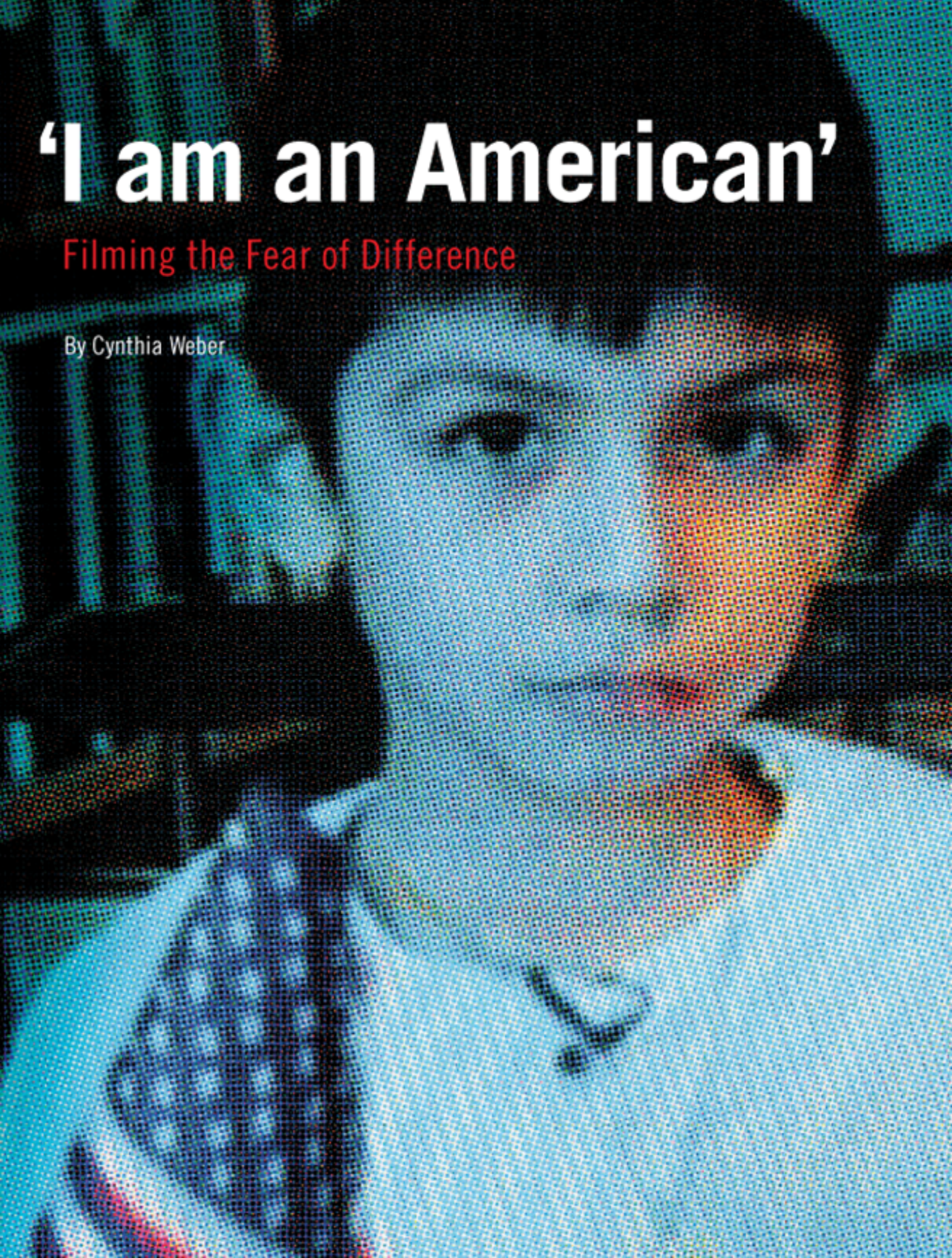
‘I am an American’

Filming the Fear of Difference

By Cynthia Weber



‘I am an American’

In loving memory of my aunt, Doris Fyfe Thomas

and

For my friends in Morgantown, the most ordinary and extraordinary Americans I know

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Filming the Fear of Difference

Cynthia Weber

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Introduction

'I am an American'. This declaration plays a central role in US history, whether to instill a sense of civic duty in US citizens or to distinguish them from citizens of other nations. In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, US advertizing executives mulled over this expression as they pondered what it is that makes America unique.[1] They concluded that the nation's celebration of diversity is the defining feature of America. Fearing a backlash against Arab and other minority Americans after the attacks, they decided to produce a Public Service Announcement (PSA) to remind US citizens 'that this was the time to unite as a country'.[2] The result was the famous 'I am an American' PSA which they shot for the American Ad Council, the leading producer of PSAs in the US.

