



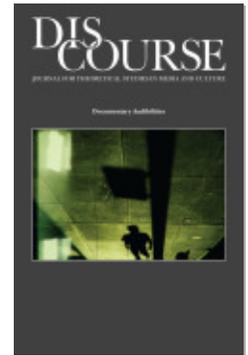
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Between We and Me: Filmed Interviews and the Politics of
Personal Pronouns

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Between We and Me: Filmed Interviews and the Politics of Personal Pronouns

Paige Sarlin

Prologue

This essay is meant to sensitize *YOU*, my reader, to a weird slippage in the English language that pivots around the second-person pronoun. We hear its variations in everyday speech when we are speaking with each other about *our* experiences. Moving between plural and singular, across number and person, this pronoun's oscillations of reference and meaning enlarge the space from which one speaks, standing in for "I" and "one" and calling others to attention ("Hey YOU").

We often use the pronoun "you" when we are moving between talking about *oneself* and *ourselves*—or "I" and "we." In these instances, "you" enables a speaker to understand oneself as part of a "we," to slip between speaking about a particular experience and a generalized or collective experience (e.g., "*you* get angry when *you* see injustice"). This is the "you" I sometimes use when I would like to think that I am part of a "we" that is coming into being and want my listeners to identify with me. I also use this "you" when I want to

urge others to join a nascent “we” (e.g., “*you* have to fight discrimination”) or when I want to use my own experience as an example of something bigger than me. I use this “you” when there isn’t yet a “we” present or when I don’t want to presume that such a “we” exists (e.g., “when *you* don’t want to assume anything”). This “you” really means “one” but can also mean “many.” It exists somewhere in the murky space between “me” and “you”—or rather, between “I” and “we.” Without gender or number, it references both self and other, speaker and listener.

There are three grammatical and linguistic terms for this particularly shifty second-person pronoun: the *indefinite* “you,” the *generic* “you,” and the *impersonal* “you.” Something rarely read but often heard and spoken, this common deictic passes by us as colloquial, informal, and unremarkable. In everyday speech, we sometimes end our sentences with “you know” in an attempt to request assurance and assert commonality. But there is also another more political way of understanding this pronoun, one that documentary interviews from 1970s feminist and gay liberation films have made perceptible to me.

As a category of speech, the polyvalence of the generic “you” is grounded in its connection to the discursive character of voice. In the context of a filmed interview, the dialogical aspect of this pronoun expands because an interview is never simply dyadic; it is always grounded in the triad of interviewer, interviewee, and a real or imagined audience. As a result, whether it refers to a singular or a plural, whether it is a sign of informality or of distancing, the indefinite “you” gives form to a structure of feeling that resists *impersonal* generalization even as it makes a space in language for the voicing of thoughts and experiences without specific, immediate, or concrete referents. The deployment of the generic “you” in a filmed interview marks the possibility to refuse being singular, reducing oneself to “one.” *It can invite auditors to imagine a shared difference.* In this way, the generic “you” is both denotative *and* a mode of address—a vehicle for the interpellation of the audience and an invitation for abstraction. This “you” can function inclusively and productively, not just phantasmatically; it is much roomier than “one,” offering a broader platform for articulation. It can be the indicator of “a sense of unease that accompanies” talking about “oneself,” in some ways softening the risks associated with speaking in front of a camera.¹ But the indefinite or generic “you” can also become *transversal*, taking on a different significance when it is uttered within the context of movement building and recorded for the purpose of publication. Situated amid a framework of active politicization, the filmed interview becomes a form through which

the transversal “you” can extend an interviewee’s mode of address past a distancing from “oneself” toward the possibility of collectivity.

Félix Guattari introduced the term “transversal” to characterize a “plane of reference” that cuts across multiple levels of meaning.² For Guattari, the transversal is a therapeutic realm in which the desire to escape the isolation of the individual can be realized—in which the desire for collective experience and connection can be activated whereby fantasy, thought, speech, and action can be harnessed to support personal as well as societal transformation and encourage “social creativity.”³ Essentially a category of movement between and across already established identities, subjectivities, and levels of analysis, the realm of the transversal encompasses those who are expected to speak and those who are silenced, those with and without voice. The transversal “you” can emerge within the context of polyvalence and polyvocality as well. It marks a place in language that is not merely indefinite but is also in motion, inflected by and reflective of the presence and absence of different listeners and audiences and by the possibility of community and social connection. More than just a stand-in for a generic “one,” the transversal “you” names a space between the singular and the plural, between the first person and the third person, between what is and what can be. It marks a political mode of speaking that encourages identification but transcends it, making room for new associations and collective formations that do not rely on or reify already existent subject positions and identities. In this way, the transversal “you” calls attention to the performative function of speech that often exceeds the politics of language’s representational power.

