

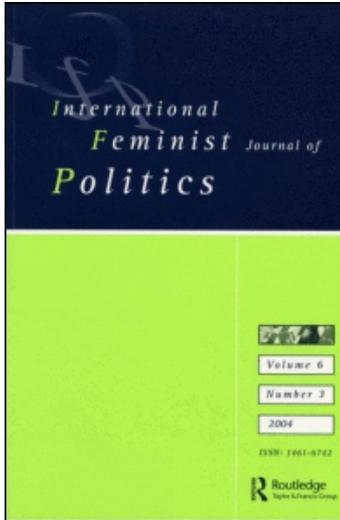
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Who Might We Become?

Marjaana Jauhola ^a; Jennifer Pedersen ^a

^a Aberystwyth University, UK

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Who Might We Become?

AN INTERVIEW WITH CYNTHIA WEBER

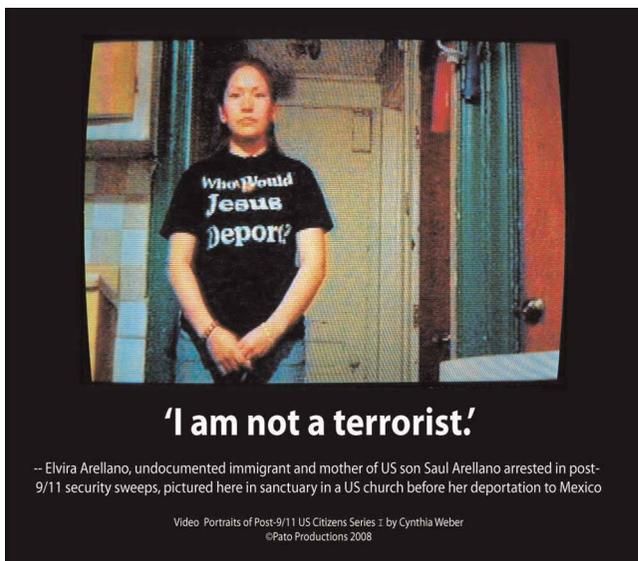
Cynthia Weber exhibited and screened her project 'I Am an American', which consists of still photographs and documentary films about unsafe US citizens, at the Aberystwyth Arts Centre and at the Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University, in March 2009. In this interview, Marjaana Jauhola and Jennifer Pedersen, PhD students at the Department of International Politics in Aberystwyth, talk with Cynthia about her ongoing project.

Cynthia Weber is Professor of International Relations at Lancaster University and Co-Director of the Media Company Pato Productions. More information about the 'I Am an American' project and a selection of the films included in it are available at: http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/democracy_power/america_power_world/citizen_identity.

Marjaana Jauhola (MJ) – Could you tell us what your project 'I Am an American' is about?

Cynthia Weber (CW) – Ten days after September 11 2001, and one day after George W. Bush gave his famous 'you are either with us or with the terrorists' speech, the US Ad Council launched its 'I Am an American' public service announcement (PSA) that was broadcast on US television.¹ The PSA features a montage of US citizens of various ages, races, religions and ethnicities looking directly at the camera and declaring 'I am an American', while Americana music plays in the background. It ends with the US motto – *E Pluribus Unum*, Out of Many (differences), One (nation). The idea behind the PSA was to reinforce the US melting pot myth by reminding US citizens that their individual differences matter less than their national identification to the US state, as a way to prevent a backlash against 'different' US Americans after 9/11. It didn't work, but it was a laudable aim.

Among the reasons the PSA didn't work is because, as I've argued elsewhere (Weber forthcoming), the PSA constructs a mobile system of differentiation that marks some citizens as safe and others as unsafe. Unsafe citizens are US citizens who either will not or cannot make their differences normatively conform to the national ideal of the one composed of the many. These are,



Source: Cynthia Weber, Pato Productions

for example, Muslim and Arab Americans who after 9/11 suddenly were regarded by other US Americans as not sufficiently melted into the US (Alsultany 2007) or indigenous Americans who historically have not been invited to melt into the US. My project is about unsafe US citizens.

