

She asked me what I was going to be when I grew up and I said, the President. She thought that was a riot.

Irene Lusztig

Near Ms.

In the first interview in *Yours in Sisterhood*, filmed in 2016, a thirteen-year-old in Quincy, Massachusetts, reads a letter written by a thirteen-year-old from her town in 1973, to Ms. magazine. In it, the writer describes a bus journey in which she talked to the elderly woman sitting next to her, who can't believe the future that this young woman imagines for herself.

After all, it had only been a year since Ms. put out its first full issue, featuring the headline WONDER WOMAN FOR PRESIDENT, and since Shirley Chisholm—the first African American congresswoman—had announced her candidacy for the President of the United States. She didn't succeed, but when Irene Lusztig started shooting



Yours in Sisterhood in 2015, it looked like Hillary Rodham Clinton might. The young reader of the letter says:

“Now there’s a woman President. Well, there’s a woman President running, and I think she has a chance.”

What a near Ms., from the perspective of 2017, as Lusztig is completing the film begun in a moment of hope, researching the archive of unpublished letters held at the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, at Radcliffe College. The film bridges the moments of expectation and—with a reading by a woman in an interracial relationship in North Carolina, who tries to contain her emotions while describing a KKK parade that followed the 2016 election—devastation.

The opening interview is poignant as well as bitterly ironic, because its multiple lines of possibility are familiar from another kind of 1970s American feminism: its rich legacy of science fiction. What thus emerges from the film is feminism’s commitment—to paraphrase Emily

Dickinson—to “dwell[ing] in possibility.” A near Ms. gets close, asks us to be open.

It’s particularly poignant to be finishing this essay so soon after the death of Sheila Michaels, the campaigner who popularized the honorific “Ms.” In 1969, she gave an interview to WBAI Radio, 99.5FM, in New York that caught the ear of Gloria Steinem, searching for a name for her proposed magazine. *Yours in Sisterhood* restores to the letters that which the word Ms. offers: a feminist address, a way of being heard.

Particularly for voices that remain marginalized: a young African American woman who says “I want to be behind the camera, I want to be in the writers’ rooms;” an ASL speaker who animates a letter from an “angry but loving lesbian” feeling unrepresented by Ms; and a Lakota elder who links colonial-era violence to that faced by the water protectors at Standing Rock.

In the gallery, *Yours in Sisterhood* will play on a loop, its form emphasizing this sense of repetitions—not only in the recurrent issues, but also in reappearing bodies. Claudia Stallman,

reading her own coming-out letter to Ms., says “I like that the letter is in my own handwriting. I sat down at my desk—I can see where.”

The word Ms. is also a work of science fiction in itself: a new word recognizing a new state of being. One letter-writer asks the magazine to support the gender-neutral pronoun they have coined: ahon (a, her/she, him, one). The contemporary reader in Emporia, Kansas—who uses female pronouns but finds that others may not use them for her—looks back to this letter from 1975 and comments, “It’s almost eerie.”

“A new word,” she concludes, “why not? If we can invent bae, why not ahon?” *Yours in Sisterhood* delves into the archive and renews the word, bringing neglected letters into the circulation they sought, and changing their unpublished pasts into public futures where their voices are heard. It uses the letter as a form of time travel, and even teleportation.

