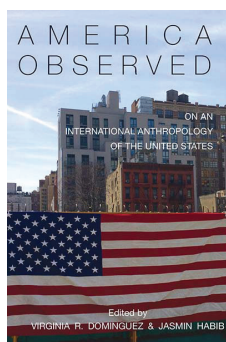




AMERICA OBSERVED: ON AN INTERNATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE UNITED STATES

by Virginia R. Dominguez and Jasmin Habib, eds.
(A Book Review)



*A*merica Observed: On an International Anthropology of the United States brings a fresh perspective both methodologically and theoretically to the subfield of the anthropology of the United States. Alterity being a stubborn cornerstone of the field of anthropological inquiry, Dominguez and Habib ask the poignant question: Can the U.S. be “Othered” (1)? In their introductory chapter, the editors clearly lay

out a compelling argument for non-U.S.-based anthropologists to conduct extensive ethnographic work in the United States and the challenges that come with such an approach. As a U.S.-born anthropologist of the United States, I find this call compelling and overdue. Predominantly, anthropology has always pushed the idea of anthropological study in foreign, remote places where the anthropologist must become accustomed. The anthropology of the U.S. has had the opposite problem, with the majority of U.S. specialists conducting “home anthropology.” This is a designation that the authors outline; however, any anthropologist of the U.S. who comes from the U.S. will attest that the country is vast, culturally diverse, and socially complex. Conducting field work in different parts of the states where one may not be familiar can be as “othering” as any international inquiry. Nonetheless,

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it is an important question to raise, What would an anthropology of the United States look like if it was conducted by colleagues from outside of the U.S.?

What follows is a series of chapters that try to answer this poignant question, grounded in the thick description that anthropological methods require. Although forward thinking and compelling, the breadth of Habib and Dominguez's introduction would have been enriched by a detailed discussion of the history of anthropology both *in and out of* the United States, noting its inextricable links with empire and settler colonization. Such an inclusion might well have yielded interesting insights and redoubled the foundation for what follows. To be sure, any discussion of the present and future of a U.S. anthropology should consistently and thoroughly interrogate its highly entrenched and contentious disciplinary past.

The contributing authors provide a series of ethnographic studies and essays that explore how international ethnographic researchers can contribute and provide insight into the anthropology of the U.S. The text is divided into two thematic sections: the first, "On the Outside Looking In? The U.S. As a Fieldsite," takes the reader through a series of ethnographically rich chapters that showcases the potential of scholars outside the U.S. conducting U.S.-based field work. Helena Wulff's chapter explores the influence of American pop-culture on Swedish youth, mobilized as a driving force for Swede migration to Manhattan, New York. Wulff employs an ethnography of young Swedes living in Manhattan to elicit responses about the United States from "outsiders." Wulff frames their experiences as transnational, global, and temporal. The ethnographic material is carefully curated, and her analysis draws on ideas of collective connection, fantasy, and national imagination. We are drawn to think of Manhattan (and New York) as a cosmopolitan hub. Wulff approaches this vast socio-cultural conglomeration from a micro-perspective and crafts an ethnographic language that takes the reader through an emic perspective on the United States and its relationship to self-realization in the city.

Jasmin Habib's chapter, "Is It Un-American to Be Critical of Israel? Criticism and Fear in the U.S. Context," begins with a thought-provoking series of quotes that interrogates what it means to be

both Jewish and a U.S. citizen in the shadow of historical American Judaism and the concept of homeland. Habib explores the views of diasporic “dissident activists” who are critical of the U.S.’s relationship with Israel and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Through her ethnography, Habib invites the reader to see U.S. Jewish activism and identity through the lens of empire, which allows for nuance and complexity. The ethnographic writing is strengthened by Habib’s personal and in-depth profiles of two activists, grounding her ethnographic material in rich historical narrative.

