

A silhouette of a person standing in a field of tall grass, looking towards a bright, hazy sunset or sunrise. The person is positioned in the center-left of the frame, with their back to the camera. The sky is a warm, orange-brown color, and the grass in the foreground is dark and silhouetted.

STATELESS

a film by Michèle Stephenson

DISCUSSION GUIDE

POV





STATELESS

Director Michèle Stephenson brings to light the crisis of people of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic, many of whom have been left stateless by the country's 2013 decision to revoke/deny/take away the citizenship of Haitian immigrants and their descendants.

Watch the film here: nfb.ca/film/stateless



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FILMMAKER STATEMENT

As a child, growing up in a Haitian and Latinx household and diaspora communities in North America, I continued to hear stories about the history of my birthplace relating to race, colour, class, colonialism and human rights. Those observations formed the basis of how I made sense of the world that surrounded me, especially as those notions collided with the racism, segregation and discrimination that we faced in our adopted countries. Those experiences fuelled my passion to dig deeper into the consequences of our deeply painful common history of slavery and colonialism and how we continue to internalize self-hatred.

Stateless in some ways is a culmination of years of working through storytelling approaches that allowed me to land back home and use a creative way to unearth and express that childhood pain.

As a hyphenated Black Latina, I felt compelled to express how deeply embedded the racial caste system is in our Latinx communities and how identity and citizenship are so closely connected to anti-Blackness—and yet its discussion either escapes, or is superficially misconstrued by, mainstream media.

Stateless highlights universal themes of access to citizenship, migration and systemic racism. In the United States, we are witnessing a chipping away at immigrants' and citizens' rights. We are facing a global crisis of white supremacist manipulation of migrants' rights, birthright citizenship and human dignity for Black and brown people.

My objective is to connect the film to a network of committed partners in the Caribbean region, Latin America, the U.S. and internationally, to utilize the film as a platform for their work on protecting the rights of migrants and citizens, and to deepen people's understanding of the intersection between anti-Black racism, migration and citizenship rights.

– Michèle Stephenson, Director/Producer

USING THIS GUIDE

This discussion 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 **Stateless** to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. Conversations that centre politics, race, land/space/belonging and identity can be difficult to begin, but this guide is meant to support you in sustaining conversations around identity, activism, politics, colonialism, racism and community organizing. 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 listen actively and share divergent viewpoints with care and respect.

The guide is designed to spark dialogue around issues presented in the film. It is meant to inspire people with varying degrees of knowledge about these topics to enter the conversation—and hopefully stay in the conversation—in order to impact change and awareness.

The discussion questions included in this guide are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the topics 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 and/or uncomfortable.

SYNOPSIS

Michèle Stephenson's documentary **Stateless** tells the story of grassroots organizer and attorney Rosa Iris as she works with Dominican families of Haitian descent who've been stripped of their citizenship. Rosa's encounters with these families and individuals reveal the complex history between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and tensions related to politics, identity, race, humanity and belonging—a history that informs present-day politics and the safety and privilege of people in both the Dominican Republic and Haiti. As the Dominican Nationalist Movement works tirelessly to police the borders into the Dominican Republic, attempting to keep Haitians out, those with Haitian ancestry work even harder to legitimize their existence and value in a system and a political structure that seeks to limit their possibilities and humanity.

KEY PARTICIPANTS

- Michèle Stephenson, Director
- Rosa Iris Diendomi, Community Organizer, Lawyer and Activist
- Juan Teofilo Murat, Rosa's cousin and one of the 200,000 people with Haitian ancestry who are now stateless
- Gladys Feliz, a member of the national movement group that blames Haitians for problems in the DR

KEY ISSUES

- Colonial pasts and systemic racism
- Anti-Black racism and its global impacts
- Nationalism and citizenship rights
- Statelessness
- Borderlands and identity
- Human rights and violence
- Community resistance
- Personal as political
- Political corruption, violence and state power
- Grassroots political organizing
- Strands of activism and community mobilization



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

HAITI AND THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: A SHORT HISTORY OF COLONIALISM AND ITS LEGACIES

The term *anti-Haitianism* was coined to define the prejudice and hate towards Haitian people in the Dominican Republic (DR). Though this prejudice and hate were not always present, they reflect consequences of how two countries that share one island have an unresolved past. Haiti and the Dominican Republic both exist on the same island of Hispaniola. Both countries have common histories of being colonized, their people enslaved, and the foundations of racist oppression that motivates colonizers' violence. Both countries were also forced into dictatorship. The borders between Haiti and the Dominican Republic are physical, emotional and marked by historical trauma that divides them and has made them turn against each other, specifically governed by global anti-Black racism that fuelled anti-Haitianism. However, this prejudice against Haitians, tensions between DR and Haiti, and anti-Blackness did not happen overnight. According to Gibson (2013), these historical events can help trace how politics, power, colonization and anti-Black racism have worked to further the divide and leave large groups of people unable to gain recognition as citizens by any state or its laws, protections or supports; they are therefore forced into a position of statelessness.

