

## SECTION 2

### ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCES OF AMERICAN POWER IN THE AGE OF THE WAR ON TERROR

EDITED BY JEREMY WALTON *and* SEAN T. MITCHELL

**A**n observation, both real and surreal, both mundane and fantastic: the United States of America, omnipresent, ubiquitous yet curiously opaque, sometimes even stealthy. American military, American products, American media; desire for it, resentment of it, orientation to it, patronage from it. Across particularities of space and place, nation, language, and culture: USA. Yet this USA has hardly been uniform in its nature or effects, however global its horizons. The power that it marshals and represents has long been manifold. How might anthropologists locate American power within and across divergent contexts? This section explores the ways in which American power has been experienced, understood, imagined, and produced in the age of the War on Terror. Both the subject of critique and the object of aspiration, an apparently unipolar and definitely bellicose United States has become conspicuously central to political and social imaginaries worldwide. Of course, the mediations of these imaginaries are subject to local specificities of history, culture, and politics—the domain of ethnographic inquiry.

Together, these papers form a multifaceted inquiry into the modalities of American power outside of the hot theaters of U.S. troop deployment, Afghanistan and Iraq. In different ways, they consider how the images, discourses, and effects of global counterinsurgency or the “long war” have been deeply dependent on, and also genera-

tive of, the specific histories and contingencies of local situations. These papers consider sites, discourses, and anxieties from across hemispheres, from Brazil to the Palestinian territories, from Turkey to southern Uganda to the Los Angeles basin. Even those contributions that focus explicitly on the materialities and ideologies of the American military underscore the multiplicity and complexity—or, to use Mihir Pandya's phrase, borrowed from Ernst Bloch, the nonsynchronicity—of the productions and predilections of American power.

As a thematic ensemble, these five papers develop a loose narrative of the modalities of American power as both material production and ideological effect. In the first two essays, Sean T. Mitchell and Jeremy Walton examine localized discourses that articulate fantasies of American power in unexpected, instructive ways in contemporary Brazil and Turkey, respectively. Here we venture into the murky domain of conspiracy theory. As the familiar saying goes, "Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get me." And just because some of the narratives discussed by these papers are implausible and paranoid—in fact, sometimes, nuttily wrong—does not mean that they are not on to something. In different ways, these papers set themselves to the difficult task of addressing the social importance of narratives that are false or unverifiable without taking the easy paths of either (1) merely demonstrating the functional coherence of these narratives or (2) merely debunking them, as neither of these two theoretical choices shed much light on the actual workings of power. The ethnography of fantasies of American power and their stunning boost in popularity offers a glimpse of a very real USA beyond the control of American authors.

Amahl Bishara and Liz Garland shift our attention to politically saturated contexts in which the very act of recognition or affiliation with the USA can be a matter of life and death. Through her vivid rendering of a single night of violence in the West Bank city of Nablus during the Second Intifada, Bishara interrogates the effects of both successful and unsuccessful laminations of American power upon physical objects and Palestinian subjects alike. In her equally riveting account, Liz Garland traces the disjunctures of her own experience as an American political subject, first in a moment of violence and dangerous hostility in southern Uganda following the Rwandan genocide, then as a witness, defined by presupposed commitments and complaints, within American courts. As Garland experienced and eloquently explains, the arrival of the War on Terror changed almost everything for the criminal and judicial proceedings involved. In effect, the murderous gang was recategorized from criminal to terrorist. If Mitchell and Walton focus our attention on imaginaries of American power and some of their oblique ideological and mate-

rial referents, Bishara and Garland introduce us to the material invasiveness of American power and its complex effects in people's lives.

Finally, Mihir Pandya directs attention to the production of American power at its most material: the arms industry in Southern California. Here we are offered crucial ethnographic insight into the relationship between the material production of technologies of destruction and deterrence and the ideological production of American power within war- and peace-making institutions. As Pandya shows, temporality matters. The stealth bomber, a cold war idea, gained material form and the need for function in the age of the War on Terror. Weapons systems in development for years have to be geared to multiple imagined futures and institutional timelines and are not necessary adaptable to the contingencies of any one present.

On the whole, these authors share a concern for the dialectic of visibility and opacity, the play of display and disavowal in contemporary American power. The spectacularly visible and sometimes brutally tangible projection of U.S. power in the age of War on Terror has been complicated by fateful nonsynchronicities and by that power's (occasional) opacity and, sometimes, deliberate stealth.