Limor Samimian-Darash’s chapter on biosecurity opens with a delightful auto-ethnographic vignette where she describes her experience presenting a paper at the American Anthropological Association’s annual conference. This vignette showcases what she calls a “cultural prism,” where a paper given by another conference participant about the U.S.’s response to biological terrorism and threat receives a “non-cultural reading,” whereas her own paper (also on the topic of preparedness for biological threats but focusing on the Israeli context) is described by the panel discussant—a U.S. anthropologist—as an ethnographically rich exploration of a “small country,” thus revealing the underlying Malinowskian exoticism that still seems to pervade much contemporary anthropology. Harkening back to the editors’ question about the possible othering of the U.S., indeed, with this brilliant opening, Samimian-Darash definitively shows the reader that the U.S. in anthropological discourse is often treated as all-encompassing, resistant to the gaze of alterity. The rest of the chapter does not disappoint with Samimian-Darash presenting a complex discourse on the construction of knowledge in biosecurity in the U.S., which she shows is permeated with a kind of Americanness that refuses to acknowledge its localized ways of knowing.

Ulf Hannerz’s chapter starts with a more conversational commentary on his relationship and experience as an “outside” researcher in the U.S., humorously characterizing his method as a “relaxed America-watch.” Hannerz’s chapter, “American Theater State: Reflections on Political Culture,” reads largely as a discursive cultural commentary. It does not include the typical rich ethnographic data that the other chapters in this section

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provide. Nonetheless, Hannerz gives a sort of auto-ethnographic insight into what “America Observed” really means, a sustained outsider’s gaze into the strange cultural milieu that is the United States. Hannerz poses that political culture in the U.S. is akin to a sort of theatrical performance. For the U.S. citizen, anthropologist or not, this approach begs the question, Are we the audience members? Fellow actors? Or somewhere in between? Hannerz’s chapter is the real star in terms of showing the reader what an outside critical discourse on the U.S. can elicit.

This thematic section concludes with Moshe Shokeid’s chapter, which examines the emergence of several gay voluntary associations in New York. Shokeid details various groups and meetings he attended throughout his field research, providing a varied and robust ethnographic picture of his field site(s). Throughout the piece, Shokeid is continually self-reflexive, allowing his outsider status to run through the ethnographic material. This reads as an effective and powerful symptom of the particular positionality that the text is attempting to cover. Shokeid’s writing highlights this unique perspective with clarity and sophistication. The second half of his chapter is a juxtaposition of the historical sociality of gay communities in New York with gay communities in Israel and the influence of the former on the latter. This approach produces a tenuous comparison that could have been better unpacked with a more robust and varied theoretical framework. Shokeid relies heavily on more discursive elements, forgoing richer ethnographic comparisons that might well have strengthened his argument. However, his approach is compelling and merits a text that would allow for a longer, more detailed exploration.

The second and final section of the book, “From the Inside Out? Reflections on an International Anthropology of the U.S.,” is a collection of essays that rounds out and contextualizes the previous section. Geoffrey White’s “Who Cares? Why It’s Odd and Why It’s Not” interrogates the question of the U.S. as a field site by situating it within a discourse of “insider/outsider” with a comprehensive review of the previous chapters. His use of the authors’ texts to juxtapose short quotes evokes a sort of comparative ethnographic analysis and is extremely effective in tying the various authors’ chapters together under the book’s

overall theme. Keiko Ikeda's piece, titled "Power and Trafficking of Scholarship in International American Studies," provides the reader with a nationalistic discussion on the emergence of an International American Studies focusing on geopolitical positionality and hierarchies. Finally, Jane Desmond presents a discourse on the insulation of U.S.-based researchers and the neglect and lack of recognition for the scholarship by non-U.S. researchers who conduct research in the United States.

While each chapter was wonderfully executed and provided sophisticated anthropological insight, as a cohesive series, the volume might have showcased greater ethnographic diversity. As the editors have acknowledged, the United States is not only a large geographic region but a complex bricolage of culture that is not so easily encompassed. In a book exploring the "Anthropology of the United States" from international perspectives or otherwise, one needs both quality and quantity. This is not a criticism of a shortcoming of the text but a call for a larger more robust volume of its kind. Conducting extensive ethnographic field work takes long periods of time, where researchers are required to live for extended periods alongside their communities of study. Thus, considering the expansive nature of the U.S., an ethnographically diverse text under the positionality of an International Anthropology of the U.S. would take a considerable amount of time and a great number of researchers committed to collaborating and conducting U.S.-based field research. Hopefully, with this brilliant effort by Dominguez and Habib, more anthropologists from outside the U.S. will pursue U.S.-based field study, contributing a robust etic perspective on the anthropology of the United States.

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WORKS CITED

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