- In 1492, Christopher Columbus colonized the island with European settlers.
- In 1795, France took over the entire island, which was under Spanish rule.
- In 1801, General Toussaint Louverture, who was formerly enslaved, led one of the largest and most important successful revolts and freed all people who were enslaved on the island colonizers had named "Hispaniola." He governed the island and made slavery illegal.
- In 1808, a group of Dominicans started a war of reconquest to drive out the French and return the Eastern part of the island to Spanish rule—the West, by this point, was the Republic of Haiti.
- By 1822, Haiti had established control of the whole island once more.
- In 1844, the Dominican Republic gained its independence from Haiti, not Spain.
- In 1937, Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, who was guided by anti-Black and white supremacist ideologies, ordered the massacre of Haitians in border areas where many worked cultivating sugar. To determine who was Haitian, soldiers with machetes asked dark-skinned people to say the word *perejil*, which is Spanish for parsley. For Creole-speaking Haitians, the "r" sound was difficult to pronounce, and a slip of the tongue became a death sentence. Estimates of the massacre range from 10,000 to 25,000 people killed over the course of a few weeks.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- In 1978, the Dominican Republic agreed to guarantee children the right to receive nationality and prohibited arbitrary and discriminatory denial of nationality through the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the American Convention on Human Rights.
- In 2004, “in transit” was adjusted, introducing *temporary workers* status, with the majority coming from Haiti irrespective of their length of time in the Dominican Republic. In addition, General Law on Migration No. 285-04 included “non-resident” foreigners’ *constancias de nacimiento*, or certificates of live births registry (in pink), distinct from the certificate used for Dominican citizens.
- In 2005, the constitutionality of General Law on Migration No. 285-04 was questioned; the Supreme Court of Justice interpreted “*foreigners in transit*” to include individuals without a residence permit. In other words, people in an irregular migratory situation, regardless of decades spent living in Dominican territory or having children; those lacking residence permits were not entitled to Dominican citizenship even if they were born in the country.
- In 2007, Resolution 12-2007 was created by the Central Electoral Board (its acronym in Spanish was JCE), which initiated the “*Registry of the Birth of a Child to a Foreign Non-resident Mother in the Dominican Republic.*” This parallel registration system began recording the *constancias de nacimiento* certificates of live births (in pink), to deny citizenship to migrants and foreigners, and failed to recognize discrimination and delays by JCE officials, loss of documents, etc., to prove their residency in the Dominican territory.
- In 2010, an earthquake devastated Haiti. Dominican Republic stepped in to support their neighbours. Still, to this day, some Haitians are left trying to recover from the natural disaster. This means finding work and opportunities in the Dominican Republic.
- In 2013, Dominican Republic’s highest court ruled to revoke the citizenship of children of illegal Haitian migrant workers, which will not only impact migrants’ children, but their grandchildren and, in some cases, even great-grandchildren. This is the case we see with Juan Teofilo, who has been stripped of his citizenship and separated from his two children who live in the Dominican Republic.
- In 2014, under heavy criticism and intense national and international scrutiny, the Dominican legislature passed Law 169-14 in an attempt to restore citizenship to people registered as citizens before Judgment 168-13, known as “Group A,” and a path towards naturalized citizenship to people not registered as citizens before Judgment 168-13, known as “Group B.” Creating these groups—arbitrarily—unnecessarily complicates an already problematic situation.
- In 2017, it was apparent that Law 169-14 had not been the solution to the barrage of constant obstacles that Dominicans of Haitian descent faced even as registered Dominican citizens. The majority were still without valid identity documents three years after Law 169-14 had passed. Many in “Group A” have been “re-registered” as citizens in a separate registry that lacks legal basis, marking them literally and symbolically as second-class Dominican citizens.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- In 2020, former president Danilo Medina naturalized 750 people born and raised in the Dominican Republic and previously deprived of citizenship due to the immigration status of their parents.

Thousands of people continue to not be recognized as Dominican citizens under these laws, while over six thousand continue to wait for naturalization.