The people I interviewed include patriotic soldiers who paid a high price for their citizenship like Lupe Denogean, who received 'fast-tracked citizenship' only after he was severely wounded in the current Iraq War, and US Army Muslim Chaplain James Yee, whose patriotic service at Guantanamo Bay led to his own detention when he was wrongly accused of being a US enemy combatant. I also interviewed people who protested the Iraq War, like Peace Mom Cindy Sheehan who set up camp outside of President George W. Bush's Crawford, Texas, home because she wanted to ask the President 'For what noble cause did my son die in Iraq?' (see Sheehan 2006). And I interviewed people on both sides of the immigration debate in the US, which since 9/11 has become another domestic front in the War on Terror. These include folks like the founder of the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps Chris Simcox who organizes civilian patrols on the US border to track undocumented migrants and turn them over to US Border Patrol, and human rights activists like Shanti Sellz who provide humanitarian aid to migrants who might otherwise die in the desert. Finally, I interviewed people who were 'collateral damage' in the War on Terror, like Hurricane Katrina evacuees Greg and Glenda Avery who were called 'refugees', or civilian Muslim Americans like Julia Shearson and Abe Dabdoub who are on the terrorist watch list, or indigenous

Americans living on the US/Mexico border who have been subjected to extraordinary surveillance since 9/11.

I invited these unsafe US citizens to narrate in the first person their experiences of citizenship after 9/11 and to declare not only 'I am an American' but also what *kind* of US American they are (a political refugee *from* the US, the son of an immigrant without papers, a wrongly accused terrorist spy). I did this project both to give them voice and to explore the complicated meanings and practices of citizenship, tolerance, nationalism, patriotism, justice and memory woven into and around the seemingly simple declaration 'I am an American'.

MJ – I find the project to be an important subversion of the official PSA. In the original one, anonymous people reiterate 'I am an American' and none of their stories are heard.

CW – When I first saw the PSA, I thought to myself all I know about these people is their nationality, their citizenship and what they look like. I don't know their names. I have absolutely no idea what the back-story is for any of these people. But as a US citizen, I got the impression that I was supposed to feel like I am one of these many US citizens who can perform their patriotism by 'tolerating differences', albeit only those differences sanctioned as patriotic by the PSA (Alsultany 2007). So when I saw the PSA three weeks after 9/11, I knew immediately that this was a very powerful advertisement – politically and affectively – and that it needed a political response that was also an affective response. Because if US citizens were not as moved by my response as they were by the original PSA, it was unlikely that my critical political engagement with the PSA would resonate with them.

MJ – Could you say something about the feminism and queer politics of this project?

CW – Although International Relations theory, feminist theory and queer theory aren't explicitly articulated in these films, none of these films would have been possible if I weren't thoroughly immersed in all of these literatures, whether by endorsing them or criticizing them. From IR and political theory, I take questions about sovereignty and nationalism, but also the profound dilemma between humanity and citizenship that is unresolved in modernity and post-modernity. From feminist theory, I take questions like Cynthia Enloe's query 'Where are the women?' and Jean Elshtain's critique of women as 'beautiful souls' when I interview and edit films about 'Peace Mom' Cindy Sheehan, or Elvira Arellano, an undocumented immigrant who sought sanctuary in a US church when she was to be deported to Mexico so that her son Saul, a US citizen, could remain in the US. Or Muslim American Julia Shearson who is suing the US government to be removed from the Terrorist Watch List, or African American Hurricane Katrina evacuee Glenda Avery who has been treated more like a 'refugee' than a 'citizen' in recent years. From queer theory, I think about Judith Butler's (1999 [1990]) point about how homosexuality makes heterosexuality possible – a point that I *live* sometimes comically (like when women in the restroom think I'm a

man) and sometimes dangerously (like when I was detained under the UK Terrorism Act for 'taking an unusual interest in the US Embassy in London' – I just looked at the building for like 10 minutes – but then was released when they found out I was an academic *and a woman*). Over the years, queer theory has been articulated in a broader sense of queerness, as something that doesn't fit and therefore confuses and confounds the norm and normativity. What I call unsafe citizens also do this. I don't want to lose the sexuality out of queer theory (and in an upcoming series of films I will be exploring this), but I do think that queerness understood in this broad sense can be read in this project.

So as a film maker, an academic and a person, it matters that I am not someone who normatively conforms to the hail to be a particular type of US American, and my sexuality and my feminism are parts of that inability to normatively conform to that hail as much as my politics are. Whether I want to or not, whether I try to or not, I am not 'allowed' to be a 'normal' and safe US American.

Jennifer Pedersen (JP) – There is something very interesting about your inclusion of the two mothers, Cindy Sheehan and Elvira Arellano. Cindy Sheehan, of course, is such a major figure right now in the anti-war movement in the United States.

