls. The poetic comfort of these visuals is also an homage to the lyrical and shifting quality of our most enriching and challenging relationships; to the silence and ambiguity of what was once unsaid, and to the softness, openness and possibility of something new.

Sources:

“A Brief Overview of Adult Attachment Theory and Research: R. Chris Fraley.” A Brief Overview of Adult Attachment Theory and Research | R. Chris Fraley, Accessed 23 Dec. 2023.

Williams, Laura, et al. “Intergenerational Trauma: Definition, Health Effects, and How to Cope.” EverydayHealth.Com, Accessed 7 Jan. 2024.

“You Are What You Shoot: The Autodocumentary.” *International Documentary Association*, 21 Dec. 2018, www.documentary.org/feature/you-are-what-you-shoot-autodocumentary.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Grounding Yourself + Starting The Conversation

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

Reflect on the feelings you might have experienced while watching *Still Waters*, and what parts of your body or memory they may have activated. Sit with yourself for a few minutes of quiet, breathing into those spaces and allowing the feelings to flow through you. If it feels useful, take a moment to close your eyes.

Visual Poetry

“We step on the edge

of lacey waves that feel

like butter on hot skin.”

Maria Lisella, “Stepping into the Sea”

In this film we experience visuals of an expansive, ever-shifting ocean, the craggy seashore from a vast distance, and the dreamlike, fuzzy portal of archival footage from the filmmaker's childhood. Ambient sounds of birds, crackling flames, waves, and low, humming tones also weave in and out of the film's voiceover narrative. At some of the most challenging moments of the conversation between the filmmaker and her mother, we are met with these soothing sights and sounds.

- How does this poetic sonic and visual landscape add to the conversation that unfolds between the filmmaker and her mother?
- Discuss the role of this filmmaking technique in conveying the complexity, nuance, and diffusion of emotions in this story.
- Consider the significance of the film's title, *Still Waters*. How does it act as a metaphor for the depth and texture of untold family stories and generational trauma?
- What name or title would you give to the process of excavating previously unknown stories from your own life?

Legacies of Care

"Time, I know

I can't reason with you. You go on and on.

Instead, I'm wishing her

astonishing slowness, softness

inside the arduous & unfair."

Zeina Hashem Beck, "Time,"

Take some time to reflect on the overarching message of *Still Waters*.

- What were the moments in the conversations between the filmmaker and her mother that resonated with you?
- What feels important about addressing and understanding the past experiences of our parents or caregivers?
- How are the film's viewers witness to care and gentleness? What scenes especially document care and nurturance between the filmmaker and her mother?
- What strengths and qualities of character do you see or hear present in the conversation between the two protagonists? What do we feel the filmmaker learns from the challenge and vulnerability of their shared conversation?
- In what ways do we hear or see Aurora's mother also learning from her daughter, in turn?

CLOSING ACTIVITY

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

- What are some of our favorite qualities we feel have been passed down to us from our own family members or elders? What legacy do we feel called to carry onward on their behalf?
- What are the ways we take care of ourselves that we hope to share with our kin, both biological and chosen?
- Where are the places in the natural world that bring us peace and comfort?

"Please, you,
being water too,
find a way into the air & then
the river & the spring
so that your waters can wash the elders,
with the medicine of the dreaming of their children,
cold & clean."

Aracelis Girmay, "to the sea"

Resources

Darkness to Light

Darkness to Light is a leader in child sexual abuse prevention, advocacy for behavioral impact, education and training, and research. They offer a toll-free, confidential helpline for children and adults living in the United States who need local information and resources about sexual abuse (1-866-FOR-LIGHT) and a crisis textline (Text "LIGHT" to 741741.)

RAINN

As the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, RAINN operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline (800-656-HOPE) and crisis support services for sexual assault and harrassment. RAINN also offers advice if you suspect a child being harmed.

Stop It Now! USA

Stop It Now! USA works to prevent the sexual abuse of children. Their national prevention helpline (1.888. PREVENT) provides free, confidential, and direct support and information to individuals with questions or concerns about child sexual abuse.

Credits & Acknowledgments



About the Author

leena joshi is an artist, poet, and educator. Working across multiple mediums, their work is curious about new forms and practices, often engaging the digital and speculative as spaces to explore an expansive, shifting definition of personhood in the margins. leena's poetry and written work can be found in SFMoMA's Open Space, *baest*: a journal of queer forms and affects, Berkeley Poetry Review, and TAGVVERK, among others. They hold a BA in Creative Writing and Gender Studies from the University of Washington, Seattle and an MFA from the University of California, Berkeley's department of Art Practice.

DISCUSSION GUIDE PRODUCERS

Courtney B. Cook, PhD | *Education Manager*, POV

C. Rees | *Education Editor*, POV