Discourse Analysis and Filmed Interviews

The filmed interview, as a method and a means of representation, emerged as an important media form in American political documentary film in the 1960s and 1970s. Testimony captured through this mode of inquiry was especially significant for filmmakers who, being associated with feminist and gay liberation movements, were interested in challenging hegemonic ideas about gender and sexual identity. As American social movements coming out of 1960s radicalism took a more cultural turn, issues within the private sphere began to take more and more precedence, bringing the “first person to the foreground of social and cultural discourse.”⁴ Grounded in forms of consciousness-raising, these movements spotlighted questions of gender equality and sexual freedoms in a way that highlighted the connection between individual experience

and social/political structures. The documentary interview is a site where this new perspective on politics emerges.

For the purposes of this essay, it is important to understand the filmed interview as both a process and a product. The distinction between the interview as a method and the interview as a form is rarely acknowledged—in part because the interview is not understood as the representation of a political or social practice. Rather, it is most often understood as a means for the delivery of content. The significance of the filmed interview as a media form derives from its ability to represent subjectivity as a discursive process and event. Not merely a transparent or neutral vehicle for the capture and circulation of what Joan Scott refers to critically as “the evidence of experience,” the filmed interview is the trace and inscription of a linguistic and symbolic exchange.⁵ And when it is read for “the literary,” with great attention to linguistic and textual specificity, the media form can lay bare “the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation, its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate,” and its notions of experience and subjectivity as well as the relation of identity and experience to politics and larger structures of power and oppression.⁶ From this vantage point, the filmed interview emerges as an important object of analysis because it offers a representation of the historical and discursive processes that position subjects and shape their experiences as well as their modes of analysis and ideas about political change. In particular, a close reading of filmed interviews demonstrates and refines the role of speech and language in the construction and articulation of political subjectivity.

This “literary” mode of reading documentary film is in contrast to much recent scholarship that focuses on the political registers of voice that escape or elude speech and language.⁷ Looking for ways to understand the voicings of minor subjectivities, this trend grounds recent attempts in documentary studies to challenge what Pooja Rangan refers to as “our ideological attunement to speech and language as markers of humanity, or, in other words, logocentrism.”⁸ Despite the validity of this critique, considerations of voice cannot overlook the ways in which “speaking truth to power” has been asserted historically as a project aligned with language *and* embodiment.⁹ The emergence of significant protest movements, such as Black Lives Matter, underscores the relevance of this history to our understanding of the political force of “voices” in the street and mediated speech on social media. In addition, struggles surrounding the use of gender-neutral, nonconforming, or nonbinary pronouns have reemerged with the growth of a vibrant and vocal movement for transgender rights. This critique of figures of

speech that reflect and reinforce dominant power structures identifies language as a battleground in the struggle for respect and inclusion.¹⁰ Furthermore, the proliferation of outlets for the circulation of “voices from below” has corresponded with a resurgence in the political project of “speaking as”: speaking as female, male, or gender-nonconforming; as colonizing or indigenous; as brown, white, or black; as straight, gay, or queer, etc. As a result, discourse analysis has a crucial role to play in resisting the traps of visibility or visual identification, calling our attention to the ways in which documentary modes of inscription, such as the filmed interview, can amplify voicings that operate between the registers of the literal and the metaphoric.

To a great degree, personal pronouns are the ground zero for the articulation of subjectivity in the filmed interview, and it is usually assumed that interviews are populated almost entirely by first-person statements. But the second-person “you” designates an important alternate register of articulation in filmed interviews. Generic and indefinite, “you” can refer to a generalized or abstracted self or can address a *second* person, an interlocutor, or both together. Thus, the use of “you” in a filmed interview suggests the importance of capturing voice for more than just self-expression. It establishes the social character of voice and sets the ground for a recognition of the transversal and performative capacities of speech. The deployment of “you” suggests that coming to voice can be part of a struggle for more plural modes of being, for the construction of and inclusion within what Giorgio Agamben calls “the coming community.”¹¹ Considering the second-person register of “you,” it becomes clear that “speaking truth to power” does not necessarily privilege individual experience or solidify notions of identity.

Feminist and gay liberation movements in the 1970s and early 1980s were explicitly grounded in debates about the significance of self-expression and the circulation of experience. As a result, the films that sought to document these movements focus on the politics of the personal and its role in the development of political analysis, strategy, and organization.¹² As Julia Lesage and Barbara Martineau have remarked, many feminist filmmakers turned to the interview format as an extension of the process of consciousness-raising.¹³ Filmed interviews were particularly appropriate and useful tools for establishing a politicized understanding of experience. From this perspective, filmed interviews function as a site for the exploration and articulation of the ways in which “the personal is political.”¹⁴ But films such as San Francisco Newsreel’s *The Woman’s Film* (1972) and *Self-Health* (1974) also present the group contexts

out of which the axiom emerged.¹⁵ In this way, the interview-based films associated with social movements of the 1970s remind us of the importance of the phrase that frequently accompanied the “personal is political” axiom in its first usage: “There are no individual solutions.”¹⁶