The 'I am an American' PSA, which began airing on US television ten days after 9/11, features US citizens of various ages, races, religions, and ethnicities looking directly into the camera and declaring 'I am an American', while emotive Americana music plays in the background. To communicate that 'out of many faces, religions, geographical backgrounds, and ethnicities, we are one nation',[3] the PSA incorporates the original US motto – *E Pluribus Unum*/Out of Many, One. It ends with a little girl – possibly Arab, possibly South Asian, possibly Hispanic – smiling broadly as she waves the US flag.

The response to the PSA was unprecedented, both in terms of media donations of time to air the spot and expressions of thanks from US citizens to the Ad Council for 'bringing such an important message to the country at this time'.[4] Indeed, the PSA so enchanted US citizens that the Ad Council concluded it 'made a measurable difference in our society'[5] because it 'helped the country to unite in the wake of the terrorist attacks'.[6] These many years later, the PSA is still fondly remembered by many US citizens when they recall September 11 and the spirit of unity that embraced the country in its aftermath.

For all its good intentions, though, the 'I am an American' PSA did not prevent a backlash against minority populations in the US after the terrorist attacks. Nor did it articulate the full breadth of sentiment at play in the post-9/11 US, as President George W. Bush announced that the time for mourning was over and the time to take sides in the War on Terror was upon us.[7] For what became increasingly clear was that the 'with us or with the terrorists' War on Terror was going to be fought every bit as much on the home front as it was on the

battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq. And its fault lines were not just between US citizens and non-US citizens but between some kinds of US citizens and others.

What we US citizens witnessed after September 11 was that national unity is not as easily achieved in practice as it is in the US motto or in the idealized image of the American melting pot as it is portrayed in the 'I am an American' PSA. Instead, September 11 splintered the US along some very lamentable yet predictable lines (like when the idea of the 'clash of civilizations' pitted Christian against Muslim) and unpredictable lines (like when humanitarians, artists, and environmental activists were accused by the Bush administration of being or being associated with terrorists). As the War on Terror dragged on, what became increasingly apparent was that being a US citizen was no guarantee of being part of the 'One'. What also became apparent was that the seemingly simple declaration 'I am an American' is fraught with complications and paradoxes, particularly when it is meant to express citizenship, identity, tolerance, nationalism, patriotism and justice.

This project chronicles some of those complications and paradoxes. Part history, part cultural anthropology, part political biography, part memoir, the project is rooted in first-person interviews with US soldiers and citizens who more often than not found themselves on the wrong side of the Bush administration's interpretation of what it means to be and to act like a loyal and law-biding US citizen. Though it insistently observes the failures of the post-9/11 US to live up to its national ideals, the project is in no way meant to disparage the US for its ambition of constructing the celebration of diversity as among its claims to identity. Nor is it meant to deny the practical achievements the US has made in this direction, both before and after 9/11. Rather, by documenting the human costs of a fear-based patriotism, it is intended to serve as an intimate reminder to US citizens of just how great the gulf between lived realities and principled ideals can be, especially in the wake of national tragedy, and predominantly for those 'Many' US citizens whose differences prevent them from melting into the always changing national ideal of the 'One'. With this in mind, while this project takes September 11, 2001, as its focus, it is as much an invitation to US citizens to contemplate the history of the US that is currently being written by the administration of President Barack Obama and the history of the US that has yet to be written as it is an invitation to them to critically reconsider September 11 itself.

The project began as a series of documentary films. My struggle to write about these films has been a long and arduous one, as I grappled with how reductive yet also supplementary textual accounts of films can be. It was not until I was invited to mull my dilemma over with an extraordinary group of academics at the Institute for LGBT Studies at the University of Arizona – Laura Briggs, Adam Geary, Laura Gutierrez, Miranda Joseph, Liz Kennedy, Eithne Luibheid, Spike Peterson and Hai Ren (aka, the Clusteristas) – that I broke out of this predicament. They told me, 'Don't write about your films as a writer; write about them as a film-maker'. Their comment was foreshadowed in the phrase the sociologist Kate Nash had used a year earlier to describe my project, a phrase that became the subtitle of this book – 'Filming the fear of difference'. Between these covers is the book that resulted from the sage advice of these colleagues.

