

# 'I Am the Library'

Audrey Sprenger

I Am - The Library is an ethnographic video project, [1] which documents the everyday ways a public library is used. Set in and around the Denver Central Library a few weeks before the 2008 Democratic National Convention, it is inspired by the social and oratorical work of the Reverend Jesse Jackson, a former presidential candidate whose life's work as a civil rights activist was triggered when, as a twenty-year old college student, he fought to desegregate his hometown public library.

The film takes its title and finds its rhythm in Jackson's 1971 speech, I Am - Somebody, a rallying call and response poem, which invites people to stake their political claim by simply declaring who or what they are, be their status small, flawed or tired. In making I - Am The Library, I asked over two hundred residents of the city of Denver to do the same, then asked them to speak out for their public library, as a way to make clear the very obvious but also very often overlooked social truth that the stories of our lives and, in turn, our identities, are also the story of our structural institutions, whether we believe in or regularly engage with these structural institutions or not.

I then inter-cut these faces and voices with footage shot at some of the free public events I created for the Denver Central Library between January and July of 2008. Over this relatively brief period of time I drew Denver's downtown community into a basement conference room for several very different kinds of free events: A combination cooking class and soup kitchen, where after a chef demonstrated how to make soup from scratch, it was then distributed to any library patron who was hungry; an inter-generational jazz-poetry concert rooted in the writing and philosophies of novelist Jack Kerouac, featuring Kerouac's first musical collaborator, composer and multi-instrumentalist David Amram, as well as slam poet Panama Soweto and rising young hip-hip band The Flobots; a town hall meeting and political button making workshop with political writer John Nichols and Denver-based entrepreneur Tran Wills; and a cowboy wear and fine arts exhibit on playwright Oscar Wilde's travels to Denver in the late 19th century featuring painter and art critic Ed Adler. [2]

Like my collected chorus of voices, the purpose of these events were an attempt to push the boundaries of what a public library is and should be in the twenty-first century: A safe space and resource for the nomadic, the creative and, of course, the literary, both fictive and real.

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## Endnotes

1. Videography and editing by Emily Crenshaw and Mary Grace Legg of the Denver-based production company Lockerpartners; still black and white photography by [Ashley Vaughan](#).

2. Parts of these events were co-created with Chris Loffelmacher