CW – Cindy Sheehan and Elvira Arellano are two women whose politics were based on their motherhood. What I find interesting is how they both *perform* a state-confounding notion of 'the camp' in ways that might be rethought in relation to Agamben's notion of the camp as a 'zone of indistinction' (Agamben 1998), so that Cindy and Elvira didn't just become '*homo sacer*', as Agamben suggests, but '*homo sacer-moms*' – a term Halit Mustafa Tagma and Rick Ashley came up with as they wondered why we never find any soccer moms in the category of *homo sacer* (see Tagma forthcoming). I'm trying to think this through – and I haven't through it all through yet, so take these points as thoughts in progress – but it's interesting how these two very different moms 'voluntarily' camped out – Elvira in sanctuary in a church, Cindy in tents outside of George W. Bush's Texas ranch, and what responses they got to doing this. On the one hand, their protest practices seem traditional and so stereotypical of how we think about the relationship between moms and peace/sanctuary and protest. And yet how these protests were done ended up confounding the US state's claims to normalcy, how it practiced its law and maybe even some of the gendered ideas in Agamben's work, the sorts of things Cristina Masters has been writing about lately (see Masters 2009). It's like by performing the camp, Elvira and Cindy were highlighting how the state of exception that Agamben writes about has become the US norm. Ok, we know this. But what's interesting is that when confronted with 'voluntary'/performative camps inhabited by 'exceptional women' – one of whom (Elvira) was violating US laws by remaining in the US – the US state did not know what to do with them! So it ignored Cindy and Elvira while they were camping out! I have to think about this more, but this intrigues me.

MJ – When putting up the exhibition I was thinking about your article ‘Performative States’ (Weber 1998), the connections between the project on performativity and an ethical question: do we want to support the Minuteman’s² version of becoming? There are contradictory yet parallel visions of what it is to be an American.

CW – I emphatically do not support the Minutemen’s vision of what it means to be a patriotic or an ethical US citizen! But I do strongly believe that it is important to show that their vision of patriotism is competing for the hearts and minds of US citizens. Part of what I am trying to show in the context of the War on Terror is how performativity is regulated. Safe citizenship is very much regulated citizenship, and US citizens enable some of this regulation through their repeated performances of fear of Muslim Americans or undocumented immigrants or gay married couples, for example. In the case of the Minutemen, neither the US state nor a large portion of the US citizenry think the Minutemen practice patriotic or ethical citizenship. Instead, they practice what Roxanne Doty (2007) calls ‘vigilante sovereignty’ since they are trying to take power from the State in what many (including myself) regard as racist ways because the State isn’t exercising power in the way the Minutemen want the State to exercise power around issues of immigration.

When we think about ‘*who might we become?*’, we have to think about how are we treating marginalized citizens and non-citizens? How are we constructing the abnormal, so that the abnormal marks the outer limit on normality and can therefore be subjected to practices of normalization and, if these fail, arrested or able to be killed or left to die? Who are we supposed

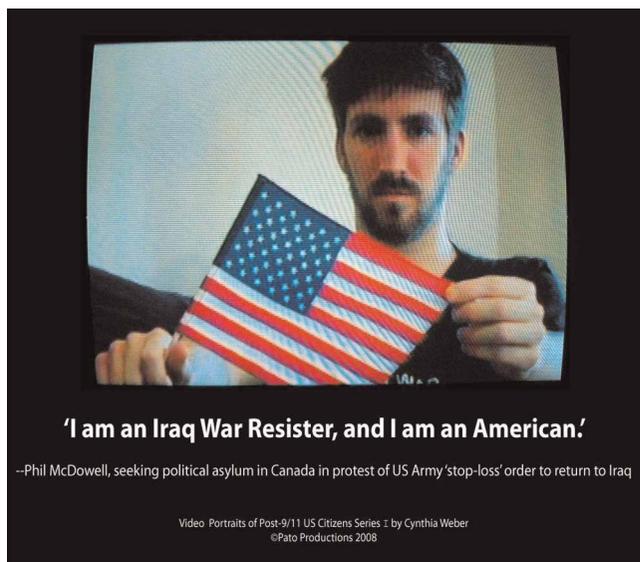


Source: Cynthia Weber, Pato Productions

to be afraid of? And what about citizens who *cannot* or *will* not normatively conform to an ever-changing ideal of national belonging or patriotic citizenship because of their sexuality, sex, race, religion or because of how they practice their art – like when artist Steve Kurtz, who uses benign bacteria in his artwork, was detained on suspicion of bioterrorism when his wife Hope died of natural causes. What is it going to be next? And *who* is it going to be next? Any one of us could become one of those ‘abnormal’, unsafe people at any moment without trying to be because we don’t decide who is safe and unsafe – the State does.

JP – In your book *Imagining America at War* (Weber 2005), you ask the question, ‘what does it mean to be a moral American?’ It seems to me that your films also present a challenge to what is considered moral. I was especially struck by how, in his film, Phil McDowell talks about it being a moral decision to refuse to return to Iraq – he says ‘saying “No” is one of the most patriotic things you can do’. Do you see your films as a continuation of the project you started with *Imagining America at War*, and do they answer the question you asked at the end of the book, ‘how might we act morally in the post-9/11 era’?