In today’s cultural framework, neither of these assertions carries its former radical charge. But in the context of contemporary struggles such as Black Lives Matter and the reinvigorated global women’s movement, they both deserve greater attention, as do the films that were most invested in exploring, enacting, and deploying their radical possibilities. The problem of finding “one’s” footing within the context of a social movement and the struggle to understand the forces of subjectivization as both an individual and social being have reemerged in today’s struggles as critical issues. In such a context, the interview has renewed relevance and potential as a political tool or tactical method that can catalyze and record processes of radicalization and politicization. As I show in the following film analysis, the use of the indefinite “you” in the filmed interview politicizes habitual uses of this pronoun and becomes a transversal vehicle for these politicizing processes. Within the triangulated and mediatized framework of the interview form, the transversal “you” supports and reinforces the point that “coming to voice” as an intersectional member of a class, union, group, or organization is part and parcel of the development of “collective solutions” and collective formations large and strong enough to challenge the neoliberal forces of atomization—namely racism, sexism, and exploitation.

From Me to We: *Word Is Out*

The film I am going to focus on is the Mariposa Film Group’s *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1977). *Word Is Out*, a collectively produced documentary that aired on public television, seeks to represent the variety of experiences of the gay and lesbian communities of the 1970s through the aggregation of interviews with various homosexual individuals and couples. This film is exemplary because its deployment of the interview as a cinematic method is central to the construction of the argument of the film, what Bill Nichols referred to as “the voice” of documentary.¹⁷ The film also represents multiple speaking subjects: in many ways “the voice” of the film can be characterized as a plurality in search of a container or shape for connection and/or association.¹⁸ *Word Is Out* makes these exchanges between the filmmakers and their subjects visible

and audible for a public, displaying the collaborative processes by which the interviews are produced.¹⁹ The film deploys the interview as a way to stage the negotiation between individual and social experience and opinion. In doing so, the film demonstrates the political character of the interview's form of inscription as it relates to the articulation of subjectivity—both personal and collective. But this film and the interviews in it do more than affirm speaking as a political act, or the axiom that “the personal is political.” In *Word Is Out*, the interview is deployed in ways that demonstrate the limitations of relying on individual personal experience and perspectives to investigate broad social issues. In addition, the process of filmmaking itself is a catalyst for the construction of *plural* formations. The depiction of American gays and lesbians in *Word Is Out* constructs an image of collectivity at the same time that the filmmaking process involved and connected a group of filmmakers. Furthermore, the film was screened publicly a number of times at different points in the production process in an effort to solicit feedback for both editing purposes and to fund-raise. This community involvement extended the collective responsibility and authorship of the film to parts of the gay community in San Francisco.²⁰

From this perspective, *Word Is Out* does more than capture “the stories of some of our lives” and also does more than picture the “voices” of homosexual men and women. It demonstrates how filmed interviews can make audible the movement from voice to *voices*, from a concern with the embodiment of singularity to the difficulties associated with the construction of collectivities that have the potential to transform the institutions and structures that enforce heteronormativity. In the context of movement-based documentary media, the production and presentation of multiple interviews has the capacity to operate as a political project, working to constitute what Jonathan Kahana calls “forms of association,” capable of transforming and escaping the traps and limits of individual experience and identity.²¹

Word Is Out appeared in movie theaters in 1978 and was broadcast on American public television in 1979. The film, which took over four years to make, was produced by a group of people who became a collective “in retrospect.”²² Over 140 men and women across the United States were initially interviewed on videotape before the final 22 individual subjects were chosen to be interviewed on film.²³ Interviews comprise almost all of the final film, supplemented by a number of scenes of musical interludes in which songs about the experience of coming out are performed. B-roll is used very sparingly; as a result, the audio interview testimony is almost always accompanied by an image of the person

who is speaking. Grounded on the assertion that coming out is a political gesture enacted through speaking, each speaker's story is verified and corroborated by this simultaneity and copresence of the image and sound tracks. Facial expressions add to the affective power of the words spoken and underscore the political significance of the recording and circulation of this testimony. The film features people who are young and old, men and women, white, Asian, black, and Latino, all of whom identify as gay. Representing this range of people through the use of the interview, the film asserts the presence, history, and humanity of people who do not subscribe to the heterosexual norms enforced by political and cultural institutions and portrayed within the media.

A significant documentary in the history of queer media, *Word Is Out* is divided into three sections: "The Early Years," "Growing Up," and "From Now On." These temporal markers refer to the stages in the lives of each of the individuals and the social status of homosexuals in American society more broadly. Loosely linked by periodization, the interviews document "25 people who trusted us to freeze a moment of their lives." Framed as an answer to the question "Who are we?," the film uses the interview format to produce its anecdotal evidence of the presence of homosexual men and women. Each subject is pictured in a different location particular to that person, often domestic sites. In this way, the film emphasizes the individuality and particularity of each of the subjects. These "stories" are edited in relation to each other so that they all progress in parallel. This editing draws analogies that are impossible to ignore. The cumulative effect of the editing is an undeniable sense of the ways in which ideological and social beliefs manifest in personal lives. The testimony of the film also exposes the history of homophobia as articulated through institutions, practices, and individual lives and bodies. But building a portrait of a "we" through the accumulation of individual interviews poses a number of problems that the film attempts to mediate—problems made more visible by the mechanisms and confrontations of the interviews themselves.