The book is organized into two parts. Part I explores how this project grew out of my encounter with the American Ad Council's 'I am an American' PSA and tells the stories of the US citizens I interviewed through my experiences of filming them. Using vignettes and images, these chapters move from showcasing the most predictable protagonists in the War on Terror (soldiers who fought in the Iraq War and their families) to the less predictable (citizens fighting the emerging War on Immigration) to the unpredictable (citizens who declared no side in these wars yet got caught up in the War on Terror as 'collateral damage'). Dispersed throughout are red, white, and blue comment cards containing anonymous public reflections on the project which I collected at public screenings and exhibitions. Part II offers a selection of academic reflections on the project.

The many images throughout the book are drawn mainly from the documentary films I produced, highlighting the filming aspect of the project, while the vignettes offer my reflections on the film-making process – sometimes as a film-maker, sometimes as an academic trained in the field of International Politics, and always as a US citizen living abroad who has returned to the US in search of a ground-level view of what it means to say, 'I am an American'. Within each chapter, these materials are not organized by character, by chronology, or by event. Instead, they are mixed together and juxtaposed to one another in ways that both mirror how these citizens and their stories were introduced to the US public, as well as how fragmented the process of filming actually is. To me, their organization highlights the ironies and illogicalities that marked post-9/11 US policies and some of the responses to them, all in the name of being 'an American'. But there is nothing essential in their ordering, so readers should feel free to engage with these materials in any order.

The fourteen films that resulted from my filmed interviews can be found in the permanent collection of the September 11 Memorial Museum located at the site of the former World Trade Center in New York City. A selection of the films can also be viewed online at the Open Democracy website at: http://www.youtube.com/user/opendemocracyteam. All but one of these films are four minute mini-documentaries in which each of the people I interviewed tell their story in the first person. The final film is my critical remix of the Ad Council's 'I am an American' PSA featuring the 'Many' US citizens I interviewed. They state not only 'I am an American' but also what kind of US citizen they are – the son of an immigrant without papers, a political refugee *from* America, a wrongly accused terrorist spy. This remixed PSA also incorporates many of the 'flag shots' that end each of the individual mini-documentaries and which are included in this book, in which each main character poses with the US flag in a way that expresses their relationship to the US state.

While I produced, directed, filmed, and edited all of the films, my Co-Director at Pato Productions Nina Clovis provided invaluable support for this project throughout and provided crucial production assistance whenever I needed it, particularly on the film featuring Greg and Glenda Avery.

The research for this project was made possible by two major grants, one from the British Academy and another from the Leverhulme Trust, which allowed me to conduct interviews in the US, Mexico and Canada, and by a Visiting Professorship in the Department of Political

Science at the University of Arizona, where I was based during some of my filming. My generous network of friends and family helped my research funds go further by providing me with accommodation, food, and transportation whenever they could. They include Lucy Suchman, Andrew Clement, Monique Fortier, Roxanne Doty, Spike Peterson, Nigel and Cheryl Clark, Larry and Connie Banta, Candy, Heather and Max Ogle, Shelia Rye, and as ever Nina, Chuck, Lindsay, and Seth Clovis. I received additional grants for the production of exhibition materials from the Lancaster University Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Lancaster University Friends Association. The Department of Political Science at Arizona State University also generously contributed funds toward an exhibition in Phoenix, Arizona.

My greatest debt is to the people featured in this project – Lupe Denogean, Phil McDowell, Jamine Aponte, Fernando Suarez del Solar, Cindy Sheehan, James Yee, Chris Simcox, Elvira Arellano, Saul Arellano, Shanti Sellz, José Matus, Ofelia Rivas, Greg and Glenda Avery, Abe Dabdoub, Julia Shearson, Will Potter, and Steve Kurtz. They not only consented to multiple interviews. They each granted me 'fly-on-the-wall' status, often for days at a time as they went about their lives. Behind the scenes, numerous individuals and organizations helped me to secure these interviews – Brandon Mayfield, Lee Zaslofski, Nina Clovis, Bonnie Stewart, Barbara Griffin, Pastor Walter Coleman, Emma Lozano, Father Daniel French, Dereka Rushmore, and Roxanne Doty as well as Somos America, No More Deaths, Sin Fronteras, Alianza Indígena Sin Fronteras, Guererro Azteca Por La Paz, the Minutemen, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and the Critical Art Ensemble.

