

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue spiral graphic on the left side of a dark blue header bar.

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

What does an international anthropology of the US say about the global practice of the discipline?

Review by Judith Freidenberg

Americaⁱ Observed: On an International Anthropology of the United States

by Virginia Dominguez and Jazmin Habib, Editors

Berghahn Press, 2017

This edited collection contributes to the framing of a global anthropology in the 21st century as it poses a question and a mystery to readers. The question, whether the US can be “othered”, seems to me to help reflect on the practice of anthropology globally. From the outset, we get the sense that the question is preliminary answered negatively, thus unveiling the mystery—that the US has not been the site of long-term fieldwork nor the object of specialization by anthropologists from abroad.

When I first read the introduction to the collection, I thought foreign-born anthropologists like me had not been included. I had chosen to carry out dissertation research on the politicization of Puerto Rican identity in New York City when return to work on peasants in Argentina, my country of birth, was thwarted by state terrorism in the mid-nineteen-seventies. Like my peers, I was trained to expect that dissertation research would be conducted abroad. Unable to commit to my initial plan, I argued that the US was a foreign culture to me. Fortunately, these were the early days of an interest in an anthropology of the US, albeit one that focused on the others within. Yet, reading the introduction on, I realized the editors weren’t referring to people like me, foreign-born anthropologists who trained in and then resided in the US during their professional careers. Rather, the mystery was about those who had had professional careers in their home countries, regardless of where they trained. Perhaps because I was not born in the US and have engaged professionally in both the US and Argentina throughout my career, I value most anthropology’s perspective which helps de-familiarize the familiar, in a sense

othering ourselves and our life circumstances as well as those we observe. This is intrinsic to the discipline, regardless of the country location of the fieldsite or personal characteristics of the anthropologist, such as place of birth and/or professional practice (Miner, 1953; De Vita, 2016; Hannerz, 1969; Freidenberg & Nash, 2001). It was in this frame of mind that I read on.

The edited collection consists of an introduction, two parts and an afterword. Part I, *On the outside looking in: The US as Fieldwork*, features five authors who hold positions outside the US but have conducted fieldwork in the US. In their essays, they all manage to do three things well: they describe their fieldwork in the US; they set up comparisons with other countries, including those where they work, whether based on actual research or personal “insider” reflections; and they share their own experience of the US. To expand: Wulff centers on young Swedes’ experiences of short sojourns in Manhattan while sharing her own initial sensory impressions and later learning of social issues foreign to her such as homelessness. This form of geographic mobility works as a rite of passage to sediment or accumulate social and cultural capital to be displayed upon return to Sweden, and found useful to garner social connections globally. Habib uses her research on Jewish activism in the US Midwest to understand the perils, real or imagined, of diasporic opposition to Israel’s military politics for a US citizen living in the nation-state (Is it Un-American to be critical of Israel, Habib asks?). She ponders how the state helps frame the nature of political activism through references to her research on the topic in Israel and Canada. The question of homeland is, for Habib, both personal and academic. After conducting research on life sciences biosecurity in Israel, Samimian-Darash turns to an inquiry on how the US-health policy establishment positions itself regarding the global interest in battling influenza. Surprised by the high level of public access to meetings in Washington, she immerses herself in what ends up being a cultural study: in the US, as different from Israel for example, preparing to respond to the pandemic is framed as biosecurity, which means that research which might be harmful to others is not disseminated. Hannerz, who has conducted research in the US since the 1960s, reflects comparatively on the success of the US entertainment industry, both in its global dissemination and consumption. He also shows how the industry inspires theatricality in the performance of the country’s political leaders and exerts soft power on the population. Finally, Shokeid’s ethnography of gay voluntary associations in the US reveals their role in placating a sense of estrangement from the larger society, including family and friends. A comparison with his research on similar populations in Israel allows Shokeid to suggest that the Israeli social fabric infuses a sense of belonging that deters the need for the company of strangers, as in the US, which explains the relative lack of gay voluntary

associations.

Following these five cases of fieldwork on the US by foreign-based anthropologists, Part II, entitled *From the inside out: Reflection on an international anthropology in the US*, provides commentary and reflection from three anthropologists on the essays in Part I of this work, only one of whom-Ikeda-is based abroad. In different ways, they all reiterate that the lack of something—in this case, foreign-based anthropologists researching the US—helps us understand 21st-century anthropology as a global rather than a fieldsite-away-from-home type of practice. The question then becomes what this anthropology looks like, rather than the personal characteristics of the fieldworker:

In sum, these essays lead us well beyond the puzzle of the absence of a foreign anthropology of the US. Rather, they open a critical window on to the premises of twenty-first-century anthropology, suggesting that the promise of the 1980s critique to “bring anthropology back home” is only just now beginning to be addressed in complex circuits of global ethnographic practice. (White, 152)

Like with other commodities, the production, circulation and use of knowledge can be tracked to understand the connection among sites, instead of separating them through labeling:

...I want to explore how the situational positioning of “Other” vs “us,” “foreign” vs “native,” and “Japanese” vs “American” emerges and works in the production and circulation of knowledge. As we engage in various international collaborations, I hope to show here that distinctions and their meanings, often taken for granted in cross-cultural interactions, such as “Japanese” vs “American,” “outsider” vs “insider,” or “native” vs “foreign”, are arbitrary and simplistic constructs produced and reproduced through shifting landscapes of relational exchanges. (Ikeda, 156)