The women and men who are interviewed in *Word Is Out* do not confine themselves to "I-speak" and instead invoke the indefinite and transversal "you" in order to extrapolate from themselves and make assertions from their experiences that generalize. As a result, the interviews in the film navigate the tension between general statements and specific experience in a way that amplifies the primary political goal of the film: to produce a representation of homosexuals in the United States that preserves the individuality and difference of each of the speakers at the same time that

it indicts the social structures and institutions that oppress homosexuals. The transversal “you” marks a pivot point in speech, at once distancing from the explicitly private and yet also offering an acceptable way in which to talk about oneself that grasps at the structural. It is a version of the “you” that asserts the political significance and commonality of personal experience.

In one particularly important sequence, the testimony of four men and women details how the medical profession and the police treated homosexuals in the 1950s. Together, Bernice “Whitey” Fladden and Rick Stokes reveal their intimate knowledge of the medical treatments administered to “cure” gays of homosexuality. Accompanied by tight close-ups, Fladden’s speech revolves very firmly around speaking in the first-person singular about her own experience. But as she ventures into more general statements on “state psychiatric hospitals” in the United States, she begins to move toward invoking the transversal “you.” When she is asked “So you were given shock treatments and stuff?” she answers with “I personally didn’t get shock treatments, thank goodness, but you were threatened with them all the time to keep you in line.” Stokes takes up the storyline from here and offers a description from memory of the process and feelings associated with shock treatments. Speaking as a survivor, his account also vacillates between the generic “you” and his particular “I,” offering testimony that is simultaneously personal and impersonal:

Each time, you would hope against hope that it wasn’t your time yet . . . but that’s the last thing I would recall—spinning wildly out of control until you lose total consciousness and you are aware constantly of this little box over there and what it’s going to do to you.

The details of his narrative provide further evidence of the brutality involved in the medicalization of homosexuality offered by Fladden’s testimony. The question “How many were you given?” posed from behind the camera by Peter Adair, one of the filmmakers, recenters the deixis of “you” onto Stokes. “I really don’t know, Peter, it would have been somewhere between 10 and 50, probably 25 somewhere along in there. But again, I’m not certain of the number.” Here, the interview’s dialogical form foregrounds a negotiation between detail and extrapolation, between specificity and conjecture. As the speaker veers into the realm of the impersonal “you,” the filmmaker’s question returns the interviewee to the more solid ground of speaking from the first-person singular and, in this case, to a sort of spurious precision that works to produce assurance and a sense of accuracy. Placed next to one another,

Fladden's and Stokes's testimony offers proof of the widespread violence suffered by homosexuals.

An extended scene with Pat Bond builds on this sequence. Bond's tales of the lesbian culture within the army during the 1940s and 1950s are drawn from personal experience, but they also offer a portrait of the institutions and practices that determined sexual and gender roles more broadly. Most of Bond's indictments of the structures that oppress homosexuals operate on the plural ground of the "you" and the "we," sitting in between generalization and specificity and, even more important, between a personal statement and an interpellation of the viewer. In doing so, they demonstrate the way in which the interview provides an exemplary site for examining the process of subject positioning through which ideology operates and the ideological structures/apparatuses themselves:

I know we are oppressed by society certainly. Good God, the times when we were beaten up by the police, run over by the cops, persecuted by police, uh so many times, and there was absolutely no recourse. You just had to put up with that crap and, uh, being called names by the police, uh, being rousted out of bars for no reason where, you know, you were just sitting having a beer.

Bond's use of the "we" is instructive, grounding a statement that calls attention to the institutional character of the treatment of gays. But the "you" brings the description closer to the sense of powerlessness experienced by an individual who is being persecuted. The impersonal "you" offers some distance from that intimate knowledge but is informed by the vantage point of an isolated individual. In addition to distancing the speaker from her intimate knowledge, the pronoun "you" beckons the viewer/listener to misrecognize themselves as the subject of the sentence.²⁴

Another exchange that highlights the tension between the process of subject positioning and ideological critique begins with a statement rather than a question from the interviewer: "It's incredible to me that you put up, that you lived with that eh uh on a daily basis and accepted it." Pat Bond responds "You had to. What else were you going to do?" which is followed with her uncomfortable laugh. The interviewer responds with a question: "What kind of toll does that take? It's a number." And it is at this point that Bond offers some of the most *personal* statements yet, even correcting herself when she veers toward the generic "you":

Yeah, I don't know, I suppose it takes a terrible toll in that you never, I never felt anyway that I was really worth very much. Uh, that what . . .