The project has so far been shared through numerous public lectures, film screenings, and exhibitions in the United States, Canada, Mexico, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Belgium, Denmark and Turkey. Thanks to all the organizers and audiences of those events, particularly Marianne Marchand who organized an exhibition at the University of the Andes in Puebla, Mexico; Jen Urso who curated an exhibition at the Ice House Gallery in Phoenix, Arizona; Marjaana Jauhola and Jennifer Pedersen who curated an exhibition at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth Arts Center; Leon Gurevitch who organized an exhibition at the Dukes Cinema Gallery in Lancaster, England; Christina Rowley and Elspeth Van Veeren who included the work in an exhibition they curated at the Centerspace Gallery, Bristol, England; and Jane McElhone who curated an exhibition at the Open Society in London, England. Thanks also to Bill Gamble, Kirk Woolford, Dave Blacow, Mick Bowen, Janan Yakula, Andy Sellers, Lucy Frost, Kat Stoney, and especially Chuck Clovis for their artistic and technical support and assistance with the still video portraits used in the exhibitions. A further thanks is due to Chuck for his unwavering and timely technical assistance throughout every stage of the film-making process. Robert Ransick, who I met while filming in Arizona and Mexico, has become an important sounding board for the project, both in terms of its content and its exhibition. And had I not received initial training in documentary film-making at Leeds University thanks to my colleagues in the Department of Communications Jayne Rodgers and Stephen Hay, it is doubtful this project ever would have existed. Thank you.

All exhibitions were co-sponsored by OpenDemocracy, which initially published a selection of the films on its website OpenDemocracy.net. Thanks to Sarah Lindon, Grace Davies, David Hayes, and Tony Curzon Price on these fronts. Thanks also to Jamaica Jones who upon discovering the films on the Open Democracy website invited all of the materials from the project to become part of the permanent collection of the US National September 11 Memorial and Museum at the former site of the World Trade Center.

While most of the images found in this book come from the films I shot, Jen Urso, Christy Putz, and Anne-Marie Fortier kindly granted their permission for me to reproduce their photographs documenting the project, and the American Ad Council, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Guererro Azteca Por La Paz, Critical Art Ensemble, the Westboro Baptist Church, Greg Avery, Cindy Sheehan, James Yee, Phil McDowell, and Will Potter granted permission for additional images to be printed here. Thank you. Pastor Beti Guevara, Fernando Suarez del Solar, Marianne Marchand, and especially Luisa Fernanda Grijalva Maza assisted me with the Spanish translations of the films. Again, thank you.

I would also like to thank the editorial team at Intellect Books – my copy-editor Emma Rhys and especially my editor May Yao, who has creatively and supportively steered this book project from start to finish. Thank you both.

Returning to my academic colleagues, thanks to Jef Huysmans, Tim Luke, Alex Danchev, Roxanne Doty, Peter Nyers, and Lily Ling who reflected on this project and kindly agreed to have their commentaries reproduced here. Their commentaries originally appeared in *International Political Sociology* (2010), 4:80–103 under the title 'IPS Forum on Cynthia Weber's Multi-media Project "I am an American"'. Thanks also to Peter for allowing me to interview him about the case of Yaser Hamdi. I would also like to thank my colleagues at Lancaster University, especially Mark Lacy, for their support, enthusiasm, and constructive criticisms of this project as it developed. I am grateful to Lancaster University for providing me with a timely sabbatical during which I was able to complete my filming and begin my writing. I finished writing this book just after I began my new post at Sussex University. I am grateful to the School of Global Studies at Sussex University for contributing to the costs of printing this book in color, as showing the color images from my original color films makes an enormous difference to the telling of this image-based story. I am also appreciative of the supportive intellectual setting in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Leeds University, where I first began thinking about this project.

Having said all that, though, there has been no greater intellectual influence on me or on this particular project than that provided by Richard K. Ashley. Rick taught me that the key political move is to ask the question 'who are we?', and the key ethical move is to ask this question critically so that it can open up new possibilities for political and ethical engagements. This is in contrast to how scholars like Samuel P. Huntington ask this question and mobilize answers to it to close down political and ethical engagement. So to Rick, another heartfelt thank you.

I am particularly grateful that I was able to share this book with Professor Emeritus of Geography and Regional Planning Dr. Charles Weber (aka, my father), who not only embraced its content but provided important editorial comments. Thank you.

Finally, I wish to thank Anne-Marie Fortier, who has lived with this project nearly as long as I have and has advised me on it every step of the way. Her astute intellectual input and editorial suggestions have been invaluable. So has her graciousness in putting up with the many disruptions caused to our lives by my breakneck filming schedule and by me working on this book during our holidays. Thanks for your unwavering support of this project and of me.