This contemporary practice of depriving Haitian immigrants of citizenship rights is a consequence of political and racial tensions that have historically accumulated as a result of colonization. This has shaped racialized antagonisms between the two countries, and left thousands of people stateless as the Dominican Republic responds to nationalism, racism and colourism.

THE EXPERIENCE OF STATELESSNESS

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), today, millions of people around the world are denied a nationality. As a result, they are denied basic human rights like being able to go to school, health care, the right to vote, the ability to get a job, secure housing/property rights, or even the right to get married. These difficulties get passed down to subsequent generations, and the traumas and obstacles and being denied a nationality become interwoven with a family's history. The UN Refugee Agency defines *stateless* as:

“[A] person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law... a stateless person does not have the nationality of any country. Some people are born stateless, but others become stateless. Stateless people are found in all regions of the world. The majority of stateless people were born in the countries in which they have lived their entire lives.”

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UNHCR also suggests that stateless people often experience the denial of basic rights and a nationality from the cradle to the grave. So, being denied a legal identity when they are born, the basic rights of human life and the respect of an official burial and death certificate when they die, many pass on statelessness to their children, who then pass it on to the next generation. Statelessness can be caused by:

- discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language or gender;
- an oversight in nationality laws;
- conflict of nationality laws;
- new states and changes in borders;
- loss or deprivation of nationality—e.g., in some countries, citizens can lose their nationality simply from having lived outside their country for a long period of time;
- lack of birth registration and/or key information needed to establish a nationality.

ANTI-BLACK RACISM AND COLOURISM

Anti-Blackness is a specific form of racism directed towards Black people that simultaneously devalues Blackness and systemically marginalizes Black people through overt and structural (covert) racism. Anti-Black racism, governed by white supremacist ideas, frames Black bodies (and Blackness) as inhuman, disposable and inherently problematic, and is a foundational logic that drives and organizes white supremacy. All kinds of racism are inexcusable, but it is still necessary to make clearer definitions for the kinds of racism that disproportionately affect certain groups—like anti-Black racism, which, in the DR, largely impacts those of Haitian descent due to their darker skin. Globally, colonizers promoted anti-Black racism to justify their violent practices of dispossession and enslavement, and anti-Black racism still works to inform discrimination, negative prejudice and stereotypes directed towards people of Haitian descent, to benefit those in power. Anti-Blackness prevents those of darker skin and/or visible African descent from exercising fundamental freedoms, enjoying basic human rights, and being treated equally. Ultimately, colourism (a practice of discrimination that assigns more value to the lives of those with lighter skin and institutionalizes prejudice against darker-skinned people), which is rooted in anti-Blackness, worked to render Haitian people as “others” and create a racial caste system, or hierarchy, where the colour of a person’s skin was taken to signify a person’s value. Even though the Dominican Republic is in the Caribbean, the history of anti-Blackness and colourism, stemming from a global practice of colonization, still fuels hatred of dark skin. Within this model, to be Black or have darker skin is taken to represent Haitian descent, and is politically, socially and legally used to devalue, discriminate and harm Haitians.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

What ***Stateless*** reveals is that in the Dominican Republic, colourism and anti-Black racism are entrenched, with a targeted and vocal disdain for darker-skinned Haitian people. So, the ideology of racism and colourism historically rooted in colonization is still very present today. The lasting impacts force Haitian people into precarious realities, and augment the power and privilege of lighter-skinned people in the Dominican Republic. The ideas at the foundation of anti-Blackness and colourism, which create fictions of superiority and inferiority, are therefore used to justify power and privilege in the Dominican Republic. Approximately 90 percent of Dominican people also have African ancestry, though they resist being classified as Black or of African descent.

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STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen, or pose a general question (examples below) and give them some time to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- If you were going to tell a friend about this film, what would you say?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly striking or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?
- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, who would you ask and what would you want to know more about?
- Did anything in the film surprise you?
- What aspects of the film (landscape, language, feelings, family dynamics, etc.) were relatable? If so, what felt familiar? If not, what felt new and unfamiliar?

