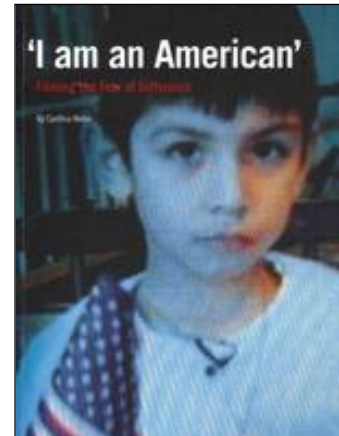


Cynthia Weber, **'I am an American': Filming the Fear of Difference**, Chicago: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, 224 pp., \$17.50 (paperback).

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"The issue is *how* we remember or forget September 11 and what that remembering or forgetting makes possible" (p. 200). This observation summarizes the issue that all 9/11 related works—no matter what medium—have to tackle. Cynthia Weber chose a very different approach than did the many books, documentaries, and feature films that already exist on 9/11, such as *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (Prince, 2009), *World Trade Center* (Feghali, Hill, & Stone, 2006), and *9/11* (Hanlon & Naudet, 2002). Most works focus on the people directly involved or impacted by the events that took place on September 11, 2001—actual survivors or victims. Other works, such as Prince's book, study the impact such events have on film production thereafter. In her book, **'I am an American': Filming the Fear of Difference**, Weber is not interested in either. Instead, she focuses on the forgotten and/or easily overlooked secondary survivors and victims of 9/11.



This book is a companion to her video work, *I am an American*, which she created as a reaction to the *I am an American* PSA that was produced and aired shortly after September 11, 2001. Weber's video is not provided in this book, but it is not needed, as the text provides an intimate, inside look into the creation of the video via firsthand accounts and the use of still video images. Both bring the moving images to life on these pages. As such, her book represents a successful adaptation of a video project to the static pages of a book.

Simultaneously, and this may be the book's most invaluable strength, the selection and order of materials permits readers to engage with the text in various manners; the book does not provide one "preferred reading." For this reason, I will refrain from using in-depth examples, such as giving specific details about people featured in the project, to provide readers with the opportunity to peruse Weber's book with the same range of possible interactions that she envisioned when creating this work. Throughout the book, Weber encourages diverse responses by providing varied feedback from visitors to her exhibit of her video work.

Weber introduces us to individuals whose lives changed in the post-9/11 world due to the events that had taken place and that seemed unrelated to their lives. Of course, military personnel are included, along with people living along the U.S.-Mexican border, illegal immigrants, Hurricane Katrina evacuees, and even an artist whose work is deemed suspicious and threatening to U.S. safety. This mix of people creates the message that in the post-9/11 world many Americans, who at first glance do not have much in

common, shared one significant denominator—being American. This fact suddenly became essential to their way of life in this “free country,” and it would challenge their American Dreams in various ways.

Weber’s book, however, does more than tell personal stories. Its structure and layout permits readers to engage with the content in multiple ways. This is accomplished by the segmentation of content: The author tells people’s stories in segments, incorporates stills from the video project she is discussing, adds behind-the-scenes information about the shooting of a scene, and includes feedback from audiences. The one flaw with these responses is that they are handwritten and on a red, white, and blue background, which results in many of these comments being difficult to read due to either the background color or to the handwriting.

Weber’s statements about the production of this film make this book as reflexive as a reflexive documentary would be. For instance, she discusses the challenges of shooting with proper exposure in a hot Arizona desert that does not provide any shade (p. 85). The reader is constantly aware of the choices the filmmaker had to make and how they impacted the presentation of the subject. In turn, this permits readers to consider their reactions to a particular story. An image may have been created that may make a person look favorable or nonfavorable due to the construction of the piece and not to the subject’s actions. At times, the focus on behind-the-scenes comments somewhat distracts from the subject, such as Weber’s personal opinions about a group of people she is filming (p. 76). This structure, however, exemplifies how filmmaking can never be objective and how each film is shaped by the filmmaker’s goals and objectives, which Weber summarizes as well (p. 200).

The case of Saul A. provides excellent insight into the moral and ethical dilemma that documentary filmmakers face. In this case, the issue arises when filming a child who does not want to be filmed despite his mother having signed a release form. Weber decides to “lower her camera” and stop filming, respecting the child’s wish (p. 97). Such segments are excellent real-life examples of the documentary filmmaking process and could be used in the classroom as discussion-based scenarios, augmenting other texts, such as Bill Nichols’ chapter on ethics in *Introduction to Documentary* (2001, pp. 1–19). Along the same lines, her use of semiotic analysis to break down her choice of mise-en-scene and framing could be used as a teaching tool in the classroom. (One such example can be found on p. 139 of Weber’s book.)

The only subjects that seem not to fit fully in this book are the Hurricane Katrina evacuees, as their connection to 9/11 is debatable compared to that of the other subjects. For the “average American,” the artist’s example of Steve K. is possibly the most shocking and relatable, as in his scenario all coincidences transpired against him, resulting in his being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Equally powerful is the experience of Weber herself when police in London question her during location scouting outside the U.S. Embassy (pp. 157–161). She is fortunate and does not get taken into custody, but the stories of her subjects make it very clear that others, such as those following a different religion or with a different ethnic background, might not have been so lucky.

The blank slides Weber included in her exhibit for all the untold stories that were not included in the video could have been added to this book, enhancing the open interpretation of the text for the

reader. Throughout the book, double-page spreads of her subjects posed in front of the American flag and stating that they are Americans are used for reflection. Why not also include a blank slide to permit readers to fill in their own stories of people they know and have been reminded of by reading this book? Also, a significant shortcoming of the double-page spreads is that the binding of the book obscures parts of the photos and text. A different presentation format might resolve this matter.

A second matter that detracts from the book's openness and full engagement with the subject matter is the order and segmentation in which Weber decided to present her subjects. The first focus, following the introduction of the project, is military personnel. Chapter 3 is dedicated to civilians with expected links to 9/11, such as those living on a border. Those with surprising ties to 9/11 can be found in Chapter 4. Segmenting the subjects into these categories and ordering them in this particular way implies a level of importance that runs counterproductive to the otherwise open investigation of how 9/11 impacted any American, regardless of one's background. It is effective to tell various stories in vignettes in a chapter, but why not mix people of different classifications together in a single chapter, for example, one member of the military with two civilians and one "collateral damage" victim (as the Americans in Chapter 4 are referred to)? This would suggest equality of all Americans.

The academic responses that conclude the book appear equally counterproductive, if the book is to be seen as an open-ended discussion of the impact on 9/11 on Americans. These responses provide preferred readings that, due to the authors' status, carry value and suggest to readers that they should align themselves with one or more of the opinions of these experts.

Overall, this book is a thought-provoking piece that any person—whether U.S. citizen or not, whether American or not—can engage with. It enables readers to hold up a mirror to their government and their lives for evaluation.

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