[zoom into close-up] whatever I did had to be to make a secret little safe place in my life for myself, somehow, without any help at all, from any quarter, except perhaps my dogs, you know, uh . . . [pause, which is followed by a zoom out to a wider shot] and perhaps a couple very good friendships, that's about it. I don't, uh . . .

This is a particularly poignant moment in which an interview enacts coming out as an emergence from both personal and political isolation. Bond's description moves between a very private register and the assertion of a plural experience, demonstrating how the constitution of identity itself is at the center of the operations of ideology and the filmed interview. The form of the interview actually dramatizes the isolation she describes, creating a tension that the film's structure answers. The content of the testimony justifies the very act of speaking in front of the camera, of coming out both personally and publicly on film.²⁵ It also leads quite logically into a series of assertions about the need for a collective social movement, a sort of unity, to confront these structures.

Throughout the interviews in *Word Is Out*, the generic "you" is both politically powerful and suggestive of shared experience. The movement between the impersonal "you" and the first-person singular evinces part of the tension of coming out in a filmed interview, of emerging from the private into something more public. Occasionally, a question from behind the camera repositions the speaker in the province of the "I." Deploying the second-person "you" as a denotative deixis, the filmmaker's voice reminds the viewer that the concrete situation of the interview is interactive and dialogical. The questions from offscreen also induce a vacillation between slightly different registers of positioning and address, returning the filmed speaker to the strong and almost legalistic statements that are the provenance of the first-person singular, the assertions on which the film's explicit use of the interview is premised. As Pat Bond says in her interview, "I'm coming out right now, right? Here I am on television. Big white face on the screen saying 'Yeah, you know, I'm gay.'" But the polyvalent "you" always resurfaces, moving the interview testimony into a transversal political space, accompanied occasionally by reference to the first-person plural. The implicit work of this second-person plural "you" in the interviews is to represent the heretofore unrepresented social and political subjectivity of homosexuals as part of a nascent "we." The first viewer and subject of address is the second-person singular "you" behind the camera, someone who already identifies as gay. But in every interview, the speaker's "you," which is simultaneously a second-person singular and plural pronoun, hails both the

interviewer *and* the audience as members of an imagined community in the making.

Near the end of this segment of Part One, which focuses on the explicit exposition of the state institutions that enshrine and enforce repression, George Mendenhall asserts that “it was the beginning of my awareness that I was not only a gay person, but that I should come out of my person and be in a broader sense, aware of other gay people and their rights too, because Jose would say, let’s unite.” He goes on to describe a moment of collectivity—the collective singing of “God Save Us Nelly Queens”—a memory that brings him to tears because of the way in which it signifies a space of freedom, acceptance, and social togetherness. Thus, the film aggregates individual testimonies that document the internal and private struggles that have resulted from confrontations with structural repression and discrimination. Collected together, the interviews in *Word Is Out* constitute an image of social totality constructed from the vantage point of personal experience. The transversal “you” opens this series of interviews onto the plane of the first-person plural, opening up the filmmakers, speakers, and listeners in the audience to the possibility of collectivity.

As the film unfolds, the generic axiom that the personal is political comes to have greater and greater specificity as it is shown to be true for a number of different speakers, and the depth to which prejudice and discrimination, both personal and structural, has effected these individuals becomes unavoidably clear. The final footage of the film offers images of a Gay Pride parade, an embodiment of the differences and singularities that have been revealed through the process of aggregating these interviews. An even larger composite emerges in these images of masses of people in the streets—one that points to the potential scale of a gay liberation movement that might be able to take up individual causes and combat prejudice. But these images are fleeting; they are similar to the momentary and conjunctural solidarities established through the conversations between the filmmakers and the interviewees, which are referred to in the final credits of the film as “shared moments.”

The critical and scholarly emphasis on the collaboration of the filmmakers eclipses the extent to which the form of the film stages and responds to the problem of forming a collectivity of individuals.²⁶ There are only a few moments where the first-person plural is voiced by speakers in *Word Is Out*, and yet the whole of the film speaks from that place; *Stories of Some of Our Lives* is, after all, the subtitle of the film. The filmed interview is the form that mediates this representation, enacting and making visible the space of

social subjectivity and the filmmaking process that has produced it. In this film the group comes *afterward*, a function of the interview form and its deployment as much as the film process. The “you” functions as a crucial intermediary in this process, mirroring the way each interview segment gestures toward a social body *and* paves the path toward a “we” that is a sum of these parts.