Notes

1. These advertizing executives were from the Austin, Texas ad agency GSD&M. For more details about how they conceived of the 'I am an American' PSA, see http://www.adcouncil.org/default.aspx?id=141. Downloaded 8 September 2009.
2. http://www.adcouncil.org/default.aspx?id=141. Downloaded 8 September 2009.
3. http://www.adcouncil.org/default.aspx?id=141. Downloaded 8 September 2009.
4. http://www.adcouncil.org/default.aspx?id=141. Downloaded 8 September 2009.
5. http://www.adcouncil.org/default.aspx?id=61. Downloaded 8 September 2009.
6. http://www.adcouncil.org/default.aspx?id=141. Downloaded 8 September 2009.
7. President George W. Bush (2001), 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress Following 9/11 Attacks', 20 September, http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911jointsessionspeech.htm. Downloaded 8 September 2009.

Part I

‘I am an American’

Chapter 1

Beginnings

Figure 1: Final shot of American Ad Council's 'I am an American' PSA. Courtesy of AdCouncil.org.

Loss and remembrance

Paramus, New Jersey: I have returned home from England to bury my favorite aunt. It is a couple of weeks after September 11, 2001. Everyone in the family is doubly shaken – by this death and by the deaths of so many others across the river and across the country.

My cousin and I head into New York City, as we do every time I'm home. We think we are wandering aimlessly, but at some level we know we are bound for what was the Twin Towers, to what is now this new place called 'Ground Zero'. We taste the smoke and dust still lingering in the air. We see missing persons flyers lining walls and shop windows. We stop at Fire Stations overflowing with wreaths. A few blocks from Ground Zero, barricades stop us. We loiter behind them with others who have wandered in this same direction. This is the quietest New York crowd I have ever been a part of.

Back in Jersey, we bury my aunt. We retire to the house where we recall her life, her spirit, her goodness, what we love most about her.

A television plays in one corner of the living room, as our attention is torn between a life that was and a War on Terror that is beginning. A commercial airs. It is a Public Service Announcement (PSA) by the American Ad Council. In it, US citizens of various ages, races, religions, and ethnicities look directly into the camera and declare, 'I am an American' while emotive Americana music plays in the background. The original US motto appears on the screen, first in Latin, then in English – *E Pluribus Unum*/Out of Many, One. The final shot is of a young girl – possibly Middle Eastern, possibly South Asian, possibly Hispanic. She rides her bike in Brooklyn Bridge Park across the river from where the Twin Towers used to be. Smiling broadly, the little girl waves a US flag.

The PSA touches a cord in me. I know my response to it is as much about the grief and mourning I feel for my aunt as it is about the grief and mourning I feel for those who died on 9/11. But even right there in that living room, I grasp the similar desires bound up in my personal grief and a broader collective grief – a desire to remember the best of what has been lost, a resistance to speak of the lost in the past tense, an attempt to rekindle a lost spirit.

The PSA recalls the best of what it means to be a US American – to be so melted into the US that differences of race and religion matter less to us than our shared identification as US Americans. This is what the PSA celebrates. This is what the PSA attempts to rekindle in us now, refusing to speak about this spirit in the past tense.

Yet I experience the PSA as a death notice, announcing the death of the melting pot myth. For if this myth were alive and well, the Ad Council would not need to remind US Americans of its existence and of their duty to act upon it in the wake of 9/11 by not, for example, targeting 'Arab-looking' and 'Muslim-looking' US Americans as the enemy. In contrast to my pessimistic reading of it, the PSA strives to be optimistic. For it suggests that by looking back at our history, we will find our common future, one in which we will put aside our petty differences and respect the Many as much as we do the One.

Looking back at our nation's history is what the PSA is calling upon us to do as US citizens. Looking back at our family's history is what my relatives and I instinctively do as we bury my aunt. For this is the best that loss and remembrance have to offer – a moment to pause, critically reflect, and come away from a painful experience stronger, smarter.

But my family's reflections about my aunt are anything but critical. As the days go on, these reflections become more and more idealized. 'She was the soul of our family'. 'She was only good'. 'She was always thus'. This is the family pact – that we agree to tell this and only this story about a complicated and surely flawed woman we love so much. No one says this is what we are doing. No one has to. We know what we are doing. We are searching for some relief from our grief by fudging the facts in favor of a more comforting fiction because this consoles us in this difficult moment.

This is what troubles me about the PSA. I see in it a call for US citizens to do the very same thing in relation to the US nation that my family is doing in relation to my aunt – remember only what is good, don't be too critical especially now, take comfort from flawed memories if these help us regroup at this difficult moment.

