

AMERICAN SEAMS

A FILM BY CARLY JAKINS



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE

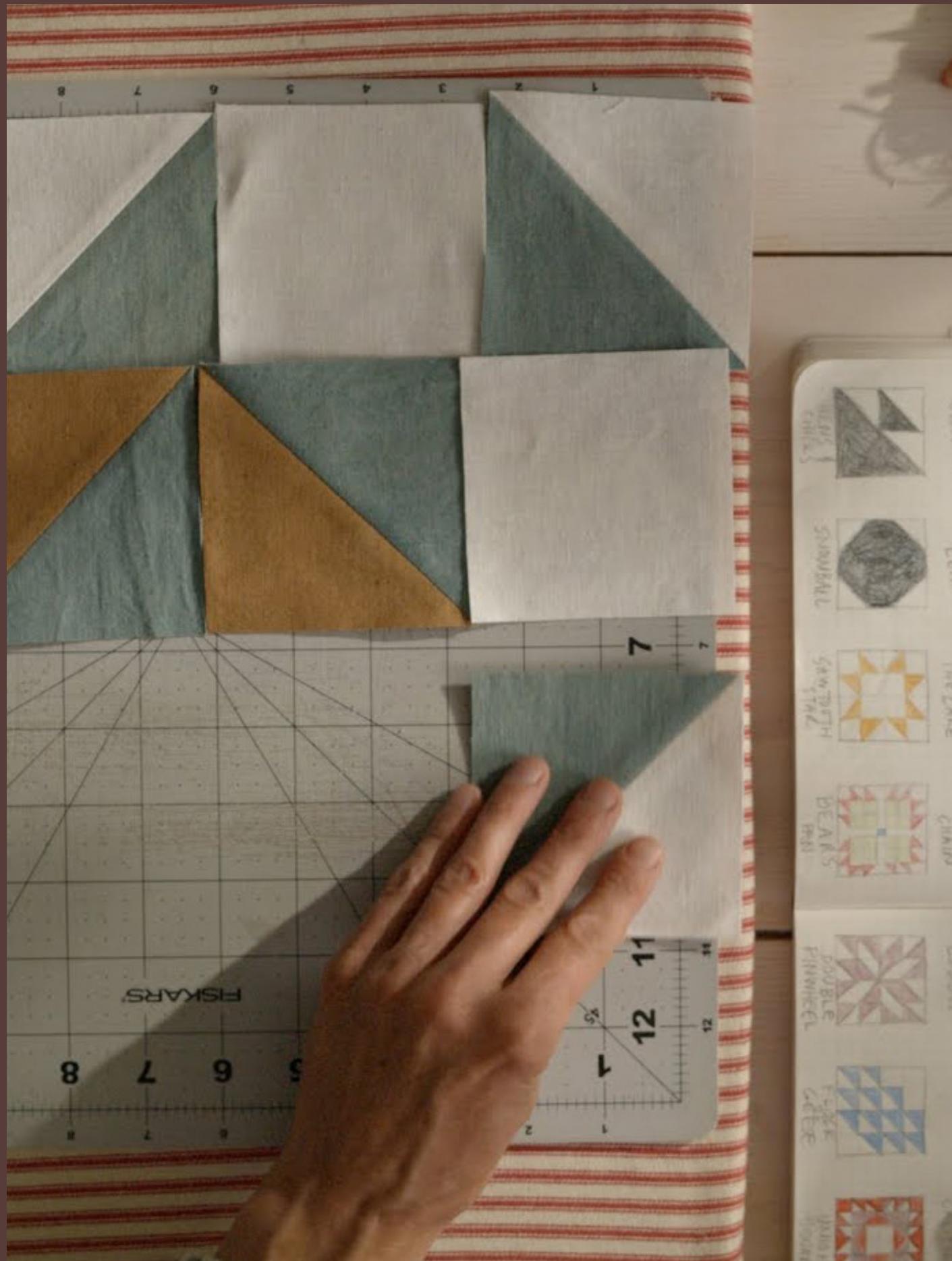




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Film Summary



Explore the stories of three women quilters whose lives complement and contrast each other across stunning landscapes in rural Colorado, Utah, and the Navajo Nation of New Mexico.

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 *American Seams* 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/>.

Key Participants

This documentary short film features three female quilters living in the rural Intermountain West:

- Brenda Bailey (Utah)
- Sara Buscaglia (Colorado)
- Susan Traditional Woman Hudson (Navajo Nation, New Mexico)



Key Issues

American Seams is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Sewing, quilting, fiber arts, and natural dye practices
- Women as caregivers and keepers of tradition
- Gender discrimination
- Sewing to combat trauma, loneliness, and apathy in the modern world
- Healing through creative self-expression; using art to escape (or cope with) reality
- Rediscovery of self through art
- Generational and personal traumas
- Quilting traditions and cultural legacies of the Navajo Nation
- The Long Walk of the Navajo

Background Information

Brenda Bailey

The story of Brenda's personal and professional journey into sewing also paints a bigger picture of America's deeply held gender biases, which have held women back from the male-dominated world of arts and letters and kept them firmly within the confines of domestic "crafts" and matriarchal responsibilities for generations.

Despite a lifetime of suppressive obstacles, from being relegated to a Home Economics major to shouldering the primary caregiving role for her family for decades, Brenda's passion for sewing survived. She chronicles the successful rise of her own quilting business, but ends by emphasizing the personal fulfillment that sewing still provides for her – a refreshing act of creation that keeps her from self-pity and remains "just for [her]."