Conclusion: The Filmed Interview as Political Imaginary

Throughout this essay, I have drawn an analogy between the formal structure of *Word Is Out* and the process of moving from the personal to the political, or from an individual to a broader structural perspective. In addition, I have argued that understanding interviewing as a political mode of capture allows one to read the tension between the individual interviews and the final assemblage as a generative problematic. In the case of *Word Is Out*, the tension between representation and performance, between the filmed interview as a descriptive or evidentiary project and one capable of enabling a process of politicization, operates at the level of language choice in each exchange but even more significantly in the organization of the film as a whole.²⁷ In this way, the collected interviews of *Word Is Out* offer a counterpoint to earlier documentary films such as Geri Ashur’s *Janie’s Janie* (1971) that focus on single subjects and deploy a variety of formal strategies to situate the individuals onscreen within a social context and extend that political framework to the viewers. In the case of *Word Is Out*, the inscription of voices (*plural*) reveals the space between the denotative and the metaphoric that documentary film has the capacity to activate.

In her essay “Feminist Documentary: Aesthetics and Politics,” Julia Lesage recognizes how interviews and testimony in 1970s documentary comprise an aesthetic analogue to the politics of American feminist consciousness-raising. Lesage’s reading of interview-based feminist films as analogues to consciousness-raising groups has a historical significance in its contribution to an appreciation of the politics of form in films such as *Self-Health* and *The Woman’s Film*, but her essay also offers broader insight into the political and ideological work of interviews in documentary as a vehicle for constructing a nascent collectivity.²⁸ The emphasis on the collective or the social in relation to the personal in films such as *Word Is Out* resists the prevailing tendency in documentary practice and criticism of emphasizing the particularities and specificities of the content on offer, or what Lesage calls “the surface structure.”²⁹ By recognizing in the structure of the films a larger

social and political significance, Lesage's essay points to the filmed interview not only as a mode of representation that enables new voices and content to circulate but also as the process by which the personal (and personal speech in particular) can be *made* political, not merely asserted or represented as political. For me, this is the central significance of the filmed interview: it is productive of politics at the same time that it is reflective of them.³⁰

In this essay, I have shown the role that personal pronouns play in this political process, identifying the generic "you" as a point around which the struggle of individual and collective representation pivots. The transversal "you" functions as a hinge—between structures of identification and conceptualization, between an interpellation of a viewer, a hailing of listeners (and interviewers) real and imagined, and a movement or construction of identity and experience—that rests on an important but subtle place of slippage in language that can strain against the ossification, essentialism, or reterritorialization of a subject. The deployment of the indefinite "you" calls our attention to the central problematic of the interview: the relation of the personal to the political and, specifically, the process of conceptualizing the political not simply as an aggregate of individuals but instead as a class, group, or movement.

The transversal "you" occupies a place in this process of pivot and indeterminacy that is not simply polyvalent. Rather, the transversal "you" indicates how the processes of generalizing and abstraction can be politicizing, serving as the basis of movement building and the construction of temporary and lasting structures of identification, alliance, affinity, and solidarity—in assemblages, organizations, and groups that can move, struggle, demand, and transform the world in which we live. In this sense, documentary interviews operate as both a process and a product, a *collaborative* and improvisational exercise that is transacted in a social context, and then transformed through editing, aggregation, and presentation. The transversal "you" is *almost* a "we" not because it references or *shows* us collectivity but because it is a starting point from which individuals and groups begin to construct a reference for new social and economic formations. It points to a political imaginary that is a necessary condition for the building of social movements. The transversal "you" is both a sign and a tool of politicization and radicalization, a site where the personal is made political.

In its inscription of the transversal "you" and all that surrounds it—*Word Is Out* demonstrates that speaking truth to power, as a historical practice, a conceptual paradigm, or an activist strategy, needs to be framed in collectivity in order to become audible. To some degree, we no longer need to fight or prove that the personal

is political. Instead, we are faced with the task of finding forms for fighting the ways in which the personal is neoliberal, privatized, commodified, and isolated. Our task is to articulate and activate collective resistance and opposition rather than voicing dissent as individuals. From this perspective, the example of *Word Is Out* can sensitize you and me to the presence of the transversal “you,” to the voicing of the desire for affiliation and collective action. When understood as transversal, the generic “you” is precisely *not* a stopping point from individual consciousness-raising; rather, it is an indicator of a midstation on the way to greater and grander forms of politicization and voice. Straining against atomization and alienation, the transversal “you” indexes the need for practices of “speaking as” that can ground solidarities. Audible in the context of some filmed interviews, it calls our attention to modalities for “coming to voice” and registers for “speaking out” that can engage the longing for social transformation and aggregate the social power necessary to resist and dismantle the institutions and structures of discrimination, injustice, and inequality that divide and oppress me and you.

Notes

1. Karolin Meunier, *Return to Inquiry* (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, Meunier, 2012), 11.
2. Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 18.
3. *Ibid.*, 26.
4. Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), x.
5. Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 796.
6. *Ibid.*, 778.
7. Two significant examples of this trend in scholarship are Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005) and Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
8. Pooja Rangan, “‘Having a Voice’: Toward an Autistic Counterdiscourse of Documentary,” in *Inmediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 138. For another important example, see Irina Leimbacher, “Hearing Voice(s): Experiments with Documentary Listening,” *Discourse* 39, no. 3 (2017): 292–318.
9. The phrase “speak truth to power” was introduced to a broad audience in 1955 with the publication of the book with the same name. The religious ideas in

this book provided a foundation for the pacifism and nonviolence of the American civil rights movement. In the book, truth is defined as love, and “speaking truth to power” is described as an expression of “No!” to violence, war, and injustice. In the context of the American civil rights movement, “speaking truth to power” was not limited to literal speech—the opposition to racial discrimination was often expressed through the bodies of activists at lunch counters, on buses, and in marches. American Friends Service Committee, *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1955).