The PSA is as full of flawed memories about the US nation as my family is about my aunt. What it remembers and celebrates is the melting pot myth as if it were an accomplished fact, as if it were a good idea for everyone living in the US, as if indigenous and formerly enslaved US Americans were not and are not often excluded from the One forged out of the Many, as if new categories of excluded US Americans are not being invented every day.

It is this invention of new categories of excluded US Americans that the makers of the PSA were trying to address. They understood all too well that 'Arab-looking' and 'Muslim-looking' US Americans were in danger of experiencing a backlash in the wake of 9/11, as US grief turned into US rage. By making a PSA about what they believe is fundamentally good about the US, they were trying to avert such a backlash. It didn't work, but it was a laudable aim. The difficulty is that these days, some years after 9/11, few US Americans remember this PSA as representative of just this laudable aim – to present a partial truth about who we are as US Americans as if it were the whole truth so that in the aftermath of 9/11 our actions would make it completely true.

Over the years since it first aired, the PSA is still vividly remembered by countless US Americans. Some of them tell me that the PSA captures the essence of what it means to be a US American. These are the US Americans who firmly feel like part of the One. Other US Americans speak of how the PSA plays on old and emerging exclusions of the Many from the One. They point to how those who are excluded are turned into those to be feared – from

'the angry young black man' to 'the undeserving immigrant' to 'the Muslim terrorist'. This, they tell me, shows that the melting pot myth is an idealized rather than a real account of the US, especially now. If this were not the case, they point out, there would have been no backlash against 'different' US Americans after 9/11.

These US Americans remind us that we must not remember 9/11 and its aftermath simply as we wish it had been, as our individual selective memories and our collective national myths encourage us to. Nor must we forget it. Instead, we must remember 9/11 as fully as we can, including those things about it we would rather forget. For it is this more complete history that is shaping who we are and who we might become, individually and collectively, in relation to the seemingly simple declaration 'I am an American'.

A double bind

Leeds, England: I attend a Faculty Tea to welcome students back to the British University where I teach. It is some weeks after September 11. Because the British academic year begins in October, I have not seen my colleagues since before 9/11. The outpouring of good feeling toward me as a US citizen and toward the US in general because of the terrorist attacks is extraordinary. I experience this same response everywhere I go in Europe right now. This is partly why I am so taken aback when one of my colleagues expresses a very different sentiment. 'America got what it deserved,' she says.

I want to ask her – What America? Which Americans? Of course, she is referring to the United States of America and to US citizens. And she is expressing the idea that the terrorist attacks are the result of what Chalmers Johnson writes about as 'blowback', the unintended and unwelcome domestic consequences of US foreign policy.[1] But what has me fuming is how she is spinning this into a condemnation of the US nation and its people as a whole.

I want to scream at her: Did the grieving families I just saw in New York get what they deserved on September 11? Did all those students who enlisted in the Military Reserves to pay for their education and who will soon find themselves going off to war get what they deserved? Did the US citizens who voted *against* George W. Bush for president and now find themselves in a 'with us or with the terrorists' War on Terror get what they deserved? Did the US citizens who voted *for* George W. Bush for president and will soon find themselves as appalled by the Bush Administration's responses to the September 11 terrorist attacks as they were to the attacks themselves get what they deserved?

Here's the problem, I want to tell her. You have just equated all US citizens not only with the policies of their government but with their state itself, as if each individual US citizen were the symbolic equivalent of 'The US State'. So if someone has a problem with 'The US State', then on your thinking this is a justification for them to attack a symbol of 'The US State' – whether this is an inanimate object like the World Trade Center or an animate subject like a US civilian. All are equally justifiable targets. The problem with this logic is not only that it justifies the murder of US civilians on September 11; it justifies the violent

killing of anyone who could be conceived of as a symbolic enemy of anyone with a political cause. And since we are all potential political symbols – whether as 'citizens' or 'terrorists' or other engaged or even disengaged political actors – 'humanity' (with all the complications that term implies)[2] becomes the necessary casualty of oppositional politics. For me, that's a serious problem.

I also want to challenge her comment in a British context. As a British citizen, would she allow her students to make such blanket statements about 'the British'? Would she condone equating all British citizens with the policy decisions of 'The British State' and transforming them into symbols of 'The British State'? Would she condone denying the humanity of British citizens based on nothing more than the accident of their birth? I don't think she would. Instead, I think she would lecture her students on their laziness in relying upon national stereotypes that rarely if ever make sense when applied to real, living human beings and that may be a lot more reactionary than they intend them to be. Yet somehow she feels OK about applying these sorts of stereotypes herself to US citizens.