STATELESSNESS: THE POLITICAL PARAMETERS OF BELONGING

- How has this film helped you better understand the experience of statelessness? Before screening ***Stateless***, had you understood the implications of statelessness and how it impacts the lives of those who are forced to experience it?
- What are the problems with statelessness? Why do you think this film and the discussions it can inspire matter?
- Upon reflection, what factors are at play that make solving the problem of statelessness so difficult?
- Since people who are forced to experience statelessness are not recognized by any nation, whose responsibility is it to intervene and provide basic human rights for these people?
 - What is the responsibility of the global community with regards to accountability?
- In what ways do you recognize statelessness as a human-rights issue?
- How does deeming a group stateless work to stratify some and maintain power for others?
- In what ways are people's identities impacted by their mobility in the Dominican Republic and around the world? How does identity become political?
 - In what ways are peoples' identities impacted by the political conditions of their lives?
- How does historical political trauma become internalized by individuals and communities? What are some examples in the film that show the lasting impacts of oppression on individual and community identities?
- What is the role of healing these historic traumas on a road to more just futures?



DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- With regards to statelessness, what questions does this film raise about how people come to identify with one another and seek feelings of belonging?
 - In what ways does feeling a sense of belonging sometimes require the exclusion of others?
 - In that sense, can statelessness or ethnic ties to belonging be divisive? Do they have to be?
 - Do you think stateless people can ever achieve a feeling of belonging?
- How does this film raise questions about and/or draw parallels with the experience of those who are forced to live in the margins of our country?
- How has **Stateless** changed your ideas of nationalism?

ANTI-BLACKNESS AND COLOURISM: LEGACIES OF COLONIALISM

- How have histories of colonization, political oppression and white supremacy impacted the lives of Black and Indigenous people in Haiti and the Dominican Republic?
- Can you recognize any of these impacts on people or groups in your communities today?
 - Why might we not be taught about these histories in schools?
 - In what ways is education connected to the legacy of colonization and political oppression?
- In what ways are the problems and threats of white supremacy global issues, and how does **Stateless** make this visible?
- How do everyday structures, policies and practices reinforce racist/colourist ideas?
- Describe some of the broader implications of our complicity and investment in racism and colourism.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

PERSONAL AND POLITICAL POWER, AND THE LIVES OF PEOPLE

- In what ways are aspects of personal life and political realities (policies, practices, access, etc.) always connected?
 - What examples from the film highlight this?
 - Do you have any examples from your own life that are relatable?
- Is it a politician's responsibility to promote equality and ensure that everyone has the same rights?
 - Is it their responsibility to ensure a fair and just community/country?
- What does **Stateless** teach us about the relationships between politicians and activists?
- What is the role of people and communities in holding those with power (e.g., politicians) accountable?
- How can people learn to talk about injustices, push against injustices and resist violence within their own communities? Is this possible?
- Should individuals stand up for what's right when it puts them and those around them at risk?
 - What do the conditions of risk and threat suggest about systems and structures of power?
 - Why, for example, are activists and political leaders who are fighting for justice and equality put at heightened risk or threat? Who, and what, is threatening them?
 - What are the people in positions of power afraid of? Why?
- What does **Stateless** teach us about state power?
- In what ways are all decisions political or connected to systems of power?

TAKING ACTION AND RESOURCES

TAKING ACTION AND RESOURCES

- For more information on **Stateless** and related themes, please review POV's [Delve Deeper Reading List](#), [Healing Guide](#) and NFB's [Mini-Lesson](#), created specifically to support deeper engagement with the documentary.
- Read more about people affected by the Parsley Massacre [here](#).
- Read or listen to this podcast about colourism in the Caribbean [here](#).
- Read about how colourism in the Dominican Republic is entrenched at a young age, and how young children feel about various skin tones [here](#).
- Listen to [Code Switch](#), a podcast about race.
- Read [The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story](#), by Nicole Hannah-Jones.
- Read about and get involved with Njeri Mwangi's organization, [Pawa254](#), a Kenyan non-profit that uses art and cultural collaboration as catalysts for social change.
- Read about how the [impacts of colonialism and colonization](#) are present today.
- If you are a community organizer and/or activist, work with your support system to find a healthy work/life balance that centres self-care.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maureen Nicol



Maureen Nicol is a doctoral student at Columbia University studying Early Childhood Education, and the founder and director of Camp Story, a pop-up arts camp based on the continent of Africa. Her background is in teaching and education. Maureen is committed to working with young children and educators to ensure that every child and teacher knows their value, worth and power. Maureen's research and work interests have always situated children of colour, but specifically young Black girls. Her ultimate goal is to make schools safer places for young Black girls, with the idea of safety being articulated based on the terms and articulations of Black girls. Maureen is also researching and building curriculum for young girls (specifically young girls of colour) on how they can see themselves as feminists using arts integration. In her free time, Maureen enjoys going on long walks with her dog, baking and maxing out her library card with good reads.

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