Sara Buscaglia

Sara describes her discovery of hand-sewing as a series of magical revelations and rediscoveries. Buying a new sewing machine “woke up something” inside of her and she defines the act of quilting itself as *alchemy*, a transformative process that continues to expand and unfold as her own curiosity and multifaceted craft evolves.

We watch as she works in her garden or studio, mainly alone, in deeply intentional ways that keep her intimately connected to the natural world around her, starting with the stewardship of a tiny sprouting seed. We see the profound transformation of each one of her interests leading on to the next, as she extracts art from nature and nourishes her own creative expression and self-sufficiency.

Susan Traditional Woman Hudson

Each one of Susan’s quilts carries the delicate weight of remembrance, with every stitch weaving the stories of her Navajo ancestors into the fabric of recorded history.

As an indigenous female quilter, Susan acts as a living, breathing link to her past, creating each one of her quilts as an homage to her ancestors and the Navajo Nation’s tales of immense suffering, survival, and resilience that might otherwise go untold. Through bright colors, masterful sewing, and mystical imagery, her textiles serve to honor and record collective traumas, like The Long Walk of the Navajo, that will be preserved and passed on for future generations.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

STARTING THE CONVERSATION:

The film opens with the question: "If you had a day all to yourself, what would you do?

- What would a day "all to yourself" look like?
- What's something that lets you escape reality or "fills the gaps" for you in times of either boredom or overstimulation?
- Is there any skill or routine in your life that started as a practical need (for your family, work, basic survival, etc.), but turned into an artistic form of self expression? Something you do now that's "just for you"? (the way you plate your meals at home, how you get dressed in the morning, how you tell a story to friends...)

CRAFT AS CARE WORK

All of the women in this film touch on how the act of sewing became a saving grace during different periods of their lives. Born out of a practical need, sidelined ambition, or burgeoning curiosity, it led to a hands-on practice of creative self-expression that became a profoundly important part of their lives. In the first vignette, Brenda Bailey says she "never sit[s] around feeling sorry for [her]self... because [she's] able to *create*. And it's a good feeling to be able to do that."

- What's something small or simple that you do or create by hand that soothes or nourishes you amidst your daily routine? (arranging flowers, making coffee, writing a letter to a friend...)
- Do you do anything that can pull you out of self-pity when you're feeling overwhelmed or depressed? Something that inspires you to lean towards action and community and away from paralysis and isolation?
- Do you know anyone (personal to you or a public figure) who uses art to cope with trauma or depression?
- In what ways can art be a mode of supporting community, connection, and care?

GENDER AND CRAFT

- Can you think of a time when you were directly told something you were interested in or excelled at wasn't "for" your gender?
- After watching the film, why do you think the historically important, but female-dominated medium of fiber art is still largely referred to dismissively as "craft" or "decorative art"?
- American art historian Linda Nochlin wrote a book of essays titled "*Why Are There No Famous Women Artists?*" that centers around that same question. What are the factors in American society that you think contribute to there being "fewer famous women artists"? (educational systems, accepted social norms and bias, access to the arts, white male-dominated spaces...)

ART, STORYTELLING, AND HEALING

- After watching this film, did you get a glimpse into the unique toll that matriarchal and domestic responsibilities take on women?
- Why do you think it falls on women to be the caregivers and keepers of tradition in America?
- Quilting has been an important medium of generational storytelling for centuries. It's also been a subversive way that women get to record their own stories throughout American history, many of which are otherwise completely left out of mainstream narratives. Why do you think it's important for women and minorities to record, analyze, and preserve their own personal histories?
- In the film, Susan Hudson of the Navajo Nation says she creates her quilts as a way to honor the collective trauma and subjugation of her ancestors, who were brutally and forcibly removed from their native homelands and culture... But she decided not to teach her own children to sew. How do you personally feel connected to your ancestors? What would you want (or not want) to be passed on to the next generation?

CLOSING/QUESTION 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.

- How did you feel after watching the film?
- Did any of the women in the film remind you of anyone in your life?
- Do you know anyone who uses art to survive in one way or another? (Traumatic coping mechanism, full-time income source, important tie to their social circle or community...)

TAKING ACTION

- Research a craft or skill that you would like to learn (sewing, weaving, coding, auto mechanics, ceramics...) – and sign up for a class in your area. Follow your genuine curiosity and ignore any predetermined beliefs or long-held associations with gender.
- Analyze your relationship with the predominantly patriarchal systems that are in place in America and how they affect your daily life. How do you unintentionally engage with entrenched, everyday societal systems that keep women diminished? How could you personally work to subvert unconscious gender bias in your daily life or community?
- Research and learn about women artists in your local area and support them by attending the museums, art galleries, and markets where their work is exhibited. Advocate for equal representation in your local arts organizations.

Resources

American Seams - full documentary streaming on YouTube

American Sewing Guild - "Advancing Sewing as an Art and Life Skill"

Common Threads Project - "Why Trauma Healing Matters"

Social Justice Sewing Academy - "Quilting for Change: Community Quilts, Remembrance Projects, and More"

The Foundation for Arts & Healing - "Make Your Own Project UnLonely"

Healing Ribbons - "Promoting Positive Cultural Identity for Indigenous Women - Healing Intergenerational and Multiracial Violence"

Credits & Acknowledgments

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