10. For two important examples of how these recent critiques of voice can be harmonized with an attention to the linguistic in order to challenge the exclusion of difference, see Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

11. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

12. Some examples of films include Sheila Page, *Women's Happytime Commune* (1975); Luce Guilbeault, Nicole Brossard, and Margaret Wescott, *Some American Feminists* (1980); and Denise Bostrom and Jane Warrenbrand, *Healthcaring* (1976).

13. See Julia Lesage, “Feminist Documentary: Aesthetics and Politics,” in “*Show Us Life*”: *Toward a History and Aesthetics of Committed Documentary*, edited by Thomas Waugh, 223–51 (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984); Barbara Halperin Martineau, “Talking about Our Lives and Experiences: Some Thoughts on Feminism, Documentary, and ‘Talking Heads,’” in “*Show Us Life*,” 252–73.

14. In an effort to establish the feminist documentary as a genre, Lesage lists a number of films that inscribe the personal through interviews; these include Geri Ashur's *Janie's Janie* (1971), Kate Millett's *Three Lives* (1971), Joyce Chopra's *Joyce at 34* (1972), Donna Deitch's *Woman to Woman* (1975), and Deborah Schaffer and Bonnie Freidman's *Chris and Bernie* (1975). Lesage, “Feminist Documentary,” 224.

15. Shilyh Warren, “Consciousness-Raising and Difference in *The Woman's Film* (1971) and *Self-Health* (1974),” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 54 (Fall 2012), www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc54.2012/Warren70sFemstDocs/text.html.

16. See Carol Hanisch, “The Personal Is Political,” in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation; Major Writings of the Radical Feminists*, edited by Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt (New York: New York Radical Women, 1970), 76–78. It is extremely interesting to note how this maxim has circulated since its first deployment in relation to consciousness-raising groups. The problematic it names continues to be tied into questions of gender, sexuality, and consciousness and the relation between speech and visibility and between publicity and privacy. But absent of social movements that might offer a link to the history of struggles for gender and sexual liberation, the reiterations of this sentiment appear to license the cataloging and enshrining of individuality and lifestyle choices. The maxim was meant to signal the consciousness-raising group's role as a bridge from the personal to the collective. But “the personal is political” has come to circulate as a truth statement rather than the founding assumption for a collective activity or that polemical response to the dismissal of women's issues by male-dominated leftist organizations that it was. The reification of the phrase “the personal is political” has allowed the historical context of its first emergence to be erased. And without that context, the crucial additional assertion that followed the axiom—“there are no individual solutions”—has receded from prominence.

17. Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983): 17–30.

18. Thomas Waugh writes that "[b]eyond the fundamental character of collective authorship, the films under review show many techniques facilitating collaboration between author(s) and subject, of which the most important is more than familiar: the interview. . . . The interview has been re-invented by lesbian/gay-filmmakers. Or, rather re-invented by the 'consciousness-raising' feminist films of the early seventies, it has been refined and shaped in new directions by the present film-makers." Thomas Waugh, "Lesbian and Gay Documentary: Minority Self-Imaging, Oppositional Film Practice, and the Questions of Image Ethics," in *Image Ethics, the Moral and Legal Rights of Subjects in Documentary Film and Television*, edited by Lawrence Gross et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 260.

19. For more on the interview as an indicator of the "interactive" mode of documentary, see Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 44–56. For more on the interview as a collaborative performance, see Thomas Waugh, "Walking on Tippy Toes: Lesbian and Gay Liberation Documentary of the Post-Stonewall Era, 1969–1984," in *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writing on Queer Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 250–51.

20. Waugh, "Lesbian and Gay Documentary," 250.

21. Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 204.

22. Rob Epstein, "Word Is Out: Stories of Working Together," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 24–25 (1981): 10.

23. Twenty-two subjects were chosen out of the preinterview tapes. A number of partners were included in the final interviews, so the total number of interview subjects in the film is twenty-five, despite the fact that one of the early title plates in the film states that the film documents "Conversations with 26 gay men and women." Greg Youmans calls attention to this discrepancy between the title card's number and the fact that while there are twenty-six subjects introduced by thumbnail images, only twenty-five are interviewed. Greg Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2011), 28–29.

24. I have chosen to employ the nonstandard third-person pronoun "themselves" in order to underscore the possibility of plural and nonconforming subjectivities in the audience and to connect the version of Roger Brown and Albert Gilman's "solidarity semantic" underlying the transversal "you" with other explicitly political deployments of polyvalent pronouns. Rob Brown and Albert Gilman, "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity," in *Style in Language*, edited by Thomas Sebiok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 267.