CW – These films are most explicitly directed toward another question raised in *Imagining America at War* – ‘*who might we become?*’ That I think is the political question. And what I think these films try to do is track who we are becoming as a state, as a citizenry, as a society. And in those trackings, the films give us these conflicting possibilities for who we might become.



Source: Cynthia Weber, Pato Productions

I haven't tried to hit people over the head with the morality stuff, but I think it's inescapably in every film. Phil is a very good example with the grounds upon which he is resisting the US war in Iraq – as he says, 'this is an illegal and an immoral war'. But when you consider the moral claims of each individual film with the other films, they don't add up. For example, Chris Simcox's morality doesn't add up with Elvira Arellano's morality. Nor does Phil McDowell's morality square with Lupe Denogean's morality.

JP – Have you ever considered this project or your work as your own act of patriotism?

CW – I certainly view it as my political project. As a US citizen, I am grateful for my citizenship and troubled by it at the same time. It's not something I would give up, but it's not something I would leave uninterrogated. I think at this moment of history it is particularly important for US citizens to reflect on US power and action in the world and think about how – through their citizenship practices – they support or resist US policies and ideals, for better or worse. That concern has been my on-going project – that's why I ended up staying in graduate school, doing a PhD and having a career as an academic. What I hope that the films do is what I hope my larger body of work does, which is really try to ask the question, 'how can the United States, whether as a state or a society or as a collection of individuals, or individuals themselves, be more responsible'?

MJ – When we announced that your project was coming to Aberystwyth, one of my colleagues said, 'that sounds fantastic, but has she published anything on it?' That led me to think of the desire for text, especially within the field of International Relations. How does a film representation differ from a text?

CW – There's a reason why I'm not only writing books and articles anymore. I'm making films because they leap across that boundary of the academy out to the public realm, and they engage with what James Der Derian calls the Military–Industrial–Media–Entertainment Network by using some of their own techniques critically. These films and photographs and gallery shows are aesthetic and affective objects and experiences that people without academic backgrounds get at a gut level. Hopefully by moving from textual practice to aesthetic practice, instead of just writing about a political question or a research question, I'm placing that question within the person watching the films or attending the exhibition so that they might say, '*who might we/I become? What's our/my responsibility here? How might we/I live differently?*'

To have US citizens be confronted by compatriots like Phil McDowell and Jamine Aponte, both Iraq war resisters, who say, 'I'm a political refugee *from* the United States, I'm in Canada seeking asylum because I don't want to go back to the United States' – that blows your mind! It's completely contrary to the poem that's at the base of the Statue of Liberty: 'give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free' – it's like, 'I'm yearning to be free by *leaving* the United States!' That confronts US Americans with these positions that they might not otherwise be thinking about. And this is one of

the points of the films – to turn US citizenship on its head so it can be critically interrogated by US citizens. One of the strategies all the films in this project use to do this is to reverse the US motto that the Ad Council's PSA ends with – *E Pluribus Unum*, 'Out of Many Differences, One Nation, One People'. I turn that around in my films, to out of one ideal of nationhood, one ideal of community, many experiences of citizenship. And out of one idea of *safe* citizenship, there are many experiences of *unsafe* citizenship. I'm not trying to be clever by reversing this motto. What I'm trying to show is that the motto itself is reversible, that the State can change its mind at any time, and someone who is safely inside the 'one' can become unsafely outside of the 'one'.

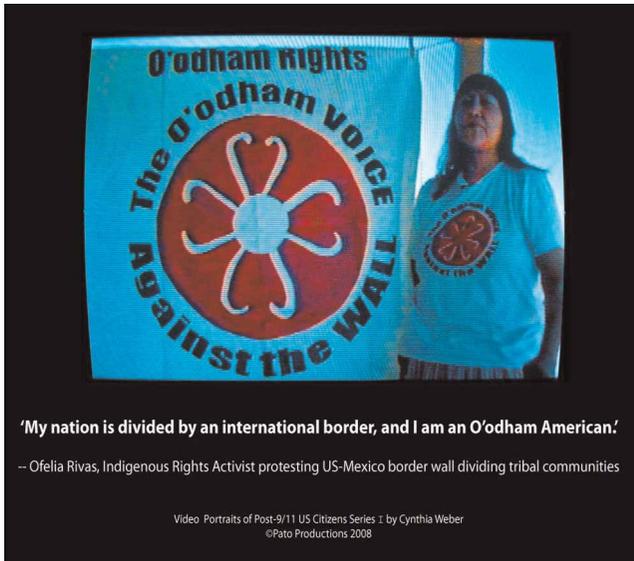
MJ – I am thinking about how the notion of being a safe citizen has not necessarily ever existed.