I understand that my colleague's quip 'America got what it deserved' is grounded less in her British citizenship than it is in her distain for much of US foreign policy. This foreign policy supports US hegemonic power often to the detriment of other states and peoples, even when it understands itself to be helping them. In uttering this quip, she is acknowledging a point I very much agree with – that there is a history to September 11. September 11 is not some isolated instance in US history when 'evil terrorists' came out of nowhere and attacked 'the innocent USA'. Rather, September 11 is a moment that sits within a wider US history. This history should sometimes be celebrated, sometimes be criticized, and always be debated. But it should never be allowed to use September 11, 2001, as an exceptional moment that justifies all US policy decisions in its aftermath. But that does *not* mean 'America got what it deserved on September 11'. It means things are a lot more complicated than that. And that means that blanket condemnations of the US and its citizens that understand everything the US does as 'bad' and everything opposed to the US as 'good' are not only smug; they are stupid.

But the truth is I don't say anything to my colleague. I remain silent because of the double-bind I find myself in as a US citizen living abroad. If I say anything in defence of the US, I am written off as a stereotypical unthinking American. Yet if I make a balanced comment that is at all critical of US policy, I am read as inviting others to trash the US as a whole. Either way, I fail to convey my point because of how my point is interpreted through my citizenship. Working my way out of this bind takes on a new urgency for me in light of this conversation. But the best I can do today is project a disagreeing silence and then walk away.

Two years later during the morning rush hour in London, terrorists opposed to British involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq blow up trains, a bus, and mostly British passengers. At work, no one says Britain got what it deserved.

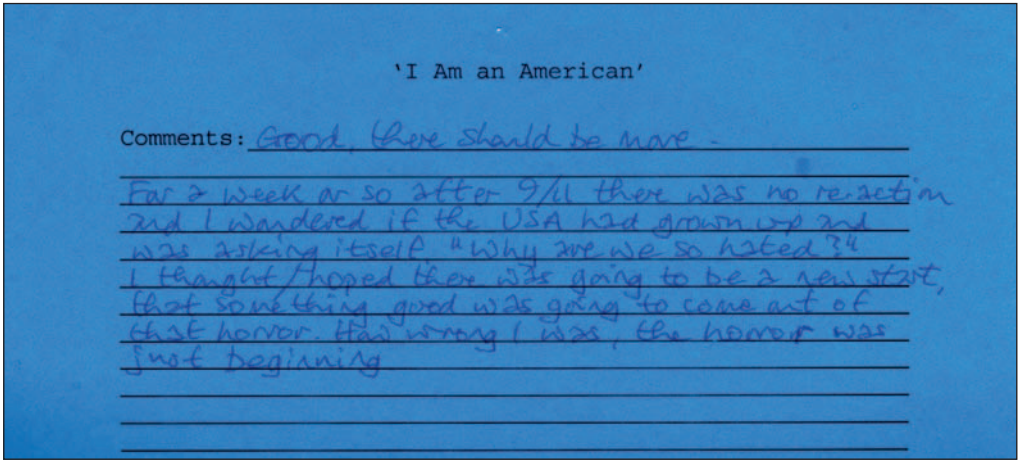

Figure 2: Anonymous comment.

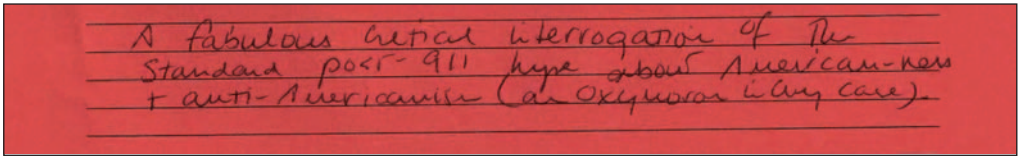

Figure 3: Anonymous comment.

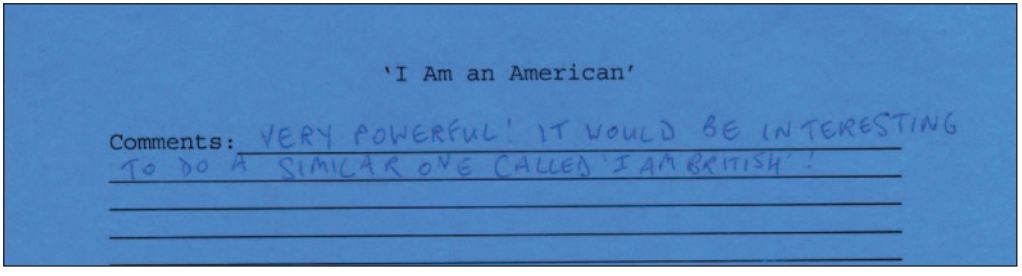

Figure 4: Anonymous comment.