This statement prompts questions about how “we” think of “them”. Are we “othering” the foreign-based anthropologist by focusing on her country of practice? Are we reproducing labels instead of trying to blur the differences in practice and working towards a global anthropology? Are we simplifying the heterogeneity of nation-states by making a foreign-based anthropologist its representative? Let me discuss next some issues addressed in the volume. One is raised in the

introduction where the editors entertain possible causes for the noted lack of long-term fieldwork in the US by foreign anthropologists and what this absence might reveal. Could the practicalities of cost, visa policies and politics turn them away, they ponder? Could the US be found less interesting culturally abroad? Would anti-Americanism be a factor? Each of these possible reasons is disputed, leaving us with the initial question...and the mystery. We are assured there are some anthropologists who fit the bill, including those recruited to write for the collection, but there are no answers for why there are not more. Since the editors sought contributions from anthropologists who were born abroad and who practiced anthropology abroad, I looked more closely into their career trajectories and status to see if that approach might shed other ideas.

Part I features the fieldwork of five foreign-born and based anthropologists: two from Sweden (Wulff and Hannerz); one from Canada (Habib); and two from Israel (Samimian-Darash and Shokeid). Although it is difficult to ascertain where they were born, they all work at major western universities (one assistant professor, one associate professor, one professor and two emeritus professors). They all work in wealthy countries that have probably more familiarity and experience heightened US cultural penetration than others (although it may be argued that US cultural penetration is now worldwide). Wulff speaks of the cultural transmission of US culture through the media as “anticipatory socialization” (p. 39) to the US; Hannerz comments that “...the US is a global power influencing everybody’s lives...” (p. 108). In addition to distance- learning the US, most of the authors had personal life experiences—as students, visiting scholars, or just visitors—in four different regions before defining fieldwork. One can then say that these academic professionals are transnationally connected to the US, as are their subjects of study. If national borders are blurred, then where the anthropologist is employed might not be relevant for constituting the discipline in the 21st century. Both the authors and the commentators, also senior academics (one from Japan), practice a global anthropology in that they frame research questions from their double, and often multiple, situational circumstances and affiliations. This is certainly different from the sustained preference for anthropological research in sites where there are notable asymmetries in the social class and embodied power of the observer vis-à-vis the observed. Both the dual role of insider and outsider of the authors and the increase in anthropology of the US by US practitioners constitute a “further step in the de-Orientalizing of anthropological practice” (White, 143). These considerations bring forth additional possible reasons for the negligible anthropology of the US by foreign-based anthropologists. For instance, since US culture has disseminated globally, it might not be perceived as an interesting

fieldsite. In addition, the increase of published anthropology of the US by US-based anthropologists might deter the foreign-based anthropologist from seeking funding to study what is assumed to be a saturated and well-known field already. Which brings us back to the discipline rather than its practitioners.

Then, there is the issue of whether we should conceive a country only within its geopolitical borders, an issue I have been working on. Like all countries, there are millions (estimates range from 4 to 10) of US nationals—not counting the military or diplomats—residing abroad, in nations they have “othered”, and where they are regarded as “others” In fact, they differentiate themselves as US nationals abroad by designating themselves as expats, in contrast to the country/s native population and to immigrants (Freidenberg, 2011).

To conclude, this volume raises very interesting questions, but the attempts to answer them leads us to think of the discipline. It sets us thinking about anthropology as a global field; one where the local issues help frame global ones and, vice versa, the extent to which the local is shaped by the global. Many topics attracting the attention of contemporary anthropologists are global in nature, among many others, genomics, climate change, the Anthropocene, migration, and health. Perhaps we are reaching a moment where the framing of the topics for research is global in nature, even if the actual fieldsite is local. If so, we should not be asking ‘where’, but ‘what’, and not ‘who’, but ‘why’; and moving from an international anthropology of the US to an global anthropology mediated by local conditions.

References Cited

DeVita, Philip, ed. *Distant Mirrors: America as a Foreign Culture*. Illinois: Waveland Press, 2016.

Freidenberg, Judith and June Nash. “Forum on Institutionalizing International Anthropology.” *American Anthropological Association*, Washington, D.C., 2001

Freidenberg, Judith. “Researching global spaces ethnographically: Queries on methods for the study of virtual populations”. *Human Organization*. (2011): (70) 3.

Miner, Horace. “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema”. *American Anthropologist* 58:3, June 1956

Hannerz, Ulf. *Soulside: Inquiries into ghetto culture and community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1969.

Judith Noemí Freidenberg is Professor Emerita of Anthropology at the University of Maryland at

College Park, where she directed the Anthropology of the Immigrant Life Course Research Program and the Certificate in Museum Scholarship and Material Culture and was co-editor of *Practicing Anthropology*. She was affiliated with the Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires as a Visiting Researcher during her sabbatical stay in Argentina in 2016. Her books include *Contemporary Conversations on Immigration in the United States: The View from Prince George's County, Maryland* (Lexington, 2016), *Growing Old in El Barrio* (New York University Press, 2000), *Memorias de Villa Clara* (Antropofagia, 2005), and *The Invention of the Jewish Gaucho: Villa Clara and the Construction of Argentine Identity* (Texas University Press, 2009); translated into Spanish by Prometeo Editorial, Argentina, 2013. She has edited books and journal issues and published numerous articles.



© 2018 Judith Freidenberg

ⁱ Many Latin Americans, myself included, object to the use of America and the US as synonyms. In this text, I will therefore choose to use America to designate the continent and U.S. the nation.