25. In "Lesbian and Gay Documentary" (265–70), Waugh focuses on the ethical and ultimately political stakes of "coming out." In the later essay "Walking on Tippy Toes" (264), he focuses on the way in which this practice of coming out (and the interview, its favored cinematic form) "involved the transgression of the public-private divide."

26. Waugh's first assessment of *Word Is Out* (published in 1977) foregrounds the role of the collective process in the production of the film as did Rob Epstein's process description, published in 1981. Interestingly, these pieces were both published in *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, a journal that has featured much writing

that emphasizes the politics of collective filmmaking. See Thomas Waugh, "Films by Gays for Gays: *A Very Natural Thing*, *Word Is Out*, and *The Naked Civil Servant*," in *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writing on Queer Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), previously published in *Jump Cut*, no. 16 (1977): 14–18; Rob Epstein, "Word Is Out: Stories of Working Together," *Jump Cut*, no. 24–25 (1981): 9–10; Nancy Adair, *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (San Francisco: Delacorte, 1978).

27. In two separate scenes, interview subjects actively challenge the cinematic project of "picturing" the gay and lesbian community. In the opening montage of the film, Betty Powell states that "even as a black lesbian, I wouldn't want to be seen as this is how Black lesbians are. . . . I was hoping the film would be able to give a broader spectrum of a Black lesbian than just me." She remains the only black lesbian in the film, but the inclusion of this statement seeks to mitigate her token status by virtue of its representation of the filmmakers' reflexivity. In another scene, Elsa Gidlow, a seventy-year-old white lesbian, answers a question posed from behind the camera: "Elsa, you were worried how we would use you in the film?"

Well you see, when someone has a preconceived structure into which they want to fit you, which, I mean with all due credit and everything else, that is precisely what you are asking me to do. You wanted to fit me into a structure which you have. Just as if I'm writing a novel or you're writing a novel, we use our characters that way we want to fit them into the structure we have for this work of art. And I understand your point of view in this; you have a structure and you want to fit your characters into it. But this happens to be a character that doesn't want to be pushed around or put into a context where she doesn't feel that it's true to her.

Straining against the very structure and premise of the film, Gidlow is the only person in the film to refer to herself in the third person. Her criticism of the use of an interview to fill in a blank or fulfill a quota articulates the limits of a political or aesthetic project that operates solely on the level of representation. But Gidlow's verbal resistance and the formal singularity of this scene within the context of the film authorize the very project that she questions, introducing one of the clearest assertions of identity in the film. She states:

I'm glad I'm a lesbian. I feel complete. Because I'm utilizing what society characterizes as the male and the female elements and character. I feel that I have a proportion of each. I've said yes there's such a thing as a lesbian personality—I believe it's what I have and what I was born with. Having said that, let's take it for granted and go on from there and live our lives.

Elsa Gidlow's statements mark a kind of platform or baseline assertion about the significance of identity, one that allows her to navigate the jump between the first-person singular and plural effortlessly and to fit within the structure that the filmmakers have provided for all of their subjects.

28. In addition to a close reading of *Self-Health*, Lesage offers a list of feminist documentaries that highlight the significance of cinematic form to the politics of this mode of committed filmmaking (see note 14 above). Lesage's analysis has been extended to many other examples of political films; most relevant to this essay are the references made by Thomas Waugh in his various analyses of *Word Is Out* cited in see note 18 above. Examples of other films that use the interview to point us toward a nascent collectivity include Emile De Antonio's *Underground* (1976) and Peter Watkin's *La Commune (Paris/1871)* (2000). More recently, Victor Kossakovsky's *Demonstration* (2013) and Peter Snowdon's *The Uprising* (2013) do not use the interview

in their attempts to give cinematic shape to the collective subjectivity embodied in political protest.

29. Lesage, "Feminist Documentary," 231.

30. The interviews in *Word Is Out* provide a form for the production of subjectivity as well as its representation. From a Foucauldian perspective, these interviews represent a site where the inducement to talk about oneself feeds institutions with information and subjects the speaker to disciplining and self-regulation. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). But these interviews are not simply confessions, in Foucault's sense; they are examples of testimony. Gregg Bordowitz in *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004) differentiates between these two forms:

Through testimony one bears witness to one's own experience to one's self. Through confession one relinquishes responsibility for bearing witness to and for one's self with the hope that some force greater than one's self will bear away the responsibilities for one's actions. . . . A testimony that leads to confession recapitulates repression. A testimony performed successfully can lead toward liberation. (116–77)

Unlike confession, a form in which the individual subject is situated in relation to power structures, these interviews are conducted within the context of consciousness-raising rather than discipline. As a result, the filmed interview is shown to be a technique and form through which it is possible to generalize from one's experience and to extrapolate and provide an analysis that moves out from one's own perspective.