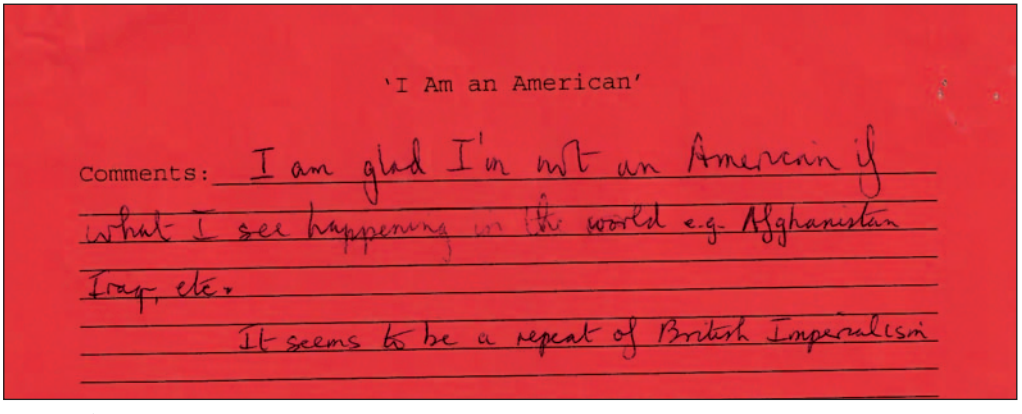

Figure 5: Anonymous comment.

Unknown Americans

Lancaster, England: I can't stop thinking about the American Ad Council's 'I am an American' PSA.

Much time has passed since I first saw it, and yet the PSA regularly haunts me with some nagging questions: Who were the people featured in the PSA? Did they all feel like they were part of the 'One' that the PSA celebrates when they agreed to be in it? What are their post-9/11 experiences? How might each of them interpret the declaration 'I am an American' in light of those experiences? Would they all agree on what it means to be a patriotic US citizen in the post-9/11 US? Do their post-9/11 ideas about patriotism and justice differ from their pre-9/11 ideas about patriotism and justice? Do they believe that tolerance is a fundamental US value? Do they believe the US is as tolerant of difference as the PSA suggests, especially now? Do they think the PSA was a success, even though it did not prevent a backlash against 'different' US citizens after 9/11? Were any of them subjected to a backlash in the aftermath of 9/11? Did any of them take part in such a backlash? How do they feel about how US Americans experienced the PSA immediately after 9/11 and how US Americans experience it now?

I will never know the answers to these questions, as the individuals featured in the PSA are unknowable beyond their apparent race, sex, gender, ethnicity and US citizenship. I think about trying to find them, to ask them my many questions, but I am sure that they are largely untraceable because their names are not listed in the PSA's credits.

Their anonymity intrigues me. On the one hand, it means that viewers of the PSA are not distracted by the individual stories of the US citizens featured in the PSA, with the PSA directing them to focus only on how these US citizens look and sound, what they say, and where they say it (often in front of US national landmarks). But on the other hand, it means that viewers of the PSA lack any additional context or content through which to relate to the people in the PSA. All viewers have are faces and flags, Americana monuments and music, and one simple sentence, 'I am an American'. And what the PSA's particular staging of the sentence 'I am an American' creates is a sentimental yet rather empty sense of patriotism and national unity, even though it is anchored in the idea of the American melting pot.

It is all reminiscent of how countries around the world memorialize 'the unknown soldier'. The unknown soldier is always an anonymous, unidentifiable individual who was sacrificed for a national cause and who is celebrated after his[3] death as a reminder to all citizens that national purpose trumps individuality, especially in times of national crisis. The unknown soldier can serve as a national emblem of unity and patriotism only because his individuality is erased. For it is his anonymity that allows him to be nothing more and nothing less than a soldier, with no personal history and no personal political views. This is vital to unifying the nation, for if the unknown soldier's backstory were known it would surely detract from if not raise uncomfortable questions about how this particular entombed individual fits into the seemingly universal idea of the nation.

I expect the situation would be the same if the people featured in the 'I am an American' PSA were not anonymous. For if we knew more about them – if they seemed more real to