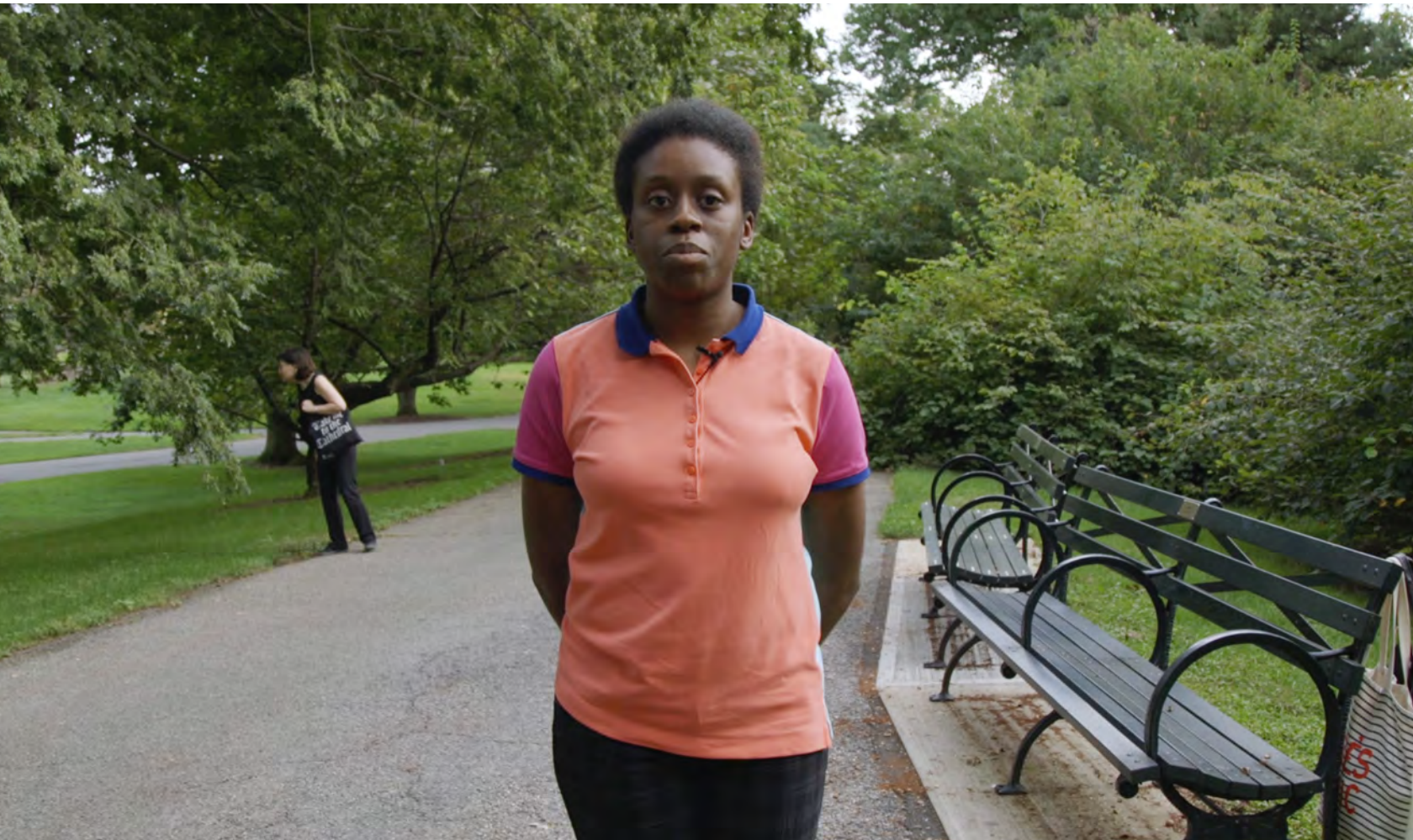
This is science fiction of the highest order: moving non-linearly through time and space, beaming us from past to future and back again,

transforming bodies into other bodies through quantum connections. A film that could have been a valuable but static time capsule becomes instead a spaceship searching for its own lost futures, to activate them: in the bodies of us, its viewers, whom it also calls (knowing that some of us might prefer ahon, or they, or he; or be pleased with the recognition), to whom it also gives the responsibility of being or becoming, Sister.

Sophie Mayer

Author of *Political Animals*:

The New Feminist Cinema



Pages 46–55, all images from:
Irene Lusztig, Yours in Sisterhood, 2017
 Frames from single channel HD video loop