CW – I am trying to engage with these US 'national fantasies' as Laurent Berlant (1997) would call them and how these national fantasies are about safety or security. I've argued elsewhere (Weber 2008) that there is no such thing as a safe citizen, at least from the standpoint of the citizen, and that what the State is trying to do in constructing so-called 'safe citizens' is to solve the problem of the state–citizen–violence relationship. If we go back to Max Weber's notion of sovereignty as absolute authority, what the State is trying to do is *control* the legitimate use of violence. And to do that it has to construct its citizenry in such a way that this citizenry exercises its violence on *behalf* of the State. So this is why the Minutemen become a danger to the State, because they are not actually exercising their violence on behalf of the State. They are exercising it on behalf of a different imaginary of what the State ought to be. So yes, safe citizenship is a myth. But what is so interesting is that it is a myth that US Americans and many other nationals still cling to.

JP – One thing that struck me in all the stories is the certainty of everybody's experience.

CW – A point that comes through in *Imagining America at War* and in this 'I Am an American' project is that when you take all of these certainties – in this case, of these thirteen films – and put them together, you have to become uncertain. Because these certainties don't add up. The only consistent certainty that runs through all the films is the voiceless character of the US State, which, as Terrell Carver commented about the films, is in documents and lawsuits and often faceless officials. The individual films . . . I hope they are powerful and convey strong stories. But the point of the project is to take all of these films as a collection.

People ask me, where is *your* voice, Cindy? My voice is most strongly in the *collection* of these thirteen stories. It is not in any one of these stories. I mean, of course my voice is everywhere in the sense that I use the words of my interview subjects but I edit their stories, I visually construct their stories as well as textually and aurally construct their stories. But I try to edit their films in ways that they would identify as their stories, from their perspective (for better or worse). And in every case, whether as an individual or an organization,



Source: Cynthia Weber, Pato Productions

they've all embraced the films I've made about them. But I wouldn't embrace any one of the films on its own. For me, my perspective is these thirteen stories told together and how they don't add up and how they continue to fragment this notion of a national unity and a unified understanding of citizenship and how I can get everyday US citizens to think about what that means politically. *That's* the Cindy Weber part.

MJ – I find the silent moments and small details of the film very powerful.

CW – There are several moments where I just want to give people thinking space. Each film and the whole collection of the films are about giving space for questions of citizenship, tolerance and identity, belonging, nationalism, memory. How *dare* we treat a US citizen – how *dare* we treat *anybody* – this way, whether they are US citizens or not. What is it that we actually think we remember about 9/11? And how might these films begin to complicate that official memory of 9/11, both personally and nationally?

JP – You mentioned that the films will be part of the US September 11 Memorial Museum that is being built at the World Trade Center site. Could you speak to the significance of having your films chosen as part of the *official* commemorative project of 9/11?

CW – I submitted the films to openDemocracy.net³ which published a few of them. As a result of that, the project started getting a lot of attention. People started teaching them, and they got invited for exhibition at film festivals and in galleries. Then one day out of the blue I was asked by Jamaica Jones, part of the curatorial research team at the National September 11 Museum, if I

would donate the project to the Museum. My immediate response to her was to ask two questions: what is the mission of the museum, and what do you think these films do? Why do you want them, in other words? And she wrote back to say that it is a memorial and museum about 9/11, but the curators are keen to include things that don't often get remembered about that time. Their interest in my work is that it runs counter to official US memories of 9/11.

If someone had asked me, 'In your wildest dreams, if this work could be anywhere, where would you want it to be?' I would have said at this museum at Ground Zero, because this is where not only US Americans but people from all over the world are going to come to remember and reflect upon 9/11. Until the United States government forgets 9/11 and stops memorializing it (which isn't going to happen anytime soon), then I think it's very important that there are aesthetic works that engage with that official memory in a way that troubles it. So to have this work included in the site of official US memory about 9/11, I think this is without a doubt the best thing that could possibly happen to the project.

*Marjaana Jauhola and Jennifer Pedersen
Aberystwyth University, UK*

Notes

- 1 <http://www.adcouncil.org/default.aspx?id=141>
- 2 The Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, founded by Chris Simcox, is a volunteer group concerned with preventing illegal crossings of the United States–Mexico and United States–Canada border.
- 3 The first six films at <http://www.youtube.com/user/opendemocracyteam> are part of this project.

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